on a scale (from one to ten)

by softanticipation

Summary

After a summer apart, everything changes between Christen Press and her childhood best friend, Kelley O'Hara. All Christen wants to do it figure it out, but she's got a handful of other things that keep distracting her: thinking about grad school, being forced to make new friends, and - most importantly - trying to get along with Kelley's newest teammate, who seems to be out to make Christen's life a living hell.

Notes

See the end of the work for notes.
would you give me a foot massage?

“On a scale of one to ten, would you give me a foot massage if I asked for one right now?”

Christen wrinkles her nose.

“Kell, you’re asking me weird scale questions again,” she says, rolling over on her bed where she’s been napping for the past hour or so. “I thought you said you wouldn’t do that anymore.”

Kelley comes over and throws herself down next to Christen who immediately squeals.

“You know you’re not allowed in here until after you’ve showered,” Christen says, pushing at Kelley’s sweaty and grass-covered legs with her feet. “Unless you’re ready to wash my sheets.”

Kelley just grins at her, laying on her side with her head propped up by her hand. She’s only wearing a sports bra and her favorite practice shorts, and the sheer expanse of skin makes Christen hyperaware.

“Sorry, mom,” Kelley says, rolling her eyes. “But practice was awful today. I can barely stand, much less take a shower.”

“You’re supposed to shower back at the locker rooms,” Christen tells her, still kicking. “Seriously, Kell. You smell.”

Kelley moans and groans for a minute, but she eventually gets up off of Christen’s bed.

“I’ve just missed you,” she says, tugging her hair out of its ponytail and sliding the elastic onto her wrist. “Aren’t I allowed to miss my best friend after she’s been gone all summer?”

Something in Christen’s heart skips, and it isn’t until Kelley pokes at her knee through the covers that she realizes that she should say something.

“Yeah, Kell,” she says, and it’s weak but it’s better than nothing. “You’re allowed to miss me.”

“Texting all the time just isn’t the same as having you here in front of me to bother,” Kelley says, her smile uncertain as she hovers. “How am I supposed to annoy you if you aren’t here to watch me stick the empty milk back in the fridge and leave the air on all night?”

Christen just offers up a hesitant smile, shaking her head in an attempt to get her mind screwed on straight.

“Missed you too, Kell,” she offers, and it seems to be good enough for Kelley, who blows her a smacking kiss before skipping out of the room and hopefully towards the shower. As soon as she’s out of sight – leaving the door open, as always, no matter how many times Christen reminds her to close it – Christen rolls onto her stomach, sighing into her pillow and wondering how she’s supposed to survive the year.

“Remember,” Kelley says, appearing in the doorway and jolting Christen upwards with a shock to her senses. “I’m taking you out tonight.”

Christen groans.

“Kell, I thought that was a joke,” she says, all prayers that Kelley had forgotten going out the window. “You know I don’t like to go out on school nights.”
“It’s a Sunday,” Kelley says, tilting her head to the side in confusion. “And school hasn’t even started yet.”

“Yes, but it starts tomorrow,” Christen explains. “And you know how I like to get into the right frame of mind before the start of every semester.”

“You told me you’d come,” Kelley says, putting on an exaggerated pout. “Come on, Chris. You never come out with me and my friends.”

Christen doesn’t know what to say, because Kelley’s right. She doesn’t like going out with Kelley’s friends, mostly because they’re all too high-strung for her. Going out with just Kelley is one thing, she can handle her just fine, but it becomes a different story when there’s more people to deal with.

“I know, but maybe another night,” Christen tries, keeping things vague enough so that Kelley can’t accuse her of backing out in the future. “I’m just really tired right now. I only got here a few hours ago, remember?”

Kelley heaves a giant sigh.

“Next weekend,” Christen compromises, unable to look at the kicked puppy expression on Kelley’s face any longer. “Okay? Maybe next weekend, when I’m not so exhausted.”

“Fine,” Kelley relents. “But I’m holding you to that, okay?”

She turns around to leave then.

“Close the door!” Christen calls after her.

Kelley doesn’t close the door.

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Christen has known Kelley since approximately forever. It’s to remember a time when they didn’t know each other, really. They’d met in kindergarten, their last names placing them next to each other in class, and they had formed a quick friendship based on sharing crayons and swapping carrot sticks for apple slices at lunchtime. Then middle school came along, the both of them landing in the same classes. Kelley has always been the more outgoing of the two, amassing a small army of friends over the years, but Christen has always been the friend that Kelley would spend Friday night sleepovers with. Kelley has always been there for Christen, sticking with her for homecoming and prom when neither of them had found a date worth spending an entire night with. She has always been at Christen’s side, loyal to the end.

So Christen has always been there for Kelley. She’d gone to all of Kelley’s soccer games – still goes to most of them, actually – and had tagged along on family vacations and kept her company during her sister’s birthday parties. When they had both gotten into the same college, Christen had been the one to commit after Kelley had confessed how scared she was to move away from home. They’d been lucky, Kelley scoring a soccer scholarship at a DI university that Christen could easily attend. They’d become roommates their first year on campus, and even though Kelley had joined a sorority, they moved off campus together into a two-bedroom apartment for their sophomore year.

Now, going into their junior year of college, with Christen having been gone all summer at her out-of-state internship, their friendship is just as tight as ever – something proven by the fact that Kelley still has no boundaries and therefore no problem rifling through Christen’s closet on Friday evening.

“Kell,” Christen warns, coming into her room and sighing, setting her backpack down on her desk.
and kicking off her sandals. “Kell, what are you doing?”

Kelley is sitting on the floor between Christen’s bed and closet, holding up two different shirts and looking at them far too intently.

“Which one?” she asks, blinking innocently as she struggles to her feet. “We’re only going to a bar, so it’s not super fancy or anything. I really like the chambray, but I feel like it’s too warm out for it, even if you roll up the sleeves.”

Christen gently takes one hanger from her, then the other, and sidesteps her to hang them back up in her closet.

“Kelley,” she says as firmly as she can, which isn’t saying much at all, “I’ve been in class all day. Some of us don’t have the luxury of skipping class whenever we want, just because we have a coach’s note.”

“Wow,” Kelley says, the hurt apparent in her tone. “Okay, if you’re going to be like that.”

Christen sighs in frustration, running a hand through her hair and wishing that it hadn’t drizzled earlier between statistics and social psych, because her head is an absolute ball of frizz that is only agitating her further.

“Kelley,” she says again, “I didn’t mean it like that.”

“No, you only meant that once again, I’m slacking off and you’re the hard worker,” Kelley bites back.

“You know that’s not what I mean,” Christen tries, and Kelley seems to deflate before she can get any more riled up. “I know that your classes are hard and that you go to them, but you know that school is hard for me. I have to work harder than you do. That’s not a bad thing, Kell. It’s just the truth.”

Kelley closes her eyes for a moment, taking a long inhale and exhale, and then responds.

“If you really don’t want to go out tonight, you don’t have to,” Kelley says finally. “I’m not going to force you to. I just thought that maybe it would be nice to hang out with my best friend after she spent the entire summer away.”

Christen can hear the hurt in Kelley’s voice, and it makes her wince. She knows that Kelley missed her while she was gone – hell, Christen had missed her plenty – but that doesn’t mean that she wants it thrown in her face and used as a guilt trip. Mostly because she knows it will work, and she knows that Kelley knows that too. Kelley knows where to hit Christen where it hurts, just like Christen knows exactly how to get underneath Kelley’s skin.

So Christen bucks up and rolls her shoulders back, mentally bracing herself for what she’s about to do. Going out isn’t what she really wants to do – she was actually looking forward to a night full of puppy videos on YouTube and the scrapings of ice cream Kelley had left behind in Christen’s pint of Half Baked – but she’s willing to do her best friend a solid and spend some time with Kelley in her preferred environment: surrounded by friends and alcohol.

“Okay,” Christen says, knowing what she’s agreeing to but still not quite believing that she’s agreeing to this. “I’ll go out – on one condition.”

Kelley is grinning widely, clapping her hands together and tucking them under her chin. She looks positively wicked in a way that makes Christen press her mouth together in an attempt to keep from
smiling.

“Anything,” Kelley says excitedly. “I will literally do anything. This is a rare day. Christen is actually coming out at night. You know, I’d started to think that you were the opposite of a vampire.”

Christen groans pointedly, and Kelley covers her mouth and stands straight.

“I’m listening,” Kelley says, the words muffled by her hand. “Listening. Tell me what you want.”

“I want you to stay out of my closet,” Christen declares.

Kelley blinks, lowering her hands.

“Wait, that’s it?” she says gleefully. “I can totally do that. I will let you dress yourself tonight.”

“Let me rephrase,” Christen says quickly. “Stay out of my entire getting ready process. And no complaining that I’m taking too long. Not everyone can show up to Potbelly’s with unbrushed hair and smeared mascara and get three guys’ numbers in one night.”

Kelley scoffs, as though Christen is being unreasonable.

“First of all,” Kelley says, ticking off her index finger, “no one calls it Potbelly’s. Anyone who isn’t a first week freshman calls it Pots, and you know it.”

Christen rolls her eyes.

“Second of all,” Kelley continues, ticking off her middle finger, “I was interested in exactly zero of those guys, so your point is moot. It doesn’t count if I’m not interested. Third of all,” – Kelley ticks off the next finger – “I’d brushed my hair that day, just not after practice.”

“Even better,” Christen says sarcastically, but Kelley doesn’t appear to be listening.

“Fourth of all,” Kelley says loudly, raising her eyebrows, as though she’s actually successfully disproving Christen’s argument (she’s not), “smeared mascara is actually a very high fashion thing, and I can’t help it that other people recognized that.”

Christen snorts. “Yeah, okay, Kell,” she says sarcastically. “I’m really sure that it was on purpose, and that those frat guys appreciated it.”

“They did,” Kelley says proudly. “Now. I will agree to your condition on one condition.”

“This doesn’t sound fair,” Christen comments, but Kelley keeps talking.

“You have one hour,” she says, holding up a single index finger. “You got home late, which means that while I am here waiting for you, all the other girls are pregaming without me. If I’m going to be sober when we get there, I better at least get there when everyone else does. Otherwise I’ll never catch up.”

“Fine,” Christen says, thinking that she might have to opt for dry shampoo over a shower, but she might be able to make it work. At least she’s not smelly – she’s spent most of her day in heavily air conditioned university buildings and chose to drive to campus this morning instead of walking.

“Where were you all afternoon, anyway?” Kelley says, as though the thought is only occurring to her now. “I thought you were done with classes at three-ish.”
“Um,” Christen says, sorting through the mess that Kelley has made of her closet. “Julie and I went to the library and then got dinner together.”

Kelley makes a noise and Christen shoots her a warning look.

“What?” Kelley says defensively, holding up her hands in surrender. “What did I do?”

“I know you don’t like Julie,” Christen says, trying to keep the accusation out of her tone. The truth of the matter is that Kelley isn’t overly fond of Julie, who is Christen’s closest friend aside from her. They’d met the first week of freshman year, sharing a major and the majority of their classes over the years, and she’s the only other person in town that Christen is completely comfortable with. She suspects that Kelley’s dislike stems from jealousy, which is completely illogical on several levels. No one will never know Christen better than Kelley thanks to the years they’ve spent together, and Julie rarely steals Christen’s time for long. Julie has a serious boyfriend on the football team, and she spends most of her free time either studying with Christen or on cute dates with said boyfriend. Kelley never even studies, so it’s not as though Julie is infringing on sacred best friend time.

Julie never eats Christen’s ice cream, though, so she just might have a leg up there.

“Julie is fine,” Kelley says. “It’s just that I skipped dinner at the house so I could come back and find you an outfit, so next time let me know.”

“Aw,” Christen says, grinning widely. “Did you miss me?”

“If we have this conversation one more time,” Kelley threatens, “I will never tell you that I miss you again. You could literally spend five years on Mars and I would never say it.”

Christen just smothers Kelley in a hug, ignoring the thumping of her heart and just giggling as Kelley complains and struggles to get free. She twists away easily, of course, because Kelley’s always been the stronger of the two.

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Christen defies Kelley, wearing the worn and faded chambray with the sleeves rolled up the way she was taught the one summer she worked at J Crew. She pairs it with a pair of white cotton shorts, ignoring the way Kelley looks at them dubiously and mutters things about sticky vinyl seats and beer spills. Christen feel cute, damn it, and she’s not going to let Kelley kill her vibe. It’s been a while since she got to dress up like this, all cute and ready to impress, since she spent most of the summer wearing five-year-old jeans and old camp shirts in a behavioral research lab. In an environment where the rats are liable to pee on anyone at any time, looking cute is low on the priority list.

Kelley convinces Christen to take a shot with her before they leave the apartment, an Uber only five minutes away. It’s tequila, which Christen despises and Kelley loves, and she’s certain that Kelley’s poured nearly a double shot into the coffee mug that gets pressed into her hands. Christen coughs as it goes down, needing nearly three swigs to finish it all and a very large amount of water to wash it down and keep from giving into the urge to puke it back up. It does the job, though, and by the time they’ve arrived at the dark and loud bar, she’s feeling especially warm in the ninety-degree humidity that the end of August brings every single year.

“Okay,” Kelley says, once they’re inside. She’s got her phone in one hand, texting furiously, and has the other hovering over Christen’s hip to keep her close in the crowd. “So, I’m going to try and find the girls first and see if they have any pitchers, and if you don’t want beer, we can try and get something else.”
“Beer is fine,” Christen says, hyperaware of Kelley’s hand brushing the barely visible strip of skin exposed between the high waist of her shorts and the hem of her shirt, the tails of which she’s tied into a knot positioned right over her navel. “Who are we meeting, exactly?”

“Oh, I’ll introduce you, don’t worry,” Kelley says, dismissively waving her phone in the air. “They already know you – you can thank the good luck picture of us at prom that I keep in my locker for that.”

Christen wants to roll her eyes, thinking of how Kelley brags about needing to kiss the taped picture before every home game, but instead her chest just feels tight and her nerves multiply. She feels uncomfortable, to say the least, and Kelley is doing the opposite of helping.

“Okay, but I don’t even know which friends I’m meeting,” Christen says, having to nearly shout so that Kelley can hear her over the country music. She uses the phrase “meeting” loosely – she’s met most of Kelley’s friends before, of course, but she never remembers faces or names. She never makes it a point to get to know them too well, mostly because she knows it’s a waste of time. She’s not going to end up close friends with them, and she knows that Kelley’s friendships with them have an expiration date that coincides with their graduation ceremony.

“Here,” Kelley says, finding a group of three girls sitting around a high top. She grabs an empty seat from the next table over despite the fact that it looks like a guy was just about to sit down on it, and hops up onto it. “Chris, meet the Gals. Gals, meet Chris.”

Kelley pats her seat, scooting over so that Christen can tentatively slide half of her ass onto it. The part that comes into contact with her exposed thigh feels sticky enough alright, and she tries her best to keep her expression neutral so that she doesn’t appear as though she’s disgusted by the girls – sorry, Gals – in front of her.

“Hi,” she says politely, smiling nervously. “I’m Christen.”

She looks around the table, and it’s clear that these are Kelley’s soccer friends. They’re all dressed casually – almost too casually – and it makes her feel self-conscious about all the effort she put into her eyeliner and shoe choice. The girl to her right is horribly pretty with long hair and blue eyes, wearing a denim vest over a white t-shirt. The girl across the table has dark hair pulled into a bun and a toothpaste commercial smile, and her lashes instantly make Christen jealous. On Kelley’s left is a girl covered in tattoos who looks like she might have actually spent more than five minutes getting ready for the night, much to Christen’s relief.

“Hi,” the tattooed one says, extending a hand for Christen to shake. “I’m Sydney.”

Christen nods, reaching past Kelley and over a half-full pitcher of beer to awkwardly shake Sydney’s hand.

“I’m Ali,” the dark haired one says, “and this is Alex. You don’t have to shake our hands, Syd is just being weird.”

“I’m trying to make a good impression, excuse me,” Syd says, gripping her plastic cup of beer. Christen places her hand in her lap, cringing at how clammy it is.

“Any good impression you make will be gone in five minutes,” Kelley says, stealing Alex’s beer and taking a swig.

Syd scoffs and mutters “rude” under her breath.

“So, you’re the famous Christen,” Alex says, twirling her ponytail.
“Not famous,” Christen says, glancing sideways at Kelley who is no help at all, seemingly determined to finish Alex’s drink as fast as she can. “Not really.”

“Kelley has a picture of you taped in her locker,” Ali says, smiling toothily. “You’re pretty famous in the locker room. She makes us all watch her kiss it before every game.”


“Stop, guys,” Syd says, pulling a plastic cup from a small stack in the middle of the table. “You’re embarrassing her.”

Christen’s cheeks have been warm since before she sat down, but now they’re positively on fire.

“Oh, sorry!” Ali apologizes. “I meant it in a good way! Like, Kelley tells us that you come to all our home games, but we’re always on the pitch so we’ve never really gotten to meet you. Kelley’s just really hyped you up to us, that’s all.”

Syd pours a cup of beer and slides it to Christen who grips it immediately, desperate for something to do besides sit there and look stupid.

“Definitely in a good way,” Alex inputs, looking at Kelley who has finally finished her drink and is wiping at her mouth with the back of her hand. “Kelley, don’t we mean it in a good way?”

“Yes, I told you they love you already,” Kelley says, wrapping an arm around Christen’s shoulders.

Christen takes a sip of her beer. It’s not the best she’s had, but it’s at least cold and mild enough that she won’t mind nursing it for the better part of the night.

“It’s just good to meet you,” Ali says, reaching across the table to touch Christen’s hand. “Any friend of Kelley’s is a friend of ours.”

They’re all wonderfully nice and welcoming, but it quickly becomes very obvious that they’re all very close to each other and Christen is the odd one out. Conversation quickly devolves into soccer talk, the four of them discussing their first game next week and their opponent. From there it becomes constant recounts of their times at practices since they’ve gotten back to school, memories of old teammates, and the antics they all got up to during summer session. Christen listens closely, laughing when appropriate but otherwise not contributing much. She does learn that Ali is a senior defender, and Alex and Syd are both sophomore forwards who score way too many goals. Syd is the very definition of hilarious and Ali is almost too good at embarrassing herself, but she takes it in such stride that it’s difficult not to find endearing. Christen is having trouble seeing Alex as more than just a pretty face, but the others talk about her like she’s an all around golden child and it’s easy to see why.

When the pitchers of beer are empty and Syd has snagged another chair for Christen to have to herself, Kelley slides off her seat and looks around expectantly.

“On a scale of one to ten, who wants to come with me to get more drinks?” she asks.

Christen wants to say something, to criticize Kelley’s weird scale question again, but Syd speaks before she can open her mouth.

“I wish Dom were here,” she says, and Christen has learned that Dom is her super sexy soccer-playing boyfriend whom she is normally attached at the hip to. “He’d get the drinks for us and we wouldn’t have to make Alex flirt with the bartenders.”
“I’m not going up there again,” Alex says flatly. “Only once per outing, that’s the rule.”

“I’ll go,” Syd volunteers, leaning to the side to look at the bar. “Maybe this time we’ll actually get the drinks for free.”

She looks at Alex pointedly, and Alex glares at her.

“Listen,” Alex says, pointing a painted fingernail in Syd’s face. “You try flirting with the skeezy bartenders. I’d buy myself ten thousand pitchers before I pull some of those tricks that you do. You have a boyfriend, Syd. Stop pulling your shirt down, or I’m sending Dom a picture.”

Ali coughs loudly, and Alex turns her glare on her. It’s easy to see why, because Alex doesn’t have nearly half the cleavage that Syd does, and Christen has to bite her tongue to keep from laughing.

“Girls, girls,” Kelley says breezily. “Let’s not fight over cheap beer. Alex, you know they don’t make you pay full price anyway. You always do well.”

“Damn right,” Alex mutters.

“Listen, Dom would love a picture,” Syd says, sweeping a hand over her chest. “So feel free. Until them, I’m going to get us some free drinks. Come on, Kell.”

Kelley giggles into Syd’s shoulder as they leave the table, slowly winding their way through tables and people on their bar to the bar. Christen turns her head to the side, tucking her chin into her shoulder to watch them go. It isn’t until someone clears their throat that she remembers where she is and redirects her attention to her company.

“So,” Ali says, “how are we doing?”

“What?” Christen asks, tilting her head in confusion.

“Do we pass the test?” she asks, grinning. “Are we good enough for Kelley’s best friend?”

“There’s no test,” Christen says, puzzled. “I mean, Kelley’s already friends with you.”

“Yeah, but you’re her best friend,” Ali says with emphasis. “If you don’t approve, how are we all supposed to hang out together?”

“Oh,” Christen says in surprise, looking between her and Alex, the latter of whom seems to be studying her intently. “Um, you know, you’re allowed to hang out with Kelley. You really don’t need my permission, or whatever.”

“She’s trying to be your friend too,” Alex cuts in, her words short but not unkind. “Ali, stop being weird.”

Ali just smiles, tongue pressed up against her teeth. Christen is starting to feel blinded by all the whiteness on display.

“Christen,” Alex says, focusing on her in a way that makes Christen squirm, “do you want to come out with us after our game next week?”

Maybe it’s the way she says it, so completely unaffected and nonchalant, as though it’s perfectly normal for her to be inviting Christen to hang out with the team after a game when even Kelley has never really extended that invitation, that makes her say yes.

Or maybe it’s the way the four of them have been bantering, reminding Christen of the way her and
Kelley and their sisters used to all talk together, that keeps her from giving into the instinct to say no.

It might also be the way Ali looks at her with genuine happiness, like she’s thoroughly enjoying Christen’s company despite the fact that she hasn’t contributed much, that let’s Christen forget how much she hates socializing for a minute.

No matter the reason why, she finds herself accepting Alex’s offer with only minimal hesitation.

“Excellent,” Ali says. Christen wonders if her smile is permanently pasted on her face, or if she’s just really that amiable. “We don’t know where we’re going yet, but we’ll find you after the game. Here, let me give you my number.”

Christen hands her phone over, feeling a little dazed and overwhelmed. When Ali is done sending a text to herself, Alex takes the phone and does the same. When Kelley and Syd come back over, pitchers in hand, Christen is wondering if Kelley’s friends have always been this nice, or if she’s simply been blind to it this entire time.

“Hey,” Kelley says, setting a pitcher on the table but not setting down. “I see some girls from my house over there. Are you good here if I go say hi to them?”

Christen glances around the table, seeing Alex’s harmless smirk and Ali’s perma-smile and Syd’s quirked eyebrows.

“Yeah,” she says slowly, a smile curving across her face. “Yeah, I’m good here.”

“Great,” Kelley says, reaching over to peck Christen’s cheek, leaving her chapstick residue behind. “Guys, take care of her,” she orders, and then she’s gone just as fast as she appeared.

Christen brushes her fingers against her cheek, feeling the tacky wax that she knows smells like strawberry – she’d bought Kelley that chapstick, they have the same one – and tries not to let her fingers linger in wonder. The clearing of a throat makes Christen look up, and she tries not to blush as she sees Alex’s curious gaze and Ali’s faltering smile.

“So,” Syd says quickly, pouring Christen some more beer. “Give us all the dirt on Kelley. You knew her in high school – you’ve got to have some pretty good stories.”

Christen tears her eyes away from Alex’s calculating stare to meet Syd’s harmless eyes.

“Yeah,” she says, taking her beer back. “Let me tell you about the time I was grounded and she scaled my house’s gutters one night and almost broke her neck. Never mind that she was the reason I was grounded in the first place…”
It’s not that Christen’s stupid, or that her classes are extraordinarily difficult. She knows that psychology isn’t a particularly stressful major, but college in general isn’t easy and she often finds herself stressing out over online quizzes and homework assignments that shouldn’t worry her nearly as much as they do. She’s not like Kelley, who is a biochemistry major and manages to maintain a 3.75 GPA despite the fact that she spends every fall semester deeply entrenched in soccer season. Instead Christen is like Julie, who is a hard worker and understands that sometimes a B is a result of weeks’ worth of studying and not just a single morning of skimming notes before going into an exam.

Wednesday afternoon finds Christen in the science library with Julie, hidden in a corner far away from the biology majors who tend to make far too much noise as they discuss Gram staining and immunoglobulins. It’s always cold in the library, so Christen’s bundled up in a hoodie and leggings while Julie has donned a pair of her boyfriend’s sweatpants. They’re working in silence on an online quiz for social psych, occasionally flipping through their notes or scrolling through the professor’s powerpoints.

When she finishes, Christen stretches her arms far above her head and yawns.

“Hold on, I’m almost done,” Julie says, eyes focused on the screen as she clicks away on her laptop.

“I beat you for once,” Christen says, trying not to brag.

“You know I hate these questions about who developed whatever theory,” Julie says. “It’s such a waste. As long as I know the concept, does it really matter who came up with it?”

Christen chuckles to herself, closing out of the windows on her screen and powering her laptop down. Julie follows a couple of minutes later, and the two of them rise from the floor together.

“Want something from Starbucks?” Julie asks, digging her wallet out of her backpack. “I’m dying for some caffeine. Zach and I are supposed to go out to dinner but he’s not done with practice until late, so I’m going to be up forever.”

“You could just take a nap,” Christen suggests, but she follows Julie to the first floor Starbucks anyway.

“Then I’ll never fall asleep,” Julie says.

They get in line together. There might be four Starbucks locations on campus, but that doesn’t mean that all of them aren’t crowded at any given moment. Christen checks the time and sees that it’s in between classes, but there are still at least five people in line before them. It’s ridiculous, really, how many students need their coffee to get through the day.

“So,” Julie says, pulling her long blonde hair up into a ponytail. “What are you doing this weekend?”

“Oh, um, I might be hanging out with Kelley and her soccer friends,” Christen says.

Julie raises her eyebrows, because she knows how much Christen doesn’t enjoy Kelley’s friends.

“Really?” she says interestingly. “How did that happen?”

Christen tells her about last Friday, and in the time it takes to do so, they only move up one spot in
“They sound nice,” Julie offers noncommittally.

“They are,” Christen says, chewing on her bottom lip. “I mean, they’re all really close, and it feels like, ‘oh, there’s poor Christen. Friendless and lame. Let’s invite her to hang out with us so she can feel even more left out.’”

“Hey,” Julie says, swinging an arm over Christen’s shoulders. She’s tall, and something about the gesture makes Christen feel better. “You’re not friendless or lame. Unless I’ve been your imaginary friend all these years.”

Christen snorts.

“No, Jules, you’re real, I know that,” she reassures her. “It’s just weird. Kelley’s been on the team for years and it’s only now that I’m really getting to meet them. Almost makes me wonder if she didn’t want me really hanging out with them, you know?”

Julie makes a noise in the back of her throat, tilting her head from side to side.

“I’m sure that’s not it,” she tells Christen, arm falling as they step forward. More and more people have gotten into line behind them, and Christen’s glad that they got there when they did. “It probably just never occurred to her. I mean, Chris, we all know how much you enjoy your time to yourself.”

“Yeah,” Christen says, but she’s still skeptical.

Julie talks about the classes that her and Christen don’t share this semester until they reach the register, where Julie insists on paying for Christen’s coffee.

“I’ll get it next time,” Christen says, and Julie agrees easily. They go outside then, with Julie heading in one direction and Christen in the other.

“Let me know if you need help this weekend,” Julie tells her. “When is it, Friday? Zach won’t miss me. If you need someone to silently judge all those soccer players with, I’m your girl.”

“I’ll let you know,” Christen says, feeling a rush of gratitude for the one person who seems to really understand. “See you Friday in class.”

“See you,” Julie echoes, and then Christen heads to the parking garage where her car is waiting for her.

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Christen ends up calling Julie, who is more than happy to take a break from smothering her boyfriend and hang out with some girls for a change.

“I literally never get to do this,” Julie says excitedly, sitting on the closed toilet lid in Christen’s bathroom. Christen is trying to apply her eyeliner evenly, but Julie is practically bouncing off the walls, which makes it a little difficult. “I haven’t gotten dressed up for Zach in years.”

“You know, it’s just a soccer game,” Christen says, because Julie is wearing a maroon colored dress in a show of school spirit. “It’s not fancy or anything. And it we’re not going anywhere fancy afterwards – Kelley says we’re just going to her teammate’s house.”

“Yeah, but still,” Julie says. She’s been rifling through Christen’s makeup bag for a while, twisting
up all her lipsticks to look at the colors and popping open eye shadow palettes in interest. “How are
we getting there, though? Are we driving to the game?”

“Nope,” Christen says, stepping back from the mirror to see if her eyeliner is even on both eyes.
“Syd’s boyfriend Dom is volunteering as DD for the night, so he’s coming to pick us up and he’ll be
the one driving us around all night.”

“I would ask Zach to be our chauffeur for the night, but I’m pretty sure he’s with his bros,” Julie says,
rolling her eyes and standing up, her hair swinging behind her. “They’re probably just going to eat
Chipotle and arm wrestle all night. What time are we leaving, then?”

Christen presses a finger to her phone’s home button.

“It’s five thirty-seven,” she reads off the screen. “Kick off is at six thirty but Kell says to get there by
six, which means that Dom should be here in like ten minutes.”

“I’m excited,” Julie says, adjusting the straps of her dress. “Finally, a sport that doesn’t require an all
day commitment.”

Christen laughs as she heads for her dresser, sorting through piles of jeans until she finds her favorite
pair of frayed denim shorts.

“So, if Kelley has always played soccer, have you ever played with her?” Julie asks, relocating to
Christen’s bed. Julie has been ready to go since Zach dropped her off with an overnight bag, and
she’s been very patient while waiting for Christen to finish getting ready.

“I tried for a season or two when we were in elementary,” Christen says, trying to tug a plain black
v-neck out from underneath a couple of tank tops. “But I didn’t like to get too close to the ball, which
was obviously a problem.”

Julie laughs heartily.

“Yeah, I’ve never really been into sports either,” she says. “Zach tries to make me play with him
sometimes, just to help him practice, but it’s been years and I still can’t throw the ball the way he
likes, so.”

Christen just hums in response, quickly changing into her clothes as Julie texts on her phone. A
liberal amount of perfume later and Christen is ready just as her phone beeps with a text from an
unknown number telling her that her chariot has arrived. She laughs, grabbing shoes and a small
cross-body bag as she saves Dom’s number into her phone.

“Ready?” Christen asks, grabbing her keys off her dresser and looking at Julie who immediately
perks up.

“Yep!” she says, hopping along behind Christen. “Let’s go.”

Dom is a very nice guy who is just as funny as Syd and twice as pretty. He let’s Julie sit up front and
fiddle with the radio stations, and between him and Christen, they answer all her questions about the
sport.

“Oh, okay, so you’re telling me that the same eleven players stay on the field the entire time?” Julie asks,
amazed. “Defense and offense both stay on the field the entire time?”

Dom nods, coming to a stop at a red light. Christen knows the sport pretty well after watching Kelley
play for more than ten years, but Dom understands more of the game than her and is better at
“You can make substitutions, and depending on what level you play at, your subs might be limited,” he explains. “Like, at the college level, you can make as many as you want. You can even take someone out during the first half and put them back in during the second half. Professionally, though, you usually only get three, and once you’re out, you’re out.”

“Wow,” Julie says, like her mind is being blown. “So what if someone gets injured?”

“You better make smart subs,” Christen says darkly.

Dom chuckles.

Julie keeps up a steady stream of questions and it’s fairly amusing to see how she keeps comparing the sport to football – she wants to know about the different punishments for fouls, and she at least seems to understand that the keepers are the only ones who can use their hands. Dom is patient with her, answering everything as best as he can as they get to the field and find seats.

“I always sit in the front, because otherwise Syd would kill me,” he explains, leading them to a spot fairly close to the bench. The players aren’t out yet, but that’s because it’s still early.

“I usually hide in the back,” Christen says dryly. “Otherwise Kelley notices me and tries to wave.”

Sure enough, once the team files out onto the field, Kelley beams up at Christen and nudges the girl next to her, pointing to where Christen is trying to hide behind Julie and wildly waving her arms above her head.

When the game starts, Dom gets too into the action to explain much to Julie, leaving the job to fall to Christen. Julie seems primarily concerned with recognizing all the players, asking Christen to point out who she knows.

“Oh, Christen says, tucking her hair behind her ear. She’s regretting leaving it down because it’s hot out and the back of her neck is sweating, but there’s nothing she can do about it now. “So Kelley plays winger sometimes, like tonight, which means that she’s in midfield and hangs out on the sides. She’s right there, on the right side of the field, see?”

Julie nods obediently.

It takes Christen a few minutes to identify the other players, but they’re close enough to the field that it isn’t too hard and the names on the backs of the jerseys are large enough for her to easily read.

“So up front is Syd. She’s a forward.”

“I know what that means,” Julie interrupts.

“Alex is the other forward playing now,” Christen continues. “I met both of them last week. Behind Kelley is Ali – she plays right back.”

“So she’s a defender?” Julie asks, and Christen nods in confirmation. “See, I’m learning!”

“You’re doing well,” Christen says, smiling. “Now, Megan used to play on the left wing, across from Kelley, but she graduated last spring so I’m not sure who the girl in her place is. I know that Meghan – Kelley calls her Kling, because that’s her last name – plays left back. Morgan plays in the middle of the midfield, so she doesn’t usually run up the side like Kelley does.”
That’s the extent of Christen’s knowledge of the players on the field. Most of the players she’d come to recognize over the past years have graduated, and there are some younger players out there getting minutes, and she doesn’t even recognize the names on the jerseys.

“I like her,” Julie says, pointing to a center back as she smoothly kicks the ball away from goal. “She’s good.”

Christen watches for a few seconds. “Yeah, she is.”

Alex scores two goals, one of which Kelley assists, and Syd scores another. That’s all before halftime, and Julie is impressed before Dom tells her that the team they’re playing is kind of mediocre. The second half slows down a bit, but the girl playing on the left wing assists a goal made by a baby freshman that has subbed in for Alex, and it’s an absolute beauty that gets everyone in the stands on their feet. There isn’t a huge crowd – it’s mostly friends and family in the stands – but they still make a decent amount of noise.

The other team gets one in the net mere minutes before the game is over, and the keeper takes it in stride. Christen recognizes the keeper from years before – she’s pretty sure she’s a senior, but she wouldn’t want anyone to quote her on that – but aside from the name on the back of her kit, she doesn’t know who she is. Once the game is over, Kelley runs off the field and barrels head first towards Christen.

“Did you see that?” Kelley asks excitedly. She’s sweaty as she hops over the first row of bleachers to reach Christen, jumping on her and making Christen fumble to catch her in time. Kelley does most of the work, wrapping her legs around Christen’s waist and tucking her face in her neck. Christen nearly stumbles with the surprise of it all, but Julie is there for her to lean against while she regains her balance.

“Good job,” Christen says, her face flaming as she tries to support Kelley’s weight without placing her hands anywhere inappropriate. “Real proud of you, Kells.”

“Next time I’ll score for you,” Kelley promises, raising her head to look at Christen head on. “I almost did this time – did you see my shot in the second half? The one that hit the crossbar?”

“That darn crossbar,” Christen says wryly.

Kelley laughs, pushing her sweaty face back into Christen’s neck.

“You played really well,” Julie offers, and Kelley whips her head up and around to look at her.

“Thanks,” Kelley says, and Christen is pretty sure that she’s not imagining the suddenly icy tone to her voice. She hops off of Christen after that, pushing flyaways off of her face and pulling her jersey away from her sweat-soaked torso. “So. Are you coming with us later?”

“That’s the plan!” Julie answers cheerfully. “I had a lot of fun watching you guys play.”

Kelley smiles at her but it’s twisted and pained, and she refocuses her attention back on Christen as soon as she can.

“So, Syd and I will ride with you and Dom,” she says. “Meet you outside the locker room?”

“Syd might need a while,” Dom says from next to them. He’s been kissing Syd ever since the whistle had sounded and she’d charged for him, but it looks like she’s joining the rest of her teammates on the way back to the locker room.
“I’ll make sure she doesn’t,” Kelley says, sniffing her armpit. “Actually, I might need a while too.”

Julie laughs, and Kelley seems to take that as her cue to walk away. Dom offers to go pull up the car since the parking lot is a good five minutes walk away, leaving Julie to fix Christen with a very curious stare.

“So, either Kelley really hates me, or she just really likes you,” Julie says, raising her eyebrows as a tentative smile crosses her face.

“Probably the latter,” Christen says embarrassedly, praying that her cheeks aren’t as red as they feel. “I mean, you know we’ve been friends forever.”

“Yeah, but she was all over you, and she barely even looked at me,” Julie points out as they step onto the grass and begin the long walk to the far end of the pitch.

“That’s just Kelley,” Christen says, even though Kelley’s behavior towards Julie is a true anomaly. Julie doesn’t need to know that, though. “She’s better with people she’s close to, and I just think that she feels like she doesn’t know you very well.”

Julie just shrugs it off because she’s just that great, and she doesn’t even complain when they all climb into Dom’s car later and Kelley makes a big deal about Christen sitting in the middle of the backseat even though Kelley’s smaller and has shorter legs.

“So,” Syd says, turning around from the passenger seat. “We’re going to Kling and Moe’s place because, unfortunately, there are way too many young guns on the team to go out anywhere.”

“Mal is still seventeen,” Kelley says, poking Christen. “She’s the one who got us that fourth goal.”

“Seventeen?” Christen asks, unbelieving. “How?”

“She skipped a grade when she was younger, I guess,” Syd says with a shrug. “Anyway. Kling and Moe actually live in a house a little further out, which means that there’s less of a chance of annoying neighbors shutting us down as long as we keep everything under control.”

She then fixes her gaze on Kelley, raising her eyebrows.

“I can stay under control,” Kelley says defensively. “I did fine last Friday!”

“We weren’t drinking liquor last Friday,” Syd reminds her. “And there were only five of us.”

Kelley grumbles under her breath, leaning into Christen who has to stiffen in order to avoid leaning into Julie.

Kling and Morgan live in a small but neat house. It’s clearly home to a couple of college students, someone’s mom having made an obvious attempt at decorating between the throw rugs and stacks of books everywhere. There are already a good amount of people there – Dom hadn’t been joking when saying that Syd would need a while to get ready – and Kelley wraps an arm around Christen to steer her around. Christen reaches out a hand to Julie who accepts it, staying close.

“This is Morgan,” Kelley introduces her. “Moe, this is Christen.”

“This is Julie,” Christen says quickly. “Thanks for having us here.”

“Oh, no problem,” Morgan says. “I really like your dress!”

“Oh, thanks,” Julie says, beaming.
“Come here, I’ll get you guys drinks,” Morgan says, motioning them towards the kitchen.

“On a scale of one to ten,” Kelley starts, making Christen groan, “you’re not exactly a bartender, you know.”

“I’m better than you,” Morgan shoots back as she studies the bottles in front of her.

“You’re not even legal,” Kelley says.

“Neither are you.”

Christen stifles a laugh.

“Do you have rum?” Julie asks, moving a bottle of vodka aside.

“Yeah, but I think Alex stole it,” Morgan says, tapping her chin. “Come on, we can go find it.”

Julie is at Morgan’s side then, smiling at Christen helpfully. “Come find me if you need me!” she calls as she leaves, already arm in arm with Moe.

Christen sighs, picking up a red plastic cup from a stack and reaching for a bottle of whiskey.

“Oh, hard liquor?” Kelley teases. “We’re getting wild tonight, I see.”

“Well, I figure if I’m here, I might as well enjoy it,” Christen explains, pouring some into a cup and then passing it to Kelley before getting another cup. “Right?”

“Right,” Kelley says, twisting the cap off a two-liter of Coke. “One a scale of one to ten, would you rather play beer pong or meet all of the other players?”

Christen hesitates, because as much as she sucks at beer pong, she doesn’t know if she necessarily wants to listen to Kelley share inside jokes with all of her teammates.

“Meet everyone, got it,” Kelley says when Christen takes too long to answer, taking the other cup from her and pouring Coke in with the whiskey. “Come on, let’s go.”

Kelley forgets to screw the top back on the Coke so Christen does it for her, lagging behind and having to jog to catch up with Kelley who is already weaving her way though the living room.

Christen meets Mallory who is a baby at seventeen and nursing a can of beer, something that she mentions was thrust into her hands by Syd who is a complete party animal – Mal’s words, not Christen’s.

“I’m switching to water after this,” she says, rolling her eyes from where she’s perched on the arm of the couch.

Mallory sits with Rose, another freshman who is wide-eyed and funny and drinking a beer of her own with ten times the amount of enthusiasm Mal is. On the other end of the couch is Emily who is relatively quiet, letting Kelley and Rose dominate the conversation and trading wry remarks with Mallory who nods in response.

After the babies of the team decide to head outside, something about Rose wanting a go at the beer pong setup, Kelley forces Christen to accompany her to the bathroom. Christen squeezes in with her, holding Kelley’s cup and taking small sips from hers so that she doesn’t have to look as Kelley pushes down her shorts.
“So, how are you doing?” Kelley asks, once she’s sat down.

“Good,” Christen says quickly. “Everyone is really nice, so that’s good.”

“Rose is a trip,” Kelley tells her. “We’ve been thinking of adopting her.”

“Who’s we?”

“Just the team in general,” Kelley answers, reaching for toilet paper. “Abby – you know, our assistant coach – is obsessed with her, and some of the sophomores adore her.”

“I feel like there are so many people on the team,” Christen confesses. “I feel like I’ve met so many, and there are so many more that I haven’t even seen yet.”

Kelley laughs, hopping up from the toilet and flushing it as she tugs her shorts back up onto her hips.

“Well, come on,” Kelley says, reaching past Christen to wash her hands. Christen edges out of the way, lips resting on the rim of her cup. She hasn’t drunk much, not enough for the alcohol to really affect her yet, but she’s wondering if she needs to pace herself, considering that the last thing she ate was a poptart she shared with Julie back at her apartment. “Let’s make the rounds.”

Kelley keeps Christen close at her side, clutching her upper arm and tugging her around. Christen goes easily, smiling and giving one-armed hugs to those Kelley introduces her to. There’s Kling who is short but a riot, and she stands with Ali who hugs Christen tightly.

“It’s so good to see you!” Ali exclaims with her beautiful smile. “Are you having fun?” Christen just nods and reassures her that she’s having a good time, but before Ali gets to say much else, Kelley is nudging her and nodding her head across the room.

“Ash is looking for you,” Kelley tells her, and Christen looks in the direction Kelley had nodded in an attempt to find out who Ash is.

Ali lights up, hugging Christen again and telling her that she’ll talk to her later before she takes off.

“Cruel,” Kling says, shaking her head with a grin on her face. “You know perfectly well that Ashlyn was not looking for her.”

Kelley shrugs in amusement.

“What Ali doesn’t know won’t hurt her,” she replies, and before Christen can ask what’s going on, Moe sidles up to them with Julie and another girl at her side.

“Hey,” Julie says, knocking her shoulder with Christen’s. “You doing alright?”

“Yeah,” Christen says, looking at Kelley who is eagerly reaching for the girl whose name she doesn’t know yet, finally letting go of her bicep in the process. “Kelley keeps acting like she’s going to introduce me to people and then doesn’t, so whatever.”

Julie purses her lips for a moment before she’s smiling again.

“They’re all actually really cool,” she tells Christen. “Crystal – here, have you met her? – is literally the best dancer I’ve ever met. I’ll make sure she shows you later.”

“Hm,” Christen says, taking a gulp of her drink. It’s fairly diluted, so it doesn’t burn too badly going down, but her cup is almost empty and she’s beginning to feel warm.
“Hey.”

Two girls show up, one of them tall with blonde hair and the other short with a dark sloppy ponytail.

“Sammy bet me that she can do more shots than me,” the dark-haired girl says, eyes lit up with mirth. “Who wants to get in on this? Easy money, if you ask me.”

The taller girl scoffs. “I’m bigger than you,” she explains. “Steph, even if you’ve got a ‘higher tolerance’” – she rolls her eyes as she speaks, putting air quotes around the words – “I bet I can still handle my liquor better than you.”

“Now this I’ve got to see,” Morgan says mildly.

“I’ll bet on Sam,” the other girl, Crystal, says. “I’m short, so I get it. No offense, Steph.”

Steph looks unfazed.

“To the kitchen!” Kling shouts.

In the kitchen they manage to draw a small crowd, with the babies crawling in curiously as Kelley takes it upon herself to prepare the rows of shot glasses. Steph is shoveling a 100 calorie pack of pretzels in her mouth while Sam does lunges, and Alex has appeared out of nowhere to declare herself in charge of the money, collecting people’s pocket change and claiming, “I’m a business major, I know what I’m doing.” Julie offers to film the entire thing, so Christen finds herself laughing as she watches her climb onto the countertop and test out different angles.

Christen waits with everyone else, quiet as Rose and Mallory stand on either side of her. Rose is shouting something at Sam that sounds suspiciously like trash talk, but Sam doesn’t seem too affected, taking it all in stride. It’s clear that Steph is the favorite to win, which means that Christen finds herself rooting for the underdog.

It’s taking too long to get started, Steph rolling her neck impatiently as more and more people approach Alex with their bets. Christen’s attention wanders over all the faces, most of them familiar to her now. There’s Lindsey, who’s almost as tall as Sam. Becky is crossing her arms over her chest, claiming to not be involved in what’s happening and insisting that she’s only there in a supervisory capacity. Ali shows up just in time to get her bets in, her lipstick smeared and her shirt wrinkled in a way that makes Christen raise her eyebrows.

There’s one girl though, standing nearly hidden next to Lindsey and holding a plastic cup loosely in her hands, that catches Christen’s attention and makes her do a double take. She stands with strong shoulders and hair that falls over one shoulder, head inclined slightly as she listens to Lindsey talk. When she raises her cup to her mouth, she catches Christen’s eye from across the kitchen, and Christen shifts uncomfortably.


Mallory follows Christen’s line of sight.

“What? Lindsey?”

Christen shakes her head, and Mallory looks at her knowingly.

“Tobin,” she explains.
“Tobin,” Christen repeats, the name sounding strange and foreign yet fascinating on her tongue. She wraps her head around the unusual name, trying to associate it with the girl’s tanned skin and lanky but strong limbs.

“She’s new,” Mallory explains. “A senior transfer from UNC.”

Christen knows enough about college soccer to be shocked by this information.


Mal shrugs, but answers.

“Well, they weren’t winning any championships, and we were,” Mallory says. “I heard that she wants a second title before she graduates, and coach promised to play her a full ninety every game. She’s good. Fancy feet, and she’s been feeding Alex some pretty great crosses in practice.”

“She came from UNC?” Christen asks, still in disbelief.

Mallory nods solemnly.

“She’s kind of on the national team,” Mallory tells her casually. “I mean, I’ve been called up to the U17 team before, but she’s part of the real thing. Got her first call up in January. Didn’t make it to Canada, but they say she’s going to Rio. So, she’s kind of decent on the pitch.”

Christen tries to ignore the white-hot intrigue spiking up her spine.

“Wow,” Christen says, more than impressed. “So how do you play on the national team and the school team at the same time?”

“Sacrifice,” Mallory answers. “Time management. I live, breathe, and sleep soccer, and I bet you she does too. Lindsey had to twist her arm to get her to come tonight. Here, look. They’re starting. I’m thinking Steph pukes after she wins, what about you?”

“Yeah,” Christen says, dragging her eyes away from Tobin. “Yeah, me too.”

* 

A couple of hours and a failed attempt at beer pong later, Christen has been separated from Julie and Kelley. Alex and Syd absolutely killed Christen and Becky at the game, but Becky doesn’t seem too upset about it as she compliments Christen on a good game.

“I’ve got to pee,” Alex excuses herself as Syd heads off to find Dom, and just like that, Christen is alone. She wanders inside, keeping an eye out for Kelley or Julie. She even scans the small crowd for Ali or Mal, but she reaches the empty kitchen before she sees anyone she feels even remotely comfortable enough to strike up conversation with. A mess of shot glasses remains on the counter from Sam and Steph’s competition – which Sam had ended up losing, but only very narrowly – and Christen frowns at it all, setting all the glasses upright and wondering if anyone would notice if she starting mopping up the liquor that had spilled.

There is a roll of paper towels on a holder in the corner, and Christen doesn’t think it will hurt if she uses a few to clean up the counter. She tears off a couple of sheets and wipes, tossing them in the trash afterwards. Then, still looking for something to do and wasting time before she has to go back out and search for Kelley and Julie again, she reaches for a new cup and begins examining the bottles on the counter.
“Shoot.”

She doesn’t even realize she’s spoken aloud for a moment, holding onto the empty last two liter of soda. Christen doesn’t like drinking liquor straight and she really doesn’t want to end up with a beer, so she contemplates her options as she studies the Coke bottle and briefly considers finding Moe or Kling to ask if they have any mixers stashed away.

“Here,” a voice says, sliding a cup over to her. Christen looks up abruptly, jumping slightly when she sees how close someone has gotten to her. It’s Tobin, leaning against the stretch of counter next to her and observing her intently.

“What?” Christen asks, her voice shakier than she wants it to be.

“I haven’t roofied it or anything,” Tobin says, a ghost of a smile crossing her face as she crosses one ankle over the other, folding her arms across her chest. She’s not taller than Christen – she might even be a little shorter – but there’s something about her that comes off as intimidating. “Just try it.”

Christen looks between Tobin’s face and the cup warily, seeing dark syrupy liquid inside and wondering if Tobin is really offering her drink up to a literal stranger. She gives in when Tobin’s smile doesn’t falter, picking up the cup and sniffing it gingerly. The action makes Tobin smile wider, and Christen flushes as she takes a sip.

It tastes like plain Coke, no alcohol added, and it takes Christen by surprise. Everyone has been liberal with their alcohol consumption tonight, Mal and maybe Emily notwithstanding, but Christen can see even though the slight haze that Tobin has probably been drinking only soda all night.

“You’re not drinking,” Christen says, the words feeling thick in her mouth.

“Nope,” Tobin says, shaking her head. She reaches for the empty cup that Christen had been going to use, sticking it under the faucet and filling it with water. Christen watches her closely, even more surprised when Tobin begins drinking from the cup.

“Why not?” Christen asks.

Tobin shrugs.

“I’m not going to mind if you add anything to that, you know,” she says, nodding towards the cup of Coke.

Christen automatically reaches for the bottle of whiskey and Tobin looks remarkably pleased with herself.

“Everyone else is drinking,” Christen says, splashing maybe a little more whiskey in her cup than she normally would. “Everyone but you.”

Tobin just shrugs again.

“I’m Tobin,” she says. “But I don’t know who you are.”

It’s not as much of a statement as it is a question.

“Christen,” she answers, pointing at herself once she’s screwed the cap back on the bottle. “I’m a friend of Kelley’s.”

“Ah,” Tobin says, nodding. “Yeah, she said she brought a friend.”
“Have you seen her?” Christen asks, clutching her cup tightly. “I haven’t seen her in a while and I’ve been trying to find her.”

“I saw her with Crystal a little while ago,” Tobin offers.

“Thanks,” Christen says. “It was nice meeting you. Good game, by the way.”

The smile that spreads across Tobin’s face is something beautiful. It’s wide and lights up her entire face, and it makes Christen smile too.

“Thanks,” Tobin says, positively beaming.

“So, um, I’ll see you around,” Christen finds herself saying, staring as Tobin’s smile is interrupted by her licking her lips.

She’s nearly out of the kitchen, feeling restless and like she can’t stay where she is for much longer before she goes crazy.

“Hey,” Tobin says, catching her attention. Christen turns around, looking at Tobin who hasn’t moved an inch and is still standing with her cup of water. “Nice to meet you too.”

Christen expects to tense, but something in her relaxes minutely.

“Thanks,” Christen says.

“You know,” Tobin says casually, something in her eyes alight with mirth, “Kelley apparently kisses a picture of the two of you before every game. Is that just a Kelley thing, or do they do things differently here?”

Christen rolls her eyes, feeling her cheeks flush.

“I hate her,” she says, shaking her head. “No one ever shuts up about that picture, apparently.”

“You should get her one for away games,” Tobin muses, bringing her cup to her mouth. “It seems to work.”

Christen’s mouth hangs open, not knowing what to say as Tobin straightens. She sends Christen a wink, sidestepping her to get out of the kitchen and leaving a very stunned and confused Christen behind.
am i a cute third wheel?

Saturday morning dawns late, but it feels far too early for Christen. She’s not hungover – she refuses to believe that three Jack and Cokes and a game of beer pong spread out over an entire night is enough to get her hungover – but she is exhausted. Julie left a few hours before, gently shaking Christen awake to tell her that Zach was there to pick her up, and now that she’s fully conscious, Christen feels bad for not doing more than grunting before rolling over and going back to sleep.

Christen tries to spend at least one morning per weekend at the dog shelter in town. It’s a little late to get started for the day, already half way through the eleventh hour, but Christen drags herself through a shower before tying her hair up and grabbing a poptart on her way out. She checks on Kelley before leaving, but is only met by an empty room. Kelley’s probably already at her sorority house pregaming for the football game, and Christen grows more thankful that she’s found something to do that doesn’t involve sitting around the apartment and waiting for her best friend to show up and entertain her.

The dog shelter isn’t quiet, but it brings about a certain inner peace that Christen can’t find anywhere else. It settles something inside her and brings the world to a stop for a moment while all the dogs bark and whine, and she’s glad that in her freshman year she had stopped to look at a flyer in the psych building wanting volunteers at the shelter.

Lauren, the student volunteer coordinator, is newly graduated from the university and one of the nicest people Christen has ever met. She’s always happy to see Christen, and this Saturday is no exception.

“Christen,” Lauren says brightly when Christen enters the building. “Hey, I didn’t think I’d see you here today!”

“Why not?” Christen asks, confused as Lauren gets up from the front desk to round the counter and give her a hug.

“It’s game day,” Lauren explains, squeezing her before letting go. “I figured you’d be off with your friends.”

Christen wishes that was true, but Julie’s spending the day with Zach’s family and Kelley is spending it with beer bongs and ice luges in a fraternity’s backyard.

“Not today,” Christen says, feeling eased by Lauren’s mere presence. “I went out last night and wasn’t really feeling it this morning.”

“Understandable,” Lauren says with a wry smile. “I’m like that too. Amy’s in the back if you want to check with her and see what needs to be done.”

“Sure, I’ll go find her,” Christen says, pushing past into the kennels to go find Amy, Lauren’s partner in crime, in the back room where they keep all the food and supplies. On the way she passes rows of dogs, all of them either quieting or barking loudly at the sight of her, and the amount of self restraint it takes to keep from stopping and petting every single puppy is enormous. She passes nearly thirty dogs before pushing open the back door, laughing to herself when she sees Amy bopping along to some music playing from her phone, set on the edge of the counter. There’s a small puppy in the
sink, Amy up to her elbows in suds as she bathes what looks like a Chihuahua mix.

“Hey,” Christen says, carefully edging into Amy’s line of sight as to not surprise her. “How are you?”

Amy stops singing abruptly, grinning widely when she spots Christen.

“Hey!” she exclaims, leaning forward and giving Christen an armless hug as best as she can. Christen wraps her arms around Amy, letting herself relax into the hug for a long moment before drawing back. “Turn the music down, talk to me!”

Christen grins, playing with Amy’s phone until the music fades into the background and they can hear each other a little better.

“What’s up?” Amy asks, doing her best to restrain the squirming puppy who seems determined to investigate Christen’s sudden appearance. “I wasn’t sure you’d be in today! I know there’s a home game today, are you not going? Or is it not until later?”

“The game starts at three,” Christen tells her, wordlessly gathering the towels that Amy has forgotten as Amy begins rinsing the dog off. “I’m not going though. I was out last night and I kind of wanted a chill day, you know?”

Amy nods appreciatively.

“Totally,” she says. “I get it. So, what did you do last night?”

Christen tells her about hanging out with Julie and going to the soccer game before hanging out with the team at Moe and Kling’s, and Amy listens intently, interjecting every here and there.

“So, they’re all Kelley’s friends?” Amy asks, and Christen nods in confirmation. Amy and Lauren both know who Kelley is because she’s dropped Christen off a few times and once stayed for a fundraiser, but they don’t know much about her aside from the fact that her and Christen are childhood best friends. “Were they all nice to you?”

Christen appreciates the fiercely protective tone Amy takes on. She’s only a couple of years older than Christen, but she’s been a bit of an older sister to her since they met.

“Very nice,” Christen assures her. “For a while, I wasn’t even with Kell or Jules.”

“Good,” Amy says, finally finishing cutting the dog’s nails and letting him climb up into her arms. “So what do you say, want to grab a few of the big dogs and take them out back to get hosed down?”

Christen glances down at her old running shorts and t-shirt.

“Let’s do it,” she agrees readily.

For the next couple of hours they let the dogs run loose, tackling one every once in a while so they can work together and give it a proper bath. Amy and Christen alternate taking the dogs back inside, and Christen takes care to sit down with the dogs for a moment and let them lick her face until she begins to feel bad for leaving Amy alone for so long. It’s an easy afternoon, and when the dogs are all clean, she takes up residence with a middle aged retriever while Amy closes up the other kennels.

“Is it okay if I hang out back here?” Christen asks, petting the dog’s head between it’s ears as Amy stashes a ring of keys in her pocket.
“Of course,” Amy says easily. “I trust you. I’m just going to be up front with Lauren. We’ll probably try to stream the game on one of these ancient desktops, so feel free to join us if you want.”

Christen sits with the dog, letting him mindlessly lick at the underside of her left wrist while her right hand scrolls through her phone. Everyone on Instagram is posting game day pictures, dressed to the nines in varying degrees of garnet and gold, and something pangs within her chest. Kelley’s posted a picture of her draped over her little and her little’s boyfriend, and Christen grins as she likes the picture and rolls her eyes at the caption.

*On a scale of one to ten, am I a cute third wheel?*

Christen thinks for several long moments before commenting, *At least a seven. If this is a scale of patheticness. Otherwise a zero.*

She’s got a few friend requests from some of the girls on the soccer team, and she assumes that they found her through Kelley’s profile. Ali, Syd, and Alex had already followed her after last weekend, and she had followed them back. Christen okays requests from Moe, Kling, Steph, Sam, Rose, and Mal, and follows them all back. She gets distracted by Steph’s profile, scrolling to see a picture from the previous week – Tuesday, she thinks, if she’s counting back the days correctly. It’s a picture of the team piled together after a practice, the lot of them sweaty and some of them grinning while others look exhausted and ready to head home. She grins when she sees Kelley’s smiling face smashed between Lindsey and Alex’s, and she’s relatively impressed with herself when she recognizes most of the people in the photo.

A notification pops up at the bottom of the screen, and Christen holds her breath when she sees that Kelley has tagged her in a comment. It’s on her own photo, a response, and Christen clicks through to look at it.

*@christenpress I’m a dime piece on all scales and you know it.*

Christen doesn’t reply, but instead stares at the comment for a while, barely cognizant of the gentle smile on her face.

* A rainy Sunday means that Christen parks herself in the science library to study for an upcoming quiz, and Kelley joins her halfway through to finish a lab report that’s due Tuesday. They work in silence for most of the day, surrounded by gray clouds and the occasional flash of lightning.

Monday classes aren’t much fun, with the occasional drizzle making things more annoying than usual. Julie is nursing a cold which means that she isn’t in class, so Christen finds it hard to focus. Kelley spends the evening at the sorority house, and Christen makes dinner for herself while watching tv.

Tuesday means that Kelley spends most of the day in labs, and Christen decides to head to the gym in the afternoon out of pure boredom. She only puts in about half an hour of cardio and works with a few of the weight machines, but the process relieves some of the tension that’s been mounting in her shoulders and neck.

Wednesday brings back any of the stress she’d managed to eradicate, because her mom calls and grills her about her grades for twenty minutes. Kelley doesn’t help the situation when she gets home from practice still sweaty and grass-stained, begging for Christen to pick up bags of ice so she can soak in her bath. Christen is annoyed because she knows for a fact that Kelley can take her ice baths back at the practice facility with the rest of the girls, but Kelley seems hell bent on pestering Christen
until she cracks. Christen holds it together, though, traveling to Publix to pick up bags of ice and subs for them to eat for dinner, and she sits on the toilet while Kelley huddles into herself in her ice bath. The two of them eat while Kelley soaks, and by the end, Christen feels tense despite knowing that she shouldn’t.

Thursday is worse. Kelley wants to go to Chipotle after practice and pouts when Christen refuses, claiming that she has a research paper to start gathering sources for and can’t be spending all her money on food. Instead of meeting Kelley, Christen texts Julie who is more than happy to bunker down in one of the campus Starbucks with her while she browses online journals and drinks cup after cup of coffee.

Kelley leaves Friday morning for an away game, and doesn’t get back until Sunday night. When she comes back, she crawls into bed with Christen, who is watching Netflix on her laptop with her glasses on and a certain amount of tension in her shoulders that makes it difficult to relax when Kelley snuggles into her side.

“I missed you this weekend,” Kelley sighs, breathing hot air against Christen’s bicep. “Can we do something together tomorrow?”

“I’m in class until three,” Christen says begrudgingly.


Christen hesitates. Part of her feels like she should be mad at Kelley for being demanding and domineering and neglectful, all at the same time, but another part of her is melting despite the lack of apology for being less than a great friend. She finds herself agreeing despite herself, and hours later when trying to fall asleep, she avoids pinpointing exactly why she keeps giving into Kelley.

* 

It’s supposed to be just the two of them, so when Christen sees two figures approaching her car as she waits on the curb – parked dangerously, with her flashers on, something that makes her increasingly nervous the longer it takes Kelley to reach her – she feels her gently simmering temper begin to boil.

“Kelley,” Christen erupts the second the car door is opened, “you said five fifteen at the latest. It’s five twenty-four.”

Kelley raises an eyebrow at her from outside the car, sliding her bag off her shoulder.

“Can you pop the trunk?” Kelley asks, nodding her head towards the back of the car. “Unless you want smelly sock smell in your car for the next month.”

Christen glares at Kelley but does as asked, and Christen watches carefully in her rearview mirror as Kelley and the girl accompanying her dump their things in Christen’s trunk. When they’re done, Kelley slides into the passenger seat while the other girl gets into the backseat. When she stops moving, Christen can get a good look at her and she’s mildly shocked to see that it’s Tobin, still dressed in her soccer gear like Kelley and looking like she’s currently dripping sweat on Christen’s leather seats.

“We wouldn’t have been late if Syd hadn’t gotten to practice late and earned us all an extra five laps around,” Kelley says, reaching to blast the cool air throughout the car. “Chris, this is Tobin. Tobin’s coming to dinner with us.”
Christen wants to soften because she knows that Tobin is new, knows how hard it is to make friends, and she doesn’t want to be difficult. Still, she’d been looking forward to dinner with Kelley alone, just the two of them, and she finds herself forcing a smile onto her face as Tobin wiggles her fingers in a wave.

“We’ve met,” Tobin says simply, slouched and sprawled out across the backseat. Christen whips her head around, craning her neck to see if Tobin’s got her shoes on the seats, but it looks like she’s kicked off a pair of flip-flops and is letting her bare feet dangle just off the edge of the tan leather.

“Oh, at the party, right?” Kelley says as Christen puts the car in drive and turns off her hazards.

“Yep,” Tobin answers.

Christen doesn’t say anything, and she purses her lips as Kelley reaches for her phone in one of the cupholders, swiping her thumb across the screen. She knows that Kelley knows her passcode – Kelley had practically been the one to set it – and normally she doesn’t mind Kelley taking control of her phone to play music through the car, but something about Kelley’s sense of entitlement is irking her.

“Kell,” Christen says, coming to a red light and reaching over to yank her phone back.

“What?” Kelley asks, eyes wide. “What’s wrong?”

Christen doesn’t know how to articulate what’s bothering her, not that she would anyway, so instead she just puts her phone in her lap and grips the steering wheel tightly.

“Where are we going?” Christen asks once they’ve turned off campus.

“Let’s go to the chicken place,” Kelley says, turning around in her seat. “Tobin, you’ve got to try this place. It’s got the best smoothies.”

“Kell,” Christen says again. “You know I don’t like it there. What happened to wanting Chipotle?”

“We go there all the time,” Kelley says dismissively. “Besides, at this time, we’ll be in line forever and then not be able to find a seat. What do you say?”

She directs the last bit at Tobin, who just shrugs her shoulders, spinning her case-less phone between her thumb and forefinger.

“Wherever you two want to go,” she says, and when Christen meets her eyes in the rearview window, she can swear she sees she hint of a smirk. “Don’t make me a part of this.”

“Please, Chris?” Kelley begs, folding her hands together under her chin as she turns to her and pouts. “Can we go to the chicken place? I promise, promise that we’ll go to Chipotle next time.”

Christen sighs.

“Fine,” she says, switching lanes smoothly. “Fine, you can have your smoothie.”

Kelley fist pumps, and Christen trains her eyes on the road.

Christen does her best to not be difficult. She lets Kelley pay for all three of them, and lets Kelley choose the table at the front of the restaurant, even though Christen’s pretty sure she’s made it known how much she hates sitting near the windows where anyone can look in and see her. She doesn’t even say anything when Kelley slides into the seat next to Tobin, leaving Christen all alone on the
“Chris,” Kelley says, kicking her underneath the table. Christen stiffens, tucking her legs underneath her chair. “Chris, are you coming to our game this week?”

“Don’t I always?” Christen says, the ice slowly melting off of her.

“She’s really asking if you’ll be at the after party,” Tobin interjects, busying herself by twisting a paper straw wrapper around her index finger while they wait for their food. Christen watches Tobin’s hands for a second, looking at her strong fingers and lightly calloused palms before realizing that she seems to be left handed. “Moe and Crystal already invited Julie.”

“Oh, wow,” Christen says, sitting back in her seat. “She was that big of a hit?”

It figures, really, that Julie would go only as moral support and end up more popular amongst the group than Christen could ever dream of being.

“Well, they seemed to like her,” Tobin says, her voice a bit of a drawl.

“You should come,” Kelley tells Christen. “You had fun last time, right?”

“I guess,” Christen says with a shrug. “I’ll think about it.”

“The more the merrier,” Tobin says, raising her eyebrows in a gesture that Christen doesn’t quite understand.

“Do it for me?” Kelley asks, pouting and reaching across the table to hold Christen’s hands in her own. Christen reluctantly allows her to, her limp hands held tightly. Something about having Kelley beg for her company makes her feel a little less sour.

“Fine,” Christen relents, looking at Kelley who’s stuck her bottom lip out and looks positively ridiculous. “I’ll go.”

Kelley opens her mouth to reply, but before she can do so, their order number is being called.

“I’ll get it,” Kelley says, jumping up and out of her seat. Christen’s hands suddenly feel cold. “Be right back.”

Christen’s eyes find Tobin, who’s leaning back in her seat with an intrigued look on her face as she spins her phone between her fingers once more.

“What?” Christen asks, more defensively than intended.

“Nothing,” Tobin says easily, eyebrows rising again. “Don’t worry about it.”

Christen frowns and is about to demand an explanation, but then Kelley is there setting down the tray full of food and divvying it up.

“Thank you so much for letting us come here,” Kelley moans through her second mouthful of chicken and rice. “I owe you big, Chris.”

“You always do,” Christen deadpans.

Kelley chuckles, reaching a hand across the food to pat Christen’s cheek. Christen’s cheek burns from the contact, and she stares intently down at her food while feeling Tobin’s eyes on her.
Tobin’s not a big talker, Christen notices. She chimes in every now and again, but it’s mostly Kelley controlling the conversation, and Christen finds herself not minding that Tobin is there despite the strange things she’s said and done thus far. With Kelley in charge, Christen finds it easy to guide the conversation the direction she wants, talking about her classes and commiserating with Kelley about recitation sessions and reminiscing on the child psych class they’d taken together last semester.

“Sounds like fun,” Tobin remarks, sticking a piece of chicken in her mouth.

“One of the more interesting psych classes I’ve taken,” Kelley teases, looking pointedly at Christen.

“Psych isn’t that bad,” Christen starts, ready to defend her choice of major. “I have labs too, you know.”

“I know, babe,” Kelley says, patting Christen’s forearm. “I would never make fun of you, not around this one over here, anyway.”

She jerks her head in Tobin’s direction, and Christen’s eyes drift to see Tobin rolling her eyes and shrugging.

“Why?” Christen asks. “What’s your major?”

Tobin chews her mouthful of rice and beans slowly before swallowing.

“Communications,” she answers eventually.

“Oh,” Christen says, trying not to cringe. She tries not to be an elitist when it comes to major choices, seeing as psych isn’t exactly exclusive and her degree will be near useless unless she goes to get her masters, but communications is the one major she’ll never understand. She tries to be open minded about it though, acting as interested and respectful as she can. “So, what are you planning on doing with that?”

Tobin looks at Christen curiously, as though she’s watching her sprout a second head as they speak.

“Nothing,” Tobin says, as though its obvious.

Christen grinds her teeth, raking her fork through what’s left of her food and trying to ignore the warning look that Kelley is sending her.

“You’re not planning to do anything with your communications degree?” Christen asks for clarification. “Why are you even getting a degree then?”

“Because I have to go to school,” Tobin says, shooting Kelley a look that is plainly asking for help. Kelley remains silent though, sucking on the straw of her smoothie. “Might as well get something out of it though, acting as interested and respectful as she can. “So, what are you planning on doing with that?”

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“No, I mean, what do you plan on doing with your life if you’re not going to be using your college degree? What is even the point of the degree then?” Christen says, trying to clarify.

“Oh,” Tobin says, understanding dawning on her face. She looks at Kelley. “I guess she wouldn’t know about this from you.”

Kelley takes her mouth off the straw and lets out a small burp.

“Sorry,” she says to Tobin with a shrug and a smile. “I’m studying for the MCAT.”

Tobin turns back to face Christen.
“I’m going pro,” she explains.

Christen knows that Mallory mentioned something about a national team, and while Christen admittedly doesn’t know a ton about that kind of thing – she’s heard Kelley fawn over the team at the Olympics and World Cups over the years, but she won’t pretend to understand the system – she isn’t exactly expecting it to be a viable career option.

“So – what, you’re just planning on playing soccer for a living?” Christen asks. “What if that doesn’t work out?”

Tobin settles into her seat, looking amused in a way that gets under Christen’s skin.

“I mean, it’s already working out,” Tobin says confidently.

“But surely you can’t have that be your career,” Christen pushes, not understanding how Tobin can spend four years in college, earn a degree, and then toss it to the side in favor of playing sports for the rest of her life. “I mean, you’ll need your degree at one point or another, right?”

Tobin exchanges another look with Kelley, who finally decides to speak up.

“Chris, babe, no,” Kelley says gently. “When Tobin says she’s going pro and won’t need her degree, she’s right. Barring a career ending injury – knock on wood – she’s probably going to be playing professionally until her legs give out on her. She’s that good.”

“Are you not?” Christen asks, confused. She’s been under the impression that Kelley is a pretty good soccer player.

“I could be,” Kelley says. “But I don’t want it as much as Tobin does.”

Christen sips at the last of her drink, trying to keep her face neutral as she watches Tobin, who looks slightly smug. She gets it, kind of, understands that when someone is good at sports they can play for a living. It’s just hard to imagine someone simply going through the motions of earning a college degree only to metaphorically shove it in the back of a drawer for the rest of their life, especially since Christen has been working her ass off just to pass her classes.

“I’m going to the bathroom,” Kelley says a few minutes later. “You two play nice.”

She gets up, passing Christen on her way to the back of the restaurant. As she does, she ruffles Christen’s hair and leans down to press a kiss to the top of her head. Christen scowls, running her hands over her hair and trying to straighten the mess as Kelley walks away.

“So,” Tobin says, sitting up and resting her elbows on the tabletop as soon as Kelley is out of earshot. “How long have you two been together?”

Christen furrows her eyebrows as she tries to make sense of Tobin’s words, and when she finally understands, her jaw drops in horror and she can feel the heat of a blush burning her cheeks.

“We’re not,” she says quickly. “We’re not together.”

Tobin looks as though she isn’t buying it.

“Hm. Okay.”

“We’re best friends,” Christen hurried to explain. “We’ve known each other since we were kids. That’s all. Besides – I’m not even into girls like that.”
Tobin raises an eyebrow before leaning back in her seat, crossing her arms over her chest.

“Sure.”

Tobin says it in a way that grates on Christen’s nerves.

“I’m serious,” she insists. “I don’t know about Kelley, I don’t want to speak for her, but I’ve never been interested like that.”

Her chest grows tight as she says the words, but she ignores it in favor of convincing Tobin.


“We are,” Christen says. “But we’re just friends.”

Tobin doesn’t respond, looking at something to the left of Christen’s head as she zones out. Christen sits awkwardly for a few minutes, sipping from her practically empty cup and wincing at the rattling noise the ice makes.

“Well,” Tobin says, sitting up straight and gathering all the garbage at the table. “You two would be great together.”

Christen’s throat feels swollen, like she couldn’t speak if she wanted to, so she’s forced to remain silent as Tobin walks to the garbage. When she comes back, Christen pointedly looks at her soda cup, not wanting to look at Tobin at all.

“So I’ve got to head to the house, something about how one of the girls fucked up planning for the date event next weekend and I’ve got to fix things,” Kelley says, the words too fast as she approaches the table, grabbing her wallet with the hand not currently occupied by her phone. “Chris, can you drop me off there please?”

Christen bites her tongue, nodding tersely. She’s been looking forward to spending the evening with Kelley, especially since they hadn’t gotten their time alone while eating, but she guesses that’s not happening anymore.

“Thanks,” Kelley says, eyes focused on her phone screen as she types out messages with a single thumb. “God, how hard is it to make sure that the venue – “

Christen tunes her out, hooking her keys through her index finger as she leads the way outside and to her car. Kelley follows blindly, still texting away, with Tobin ambling along behind her, and Christen finds herself annoyed by Tobin’s lack of urgency. They all slide into the car and Christen drives them back towards campus, not bothering to play any music and instead letting the three of them sit in silence.

Kelley doesn’t have to tell Christen where to go, because Christen’s been to the house a million times – mostly picking up or dropping off. Halfway there Kelley answers a phone call that Christen barely listens to, not understanding a word about the logistics and budget issues that she’s dealing with. When Christen glances in her rearview mirror before switching lanes, she notices Tobin rolling her eyes in the backseat and she has to refrain from doing the same.

“Thanks, babe,” Kelley tells Christen when she comes to a stop in front of the house. “I appreciate it. See you later.”

She presses a smacking kiss to Christen’s temple before getting out of the car and slamming the door shut, dirty streaks of sweat still running down her legs and hair still a mess that somehow manages to
look good on her.

Christen has to take a moment, clutching the steering wheel with both hands and telling herself to get it together.

The clearing of a throat brings her back into her surroundings.

“Oh,” Christen says, turning around to look at Tobin, legs thrown across the backseat and looking comfortable despite the awkward situation. “I guess I should take you back home?”

“Do you think you could just take me back to the field?” Tobin asks.

Christen scrunches up her nose in confusion – they’ve only just finished with practice and she had no idea why Tobin’s so eager to get back – but nods anyway.

“You can come sit up front if you want,” she says to be polite, and Tobin takes her sweet time gathering her shoes and opening and closing doors to sit in the passenger seat.

The field is at the opposite end of campus from Kelley’s sorority, and all of the narrow one way streets take some time to navigate. Tobin remains quiet, spinning her phone between her fingers as Christen switches on the radio and plays the latest hits station at a low volume. Christen feels like she should say something, but she’s honestly lost for words. What Tobin had said to her in the restaurant earlier is still nagging at her, and she feels like she can’t do anything without Tobin taking note of it.

Of course, Christen can’t help herself, and ends up blurting her question out just as she turns the last corner onto the street on which the practice facility entrance is located.

“What did you mean when you said that we’d be great together?”

As soon as she says it, she wishes she could take it back. Tobin doesn’t seem perturbed though, still spinning her phone and her face still smooth.

“Just that,” Tobin says simply. “I mean, you two are obviously close. I guess I was wrong, though.”

“Yeah,” Christen says, fingers clenching and then releasing. “Yeah, you were wrong.”

She pulls up by the curb, foot steady and firm on the brake as Tobin releases her seatbelt.

“You need help with your things?” Christen asks.

Tobin laughs.

“No, I’ve got it,” she says easily, opening the car door and stepping out. “Thanks for the ride, though. It was good to hang with you guys.”

Christen pops the trunk and Tobin goes to retrieve her things, a soccer ball tucked under her arm when she appears back in the open passenger doorway.

“I’ll see you this weekend, I guess,” Tobin says, leaning an elbow against the top of the car as she leans down to look at Christen, her ponytail swinging over her shoulder. “Bye, Christen.”

Christen’s face flames and she waves stupidly. Tobin’s gone after that, closing the door gently – not slamming it, the way Kelley does no matter how many times Christen asks her not to – and leaving Christen wondering what she’s supposed to do about this.
you guys have been really great in terms of responding to this story, so thank you so much for reading. the next chapter is pretty lengthy and might take a while to get out so i'm going back to giving sneak peeks if you message me on tumblr. the nice things you say to me make my day, so leave a review if you can! anything is better than nothing, i promise.
would you murder me if we did it again?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Before the game on Friday, before Kelley has to head on over to the field, she pulls Christen aside.

“I’ve got to ask you a question,” Kelley says, gnawing on a fingernail edge as soon as Christen walks in the door.

“Can it wait?” Christen asks, heading for her room. “I’ve really got to pee.”

“No,” Kelley says. “It’s urgent.”

Christen sighs, kicking off her shoes and dropping her bag on her bed. Kelley follows her into the bathroom and doesn’t even bat an eyelash as Christen pulls her shorts down.

“What is it then?” Christen asks, talking so that she can focus on something other than how much she wishes that Kelley would respect at least a few boundaries between them after so many years. “What do you need?”

“Well, Kling and Moe were supposed to host again tonight,” Kelley says, leaning against the counter. “But their AC broke this morning, and well, you know what the weather’s like outside.”

Christen thinks of the sweltering heat and humidity that’s been pressing down on her all day.

“Yes,” Christen says slowly, eyeing Kelley suspiciously. “What does that have to do with it?”

Kelley shifts her weight around.

“I told everyone they could come here if they wanted.”

Christen wants to scream, but instead she just buries her head in her hands, elbows pressing into her thighs. There’s no use arguing with Kelley over something that’s already been done, but that doesn’t mean that she’s happy about it.

“Kell,” she says, knowing that her voice is muffled by her hands, “you owe me so big for this one.”

“I know, I know,” Kelley says quickly. Christen slowly raises her head, shaking it when she sees the pleading look on Kelley’s face. “I’m sorry, Chris, I really am, but everyone else hosts all the time and I never have, and Ali made a comment about it, and I just felt like I had to offer, and everyone is already excited to see you again so I figured it couldn’t hurt.”

Christen reaches for the roll of toilet paper.

“And this way, you don’t have to worry about getting home at the end of the night!” Kelley says helpfully.

“True,” Christen says. Kelley mercifully looks away while Christen stands up and pulls her shorts up her legs. “But honestly Kelley, at least ask me next time.”

“I will,” Kelley promises fervently. “But I promise to make this as painless as possible for you. I’ll make sure no one goes into your room, and I’ll make everyone use my bathroom. I know that you don’t like people in your stuff”
Christen nudges Kelley aside so she can reach the sink to wash her hands.

“Does this mean that we have to go out and get liquor?” Christen asks, internally groaning at the thought of supervising a couple dozen drunk girls let loose in her apartment.

“Nah, we’re just hanging out tonight,” Kelley says. “During the season we try to stay pretty sober. The first home game is always an exception.”

“Good to know,” Christen says in relief. “So wait, are you all just literally hanging out? Is there a plan at all?”

Kelley shrugs, pushing off the counter and heading into Christen’s room.

“There’s a Harry Potter marathon on tv that Rose wants to watch,” she suggests. “Aside from that, we’re ordering pizza and soda. Listen, I’ve got to get ready to go, but I’ll see you after, okay?”


“Great,” Kelley says, and she gives Christen a quick hug before she’s bouncing out of the room. “Would you do me a solid and clean up a little before you leave? I don’t want everyone to think that we keep this place a mess. Thanks!”

Christen bites her tongue so she doesn’t say anything she regrets, and just nods. Kelley’s already gone, clearly expecting Christen to agree no matter what, and Christen does her best to brush off the hurt settling atop her shoulders.

The game goes well. The Gals win 3-1, and Julie gets excited when she sees Crystal score the first goal of the game. Alex scores one of the other goals, Lindsey scoring the third. When the game is over, Julie and Christen don’t bother sticking around. Kelley’s driving back to the apartment on her own and besides, Christen wants to head back with enough time to finish tidying up before anyone starts arriving.

“So what, Kelley didn’t even ask you?” Julie asks on the drive back, phone in her lap as she texts Zach.

“I mean she kind of told me,” Christen hedges, not wanting to make Kelley look like the bad guy. “If I’d put my foot down, told her no, she would have listened.”

Julie makes a noise in the back of her throat. Christen winces because she last thing she wants is for Julie to not like Kelley, but the two of them have been talking about the situation all night long and Christen may or may not have been noticeably bitter and frustrated about the whole thing.

“It’s fine, though,” Christen says, pushing a few fallen strands of hair away from her face. “I mean, the girls are nice and it sounds like tonight is going to be pretty casual.”

“Yeah,” Julie says, perking back up. “It’s really just nice to spend some time away from all the testosterone for once.”

“I bet,” Christen says, pulling into a parking spot outside her apartment. “Now come on, if I don’t wipe down Kelley’s sink, no one will.”

* 

Kelley’s right about the plans for the night. Alex and Ashlyn coordinate the food, ordering what sounds like a million boxes of pizza before heading out to grab soda and paper plates. While they’re
gone, Ali sidles up next to where Christen’s been hovering by the counter, a position that’s been
allowing her to keep an eye on everyone as they filter inside. Kelley’s holding court with Syd and
Crystal over on a couch, and some of the younger girls are busy looking through all the movies that
Christen and Kelley keep on a shelf below the tv.

“So,” Ali says, grinning widely at Christen. “What’s up?”

Christen looks at Ali, dressed in soft looking sweatpants with her wet hair pulled up into a bun.

“Nothing much,” Christen says. “How are you?”

“Doing well,” Ali says. “So, are you okay with everyone being here tonight? Kelley said you were,
but you kind of look like a deer in headlights right now.”

Christen wonders if she’s really that obvious.

“It’s cool, really,” Christen assures her. “I mean, we usually don’t have a ton of people over like this,
but it’s fine. Kelley says it’s going to be casual, so I’m fine with that.”

“Good,” Ali says, smiling genuinely. “It was kind of my idea and I didn’t want to put you in an
awkward position.”

“No, it’s fine,” Christen says. “Trust me.”

Ali looks at her for a moment, still smiling but somehow scrutinizing, and then she’s straightening up
and looking sincere again.

“Great,” she says. “So. I’ve got to pee – where’s the bathroom?”

Christen directs her in the direction of Kelley’s en suite before turning her attention back to the room
in front of her. Almost everyone has arrived and Ashlyn and Alex should be back any minute now.
Something in Christen wants to join Julie where she’s seemingly immersed in conversation with
Emily and Moe, nodding intently as she listens to them talk, but the part of her that’s drawn to Kelley
wins out and has her tentatively joining the group that is arguing over what movie to play when the
pizza arrives.

“We were here to watch Harry Potter anyway!” Rose exclaims, clutching the fourth movie and
brandishing it in front of Lindsey who looks completely unfazed. “This way, we don’t even need to
sit through commercials!”

“No,” Lindsey says flatly.

“I think you’re outnumbered,” Kelley speaks up apologetically.

“Let’s do a vote,” Tobin says calmly, hanging with her arms around Lindsey’s neck. Lindsey doesn’t
seem to mind, almost oblivious to it.

“Here,” Kelley says, spotting Christen as she lingers just to the side. “Christen, what do you think of
watching Harry Potter?”

“Well, they’re in your half of the movie collection,” Christen starts to say.

“Yeah, but you’ve watched them with me before,” Kelley says.

It’s true, Kelley’s dragged Christen to the movies with her to see each and every one, but they’re not
necessarily Christen’s cup of tea. Emboldened by Kelley’s fingers tugging at the hem of her shirt,
Christen takes a breath and looks at Lindsey.

“I’d vote no,” she volunteers.

“Excellent,” Lindsey says, moving to knock the movie case from Rose’s hands. Rose grips tight, tiny and darting out of Lindsey’s way just in time. “Let’s have a vote.”

Tobin detaches herself from Lindsey who goes around with Rose and the movie, asking everyone whether they vote yes or no. Christen does her best to take advantage of the distraction, moving to face Kelley and hopefully prevent Tobin from joining the conversation. She doesn’t want to be rude, she really doesn’t, but she feels like it’s been ages since her and Kelley were alone for a substantial amount of time.

“So, I told Alex to order a bunch of regular cheese pizza for you,” Kelley says, grinning at Christen and reaching out to brush at a piece of lint on the front of her shirt. “It’s her favorite,” she then tells Tobin, who is wearing the most ridiculously baggy pair of pants Christen has ever seen.

“Cool,” Tobin says.

Christen wants to groan in frustration. She’s ready to literally drag Kelley aside when the front door is thrown open and Ashlyn appears, arms loaded with bags full of soda.

“Ash is downstairs with the delivery guy,” Ashlyn shouts across the apartment as she heads straight to the kitchen. “Someone go help her!”

“Come on,” Kelley says, grabbing Tobin. “Let’s help her.”

Christen watches as they make their way out, Ashlyn following behind them after dumping the plastic bags on the counter, and she swallows the sour taste of bile rising at the back of her throat.

From there on out it’s impossible to get next to Kelley, much less get her alone. Rose wins the vote for Harry Potter, so Christen ends up squashed between Julie and Lindsey, neither of whom care much for the movie. Lindsey and Julie trade back snarky remarks that have Rose threatening to pelt them with her pizza crusts from the loveseat she shares with Moe and Emily, and Christen laughs to herself as she nurses a cup full of soda.

“So what, do you just sit and watch the movie all night?” Christen whispers to Lindsey after she’s finished two slices of pizza and gotten up to throw out her plate.

“Usually it’s a movie that most of us enjoy,” Lindsey explains, rolling her eyes. “But Rose is on a Harry Potter kick and there are too many of us willing to back her. Besides, in about ten minutes, people are going to stop paying attention and only Kelley, Rose, and Tobin will be actually watching.”

Christen stares at where Kelley and Tobin sit together on the floor, Alex on Kelley’s other side.

“Tobin?” Christen asks.

“I guess she likes it too,” Lindsey says through a yawn, stretching her arms above her head. “I’m going to get another slice. You want one?”

Christen shakes her head and Lindsey leaves, pretending to step on Kelley’s shin as she maneuvers her way through the bodies on the floor.

“I’m so glad that we’re not drinking tonight,” Julie says, nudging Christen for her attention. “I was
not looking forward to writing that homework assignment for social psych while hungover.”

“What homework assignment?” Christen asks, confused. “We just handed one in last Monday.”

“The short one,” Julie says, looking at Christen curiously. “I mean, it’s just one thousand words, compare and contrast – “

“That’s not due until next Monday,” Christen interrupts. “I wrote it down in my planner.”

“It’s due this Monday, I promise,” Julie says, as if she’s reassuring Christen who is suddenly flipping through the pages of her mind, wondering if maybe she’s wrong. She went though her planner earlier in class – she’s positive that she doesn’t have anything written down as being due Monday. “I mean, I haven’t done it yet either, so don’t worry. It’s not hard, I don’t think, but it’s probably not fun.”

Christen has to take a deep breath to calm herself.

“It’s only a thousand words. Right.”

“Yeah, not hard at all,” Julie confirms, nodding and pulling up her legs to tuck under herself. “Hey, what did you get on that pop quiz from Wednesday? I forgot to ask you earlier.”

“A ninety,” Christen says absently, looking at the time and trying to remember what she’s got planned for tomorrow, and when she’s going to have time to get this homework assignment done. She’d initially meant to spend her spare time this weekend getting a head start on her mock proposal for her research methods lab, but it looks like she might have to push that back a bit. With her eyes on the screen, Christen’s mind wanders to her plans for the week, itching to go retrieve her planner and cross-check everything she’s written down with every single syllabus she’s been given for the semester.

Lindsey sits back down and ends up talking to Rose from across the room, something about the dozens of plot holes on the film – something that Rose argues fiercely, constantly referring back to the books. It makes no sense and it’s making Christen’s head hurt, and with people wandering off to either hang out in the kitchen or in Kelley’s room, she decides to excuse herself around the time that Harry finds himself in some enormous maze. The kitchen is barely quieter, still open to the living room but far enough away that she can close her eyes and rub her temples without feeling overwhelmed. Only Crystal and Moe are there, standing over a box of pizza and talking lowly, and Christen is thankful for a moment to herself. As much as she enjoys listening to all the conversation around her at times, sometimes she just needs a break.

Of course, that doesn’t last very long. The padding of bare feet against the floor comes to a stop in front of her, and Christen lifts her head and drops her hands to see Tobin standing in front of her.

“Hey,” Tobin says slowly, her voice slow and unrushed like molasses – or honey. “Kelley told me to come and ask you if I could use your bathroom.”

“Mine’s off limits,” Christen says automatically.

“Yeah, that’s what she said,” Tobin says unblinkingly. “But I checked and hers is kind of occupied right now.”

“Can’t you wait?” Christen says, internally wincing at the impatience in her own voice. “Sorry, I just really don’t want people all up in my space tonight.”

Tobin looks at her like she can tell that Christen isn’t really sorry.
“I get it,” Tobin says, head dipping once in a nod. “I do. But Ali and Ash are in Kelley’s bathroom and I’m not about to get involved there.”

Christen eyebrows knit together, trying to figure out exactly what Tobin is implying.

“What does that mean?” she asks after a moment.

“I don’t ask questions,” Tobin says, holding a hand up in a defensive gesture. “I don’t want to know. I only know what Kelley told me when I told her that I heard them arguing, which is that it’s something I probably don’t want to get in the middle of. I really need to go – do you think I can use your bathroom?”

It might be the largest amount of words that Christen has heard Tobin string together thus far, and she tamps down the curiosity in regards to what Ali is up to in favor of standing up straight and nodding in defeat.

“Yeah, okay,” Christen says, jerking her head in the direction of her bedroom. “Fine. Let’s go.”

The corner of Tobin’s mouth quirks into a smile.

“I don’t need a babysitter,” she says, following Christen nevertheless. “I appreciate it, though.”

“I don’t want you touching my things,” Christen says shortly, her irritation coming back full force. She hasn’t needed to lock her door – Kelley’s teammates have enough respect for Christen that they’ve steered clear of her room all night – and so she twists the doorknob for Tobin who is quick to slip in behind her.

“Okay,” Tobin says to Christen, who closes the door behind them. It’s infinitely quieter inside, and Christen begins to seriously consider hiding out in her room for the rest of the night.

“Bathroom’s there,” Christen says, nodding to the slightly ajar door of the en suite.

“I won’t take long,” Tobin promises.

The bathroom door closes and Christen sighs to herself, sitting on the edge of her bed to wait. She retrieves her planner from her backpack, sitting on the floor nearby, and flips through. She’s a little surprised to see that sure enough, she’s written down that she’s got a homework assignment due on Monday, but she wonders if she’s really been so distracted lately that she can’t even keep track of her schoolwork. She’s supposed to join Kelley at the football game tomorrow – with a ton of her sorority sisters, because Kelley can’t do anything without an entourage – and even though she’d been looking forward to it, depending on it to get her time with Kelley who seems to be a rare commodity these days, she’s thinking about canceling.

Tossing her planner to the side, Christen sighs again and lies down on the bed, legs dangling from the side of the mattress. She’s pretty sure that plenty of time has passed for Tobin to have used the bathroom, and she’s wondering why she didn’t just make her wait to use Kelley’s bathroom in the first place.

Maybe she didn’t because she knows that it’s not what Kelley would have wanted. After all, Kelley knows how much Christen doesn’t want people in her room, and she still send Tobin to her.

She tries to push that aside, but all that Christen can think about is how Kelley was pressed up against Alex’s side the last time she looked at her, and how maybe she couldn’t handle seeing that when she herself was physically so far away, and how that might have been a major contributing factor to the reason Christen retreated to the kitchen in the first place. Christen isn’t jealous of Alex –
she literally has no reason to be and she’s a mostly rational person, she knows this – but she doesn’t get why all of a sudden it feels like it’s impossible to spend time with her best friend. It’s not a recent development, because Kelley’s always had dozens of friends who weren’t Christen, but for some reason it’s hitting her like it never has before.

Christen exhales loudly, staring at the ceiling and wondering how long she’s going to suffer before she stops feeling like this. She doesn’t like this pit in the bottom of her stomach and she hates the way her heart climbs into her throat every time she thinks about getting Kelley alone, and despite everything that her brain is telling her, she’d rather resist this and just wait for it to go away.

So wrapped up in her thoughts, plotting how to wrestle Kelley away from her sorority sisters tomorrow and trying to figure out what she would even do once it was just the two of them, Christen doesn’t register the creaking of door hinges until Tobin is loudly clearing her throat.

Christen sighs yet again.

“That wasn’t quick,” Christen says, eyes still on the white ceiling.

“You’ve got a lot of bath products,” Tobin says matter of factly. “I didn’t know that any one person needed that many different kinds of shower gel.”

“Oh, screw you,” Christen snaps, sitting up and narrowing her eyes at Tobin who’s standing in front of her, looking tall even though she’s slouching, wearing her hair in some ridiculous style that Christen would never be able to get away with without looking insane. Her blood is boiling and she isn’t sure exactly what it is about Tobin that manages to quiet her one second and infuriate her the next, but she does know that she’s not about to let some pompous transfer student criticize her bathing habits. “Some of us like to smell good, you know.”

Tobin lifts a single eyebrow, looking genuinely befuddled. “I think I smell pretty good.”

Christen lets her upper body fall back onto the bed and she bites back a groan, instead clenching her hands into fists. She’s not a violent person, but she thinks that if she were to punch anyone for the first time, it might be the girl in front of her.

A stretch of silence follows, and just as Christen is about to ask Tobin to leave her to stew in peace, Tobin speaks up.

“Are you alright?”

Christen almost shoots back up to send Tobin a look, but instead remains where she is and closes her eyes tightly. The truth is that she doesn’t know if she’s alright, and while maybe her life isn’t exactly falling apart, all the signs are starting to point in that direction.

“I’m fine,” Christen says after a few deep breaths that aren’t nearly as calming as the internet promised. “Just got a lot to think about and having you say snarky things about my shower gels isn’t really helpful.”

“I wasn’t being snarky,” Tobin says, and Christen almost thinks that she hears a hint of surprise in Tobin’s tone. “I’m actually a little jealous. I smelled the pina colada one and was going to ask you where you got it.”

This time, Christen does sit up again, sending Tobin an incredulous look.

“You smelled them all?”
Tobin shrugs.

“Just the ones that looked good,” she says, as though what she’s done is perfectly normal. “I didn’t smell the one with the picture of roses on it – I’m not a huge fan of flowers. Also, that conditioning mask you’ve got – does it actually work? Alex won’t stop complaining about her split ends and she’s in the market for something new.”

Christen is at a loss for words. She almost wants to laugh, picturing Tobin carefully examining the labels on the products she keeps in her shower.

“I’ll talk to Alex,” Christen says, shaking her head. “Don’t worry about it.”

“Oh good,” Tobin says, relief passing over her face. “If I have to pretend to care about her hair for one more minute, I don’t know what I’ll do.”

This time, Christen lets out a short laugh.

Tobin smiles hesitantly.

“So are you okay?” she asks, pushing a little. “You look like you’re stressed about something.”

“Just normal stuff,” Christen says, waving a hand dismissively. “School, the fact that my roommate invited her entire soccer team into our apartment – you know. The usual.”

“If it helps, not everyone is here,” Tobin says. “I think that Becky is with her boyfriend tonight.”

“I like Becky,” Christen says simply, and Tobin’s face falls.

“Can I sit?” Tobin asks, pointing to the stretch of bed that Christen isn’t occupying.

“Why?” Christen asks suspiciously.

“Because you look like you’re about to start hyperventilating,” Tobin explains serenely, “and because I don’t really think that either of us want to go back out there and listen to Rose and Lindsey fight all night.”

Christen stares at Tobin who is looking back at her, a lack of expectancy on her smooth face. She wonders if Tobin is completely emotionless, or just really so relaxed all the time.

“I guess,” Christen finds herself saying, her mouth forming the words before her brain can give its permission. “Why not.”

Tobin climbs onto the bed, staying a safe distance away and only barely wrinkling the neatly made covers. She lies down like Christen was earlier, and so Christen lets herself relax back down into the soft mattress.

“So,” Tobin says, her voice lulling Christen into a strange bubble in which what’s going on in the rest of her apartment doesn’t exist. “Talk about what’s bothering you.”

It takes Christen a few bumbling minutes to get it out, starting slow and telling Tobin about how she’d forgotten about a homework assignment and how she’s got so much to do before Monday, like go grocery shopping and clean the apartment, especially since everyone is sure to leave a mess behind tonight.

“You’ll get it all done,” Tobin says confidently.
“How do you know?” Christen asks doubtfully.

“You seem smart,” Tobin says. The two of them are staring at the ceiling, watching the fan spokes circle slowly. “And hard working. I mean, it’s not even due for another thirty-six hours, and you’re already freaking out about it. You’ll be fine.”

“Yeah, but I was supposed to be busy tomorrow,” Christen says, doing her best but failing at not whining. “I was supposed to go to the game with Kelley tomorrow.”

“So go,” Tobin says easily. “I mean, what time is it tomorrow? Six? Don’t tailgate or whatever you do, and get your assignment done beforehand. Do everything else on Sunday. Listen, you’re going to be fine. I promise.”

“Why am I even asking you?” Christen says without thinking.

Tobin goes silent for a while, and it isn’t until Christen thinks that maybe she said something wrong that she looks over to see Tobin deep in thought, her brows drawn together and her tongue running over her bottom lip before her front teeth dig deep into the pink flesh there.

“Hey, Christen.”

When Tobin speaks, it’s like she’s had a revelation.

“Yeah?” Christen asks curiously.

Tobin doesn’t say anything, eye still on the ceiling, but she moves a hand to gently touch Christen’s. Christen’s arm jerks a little, away from Tobin’s cool fingertips, and she has to tell herself to get it together before relaxing, moving her hand so that Tobin knows to try again. It’s not much, barely a brushing of skin, but it’s reassuring and comforting as Tobin’s hand hovers to maintain just the slightest bit of contact.

“Do you want me to ask you what’s going on with you and Kelley?”

Tobin says it lightly, like there’s no pressure to answer or confess anything. It’s an offering, letting Christen know that Tobin’s there if she needs anyone to talk to, and while Christen feels an immense rush of gratitude, she can’t find it in herself to tell Tobin much of anything that she doesn’t quite understand herself.

“Not yet,” Christen gets out eventually. “Not…. just not yet.”

“Okay,” Tobin says effortlessly. “Not yet.”

Tobin pulls her hand away, letting it rest back on the flat of her stomach as they continue to lie there. Christen thinks she hears the movie from the other room, and wonders if it’s almost over yet so that everyone can go home and she can comfortably stay in her room for the rest of the night. She’s thinking of going to bed early so that she can wake up early and get some schoolwork done and make her feel better about something that she can actually control.

The silence that Christen and Tobin have settled into is interrupted by the door to the bedroom being flung open, letting in a stream of voices and laughter filtering down the hallway from the living room. Christen bolts upright, followed by Tobin who gradually eases up onto her elbows. Alex and Syd stand in the doorway, Alex’s hand on the doorknob as she fixes Tobin with a stare.

“Come on, we’re ready to go,” Syd says. “You’re still riding with us, right?”
“Who else would drive me?” Tobin asks lazily, scooting to the edge of the bed before standing up.

“We’ll be outside,” Alex says, looking between Christen and Tobin and moving her hand from the doorknob to Syd’s elbow, tugging her back. “Hurry up, I’m not waiting. I’m tired.”

“I’ll be right there,” Tobin says, but Alex and Syd are already gone, leaving the door open behind them.

“I’ll text Alex about the hair mask,” Christen tells Tobin.

Tobin hesitates, reaching up a hand to smooth over her hand, and it’s the most unsure that she’s looked since Christen met her.

“I’m here if you need to talk,” Tobin says, and the words and her posture are slightly awkward. “Just in case, I don’t know, you need to talk to someone.”

Christen wonders if it’s that obvious that she doesn’t have a lot of people to talk to.

“Thanks,” she says, trying to be sincere despite the temptation to act otherwise. “I’ll keep that in mind.”

Tobin leaves then, nearly crashing into Kelley who is on her way down the hall. Christen watches them, watches Kelley squeeze Tobin in a hug goodbye, watches Kelley blow her a kiss before refocusing her attention.

“God, see, that wasn’t so bad,” Kelley says, flinging herself onto Christen’s bed, legs falling across Christen’s lap. “On a scale of one to ten, would you murder me if we did it again?”

Christen lifts a hand, considering, before placing it tentatively on Kelley’s calves.

“Yes,” Christen murmurs, moving her hand up and down the back of Kelley’s lower legs, careful not to reach past her knee and inch towards the hem of her soft fleece shorts. Christen knows these shorts – Kelley’s had them since high school. “Yes, I would.”

Chapter End Notes

love it? hate it? your feedback is always helpful!
One weekday in the beginning of October, Christen runs into Tobin in the middle of a busy Starbucks. It’s unintentional and unexpected – Christen has never seen Tobin around campus before. Christen’s alone when it happens, distracted and as she studies the email her statistics professor has just sent out. Her drink is in her hand and she’s trying to navigate past the long line and get on her way to her next class when, suddenly, she slams into Tobin before registering that it’s her.

“Oh my god,” Christen says immediately, looking up from her phone and frantically checking to see that she hasn’t spilled her iced coffee. “I’m so sorry.”

“It’s all good,” Tobin says, and when Christen focuses on her face, she’s a little surprised to see her. She knows that surely Tobin must spend her fair share of time on campus, but it seems so surreal to see her off the pitch and in clothes that don’t look like they could double as practice gear. “No harm.”

“Hi,” Christen says, tucking her hair behind her ear. “How are you?”

Tobin’s thumbs go to adjust the straps of her backpack and she looks mildly amused when she answers.

“Good,” she says. “You?”

“Good,” Christen says, and Tobin nods at her and maybe that’s all they need to say, all the exchange needed between the two of them before they go their separate ways.

But Christen finds herself hesitating, staying rooted to where she’s standing and looking at Tobin, wondering if she should go ahead and make herself vulnerable to someone she barely knows.

Well – she knows Tobin. She knows her well enough at this point. She knows what Tobin is serious about soccer and not much else, and has discovered that Tobin rarely goes anywhere without a ball on her person. In fact, as they speak, Tobin’s got one tucked up against her hip, held there by a casual elbow. Christen knows that Tobin doesn’t care that she always ends up in the backseat because Kelley has permanently claimed shotgun, and Christen knows that Tobin likes her burgers without cheese. They’ve hung out, mostly with Kelley as a buffer, sometimes with Alex joining them. Tobin’s not as awful as Christen might have hoped, but she is infuriatingly easygoing and incredibly difficult to rile up.

Not that Christen has tried, or anything.

But Tobin seems reasonable and steady, so Christen ignores the strange look aimed at her and decides to go ahead and ask.

“Remember that thing you asked me a while ago?”

“You’re going to have to be a little more specific than that,” Tobin tells her. “Hey, do you mind if we wait in line while we talk?”

Christen blushes, shifting her weight around and reconsidering what she’s doing.
“Never mind,” she says, looking down at her watch and taking note of the time. “I’ve actually got to get to class right now.”

Tobin hums, smiling as she takes a step towards the line. “Alright,” she says. “See you around.”

*  

Christen doesn’t know why she does it, really. Maybe it’s a lapse in judgment or maybe she’s just gotten desperate, but she ends up agreeing to join Kelley at a tailgate that her sorority is hosting for game day. The game doesn’t start until eight which Christen knows means that everyone is going to be drinking all day, predictably wasted by late afternoon with just enough time left before kick off to get sober enough to be allowed in the stadium. It’s definitely not the way she wants to spend her Saturday, especially not with midterms right around the corner, but Kelley begs and pleads and puts on the biggest pair of puppy eyes that Christen has ever seen, and she finds herself caving.

“Are you excited?” Kelley asks once they reach the tailgate, squeezing Christen’s hand in hers. “I can’t remember that last time you came with me to one of these.”

“I don’t think that I ever have,” Christen says, feeling her ponytail to make sure it’s still smooth. She’d taken a while to get ready, debating outfits and taking great care with her mascara while Kelley waited impatiently. “But yeah, I’m excited. It’s been a while since we got to do something together.”

Kelley is pulling Christen forward through the crowds of people and tables set up until they stop at a keg. Kelley doesn’t even smile at the guy supervising it, just reaching for a cup and only disentangling their hands when she needs both of hers in order to fill up two plastic cups for them. The beer is warm and makes Christen grimace, but her cup is only halfway full and she figures she can suck it up and deal with it.

“Okay, so, there are some people I need to say hi to,” Kelley says, hooking her elbow through Christen’s.

“Oh,” Christen says, trying not to sound disappointed. “Like who?”

“Well, I invited Alex and Tobin,” Kelley says, and the irritation prickling along Christen’s neck makes her grow hot in the relatively cool outdoors. “So I want to keep an eye out for them. And I need to get a picture with my big and little and then her little – you’ll take that, won’t you?”

“Sure,” Christen agrees, and if Kelley hears the annoyance in her voice, she doesn’t mention it. Kelley maintains contact with her, whether it be a linked arm or a hand on Christen’s forearm, and maybe that’s why Christen doesn’t find herself bothered when Alex and Tobin show up.

“Hi!” Kelley says excitedly, letting go of Christen to enthusiastically wrap her arms around Alex. “Did you guys find it okay? I’m so glad you could make it!”

Alex grins at Christen over Kelley’s shoulder.

“Hey Kell, Christen,” Alex says. When Kelley lets her go to hug Tobin hello, Alex greets Christen
with a hug of her own. “Sorry we’re a little late, Syd was hosting her own thing and I promised I’d stop by.”

“It’s fine, I’m just glad that you could make it,” Kelley says once she’s released Tobin. Christen hesitates unsurely, looking at Tobin who looks just as indecisive, and it’s as though they silently agree that a hug isn’t necessary. “Look, the kegs are over there, just help yourself. Unless you want liquor, then I can take you inside and get you something.”

“No, beer is fine,” Alex says. “You two want a refill?”

Kelley hands over her empty cup but Christen looks down at hers, still a third full, and shakes her head.

“I’m not really trying to drink today,” she explains, feeling embarrassed, but Alex just nods understandably and heads for the kegs, dragging Tobin behind her.

“Wait, you don’t want to drink?” Kelley asks perplexedly, hand back on Christen’s arm. “Why not?”

Christen shrugs.

“You know me,” she tells Kelley. “It’s not really my thing anyway. And I don’t want to be drunk for the game.”

Kelley raises an eyebrow and looks like she wants to say something else, but then another couple of shrieking girls come up to her, and Christen, once again, is back to watching and smiling along. They’re still stuck there when Alex and Tobin return, handing Kelley her beer, and Alex instantly introduces herself to the two girls Kelley is talking to while Christen waits patiently. Tobin hangs back, just behind Christen, who is trying not to squirm at the close proximity.

It quickly becomes apparent, as Alex reaches out to admire one of the girl’s bracelets, that they’re not going anywhere soon.

So Christen slowly turns to Tobin, who is bopping her head along to the music blaring throughout the yard and staring off into the distance. It’s funny to watch and Christen smiles as she brings her cup to her mouth, contemplating taking a sip of her beer just to hide her expression.

“So, you got dragged along too?”

The words shock Christen because she hadn’t thought that Tobin had been paying attention to her at all. Christen tilts her cup upwards to take a small drink just to give herself time to recover, thinking over her words before speaking.

“I mean, Kelley asked me to come,” Christen explains.

Tobin nods – or maybe she’s just bopping her head again; Christen can’t tell.

“You do everything Kelley asks you to, then.”

She phrases it like a statement rather than a question – something that Christen has noticed she has a habit of doing – and Christen takes a second sip as she thinks about how to respond appropriately.

“Kelley’s my best friend,” Christen explains. “I do things for her, she does things for me. That’s how it works.”

Her tone is easy, her expression calm, but as always, something about her demeanor throws Christen off and irritates her.

Christen finds herself wanting to argue and defend Kelley for some reason, but bites her tongue and just takes another sip of her drink, finishing it off.

“So,” Christen says, desperate to find another subject to talk about, since it seems that her and Tobin are the odd ones out at the moment. “Are you enjoying the keg beer?”

Tobin glances down into the cup she’s holding before raising her eyes to meet Christen’s, shrugging and reaching up her free hand to scratch at her shoulder. She’s wearing a simple white t-shirt and ripped jeans, effortlessly cool in a way that has Christen almost jealous. It had taken her nearly fifteen minutes to decide between black or blue denim shorts, and she’s still not entirely sure that she made the right choice.

“Not really,” Tobin says. “It’s a little warm.”

“Way too warm,” Christen agrees maybe a little too quickly. “I mean, beer is fine when it’s cold, but warm beer is the worst.”

Tobin swirls her cup around, hand still itching at her shoulder and eyes still on Christen. Her gaze makes Christen uncomfortable, and when she doesn’t respond, Christen wonders if there’s any way to salvage the pathetic farce of a conversation.

“Hey, Alex,” Tobin says, reaching past Christen to nudge Alex’s left tricep.

“Yeah?” Alex asks, turning around quickly.

“Tell Christen what you were saying about her this morning,” Tobin tells her, and Christen’s cheeks burn.

“You were talking about me?” she says. “What about?”

“Nothing bad,” Alex reassures her. Kelley is hugging the girls they were talking to, and by the time Alex continues, Kelley has turned around to face Christen and Tobin fully. “I was just telling Tobin about how much I wished you were on the team so we could see you more often.”

“Oh?” Christen says, face feeling even hotter than before. “Why?”

“I mean, we’re always at practice and traveling for away games,” Alex explains. “We only get to see you sometimes, when you’re not busy and we’re not busy, and that’s like, almost never.”

“Christen hates soccer,” Kelley teases, and even though she’s not close to Christen, Christen still finds herself smiling as though Kelley had thrown an arm around her shoulder and tugged her close. “She only comes for my face.”

Alex smiles sweetly at Christen, rolling her eyes at Kelley.

“I was just joking around, mostly,” Alex explains. “Saying stuff about how you could be our water girl. Tobin thought it was funny. I know that you have your own things going on though.”

“Christen would never be a water girl,” Kelley says. “That would require her to actually get near the pitch.”

Christen frowns at her.
“I’m not that bad,” she reasons. “I mean, I come to all your home games. I traveled to the championship game last year. I got close to the grass.”

“I’m kidding,” Kelley says, squeezing between Alex and Tobin to pinch Christen’s cheek, laying an exaggerated kiss on the other one. “I know that you’re not that bad, I’m just playing with you.”

“I know,” Christen says, but she’s still feeling unusually alert and on edge when Kelley steps back with a grin.

“I’ve got to go in and pee,” Kelley says, looking at Alex and Tobin. “Does anyone want to come with?”

“No, I’m good,” Alex says, looking at Tobin who nods in agreement.

“Christen?” Kelley tries.

“Yeah, sure,” Christen says, clutching onto her empty cup and uncrossing her arms from her chest. “Why not.”

So Kelley waves at Alex and Tobin before grabbing Christen’s hand with hers. Christen’s hand feels clammy and she’s worried that Kelley will think that it’s gross but she doesn’t say anything, just in case Kelley doesn’t mind. They navigate their way to the house and make their way through dozens of bodies, Kelley tugging Christen along until they reach the bathroom. Some guy is emerging as they approach and even though there’s a bit of a line, Kelley pushes past and pulls Christen with her.

“Hey,” the next girl in line complains loudly, “some of us were waiting.”

“I go here,” Kelley snaps, closing the door just as some guy at the back of the line wolf-whistles at the two of them. Christen blushes, the sound stuck in her mind, but Kelley seems unbothered as she hikes the hem of her dress up to her waist and reaches for her underwear.

“Not sure that’s appropriate behavior, Kell,” Christen says, taking the opportunity to look at herself in the mirror.

“There are Port-A-Potties at Pike if they don’t want to wait,” Kelley says flippantly.

Christen doesn’t respond and just wipes at the mascara flakes under her eyes.

“So,” Kelley says after a minute, standing and pulling her underwear up her thighs. “On a scale of one to ten, you would tell me if you were pissed with me, right?”

“What?” Christen says suddenly, whipping her head around to look at Kelley head on. “Why would you say that?”

“You’ve been acting weird for weeks,” Kelley says accusingly, straightening out her dress. “I thought we were best friends, Christen.”

“We are,” Christen says, just barely choking the words out. “I didn’t think that I was acting weird.”

Kelley gently elbows Kelley of of the way until she can reach the sink. Christen moves but it feels mechanical, the way her body adjusts to step to the side and make way for Kelley.

“I mean, it’s not that weird,” Kelley clarifies. “I’ve only noticed because we spend so much time together. I know you better than anyone else. It’s just, you don’t talk to me as much anymore. And you used to ask me get coffee with you all the time, but now I feel like you always go with Julie.”
It’s a lot of information to take in, so Christen tries her best to sort through it methodically. Honestly, she just can’t wrap her head around the fact that Kelley thinks they’ve spent a lot of time together lately, because it feels like the exact opposite.

“I talk to you,” Christen says. “We’ve just been busy, I think. And there’s not a lot to talk about. I’ve just got school going on, and you’ve got your own stuff that we talk about. And I just figured that you didn’t have time for our coffee dates anymore.”

“Do you not need the toilet?” Kelley asks, looking at Christen in the mirror and jerking her head to the side.

Christen shakes her head, feeling a pit grow at the bottom of her stomach.

“Not anymore. Thought I did.”

Kelley just shuts off the tap and dries her hands.

“I’ll always have time for our coffee dates, okay?” Kelley asks, smiling brightly as she reaches for the doorknob. “We both love our coffee – it only makes sense that we get it together. Next time ask me instead of Julie, okay?”

“Okay,” Christen says, a little stunned and dazed as she follows Kelley out of the bathroom and past the angry girl who’s been waiting for her turn. “Okay. I’ll ask you instead.”

“Awesome,” Kelley says with a wide grin, reaching out a hand with spread fingers that Christen shakily slips her own in between. “Come on, stay close to me. I don’t want to lose you.”

So Christen sticks close by, glued to Kelley’s side as they head back out to find Alex and Tobin.

* 

The sun is starting to fade, sunset still an hour away, and Christen is starting to actually enjoy Alex and Tobin’s company. Alex is nice and funny in a dorky sort of way that keeps Christen laughing, and Tobin’s dry sense of humor has Kelley constantly cackling. Cool air settles in around them as game time creeps closer and closer, and Christen is wondering if it would be considered lame to ask for some food soon – for a tailgate, there is a surprising lack of anything besides beer that’s now hot from sitting in the sun all day. She doesn’t think she’s eaten since breakfast, and she’s not about to take the Kelley route and start filling up on beer.

She can’t even remember how many cups of beer Kelley’s had; she’d attempted to keep track at first but it had proved near impossible, with her constantly accepting refills with her cup still half full, or accidentally sloshing some on the ground. Kelley’s not sloppy but she’s definitely a tipsy kind of happy that has her clinging to Christen in a way that’s making Christen consider cutting her off. As nice as it is to have Kelley constantly touching her in one way or another, it’s also a little disconcerting, especially once she takes into consideration what Kelley said earlier in the bathroom.

It’s not as though Christen hasn’t been carefully monitoring her own behavior, from every word she says to every move she makes when Kelley’s around. Their friendship, which had always felt so natural, has turned into something that Christen barely recognizes – and therein lies the problem, she realizes, zoning out while Alex and Kelley tell her and Tobin stories from last year on the team, Kelley with a pressing hand on Christen’s shoulder as she leans into her, giggling with her beer in serious danger of spilling onto Christen’s shoes.

Christen has been so paranoid that someone might notice, so scared of facing the facts herself, that in an effort to keep everything normal, she’s been acting weird enough to garner the attention she’d
hoped to avoid. It’s not as though Kelley has a clue about what’s really going on, she tells herself, gently shrugging off Kelley’s grip until Kelley straightens up and pouts.

“What?” Kelley asks, even though Christen hasn’t said anything. “You’re so nice to lean on.”

Tobin lets out a snort that she quickly disguises as a sneeze, and Christen shoots her a glare before looking at Kelley’s adorably distressed expression.

“Kell,” Christen starts, ready to ask if there’s somewhere she can get something to eat before the game starts – anything will suffice, really, she’s just starving – but then a guy walks up to Kelley, slinging an arm around her shoulders so that she can lean into him instead.

“You’ve got to some play flip cup with us,” he tells Kelley before even looking around. “Hey, girls. You want to play?”

“Christen,” Kelley says immediately, wiggling out from underneath the guy’s grip and grabbing onto Christen’s hand. “Christen will come play.”

“Um, no thanks,” Christen declines as politely as she can.

“Why not?” Kelley asks, face falling.

“It will be fun,” the guy says, looking between Kelley and Christen.

“It’s getting close to game time,” Christen excuses. “I really don’t want to be drinking right now – cutting it a little too close, you know.”

“But you’ve barely had anything all day,” Kelley whines, tugging on Christen’s hand roughly. Christen flinches, pulling her hand back, but Kelley’s hands just go with it. “Come on, one game of flip cup won’t kill you.”

“Kell,” Christen tries again, “I know, but I don’t want to.”

“Do it for me,” Kelley attempts to bargain.

“I’ll be over there,” the guy says, pointing to a corner of the yard. “Just come on over whenever you want to play.”

Kelley ignores him, pouting at Christen and still tugging tightly at her hand.

“Kelley, no,” Christen says firmly, determined to stick to her guns, especially as Tobin watches the entire thing with a blank, unreadable stare. “I’m not playing because I’m not drinking.”

“I’ll play,” Alex offers tentatively, raising a hesitant hand and looking at Kelley with drawn eyebrows. “I don’t mind. I’m actually pretty decent at flip cup. Not as good as I am at beer pong, but – “

Tobin elbows Alex who shuts up immediately, rubbing at the point of contact on her ribcage.

“Christen,” Kelley says, irritation lacing her tone. “Come on, it’s just flip cup. It’s just beer.”

“Beer is still alcohol,” Christen points out.

“ Barely,” Kelley scoffs, pushing away from Christen and dropping her hand. “Christen, come on. I’ll help you so that you know what you’re doing if that’s what you’re worried about. I won’t let you look stupid – “
Christen blinks furiously, staring at Kelley with her lips pressed together, trembling in both sudden anger and hurt.

“She said no,” Tobin says quietly, edging her way in front of Christen, forcing Kelley to move back a little. “Okay? Leave her alone.”

Christen feels embarrassed that Tobin has to step in for her, red hot heat flushing her cheeks as she turns her eyes to the ground so that she doesn’t have to look at Kelley over Tobin’s left shoulder. She doesn’t hear what Kelley says – she only vaguely registers Alex reaching for Kelley and chatting up a storm as she steers her in the direction of the flip cup station. There aren’t tears in her eyes – no, there definitely aren’t – but there’s a definitely scratchy sensation at the back of her throat and at the corners of her eyes. She blinks, eyes fluttering open just to see Tobin turn around to face her.

“Hey,” Tobin says, drawing the word out. “I’m sorry I did that. I didn’t mean to overstep or anything. You just looked like if she kept on going on with you – “

“I would have said yes, yeah,” Christen says tightly, clearing her throat so that her voice doesn’t crack when she continues. “I know, I always say yes to Kelley.”

Tobin tilts her head to the side, regarding Christen with scrutiny that is somehow made to feel less threatening as she hums a melody that Christen tries to place but can’t – she vaguely wonders if maybe she’s making it up as she goes along. She wonders if that’s maybe how Tobin does everything, just winging it all as she coasts through life, inserting herself into people’s lives and doing things like making Christen rethink everything while remaining completely cool and collected the entire time. A couple of months ago Christen didn’t even know who Tobin was, and now she’s faced with someone who can somehow read her frustratingly well and remain unflappable the entire time.

It’s not natural, and Christen thinks that maybe Tobin is too observant for her own good.

She’s too observant for Christen’s good, at least.

“Want to get something to eat?” Tobin asks suddenly, refocusing Christen’s attention.

“Yeah – what?” Christen asks. “How’d you know I was hungry?”

Tobin grins confusedly. “I didn’t,” she says, slipping a hand into her own back pocket. “I just know that I’m starving. Want to walk to Denny’s?”

“Yes,” Christen says, saliva pooling in her mouth at the very idea of squeaky plastic booths and greasy plates full of artery-clogging food. “Yes, please.”

* 

Tobin orders a burger and Christen gets chocolate chip pancakes. Christen holds back a laugh as Tobin stuffs fry after fry in her mouth. She doesn’t know why she finds it funny, but there’s something about Tobin attacking her meal with reckless abandon that paints a contrasting picture to the one Christen has in her head.

“You might want to breathe,” Christen says jokingly as she cuts into a pancake.

Tobin shrugs and swallows, mouth barely empty before she’s taking an enormous bite of burger. They eat in silence for a while, and it’s somewhere between awkward and comfortable.
“So,” Tobin says, rubbing at her shiny fingers with a napkin once she’s inhaled half her plate. “I’ve got to ask you something pretty serious.”

Christen’s heart speeds up, frantically thinking about how to dodge Tobin’s questions about Kelley that are surely coming.

“Okay,” she says, because that’s all she can think to say. “Shoot.”

“Can I trade you a few fries for a piece of bacon?” Tobin asks, the most solemn expression on her face.

Christen reacts by letting out a shaky laugh, holding a hand to her chest and telling herself that there’s no reason for her heart to be overreacting the way it is.

“Yeah, of course,” Christen says, turning her plate so that the side with the bacon on it is facing Tobin. “Help yourself.”

“Thanks,” Tobin says, smiling widely and plucking up a piece of bacon between two fingers.

“I thought it was going to be something serious,” Christen admits, watching Tobin stick the bacon in her mouth, the majority of it dangling past her chin. “You had me scared for a second.”

Tobin smiles, the bacon caught between her teeth as she pushes her plate closer to Christen. Taking a cue, Christen carefully picks up three fries and places them on the edge of her own plate, making sure that they don’t come close to touching the puddles of syrup. Tobin’s hand comes back out to pull at the bacon in her mouth, leaving a bite behind that she swallows without really chewing.

“What could I have possibly asked you that would scare you?” Tobin wants to know, and part of Christen feels stupid. She keeps her lips pressed tight together, dragging her knife through her pancakes and ignoring Tobin’s unassuming eyes and bright smile.

“You know,” Christen mutters eventually, sticking her fork in a piece of pancake and bringing it to her mouth, hoping that she’ll stop saying stupid things if she can’t talk anymore.

Tobin doesn’t respond, finishing her slice of bacon before going back to her fries.

Christen’s phone, sitting face up on the table near her glass of water with lemon, buzzes with an incoming message. Her eyes go to it immediately, and she carefully places her fork on her plate before picking up the phone and sliding a finger across the screen. It’s Kelley, wanting to know where she is, and Christen hesitates, fingertips hovering above the keyboard.

“Who is it?” Tobin asks, reaching for her own glass of lemon-free water. “You look like you’ve seen a ghost.”

“I do not,” Christen says, but even as the words leave her mouth she is aware of the petrified expression on her face that she can’t help but put on display. “It’s just Kelley. She wants to know where we are.”

That’s not true. Kelley is only asking about Christen, but something about that feels wrong to share with Tobin who only looks mildly curious – like she’s asking half out of common courtesy, even though it’s definitely not polite to ask questions like that.

“What’s she going to do when you tell her, come here?” Tobin jokes, and she’s got a straw wedged between her molars and her hair is falling out of the loose ponytail it’s been in all day, and Christen shifts in her seat.
“Probably not,” Christen says quietly, and the realization makes her set her phone back down on the table after locking it without replying.

Tobin immediately picks up on the tension, and stays silent. She dips her fries in ketchup and chews with a little less vigor than she’s been doing so far, still efficiently making her way through her meal. Christen on the other hand, picks at her pancakes and nibbles at the fries she’d taken from Tobin’s plate. Her stomach suddenly feels hollow and angry, and she’s scared of upsetting it further with crappy chain diner food.

“Do you want to do something else after this?” Tobin asks, after their waitress has come by and Christen has asked for two separate checks.

“Like what?” Christen asks dully, pulling her debit card from one of the slots built into her little bag. Tobin chews on her bottom lip and looks nervous for approximately half a second before speaking.

“How do you feel about going on an adventure?”

Christen is lost for words, tapping her plastic card against the tabletop.

“It will be fun,” Tobin continues, wiping between her fingers with an already crumpled napkin. “Promise.”

Christen wears a wary expression, staring at Tobin in the hopes that Tobin will look back at her, but she doesn’t. Instead Tobin remains focused on her hands, drawing Christen’s gaze after a few long moments.

“I take promises very seriously,” Christen finally says as the waitress comes by, setting down two checks.

“Good,” Tobin says, trading the napkin for her check, glancing up to grin beatifically at Christen. “Because so do I.”

* 

Tobin’s idea of an adventure involves sneaking into the athletic building, punching five digit codes into locks. She reads them out loud off her phone screen, and when Christen asks where the hell she got them, Tobin brushes off the question with a few words about someone sucking up to the assistant coaches and sharing the information with a select few – one of whom is apparently Tobin. Christen sticks close to her – maybe too close, close enough to smell sunshine and crisp autumn air on the back of Tobin’s neck, underneath where she’s turned her ponytail into a bun – because she’s terrified of being caught, even if kick off was fifteen minutes ago and everyone in town is watching the game either in person or on tv.

“What are we even doing here?” Christen whispers, tiptoeing through dark hallways and past closed doors.

“I left something here after the game yesterday,” Tobin explains, her voice at a normal volume. “I didn’t feel like waiting until Monday to get it back.”

“So we’re really here for you?” Christen asks, unexpected disappointment seizing her chest.

“We’re here because you need for forget about Kelley for five minutes,” Tobin says, coming to another door with another keypad. She has the code ready, mouthing the numbers as she punches them in slowly. The light at the top flashes green and Tobin reaches for the doorknob to let them in.
When Christen slips in behind her, careful to hold the door as it closes shut, she sees that they’re clearly in a locker room. Christen has never been here before, never had a reason nor desire to, but as Tobin flips on a thousand bright lights that illuminate the space as though it’s ready for a couple dozen occupants before a game, she wonders why Kelley’s never brought her back here. The air is stale and thick but not entirely off-putting. Tobin leads the way, passing an open side room full of toilet stalls and sinks and a room full of equipment before reaching the lockers. They line three small walls, every one decorated with the player’s name and number at the very least, the locks on each of them varying from locker to locker.

Tobin finds hers immediately, making a beeline for it. Christen gets distracted though, seeing a large number nineteen taped onto one in what looks like construction paper decorated with gold glitter. She stops there, one locker separating her and Tobin, and runs a finger alone the miniscule dials of the purple lock, wondering if she could guess the four-digit code all by herself.

“Got it,” Tobin says, flinging her locker open. Christen looks at what Tobin strains to pulls from inside, frowning when the only thing Tobin holds is a roughed up looking ball.

“You came here for a soccer ball?” Christen says, squinting at the grass stains and worn seams. Tobin drops the ball to the ground almost instantly, having taken a step back so that she can easily kick the ball back up into her hands.

“It’s my spare,” Tobin says with a shrug, bouncing the ball a couple of times before flicking it with her toes – it soars up, landing with a soft thud against Christen’s lower abdomen. “Sorry, I thought you might catch that.”

Christen looks down at the ball, patterned with navy blue and red, wondering how long Tobin’s been kicking this one around.

“I haven’t ever really played with one,” Christen admits, feeling like a fool for it. She knows that Tobin knows her lack of experience with the sport, but in front of Tobin, who clearly regards the ball like it’s a fifth limb, she feels like an idiot for not being able to at least stop a ball from hitting her in the stomach.

“It’s fine,” Tobin says, once again getting a foot under the ball and sending it flying neatly into her own hands. It’s smooth and Christen’s can’t figure out the physics of it, how she manages to have such control over the ball’s velocity and momentum, and it’s slightly intriguing but mostly incredibly frustrating. “I wasn’t expecting you to have.”

With the ball resting in the palm of one hand, Tobin turns back to her locker. She wears a look of concentration as she twists the single dial of her lock, yanking on the electric blue device until it’s clear that it’s locked, and then she looks at Christen with an inviting smile.

“Come watch me try something new?” she offers, nodding a head towards the direction they’d come from. “Tell me if I look like an idiot or not.”

Christen doesn’t know how to tell Tobin that she could never look like an idiot with the ball, that she’s never seen anyone look like such a natural with one, (not without being creepy at least), so she just nods and takes one last glance at Kelley’s locker before starting out of the locker room.

It’s a practice field, Tobin tells her as she kicks the ball in front of her. It’s technically off limits at times like this, she explains when Christen asks if they’re allowed to be there, but no one is going to catch them.

“We don’t have to if you don’t want to,” Tobin says, and in the overhead lights, Christen thinks she
can see Tobin gauging her expression. “I’m not trying to get either of us in trouble.”

“It’s fine,” Christen tells her, reluctantly, because Tobin doesn’t seem the type to knowingly get herself in trouble. She’s a little bit offbeat, a little hard to pin down and control, but she doesn’t seem as though she’s purposefully trying to break rules. “Just – if someone sees us, I’m running and not looking back.”

Tobin grins at her, head turning slyly to the side to do so as they step onto the grass.

“I wouldn’t expect anything less.”

Christen collapses onto the field once Tobin stops walking, sitting with her legs out in front of her and her palms behind her pressing into the cool grass. Tobin starts kicking the ball from foot to foot, foot to knee, knee to knee – it’s fluid and she moves proactively, like she’s perpetually a step ahead of where the ball is. It’s a little mesmerizing to watch, and after a few minutes, Christen sinks back onto her elbows and crosses her legs at the ankle.

“You’re good,” Christen says thoughtfully after a while. Tobin has fumbled a few times, had to start over two or three times, and even though Christen knows next to something about the technical aspect of the sport, she can tell that Tobin is no amateur. She’s good, familiar with the ball in a way that makes Christen start to understand why she might be good enough to make a national team when no one else at school is.

“I know,” Tobin says, and the way she says it with a lopsided smile and a hand pushing back at her hair makes it less conceited and more confident. She’s secure in this, Christen thinks. This is what Tobin’s good at and she knows it.

Christen wonders what she’s good at.

Her phone buzzes before she can think too hard at it, and she pulls it out of her back pocket, having to shift onto her left side to retrieve it, to see that it’s another message from Kelley, this time a picture of her and Alex posing in the stadium. They’re grinning, the both of them looking at least a little wasted as they cling to each other. Something in Christen pings with jealousy, but she’s smiling down at the screen and zooming in, moving from Kelley’s head to toes and wondering if she’d have been able to get one of just the two of them if she’d stayed.

“Kelley?”

Christen jumps, locking the screen and looking to see Tobin, barefoot in the grass and not looking the least bit out of breath, using only her head to attempt to keep the ball in the air. It doesn’t last very long – she overshoots it and can’t get to it in time – but it’s entertaining to watch.

“Of course,” Christen says, resigned to the facts. “Who else would bother talking to me?”

Tobin stops with her foot resting on top of the ball, visibly frowning.

“I bother to talk to you,” she says, almost indignantly.

“Not usually,” Christen says dryly.

“Do I need to start?” Tobin asks, suddenly falling to the ground next to her, leaning back on her elbows very much in the same way Christen is. The ball lays a foot away, forgotten for the time being.

Christen contemplates the question and her burning cheeks.
“Only if you’d want to,” she says, uncrossing her ankles.

“Are you going to text her back?” Tobin asks, reaching over her foot to nudge Christen’s. Tobin’s feet are bare, tanned and worn from the earth, in stark contrast to Christen with her pristinely manicured toes and strappy flat sandals. “I’m not going to judge you,” Tobin says, tilting her head to look upwards. Christen glances up but doesn’t like the strain it puts on her neck, even if the stars are unusually bright in the midnight blue sky. “It happens, you know.”

“What happens?” Christen scoffs derisively. “People start liking their best friend?”

“I mean liking someone in general,” Tobin says with a casual shrug. “The fact that she’s your best friend shouldn’t make it mean something else.”

It takes a moment for Christen to realize what she’s admitted, too hung up with how much she disagrees with what Tobin’s just said.

“I lied,” is the first thing she feels like she needs to clarify, fingers itching in the cool, almost wet grass. They feel restless but she just presses harder, telling them to quiet. “At the chicken place.”

“I know,” is all that Tobin has to say in return.

“How?” Christen needs to know, pressing harder with her palms, afraid that she’s going to end up with dirt under her fingernails.

Tobin sighs, but not in an exasperated way. It’s gentle and soft as she falls onto her back, hands folding on top of her stomach as she pulls her legs up, knees pointing upwards with her feet flat on the ground.

“I just knew,” is all she has to say. “I could just tell.”

“You’d seen us together for like, five minutes,” Christen argues.

“Chris,” Tobin says gently, reaching out a hand to tug at Christen’s shirt. Christen follows, confused, until Tobin’s tugged her to the ground so that they’re level. “Chris – I can call you that, right? – it’s not really a secret. You look at her like she’s the best thing that ever happened to you, but like she’s the scariest thing that’s ever happened to you too. You do anything for her and don’t think twice about it. I might have believed you if you hadn’t freaked so bad when I asked.”

The more time Christen spends with Tobin, the more she thinks that Tobin isn’t as quiet and simple as she’d initially thought.


She can’t bring herself to say it. She’s thought about it a million times, has been turning the revelation over and over in her mind since the middle of summer, but saying it is something entirely and she doesn’t think she’s ready for that yet. Tobin still seems to know though, know what she can’t put into words.

“I know,” Tobin says, her voice a soothing wash over Christen’s strained ears. “I know. It’s okay, you know. You don’t need to lie about it.”

“I haven’t talked about – “

“I know,” Tobin interrupts. “And you don’t have to. Not with me, not if you don’t want to. I’m not going to make you do anything you don’t want to do.”
So Christen feels like an elephant has just been lifted from her chest and she deflates, closing her eyes and ignoring the way the grass is tickling the backs of her legs.

“Thank you,” she says.

“You’re welcome,” Tobin answers. “I just want to make sure that you know I’m here for you if you need anything.”

“Thank you.”

Tobin lies there for a few more minutes but then she gets back up, back at it with the ball – this time doing something where she catches it behind her knee. Christen watches from her limited vantage point, too bone-tired and weary to move to get a better look. Instead her lids hover half-closed, listening to the gentle rhythmic smack of ball against skin and Tobin’s constant humming. She still doesn’t know what Tobin sings, what songs fill her head, and part of Christen doesn’t want to know.

She isn’t aware that she’s fallen asleep until Tobin is gently shaking her awake, a hand to her shoulder as she crouches beside her.


So Tobin does, telling Christen that it’s okay and she doesn’t need a ride home. She knows how to work the bus system and there’s a stop close to where she lives, and it isn’t late enough for it to be dangerous yet.

“Hey,” Tobin says, pushing a lock of hair behind her ear. She’d taken it all out of its bun on their walk, shaking it out as they’d ambled along sidewalks. “On a scale from one to ten, how boring was I tonight?”

Christen blinks at Tobin, one hand in the middle of pushing her apartment door open.

“Like, a three,” Christen says. “How can you ask me that when I’m the one who fell asleep on you?”

Tobin shrugs, bouncing her ball once on the concrete stoop. “Yeah, exactly. You’re the one who fell asleep.”

“Maybe even a two,” Christen says, something in her desperate to make sure Tobin knows that she did nothing wrong. “I had fun, really.”

Tobin gives her a small grin, tucking the ball against her side with her arm.

“Thanks,” she says. “So did I.”

Chapter End Notes

the next chapter might take a little longer than usual, but that’s only because i’m taking a short break to write a small something that i think y’all will enjoy.
that is definitely not your sweatshirt

Christen has lost track of time.

She looks at her phone for the time only to discover that it’s dead, and by the time she’s found an empty outlet and let it charge long enough to reboot, it’s nearly six. A quick calculation tells Christen that she’s been in the library for five hours, which maybe doesn’t seem like much, but she’d headed over as soon as she’d finished with classes for the day and hadn’t even bothered to grab something for lunch. Starving and feeling like it’s time for a break, she opens up her messages and fires one off.

On the third floor of Dirac in that one corner I like, do you want to come and bring me coffee?

Waiting for Kelley to respond is agonizing. Christen spends the fifteen minutes it takes to get a response checking her email and Instagram, but it’s worth it because when her phone finally buzzes and the notification slides down at the top of her screen, her heart races and she has to read the text three time before her mind begins to process it.

Was heading to campus anyway :) see you soon!

Christen lets out a breath she didn’t even know she was holding, feeling relief knowing that Kelley’s actually taking her up on this – that Kelley had meant it when she’d told her to ask her instead of Julie the next time she wanted coffee. Her fingers fumble on the keypad, hitting so many wrong letters that she continually has to go back and try again, and she’s positive that Kelley is watching the three little dots on her screen and wondering why her friend is such a spaz and needs five minutes to figure out a reply to a simple text.

In the end, what she sends off ends up being embarrassingly enthusiastic.

Great! Call me when you get here! Do you want me to meet you downstairs and wait in line together? Or do you mind just bringing me up my usual?

She doesn’t get another text from Kelley as she waits, giving her brain a break from hours of painstaking studying for midterms. Research methods is a class that requires a giant stack of notecards, and she’s thankful that she’s been making them as the semester has crawled along because there are nearly two hundred in her pile. The rubber band she’s been using to hold them together is stretched and frayed, and she’s a little worried that it’s going to snap from the tension and end up completely useless.

Figuring that Kelley needs time to drive to campus and find a parking spot nearby, Christen takes the time to charge both her phone and laptop. She’s slumped against a floor-to-ceiling window, rubbing at her eyes and praying that coffee gives her enough strength to make it through another night of studying. It might be only Tuesday but she’s still got three more midterms this week and she’s just trying to make it out of a hellish week with her sanity and grades intact, which is looking more and more unlikely as she minutes tick by. With restless legs and a mind buzzing from all the silence surrounding her – really, why does anyone even study in the main library when Dirac gets maddeningly quiet as soon as the bio majors clear out? – she stands up and stretches, cracking her back so loudly that she winces at the noise.

“Impressive.”
It’s Kelley calling out, dressed in Nike shorts and a sorority t-shirt, gripping a coffee in each hand and her backpack dangling from one shoulder. Christen tries not to be surprised by the fact that Tobin trails behind her, flip-flops slapping against the carpet and a laptop tucked under the arm that’s not carrying a coffee and a pastry bag.

“Hey,” Tobin says, nodding at Christen as they draw closer. Christen stands up straight, looking between Kelley and Tobin and trying to decide whether or not to be pissed that Kelley hasn’t come by herself. Tobin’s better than anyone else she could have brought though, especially considering the time they spent together just last weekend. Tobin had given Christen her number afterwards, and though Christen hasn’t used it yet, the weight of it burns heavy in her hand every time she grips her phone.

“Got your coffee,” Kelley says, drawing close and leaning in to kiss the air near Christen’s right cheek. “Two creams, one sugar – just the way you like it.”

Christen takes the cup gingerly and then adjusts her hold on it as she watches Kelley run her newly free hand through her hair.

Tobin clears her throat loudly.

“So I’ve got to head on over to the house in a little bit, but I though we could chill for second,” Kelley says, dropping to the floor. Christen follows, crossing her legs the same way Kelley does. “Tobin – come ‘ere. I’m stealing some of that croissant from you.”

“No way,” Tobin says serenely, placing her things on the ground before sitting next to Kelley. “I asked you if you wanted one and you said no.”

“You can thank Tobin for your coffee,” Kelley tells Christen, nodding at her cup. Christen is cradling it between her hands, the scalding liquid sending steam through the lid and warming her hands. The library runs freezing and coming straight from classes and a mild seventy-degree day means that she only has the thin cardigan she’d worn to class, and she’s grateful for the warmth. “I forgot my wallet back at the apartment and didn’t realize until I was at the register.”

“You drove here without your wallet?” Kelley asks, raising her eyebrows.

“No, Tobin did,” Kelley replies. “She was at the apartment with me and offered to give me a ride to campus.”

“I’ve got a paper to write,” Tobin says to Christen with a shrug. “I was going to head over to Strozier, but Kell said it would be okay to grab coffee with you two first.”

“It’s fine,” Christen says, shifting and wondering why Kelley would say that.

“This place is a lot quieter than Strozier,” Tobin observes, lifting her cup to her lips and turning her head around to observe the floor. “No one ever told me about this place.”

“It’s the science library,” Kelley explains. “You’d never need to be in here. Christen just hangs out here because she likes the arctic conditions and eavesdropping on the physics majors gossiping about all the hot TAs.”

“Physics?” Tobin asks, looking between them. “Really? Physics, of all subjects?”

Christen, blushing fiercely, shrugs. “I guess so,” she says. “Last week they were talking about an Irish one who apparently manages to make freckles look cute. There’s this one chem II lab TA who apparently has all the boys drooling, I’ve heard about her like three times times this semester.”
Tobin hums into her cup as Kelley snorts.

“Some of the girls too, I bet, if it’s the one who works in the research lab next to mine,” Kelley says. “I know that she TAs for chem II lab and she’s a freaking babe.”

Christen determinedly looks at the ground and grips her cup even tighter, telling herself that she’s imagining the pointed look Tobin is directing at her.

“Anyway,” Christen says. “Do you want to test me on my notecards?” She looks at Kelley hopefully as she speaks, reaching a hand to the side to pick her stack up off the ground. “I keep looking at the other side too soon and it’s not helping me at all.”

“I’ve actually got to go,” Kelley says apologetically, looking down at the time on her phone.

“What?” Christen asks, feeling her face fall. “But you just got here!”

“I know, but one of my sisters is passing by and she wants me to walk to the house with her,” Kelley says. “I’m studying with a couple of the other girls in the house who are taking the MCAT in the spring with me, and I figure it won’t hurt to head over early.”

“So wait, you’re leaving now?” Christen asks, frustrated. “You haven’t even been here five minutes – my coffee is still hot.”

Kelley doesn’t answer, texting as rapidly as she can with one hand.

“I’ll help,” Tobin offers tentatively, nodding at the giant stack of notecards in Christen’s hand. “If you need it.”

“That would be so great,” Kelley says distractedly, still texting, hair falling into her face and hiding it from view. “Wouldn’t it, Christen?”

“Don’t you have an essay to write?” Christen asks, hoping she doesn’t sound rude. “I don’t want to –”

“It’s fine,” Tobin cuts in before Christen can finish. “I don’t have to help you, I just thought I’d offer.”

“No, you can help,” Christen says begrudgingly. “I just don’t want to stop you from doing your own work.”

Tobin doesn’t say anything, and Kelley looks up at the silence.


“Yeah, stay,” Christen says as convincingly as she can, looking at Tobin who looks like she’s uncertain about whether or not to join her.

“Okay,” Tobin says. “But I’m going to need to borrow your laptop charger. Mine is dead and I totally forgot to bring my own.”

“See?” Kelley asks, a grin on her face. “This works out perfectly. Give me a hug, Chris. I’ve got to go, she’s downstairs waiting for me.”

Christen accepts the one-armed hug Kelley gives her, wishing that she wasn’t sitting down so she could hug her fully. Kelley then hugs Tobin the same way before getting up, dusting off her shorts.
and grinning widely.

“I’ll see you back at the apartment later,” Kelley tells Christen. “Okay?”

“Yeah, sounds good,” Christen says with a nod. “See you later.”

Kelley is off then, backpack bouncing against her hip as she walks in the direction of the stairs. Christen watches until Kelley is out of sight, and when she’s gone, she hears Tobin clear her throat again.

“I get it,” Christen says, eyes sliding over to Tobin who looks at her expectantly. “I’m pathetic, okay?”

“Not at all,” Tobin says smoothly, shaking her head. “Just, you might want to tone down the staring.”

“It’s not that bad, right?” Christen says, starting to panic. “Like, she can’t tell, right?”

“No,” Tobin agrees. “She probably can’t tell. I don’t know though – you know her better than me.”

“I don’t think she knows,” Christen says, biting her lip. “I mean, when we were at the tailgate she asked me why I’d been weird lately, but that was it. She just said something about wanting to spend more time with me and that was it.”

“She probably doesn’t know,” Tobin says, reaching for the greasy paper bag she’d brought up and opening it, pulling out a croissant. “Want some?”

She pulls off a giant piece and stuffs it in her mouth before offering it to Christen.

Christen’s stomach growls at the mere sight, but thankfully Tobin just looks straight at her like she hasn’t heard a thing.

“Yeah, if you don’t mind,” she says. “I’m starved. I don’t think I’ve eaten since this morning.”

Tobin pauses in the middle of tearing another large chunk of croissant, mouth falling open to reveal a bunch of masticated pastry.

“You should probably eat something,” Tobin advises, handing over the rest of her croissant. “Something a little more substantial than what I can get at the Starbucks counter.”

“I can’t go anywhere,” Christen warns Tobin, before she can get any ideas. “I still have to study my notecards and then I’ve got to work on the outline for social psych because Julie and I agreed that we’d both do half, and she told me that she’s finished with hers and I’m only halfway done.”

“Calm down,” Tobin says, something in her eyes twinkling with amusement as she pulls her phone out of the pocket of her hoodie. “We can order something. What do you want?”

“Oh!” Christen says in surprise, watching Tobin slide her fingers around her phone screen. “No, you don’t have to if you don’t want to, I mean you already bought food so you’re probably not hungry.”

“I can always eat,” Tobin tells Christen, grinning sideways at her, bemusement lurking in the corners of her mouth. “Alex once ordered from this one sushi place that was really great, I don’t know if you’ve heard of it? It’s in that one plaza on Pensacola Street, I think – “

“Tobin,” Christen cuts in, feeling her shoulders relax a little. “I’ve lived in this city for more than two years now. All you had to say was sushi place and I knew exactly what you were talking about.”
“Oh, good,” Tobin says. “Do you know what you want, then?”

“Let me pay,” Christen says, fumbling with one of the zippers on her backpack so she can find her wallet. “You bought my coffee and let me have some of your croissant. Let me treat you. It’s only polite.”

“Coffee that you haven’t drank at all,” Tobin notes, looking at where Christen has set her cup inside of her crossed legs. “Kelley said she did it the way you like it, was she wrong?”

“No, sorry,” Christen says, cheeks warming. “She fixed it how I like it – she used to get my coffee all the time. She knows what she’s doing.”

“I figured.”

“I just got distracted,” Christen says, picking up the cup and bringing it to her mouth. “Sorry.”

“Don’t be sorry,” Tobin says easily.

The coffee tastes good – exactly how Christen likes it. Kelley really does know what she’s doing, since they know how seriously the other takes their coffee. Black is Kelley’s favorite way to drink it, but if the coffee is crappy, Christen knows that she’ll take a spoonful or two of sugar.

“Thank you,” Christen says after she’s drained a good third of the cup. “I want to pay, though. Let me treat you.”

Tobin doesn’t protest after that, and until the deliveryman comes, Tobin charges her laptop and tests Christen on her notecards. It’s slightly easier to be around Tobin when there’s actually an agenda and they aren’t left to fumble for conversation on their own. Christen entrusts Tobin with watching her things when she has to go outside the library to collect their food, and when she comes back up she finds Tobin on her phone, having a whispered conversation. Careful not to interrupt, Christen sits down with their food as quietly and carefully as she can. She starts to wait to unpack the plastic bag full of Styrofoam containers until Tobin is finished, but Tobin hoists herself off the floor and tells the person on the other end to hold on.

“I’ve got to finish this,” Tobin tells Christen, grinning brightly as she gestures to her phone. “I’ll be back in a few.”

Something about not knowing who Tobin is on the phone with unsettles Christen as she pulls containers from the bag, popping tops to peer inside and distribute everything properly. Tobin is still somewhat of an enigma, Christen thinks, watching where Tobin has wandered a few yards away, just out of earshot so that there’s no hope of eavesdropping. For as comfortable as Christen is starting to feel around her, even when it’s just the two of them, she doesn’t know much about who Tobin was before her transfer. Thinking about it makes Christen’s nerves stand on edge, threatening to dissolve the thin film of ease that has begun to coat every interaction between the two of them.

But before that can happen, Tobin hangs up the phone and sinks back down to the floor in front of Christen.

“This smells so good,” Tobin says immediately, checking the container that Christen has set near her. “Thank you so much.”

“No problem,” Christen says, finally sliding the chopsticks out of their paper prison so she can detach them and eat. “Let me know if you want to try some of my roll.”

Tobin already has a plastic fork in hand and a mound of teriyaki chicken halfway to her mouth when
she pauses, looking at Christen with a funny expression.

“I don’t really do raw fish,” she says apologetically. “Thanks, though.”

“Oh,” Christen says, eyes darting back down to her food. “I didn’t know that.”

Tobin leans back, her right hand planted on the rough carpet while her left rakes her fork through her food.

“I don’t like raw fish or sweet potatoes,” she tells Christen in between bites. “I eat burgers and pizza way too much, but lately I’ve been drinking a lot of green smoothies because Ali is obsessed and forcing them on everyone.”

“Gross,” Christen says, wrinkling her nose.

“It’s not that bad, once you get used to chewing what you feel like you should be drinking.”

When she’s done speaking, Tobin looks at Christen expectantly.

“I don’t like bananas,” she offers lamely.

Tobin swallows.

“I’m left handed.”

“I know,” Christen says, immediately blushing at the way Tobin curiously raises her eyebrows. She wonders if it’s weird that she’s already observed that about her, but pushes past it. “I’m double jointed.”

Tobin hums in acknowledgement, still shoving food in her face at a moderate pace. She’s a bit of a fast and messy eater, dropping pieces of chicken and vegetables on her leggings and merely picking them up to place back in her Styrofoam container or in her mouth. It’s a stark contrast to the way Christen carefully picks up every piece of sushi, painstakingly making sure to get the entire thing in her mouth in one go before chewing slowly.

“I have two sisters and a brother,” Tobin says next.

“Two sisters,” Christen says.

“I watch too much Netflix,” Tobin says, and Christen snorts.

“Doesn’t everyone?”

Tobin grins.

“Fine – I watch too much Law and Order.”

“Good choice,” Christen says approvingly. “Kelley says I’m obsessed with my planner.”

“I never wear my retainer.”

Christen isn’t surprised.

“I think dogs are better than cats.”

“My worst habit is that I crack my knuckles too often.”
“Kelley thinks my major is stupid, even if she won’t admit it.”

Tobin puts down her fork and leans forward, hands on her knees as she looks at Christen seriously.

“Does it really matter what Kelley thinks?”

Christen can’t answer that. Suddenly things don’t feel lighthearted anymore and she’s forced to cut down the budding resentment threatening to bloom within her, just so she doesn’t end up projecting it all on Tobin like she knows she will because there’s no good reason to be mad with Kelley. Christen can’t answer because she knows that it shouldn’t matter what Kelley thinks, but it still does.

Tobin looks at her, waiting, and leans back on her hands, food still sitting precariously on her left thigh. Time passes and Christen doesn’t answer, sipping at her disgustingly lukewarm coffee just to have something to do besides wear her humiliation all over her face, and eventually Tobin lets the question pass unanswered.

Studying with Tobin is easy. She works in almost total silence; any noise she would make from the clacking of the keys on her laptop drowned out by the music in Christen’s earphones. Tobin mouths along to whatever song she has playing through her own headphones and Christen can’t look over at her too often, because it’s amusing and distracting and she doesn’t really need to be staring in the first place. They don’t sit too close, Christen with her back up against the window through which shines black sky dotted with the occasional yellow lamp light. Tobin sprawls on the ground, head pillowed onto the hoodie that she’d taken off to reveal a thin white t-shirt under which Christen can just barely see a sports bra decorated in school colors. Her laptop sits on her stomach as she types and every once in a while she reaches to her side, picking up one of the eggrolls she had ordered a side of to tear a bite off of before placing back down.

Christen works on her half of the outline, taking a break from her notecards. The outline is easier because she takes in the information directly, no guessing involved. It’s a little mechanical, the way her eyes switch between the electronic textbook and the outline document on her screen. The coffee and food has fueled her on, giving her the energy to make it through the rest of a long night of studying without crashing. The freezing cold of the library is forcing goosebumps to sprout up along her arms despite the cardigan she’s wearing, and she wishes that she’d at least driven to campus because that way she could have retrieved the sweatshirt she had left in the trunk the other day. As it is, she’d walked that morning, enjoying the brisk fall air perhaps a little too much.

When she finishes the outline and checks the time, she briefly wonders if might be time to call it a night. It’s almost nine and she has another busy day to look forward to, and stopping for the day might be in her best interest. She fires off her half of the outline to Julie in an email attachment and powers down her laptop, gently wrapping her earphones around her hand until they’re neatly coiled and she can tuck them into her backpack.

“You done?”

It’s Tobin asking with a mouth full of eggroll, one hand tugging an earphone loose so she can hear Christen’s response. She looks expectant, eyes wide and patient.

“With my outline, yeah,” Christen tells me. “Are you almost done with your paper?”

Tobin looks confused for half a second before laughing, pushing herself up onto her elbows and swallowing before responding.
"Yeah, I’ve been done for a while now,” she tells Christen. “I just didn’t want to bother you.”

“You could have just left,” Christen says, wondering why Tobin’s still there if she’s done with her work. “You don’t need to wait for me or anything.”

“It’s only polite,” Tobin says, using Christen’s earlier words. “Besides, I thought you still wanted to go over your notecards.”

“You stayed to help me study?” Christen asks, unable to keep the surprise out of her tone. “You really didn’t have to do that, you know.”

“I know,” Tobin says with shrug. “But it’s either hang with you or go take Alex up on her invitation to paint our nails together, and I really don’t want to do that.”

Christen stifles a laugh that Tobin still catches, grinning back at her.

“So give them here,” Tobin says, putting her laptop to the side and sitting up properly. “Let me test you.”

Christen hands the stack over, watching the way Tobin easily wraps her fingers around the height of the cards to shuffle them together.

“Those were in alphabetical order, you know,” Christen says, staring at Tobin’s hands and trying not to panic about putting all two hundred of them back in order.

“Yeah, I know,” Tobin says. “You’ve practically memorized what comes after what, which isn’t very helpful. If you want to do well on whatever exam these are for, we’re going to try something different.”

Christen is skeptical, but she lets Tobin pretend to shuffle the cards like she’s a dealer at a casino.

Tobin’s method actually seems to work, even though it leaves Christen feeling frustrated and stupid for not knowing all the answers as well as she’d like. They’re halfway through the stack when Christen’s phone beeps with a text that she reaches for immediately when she sees Kelley’s name splashed against her screen.

Leaving the house now, are you back at the apartment yet?

Christen hurriedly texts back.

Not yet, do you want me to head back now?

Kelley’s response is unexpectedly fast and makes Christen’s heart speed pick up its pace.

Yeah! Come back and we’ll watch tv before we go to bed :)

“You’re smiling,” Tobin’s voice cuts across Christen’s thoughts, halting her fingers on her keyboard. “Kelley?”

Something in Christen feels defensive and protective all at the same time.

“Yeah,” she says warily, looking at Tobin and trying to force her mouth into a straight line. “Why?”

“Just asking,” Tobin says, shrugging. “You look happy.”

Christen hesitates, looking down at her phone screen before locking it and focusing her attention on
Tobin for a moment.

“She’s my best friend,” Christen says slowly, fingers tapping against her phone screen. “Of course she makes me happy.”

“Good,” Tobin says, picking up an index card. “That’s good. Ready to continue?”

Christen hesitates, unlocking her phone to look down at the beginnings of her reply to Kelley.

“Kelley wants to know if I want to come home and hang out,” she says hesitantly, avoiding Tobin’s expectant gaze in favor of deleting what she’s typed out so far. “I’m thinking it might be time to call it quits for tonight.”

“But we’re not even halfway done,” Tobin says, and when Christen looks up, she can see Tobin’s brows knit together in confusion. “Don’t you want to at least finish with all the words?”

“I’ve already gone over them all before,” Christen says, pulling off the frayed rubber band she’s been keeping on her wrist and handing it over to Tobin who takes it slowly. “I’ll be fine. The test isn’t until Thursday anyway.”

“Okay,” Tobin says, but it sounds like she’s not believing Christen. “If you say so.”

“I do,” Christen says, not sure who she’s trying to convince. “It’s just that I haven’t gotten to hang out with Kelley one-on-one in a while because she’s so busy, so I try to take advantage when she’s not.”

“It’s always on her terms though,” Tobin says, making Christen frown. “Listen, I don’t have a problem with you running out of here to hang out with her if you’re really feeling prepared for your midterm. But if you want to go home just because she asked you to, even though you’re not really ready for this, then that’s not really cool.”

“Well,” Christen says, growing hot with embarrassment, “I do feel prepared. And I don’t like that you’re insinuating that I’m not.”

Tobin holds her hands up defensively, hands still full of fanned out index cards.

“Woah,” she says, words laden with caution. “I’m not insinuating anything. I’m just saying – ”

“It feels like you are,” Christen interrupts hotly, picking up her backpack to put her laptop away. “And I don’t like it.”

“I’m just saying – “

“I know that you’re just saying,” Christen says, snapping even though she doesn’t want to, even though she knows that Tobin doesn’t deserve it.

“First of all,” Tobin says, before Christen can continue, “stop interrupting me.”

Christen shrinks a little, pausing in the middle of zipping up her backpack as Tobin sits up straight and sets the notecards in a disorganized little pile so she can reach her hands up to mess with her hair.

“I don’t mean to – “

“I don’t do it to you,” Tobin cuts across, silencing Christen with a single firm but kind look. “Okay? It’s not a nice thing to do.”
Christen nods meekly.

“Second of all, if you’re just going to run to Kelley whenever she asks for you, maybe I shouldn’t have bothered helping you in the first place.”

Tobin’s voice sounds defeated.

“No,” Christen says, her voice catching as she suddenly feels small. “No, I appreciate you helping me, I really do.”

Tobin shakes her head in uncharacteristic frustration, running a hand through her hair before twisting it until it’s in a bun.

“I’m not doing this for me, you know,” Tobin says, pulling an elastic from her wrist to tie her hair off. “I know that I don’t have to help you and that I didn’t have to stay once I was finished with my essay. But I like hanging with you and I don’t mind helping you.”

“Listen,” Christen says, desperately racking her brain for a way to keep Tobin from being upset with her. “We’ll finish the notecards. We’ll finish the set and I’ll text Kelley that I’ll see her later when I get home. Okay?”

“I’m not going to make you do something you don’t want to,” Tobin tells her. “I’m not going to force you to stay with me and study.”

But Christen is already tapping away on her phone, texting Kelley and trying to calm the flush creeping up her face.

_Actually, I have to finish what I’m doing, will you still be awake in an hour?

“Seriously,” Tobin says, reaching for the cards and the rubber band. “Just go. You’re right – you two don’t spend a ton of time together. Go ahead and take advantage.”

Christen’s brain hurts from the whiplash that Tobin’s attitude is giving her, and she buries her head in her hands for a moment.

“You can go if you want,” Christen says through her fingers, eyes closed. It’s peaceful like this, hiding her face from Tobin and looking at nothing. “I’m going to stay and study like I should.”

A large crack of thunder tears through the weighted atmosphere, forcing Christen’s head up just in time to see Tobin jump and bring a hand to her chest.

“Fuck,” Tobin says, eyes wide as she stares through the window behind Christen. “What was that?”

The sudden and very audible downpour answers that for her, and when Christen twists around to put her face up against the glass and peer outside, it’s easy to see the buckets of rain falling to the ground. A few moments pass and then a bolt of lightning splits the sky in half, illuminating the ground below and letting Christen get a good look at the massive amounts of water pooling at the base of the sloping walkways.

Tobin’s phone chimes loudly, and when Christen turns around to look, she sees Tobin clutching the device with a petrified expression.

“Lightning warning from school,” Tobin says, answering Christen’s silent question. “Guess I’m not going anywhere for now.”
A weighted silence settles between them as Christen shivers against the icy window and turns to look back at the deluge pouring down around them. The dim lighting and abandoned, frigid library does nothing to help. They seem to be the only two left on the floor and Christen contemplates going down to get more coffee just so that she doesn’t have to worry about talking to Tobin, who’s stiff posture is reflected in the window.

“You’re cold.”

It’s a simple comment that Tobin makes in a quiet voice that makes Christen realize her teeth have been chattering as she remains glued to the window, doing nothing but watching the rain which only seems to have increased in intensity.

“A little,” Christen confesses. “I’m just really sensitive to the cold.”

“Want my sweatshirt?”

Christen’s immediate instinct is to say no, to not let herself accept anything from Tobin who seems far too nice for Christen to deserve anything from her. But Tobin had shed the hoodie hours before and hasn’t seemed to miss it, and even with almost the full length of her arms on display, she doesn’t seem nearly as bothered by the chilly library as Christen does.

“Um,” Christen hedges, looking at the black mass of soft fleece that Tobin is now holding in her hands, looking at Christen patiently. “You really don’t need it?”

Tobin shakes her head, holding the fabric out towards her. “No, I’m fine. I’m not cold at all.”

It takes a little bit of convincing, of Tobin reassuring her that she’ll ask for it back if she decides that she wants it, but Christen eventually takes the hoodie and pulls it over the sleeves of her cardigan before zipping it up to her chin. It’s warm, well lined and smelling like shampoo and laundry detergent and the crisp autumn air that’s been hanging around outside since Sunday. It’s nice, and when Tobin looks down at the ground to organize the notecards into neat piles, Christen turns her head to the side to take one long inhale of the piece of clothing, ignoring the way her eyes close for just a second.

“Okay,” Tobin says, moving to lie down on her stomach and then proceeding to army-crawl closer to Christen, one stack of index cards in each hand and the worn rubber band hanging loose from her left wrist. “Let’s go. Let’s do this.”

So they do, Tobin’s soft drawl reading off the cards and teasing Christen gently whenever she takes too long to give a definition. It makes Christen blush as Tobin good-naturedly ribs her, but after thirty or so cards, Christen catches Tobin looking out the window with her teeth digging into her lower lip. “Do you like the rain?”

Christen is so busy watching the fat raindrops drip down the other side of the window that she misses the way Tobin avoids answering the question.

“It’s kind of nice,” Christen says, turning back to her phone in her lap, which still hasn’t received a reply from Kelley since earlier. “Peaceful.”
“It’s annoying,” Tobin says, and Christen misses the way she flinches as a crack of thunder sounds again. It’s another loud one, almost deafening, and Christen just presses her face against the glass again. “It gets practice cancelled, so I’m not a big fan.”

“It all comes back to soccer, doesn’t it?” Christen asks rhetorically. “Here – come look at it.”

She isn’t sure what makes her beckon Tobin closer, and she isn’t sure why Tobin pushes herself onto her knees and scoots forward on the carpet until she’s able to lean over Christen’s legs.

“Look,” Christen says, pointing her index fingers against the glass. “Isn’t it nice?”

Tobin doesn’t say anything, hanging back slightly as she sinks down to sit on her legs and stare from a short distance away.

“Maybe,” she allows after a while, shuffling the stack of cards she has yet to test Christen on. “I mean, now that I’m inside, it isn’t that bad.”

“You know,” Christen says, casting a sideways look at Tobin, “it’s really weird seeing you without a ball.”

Tobin scoffs. “I don’t have one on me all the time,” she denies.

“It feels like it,” Christen says, grinning as Tobin lowers herself flat to the floor again, this time with her chin dangerously close to resting on Christen’s knee. “Probably for the best that you don’t though, I can only imagine how many bookshelves you’d knock over practicing your little tricks in here.”

Tobin rolls her eyes, picking a card from the pile.

“My tricks aren’t little,” she says dismissively. “And trust me, I know not to bring a ball into the library – that’s why I left it in the car this time.”

Christen giggles.

“But otherwise you would have tried to bring it in, right?”

Tobin’s eyes narrow as she taps the thick paper card against Christen’s covered shin.

“The word is test-retest reliability,” Tobin reads from the card. “Man, I’m so glad I’m not taking this class.”

Christen struggles a little trying to get the definition close enough for Tobin’s standards, but the next few words are easy. Tobin settles down and rolls onto her back, resting her head on top of Christen’s backpack. Her bun bobs down close enough to brush Christen’s thigh, and when Tobin reaches up to pull out the elastic, her hair ends up half on Christen’s leg.

“Social desirability bias,” Tobin reads, her voice dragging along with every syllable. “This one is tough.”

Christen turns the word over in her mind, trying to remember how this key term is different from all the other types of bias.

“I don’t know,” Christen says after a few minutes, turning to trace a lazy raindrop with her fingertip. She’s beginning to feel exhausted, only a small handful of cards left to review. “I know it’s a type of subject bias – I know this, it’s on the tip of my tongue.”
Tobin remains silent as Christen tries to work the answer out.

“Just tell me, Tobin,” Christen says, tearing her gaze away from the window as a flash of lightning sprints down from the heavens. “I’ll come back to it later, before the test.”

Only Tobin doesn’t respond. When Christen squints down at her through tired and blurry eyes, she sees the rhythmic rise and fall of a chest and a head turned to the side, mouth slightly open and eyes fully closed. She’s sleeping, Christen thinks, and immediately tries to think of what to do about it.

So after running through several options – including shaking her awake, praying that a loud bolt of thunder wakes her up, quietly disappearing after tugging her backpack out from underneath Tobin’s head – Christen settles on the easiest one: carefully taking her stack of unread notecards out of Tobin’s limp hand and finishing them off all by herself. By the time she’s finished, she’s ready to fall asleep herself. It’s eleven seventeen and Christen has been sitting in the library for nearly twelve hours, and even though she doubts that Kelley is even awake anymore, she’s ready to get back to her own apartment.

Thankfully, Tobin wakes up just as Christen is contemplating how to best remove her rubber band from Tobin’s wrist.

“Sorry,” Tobin says sleepily, sitting up and rubbing at her eyes. “I didn’t mean to fall asleep on you.”

“It’s okay,” Christen says, fingers itching to organize all the cards back into alphabetical error. She resists though, knowing that it would take forever and she doesn’t have that kind of time. “I finished all by myself, see?”

She holds up the stack of cards to Tobin to see.

“Proud of you,” Tobin gets out through a yawn, shooting her a thumbs up and running a hand through her tangled hair. “We can go in a minute, just let me – shit.”

Christen watches in slow-motion as Tobin reaches for the hair elastic on her wrist, only to grab the rubber band and stretch it in the process, accidentally snapping it so it breaks. Tobin looks up at her, horror in her eyes that Christen knows mirrors the look in her own.

“I’m so sorry,” Tobin says, suddenly looking terrifically awake and alert. “Shit, Chris, I didn’t mean to.”

Christen stares down at the stack of index cards in her hands and swallows thickly.

“It’s fine,” she says, knowing that the burning sensation lining the rims of her eyes is only because she’s tired. “It’s okay. I know you didn’t.”

“Do you have another?” Tobin asks hurriedly, and even though Christen just knows that she’s trying to be helpful, she can’t help but let a tear slip down the side of her nose as she shakes her head. “Hey – I’m sorry, okay? It’s not a big deal. Here, let me take these from you.”

Christen shakes her head, turning her head to the side to wipe her eyes on her shoulder.

“It’s okay, I’m sorry,” she apologizes. “I’m just really tired. I know, it’s not a big deal. I’m just tired and – and – “

“Hey, it’s okay,” Tobin says, moving closer and taking the notecards from Christen. “Look – we’ll use my hair tie, okay? It’s going to be okay.”
Christen nods slowly, wiping at her eyes with the heels of her hands and trying to keep from sniffling.


“Good,” Tobin says, stretching the colored elastic until it fits around the entire stack. “Look, we’re fine.”

“Thank you,” Christen says, too worn out to even be embarrassed.

Tobin tucks the index cards into Christen’s backpack and then zips the pocket closed, looking up at Christen with a calm expression when she’s done.

“Let’s get you home, huh?” Tobin says, gradually getting to her knees and then her feet.

“It’s still raining,” Christen says, looking outside.

“We’ll run for it,” Tobin says with a shrug. “Where’s your car?”

“I walked,” Christen says, the realization hitting her as she says it. “I walked to campus this morning, and didn’t even think about it.”

“I’ll drive you,” Tobin says, offering a hand to Christen. “Come on. I’m not parked too far from here.”

Christen only hesitates for a millisecond before reaching up a hand to grasp at Tobin, who has warm and lightly callously palms that fit smoothly against hers, and strong fingers that grip firmly but not too tightly. Tobin pulls her up easily, hand releasing as soon as Christen is standing steadily.

“Is it okay if I put my laptop in your backpack?” Tobin asks distractedly, bending down to collect all of their garbage. Christen had tried to be neat about it, packing everything back into the plastic bag that their food had come in, but Tobin hadn’t been as clean as her. “I don’t want it to get wet.”

“Yeah, that’s fine,” Christen says, unzipping her backpack to put Tobin’s things inside. “Ready?”

“Definitely,” Tobin says, running a hand through her hair as she comes next to Christen. “Let’s go.”

On the front stoop of the library, under the small awning, Christen tries to convince Tobin to wait until the rain lets up a little.

“This is as good as it’s going to get,” Tobin says grimly, looking out at the storm in front of them. “I really don’t think it’s letting up any time soon.”

“But you run faster than me,” Christen says, ending up sounding like she’s whining no matter how hard she tries not to. “I’m slow. And you’ll run and leave me behind and I’ll trip and fall into a giant puddle and you’ll never know because you’ll be in your car already.”

“Chris,” Tobin says, mouth quirking into a smile. “Do you want a piggy back ride to my car?”

Christen blinks.

“What?”

“Come on,” Tobin grins, jerking her head over her shoulder. “Hop on. I’m not going to leave you behind, promise.”
Christen is doubtful – Tobin’s lanky limbs look like they can barely support herself, much less another person and a heavy backpack.

“Come on,” Tobin wheedles. “Or else you’re going to be standing there all night and I’ll be waiting for you until tomorrow.”

“It’s almost tomorrow anyway,” Christen informs her. “It’s twenty-two minutes to midnight.”

Tobin rolls her eyes.

“You know what I mean,” she says. “Let’s go, Chris. I’ll carry you – you’re half dead on your feet anyway – and we’ll get there at the same time and no one will be left behind.”

So Christen hesitantly agrees, carefully climbing onto Tobin’s back. She’s surprised by how sturdy Tobin feels under her: solid and muscled, lean but powerful.

“Cross your legs around me,” Tobin instructs, and Christen listens, falling into Tobin and resting her chin on her shoulder. She smells just like her hoodie, soft and homey and only slightly stale from hours in a library. “And hold on. You’ve got to help me out here. Are you ready?”

Christen shakes her head. “Not at all,” she tells Tobin, hiding her face into Tobin’s shoulder, a mass of hair that isn’t her own falling into her face. “Can we stay here?”

Tobin doesn’t respond; she runs out into the rain without warning Christen who shrieks as the rain makes contact, falling in thick and heavy sheets onto them. It feels like they’re soaked within moments and Christen clutches on tightly, terrified of Tobin letting go of her and sending her tumbling to the ground. She buries her face against Tobin’s skin, squeezing her eyes shut as Tobin jogs along the paved sidewalks.

Another loud thunderclap does little to help their situation, making Tobin stumble and skid before catching herself.

“I’m going to die!” Christen shouts against wet skin.

“You’re so dramatic!” Tobin yells back, barely audible over the rush of rain.

It’s not far to Tobin’s car – barely a two-minute trip until Tobin is stopping in front of a passenger door and turning around to let Christen fall into a seat. It all happens quickly, the way Tobin slams the door and runs around to slide into the driver’s seat.

“Oh my God,” Christen gasps, eyes going wide when she sees Tobin’s clothing wet and plastered to her skin, save for a large patch on her back that is only slightly damp. “You’re soaked.”

“We both are,” Tobin says, sticking her keys into the ignition. As soon as the car is on, she turns on the heat and aims the vents at her and Christen. “Fuck, that was a lot worse than I thought.”

“I told you so,” Christen says, wrestling her backpack off of her shoulders. “I feel bad – I’m dripping all over your car.”

Tobin’s car is neither particularly new nor old, but it’s well loved. The leather is soft and worn and there are a dozen water bottles stashed around, some empty and some completely full. A soccer ball sits at Christen’s feet and there are a few candy wrappers tossed in the side compartment, something that would amuse Christen if she had the presence of mind to think about it. As it is, she’s too busy trying to warm her shivering body and look away from Tobin as she peels her shirt from her torso, revealing far too much tanned and toned skin than Christen could have prepared herself for. She
keeps her eyes forward as the rain pounds down onto the hood of Tobin’s car until Tobin finds a spare jacket in the backseat, twisting around to retrieve it and struggling to pull it on over her bare skin.

“Sorry,” Tobin says. “I just couldn’t stay in that; it was making me uncomfortable. But don’t worry about it, I’ll wipe everything down when you leave. It will be fine.”

“If you say so,” Christen says, pulling Tobin’s things out of her backpack so she doesn’t forget. “I’d be freaking out if I was in my car like this.”

“Good thing we’re not in your car then,” Tobin grunts, putting the car in reverse before pulling out of the parking spot.

Tobin drive surprisingly cautiously, even in the middle of an endless thunderstorm. She uses her blinkers, comes to complete stops, and drives so slowly that Christen wants to compare her to a grandmother. She gets them to the front of Christen’s apartment in one piece though, so she doesn’t dare complain.

“Thanks,” Christen says as the car idles, her backpack back on her shoulders and a hand on the door handle. “Thanks for the ride, and for helping me study. I owe you.”

“I’ll hold you to that,” Tobin says, her wet hair trailing water droplets down her back. “Now get inside safely, okay? I’ll see you around.”

Christen lingers, feeling like there’s more to say that she can’t put into words. When nothing comes for her, she just smiles awkwardly before hopping out and making a mad dash for her front door.

Inside the apartment, Kelley is perched on a stool in near darkness, wrapped in a blanket with a mug of tea cradled between her hands.

“Where have you been?” Kelley asks concernedly, rising from her seat. “You never texted me back.”

Kelley looks confused, reaching for her phone on the counter.

“Yes I did,” she says, thumb flicking at the screen. “I texted to say – oh, I guess I forgot to send it. I swear I meant to, though.”

Something warm spreads in Christen’s chest that has nothing to do with the temperature of the room.

“Well, you’re here now,” Kelley decides, dropping the blanket in a pile on the floor and stepping over it to reach Christen. “You’ve got to be freezing – I know how you are. Here, this tea is for you.”

Christen isn’t a huge tea fan but she takes the mug anyway, pressing the lip of it to her mouth. It’s only passably warm at this point, making her wonder how long Kelley has been sitting in the dark by herself and waiting for Christen to arrive home. She switches hands according to how Kelley removes her backpack first, then the hoodie from Tobin, which she makes a note to wash before giving back.

“On a scale of one to ten,” Kelley says, now dragging Christen’s cardigan from her arms, “that is
definitely not your sweatshirt.”

A lump grows in Christen’s throat, and she struggles to speak past it.

“Tobin’s.”

“Ah,” Kelley says, clucking her tongue. “She’s so great, isn’t she? Her body runs at like a thousand degrees – she’s literally the warmest person I know. And so nice, too.”

Something in Christen’s mind gets stuck on how Kelley knows that, but she’s forced to move on a second later when Kelley’s hands reach for the button of her jeans.

“Kell,” Christen says, gently pushing her fingers away. “I can take it from here.”

If Kelley notices the catch in her voice or the flush of her cheeks, she doesn’t say anything.

“Sure,” Kelley agrees. “I’m going to get ready for bed, but will you come say goodnight when you’re ready?”

“Yeah, of course,” Christen says, smiling into the mug as she watches Kelley scurry around, gathering everything that she’s thrown on the floor. Kelley tosses the blanket on the couch and then heads to Christen’s room with all of her clothes and backpack. “Thanks, Kell. You didn’t have to wait up.”

Kelley grins, her smile giving away how tired she is. “Of course I did,” she says, pressing a kiss to Christen’s cheek. “Don’t forget to say goodnight, okay?”


Chapter End Notes

i’ve been super excited to post this one, so please let me know if you liked it!
“I’m so relieved that I got that assignment in on time,” Julie says, clutching her purse against her size as they leave the lecture room. “I really thought that I was going to miss the deadline by seconds.”

“That’s what you get for not doing it with me,” Christen tells her. “Remember, I told you I was doing it in the library and – “

“I know, I know,” Julie says, looking sheepish. “But I was feeling lazy when you asked and didn’t feel like heading back to campus.”

“Your loss,” Christen shrugs. “At least you did well on it.”

“Thank God,” Julie says, laughing. “Hey, want a ride back to your apartment? You said you walked today, right?”

“Yeah, but I don’t mind walking back,” Christen says. “I like the exercise.”

Julie raises an eyebrow at Christen’s open-toed sandals and knit sweater. The middle of October has brought with it a cold front, predicted to only last through the weekend, but that doesn’t mean that it isn’t serious enough to bust out the winter wear for. Christen had seen Kelley pulling on a pair of fur boots that morning and laughed, because it was cold but not that cold out.

“Fine,” Christen gives in, just as her phone starts vibrating in her hand. “You can give me a ride.”

She looks down at her screen while she talks, frowning when the name registers. It’s Tobin, who is quite possibly the last person she’d expect to hear from.

“Who is it?” Julie asks, peering over Christen’s shoulder to get a look in the bright sunlight.

“Tobin,” Christen says slowly, angling the screen towards Julie so she can see. “Why would she be calling me?”

Julie shrugs, stepping away and continuing to walk.

“Just answer it,” she encourages. “I mean, it’s probably just about tomorrow.”

Frowning, Christen slides a finger against the screen to answer the call at the last possible second. She takes her time putting the phone to her ear, and when she does, she wrinkles her nose at the voice on the other end.

“Hold on,” says someone who is most definitely not Tobin. “Tobin – she picked up, come here.”

It sounds like Alex, and Christen waits impatiently as indistinct voices converse in the background.

“What does she want?” Julie whispers, and Christen just shrugs impatiently.

When Tobin finally speaks, she sounds slightly exasperated.

“Hey,” she says. “Sorry about that.”
“It’s fine,” Christen says, deciding not to ask what the hell is going on. “Why are you calling?”

“There’s this thing tomorrow,” Tobin says, her inflection making it sounds like a question when it’s not. “Like, the team is going to head to a park and grill burgers and just hang out together and I was wondering if you wanted to come.”

Christen’s frown reappears.

“I figured you’d know,” Christen says slowly, looking sideways at Julie who looks curious. “Kelley already invited me.”

“Oh,” Tobin says, sounding surprised. “She did?”

“I thought she might have told you guys,” Christen says, worry creeping over her. “I mean, it’s fine if I’m there, right?”

“Yeah, no, it’s totally fine,” Tobin says, just a little faster than her usual manner of speaking. “She just hadn’t mentioned it and I didn’t want you to feel like you were being left out.”

“No, I’m coming,” Christen says, ignoring Julie questioning hand gestures.

“I’ll see you there, then. Bye, I guess.”

“Bye,” Christen says, hanging up.

“So?” Julie asks.

“I don’t know what that was,” Christen says, staring down at her phone. “Why would she call to invite me?”

“Who cares?” Julie says, snorting. “You’re going; does it matter who asked?”

“Kelley asked me last week,” Christen reminds her. “Tobin just called me last minute. Like I’m an afterthought. Like Kelley didn’t tell anyone that she invited me.”

“Maybe she assumed everyone would know you were coming anyway,” Julie says with a shrug. “Listen, don’t stress about it. I’d come along but I’ve got plans to watch the game with Zach’s family.”

“No, you enjoy yourself,” Christen says absently, slipping her phone into her jeans pocket. “I’ll be fine.”

“Of course you will,” Julie says brightly, nearly skipping along towards the entrance of the parking garage. “Now come on, let’s get you home.”

Christen follows but can’t help the uneasy feeling in her stomach.

* * *

They carpool to the park, Christen offering to drive mostly because she doesn’t like the idea of being in a car with someone else’s potentially awful driving skills. Kelley sits in the passenger seat – as usual – and Sam, Steph, and Lindsey end up in her backseat. Christen likes them because they’re entertaining, keeping up a steady flow of conversation that mostly involves Steph ganging up on Sam with Lindsey and Kelley’s assistance.

“What are you even wearing?” Steph says from her spot in the middle of the backseat, something
that she’d protested until Sam and Lindsey had proved how much taller they are than her. “Those are the ugliest shoes I’ve ever seen.”

“We’re going hiking, Steph,” Sam says, rolling her eyes. “I’m really going to enjoy seeing how you do in those brand new sneakers.”

“At least they aren’t covered in dirt and don’t look like they’re falling apart,” Steph scoffs.

“Wait, you’re wearing new shoes?” Kelley says, turned around in her seat to look down at Steph’s feet. “On a scale of one to ten, that’s the worst idea I’ve ever heard. You’re going to end up with a ton of blisters, I’m calling it now.”

“They’re sneakers, not heels,” Steph says. “I’ll be fine.”

Christen grins from her seat, using the rearview mirror to glance back and take a second to watch the girls.

When they pull up to the pavilion that the team has commandeered for the day, Kelley tells Christen not to bother helping her unload the trunk. Their car had been assigned drinks and dessert, which Kelley had decided needed to be apple slices and melon chunks.

“You know, just because you don’t like dessert doesn’t mean that no one else does,” Christen says, hovering as Kelley bends down to retrieve the grocery bags from the trunk. “People are going to want to know where the cookies are.”

“They’ll thank me later,” Kelley says, grunting as she reaches for a case of water bottles. “Here – can you maybe go ask one of the girls to help me with the rest of the water?”

“I can help, you know,” Christen says. “I’m not as weak as I look.”

“You shouldn’t have to, though,” Kelley says, shifting the case to one hand so she can frantically wave at someone behind Christen. “I know you’re not weak, but I’m not going to make you do this kind of stuff. I want you to have fun.”

“I’ll have fun just as long as I’m with you,” Christen assures her.

Kelley grins at Christen from behind the mirrored lenses of her sunglasses. “Good,” she tells her. “Get ready for me to be with you all day, then.”

Christen grins right back at her, neither of them looking away until someone clears their throat.

“You called?”

Turning to her side, Christen sees the girl she recognizes as the team’s keeper. She’s lean and tall with blonde hair and reminds her of Tobin in that she seems intimidating.

“Kelley,” the girl says seriously, “you know it’s cloudy outside, right?”

“These are a fashion statement,” Kelley says, pushing her sunglasses further up the bridge of her nose before hoisting the case of water further up against her hip.

“What, the statement being that you can’t read a weather report?” the girl asks sarcastically.

“Christen, you deserve a medal for putting up with this girl.”

“Oh,” Christen says, not having expected the girl to know her name. “I just like hanging out with Kelley.”
“See, Ashlyn?” Kelley says, using her free arm to elbow Ashlyn who comes close to take the case of water from Kelley. “Not everyone enjoys making fun of me all the time.”

“You’re a special one, then,” Ashlyn tells Christen. “It takes a certain kind of crazy to tolerate Kelley.”

“Don’t be rude,” Kelley complains, but then Ashlyn is smirking and walking over to everyone else and Kelley is grabbing another case of water.

“I can help, seriously,” Christen says, watching Kelley stare at the third case of water still in the trunk. “Just move and let me get it.”

“Yeah, but your arms are so tiny,” Kelley protests.

“I’m offended,” Christen laughs. Kelley laughs too, moving aside to finally give Christen access to her own trunk, letting her pick up the last of the water. “See, look? I’ll be fine.”

Christen might be struggling a little with the case but she doesn’t let on, closing the trunk with her elbow.

“You’re so strong!” Kelley exclaims dramatically, pretending to swoon. “What am I supposed to do with all your muscles?”

Christen giggles, following Kelley to the pavilion.

“Kell, I’m wearing a jacket,” she says. “You can’t see anything.”

“I can see your bulging biceps through that leather jacket, missy,” Kelley tells her. “You don’t need to be modest.”

When they finally reach everyone else – they’re the last car to arrive, something that Christen isn’t proud of, but it had honestly been Steph’s fault since she was running late – Christen is already feeling a little more comfortable at the prospect of spending the entire day with the team. She’s been nervous just because that’s her knee-jerk reaction to spending time with people she doesn’t know too well, and even though she’s known that Kelley will be here the entire time, it’s still easy to remember that Kelley has a habit of running off as she pleases. Now, though, she’s thinking that maybe Kelley will prove her wrong and stick with Christen for the entire day.

Of course, that feeling doesn’t last very long.

It takes less than five minutes for Kelley to approach the grill, dragging a more than willing Christen with her. Ashlyn is standing there with Ali, the two of them watching Crystal and Moe flip burgers on the grill.

“What, no hotdogs?” Kelley jokes, welcoming the hug that Ali gives her.

“Those are coming,” Moe says, a look of concentration on her face as she lifts a burger to check if it’s done. “These just take longer to cook.”

“It’s so good to see you!” Ali squeals, pulling in Christen who goes easily, welcoming the warm hug. “It feels like it’s been forever!”

“Good to see you too,” Christen returns.

“So did Ashlyn tell you that she helped me bring over the water?” Kelley asks, smirking at Ali.
“With all her bulging muscles?”

Christen finds her smile slipping off her face.

“I’ve got bigger biceps,” Ali says dismissively, like she isn’t even considering what Kelley is saying as truth. “Ash is like a twig compared to me.”

“Ouch,” Ashlyn says loudly. “Way to hit me where it hurts.”

Ali shrugs nonchalantly.

“It’s true,” she says. “You might use your arms more than us field players but you definitely don’t have the muscle mass that we do.”

“No arguing today,” Crystal says firmly, turning around with her grilling spatula in hand. “Today is going to be a nice team bonding day and I’m not letting anything get in the way of that. Do we need to separate you two?”

“No,” Ashlyn says, glancing sideways at Ali who is decidedly looking anywhere else. “We’ll be nice.”

“Maybe you should be nice over there,” Kelley says, tugging on Ashlyn’s arm with the hand not holding her half-drunk water bottle. “Come with me to say hi to Alex and Syd, what do you say?”

Ashlyn looks over in the direction to which Kelley is jerking her chin, and nods. “Fine,” she says, still looking at Ali who is now suddenly very interested in asking Moe about the burgers. “Let’s go.”

“I’ll be back,” Kelley tells Christen lowly, nudging her as she goes to leave. “I just can’t leave them alone like this, they get nuclear when – “

“You know I can hear you, right?” Ashlyn asks rhetorically, and Kelley just shrugs before heading off.

Christen doesn’t understand what just happened, and she definitely doesn’t understand the way Ali is suddenly grinning toothily at her.

“Sorry about that,” she apologizes graciously. “Sometimes she just needs someone to set her straight.”

Moe snorts, and Christen wisely chooses to stay silent.

Ali ignores Moe, focusing on Christen.

“So Tobin invited you after all, then,” she says. “I didn’t think she was going to.”

“Oh,” Christen says, “no, Kelley invited me.”

Ali looks bemused for a second.

“No, Tobin did,” she says surely. “She asked me if it was weird – clearly it wasn’t, since you’re here.”

“I mean, Tobin asked,” Christen says, feeling the need to make Ali understand the situation. “But Kelley asked me first a while ago, so I was already planning on coming when Tobin asked. I told her that.”
“Huh,” Ali says. “When I asked Tobin what you said, she only told me that you were coming.”

Christen shrugs, wondering why Tobin would have talked to Ali about inviting her. “It’s not that big of a deal,” she says. “There was no point to her inviting me anyway.”

Ali’s confused face returns.

“No point? She was just trying to be nice and make sure that you knew that even though you’re not on the team, we still want you to hang out with us.”

Christen shifts uncomfortably.

“No point? She was just trying to be nice and make sure that you knew that even though you’re not on the team, we still want you to hang out with us.”

Christen shifts uncomfortably.

“Yeah, but isn’t it a little weird?” she asks, wondering if Ali will be honest with her in return for her own honesty. “I mean, Kelley asking me along makes sense, but Tobin asking me doesn’t. We’re not even that close.”

Ali settles her arms across her chest in a way that manages to come off as interested rather than defensive.

“Really?” she asks, her voice lilting towards the end. “I kind of assumed that you two were really good friends. I was getting a little jealous, really. I knew you first, after all.” She laughs good naturedly, clearly joking for the most part.

“We’re not,” Christen says quickly. “We’re not good friends. I mean, we both hang out because of Kelley – we’re both close to Kelley. The three of us hang out sometimes. But that’s it.”

Ali hums, scrutinizing Christen with a look that feels way too penetrating for comfort. Christen shifts her weight around and looks past Ali’s right shoulder, wondering if she can go find Kelley now or if that would be rude.

“I was just going to ask when the two of you had gotten so close, but I guess I got the wrong message from Tobin,” Ali says, shrugging. “Sorry. She just made it seem like you hang out a lot.”

“We do. With Kelley,” Christen says emphatically.

“Sorry, then,” Ali says, looking the slightest bit abashed. “I didn’t mean to like, interrogate you, or anything. It just sounded like something else.”

“Well, I mean, we’ve hung out without Kelley too,” Christen blurts out, feeling a little guilty. She doesn’t want Ali to think that Tobin has been lying or anything. “Just a few times though.”

“So you are friends!” Ali says encouragingly, arms falling to her sides. “See, it’s not weird for her to invite you if you’re friends!”

Christen bites her lip. “Not even a little weird?”

“Nope,” Ali reassures her. “I know that you probably think we’re all Kelley’s friends, but you’re allowed to be friends with us too.”

Christen turns her head around, easily spotting where Kelley is sitting with Alex and Tobin, her head thrown back in laughter. Something inside her feels a little desperate, a little lonely, and a little abandoned, so she turns back to Ali with a deep breath in her lungs and a renewed sense of determination to enjoy herself.

“Yeah,” she says slowly, smiling as best as she can and getting rewarded with Ali’s blinding grin in
“Yeah, I know.”

“Good,” Ali says, looking rather pleased with herself. “Now come on – hang out with me and Crystal and Moe here. I’m in charge of making sure they don’t burn our lunch.”

“Some of us actually like a good char,” Moe says, rolling her eyes and stopping Crystal from flipping a burger by sneakily snatching her spatula. “Gives it a little flavor.”

“That’s what condiments are for,” Crystal argues. “Come on, give that back!”

“In a minute,” Moe says.

“At least leave some of them a little less well done,” Ali says, peering down at the burgers, one hand holding her hair back away from her face. “I’ve heard that char can contain carcinogens.”

“I give up,” Crystal says, shaking her head. “Ali, Christen, will you keep an eye on her?”

“I’m not half bad at it,” Christen volunteers cautiously. “I mean, Kelley’s usually the one who almost catches the kitchen on fire, not me.”

“Excellent,” Crystal says. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, I’m going to hook my phone up to the Bluetooth speaker I told Kling to bring.”

Moe flips a burger.

“Kling totally didn’t remember to bring the speaker,” she says once Crystal is gone, handing Christen the second spatula. Before Christen can move closer to the grill though, Kelley is appearing at her elbow and tugging at her jacket sleeve.

“I need you,” she demands.

“What for?” Christen asks, hesitating as Moe transfers a burger to a paper-towel lined plate. “I was going to help with the burgers.”

“I was hoping you could hang out with me,” Kelley says, pouting. “I mean, that’s why you’re here, right?”

“Right,” Christen says slowly, looking at Moe apologetically. “I know.”

“So come on,” Kelley says. “Moe and Ali don’t mind, right?”

Moe grumbles a little but Ali shakes her head and takes the spatula from Christen.

“I can do this,” she says, pushing up the sleeves of her shirt. “Don’t worry, Christen. If I burn any, I’ll just leave them for Moe.”

“Hilarious,” Moe says, using her forearm to push some hair out of her face. “Hey, if you see Lindsey, will you tell her to come over?”

“Sure,” Christen says before walking with Kelley to sit down at an empty stretch of picnic bench. “So. What’s up?”

“Nothing,” Kelley says, grinning. She’s lost her sunglasses and has pulled her hair into a ponytail since Christen saw her last, and her freckles and long lashes are on display and making it easy for Christen to focus her attention. “Just wanted to sit down and talk about life with you.”
The whole thing feels oddly formal, so Christen just looks at her curiously.

“Okay, so I have something to ask you,” Kelley confesses. “But promise that you’ll hear me out before you make a decision.”

Christen looks at her warily. “What is it?”

“Now, I know that it’s not your favorite thing,” Kelley says, “but it would mean a lot to me if you came along.”

“Came along on what?”

“We’re going on a hike,” Kelley starts, but Christen is already shaking her head in protest. “No, just hear me out!”

“Kell, I’m not even wearing the right shoes,” Christen says in exasperation wondering if Kelley will even care. “Converse don’t count as hiking shoes.”

“They’re close-toed, you’ll be fine!” Kelley says encouragingly. “Besides, it’s not even a hike more of a nature trail, really.”

Christen doesn’t trust her, shaking her head emphatically.

“No,” she says resolutely. “I’m not going. I’ll just end up with aching thighs and blisters on my feet and no, Kell. Stop looking at me like that, it’s not happening.”

Kelley is giving her the same puppy dog face that she’s been using since elementary school, back when she’d used it to avoid punishment after pushing a boy off the top of the slide during recess. Her face softens once Christen calls her out on it, pout lessening and looking more resigned.

“Please?” Kelley begs. “You won’t go, not even for me?”

“Nope,” Christen says, shaking her head firmly. In the back of her mind she’s wondering why she’s so firmly opposed to the idea; a nature walk almost sounds nice as long as Kelley promises to take it easy on her. “Listen, if you want to go though, you should. Have fun.”

“Yeah, but I’m supposed to be spending time with you,” Kelley reminds her, as though Christen could forget. “I can’t do that if you stay here and I go on without you.”

“I don’t want to hold you back,” Christen says truthfully. “Is that all you wanted to talk about?”

“Yeah, but come on,” Kelley says, rising from the table. “Everyone is starting to eat now and I’ve got to make sure that no one has forgotten about my hotdogs.”

Christen laughs and Kelley grins, waiting until they’re standing next to each other to link arms.

“Promise me you’ll think about it,” Kelley says as the reach the end of the line, Rose and Mallory in front of them and looking at something on Emily’s phone. “I won’t be upset if you decide not to go, but just think about it.”

“I’m not going, but sure,” Christen says. “I’ll think about it.”

*

Once they’ve all eaten and enough people have complained about the lack of dessert that Christen feels comfortable telling Kelley “I told you so,” a lull falls over the group and Christen finds herself
sitting in relative quiet. She’s managed to stick close to Kelley’s side, eating next to each other so that Kelley had fallen onto her every time she’d collapsed with laughter at Syd who was reenacting all the shenanigans that come along with having a long term significant other.

“So who’s coming hiking?” Kelley asks, breaking the silence.

“Not me,” Christen says automatically.

Kelley looks likes she wants to say something, but before she can, Alex is raising her hand.

“I’ll go,” she offers. “And I bet I can make Tobin come along if we let her bring her stupid soccer ball.”

Christen’s eyes wander to the next table over where Tobin is laughing at something Lindsey is saying, clutching her stomach as she doubles over as best as she can while sitting.

“I’ll go,” Ashlyn offers.

“Which means that I’ll have to stay back and keep Ali company, right,” Syd says, nodding while rolling her eyes exaggeratedly.

“Becky will go,” Alex offers, casting a look around the pavilion. “So will Kling.”

“Rose and Mallory will stay,” Kelley says. “They’ll keep you company, Chris. Are you sure you’ll be okay here without me?”

“I’ll be fine,” Christen tells her. Really, she isn’t looking forward to Kelley leaving her for some random nature trail and she’s already wondering how soon Kelley will be back, but that doesn’t mean that she wants to go.

“Do we want to go soon?” Ashlyn asks, getting up from her seat and collecting everyone’s garbage.

“Yeah, so we don’t get back too late,” Alex agrees.

“We’ll only be gone for like an hour,” Kelley tells them. “It’s not like we’ll be gone until dark or whatever.”

Christen follows them all as they rise from the table, but only because she doesn’t want to be left sitting alone.

“Last chance,” Kelley tells Christen. “You can still come.”

“No, I’m good here,” Christen says. “Honestly, don’t worry about me, I’ll be fine by myself.”

“You can hang out with Ali,” Kelley says. “You like her, right?”

Something about the phrasing sounds off, but Christen just brushes it off and nods.

“I’m going to get a water before I leave,” Kelley says, ruffling Christen’s hair even though it earns her a scowl just like it does every time she does it. “Behave, okay?”

Christen has no idea what kind of trouble Kelley thinks she’s capable of getting up to while they’re gone, but she just nods and wanders over to the fruit station to pick at the apple slices. She nibbles at one while watching everyone else, noticing the hiking crew gathering over by the cars while Ali remains immersed in what looks like a very serious conversation with Crystal. Just as she’s picking up another apple slice between her fingers, something soft but forceful hits her right behind the knee
and makes her grip the table for support so she doesn’t fall to her feet. Twisting around, it’s easy to spot the culprit: a worn soccer ball a few feet behind her thanks to the rebound and Tobin, loping up to her with an apologetically wide smile on her face.

“Sorry,” Tobin says as she jogs closer, ponytail bobbing with the motion. “I should really stop hitting you with my ball.”

“Maybe I should start leaning how to catch it,” Christen says, watching Tobin kick the ball up into her hands so she can toss it back and forth. “I mean, you do that thing where you catch it behind your knee, don’t you?”

“Yeah, but that’s a little advanced for you,” Tobin says, grinning as she tucks the ball against her side.

“My bad,” Christen says. “I’ll stick to catching it with my stomach, then.”

“That was an accident!” Tobin says earnestly. “I honestly thought – “

“That I wasn’t completely athletically inept? Yeah, I know.”

Christen finds herself grinning in response to Tobin’s sheepish expression.

“So are you coming with us?” Tobin asks, stepping forward to pick at the fruit. “Kell says it’s supposed to be a real easy trail. Nothing you can’t handle.”

“Um, no,” Christen says hesitantly.

“Why not?”

Christen watches Tobin pinch five apple slices between her thumb and forefinger before straightening up and backing away.

“I mean, Kelley asked me to go, but I figured I’d work on the whole telling-her-no thing,” Christen says, feeling her cheeks burn as she speaks. She tries to avoid looing at Tobin’s face, but the surprised expression that settles over her features is impossible to ignore.

“Hey, good for you!” Tobin says genuinely. “You should do whatever you want, you know?”

Christen nods, something nagging at her as Tobin looks at her.

“I’m proud of you,” Tobin says, looking pleased. “So what, you just aren’t feeling up to it? It’s only like a few miles, maybe three and a half tops – “

“I just didn’t want to do what Kelley wanted me to do,” Christen says. “I’m still practicing but I think I’m doing pretty well for my first real try.”

“Wait,” Tobin says, ignoring Alex calling her name. “You just said no because Kelley asked you too?”

Something about her confused tone makes Christen flush.

“No, not just because of that,” Christen says. “I mean, I’m not wearing the right shoes and I don’t want to try and keep up with a bunch of athletes.”

“But do you want to come?”
It’s a simple question but it’s one that Christen finds herself unable to answer.

“Um,” she says, searching for the words that had been in her head earlier, back when she was telling Kelley no. “Um, not really.”

“Not really?” Tobin asks dubiously. “Well, okay. As long as Kelley isn’t the only reason you’re not going.”

“I wouldn’t have any fun,” Christen says, but the excuse feels flimsy and thin as she hears herself talk. “I’d be struggling, and I just know I’m going to get blisters…”

She trails off, getting distracted by the way Kelley is now calling for Tobin. She watches Kelley cup her hands around her mouth, sunglasses perched on top of her head still even though the sun shows no sign of making an appearance anytime soon.

“We’d keep pace with you, you know,” Tobin says, bringing Christen back to what’s in front of her. “One of us would, at least. I mean, Alex is ultra competitive and is probably going to make a race out of the whole thing, but that’s just her.”

“I don’t want to suck at it,” Christen tells Tobin. “I mean, it won’t be fun for the rest of you if I’m dragging my feet and am out of breath the entire time.”

“It might be,” Tobin says, and even though it’s cloudy and overcast, something makes her eyes sparkle as she grins. “Come on. Do you want to come?”

Christen has to seriously consider it for a moment. Kelley calls for Tobin again, but Tobin – who must be ignoring it all, there’s no way she hasn’t heard them at this point – keeps her eyes locked on Christen’s.

“I’ll go,” Christen says, and Tobin wears a splitting grin for five seconds before shoving an apple slice in her mouth.

“Let’s go then,” Tobin says, voice slightly muffled thanks to the food as she casually drops the ball to the ground, using her foot to prevent it from rolling away. “Before Alex has an aneurysm.”

Christen laughs to herself as she walks beside Tobin who kicks the ball along as they walk.

“Wait,” Kelley says, her voice full of cautious excitement as Christen approaches hearing range. “Christen, I thought you weren’t coming.”

“Changed my mind,” Christen says carefully. “I’m still allowed, right!”

Kelley fist pumps with the hand holding her water bottle.

“Fuck yeah!” she exclaims, skipping forward to grab Christen’s hand with hers, clutching tightly. “Come on, you’ve got to stick with me. We’re going to beat Alex if it’s the last thing I do.”

“Like hell you are,” Alex scoffs, making Sam roll her eyes as she bounces on the balls of her feet.

“This isn’t a race,” Steph tries to remind them.

“You’re only saying that because your feet hurt already,” Sam tells her.

Christen laughs as Kelley pulls her forward, forced to jog slightly to keep up.

“Go easy on me, Kell,” Christen says.
“Never,” Kelley teases.

When Christen looks back over her shoulder at the others, she catches Tobin throw her a subtle thumbs up. She shoots her a grin in return but before she can make sure that Tobin has noticed, Kelley has tripped over a tree root, nearly taking Christen down with her.

“Oops!” Kelley says.

“I got you, come on,” Christen says through a laugh, extending a hand. Kelley grabs it to help herself up, refusing to let go once she’s standing again.

“I know,” Kelley says, squeezing Christen’s hand tightly as they start off towards the beginning of the trail. “I know you do.”

*

Back at the apartment, Christen feels like she’s dying.

“I don’t think I’ve had that much exercise in months,” she tells Kelley seriously, collapsing onto the couch as soon as they walk in the door. “Is that bad?”

“Well, you definitely made the rest of us feel pretty good about ourselves,” Kelley tells her, kicking off her shoes as she closes the front door. “We might have only come in second but Ashlyn was acting like her and Alex had won the New York Marathon or something.”

“I don’t think I’m going to be able to move for days,” Christen says, not even having the energy to take off her jacket and shoes. “I really did not plan on running that entire thing twice around.”

“Yeah, sorry,” Kelley says with a grimace. “I really didn’t think that they’d challenge us to a rematch after we won the first time.”

“I just don’t have the endurance that you do,” Christen says. “My legs are burning.”

“Want an ice bath?” Kelley asks excitedly.

“No,” Christen says immediately, shooting Kelley a glare. “Don’t. Those things are torture and I’m still not entirely convinced that they work.”

“Some of the girls swear by them,” Kelley says, stretching. “Hey, on a scale of one to ten, what about a bubble bath?”

The idea would sound more appealing if Christen thought she was physically capable of getting off the couch.

“Maybe,” she says. “I don’t think I can manage that by myself though.”

“I’ll help,” Kelley volunteers. “Come on, we’ll treat it like one of my ice baths. Put on some spandex and we’ll take a bubble bath together.”

“We?” Christen asks, suddenly alert. “Kell, we don’t take ice baths together.”

“Yeah, because you don’t like them,” Kelley reminds her. “I, however, would be totally down for a bubble bath right now. What do you say?”

Christen swallows thickly, trying to remember if she has has a clean pair of black spandex in her drawer.
“Yeah, okay,” Christen agrees easily. “But you’ve got to help me get up from here. I don’t think I can do it on my own.”

“Fine,” Kelley agrees, “but only because I like you.”

Christen knows that Kelley means it platonically. She knows that of course Kelley likes her: they’ve been friends since almost before she can remember. She knows that she means nothing more by it, but it still makes her grin and her heart stutter as Kelley reaches out a hand to help her up.

“Come on,” Kelley says. “You get changed and run the hot water and I’ll be in there to load it up.”

So Christen goes, changing as fast as she can before Kelley can walk in on her half naked. She finds a pair of spandex buried behind her yoga pants – they’re turquoise, but they’ll still work – and they clash with the burgundy lace bralette she’s been wearing all day, but she doesn’t have the energy to hunt down a sports bra. Besides, Kelley has seen her in her undergarments before more times than she can count.

“This better work,” Christen says when Kelley comes barreling in, dressed in some ratty gray sports bra. “If I can’t move in the morning, I’m blaming you.”

“Blame Alex,” Kelley says, already in the bathroom and stepping into the tub full of running water. “She’s the crazy one who convinced us to do the trail again.”

“I should have just dropped out at that point,” Christen grumbles, watching Kelley push the plunger to fill up the tub. “Like everyone else with more than half a brain did.”

“That explains why Steph kept going,” Kelley says, crouching down to examine all of Christen’s bath products. “Which one will make the most bubbles?”

Christen taps a pink bottle full of raspberry scented gel.

Once the tub is full of water and overflowing with bubbles, Christen and Kelley sink down to sit at opposite ends of the tub. Kelley graciously takes the end near the tap, letting Christen lean back against the porcelain without interruption and close her eyes.

“Okay, this kind of feels good,” Christen admits after a few minutes of listening to Kelley go on about her sorority’s next charity function. “You might be onto something here.”

“I know,” Kelley says, and when Christen opens her eye to see Kelley looking blissfully relaxed with her hair piled on top of her head and freckles dotting the exposed skin not covered in foamy white bubbles, she can’t help but smile softly. “I’m usually right about stuff like this.”

“Stuff like what, achy muscles?”

“No,” Kelley says, grinning and poking her toes into Christen’s upper thigh. “I’m usually right about you.”

Christen grows red and prays that she can play it off as a reaction to the hot water.

“Me?”

“Yeah, you,” Kelley repeats. “I’m like, a Christen expert.”

“I don’t believe you,” Christen scoffs. “I mean, you know me well, but an expert? Really?”

“Really,” Kelley says, nodding. “I mean, aren’t you a Kelley expert?”
Christen doesn’t even have to hesitate before nodding.

“Like I know that you’re ticklish right here,” Kelley says, and sure enough, as she runs a finger along the bottom of Christen’s foot, Christen’s entire legs jerks away, the water in the tub coming dangerously close to sloshing over the edge.

“Not fair,” Christen says, shaking her head. “My sisters taught you that one forever ago.”

“Oh, you want one I found out all on my own?” Kelley asks, raising her eyebrows. “Okay. Let me think.”

Christen bites her lip.

“I know that you don’t like green apples?” Kelley tries.

“Are you asking me?” Christen asks, sinking further down to hide her beaming face from view.

“Wait, sit up,” Kelley says urgently. Christen obediently rises, bubbles sticking to her chin. She hurriedly wipes them away, embarrassed at the thought of looking like a kid pretending to be Santa Claus during bathtime.

“What?” Christen asks. “What is it?”

Kelley leans forward, arms easily reaching Christen’s side of the short tub that’s barely big enough to contain the both of them. She touches Christen’s neck though, and Christen’s breath catches in her throat while Kelley slowly wipes the bubbles away. Kelley keeps going as Christen remains still, hand brushing from shoulder to shoulder before dipping down to move over her upper chest.

Christen thinks she might die like this, with Kelley hand resting dangerously close to the rise of her breasts and her eyes trained firmly on Christen’s.

“You look really good in dark red,” Kelley says, hooking a finger under the elastic strap of the bralette before letting go, letting it snap against Christen’s skin. “I discovered that one all by myself.”

When she settles back at her side of the bathtub, she wears a smug look on her face and Christen wonders if Kelley has any idea what she’s done to her.

Chapter End Notes

thanks for the great response to last chapter! i really love hearing from y'all more than you could know.
they’re all trash

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

If there’s one thing Christen is sure she’s alone in, it’s waking up early on Sunday mornings. She actually enjoys it, getting up at her usual hour and starting off as productively as possible. Brewing coffee is usually first on the list of things to do, but then she likes to sit down with some homework or notes to study. Kelley, on the other hand, rarely rolls out of bed before noon. It’s her day to sleep in after a night out with her sorority sisters, and she usually waits until the evening to even think about the week of school ahead of her. Just the thought of her process gives Christen anxiety, but she’s grown used to it over the past couple of years.

So when Kelley ambles into the kitchen around seven thirty, rubbing at her mascaraed eyes and dragged her fluffy-socked feet, Christen nearly drops the mug she’s just lifted from the top shelf of a cabinet.

“What’s wrong?” Christen asks quickly, watching as Kelley draws closer and drops her hand to her side. “Why are you awake?”

“Hug me,” Kelley mumbles out, coming close to Christen, only to bury her head in her chest. “I’m hungover and need you to hug me.”

Christen does so gingerly at first, wrapping her arms around Kelley’s waist before squeezing tightly. Kelley is warm and smells like sleep, a little stale but mostly like her bed.

“You’ll be okay, just go back to bed,” Christen soothes. “Is that all that’s wrong?”

Kelley says something unintelligible into the fabric of Christen’s shirt.

“Sorry, Kell, you’ve got to repeat yourself,” Christen tells her, a smile barely turning up one side of her mouth as she brings a hand up to stroke at Kelley’s mass of tangled hair. “I didn’t catch that.”

Kelley groans, pulling back until Christen reluctantly releases her.

“Today is going to be best friend day,” she grumbles stubbornly, fighting through an enormous yawn.

“What is best friend day?” Christen asks amusedly.

“It’s when I decide to hang out with you for the entire day,” Kelley explains, getting her own favorite mug from where it rests in the drying rack. “Only for some reason, you like to wake up at the crack of dawn, even on Sundays.”

Christen hides her grin, turning around to check on the status of the coffee.

“I’m going to the dog shelter, Kell,” she says, watching the pot carefully. “Best friend day might have to wait. At least you can go back to sleep though, right?”

“I’ll come see the puppies with you!” Kelley protests, sounding a little more awake. “Why can’t I come?”

“They’re not all puppies,” Christen reminds her. “Some of them are fully grown dogs. And it’s not
that you can’t come – I just didn’t think you’d want to. You’ve never wanted to go before.”

“Yeah, well, I’ve never seen eight o’clock on a Sunday morning before, so,” Kelley says. “So what, do I have to wait for you to get back? Or am I allowed to come?”

Christen turns away from the coffee pot in the corner of the kitchen to smile at Kelley, teeth tucked into her bottom lip. “You’re allowed to come if you want, to the shelter with me. Lauren and Amy won’t mind.”

“Really?” Kelley asks. “You’re not going to let me go back to bed?”

Christen backpedals.

“I mean, if you want to, you can,” she says quickly. “You don’t have to come. If you really want more sleep – “

Kelley is laughing, her voice rough and raspy as she crosses the kitchen to stand with Christen.

“I’m kidding,” she tells her, pressing a lazy close-mouthed kiss to Christen’s shoulder blade. “Let me get some coffee in me and I’ll throw some clothes on so we can go.”

Christen stands where she is, pleased and happy to watch Kelley take more than her fair share of coffee before ambling back off towards her bedroom.

“When do you want to leave?” Kelley asks, as Christen finally shakes her head and goes to fill her own mug.

“Eight?” Christen suggests, looking at the microwave clock. “You can get ready by then, right?”

“I’ll look like a monster, but I’ll try,” Kelley responds before disappearing.

When they leave the apartment, Kelley looks nothing like a monster. Her face has been scrubbed clean and her eyes look bright, like she’s fully awake and ready for a day with Christen. It makes Christen’s chest feel tight, like her heart and lungs are too big for her ribcage, and she drives along while singing to the music that Kelley plays.

“You’re happy,” Kelley says at a red light, reaching over to run her fingers along Christen’s wrist.

Christen shrugs, letting her ponytail swing around to fall in front of her face and hopefully hide her smile from view.

“So?” she asks, avoiding Kelley’s questioning gaze. “Aren’t I allowed to be happy about seeing a bunch on dogs on a Sunday morning?”

“No one is allowed to be as happy as you are this early on a Sunday morning,” Kelley tells her. “Seriously. What is up with you?”

“Nothing,” Christen says emphatically as the light turns green. “I get to spend a day with dogs and my best friend. Am I supposed to be sad or something?” Her heart races as she says it, cheeks pinking with embarrassment at crediting Kelley for her good mood.

Kelley settles back into her seat with a small smirk on her face, and Christen would maybe enjoy it more if she weren’t so preoccupied with patting herself on the back for being brave enough to tell Kelley the truth.

When they finally reach the shelter, Christen finds herself suddenly nervous about bringing Kelley
with her. She knows that Amy and Lauren won’t mind – no, they’re nice and they like Kelley from what little they know of her – but she’s just nervous to show Kelley this part of her life. Kelley’s been to the shelter before, but only inside maybe once, if that. Getting to hang out with the dogs is something that Christen looks forward to every week and while she’s thrilled that Kelley wants to do this with her, that doesn’t mean that she isn’t having a little anxiety over it.

So when they walk inside to find no one at the front desk, Christen’s shoulders relax a little and the tension leaves her.

“Is no one here?” Kelley asks, jumping on her tip-toes even though there’s nothing for her to see past. “There’s got to be people here, right? The girls you always hang out with?”

“Lauren and Amy,” Christen reminds her.

“I knew it was something like that,” Kelley says, tightening her ponytail. “So, should we just head on back and look for them?”

“No,” Christen says, her hand shooting out to grab Kelley’s bicep and keep her from hurtling head-first back into the kennels. “I mean, let’s just wait for them to come out. Usually at least one of them hangs out up front.”

Kelley raises an eyebrow that Christen ignores. While Christen’s managed to earn the trust of most of the employees around the shelter, volunteers usually have to be thoroughly vetted before being allowed to hang around the dogs. She knows that Lauren and Amy will let Kelley be the exception purely based on her friendship with Christen, but she doesn’t want to start overstepping. For a moment Christen worries that Kelley won’t listen to her; she worries that Kelley will wrench her arm free of Christen’s light grip and charge on through anyway. Thankfully though she stays still even when Christen lets go, twirling her ponytail impatiently.

“I just want to see the puppies,” Kelley confesses.

“They’re not all puppies, Kell,” Christen tries to remind her.

It’s then that the door to the kennels bursts open, Amy and Lauren in the middle of a seemingly serious discussion. It takes a moment of Christen loudly clearing her throat to get their attention, but once she does, they quiet immediately.

“Hey!” Amy greets warmly, jogging forward to hug Christen. “How are you?”

Christen leans into Amy’s soft embrace, smiling subconsciously. “Good, I’m good. I brought Kelley with me today, hope that’s okay.”

“That’s fine,” Amy says, backing away from Christen only to reach for Kelley. “Hey, Kelley. I’m Amy and this is Lauren here. We’re kind of in charge on the weekends.”

“I’m really excited,” Kelley says, easily accepting Amy’s hug. “Christen always talks about how she gets to play with the puppies.”

“Dogs, Kell,” Christen corrects, letting Lauren hug her quickly.

“Dogs,” Kelley repeats. “She gets to play with the dogs.”

Lauren chuckles, holding onto Christen a little longer than necessary before holding her at arms length, studying her carefully.
“You look good,” Lauren says. “What have you been up to?”


Lauren releases her, a funny smile on her face. “You just look like you’re glowing,” she remarks, looking at Amy who is now peering closely at Christen’s face.

“Like you could be pregnant,” Amy agrees.

Kelley snorts as Lauren moves to the side to hug her politely, and Christen is just thankful that Kelley is too distracted to see the way her face burns red at the remark.

“Um, no,” Christen says, laughing as naturally as she can. “That’s definitely not it.”

“Yeah, it’s definitely not,” Kelley says, grinning when Lauren lets her go. “I mean, Chris, when’s the last time you even had a date?”

Christen just shrugs, suddenly wishing that Lauren was a little less observant and that Amy would think before speaking.

“Not a lot of options around here,” she jokes lamely, voice devoid of any humor.

“You’re in college,” Amy says encouragingly. “If you’re not going to find handsome men now, when will you? When you’ve graduated and have moved away from the insanely large pool of men just waiting for a smart and attractive girl like yourself?”

Christen shifts her weight uncomfortably, and Lauren must notice because she reaches for Amy’s shoulder.

“Not everyone finds their soulmate in college, Amy,” Lauren says firmly. “Don’t harass the girl.”

Amy backs off immediately.


“Yes!” Amy says excitedly, looking at Christen and Kelley. “So. You guys ready to get a little messy today?”

“Messy?” Kelley asks, arching an eyebrow. “Christen, you didn’t tell me there’d be a mess involved. I thought we’d be cuddling with all the dogs.”

“You can do that if you want,” Amy offers. “But today is the day for all the dogs to get their heartworm medication and it gets a little gross when the dogs squirm.”

“So just don’t let them squirm,” Kelley says, looking sideways at Christen who can’t help but giggle. “What, can’t you just hold them tight?”

Christen shakes her head.

“No, Kell,” Christen says. “It doesn’t really work like that. It’s not that easy.”

“So you’ve done this before?” Kelley asks.

“Yeah, she’s helped before and she’s really good at it,” Amy says. “The dogs hate getting medicine
but she’s really good at calming them down. Come on back with me, let’s leave Lauren to her boring desk work.”

“You’re just jealous that you’re still going to have to wrestle every dog today,” Lauren says, lot even looking over as she goes to her favorite chair.

Amy rolls her eyes, motioning for Kelley and Christen to follow as she heads back into the kennel.

“So basically, we still use the cheap stuff,” Amy explains. “I wish we had the budget for the higher quality meds which aren’t as greasy, but until then we’re stuck with what we’ve got. You basically snap the cap off the tube and empty the liquid med – “

Christen already knows the drill, so she tunes Amy out as she lags behind. Kelley matches Amy’s steps, nodding furiously and listening intently. It makes Christen smile endlessly, watching Kelley put in the effort to learn from Amy about the shelter.

“Okay, so we keep everything back here,” Amy says, showing Kelley the back room. “Christen spends a lot of time hiding back here instead of doing what she’s supposed to.”

“Hey!” Christen protests, catching the smirk Amy sends Kelley. “That’s not true at all. Kelley, don’t believe her.”

“I’m kidding,” Amy says, laughing as she uses a small key to unlock one of the cabinets, crouching down to look inside. “When she doesn’t feel like doing what she’s supposed to, she cuddles with the dogs.”

“Aw, Chris,” Kelley coos, leaning against the far counter next to Amy. “Is this true? Are you actually a slacker somewhere in your life?”

“No,” Christen denies vehemently. “Amy’s making all this up.”

“My little hard-working best friend,” Kelley teases. “Turns out you’ve been a slacker all along.”

Christen only just barely manages to duck out of the way as Kelley brings up a hand to pinch her cheeks – something she hasn’t done since before Christen left for the summer. Kelley used to do it all the time when she was making fun of Christen, and even though she used to hate it, she finds herself missing the familiar gesture.

Amy sets all the boxes of medication on the counter before locking the cabinet shut and frowning.

“Shoot, I think I forgot the list up front,” Amy says. “I mean to grab it while I was up there but got distracted by how beautiful Christen is.”

“She is beautiful, isn’t she,” Kelley says, nodding affirmatively. They both fix their eyes on Christen who immediately blushes at the attention.

“You guys,” she pleads. “This is about the dogs.”

“Right,” Amy says. “Can I trust the two of you alone while I go get the list of which dogs need their dose?”

“Of course you can,” Christen says instantly, just as Kelley says the opposite.

“You’re in charge,” Amy says, pointing to Christen before leaving.

“So,” Kelley says, hopping up to sit on an empty stretch of counter as soon as the door closes behind
Amy. “They seem nice.”

“You’ve met them before,” Christen says.

“Yeah but not like this,” Kelley says dismissively. “I get why you like them. They’re very – what’s the word? – nurturing.”

“I don’t need a mom, Kell,” Christen says, a little bothered by the adjective. “I don’t need to be constantly nurtured.”

“No, I know,” Kelley says hastily. “I didn’t mean it like that.”

“How did you mean it then?” Christen asks, trying to keep the irritation out of her voice.

“Just that they seem like great people to be around,” Kelley says earnestly. “I mean, they just make everyone around them feel happy and loved. I can tell. It’s no wonder you like it here. Especially since I’ve been such a crappy friend lately.”

Something in Christen makes her speak before thinking. “You’re not a crappy friend.”

She says it automatically, needing to reassure Kelley – why, she’s not sure, because Kelley’s right. She hasn’t been the same Kelley that Christen grew up with, not since the summer when they had been forced to separate for longer than ever before. Conversations during their time apart had slowed until they were nearly nonexistent, and then there had been that one incident –

Christen’s throat grows tight, thinking back back to the phone call towards the end of July. Before she can dwell on it for too long though, Kelley kicks her thigh to get her attention.

“I have been crappy,” Kelley says, her standard cheerful demeanor suddenly solemn and doleful. “Just admit it. You don’t have to be nice about it.”

“I’m not being nice,” Christen says, attempting to convince Kelley. “Seriously, Kell. You’ve been a good friend. You keep inviting me along to hang out with you and the team, and you never had to do that in the first place.”

“I just missed you,” Kelley mumbles uncharacteristically, hanging her head low and swinging her feet so her heels kick the cabinet doors. Christen winces at the noise, praying that no dents are left behind. “I don’t know. I thought I could juggle everything and it turns out I can’t.”

“What do you mean?” Christen asks, suddenly confused. “You totally can. I mean, look at you.”

Kelley looks up, her lips pressed into a thin line.

“I’m barely pulling a B in biochem,” she says sourly. “And my MCAT practice tests have been going awfully. My scores suck. There’s no way I’ll be ready to take the test in May.”

“You’ll be fine,” Christen says blindly. Really, she has no idea whether or not Kelley will be fine: she’s never said anything like this before, never spoken about school with anything less than a confident attitude. But this is Kelley, Kelley who is perfect and good at everything, who strives to do well in all that she takes on. If there’s anyone Christen has faith in, it’s Kelley.

So she tells her that.

“Thanks, Chris,” Kelley says in response, smiling a little half-smile.

Amy walks in then.
“Okay!” she says enthusiastically. “Time to get started! So Christen, would you rather take Kelley on as your assistant, or are you comfortable enough to do a few by yourself?”

Christen looks over at Kelley who seems to have perked up completely. She can tell that Kelley’s shoulders are still slumped and her eyes aren’t bright as they could be, and she’s missed being able to read her best friend so well.

“I’ll take Kelley,” Christen says, reaching out a hand that Kelley takes and uses as leverage to help herself down from the counter. “I’ll teach her the ropes.”

Amy grins. “Awesome,” she says, handing them a box. “I’ll tell you which dogs you can do.”

The process is just as messy as Amy had warned: the dogs like to slobber and fight Kelley as she tries to hold them still enough for Christen to empty the medication against the spot at the base of their neck. Trying to implement the strategy Christen would use with Amy is a bit of a struggle as Kelley is too wary of the medication and refuses to dispense it the way Amy usually does, which means that Christen is fumbling with the tubes and growing frustrated with Kelley’s inability to properly restrain the dogs. Eventually Kelley comes up with a new method in which she lets the dogs put their arms around her neck so she can hold them to her chest long enough for Christen to do her job. It works well, even with the big dogs, and Kelley quickly takes to whispering sweet words of encouragement to the dogs that have Christen smiling and trying not to melt inside.

She’s missed this side of Kelley, the part of her that was always willing to do whatever Christen wanted. Things between them have been stilted and strained for a while, but everything feels a little easier as they work in tandem and go through the dogs as quickly as Amy does, finishing their half of the kennel at nearly the same time.

By the time all the paperwork has been completed and the meds accounted for, it’s nearly time to refill water and food bowls. Kelley bravely decides to be independent for this task, letting Amy assign her to a section of the smaller dogs who are easier to manage. Christen’s heart swells as she sees Kelley get into the groove of things, letting the dogs lick kisses all over her nose as she makes her way down the row.

The downside of this is that they don’t get two seconds alone together, and something about their conversation has left Christen with a nagging feeling that they’re not done talking. It might have seemed like Kelley was finished, merely delivering an apology before moving on, but that’s not how it feels. Christen feels like she needs to talk to Kelley, and she doesn’t get a chance to until they’re hugged Lauren and Amy goodbye and are sitting in the car, stomachs growing with hunger and the sun high in the sky and burning heat into one of the last warm days of the year.

“All I had this morning was coffee,” Kelley says, pulling her phone from where she’d left it in Christen’s glove compartment. “You owe me food, babe.”

It’s not a nickname that Kelley has never used before, but it still makes Christen’s heart thud in her chest.

“Anywhere you want,” Christen offers as she leaves the parking lot. “My treat.”

“I’m kidding,” Kelley says, reaching over to briefly pat Christen’s legging-clad thigh. “You can choose where we go.”

“Are you sure?” Christen asks, handing her phone to Kelley to pick a song. “You’re so picky, though. How am I supposed to know what you’re in the mood for?”
“Whatever is fine with me,” Kelley says with a shrug, scrolling through Christen’s music. “Honestly. Whatever you want.”

So Christen chooses a pizza place near campus that serves ridiculously large pies, and Kelley insists on getting the biggest one they can and topping it with everything they can agree on. When she whips out her wallet and refuses to allow Christen to pay for even half, Christen starts to wonder what’s wrong.

She waits, though, until Kelley has finished her first slice and is wiping her oily fingers on a napkin to ask.

“You’ve been too nice today,” Christen says, setting down her pizza crust. Kelley reaches for it immediately – she’s been eating Christen’s discarded crusts since middle school. “What’s up with that?”

“What, I can’t be nice?” Kelley asks with a full mouth, rolling her eyes. “I know I was awful, but really? I can’t even pay for lunch without you being suspicious?”

“You haven’t been awful,” Christen says, shaking her head. “I don’t even know where you’re getting that from.”

Kelley doesn’t respond for a moment, and as Christen sips at her Diet Coke, she tries not to panic and worry that she’s said something wrong.

“I guess I didn’t realize until a little while ago,” Kelley says eventually, once she’s started cutting up her second slice of pizza into small bites. “Remember when we went on that hike?”

“Yeah,” Christen says slowly.

“You didn’t want to go,” Kelley says concentrating on her plastic knife and fork. “But then you talked for Tobin, and she convinced you to go.”

“Kell – “

“No, just listen to me,” Kelley says, looking up imploringly and meeting Christen’s eyes with hers. “I just – why didn’t you want to come with me when I asked? Do you not like doing things with me anymore?”

Christen swallows tightly, internally cringing at how far from the truth Kelley is.

“Kell, that’s not it,” Christen starts.

“So then what?” Kelley asks, hands balling into fists around her utensils. Something on her face looks uncharacteristically desperate, and Christen has only seen Kelley look like this once before: when she was begging Christen to commit to the same college as her. “Do you like Tobin better?”

“Kelley, no,” Christen says quietly, reaching across the table to wrap a hand around one of Kelley’s fists. “Kell, it’s okay. Don’t get upset.”

It takes a few minutes of Kelley closing her eyes and taking a few deep breaths, but Christen waits. She waits patiently, a thousand questions on the tip of her tongue as she holds Kelley’s hand in hers.

When Kelley finally opens her eyes, hands unclenching and breathing evening out, Christen lets out a breath she didn’t even know she’d been holding.
“I just feel bad,” Kelley says, her voice even and unwavering – a direct contradiction to her shaking hands. “I didn’t even think that maybe the reason you’ve been so weird is because it’s all my fault.”

“Kell, it’s not,” Christen tries to reassure her. “I have been a little weird. But I’ll try to stop, okay? I’ll try to be normal if it helps.”

“I just don’t know what happened,” Kelley says, pulling her hand away from Christen’s grip. She drops her plasticware on the table, hands falling into her lap. “But something changed and I wish we could go back to the way we were before you left.”

Even though there’s no bite to Kelley’s tone, it still feels accusatory and Christen has to steel herself before responding.

“We’re not always going to be the same,” Christen says, reaching for a second slice of pizza and telling herself that it doesn’t matter if Kelley physically drew away from her - that it isn’t personal or significant. This is still the closest they’ve been in months, and Kelley hasn’t been this open with her in years. “We’re people, and people change. That means that our friendship is going to change. It’s not a bad thing, though.”

Kelley doesn’t say anything for a moment, and when Christen looks up to grab a napkin, she finds herself immobilized by the soft look on Kelley’s face.

“You’re so smart,” Kelley says fondly, some of her signature teasing creeping through. “I guess I just got too comfortable and now that things are different I was having trouble dealing with it.”

“We’re still best friends,” Christen promises. “And that’s not going to change. Right?”

“Right,” Kelley nods, picking up her knife and fork again. “We’re still best friends.”

Christen starts on her own pizza, carefully cutting it while watching Kelley give up on her knife halfway through and lift the gigantic slice right up to her mouth. It’s funny to watch and Christen giggles, earning herself a laugh from Kelley who nearly chokes on a string of melted cheese.

“You know,” Kelley says, once she’s recovered and can breathe normally. “Amy was right earlier. If you wanted a date I bet you could find one, easy-peasy.”

Christen chews on her pizza longer than necessary, racking her brain for a response.

“I don’t really want one right now,” she says carefully. “And I wasn’t kidding when I said that there aren’t a ton of options that appeal to me.”

“Yeah, I guess the sixty-forty girl to guy ratio here really messes with that,” Kelley says thoughtfully.

“The guys here aren’t really dating material anyway,” Christen says convincingly, heart racing frantically.

Kelley bobs her head in a fervent nod. “Tell me about it,” she says, mouth still full of pizza. “On a scale of one to ten, they’re all trash. I’m so glad you agree.”

“Yeah,” Christen says, nodding along. “They’re all trash.”

She puts her pizza down, suddenly queasy.

“So, what are we doing after this?” Kelley asks, seemingly cheerful again. “What else do you have planned for today?”
“Well, I was going to go to the library and work on a report for research methods - ”

Kelley groans exaggeratedly.

“But,” Christen continues, smiling at Kelley’s reaction and pushing away the anxiety spiking in her stomach, “I might be able to be persuaded to work at home, in front of the tv, while watching Snow White.”

“I don’t want to complain,” Kelley says with a wide grin, “but I am going to have to ask you to reconsider your movie selection.”

“Nope,” Christen smiles, shaking her head. “It’s going to be Snow White.”

“But Ariel is the better princess!” Kelley argues. “She’s got so many good songs!”

Christen stands resolute.

“Snow White,” she says, feeling light. “Take it or leave it.”

Kelley sits back in her seat, folding her arms across her chest and looking very disgruntled.

“Fine,” she says begrudgingly. “But next time, it’s The Little Mermaid.”

“Next time,” Christen agrees. “Next time.”

*

Of all the brave things Christen has done in her life, texting Tobin is definitely in the top five.

It's that she texted her: Christen has done that before. She’s texted her to see if she wants to come along to get froyo, to ask if she needs a ride somewhere, or to ask if she feels like joining Kelley during conditioning sessions. Most instances involves Kelley, and about half of them involve Alex or Ali or another teammate. One Tuesday though, the Tuesday after Kelley spends her entire day doing whatever Christen wants, Christen texts Tobin to ask if they can meet up and hang out.

What, does Kelley need more cookie dough?

Christen blushes, typing out her reply and staring at it for what feels like forever before getting up the courage to press send. As soon as she does, she throws her phone to the opposite end of the couch she’s lounging on and determinedly stares down at the notes in her lap. She doesn’t absorb any of the information as she waits for the telltale buzz she knows will come when Tobin replies, which is an impressively fast six minutes later.

Impressively fast for Tobin, anyway.

No. Was thinking just you and I could do something?

I was planning on kicking the ball around later. Meet me by the main Starbucks in an hour and a half?

Christen exhales shakily and checks the time. It’s late in the afternoon and the sun will definitely be setting by the time they meet up, but it’s doable.

Sounds great, thank you. See you then.

Tobin doesn’t reply, but Christen doesn’t really expect her to. She’s terrible with texting, something
attributed her to always putting her phone down and forgetting about it. Christen can believe it because she’s seen it a dozen times, but sometimes it still irks her, like when they’re trying to coordinate plans and Tobin goes mia in the middle of a conversation.

An hour and a half later, Christen is waiting outside the Starbucks and searching the trickle of students around the green for Tobin’s lanky figure and broad shoulders. She’s clutching her phone, already having sent off an I’m here, are you? text five minutes before. It’s cooling down outside, November having arrived and bringing fall with it. Sixty-two degrees doesn’t sound overly cold, and Christen’s already survived two winters in town, but her blood isn’t adjusted to the weather and she shivers slightly as a breeze ruffles her hair and seeps through the weave of her cream colored cable-neck sweater.

“Here,” Tobin’s warm voice drawls, and when Christen looks behind her, she sees Tobin ambling out of the Starbucks with a coffee in each hand. “This one’s for you. Two creams, one sugar – right?”

“How’d you know?” Christen asks in surprise, taking the cup. “Thank you, you didn’t have to.”

Tobin just shrugs, dropping the ball she has tucked under her arm to the ground. It bounces weakly once or twice before stopping, and Tobin raises a leg to rest a foot on it.

“Thought you might be cold,” Tobin says, a smile poking over the top of her coffee lid as she raises her drink to her mouth. “Kelley says you natives can’t survive this kind of weather.”

“What, and North Carolina is known for it’s winters?” Christen says, rolling her eyes. “I mean, I’m sure you get snow, but is it really that bad?”

“I grew up in New Jersey,” Tobin says, this time putting her cheeky grin on full display. “So I’d say I’m a bit of a cold weather pro.”

It makes sense, Christen thinks, biting her tongue as she look at Tobin’s apparel. She’s only donned a thin long-sleeved training top and pants; almost nothing compared to Christen’s thick sweater and jeans tucked into boots.

“So am I just supposed to watch you play around?” Christen asks.

Tobin motions Christen forward, and the two make their way to a wide open empty patch of green. There aren’t as many students hanging around as there are during the day when classes are in session, but a few here and there are stretched out on the cool grass soaking up the last of the sun’s rays for the day.

“You’re going to help me,” Tobin explains.

“I don’t know how to play,” Christen says blankly, sipping at her coffee. It tastes good, exactly how she likes it.

“You don’t need to,” Tobin says, and the way she easily rolls the ball on the ground with her foot is almost mesmerizing. “I just need someone to pass it back and forth with.”

So they do that for a few minutes, Tobin giving Christen a few pointers on how to hit the ball, and before long Christen is feeling a little more confident. She starts sending the ball to where Tobin can actually reach it, instead of sending her jogging to retrieve it. Half of her coffee is gone, and Christen finds herself thankful that soccer is a sport she doesn’t really need her hands for.

“So,” Tobin says, looking up after Christen manages to neatly stop the ball with the inside of her
right foot. “I’m guessing you didn’t come here to help me practice my passing skills.”

Christen blushes, kicking the ball away. It’s not clean and it shoots feebly past Tobin’s feet, but Tobin’s a good sport about it and quickly moves to recover it.

“You said that I could talk to you about stuff, right?” Christen says hesitantly once she’s returned, determinedly looking over Tobin’s head at the sky, streaked with oranges and pinks and pale blues.

“Yeah,” Tobin says. “Why, what do you want to talk about?”

Christen fumbles the ball as Tobin sends it flying directly at her foot, embarrassingly tripping over it.

“I mean,” Christen says, kicking the ball between her own two feet, “you know.”

She feels stupid, lame with the ball and about her own feelings. After her day with Kelley, keeping her feelings to herself feels like more than she can take. With no clue how to navigate her own wishes, it seems like her only option is to ask for help.

“Here, give me that,” Tobin says, nodding at the ball. Christen obeys, kicking it over and watching Tobin flick it into the palm of the hand not holding her coffee. “You know I won’t judge you, right?”

Christen chews on her bottom lip.

“I just don’t know where to start,” she confesses. “I need to talk about it, but I don’t know how.”

“Come here,” Tobin says, jerking her head towards the fountain in the center of the green. “Let’s sit down.”

So Christen follows once again, tentatively sitting down on the edge of the fountain a foot away from Tobin with the worn soccer ball in between them, Tobin’s hand resting on top of it.

“Tell me what’s going on, but only if you want to,” Tobin says, mouth half on her coffee lid as she speaks. “If you don’t want to, that’s fine. But I think it might help for you to talk about it.”

Christen swallows, bringing her legs up under her while clinging to the last of her coffee.

“I like Kelley,” she says through a lump in her throat, thumb intently scratching at a drip of coffee trailing down the side of her cup.

Tobin doesn’t say anything, so Christen looks over at her. She’s just sitting there, cross legged, with a hand on the ball and coffee in the other. It’s peaceful, watching the fading sun cast her face into shadow while lighting up the highlights in her hair.

“Don’t make me – “

Christen chokes on her own words, but Tobin seems to understand as she looks over at her.

“I won’t,” she says reassuringly. “What you just said was really important. That’s more than enough for today.”


She feels better though, like some of the weight on her shoulders has been lifted.

Tobin nods.
“That makes sense,” she says reasonably, fingers tapping against the ball. “So. Did you just want to tell me?”

“I don’t know,” Christen says before draining the last of her coffee, just as it approaches an unbearably cool temperature. “She just – it’s so hard to be around her.”

“Why?” Tobin asks plainly. “Is it just because of how you feel?”

“No,” Christen answers. “She’s just – you know Kelley, right?”

The ghost of a smile crosses Tobin’s face. “Yes, I know Kelley.”

“Sometimes she just does things,” Christen admits, still holding onto her cup. “Like, she’ll touch me without realizing it. Or she’ll say something, or do something nice. And I kind of wish she wouldn’t.”

“Why?”

“Because it’s too much,” Christen says. “I mean, nothing is going to happen. I just need to get over it.”

“Are we talking, like, ‘my best friend is pretty’ kind of like?” Tobin asks, angling her body towards Christen and wearing a look of contemplative interest on her face. “Or are we talking about an ‘I want to kiss her and go on dates and see her naked’ kind of like?”

Christen looks away, over at the sun, which is slipping further and further down from view.

“Kind of the second one,” she says quietly, smoothing her sweaty hands over her thighs.

“So then why will nothing happen?” Tobin wants to know. “What makes you say that? Has she said something or done something?”

“Listen,” Christen says, stroking her fingertips over worn denim, “I just know. Kelley and I have been friends forever, and she’s not interested.”

“Is this because you’re both girls?”

Christen flinches as Tobin says it, so openly and blatantly in a way that Christen never could. It’s still something she’s getting used to, something she’s not comfortable with. The way Tobin says it makes her recoil, shaking her head adamantly even though yeah, that’s a big part of the problem.

“She’s my best friend,” Christen says. “What do I do if it doesn’t work out? I’m not going to make a fool of myself. If she shot me down, I’d die of humiliation.”

“You wouldn’t,” Tobin says confidently. “It would suck, but you’d live.”

“I don’t like being rejected,” Christen says stubbornly.

“It happens,” Tobin says, shrugging. “It happens all the time. But it will make you stronger, and if it works, you’ll be so thankful that you tried. You won’t even remember being scared.”

“She made a comment about me being able to date any guy I wanted,” Christen bursts out. “That doesn’t exactly say I’d be okay if you wanted to date me.”

“Christen,” Tobin sighs, pushing the ball to nudge up against Christen’s side. “Have you ever liked a girl before?”
Christen hesitates before shaking her head.

“Then there’s no way for her to know that you’re interested in her,” Tobin says gently. “The ball is in your court.”

“Wrong sport,” Christen says before she can stop herself, and Tobin laughs.

“You know what I mean,” she tells Christen. “If she doesn’t know about you, and you don’t know about her, you’re flying blind here. If you ever want anything to come out of this, you’ve got to say something.”

Christen stays silent, picking at the cuticles on her left hand.

“Of course, you don’t have to say anything,” Tobin says. “You can wait and see if this will pass, and go on never knowing.”

“I don’t think I could do that,” Christen takes before taking a deep breath. “I don’t know if it means anything, but Kelley might like girls.”


Christen rolls the words around in her mouth, trying to figure out whether or not to tell Tobin about what Kelley had told Christen in the dead of night way back when, something that Christen isn’t sure Kelley remembers telling her.

“She said something once,” Christen says, trying to sound unconcerned, as though admitting all of this to someone other than herself isn’t terrifying. “I just – Kelley’s been with one before.”

“One,” Tobin says slowly.

“That I’m sure of,” Christen corrects. “It’s like – what if Kelley likes girls, but not me?”

“If Kelley likes girls, your chances just got a whole lot better,” Tobin says darkly.

“But – “

“Stop making excuses,” Tobin says, and she’s firm but not unkind. “You need to make a decision. Do you want to tell her, or not?”

“I – I don’t – “

Christen falters, something eating at the back of her mind.

“What?” Tobin asks, softening. “Chris, I’m just saying, If you think she can make you happy, it might be worth it.”

Christen fidgets with her fingers, picking at her cuticles and the chipping pink nail polish.

“Can I say something really embarrassing, and you won’t be mean about it?”

Tobin’s hand reaches past the soccer ball between them, patting Christen’s forearm before returning to her own lap.

“I would never be mean about anything,” Tobin says.

So Christen takes a breath, gathering her words and praying they come out the way she wants them
“I’ve never been with a girl before,” she says, avoiding Tobin’s wide, expectant gaze. “And Kelley has.”

“Okay,” Tobin says patiently.

“And that part of it scares me a little.”

Christen’s face feels like it’s on fire, despite the fact that the rest of her is shivering in the cool evening. The sun is gone, their surroundings only illuminated by lamplight, and Christen hopes it’s enough to keep Tobin from noticing that her shaking isn’t entirely due to the dropping temperature. Her nerves are keeping her on edge, keeping her from relaxing.

“Can I be blunt with you?” Tobin asks, her voice a little rougher than usual. It doesn’t sound like it’s usual smooth drawl, instead sounding a little uneven around the edges.

“I guess,” Christen says, deciding to trust Tobin enough not to be more abrasive than she can handle right now.

“You are a girl.”

“I know,” Christen says, frowning.

“Don’t interrupt,” Tobin says, her voice still not back to normal. “You’re a girl. And as far as I know, you’ve got girl parts.”

Christen’s blush returns with a vengeance.

“I mean, yeah,” she gets out awkwardly.

Tobin gives her a curt nod.

“I hate to put it like this,” she says, and she looks like something other than her usual composed, confident self. Tobin looks uncomfortable, crossing one leg over the other and shifting her weight around. It’s unnerving, and Christen stares at Tobin’s profile as she speaks, lips still sharp around every word but the tic in her jaw giving her away. “But Kelley’s got girl parts. You’ve got girl parts.”

“What does that mean?” Christen asks curiously, wondering what Tobin’s trying to say.

“Do I really have to spell it out for you?” Tobin asks, and when Christen doesn’t reply, she just laughs shortly and pushes on. “Get comfortable with yourself,” she tells Christen, who is suddenly mortified. “Figure it out. I – don’t tell me if you already have. Just – just get comfortable. Get overly comfortable with your own anatomy and maybe then you won’t be afraid of hers.”

“Oh.” Christen chokes on the single syllable, shrinking away from Tobin who is somehow managing to hold her chin high as she looks straight forward across the green. “You mean, I should….”


“I’ve don’t know if I can – “

“I don’t want to know,” Tobin says quickly, head twitching like she’s about to look at Christen before snapping forward again. “I don’t need details. I’m just saying. You’ve got your own set of everything right there. Take advantage.”
Christen doesn’t have any words to say, so an awkward silence falls over them as she contemplates Tobin’s idea. It’s an idea that Christen tries to wrap her head around, but it’s difficult. Maybe it’s because it makes so much sense, and Christen wasn’t expecting to tell Tobin what she was thinking, much less walk away with something like this to think about.

“So,” Christen says, clearing her throat, “just to clarify, you think I need to touch myself before I think about touching her.”

Tobin coughs.

“To put it…delicately…yes,” she says, her voice stronger, a little closer to what Christen is used to hearing. “I think that might make you feel better about the whole thing.”

“Right,” Christen says, nodding. “It can’t hurt.”

Tobin coughs again, and Christen suspects that it’s got nothing to do with her health.


Christen wants to ask what it is that they say, but the situation is becoming painful and she doesn’t want to prolong the awkwardness if she doesn’t have to.

“Right,” she says, nodding along. “Well. Thank you for talking to me.”

She cringes as the words leave her mouth, realizing how formal and stiff they sound. Tobin doesn’t seem to notice though, standing up with her ball in one hand and coffee cup in the other.

“My pleasure,” Tobin says, just as easily as ever. “I don’t want to sound like I pity you or anything, but you sometimes seem like you could use someone to talk to.”

“Well,” Christen says, rising as well with her coffee cup in hand. “I mean, you’re not wrong.”

She shares a wry smile with Tobin’s enormous one, the tension dissipating almost entirely.

“I’m serious, though,” Tobin says earnestly, tucking a flyaway lock of hair behind her ear. “I’m here if you ever need anything.”

“Anything?” Christen asks doubtfully. “You’ve already done way more than you have to.”

“Trust me,” Tobin says, still smiling as they cross the wide lawn of grass. “I wouldn’t be offering if I didn’t mean it.”

“Thanks,” Christen says, stopping to toss her coffee in a garbage can. She reaches out a hand to Tobin, who hands off her own cup for Christen to throw away. “Seriously, you didn’t have to.”

“It’s not a big deal,” Tobin brushes it off. “Do you need a ride? My car is – “


“You’re doing better,” Tobin tells her.

“Good,” Christen says, ducking her head as they pass underneath a sweeping tree. “So, are you parked in the garage?”

“Nah, in the lot behind the union,” Tobin says. “I didn’t feel like searching for a spot.”
“Well, I’m parked in the garage,” Christen says, pointing in the opposite direction of the union. “So thanks, and I guess I’ll see you later.”

“I’m sure you will,” Tobin says. “Text me if you need anything.”

“Thanks,” Christen says. “I’d say the same, but I don’t really have anything to offer you.”

“I’ll let you know if I think of something,” Tobin says. “Besides, you still owe me from that one time.”

“Right,” Christen says, and her cheeks flush, but this time it doesn’t feel as painful as before. “I owe you.”

They part with a wave, Christen watching for a moment as Tobin drops the ball to the sidewalk and begins kicking it along, her awkward legs moving fluidly to keep it under control. She shakes her head and wipes the grin from her face before starting off towards the parking garage, clutching her keys tightly.

Back at the apartment, Kelley is in the kitchen with her hair tied up in a neat bun and a wide-necked sweatshirt falling off one of her shoulders. It makes Christen smile as she begins to take off her boots, watching Kelley concentrate on slicing an apple as she stands barefoot and barelegged, a tiny pair of shorts barely visible under the hem of her oversized sweatshirt.

“Hey,” Christen says, once she’s in just her socks and sliding across the floors to reach Kelley. “What are you up to?”

“Hey,” Kelley says, glancing up from her apple to smile back at Christen. “Just getting a snack. Where have you been?”

“Isn’t it dinnertime?” Christen inquires.

“I had a big lunch,” Kelley explains. “Where have you been?”

“With Tobin,” Christen says, trying to keep her voice neutral. “We were just hanging out.”

“You haven’t replaced me, have you?” Kelley jokes, picking up an apple slice and handing it to Christen.

“No,” Christen reassures her. “I wouldn’t dream of it.”

Chapter End Notes

sorry this took so long to get out, but i included a ton of information that was originally supposed to be revealed next chapter and it took a little while to make it all flow well. i’d really love to hear what y’all think about this one!
It’s a Tuesday night, which means that Christen would normally be holed up in the library. Maybe she’d be with Julie, maybe she wouldn’t – all the knows is that she’s being held captive in her own apartment, no matter how adamantly Kelley claims that that’s impossible to do.

“You live here,” she insists, blocking the door with her body as best as she can. “It’s not like I’ve kidnapped you or anything.”

Christen sighs. She’s long since given up on leaving, ever since Kelley got back from practice and told Christen her plans for the night. It’s been half an hour since then, though, and Christen is wondering if the other girls are ever coming over like she said they would.

“Remember when you told me that Alex and Tobin were coming over?” Christen reminds her, falling to sit on the couch. She reaches forward to collect the remote from the coffee table, pressing the power button. “What happened to that?”

“Apparently Syd wasn’t ready on time so they’re running late,” Kelley says, pulling her phone from where it’s been hanging out in her shorts’ pocket. “They should be here any minute.”

The three of them arrive not much later, carrying boxes of takeout and laughing loudly about something that Kelley demands to be informed about.

“What’s so funny?” she pesters Alex, sticking to her back as they filter into the kitchen. Christen shakes her head, locking the apartment door behind everyone.

“Kelley’s going to kill Alex.”

When Tobin speaks it’s hesitant, coming from where she stands with one hand pressed to the wall for balance while the other reaches down to pull off her shoes.

Christen swallows, trying to forget about their conversation last week and keep the others from knowing they Christen had essentially poured her guts out to Tobin in the middle of campus. Looking back, she realizes why she had done it, even though at the time it had felt a little like an out of body experience. Tobin had consistently been offering to be there for Christen if she had needed one, and taking the leap and deciding to trust her had been a scary one.

It may have been worth it though, Christen thinks, looking at Tobin’s wide smile as she peels off her second shoe.

“Oh?” Christen asks, letting herself relax and grin back at her. She can hear the others, Syd and Kelley loudly talking over each other.

“She was making fun of Kelley on the way over,” Tobin explains, pushing off the wall to walk into the kitchen slightly ahead of Christen, body angled towards her. “You know how she spins the ball
before every throw in?"

“She loves doing that,” Christen says, smiling as she remembers Kelley perfecting the move in high school.

“Yeah, Syd started making fun of her for that,” Tobin says. “And then Alex started in on all her little baby hairs — “

“She hates those,” Christen says cringing as she watches Kelley point an accusing finger in Alex’s face. “Yeah, she’s going to kill her.”

Tobin just shrugs, hip-checking Alex out of the way so she can reach for the food.

“More food for us if she’s dead,” she says, shrugging reaching for the plates that Kelley has set on the counter. She hands one to Christen before grabbing one for herself.

By the time they’re all settled on the couches with their plates and water glasses in hand, Kelley is pouting still and refusing to talk to Alex and Syd.

“Come on,” Alex gripes from where she sits with Syd on the smaller couch. “Kelley, we were just playing.”

“No,” Kelley says, shaking her head from where she sits next to Christen, taking up far too much of the couch so Christen is forced to scoot closer to Tobin who is already pressed up against the far end. “If you guys are going to insist on being mean to me, I’m going to choose what we’re going to watch.”

“Not everyone wants to watch your stupid medical documentaries,” Syd says. “Some of us want to keep our dinner down.”

Kelley rolls her eyes and lobs the remote at Alex who only barely manages to catch it.

“Changing the subject,” Tobin says slowly, twirling pasta around the tines of her fork, “who’s ready for this weekend?”

“Me,” Alex says confidently. “We’re going to win it.”

“I don’t know,” Syd says through a mouthful of meatball. “Virginia is looking pretty good this year.”

Tobin shakes her head. “Nah,” she says. “I don’t think they can beat us.”

“Well, if we play them, it probably won’t be until the final,” Kelley points out. “Because of the way the schedule is set up.”

“Tobin,” Alex says, turning to her with a mischievous grin, “are you going to be able to kick UNC’s ass this year?”

Tobin rolls her eyes, chewing and swallowing before answering.

“I’m not giving you tips on how to beat them,” she says, as though it’s something she’s had to say a million times already.

“Why not?” Syd asks, pushing her feet into Alex’s lap. “Beating them is the first step in our way to the championship.”

“Listen,” Alex says, pushing Syd’s feet away, “as soon as you came here, you left all your loyalties
behind. You belong to us now."

“I belong to no one,” Tobin points out.

“Wrong,” Kelley speaks up, talking through a mouthful of noodles. “You belong to me.”

“I’ll compromise,” Tobin says, looking between the girls, “if we end up playing them for the national championship, I’ll give you some secrets.”

The room goes quiet aside from the tv in the background, and Christen is confused by the exasperated looks being shared by Alex, Syd, and Kelley.

“Well, that’s nice of you,” Christen says to break the silence. “Right?”

“Not really,” Kelley sighs enormously. “By the time we know we’ll play them for the title, we’ll have barely enough time to come up with ways to sabotage them.”

“You know, you could actually try watching the tape coach shows us as prep,” Alex offers snidely. “Those meetings aren’t actually scheduled nap times, you know.”

“Not all of us like watching other people play, Al,” Kelley shoots back as she rises from the couch. “Some of us would rather catch up on our beauty sleep. Not everyone prefers to rely on a good eyeliner like you do. Does anyone want more garlic bread?”

“Not all of us love carbs like you do,” Syd calls after her.

“And I don’t even wear eyeliner half the time!” Alex protests.

“Do they even like each other?” Christen asks, mostly under her breath and to herself. Tobin must hear, though, judging by the way she smiles into her water.

“It’s how they show their love,” Tobin explains, speaking just as lowly as Christen, so that the others won’t notice.

“It’s brutal, is what it is,” Christen says, watching Kelley step out of the kitchen and threaten to throw a garlic roll at Syd’s outfit.

“It’s because the championship is on the line,” Tobin says, eyes glued to Kelley who looks like she’s aiming for Alex now. “I mean, they are the defending champs, so everyone is a little stressed.”

“And you?” Christen asks curiously. “You’re not stressed and threatening to start a food fight?”

“I deal with my stress in less aggressive ways,” Tobin says vaguely, stuffing her mouth with more pasta.

“If you get pasta sauce in my hair, I’m going to kill you,” Alex warns Syd, sliding off the couch and onto the floor, clutching her plate protectively with one hand and wrapping her hair around the other hand. “Listen, I used a hair mask earlier, and – “

“I don’t care what hair mask she used, I’m going to kill her if she gets red sauce all over the carpet,” Christen says under her breath.

Tobin bursts into silent laughter, clutching her stomach and bowing her head in a gesture that makes Christen feel strangely light inside.

“It wasn’t that funny,” Christen says carefully, making sure the smile on her face doesn’t grow too
“No, I’m just remembering,” Tobin gets out in between breathless giggles, “remember when I was in your bathroom? And asking you about your hair stuff for her?”

“Oh,” Christen says. “Yeah. I’m guessing it’s been working, then?”

Tobin’s still laughing hard, drawing her knees up towards her chest. Christen lets herself grin, reaching forward to set her plate on the coffee table so she has a free hand ready to steady Tobin’s plate to make sure she doesn’t spill food all over herself.

“What are you even laughing about?” Kelley asks, crawling on the floor for some reason. It looks like she has somehow hurt Alex who is glaring murderously while being restrained by Syd. “I didn’t think that I was that funny.”

“You’re hilarious,” Christen reassures Kelley, sharing a look with Tobin who has calmed down enough to roll her eyes in return. She has no idea what Kelley did and clearly neither does Tobin, but she’s willing to pretend for Kelley’s sake.

“I just feel bad for Alex,” Tobin says.

“I’ll get you back this weekend,” Alex tells Kelley, flipping her hair over her shoulder now that Syd has let her go. “You better watch your back, O’Hara.”

“What are you going to do?” Kelley asks sarcastically. “Tie me up with pink pre-wrap?”

Syd guffaws loudly while Alex whines indignantly.

“Guys, guys,” Tobin says, rearranging herself so she can finish eating. “Come on. This was supposed to be a nice, calm night before we leave tomorrow.”

“What time do you guys leave tomorrow?” Christen asks, retrieving her plate.

“Early,” Kelley says, hauling herself back up on the couch to sit next to Christen. “Like, I’m not looking forward to it at all.”

“Do you need me to drive you to campus?” Christen asks automatically.

“Nah, don’t worry about it,” Kelley says, shaking her head and leaning into Christen’s side. “Ashlyn is coming by to pick me up.”

“Let me know if Ali’s with her in the morning,” Syd says automatically, earning an elbow to the shin from Alex. “Ow, that hurt!”

“Don’t talk about them!” Alex hisses.

“Please,” Kelley says, draping a leg over Christen’s knees. “Everyone knows that that’s not happening anymore.”

“Still,” Alex says righteously. “It feels wrong to gossip.”

“So something really was going on?” Christen asks timidly, a little afraid to ask about people she has no business knowing about. “I mean, I kind of gathered, but – “

“ Kelley didn’t tell you?” Syd asks interestedly. “I surely thought she would have.”
“And if she didn’t, I assumed Tobin or even Ali herself had,” Alex adds.

Tobin points a finger at herself and looks at Alex questioningly.

“Me?” she asks. “Me, the person who never knows what anyone else is up to? The only person on the team who actively avoids all that drama?”

Alex narrows her eyes at Tobin while Kelley cuddles further into Christen’s side.

“It’s not a huge deal anyway,” Syd tells Christen, prompting a groan from Alex. “Anyway, it’s not really gossiping if the whole team knows, is it?”

“Definitely not,” Kelley says quickly.

“So what, the two of them…were something?” Christen asks, struggling for words and determinedly twirling the last couple of strands of pasta left on her plate with her fork. “And now they’re not?”

“Ashlyn offends people easily,” Syd explains.

“Um, Ashlyn did nothing wrong,” Alex says defensively. “She’s not in the wrong for giving Ali an ultimatum.”

“Ultimatums aren’t ever a good thing,” Kelley says, uncharacteristically grim. “Sorry, Al.”

“Ali’s been weird about it since the beginning,” Alex says stubbornly, tucking her legs up underneath her.

“You haven’t talked to both of them as much as I have,” Syd says. “Trust me, Ashlyn shouldn’t have done what she did.”

“What did she do?” Christen asks.

“You don’t want to know,” Tobin mutters under her breath.

“Said some really rude things to Ali,” Kelley answers anyway, not listening as Alex objects. “Really nasty, awful things about how she didn’t know what she wanted and was just wasting Ashlyn’s time.”

“Ali has been wasting her time,” Alex insists. “If you don’t know whether or not you want to be with someone, you can’t be angry if they decide to end things. Ali’s just pissed because the got dumped.”

“She wasn’t dumped,” Syd says exasperatedly. “You can’t dump someone if you’re not in a relationship, and whatever the two of them had going definitely didn’t qualify as one.”

Alex is left without words after that, so Christen just stands up with her plate.

“I’m going to wash dishes,” she says awkwardly, glancing first at Tobin who looks like she’s trying to disappear into the couch, then at Kelley who is staring at the tv, and finally at Alex and Syd who seem to be fighting the urge to continue arguing.

“I’ll help,” Kelley offers, but Christen knows that it’s purely obligatory: Kelley’s idea of doing dishes is putting everything in the dishwasher and forgetting to run it until they run out of silverware.

“No, don’t worry about it,” Christen says reassuringly. “You should relax, or start packing. Last I saw, the only thing in your bag was a pair of cleats.”
“You haven’t started packing yet?” Syd asks, sounding scandalized.

Alex clucks her tongue.

“Come on, Kelley,” Alex says, heaving herself up off the floor with Syd’s help. “The three of us will help you. Right, Tobin?”

Tobin hold up her palms defensively.

“I’m not helping anyone pack, I packed for myself and that was more than enough,” she says. “I’d rather wash dishes.”

“Perfect,” Kelley says, reluctantly getting up from the couch. “You help Christen with dishes while I go pack.”

So Christen finds herself standing over the sink, hot water running while Tobin scrapes food scraps into the garbage. It’s quiet, the running water and the faint sound of Syd’s laughter the only noises in the apartment, and it makes Christen feel at ease. Even though she would rather be at the library, there’s a part of her that’s thankful she didn’t resist Kelley’s attempts to make her stay. Alex and Syd are a little intimidating but have always been nice to her, and she’s actually been enjoying Tobin’s company.

Besides, she’s got something that she wants to say to her.

Once she’s sure that they’re alone and Tobin brings over a plate for her to scrub clean, Christen takes her chance.

“I have something to ask you,” she blurts out, a little more abruptly than she’d like. Tobin takes it well though, leaning a hip against the counter and nodding.

“Sure,” she says. “What is it?”

Christen takes the plate in the hand currently not gripping the scrub brush, hesitating while she thinks about how to say what she wants to.

“You haven’t told anyone, right?” she starts off, gripping the plate tightly. “About what we talked about?”

Tobin’s face softens as she shakes her head firmly.

“No, I haven’t,” she says. “I wouldn’t.”

“Like, any of it,” Christen says, just to be sure. “Not about – “

“Listen,” Tobin says, uncharacteristically cutting Christen off. “I told you that you could trust me, and I meant it. I know that you didn’t have to tell me everything you did, and I’m not going to be an asshole with that information.”

Christen flushes, sticking the plate under the water.

“I just wanted to check,” she mumbles. “Because I’m still trying to figure out what to do, and I don’t need it to be more complicated than it is.”

“I know,” Tobin says. “I get that. I wouldn’t want to make it more complicated for you either. I meant it when I said you could come to me for anything.”
“Okay,” Christen says, already breathing a little easier. “I know. Thank you.”

“So are you okay?” Tobin asks, peering at Christen as she reaches for the now clean plate, ready with a towel to dry it.

“Yeah,” Christen says, nodding as she reaches for a handful of silverware. “I’m good. Thanks.”

“So what are you doing while we’re all gone?” Tobin asks, and Christen feels infinitely more comfortable with the subject change. “I mean, I guess that’s a stupid question. You’ve got other friends, so I guess the real question is, what’s it going to be like with the apartment to myself?”

“I mean, I’ll have Julie while you guys are gone,” Christen says, shrugging as she scrubs at a fork. “So I’ll do a lot of studying with her – we have a huge test on Monday in statistics. Might invite her over here to study instead of going to the library.”

“I thought you loved the library,” Tobin says, a hint of a smile crossing her face.

“I do,” Christen says, grimacing at the way Tobin is teasing her. “Stop; I don’t like, live there.”

“You kind of do,” Tobin says, grinning widely, all of her teeth on display when Christen glances over.

“I just focus better there,” Christen insists. “Where Kelley isn’t liable to walk in and distract me at any minute.”

“She’s distracting, huh?” Tobin asks cheekily, and Christen makes sure to drip water over Tobin’s forearms when she hands her a water glass to dry. “Okay, okay – I’m kidding.”

“She’s just very loud,” Christen says plainly. “That’s it. And she always wants me to keep her company while she moans about practice. I can only listen to one person complain about push-ups for so long.”

“You can start listening to two people complain,” Tobin offers. “I don’t like them either.”

“Kill me,” Christen mutters. “I’d rather die than hear about how much you guys hate conditioning.”

“Good thing we’re leaving for a few days then.”

“You get back Monday, right?” Christen asks tentatively, hearing the voices from Kelley’s room float out and down the hallway.

“If we win it all, yeah,” Tobin says, nodding as she takes the last glass from Christen. “We’ll be back sometime Monday afternoon.”

“That’s a long time,” Christen says unthinkingly.

“You going to miss me?”

Tobin’s clearly joking around – she’s funnier than Christen had ever imagined, going off their first meeting that one night – but something about her words strikes a chord in Christen. As much as she’d resisted getting to know Kelley’s teammates back at the beginning of the semester, she’s started to enjoy hanging out with them. She’s already thinking about her plans for the weekend, a little panicked at the idea of not having Kelley, or even Alex or Tobin, to occupy her spare time.

“No,” Christen says eventually, turning off the tap after she finishes cleaning out the sink. “It will be good to get a break from you guys.”
She’s transparent though, so much so that she can tell that Tobin can see right through her. Tobin still plays along though, nodding and pretending to be hurt.

“Right,” she says. “Well then, I won’t miss you at all either.”

Christen can see the small smile that Tobin wears though, and she dries her hands while hiding one of her own.

Mere seconds pass before Kelley is skidding into the room in her fuzzy socks, arms flung out for balance while Alex and Syd walk behind her.

“Time for y’all to go,” Kelley announces, looking in serious danger of falling before she balances herself and stands up straight. “I need to get to bed early.”

Christen snorts. “Kell, you never go to bed early.”

“Tonight I am!” Kelley says, bouncing on the balls of her feet. “I’m taking some ZzzQuil and joining you in your grandma bedtime.”

“I feel like you’re making fun of me,” Christen says, frowning.

“Never,” Kelley reassures her, coming by to tug on her ponytail and press a kiss to her temple, free hand swinging up to wrap loosely around Christen’s front in a poor imitation of a hug. “I would never.”

Kelley moves on quickly, heading for Tobin to say goodbye while Christen finds herself faced with Alex and Syd.

“Behave yourself,” Syd says with an exaggerated wink. “Don’t get up to too much trouble without us here to keep an eye on you, alright?”

“I’m…older than you,” Christen says blankly as Syd wraps her up in a quick but tight hug.

“Ignore her,” Alex says, swooping in as soon as Syd has stepped back. “Get up to as much trouble as you want – you deserve it.”

“I really don’t know what kind of trouble you’re envisioning,” Christen says, twisting the end of her ponytail and shaking her head.

“I’m sure you’ll find something,” Alex says, eyes twinkling somewhat ominously. “Anyway, we’ve to go.”

They head for the door, but Kelley holds them up – something about her ball twirling technique, if Christen’s hearing correctly. She laughs under her breath, ready for the apartment to clear out so she can shower before getting some studying in before bed.

“Hey,” Tobin says, redirecting Christen’s attention. “Thanks for having us.”

“No problem. I don’t mind spending time with you guys,” Christen admits.

“That’s reassuring,” Tobin says. “At the beginning of the year, I wasn’t really into this stuff,” she admits. “Alex and Lindsey basically had to drag me everywhere. So I kind of get it – not wanting to be around everyone all the time.”

“Yeah,” Christen agrees, nodding. “I just need some space sometimes – you know?”
“I do,” Tobin says, scratching at her arm as she turns to look at the other three who are still squabbling about something. “Not like those three. Most of the team basically lives with each other twenty-four seven. I don’t know how they do it.”

“Hey,” Christen says suddenly, feeling her cheeks pink up as she takes a deep breath. “If you ever need to get away from them, I totally understand. But if you’re just looking for quiet…”

She falters, fear squashing the rest of her sentence.

Tobin is too curious to let it slide though.

“What?” she asks. “If I’m looking for quiet, what?”

“I’m pretty quiet,” Christen says lamely, praying that she isn’t making a fool of herself. “If you don’t want to be alone, but don’t want all the chaos that comes with the rest of them, I’m always here.”

Tobin eases her worries though, grinning widely and making Christen think that she’s never met anyone who’s ever smiled so much.

“Thanks,” Tobin says, sincere and easy. “And hey, if you ever need to talk, call me or whatever. I’m here for you.”

“Thank you,” Christen says, and just as she’s starting to feel awkward, Tobin reaches her arms out.

“Thank you for trusting me,” Tobin says, and it’s easy for Christen to step forward and let Tobin wrap her arms around her. Christen does her best to maneuver her own arms around Tobin’s lithe but toned limbs, eventually coming to curl one arm behind Tobin’s neck and the other across her back. Tobin hugs tightly, resting her face on Christen’s shoulder and it’s somehow calming, the strength with which she holds on. It feels natural to relax against her, Christen’s body exhaling as she leans in and closes her eyes for a split second, chin digging lighting into the side of Tobin’s neck.

The clearing of a throat makes her open her eyes.

“Let’s go,” Alex says, and Christen can see her impatiently jerking her head towards the doorway as Tobin slowly pulls back, hands lingering. “Come on, Tobin.”

“Anytime,” Tobin promises casually, tapping Christen on the arm before turning around. “Okay?”

“Yeah,” Christen says, nodding slowly.

Kelley locks the door behind them.

“You and Tobin are like, super close,” Kelley remarks, reaching for a garlic roll sitting in it’s open container. “When did that happen?”

“Probably around the same time you kept making us hang out with each other,” Christen says without thinking. As soon as the words leave her mouth she pauses, carefully looking at Kelley and wary of her reaction.

There’s no reason to be worried because Kelley just smirks and shoves the rest of the roll in her mouth.

“See?” Kelley says, smacking Christen’s shoulder. “I know introducing you to the team was a good idea. I’m glad – Tobin’s a good egg.”

Christen laughs at the phrasing.
“Yeah, I guess so,” she agrees.

“I’m off to bed,” Kelley informs her, smacking her garlic-soaked lips against Christen’s cheek. “Want me to wake you up before I go?”

“I’ll already be awake,” Christen reminds her, ignoring her racing heart.

“I know,” Kelley says, grinning as she walks backwards out of the kitchen. “I just wanted to make sure I’d get a goodbye from you.”

“Always,” Christen says, rooted to the spot. “I’m always here for you.”

*  

Here’s the thing: Christen has a test on Monday. A big, giant, last-test-before-the-final kind of test. A test that she’s spent weeks studying for, her and Julie poring over example problems and textbooks and quizzing each other on different methods until one of them would go crazy from it all.

Christen has a test on Monday, but it’s Sunday night and she can’t sleep.

She thinks it started when Kelley called earlier: the team had won. Reigning ACC champs for the third year in a row, she’d screamed on speaker. Christen had clutched the phone tighter to her ear, grinning furiously and still grinning even hours later when she’d been trying to study through dinner. Of course Christen had been watching the stream of the game as it played out, watching with an erratic heart who stopped and started as the game eventually went into a penalty shootout. When Ali had sunk her shot, securing their win and prompting the entire team to pile onto her in celebration, Christen had nearly screamed into her empty apartment.

But really, Christen thinks, it may have started when Kelley had called later, when Christen had just slipped off her clothes and turned on the shower and was waiting for the water to heat up.

“Christen, babe,” Kelley had breathed into the phone. “I wish you were here.”

“I know,” Christen had said, crossing her free arm over her bare chest. “Me too.”

“Why didn’t you come?” Kelley had whined. The voices in the background had distracted Christen from answering.

“Where are you?” Christen had asked. “It’s really loud, it sounds like.”

“Alex’s room,” Kelley explained. “A few of the girls on the team are trying to figure how to get alcohol so we can all celebrate – yes Tobin, you too – “

From there the conversation had been a lost cause, Kelley too preoccupied with plotting the night’s festivities to focus on Christen.

“I’ll see you tomorrow,” Kelley had promised after Christen had said that she needed to go, the shower already steaming and ready for her. “I’ll call, okay? I can’t wait to see your face.”

“Okay,” Christen had said. “Have fun, Kell.”

“Love you,” Kelley had said into the speaker before disconnecting, before Christen could tell Kelley that she loved her too.

When it started, how it started – none of that matters. All that matters is that it’s nearly one in the morning – way past Christen’s usual bedtime – and she can’t sleep, and it’s mostly her own fault for
thinking that a night like tonight would be a good time to take Tobin’s advice.

Christen is going to kill her.

An empty apartment, freshly showered and shaved, nothing else to do; it had seemed like the perfect opportunity when she’d slid between the covers, a little stressed about tomorrow’s test and keyed up from the excitement of the team winning the championship. She’d started slow, trying to get into the mood with the lights turned off and everything ready to go in the morning. There was nothing left to do to prepare for the test, she had contemplated putting on some music but ultimately decided against it, turned her phone on silent and left it to charge, and got to work.

Only it isn’t working.

Christen’s not entirely sure what the problem is. She feels relaxed enough, with the air down low and her covered pulled up over her chest. It’s quiet with no distractions. There’s a nipple pinched between two fingers and a hand shoved down her pants, but her body doesn’t seem to be cooperating the way she’d been hoping. Instead she seems to be as dry as the Sahara between her legs and there’s a prickly sense of irritation crawling up her spine, making her hot an uncomfortable. Time doesn’t mean anything to her anymore – maybe it’s been ten minutes since she started, maybe it’s been ten hours. All Christen knows is that this is working her up, and not in the good way.

Christen has a test on Monday, and she’s more pissed than turned on and wondering if Tobin had given her bad advice on purpose.

It’s not that she’s never done this before. Christen’s familiar enough with her own body to have a general idea of what she likes and doesn’t like. She’s got a mental chart of acceptable and unacceptable that she’s been compiling ever since she was in eighth grade and let a boy kiss her by his locker. He’d been sloppy and it had been wet, and Christen had decided right then and there to never let anything like that happen to her again.

She likes biting, she knows, but that information means nothing to her now. She doesn’t really care for being manhandled, but that’s not relevant either. She knows which fingers she likes to use on herself, knows that she has a tendency to get overeager too fast, and knows that she sometimes takes a while and has to be patient. None of this is helping though, because she just can’t fucking relax enough to get started properly.

So Christen tries again. She brushes a thumb over her right nipple, slow and just underneath where she’s pushed up her t-shirt. It barely reacts, soft and nearly flat despite the cool air blowing aggressively through the air vents and forcing goosebumps along her exposed torso. When she rubs harder, a couple of slow swipes back and forth – still nothing. Christen takes a deep breath and rolls it back and forth between her thumb and index finger, which just barely gets the job done.

She keeps at it for a while, and there’s no denying that it feels good. She’s feeling aroused, like maybe this will work. When she slowly slides her hands down she can’t help but go right to her destination, too straightforward to play around, and she’s hoping, praying, that this has worked a second time around.

Only it hasn’t. Christen groans in frustration, turning her head to bury her face in her pillow. She’s only barely wet down at her entrance, barely enough to dip her fingers in, and she momentarily contemplates spitting on her fingers and seeing if that helps, but she’s too annoyed and furious and horribly desperate to make something happen, so she reached out her left hand to grab her phone – she grabs it without even looking, because of course it’s sitting exactly where it’s supposed to be – and swipes awkwardly at the screen, only barely making note of the time and figuring that she’s go nothing to lose.
She doesn’t really expect and answer to her problem. She’s already overthinking it, mind racing a million miles an hour to tell herself that there was no way this was going to work, that she’s doomed to a life full of the inability to orgasm at her own hands. A small part of her is wondering if she needs to become one of those brazenly trashy girls that has a drawer full of sex toys because it’s the only way they can get off, but most of her is sullenly thinking that there’s no point in liking girls if she’ll never be able to succeed in this area. She’s tried and now she’s failed, and now she’s trying a last ditch effort because there’s nothing left to lose.

When the ringing stops and doesn’t immediately go to voicemail, Christen’s voice catches in her throat.

“Hello?”

Her voice is sleepy and raspy throat probably worn and ruined. Christen can almost picture her, probably in a generic hotel bed with white sheets with a messy ponytail, rubbing at her eyes in confusion. She doesn’t say anything, wondering if she could just hang up now and pretend like it never happened.

“Chris? Are you okay?”

Christen bites down on her tongue, panicking and rethinking this decision. She’s not reckless, not even a little, and she’s wondering why she bothered to call in the first place. She pulls the phone away from her face and lets her thumb over the end call button, ready to press down when –

“I can hear you breathing, you know,” Tobin mumbles, voice deeper than before, increasingly gravelly with every syllable. “Are you okay?”

“I think,” Christen starts, her voice cracking embarrassingly, “that I might hate you.”

She can hear rustling and movement and she’s still freaking out, still ready to hang up, but Tobin audibly clears her throat and Christen can’t go, not when she needs to hear what Tobin has to say.

“Are you okay?” Tobin repeats. “It’s really late, Chris.”

“I know.” Christen chokes on her words with her hand still in her underwear, fingers cupping herself, middle finger pressed close. “I’m sorry. I’ll hang up. Just forget it.”

“Wait.”

The single word Tobin utters makes Christen pause, phone jammed right back up against her ear while she breathes, every inhale and exhale seeming louder than ever. She waits on the edge of her seat, waiting for Tobin to say something, anything to keep her from feeling like the biggest idiot of all time. Just as she’s about to give up and say goodbye, for real this time, she hears Tobin clear her throat again.

“I’m awake,” Tobin says, her voice back to its normal tone but inordinately quiet. “Don’t hang up. Can you tell me what’s wrong? Why do you hate me?”

Christen hates how calm Tobin sounds, and she thinks that that’s what prompts her to speak. There’s a sick part of her that wants to shatter that; she wants to see Tobin all bothered and flustered, anything besides her perfectly cool and composed self. That’s how she ends up spilling the truth, words falling from her mouth before she can catch them and shove them back in.

“I hate you,” she begins. “This isn’t working. I tried taking your advice and – you know I have a test tomorrow morning? I’m supposed to be getting a good night’s sleep and instead I’m here freaking
out because you give the worst advice. I – I’m already familiar with myself, but it’s not working!
You said that – “

“Chris, stop talking.”

Christen doesn’t even realize how worked up she’s gotten until Tobin stops her, her voice firm but
gentle.

“Are you – hold on a minute, okay?”

“I can’t!” Christen says, panicking. “I’m literally trying here, I can’t hold on!”

It’s going to drive Christen crazy, the lack of a reaction she gets in return.

“I’m trying to get away from my sleeping roommate!” Tobin hisses down the line. “Give me ten
seconds.”

So Christen closes her mouth, counting her breaths until she feels like she’s not about to get
hysterical. It doesn’t take long, maybe a little longer than the estimated ten seconds, but it feels like
an eternity.

“Okay,” Tobin says, and Christen mostly misses the hitch in her voice. “Okay. Start from the
beginning. Tell me what’s going on.”

“I have a test tomorrow,” Christen stresses. “I just wanted to relax. Have a good night’s sleep. And
Kelley’s not here, so this was the perfect opportunity. I just thought I’d try it but it’s not working.”

Tobin inhales sharply.

“Calm down,” she says. “That’s what you need to do. Okay? Calm down. If it doesn’t work, that’s
fine. Try again some other time.”

“I can’t,” Christen says vehemently, shaking her head. She’s wiggling against her other hand, the
pressure providing only the smallest amount of relief, just to keep her from going completely insane.
“Listen, I need this to work. I don’t know what I’m supposed to do if it doesn’t.”

“It doesn’t always work on the first try,” Tobin says, and Christen can tell that she’s trying to be
encouraging.

“But that’s the thing!” Christen says, growing frustrated. “I’ve tried before! Before you told me too!
And it just never works!”

Tobin goes dead quiet, and Christen has to check to make sure that the call hasn’t been disconnected.
When she sees that they’re both still on the line, she grows hot with mortification.

“Forget it,” she says, words jumbling together as she hurries to get the words out. “This was stupid.
You can’t help me anyway. Just forget I ever called. You’re probably still thinking about winning
and I’m here just taking away from that.”

“No, you’re not,” Tobin says, sounding fierce. “Listen. You can do this, okay?”

“I can’t,” Christen says miserably, rocking against her fingers. At this point, they’re more of a
comfort to her than anything. “I really can’t. I’ve tried and I can’t – “

She cuts herself off, blushing at the thought of telling Tobin that she can’t even coax her body into
responding to her manipulations.
“Can’t what?” Tobin asks. “Maybe it will help if you talk it out.”

So Christen steadies herself, stilling her hand and focusing.

“I can’t get wet,” she says plainly, and when Tobin responds rationally instead of acting grossed out or appalled, she feels marginally less uncomfortable.

“That’s okay,” Tobin says immediately. “Sometimes people need a little help in that department.”

“Normally it’s not a problem,” Christen pushes on. “But tonight it’s just not happening.”

“What normally works?” Tobin asks calmly. “When it’s you or someone else – what does your body like?”

Christen struggles for a moment, battling the part of her that knows who she’s talking to, knows how inappropriate and uncharacteristic of her this is.

“My – my breasts,” she mutters into the phone.

“What about them?” Tobin prompts. “That’s a good place to start, but – “

“My nipples,” Christen gets out hastily. “Specifically.”

“Okay, good,” Tobin says receptively. “See, you can do this. Just keep going, okay? I have faith in you.”

“But I tried that before,” Christen says, trying to remain level.

“So start bigger,” Tobin suggests. “Start with your breasts. Work your way up to the good stuff. Take your time. And if you don’t get there? It’s okay. You can do it.”

“Wait,” Christen says, quickly. “What then?”

“I can’t give you a play by play of how you should do this, Chris,” Tobin says kindly.

Christen swallows what’s left of her pride, pulling her hand out of her cotton underwear.

“Could you, though?”

“Could I – what?”

“Could you?” Christen asks again, hand cupping her breast as well as it can, palm pressing down lightly. “Do this with me?”

“Are you serious?” Tobin splutters uncontrollably, and it’s what Christen’s been waiting for.

“Christen, I – do you know what you’re asking me to do?”

“I’ve got nothing left to try,” Christen says, breathing laboriously, chest rising and falling against her open palm.

She waits while Tobin tries to speak, fumbling with beginnings of words. Christen squeezes gently, eyes closed and wondering what happened and when she entered a zone of not giving a single fuck what Tobin thought of her.

“Where are you?” Tobin asks eventually, her voice dropping in volume and in pitch.
“My bed,” Christen answers, squeezing a little harder, massaging her breast.

“Lights on, off?” Tobin asks. “Sorry, I just – help me set the scene here.”

“Lights off,” Christen answers. “I’m in bed, with my head on a pillow and my blankets – “

“Get rid of the blankets,” Tobin orders.

“Why – “

“Get rid of them,” Tobin cuts in. “They’re not helping.”

So Christen kicks them down until they’re falling off the foot of the bed.

“What are you wearing?”

“Um – A shirt. A T-shirt. Underwear.”

“That was a trick question,” Tobin says. “The answer should be nothing.”

“Nothing?” Christen asks, alarmed at the idea of being sprawled out on her bed, naked and exposed.

“Try it,” Tobin coaxes, her voice syrupy and slow, like honey but only half as sweet.

“Hold on, I’ve got to put you down while I take off – “

“I’m not on speaker?” Tobin interrupts harshly. “Christen, come on. This isn’t amateur hour.”

Christen blushes furiously.

“Sorry I don’t know the standard procedure for this kind of thing,” Christen snaps. “My bad.”

“I didn’t mean it like that,” Tobin says, her voice back to it’s normal cadence. “Okay, stay with me. Put your phone on speaker.”

“Oh kay.”

“Then put your phone somewhere it won’t get lost. Like tuck it under the edge of your pillow, or something.”

Christen does as instructed, unable to help but think that Tobin must have done this, or something like this, before.

“Oh kay.”

“And get naked.”

Christen listens, stripping off her shirt and bunching it up to tuck in by the headboard before doing the same with her underwear.

“Oh kay.”

“You’re right handed?”

“Yeah,” Christen says.

“Yeah, well, tonight you’re going to use both,” Tobin says, and Christen can’t help but squirm a
little. “Are you sure you want to do this?”

“Yeah,” Christen breathes out. “Yeah, I’m sure.”

So Tobin walks her though it, asking questions and forcing Christen to answer as she goes. Christen starts slow like Tobin says, avoiding her neglected nipples until she can’t anymore.

“Tobin,” Christen interrupts. “Can I touch them now?”

“You can do whatever you want,” Tobin says, the smoothness of her voice belied by the way her throat scrapes over the words. “Start slow. Just feel them.”

So Christen goes slow, waiting until Tobin finally tells her to give a little tug.

“Tell me how you’re doing,” Tobin says.

“Good,” Christen gasps, tugging with one hand and massaging the other breast with the other.

“Tell me how it feels.”

“Good.”

It’s all that Christen can manage – mostly because she’s still painfully self aware at this point – but it’s not enough to Tobin.

“Help me out here,” Tobin says. “Tell me how I’m doing. Tell me if this is working.”

“I’m not used to this,” Christen struggles to say, fingers stilling. “I don’t know how – “


“Almost,” Christen says, head lolling back as she pinches a hardening peak, light at first but then tighter.

“What are you doing?” Tobin asks. “Tell me.”

“I’m pinching my nipple,” Christen grinds out between clenched teeth. “The right one.”

“This isn’t a manual,” Tobin says. “It’s not a test. I don’t need specifics.”

Christen’s heart falters a little, disappointed with herself for making Tobin disappointed, but she tries again.

“It feels good,” she says. “Harder, now. And – I’m doing the other one now.”

“Good,” Tobin encourages. “Keep going. Tell me more.”

Christen rolls one between her fingers, biting into her bottom lip before speaking again.

“I like it a little rough,” she gets out. “So I’m twisting one hard. And it feels even better.”

“Do the other one,” Tobin guides her. “Work them both.”

“I’m – I feel like this might be working,” Christen pants, rubbing her thighs together. “My nipples – they look – “

“Yeah?” Tobin drawls, interest spiking. “How do they look?”
Christen can barely see by the moonlight and the blinking of her charger, but it’s enough.

“They look,” Christen says slowly, “like they really want to be sucked on.”

She wonders if she’s taken it too far, but she can hear Tobin’s irregular breathing and it’s spurring her on.

“I really like it when they’re played with,” Christen continues. “Can I think about that? Can I think about them being licked?”

“Yeah,” Tobin says thickly. “Yeah, you can. What else do you like done to them?”

Christen pinches hard, harder, until it’s almost painful and she’s almost certain she can feel wetness down below.

“When they’re bitten,” Christen says. “I like that.”

Tobin guides her with a barely-there hand, her low voice helping Christen along. She tells her to move her hands, keeping one on her chest while the other slides down her stomach, pressing down as it goes until she’s ready to burst from the pressure.

“Can I keep going?” Christen asks weakly. She already knows that this is different from before, that the third time might be a charm because she just knows that it’s working, that Tobin is helping her out. “I need to keep going.”

“You don’t have to ask,” Tobin says, words catching as she speaks. “Just tell me what you’re doing.”

Christen’s hand moves down slowly, a single fingertip slipping in and stroking. The exhilaration she experiences when she feels slippery wetness makes her shudder hard, jaw clenching tightly.

“Oh, God,” she says, forcing herself to still. “It’s working.”

“Is it?” Tobin asks keenly. “Tell me how you feel. Tell me how wet you are.”

“So wet,” Christen says, only mildly embarrassed by the way she moans it out. “I’m soaked. I’m – I need something inside me.”

“Slow down,” Tobin tells her. “Don’t get ahead of yourself.”

“I’m trying,” Christen says, fighting the urge to slip a finger inside. “I’m – what if I – “

She turns her head, pressing her mouth to her bare shoulder and wishing she had someone’s fleshy neck to bite into.

“What if what?” Tobin asks. “What do you want to do?”

It takes a moment before Christen groans, responding slowly.

“My clit,” she whispers in the direction of her phone, still safely tucked away. “Just – not on it. Not yet.”

When Tobin speaks, it sounds like she’s whispering too.

“Good. You’re so good at this, Chris. Just use your fingers and figure out what feels good.”
“Just rubbing it,” Christen says, barely audible as she speaks into her own shoulder. “Not – just next to it. I don’t want to touch it yet.”

“That’s okay,” Tobin says approvingly, her words innocent but her voice sounding wrecked. “Keep going. What are you doing next?”

Christen just explores, fingers spreading and slipping all along the wetness, the sensation only heightened by the cool air still circulating into the room. She’s thankful she ditched the blankets and underwear earlier, making a note of it for the future.

“I’m going to try my fingers,” Christen says shakily.

“One at a time,” Tobin tells her unevenly. “Be patient.”

Christen nods even though Tobin can’t see her, shakily slipping her middle finger inside. It goes easily – so fucking easily – and she thinks about how easy it would be to add another, but she holds back, going up to the knuckle and crying out involuntarily.

“That’s it,” Tobin encourages. “Let me hear you.”

“I need another,” Christen pleads. “I need – one isn’t enough.”

“You’re so eager,” Tobin murmurs. “Just a minute, okay? Get used to one.”

So Christen bites her tongue and then her lip, careful not to go too hard as she pumps her finger in and out, slow and then faster.

“It’s not enough,” Christen whines. “Please, can I – “

“Yeah, go,” Tobin gasps. “Do another.”

Christen doesn’t waste anytime, and once she’s worked her two fingers in, she begins thrusting them in further, searching for something that’s starting to build.

“This is where I get stuck,” she spills, neck tensing as her wrist works harder. Her left hand is still on her chest, halfheartedly pulling at her stiff and swollen nipples. “It’s like I can’t go any further.”

“Switch,” Tobin orders her. “Take your fingers out. It’s never going to happen like that.”

“It feels so good, though,” Christen entreats. “I just – a little more.”

“A little more,” Tobin concedes, and something in Christen relaxes and tenses all at once. She slips in a third finger – she’s so fucking wet and it’s a mess down there, slick and dripping down past her fingers onto her hand. It’s easy to work at it, hitting something that’s so satisfying and that has her making little noises into her shoulder, trying to stay quiet.

“Don’t,” Tobin says, like she’s reading Christen’s mind. “Don’t do that. Let me hear you.”

So Christen gulps and then makes that noise in the back of her throat, the one that tells her that it’s getting to be too much.

“Tell me what to do,” Christen begs. “What now?”

“Take your fingers out,” Tobin says. “I know, I know, you’re going to miss them. But it’s going to be worth it, I promise.”
So Christen decides to trust Tobin, only half her brain focused on what her hand is doing as she listens to Tobin’s orders. She takes over for Christen, for whom everything is starting to seem a little hazy.

“You can do this,” Tobin mumbles, sounding half gone herself. “Come on. Keep doing what you’re doing.”

So Christen keeps a firm finger on her clit, panting into her phone with her eyes closed and head thrown back. Her hips roll to help her along, until she suddenly feels too tense to continue.

“Tobin,” she says, voice breaking as she keeps it up, forcing herself to keep going and refusing to stop. “I feels – I want to – “

“You can do it,” Tobin says, just as weak as Christen feels. “Come on, Christen. Let’s do this. Do this for you.”

So Christen doesn’t let up, works harder and faster even though her hand feels tired and it’s getting painful.

“I think I’m close,” Christen barely manages to say.

“I know, I know,” Tobin says, barely audible. “I know.”

“I’m – “

Christen never finishes her sentence, feeling herself tense up as she finishes elsewhere, her orgasm bowling her over like a tidal wave of pleasure and relief. It’s sweet, and Christen feels nothing aside from herself falling apart in the flood of gratification; it’s confirmation of a job well done.

“Tobin,” she says afterwards, boneless and immobile, sprawled across the sweaty sheets. Christen is trying not to panic at what she’s done, but not even her post-orgasmic good mood can convince her that what she’s just done is anything but a mistake. “Are you there?”

“Yeah,” Tobin says, her voice worse than it was when she first answered the phone. “I’m here.”

Christen searches for words, wondering how to end the call apart from either hanging up or thanking Tobin.

“On a scale from one to ten, how much are you regretting this right now?”

Christen can hear the sadness coloring Tobin’s tone, and she drunkenly reaches for her phone.

“I’ve got to go,” she says, chest feeling tight. “I’ve got to clean up and go to sleep and I have a test – “

“You have a test tomorrow, I know,” Tobin says, her calm voice only barely assuaging Christen’s nerves. “I’ll let you go, then.”

“Right,” Christen says, fingers clutching the phone too tightly. “Congratulations, by the way.”

“Go to bed, Chris,” Tobin says gently. “And good luck on your test.”

Christen lets Tobin hang up first, and ends up waiting far too long before going about getting ready for bed again.
Christen isn’t sure how she manages to finish her test, but she does. The entire Monday passes in a haze until she gets home, tense when she enters the apartment and sees Kelley’s belongings strewn all over. There are a pair of shoes kicked off near the door and a beanie on the kitchen counter, and as Christen tip-toes down the hallway to her bedroom she can see a pair of training shorts tossed on the ground. When she peeks past Kelley’s half-open door, she chuckles silently at the sight of the contents of her entire bag thrown on the ground.

The decision is easy. Christen slips into her own room just long enough to change into lounge clothes and put her things away before heading for Kelley’s room, stepping carefully around landmines of upturned cleats and sweaty spandex. She can only see by the faint light of the sun peeking through the closed curtains, and when she finally approaches the bed, it takes a good amount of careful maneuvering before she can finally slip in.

“Hello?”

“Sorry,” Christen whispers as Kelley slowly blinks her eyes open, eyelashes brushing freckled cheeks as she struggles to focus. “I didn’t mean to wake you.”

“It’s okay,” Kelley murmurs sleepily, rolling onto her side to face Christen. “Sorry, I’m just tired.”

“I know,” Christen says, arranging herself to face Kelley, slipping one hand under the pillow and tucking the other under her chin. “Just go back to sleep.”

“No, you’re here now,” Kelley says, eyes finally managing to stay open for more than a split second. “What’s up?”

“Nothing,” Christen says, doing her best to reassure Kelley. She can hear the tremble in her own voice and prays that Kelley doesn’t. “Just missed you.”

“Aw,” Kelley says, face splitting into a lazy grin. “I missed you too.”

“Congratulations, by the way,” Christen says softly.

“You already congratulated me,” Kelley reminds her.

“Not in person.”

Kelley looks halfway to falling asleep again, struggling to look at Christen while her breathing deepens.

“You’re such a great friend,” Kelley says fondly, eyelids pale and fluttering closed.
When Christen doesn’t answer, Kelley fixes her with a confused look.

“Are you okay?” she asks, and Christen closes her own eyes so that she doesn’t have to look at Kelley’s expression.

“I’m fine,” she answers, snuggling further into the bed.

“You never want to nap with me,” Kelley says uncertainly. “What’s wrong?”

“That’s because you kick me when you sleep,” Christen mumbles into the pillow, squeezing her eyes shut and pushing out everything that’s happened in the last twenty-four hours. “Can’t I just have missed you? Aren’t I allowed to do that?”

“Of course you are,” Kelley says. “You’re always welcome here. I’m just asking.”

“I’ll be fine,” Christen says, cracking an eye open to give Kelley a worry-free smile. “I’m just tired because I was up late studying and had trouble sleeping and I missed you.”

It doesn’t feel like a lie, because it’s the truth. Something about it gnaws at Christen’s conscious, but she ignores it in favor of savoring the sincere way that Kelley reaches out a hand to wrap around around hers.

“Missed you too, babe,” Kelley says, bringing Christen’s hand close so she can press the lightest of kisses to her knuckles. “Love you.”

Christen knows that it’s friendly, that it comes from a place founded on deep affection and life-long closeness, but none of that stop her heart from skipping a beat and leaving her brain scattered.

“Love you too,” Christen mutters, and just as she closes her eyes, she feels Kelley squeeze her hand tightly.

She feels restless, like she can’t lie still, but she forces herself to remain where she is. Kelley’s deep and even breathes are a good way to measure her own, imitating her every inhale and exhale until her heart starts to feel like it’s contracting and relaxing at its normal rate. Every nerve in her body it itching to move, but Christen forces herself to stay still out of fear of shattering the delicacy of the moment and never being able to recreate it.

Christen wonders if this is what it would be like to date Kelley.

Would they take naps together, just the two of them, in the middle of the afternoon? Christen thinks about how nice it might be to do this on the regular. Maybe they’d go out after games together, alone, just for a casual dinner where they could hold hands and Kelley would steal bits of Christen’s food. Would Kelley come to the library with Christen, pretending to study while really staring at her and counting down the seconds until they could leave?

Christen thinks that she’d like that. Christen thinks that she’d like to date Kelley, just the two of them like it always has been, only in a way that makes every single one of Kelley’s casual kisses just that much more meaningful. Christen thinks that she’d like to pluck up the courage to one day give Kelley casual kisses of her own to keep, ones for Kelley to tuck away in her memories the way that Christen does. She’d like to kiss Kelley’s freckles, Christen thinks absently, not needing to open her eyes to picture the way they splash across her nose and cheeks and dot around the rest of her face.

Instead of wondering if this is what it would be like, Christen lies still, paralyzed by fear and want and just a hint of shame.
“On a scale of one to ten,” Kelley says, shocking Christen who had long ago assumed she was asleep, “are you proud of me?”

Her voice sounds small. It’s uncharacteristic and mind-boggling for Christen, who is so used to Kelley’s loud confidence. Even in her self-conscious moments, Kelley is still large and maintains a presence impossible to ignore. Now, though, she sounds about as tiny as Christen is used to feeling, and Christen doesn’t like it at all.

So she clutches Kelley’s hand tighter, weaving their fingers together into a more comfortable manner, and takes a deep breath before responding.

“You know I hate it when you ask me on a scale questions that I can’t answer with a number,” she says quietly, keeping her eyes firmly shut. She doesn’t want to look at Kelley: she’s afraid of what she might see looking back at her.

“I know,” Kelley says, more solid and stronger than before. “But are you?”

Christen hums, thinking about the best way to answer.

It doesn’t take her long.

“Like, a ten,” she says, squeezing Kelley’s hand again. “I’m so proud of you, Kell.”

“Thank you,” Kelley says quietly, and this time Christen is sure that she’s almost asleep. “Thank you, Chris.”

*

When Christen wakes up, it’s because Kelley’s phone is vibrating incessantly. She knows it’s Kelley’s phone because there’s no earthly reason for her phone to be so busy, and so she sighs and nestles further into the covers.

“Want to go out tonight?” Kelley asks absently, and Christen idly wonders how she knew she was awake.

“With who?” Christen asks, half her mouth still mashed against the pillow. She’s suddenly wary, fully awake as she thinks about Kelley’s usual circle of friends.

“Alex,” Kelley says, fingers tapping against her phone until it vibrates again. “Syd, Kling, Moe. Crystal, Tobin, Ashlyn –”

Christen is already shaking her head as Kelley continues to rattle off names.

“Why not?” Kelley asks, perplexedly. “You should come, congratulate everyone. They’re all still really hyped up from yesterday.”

There’s no way Christen can explain this to Kelley, so she doesn’t even try. She’s trying not to think of what happened last night, how she can never show her face in front of Tobin anymore, and how that might mean that she can never hang out with the team ever again. Instead of trying to explain it, Christen just sighs and rolls onto her back so she doesn’t have to look at Kelley while she lies.

“I’m tired,” she says, and it feels lame, even to her. “And I don’t feel good.”

“Do you think you have a fever?” Kelley asks, suddenly worried. She reaches a hand over to rest against Christen’s forehead, but Christen slaps it away. “Food poisoning? Do you need me to get
“I think I just need to catch up on my sleep,” Christen says. “I feel a little better than I did earlier, already.”

That’s another lie; Christen feels worse than she did earlier. She’s starting to feel a little nauseous as her actions last night continue to sink in, the full impact of what she did continuing to hit her. She just can’t stand the thought of hanging out with Tobin, of being faced with what she’s done instead of ignoring it like she has been.

“Are you sure?” Kelley wheedles, pouting adorably. “I’ll wait for you to get dressed and everything, I know how long you can take.”

“Don’t worry about me,” Christen tries to tell Kelley. “I’ll be fine. I just think I need an early night and I’ll feel better tomorrow.”

Kelley groans, getting out of bed and stretching out her limbs.

“Fine,” she grumbles, reaching her arms high above her. “Don’t come. We’ll all miss you, though.”

“Tell everyone I’m really happy for them,” Christen says, forcing herself to get up as well. It’s a reluctant process because Kelley’s bed is so warm and the cool outdoor air has seeped into the apartment, but she slowly stands and begins to tip-toe to her own room where she plans to crawl right back under the covers.

“Crap,” Kelley says, standing over her bag with clothes in hand.

“What?” Christen asks. “Did you leave something behind?”

“I think I’m missing my favorite jacket,” Kelley mumbles, rubbing at her eyes with one hand while she texts with the other. “I’m praying Tobin has it.”

Just the mention of her name has Christen flinching and burning in the cheeks.

“Oh,” she says, too curious to just leave. “Why would she?”

“She was my roommate,” Kelley says distractedly. “Which mean that she’s never going to text me back and let me know if she has it, but I really wanted to wear it tonight – “

Christen tunes her out once again – or rather her own blood pumping through her ears tunes Kelley out. She’s panicking and her palms are sweating, and she wipes them on her thighs before swallowing loudly.

“Kell,” Christen interrupts, getting Kelley’s attention. “I’m going to go to bed, okay?”

“Yeah, sure,” Kelley says, nodding quickly. “Do you want me to pick up anything for you while I’m out? Cough drops? Do you need some Advil? A humidifier?”

“Please don’t get anything,” Christen says, shaking her head as she tries to slink out of the room, desperate to get to her phone. “Have fun, okay?”

Kelley barely responds, too preoccupied with her jacket situation to worry about the fact that Christen is nearly sprinting to her own room. Once she’s got a hand on her own phone, Christen is pulling up Tobin’s name as quickly as possible and texting furiously, too anxious to bother remembering that morning, when she’d woken up full of shame and embarrassment and had resolved
to never talk to Tobin ever again.

*You didn’t tell me that Kelley was your roommate.*

As expected, Tobin doesn’t reply right away. It takes a good fifteen minutes of stalking people on Instagram to get an answer, and when she sees Tobin’s name slide down at the top of her phone, her heart arrests with both relief and dread.

*I didn’t think it mattered. She was dead asleep anyway, don’t worry.*

Except that Christen is worrying, and her fingers struggle to find the correct letters as she shakily texts back.

*How can you know she didn’t hear anything?*

Tobin’s reply is thankfully much more immediate than her previous response.

*She was drunk. Trust me, she was asleep all night.*

Christen doesn’t know what to say in return, seeing as how she can’t tell Tobin about the tightness in her chest or the taste of bile in the back of her throat. There’s no way to communicate the nerve-wracking anxiety that’s been eating away at her since she woke up this morning, after finally falling asleep the night before after far too much tossing and turning. Really, she thinks, it’s a miracle that she was able to nap with Kelley at all.

“Christen!”

Christen stiffens as she hears Kelley call out to her, stuffing her phone under the covers and lying down, praying that she looks like she’s been there all along instead of nervously perched on the edge of her bed. She can hear the clunking of Kelley’s boots as she approaches the closed door, predictably not even bothering to knock before pushing it open.

“I’m leaving, okay?” Kelley says, her voice a loud whisper. “Are you sure you’re okay?”

“I’m fine,” Christen says, even though she feels anything but. It’s just another lie, just another omission of what’s wrong. “Go, have fun. Celebrate.”

“Text me if you need me to bring you back anything,” Kelley insists.

“Of course,” Christen says, and as soon as Kelley leaves the room – leaving the door open behind her, as usual – she whips out her phone and is texting as efficiently as her nerves will allow her.

*You promise? You promise that she didn’t hear anything?*

Tobin responds a little while later, when Christen is almost asleep. Her phone vibrates from where it’s slid to underneath her, rudely jerking her back to fuzzy consciousness.

*I promise. I went to the bathroom and wasn’t loud. I promise she didn’t hear anything.*

From there Christen falls into a fitful sleep, and when she feels the weight of her bed dip low, it takes a moment to realize that she hasn’t imagined it. When she squints in the complete darkness of the room – she doesn’t even want to know what time it is, but she imagines it’s horribly late – she sees Kelley’s tender face looking down at her.

“I brought you food,” Kelley says softly, a smile crossing her face as she reaches out an arm. Christen flinches when Kelley’s hand comes close to her head, but she stays still and lets Kelley
brush away several flyaway strands of hair. “You look like a mess, sicky.”

“Don’t be mean,” Christen tells her, but she knows she’s smiling right back. She just hopes that Kelley can’t tell.

“I brought you a sandwich,” Kelley says. “Can I turn on the light and show you?”

Christen gives her the go ahead, and when Kelley turns on the soft bedside lamp, Christen can suddenly see the Styrofoam container on her nightstand and smell the greasy food inside. Her stomach growls and Kelley thankfully ignores it, instead focusing on turning on Christen’s little dresser-top tv.

“What do you say – Grey’s Anatomy?”

“That’s your favorite, Kell,” Christen says tiredly as Kelley passes her the Styrofoam. “Not mine.”

“The Office?” Kelley suggests. “On a scale of one to ten, you look like you could use a laugh.”

Christen smiles weakly as she opens the container, greeted with the sight of a turkey BLT and fries.

“We can watch Grey’s if you go get me some water,” Christen tells Kelley, who is immediately up and running to the kitchen. By the time she comes skidding back into the room, Christen is already working her way through the sandwich. Kelley plays a random episode of Grey’s Anatomy and Christen is already regretting agreeing to this, but it’s easy to get lost in the drama of the on-screen characters instead of thinking about the clusterfuck her life has become.

“So the girls missed you,” Kelley says during a musical montage, eyes glued to the screen. “They asked about you.”

“They did not.”

“They did, promise. Crystal wants you to bring Julie around more, and Tobin said – “

“Kelley,” Christen interrupts, not wanting to hear anymore.

“Yeah?”

“Shut up,” Christen says, and for a moment she’s afraid of Kelley’s reaction.

It’s all for nothing though, because Kelley just turns her head to look at her fondly before scooting over, moving the blankets around so she can sit pressed up against Christen’s side with her head resting on Christen’s shoulder. It makes Christen feel unbalanced, like she’s about to fall into something she’s never experienced before, and a big part of her wants the uneasiness to go away.

“Missed you,” Kelley says, snuggling further into her.

“Missed you too,” Christen replies without hesitation, thinking that if this is what the universe has to offer her after last night’s mistake, she just might be able to live with the consequences of her bad decision.

*  

The rest of November is a bit of a whirlwind. Kelley spends more time at practice than usual and Julie moves into the library with Christen, hunkering down in between classes to study for upcoming
finals. Stress starts mounting and it’s reflected across campus, with all sorts of people cramming into the libraries and crowding the line at Starbucks just to keep going. Kelley even mentions needing to sit down with her books in between playoff games, and when Christen asks how she’s managing with the giant bags under her eyes, Kelley doesn’t even bat an eye.

“Sheck if I know,” she sighs, half a sock on as she pores over her biochemistry textbook while attempting to get ready for practice. “I’m just glad that the seeding means we get to play all home games so far. Could you imagine if I had to travel the country on top of this?”

“No,” Christen says, watching Kelley yawn widely. “No, I couldn’t.”

They invite Christen to hang out with them after every game but she kindly turns them down every time. Sometimes it’s Kelley asking, and other times it’s Ali or Crystal. Kelley is hardest to deal with just because she’s so persistent, and it would make Christen feel bad if it weren’t for her reasoning behind saying no. There’s no way to guarantee that she can avoid Tobin for an entire night and she’s not taking any chances, not after what happened.

Thanksgiving comes and goes quickly. It’s a quiet affair at home with everyone well behaved and civil like always. There’s a lot of napping on couches and Christen missing the days of high school when Kelley would come over to devour the leftovers, but now she’s busy prepping for the next big game and didn’t even bother leaving campus. It’s not something that Christen hasn’t experienced before, Thanksgiving without Kelley – hell, last year and the year before it had been exactly the same, maybe even worse – but that doesn’t mean that she doesn’t miss having someone to sing with on the long drive to and from school.

When Christen gets back to her apartment, tired after a long drive with frizzy hair and wanting nothing besides a hot shower, she finds her feet glued to the ground upon entering. There are people on her couch, people she might normally not mind, except there’s Tobin: sandwiched between Kelley and Lindsey and grinning as the others laugh, looking small in a pair of sweatpants and an oversized hoodie.

“Hey!” Kelley says brightly, leaping off the couch as the door shuts behind Christen. “I hope you don’t mind that everyone is here – I didn’t think you’d be here until later!”

Christen swallows thickly, staring at Kelley as she feels Tobin’s eyes on her.

“I got an early start,” she says slowly. “Thought I’d surprise you.”

It’s partly true; Christen had missed Kelley. She’d originally planned on spending lunch at home but then she’d gotten worried about traffic and driving on the interstate so late and decided to get on the road after breakfast.

“I was going to make sure everyone was gone by the time you got home,” Kelley explains, and Christen can hear some of the girls saying hello, but she ignores them in favor of clutching tightly onto the strap of her weekend bag and staring at Kelley’s freckles. “I know you don’t like it when I have people over without asking, but – “

“It’s fine,” Christen cuts across, scrubbing a hand over her bare, oily face and wanting to go back five minutes and never walk inside. “I’m just going to take a shower.”

She back away from Kelley and starts towards her room, eyes on the ground as she goes. Her shower lasts longer than necessary, and when she finally gets out, she stays in her bedroom until Kelley knocks on the locked door.
“Everyone is gone,” she says, her voice muffled through the door. “You can come out now.”

Something in Christen flames hot with humiliation and hurt, but she just opens the door and stares flatly at Kelley who is trying to look cheerful. She falters though, smile disappearing once Christen maintains her hard look.

“Stop making me feel bad,” she says, and Kelley goes to defend herself, but Christen keeps talking. “Stop, Kell. If I don’t want to hang out with the team, I don’t want to hang out with the team. That’s all it is.”

That’s not it at all. She’s avoiding Tobin at all costs, no matter how much she aches for the comradery of months past. She misses Ali’s quietly happy demeanor and Alex’s cool but also dorky self. It hasn’t been long since she distanced herself, but she figures all she has to do is wait for Tobin to graduate in May before she can show her face again.

“I just don’t get it,” Kelley confesses. “I’m not trying to make you feel bad, I just don’t understand.”

“What don’t you understand?” Christen asks, trying to be patient.

“Why you stopped hanging out with us,” Kelley says, with big eyes. “I mean, I really liked having you around. Even when I had sorority stuff and you still hung out with everyone, I liked knowing that you had them.”

“I don’t always need someone, Kell,” Christen tells her. “I’m not like you.”

Kelley looks offended.

“Whatever,” she says, shaking her head. “Friday is our last home game of the season and if we win that one we’re off to North Carolina. It would be really nice to see you at the party afterwards.”


She’s not going to think about it.

* *

The morning of the game dawns cold and crisp, and Christen bundles herself up, knowing that she might not make it back to the apartment to change before going to the game. Julie is insisting on going and dragging Christen along, offering to buy her a hot chocolate beforehand as a means of convincing her to stay.

“I know it’s cold,” Julie says when they’re in the library that afternoon, wasting time before kickoff by stressing themselves over finals which start next Monday. “But we’ll cuddle close and buy a blanket from the student store if we have to.”

“Those things are a rip-off,” Christen says absently, picking at her chapped lips as she flips a page of notes.

“They work,” Julie points out. “You won’t care what they cost when you’re freezing on the bleachers tonight.”

Christen hums in response, wondering if Julie will let her get away with running to her car as soon as the final whistle blows.

“So are you coming tonight?” Julie asks, pushing her laptop aside so she can fix her ponytail.
“No,” Christen says.

“Why not?” Julie asks curiously. “I thought you and Tobin were close.”

Christen winces instinctually, covering it up as she reaches for her planner.

“What does Tobin have to do with it?” she asks. “I’m close with the other girls, too.”

“Yeah, but it’s Tobin’s goodbye party,” Julie says. “Why wouldn’t you come for that? I hear there’s going to be cake.”

Her heart stops in her chest and when she looks up at Julie, all she sees is genuine confusion etched in the furrow between her brows and the slight frown of her lips. Christen’s mouth goes dry when she sees that Julie is completely serious, and it takes a minute for her to choke out her next words.

“Goodbye party?” she croaks out. “She’s leaving?”

Julie tilts her head to the side, blonde hair swinging behind her.

“You didn’t know?” Julie asks. “I figured everyone did. Do you even talk to her anymore?”

Christen shakes her head. “No, not really.”

She can see a dozen questions on the tip of Julie’s tongue, but Julie thankfully swallows them all and continues to explain.

“She got called up,” Julie says, the excitement hard to miss. “To the national team.”

There are so many thoughts swirling around in Christen’s head that she can’t even begin to organize them.

“I guess they got together a couple days ago but they’re letting her play here until the team gets knocked out or wins, I guess. They’re doing a stretch of games for their victory tour and decided to call up a few college players, and since Tobin is done this semester anyway – “

“She’s what?” Christen interrupts, feeling like the wind has been knocked out of her. “She – she’s a senior.”

Julie fixes her with a concerned look. “What did you two ever talk about? Yeah, she’s a senior, but I guess she’s graduating this semester.”

“So she’s leaving,” Christen says, the reality of it slowly hitting her. “If the team wins tonight, they leave tomorrow for North Carolina and she’s not coming back.”

“Yeah,” Julie says, slow and uncertain. “You – you didn’t know any of this?”

Christen shakes her head.

“Maybe you should come tonight,” Julie suggests, and Christen appreciates the attempt to be helpful even if it isn’t working. “Ask her why she didn’t tell you.”

The thing is, Christen knows why Tobin didn’t tell her. She knows that what happened between them nearly a month ago ruined things, ruined their tentative friendship and any progress that they had made with each other. It’s a little sad, knowing that she could have had someone to confide in, someone to help her out with Kelley (because Christen honestly has no idea what the fuck she’s doing), but instead of having all of that she decided to be selfish and stupid one night, making
everything worse than it had ever been over the course of the semester. Christen even thinks she’d prefer the awkward first few encounters over what’s happened since, but she refuses to take the chance and see.

She’s pretty sure Tobin would shut her down anyway. There’s no way Tobin wants anything to do with her at this point.

At least, that’s what Christen believes while her and Julie watch the game. It’s cold outside, especially so since it’s nighttime, and it makes Julie giggle to see all the players as layered in clothes as they can manage. Their hot chocolates are the only things keeping them in the stands – Christen had stopped Julie from buying a blanket, but she can’t quite remember why she thought it was a bad idea. Kelley doesn’t seem bothered by the cold too much, racing up and down the flank like it’s her job (which it is, actually) and Tobin controls the other side, and Christen has to force herself to focus on Kelley so she doesn’t end up thinking about things other than the game at hand.

It’s hard though, because Julie’s words are running through her mind on a loop. All Christen can think about is Tobin leaving, Tobin getting called up and graduating and letting Christen ignore her before leaving town forever. She knows that Tobin is no more than a blip on the radar of her life, a slight blemish that she’ll barely think about ten years from now, and she’s fairly certain that it’s the same way for Tobin. There’s no way any of this all really matters.

And maybe that’s what makes her suddenly determined. Maybe it’s the realization that if Tobin is leaving regardless, it doesn’t matter what she thinks of Christen. Christen may have already made a fool of herself and she’s been doing her best to preserve her dignity, but she finds herself with nothing to lose and nothing to gain, and she can’t stop thinking about why Tobin wouldn’t tell her.

Christen is so lost in her thoughts, so preoccupied with this information and the struggle of what to do with it all – because she has to do something, she can’t just live with everything ending like this – that when the crowd starts roaring, she has no idea why.

“What happened?” she asks Julie, when the clapping ends and Julie is back in her seat instead of standing up.

“Tobin scored,” Julie tells her. “Puts us up two to one.”

The game ends without another goal, with Tobin having secured the win in a move that has the entire team piling onto her as soon as the final whistle blows. When Julie looks over at her, Christen paints on a smile that makes her feel sick to her stomach. She makes a decision then, fierce and determined to get rid of the anxiety that has had her stomach in knots for weeks now.

“I would ask if you’re sure you don’t want to come tonight, but I’m pretty sure I already know the answer,” Julie says apologetically as they slowly file out of the stands.

“Yeah, you probably do,” Christen says, still forcing a smile.

“We can at least walk to our cars together, right?” Julie asks.

“Actually,” Christen lies, putting her hands in her jacket pockets as though she’s searching for something, “I think I left my Chapstick back where we were sitting.”

Julie looks at her strangely.

“I don’t think you’ll find it,” she says. “Come on, don’t you have more?”

“It was a limited edition,” Christen says, gripping said tube from the inside of her pockets. “Pina
colada flavored. I just want to look.”

Julie hesitates, shivering in the wind.

“I can wait,” she offers, but Christen is shaking her head.

“Don’t bother,” Christen tells her, shaking her head. “Go on ahead. Go to the party. I’m just going home anyway, so there’s no point in you waiting.”

“Okay,” Julie says reluctantly. “Will you text me when you get home safe though?”

Christen nods, slowly backing away.

“Of course,” she tells Julie. “Have fun tonight, okay? I’ll see you in class tomorrow.”

Julie leaves with a wave and a promise to let Christen know how the party goes. Christen doesn’t care much about that, but she doesn’t tell Julie that. Instead she slowly walks back to the stands, carefully measuring every small stride of hers as she bypasses the field to walk along the sidewalk to the athletic building.

She’s risking a lot, this she knows. She’s counting on a lot of things to go her way and the chances of this working out are slim to none, but she figures if Kelley or someone else finds her first, she can play it off the way she did with Julie.

When some of the younger girls file out, hair wet and wrapped up in thick coats, they wave to Christen who waves in return.

“I think Kelley left,” Mal calls to her. “You just missed her.”

“Oh,” Christen says, trying to looks disappointed when really that’s good news. “Are you sure?”

“Yeah,” Mal says nodding. The other are impatiently waiting for her to move along. “Sorry. Did she know you were waiting?”

“It’s fine,” Christen reassures her. “Don’t worry about it.”

Mal reluctantly moves on, and after what feels like forever – even though it’s barely three minutes according to her phone – the doors open again, light spilling out from the building. She sees Alex’s form emerge first, recognizing her stride and ponytail, and behind her is Tobin, shoulders hunched with her hands pushed inside her jacket pockets. Alex spots Christen easily and Christen stops fiddling with her phone, standing up straight and squaring her shoulders as best as she can despite the instinct to curve in on herself – between the freezing cold and the sudden tension that comes over the three of them, it’s quite a challenge.

“Hi, Christen,” Alex says, and Christen wonders if she’s imagining the icy edge to her tone. “Kelley already left.”

“I know,” Christen says, dipping her head in a nod, tucking her chin against her chest for a beat long enough to make her aware of the fact that her heart is thumping painfully against her ribcage. “Um, that’s not why I’m here.”

“I don’t think you should – “

“It’s fine,” Tobin says, cutting Alex off with a glance. Alex looks disgruntled, standing her ground even as Tobin sends her a look of her own. “Alex. Seriously.”
“I’ll be in the car,” Alex says, crossing her arms against her chest. “Hurry up.”

She sends Christen a scathing glance as she goes, and Christen feels even more uncomfortable than before. She doesn’t know how Tobin immediately knew what she was there for, but perhaps it makes sense.

“Sorry,” is Tobin’s first word to her. “Sorry about Alex. She’s funny sometimes.”

Christen doesn’t see how Alex’s reaction is funny at all.

“Don’t be sorry,” Christen says, shaking her head.

“You are here for me, right?” Tobin says awkwardly. “I’m not assuming things, am I?”

Every bit of hard resolve that Christen had possessed melts away, leaving behind nothing but soft embarrassment. She isn’t sure what Tobin is feeling, but there don’t seem to be any hard feelings aimed at her. Things are going well so far, and that helps her breathe a little bit easier.

“No,” Christen says, shaking her head. “No, I’m – I’m definitely here for you.”

“Okay,” Tobin says. “Just, Alex is waiting for me, so if you could make this fast – “

“Quick?” Christen says in disbelief, all the frantic anger she’d felt during her conversation with Julie rushing back. “Tobin – “

“Or take your time,” Tobin says quickly, shrugging nonchalantly. “Alex can wait. She’s the one in a heated car, not me.”

“You were going to leave!” Christen bursts out before she can stop it. As soon as the words leave her mouth she clamps her lips shut, feeling humiliated and wishing that she had never bothered in the first place.

“What?” Tobin inquires, sounding a little shocked. “What are you talking about?”

“Never mind,” Christen says, shaking her head and feeling her cheeks burn. “Forget it. I’m going to go.”

She wavers for a moment, staring at the ground and gathering herself, before going to turn around and leave.

“Wait,” Tobin says, hand shooting out to roughly grip Christen’s shoulder before she can move more than an inch. “What are you talking about? Talk to me.”

“Forget it,” Christen repeats.

“No, I’m not going to,” Tobin says surely, fingers clamping down harder. “You haven’t so much as looked at me in a month. You’re obviously here for a reason.”

“It’s nothing,” Christen says, shaking her head insistently as she looks at the ground.

“It’s not nothing.”

The firmness in Tobin’s voice makes Christen look up.

“If it’s bothering you, it’s not nothing.”
It takes Christen a while to form words, but when she finally finds them in the back of her throat, they come out broken and pathetic.

“You were going to leave,” she chokes out, blinking frantically. “You were going to leave without saying goodbye.”

Her bottom lip is quivering and she wants to run away when Tobin recoils, hand shooting back after releasing Christen’s shoulder. Tobin looks like she’s been slapped across the face, eyes wide and her jaw working furiously.

“Christen,” Tobin says, quiet and hushed but utterly incredulous. “Christen, why in *hell* would I say goodbye?”

She’s had it then. She turns and stalks off, feeling tears gather in the corners of her eyes. She wants to wipe them away with her fingertips but she’s too cold, feeling too pitiful to get rid of them before they even get a chance to streak down her cheeks.

“Chris!” Tobin yells, and Christen shakes her head as she hears the pounding of Tobin’s lazy jog along the concrete sidewalk. “Chris, come on! Can you blame me?”

Christen keeps walking, keeping her stride long and her shoulders stiff.

“Come on,” Tobin calls out, sounding tired and exasperated. “We both know I can outrun you.”

“Then do it,” Christen cries out, unable to resist as she keeps forward. “Stop being a fucking coward and – “

Tobin is aggressive, the way she suddenly runs up on Christen and grabs her, forcing her around to look her in the eye.

“Me?” Tobin asks violently, her voice heated and her eyes full of fire underneath the too-bright streetlights of campus. “You want me to stop being the coward? Have you looked in a fucking mirror lately?”

Christen wrenches herself out of Tobin’s grasp, rubbing at her arm through her jacket and staring furiously.

“Don’t be rude,” Christen says, and when she sniffs, she knows she’s done for. She knows that she’s opened something she can’t close, that she’ll keep crying until her body can’t anymore. “You were going to leave – “

Her voice cracks, and that’s all she knows before she feels suffocated, before Tobin’s wrestled her into an all-encompassing hug that’s too tight and overwhelming, before she feels like she’s gasping for breath.

“I was always supposed to leave,” Tobin says, an edge to her tone. “It had nothing to do with you. I promise.”

Christen doesn’t know if that’s what does it but her body goes limp, exhausted from fighting, as she falls against Tobin. Tobin stands, holding her up and letting Christen cry into her shoulder. It’s all ugly and snotty sobs, weeks of frustrations and stress catching up with her all at once.

“This was a bad idea,” Christen starts, trying to pull away as she speaks thickly through her tears.

“No,” Tobin says, holding her close and refusing to let go. “No, this was the best idea you’ve had in
a while.”

So Christen lets Tobin cradle her closely, holding her for seemingly hours, until Christen’s legs ache from standing in one place so long. She can’t imagine that it’s much better for Tobin who’s just run a grueling ninety-minute game, but if it’s bothering her, Tobin doesn’t show it.

“I’m sorry,” Christen says, when Tobin finally lets her draw back. She wipes at her face, the cold making her tears sting her exposed face. “I’m sorry.”

“I’m sorry,” Tobin says, sounding strangled. “I should have told you.”

Christen doesn’t have anything to say to that, so Tobin pushes on.

“I was supposed to be here for a semester,” she says, finding Christen’s eyes and pinning her gaze on them. It paralyzes Christen, forcing her to look right back. “That was it. I was supposed to win a championship, maybe an award or two, get a call up, graduate and leave. That was it.”

Christen feels like the air has left her lungs, hearing the words spoken straight from the source.

“I didn’t think I’d make friends,” Tobin says. Something in the moonlight shifts and when Christen sees the glistening in Tobin’s eyes, she wants to crumble right on the spot. “I didn’t think I’d find people who mean more to me than anyone I’ve met in a long time. I didn’t think I’d want to stay.”

The lump in Christen’s throat multiplies in size. Luckily, Tobin doesn’t seem to be looking for a response yet.

“I was supposed to get in and get out,” she says, so nearly silent that Christen has to strain her ears to hear over the howl of the wind. “I don’t know who will take me. My agent says I might go first, but we can’t bank on that.”

Christen didn’t think it could get any worse, but it has.

“Drafted where?” she croaks out, not completely understanding, but knowing enough to know that it isn’t good.

“Into the league, to play club soccer,” Tobin explains solemnly. “I could stay in state, or I could end across the country. I won’t know until I know.”

She takes a deep breath, looking up at the sky before continuing.

“So you’re really leaving?” Christen says, but it’s not a question. Tobin leaves in the morning and won’t be back in town, not ever. She’s got a life and it’s taking her far from Christen, far from campus, far from the team.

“I am,” Tobin says, and Christen tries not to look as she nods, the motion prompting a single teardrop to slide down the side of her nose. “I can’t stay, Christen,” she says gently, sadly. “I never could.”

“I know,” Christen says, nodding through the burn in her chest. “I know.”

“We’ll keep in touch,” Tobin says, and it’s a little frantic, she way she imploringly reaches her hands forward, motioning for Christen to grab at them. Tobin’s hands are solid and miraculously warm against her own freezing ones, and she clenches without thinking. “If you need help with anything,
with Kelley, with yourself – I meant it before, you know. I’m here for you. Even if I’m not here physically, I’ll always be here for you."

“I’m so sorry, Tobin,” Christen says in a hushed whisper. “I just didn’t know what to do, and you deserve better than how I’ve been treating you. I’m sorry. You’re right, I’m the coward here, not you.”

“It’s okay,” Tobin says, readjusting her hold on Christen so she’s got Christen’s hand between hers, creating a little cocoon of warmth. “I know. I get why you shut me out, I do. I just wish you hadn’t.”

“I was so embarrassed,” Christen says, and considers it a small victory when her voice stays steady.

“You shouldn’t have been,” Tobin says swiftly. “It was as much me as it was you.”

“I know, but still,” Christen says, wincing at the memory.

“Hey,” Tobin says. “It worked, right?”

Christen flushes down to her toes just remembering it.

“Yeah,” she agrees. “It worked.”

Neither of them say anything for a minute.

“I better go,” Tobin says, breaking the silence and pulling her hands back. “Alex is going to kill me.”

“Does she know?” Christen asks, Alex’s words from earlier still sharp in her mind. “She said it like you’d told her.”

“No,” Tobin says vehemently. “I wouldn’t tell anyone. I wouldn’t do that to you.”

“Then why was she so weird?” Christen needs to know.

Tobin sighs, running a hand over her flyaways.

“Alex is weirdly protective of me,” she explains. “No, protective isn’t really the right word. She was my first friend when I came here, you know? Everyone else looked at me as the new girls and I didn’t really click with the team at first, not until Alex decided to hang out with me during a water break. So I guess she’s the person I’m closest to here. She just knows that you and I were friends and then we weren’t and I was a little bummed about it.”

“I’m sorry,” Christen says again.

“Don’t be,” Tobin stresses. “I’m fine. I get why you reacted the way you did. Listen – I’ve really got to go, my phone has been buzzing for the past five minutes and Alex is going to kill me. Are you coming tonight?”

“No,” Christen says. “I’m not really feeling it.”

“I know you’ve been avoiding everyone because of me,” Tobin says carefully. “You didn’t have to, you know. I wouldn’t have pushed you to talk about it.”

“I know,” Christen says shamefully. “Or at least, I should have known. I just didn’t want to have to look at you – “

She cuts herself off, the sad smile of Tobin’s too much to take.
“I’ll miss you,” she says instead, heart climbing into her throat as she does. “Did you really mean it, about keeping in touch?”

“I’m serious,” Tobin says, smile looking a little less miserable. “And I’ll miss you too.”

“Your goal was great,” Christen tells her. “Congratulations.”

“The gals would have been furious if we’d gone into extended time,” Tobin says, grin broadening. “I was just doing my part.”

“I hope everything goes well for you,” Christen says. “I hope you win the championship and your time with the national team or whatever goes well.”


They both stand there awkwardly, and Christen finds herself feeling like something is missing, but she doesn’t know what.

“I’m going to go,” Tobin says. “I’ve still got to pack some stuff so I better head on over. You good to get home safe?”


“Bye, Christen,” she responds, and the whole thing feels more bitter than Christen ever expected it to. “I’ll see you again. I’m sure of it.”

“Yeah,” Christen says, nodding mostly to herself as Tobin goes to leave. “Me too.”

Chapter End Notes

the response to the last chapter blew my mind away. keep it up, guys! i love answering questions on my tumblr more than anything, talking to y’all is a lot of fun.
On the third Friday of January, Kelley tries to convince Christen to skip class.

“'It will be worth it,” she wheedles, sprawled out on the living room floor with a half-eaten apple in hand. She’d collapsed there to watch morning cartoons with her breakfast oatmeal, and had just continued to roll around once she’d finished and set her empty bowl on the coffee table. “Don’t you want to see Tobin get drafted?”

“Tobin isn’t even there,” Christen says absently, making sure she has all of her things before she sets off. It’s early: Christen’s first class is at 9:05 and she isn’t sure why Kelley is awake at this hour. She has class too but she’s skipping in favor of hosting a draft party, and she’s expecting several people to come watch on her laptop – Alex, Syd, Kling, Moe, and Lindsey among them. The night before Christen had joking asked if there would be snacks, but Kelley had take offense to the idea that she wasn’t adequately prepared.

“We are watching some of our best friends have their fate decided tomorrow,” Kelley had spat furiously, shaking her head. “Ali, Ashlyn, Becky – Tobin! They’re going to be terrified, and I’ll be damned if I won’t be sitting on the couch with popcorn to witness it!”

It’s true, there are a group of girls on the team that have driven up to the draft in the hopes of getting lucky and landing with a decent team. Christen doesn’t know much about the league aside from what Kelley has tried explaining to her, and she’s tried her best to be supportive, but sports just aren’t her forte. She’s supportive of Kelley’s little party, complete with bottles of Gatorade, individual packs of hummus, and carrot sticks, but that’s all she can muster up.

“Tobin might not be there, but she’s still getting drafted,” Kelley says. “She told me she filmed a little video for her acceptance, you know. She’s not allowed to tell me where she’s going, but I’m betting she goes first.”

“And you already know who holds the first draft pick,” Christen recites, because she knows it like the back of her hand. Kelley won’t shut up about how Tobin is probably going to land all the way across the country, on the opposite coast, far away from the gals and Christen and everything she had supposedly been sad to leave behind.

Deep down Christen knows that she’s being melodramatic; Tobin had truly been sad to leave everyone, she knows. The truth is, though, that Christen knows for a fact that she’s been having the time of her life with the national team. It only makes sense really, seeing as how it’s been her dream for nearly her entire life, but something about the two Instagram pictures Tobin has posted over the past month and a half has Christen a little bothered.

She’d promised to keep in touch, and all Christen can think about is whether or not she’d meant it. Tobin hadn’t seemed like one to break promises, but it’s been a month and a half of sporadic texts that mostly consist of Merry Christmas and Happy Birthday and the occasional hope you’re doing
well. Christen doesn’t want to be bitter about it, she wants to be happy for Tobin who is finally getting the chance to live out her dream, but the fact of the matter is that she’s worried Tobin will forget about her, not because she wants to, but because there’s simply too much going on for Tobin to have time for her.

“Whatever,” Kelley says, tossing her hair over her shoulder. “If you really don’t want to watch, that’s your choice. When do your classes end?”

“I should be back a little after one,” Christen says, swinging her bag over her arm, ready to head out. The freezing January temperatures mean that she’s wearing more layers than ever before, having slipped on two pairs of leggings and two pairs of socks and a sweatshirt underneath her jacket. Standing in the heated apartment makes her feel unbearably toasty hot, but she knows that as soon as she steps outside she’ll be shivering in her boots.

“So you’ll definitely miss Tobin, but you might get to see some of the others!” Kelley says brightly. “And feel free to hurry back early!”

Christen rolls her eyes and mentally prepares herself to step outside.

“Sure, Kelley,” she says, not wanting to fight about it. “I’ll keep that in mind.”

A new semester means a new batch of classes, which means that Julie just so happens to not be in any of Christen’s. Julie has already promised to maintain their study sessions – she’d said something about how Christen was the driving force behind her record high GPA last semester – but that doesn’t mean that Christen doesn’t feel a little lonely. She has a few acquaintances here and there but she’s mostly been left to fend for herself, and when she gets to her first class fifteen minutes early as she usually does, she wastes time on her phone just like every other kid in the classroom.

Staring at her text conversation with Tobin has become a bit of a bad habit of Christen’s. Tobin doesn’t initiate conversation very often and Christen doesn’t either, despite the fact that she finds her fingers twitching towards the keyboard more often than not. She supposes it’s pride that hold her back, along with the thought that surely if Tobin wanted to be talking to Christen, she would be.

Today Christen decides to take a step out of her comfort zone, taking a deep breath as she carefully presses her thumbs against the screen, deleting and rephrasing until she’s composed the perfect text and can confidently and purposefully hit send.

I’d wish you good luck, but I hear you don’t need it. Can’t wait to hear where you end up, if only so I no longer have to hear Kelley obsess over it!

Christen knows that Tobin won’t be replying anytime soon. She’s training on the west coast with the national team and is probably still asleep, so Christen tucks her phone away and does her best to forget about it while the professor arrives and sets up his lecture.

Still, something has her checking her phone every ten minutes or so, stomach dropping a centimeter or two every time she sees it blank. It makes her nervous; she’s rethinking the text, wondering if she looks overeager and then thinking that maybe her text woke Tobin off and pissed her off by interrupting her sleep. She tells herself that she shouldn’t care, that Tobin is busy and off doing bigger and better things than sitting in an advanced level psych lecture, but that doesn’t easy Christen’s insecurities and she finds herself wishing she’d never sent it.

It’s just that Christen doesn’t know how to do this. She doesn’t know how to be Tobin’s friend from afar, not while they were barely friends while in the same city. Christen is already bad enough at making friends in general, and the fact that Tobin is a bit of an enigma in addition to currently being
three hours behind her makes things more difficult. The last time Christen had successfully befriended anyone was when she met Julie, who had been so effervescent and enthusiastic that Christen had barely needed to do any of the work on her own.

But then halfway through her second lecture of the day, Christen’s phone buzzes against her ankle from where it sits in a pocket in her bag. She makes sure the professor is busy answering another student’s question before she pulls the device out, checking the screen and ending up disappointed when Tobin’s name isn’t flashing across in small print. Instead it’s Mal, which surprises Christen. She hasn’t seen much of the team since the semester started, too busy getting herself organized for the rest of the year, and she’d half expected for most of them to forget about her. Especially Mal who is just a freshman with plenty of friends of her own.

*heard you’re still on campus and heading to your apartment later. Do you mind giving me a ride to Kelley’s watch party?*

Christen grins, quickly typing out an answer.

*Of course! I’ll text you when I’m done with class and you can meet me at my car.*

The thought that she might still have a friend in someone on the team makes it a little easier to get through the rest of her classes, still waiting for a reply from Tobin that she’s beginning to think may never come.

Christen has a free slot of time between eleven and twelve, so she goes to the bagel place on campus to grab an early lunch and sits down on a bench with it to call her mom. They haven’t gotten to talk much over the past week, and as someone who calls her mom almost every day, Christen misses her. It’s a long conversation, mostly exchanging stories about the past few days and her mom filling her in on what the rest of the family has been up to. Halfway through the conversation Christen’s phone buzzes a few times, but she ignores it in favor of licking cream cheese from her fingers and sipping on her lemonade. When they finally hang up, Christen is a little shocked to see that she only has ten minutes before her next class starts and that she has several texts from Tobin waiting for her.

She reads them on the way, eyes glued to her phone as she speed walks to the building her class is in.

*I’ll take all the luck I can get! Don’t tell anyone but I’m a little nervous.*

*I’m not supposed to tell anyone but I have really good news for you*

*Are you watching?*

*Can you call me?*

Christen’s heart skips as she reads the last one, but she thinks that that’s only because she’s just tripped over a step leading up the the entrance doors.

*I’m about to head into a lecture, can I call you after?*

She’s cursing herself for not having read the texts when they’d initially come through, especially since the time stamp on the last one reads ten minutes before, but it is what it is. She finds a seat a couple of minutes before the class is scheduled to start and slips her phone into her lap, where she’ll easily be able to monitor any incoming texts.

When it lights up against her thigh just after class starts, Christen unlocks her phone as discretely as possible to read Tobin’s text.
Fuck I wish you were watching. I wanted to be able to tell you the news.

Christen doesn’t know how to respond, jotting down notes as she thinks about it.

But then, less then five minutes later, she gets three texts from Kelley in quick succession.

Holy shit Chris, call me.

I know you’re in class, excuse yourself or whatever.

Tobin told me I’m not to tell you, but holy shit. On a scale of one to ten, you’re in for one hell of a surprise.

Christen’s anxiety is starting to build because while it sounds like Tobin’s news is good news, there’s no way to tell. She stays glued to her seat, eventually typing out a reply to tell Tobin she’ll call her as soon as she gets out of class, but she can barely focus and wonders if maybe she should have skipped like Kelley wanted her to in the first place. As soon as the professor dismisses everyone, Christen is fumbling with her phone to try and call Tobin immediately. She’s got one hand trying to pack up her things and she nearly drops her phone in the process, but then she sandwiches it between her shoulder and cheek while it dials in order to gain use of both hands.

“Hey.”

It’s the first time she’s heard Tobin’s voice in a while, and it sounds almost different from what Christen remembers. It’s a little fuzzier, a little softer, with less of the edge it used to have. She sounds lighter, happier, and unabashedly radiant, and Christen’s mouth curves into a small smile at the sunshine radiating out from the speaker of her phone.

The last time Christen had heard Tobin’s voice was when they’d parted ways, before Tobin had left down and made her first appearance for the national team. It was before Kelley and everyone had fallen in the semifinal of the college cup, returning home with heavy hearts and lamenting the fact that they hadn’t been able to get Tobin her championship. It had been before Tobin had flown off, before she had reassured all her teammates that it wasn’t their fault that they hadn’t won, that she cared more about all of them than some stupid trophy and a title. She’d been lying through her teeth, Christen had known as Kelley had relayed the conversation to her in the middle of the night, curled up in Christen’s bed after Kelley had cried out all her tears. Tobin was disappointed in herself, in the team, and wished that they’d been able to win, but she was moving onto bigger and better things and didn’t need to waste her energy on blaming her friends for a team’s failure.

Christen hasn’t heard Tobin’s voice in a month and a half. So much has happened since then, like Christen acing her finals and Tobin making her first international appearance on the day before her official graduation from college. Tobin had gotten subbed in – Christen doesn’t remember when, she just remembers being in the middle of painting her nails while sitting on the couch with Kelley, only half paying attention to the game. She’d spend most of the first half packing things that she needed to bring home with her over winter break, but Kelley had convinced her to stick around through the second half. Her name being announced had been such a shock, and between that and Kelley jumping all over the couch while screaming at the top of her lungs, Christen had spilled dark polish all over her favorite pajama pants. It’s how she remembers the moment: Kelley screaming, nail polish staining, and her smiling stupidly at the television while Tobin patiently waited to be able to run out onto the field.

She’d played great, Kelley had told her. It had been hard for Christen to judge, preoccupied with the stain on her thigh while trying to focus on Tobin at the same time. It was a stark contrast, seeing Tobin in a different jersey than she was used to, with a different number than she’d worn all
semester. It was the small things that had been reassuring though, like the way she wore her ponytail the same as always, the form she kept while running that made her easy to pick out no matter where she was, and the way she connected with the ball like no one else could. Those were the things that Christen had focused on and the things she’d remembered.

After the game, Christen had texted Tobin a congratulations. Tobin hadn’t responded until the next morning – fair enough, the game had ended late – to ask Christen what she had thought. She had been nervous, something that had surprised Christen. She’d told Tobin that she’d looked perfectly sure of herself out there, that she never would have imagined the presence of nerves. There had never been another reply – which was fine, Christen had understood that she was busy. She tried not to expect too much from Tobin, still tries not to.

When she hears Tobin’s voice though, she can’t help but remember that Tobin tries her best, even if Christen sometimes doubts it.

“Hi,” Christen stutters out, blushing despite the fact that Tobin isn’t there to see her. “What’s up?”

“I have news,” Tobin says without much preamble.

“Good or bad?” Christen needs to know.

“Depends on how you look at it,” Tobin says, making Christen worry. “So, you’ll never guess where I’m ending up.”

“Kelley said you’d go first,” Christen says, frowning as she walks out of the classroom. “And she already knew who had the first draft pick, so you were going to end up in – “

“Okay, but I didn’t,” Tobin says excitedly. It’s weird, hearing her voice over the phone, so happy and unlike Christen has ever heard from her before.

“Didn’t what?” Christen asks.

“I didn’t end up on the other side of the country,” Tobin says. “Did Kelley tell you all about where the different teams are?”

“I mean yeah, but I don’t remember them all,” Christen says embarrassedly. “Sorry.”

“They traded their draft pick away,” Tobin tells her. “Traded for the second overall draft pick and a player they wanted, and I ended up with – “

Christen has to force herself to remember how to walk as she listens to Tobin, only a single word registering.

“You’re going to be close,” Christen chokes out. “You’re going to be like, four hours away from here.”

“Now do you know why I wanted to tell you?” Tobin says, and she sounds ecstatic and smug and anxious all at the same time.

“When did you find out?” Christen asks.

“Two nights ago,” Tobin says. “Went and filmed my thank you video the next morning. What do you think?”

“I think it’s crazy,” Christen says unbelievingly. She’d been mentally preparing herself for Tobin to
be away forever, never to really return. Finding out that she’s going to be a quick road trip away is incredible, and it takes Christen a moment to process. “I can’t believe it. Are you serious?”

“Dead serious,” Tobin confirms. “I don’t know when I’ll get there, it all depends on whether or not I keep getting called up, but I’m serious. I’ll be close, Chris. We’ll still be able to see each other.”

“Oh my God,” Christen breathes, finding a bench outside the building and sitting down, scrubbing a hand over her face. She knows she’s supposed to find Mal and drive them back to the apartment, but she needs a moment to collect herself. She feels overwhelmed – numb, almost – and can’t even begin to think ahead and what this means in the long term. “Listen to me: don’t you dare get yourself traded, okay?”

Tobin’s laugh comes through loud and clear, just the same as it’s always been. It’s reassuring and it helps Christen gather herself a little.

“I’ll do my best,” Tobin says. “I promise. Listen, I’ve got to go because I’m going to be late to practice if I don’t hurry, but do you think I can call you something this weekend? Just to catch up?”

“Definitely,” Christen says, nodding to herself. “Whenever is fine with me.”

“Awesome,” Tobin says. “Alright, I’m going. I’ll talk to you later, okay?”

“Bye, Tobin,” Christen says, and then Tobin is hanging up and Christen is wondering why the call seemed so short. Instead of dwelling on it, she texts Mal before slowly getting up and walking to her car, a little stiff and frozen from sitting in the cold unnecessarily. She’s glad when she reaches her car, able to turn the heat on and warm herself up a little while calling Kelley and waiting for Mal.

“Did you hear?” is the first thing Kelley says, loud and excitable.

“Yeah,” Christen says, holding her hands to her air vents to help thaw them out. “She told me.”

“Don’t you wish you’d been here to see it happen, though?”

“Don’t make me admit you were right,” Christen groans, smiling despite Kelley’s gloating.

“Fine, fine, but only because I love you. It’s online, anyway. You’ll be able to watch it later,” Kelley says. “Now hurry home before you miss any of the others. Becky’s already gone and – “

“I’ll be there as soon as I can,” Christen promises. “Isn’t it cool, though? That Tobin is going to be just down the road?”

“Eh, a little further than that,” Kelley says, and from all the noise in the background, Christen can tell that the other girls are getting rowdy. “Alex is already planning a trip for spring break, though. I told her I’d rather go to someplace with a beach, but she won’t listen to me.”

“You have a while before then,” Christen thinks aloud.

“We’ll take a vote when the time comes,” Kelley says, sounding unworried. “And I know you’ll be on my side, so – “

“Wait, me?” Christen asks, confusedly.

“Well yeah, you’re going, you get a say,” Kelley says, as though it’s obvious. Christen is a little taken aback – she’s still getting used to the idea that now Kelley’s friends are kind of her friends. A small rap on the passenger side window steals Christen’s attention, and she waves at Mal before
motioning to her to get in.

“I’ve got to go,” Christen tells Kelley, aiming the heated air flow towards Mal, who looks like a baby icicle in her hat and scarf. “I’m driving Mal and we should be there soon.”

“Hurry up,” Kelley tells her. “Tell Mal hi for me.”

“Tell her yourself in five minutes,” Christen says, rolling her eyes before hanging up. “Hi, Mal.”

“Hey,” Mal says, buckling herself in. “You heard about Tobin?”

“Did everyone know but me?” Christen asks, shifting into reverse.

“I mean, some of the girls on the team texted me,” Mal says, shrugging. “It’s just kind of a big deal, you know? You don’t really trade away the first draft pick, especially when someone like Tobin is up for grabs. It’s a bit of a surprise.”

“She’s going to be close to us, now,” Christen says, navigating her way out of the parking garage. “Isn’t that crazy?”

“Very crazy,” Mal agrees, but she’s already got her head in her phone and she’s focused on something else entirely. When they arrive in the apartment, it’s to see what looks like nearly the entire team piled into the living room with bated breath.

“What’s going on?” Christen asks quietly after fighting through piles of legs and Gatorade bottles to squeeze next to Kelley.

“The second round is starting,” Kelley says, eyes glued to the tv where she’s set up the draft. “Here, do you want a carrot stick?”

Christen takes the carrot that Kelley holds out for her, nibbling on it slowly as she watches the tv. She doesn’t understand the process at all, but she does know that the earlier you get drafted, the better. It’s a bit of a waiting game, waiting to see if you’ll be taken, and she can already hear Crystal complaining that Ali hasn’t been snatched up yet.

Ali gets taken soon enough, and Kelley has the foresight to talk Christen through what it all means.

“It doesn’t necessarily mean that she’ll end up on their final roster,” she explains. “But the earlier you get taken, the more they want you, which means that the more likely you are to end up on their final roster for the reason.”

“So someone like Ali,” Christen says, “will probably end up on the roster.”

“You’re so smart,” Kelley teases, messing with Christen’s ponytail. “Come sit, you’re all squished over there.”

Christen squirms as Kelley moves the plate of carrots settled on her thighs to the coffee table, pulling Christen closer until she’s nearly on top of her.

“You’re so bony,” Kelley mutters, wrapping an arm around Christen’s waist to hold her close. Christen feels warm, like she’s on fire, and while she’s a little uncomfortable with the way Kelley had tugged at her like she was a little rag doll, she still finds herself enjoying the feeling of being perched on Kelley’s lap.
“You’re one to talk,” Christen says back, and when Kelley laughs low and slow, it’s close and intimate against the base of Christen’s neck.

“Do we need a hand check?” Syd calls from halfway across the room, wiggling her eyebrows at the two of them as she uses a celery stick to attempt to smear hummus against Alex’s cheek.

“No,” Kelley says simply, gripping Christen’s waist tightly. “We’re all good over here. Aren’t we, Chris?”

“Yeah,” Christen stammers, unable to look in Syd’s direction. “We’re good.”

Ashlyn gets drafted to the same team as Ali, which quickly becomes the new hot topic amongst practically everyone Christen interacts with. When she goes out to lunch with Alex and Kelley later the week following the draft, it quickly becomes apparent that this is something that everyone is discussing while trying to avoid letting Ali or Ashlyn be aware of it.

“Ashlyn told me that Ali called her on New Year’s Eve,” Alex divulges to Christen, while Kelley nods on like this is old news. “She was a crying mess, telling Ash that she was sorry for everything and wanted another chance at making things work.”

“What did Ashlyn say?” Christen asks, figuring that it’s okay to be interested now that it’s clear that no one is pretending like the whole sticky mess is a poorly kept secret.

“She said no, of course,” Alex answers, rolling her eyes. “Ashlyn’s not just going to let herself be jerked around again.”

Kelley, for once, keeps her mouth shut as she chews her sushi rather aggressively.

“So what are they going to do now that they’re on the same team?” Christen asks. “I mean, you’ve talked to Ashlyn, haven’t you?”

“Yeah, she she doesn’t know,” Alex says with a grimace. “I mean, they barely made it through playoffs. I mean, a miscommunication between them is basically the reason Ashlyn got scored on in that semifinal game and it’s basically the reason we lost out on a trip to the final.”

“That wasn’t their fault. Besides, they’re professionals now,” Kelley says, reaching for her water. “They’ll make it work.”

“I hope so,” Alex says, chopsticks hovering over her roll. “Back when things were fine between them, the team was on fire. The moral of the story, Christen, is that sex can really fuck things up between two people. Kelley and I can argue about whose fault it is all day long, but basically keep it in your pants unless you want to ruin everything.”

Christen shifts uncomfortably in her chair, watching Alex shoot Kelley a judgmental look.

Kelley chews her way through another piece of roll, studiously ignoring Alex until she’s swallowed.

“Alex,” Kelley says warningly, sounding uncharacteristically annoyed. “Get off your high horse. You’re not always right about this kind of shit.”

“I’m usually right,” Alex says, shrugging her shoulders before bringing her eyes over to focus on Christen’s. “Trust me, Christen. Even if you think it’s just sex, it never is.”
Christen just thinks about how right Alex might be, staring down at her plate and pushing her food around until Kelley changes the subject to her MCAT studies.

Even though it’s surely a coincidence, it doesn’t feel like one when Ali asks Christen out for drinks that Friday night.

“You’re twenty-one now, right?” she’d asked when extending the invitation. “Because I need margaritas and someone whose fake I don’t have to worry about.”

Christen had accepted warily, joining Ali at a Mexican restaurant with loud music and too many underage kids doing shots of tequila even though it’s barely ten o’clock. It’s later than Christen is used to – normally she’d be stepping out of a relaxing, steaming shower at this point in her night – but Kelley is out with her sorority friends and it was either this or stay back at the apartment all alone, texting her sisters and watching comedy reruns on tv. She doesn’t quite see why Ali is worried about the legitimacy of anyone’s fake id at a place like this, but she briefly entertains the possibility that Ali had wanted to hang out with her specifically as they find two seats next to each other at the bar.

“Don’t worry, I’ll go easy on you,” Ali tells Christen as they’re handed menus. “Kelley told me you’re not a big drinker.”

“Not really a drinker at all, actually,” Christen mumbles as she opens her menu.

“Do you want some chips?” Ali asks, looking up from the drink menu to shoot a magnificent smile in Christen’s direction. Even in the dim lighting, with cigarette smoke curling in from the outdoor patio and sticky floors and counters coated in a film of filth, she still looks unbelievably radiant. “We can share a basket.”

“Sure,” Christen agrees, setting down her menu because she’s already eaten dinner at a normal time like a normal person.

“And a pitcher of margaritas,” Ali continues, “on me. Don’t worry, I’m not going to make you do shots or anything.”

“Thanks,” Christen says, smiling awkwardly.

“Tequila is nasty anyway,” Ali says, pretending to gag. “Do you know how long it takes to get drunk off of margaritas?”

Christen doesn’t, not really, and she hopes that she’s not about to find out. It’s fine at first though, because Ali pours margarita into her glass until it’s about to spill over and doesn’t even bat a heavily mascaraed lash when Christen fills hers not even half full. She doesn’t take a sip, busying herself with chips and salsa as Ali gulps down mouthfuls of her drink. Part of Christen wants to jokingly tell her to slow down, but it looks like Ali means business and Christen doesn’t want to accidentally offend her. As it turns out, she doesn’t have to worry because after twenty minutes of small talk – mostly Ali complaining about how difficult it is to arrange her move and Christen telling her all about the struggle that comes with studying for the GRE – Ali turns unbelievably chatty, spilling about everything without Christen even needing to ask.

“So Ashlyn wants to get a place together when we move,” she tells Christen, sucking on a salt-soaked tortilla chip. “Like, can you believe that she just wants to be friends?”

Christen isn’t stupid – she knows that she’s been invited out to give Ali some advice. The truth is that she doesn’t know which side she stands on. She can understand Ali’s struggle and therefore her potentially problematic actions, but she also understands Ashlyn’s frustration with the situation,
especially after being jerked around by someone who can’t decide whether or not they care enough to do something about it. Torn between two people, one of whom she knows slightly better than the other, Christen turns to her margarita glass.

“Um,” she says, wrinkling her nose at the taste of the tequila. The lime and alcohol are sharp on her tongue, making her pucker her mouth and reach for a chip to dilute the taste. “I’m guessing that you don’t.”

“Well of course not!” Ali exclaims. “I mean, how can she be acting like nothing happened?”

Christen wants to say that she doesn’t even really know what happened – she only knows bits and pieces of what people have bothered to tell her, and she’s missed most of the more important details – but instead she sips at her drink determinedly, racking her mind for something to say while forcing herself to swallow with minimal revulsion.

“You should probably talk to her,” Christen says, knowing that it’s a bit of a cop-out answer. She isn’t surprised at all when Ali groans and shakes her head.

“No, come on,” Ali whines, reaching forward to place a hand on Christen’s jean-clad knee. “You’re so smart and level-headed. What should I do?”

Christen glances down at Ali’s hand and then decides that she’s going to need more tequila for this. She gulps down a bit, leaving only a small amount behind in her glass before speaking again.

“How close were the two of you before?” Christen asks. “Like, were you best friends? Or were you just casual teammates?”

Ali frowns, tilting her head to the side as she sits back and taps her fingers against Christen’s knee. Christen’ squirms, but Ali’s arm remains outstretched.

“I mean, we were kind of close,” Ali says pensively. “But not as close as we were when she ended up cutting me off completely.”

“So it brought you closer?”

“Yeah,” Ali says, head bobbing in a nod. “Definitely. I mean, you know how it is.”

Christen really doesn’t.

“I mean, it’s a gamble,” Christen says, shrugging and fingering the stem of her glass. She doesn’t even know what they’re talking about anymore, but she pushes on anyway. “When you’re friends with someone, how do you know if it’s worth the risk?”

“You don’t,” Ali says. “We were friends and then it was more than that and now it’s nothing.”

“So was it worth it?”

Christen can tell from Ali’s expression that this isn’t the kind of questions she was expecting. She licks her lips before removing her hand from Christen’s knee and pouring herself more margarita, pitcher approaching empty. When she finally speaks, it’s slow and surprisingly thoughtful.

“It brought us closer together,” she starts. “It was risky, yeah, but I think it might have been worth it, if only I didn’t fuck it all up at the end there. I was scared though; you know? It’s a scary thing. I wish I could do something to change the way it ended, but it was good while it lasted. We’ll never be just friends again though, that’s the thing. We weren’t close enough at the beginning to be able to go
back to that. We didn’t have that foundation.”

“But if you did?” Christen asks, something small and hopeful bubbling at the base of her chest. “If you’d been closer, how do you think it would have turned out?”


Christen swallows what little is left in her glass, closing her eyes and trying to ignore the warm sensation spreading over her. It’s giving her déjà vu and she can’t quite place where or when she’s felt like this before, but she does know that she likes the way it feels.

“Hey, you can have the rest of the margarita,” Ali says, kicking out a foot to brush against Christen’s. “And then do you want to maybe dance a little before calling it a night?”

Christen looks over at the small crowd that’s accumulated in the middle of the restaurant, trying not to snort at how ridiculous they all look. She supposes that this is normal since Ali doesn’t seem perturbed in the slightest, but that doesn’t mean that she wants to go and join them.

“Come on,” Ali says, pouring the rest of the pitcher into Christen’s glass. “Drink up and then decide if you want to come along and watch me make a fool of myself out there.”

“You like dancing?” Christen asks, reluctantly raising her drink to her mouth.

“Love it,” Ali answers immediately. “Even if I look stupid, I love the way it makes me feel.”

“I’ve never liked it,” Christen admits. “I’m so bad at it.”

“So am I!” Ali says encouragingly. “Come on, no one cares if you know what you’re doing. It’s all about having fun!”

Christen sips at her drink as slowly as she can, but she’s getting used to the taste of the tequila and before long her glass is empty and Ali has already paid, standing up and reaching out for Christen’s hands.

“I love this song,” Ali says brightly, tightly holding Christen’s hands in hers. “Don’t you?”

The song is a favorite of Kelley’s and that’s how Christen recognizes it.

“Yeah,” she says, shrugging as Ali walks backwards in her heeled boots, leading Christen towards everyone else. “It’s cool.”

“Just move with the music,” Ali tells Christen, doing a funny little shimmy that has Christen cracking a nervous smile. “See – I told you I was awful. I wasn’t exaggerating.”

Christen bops to the beat a little as Ali continues to move her body, hands still firmly attached. She’s pretty sure that she can feel her palms sweating, but Ali either doesn’t notice or doesn’t mind.

“Do what feels comfortable,” Ali says, leaning in for a second so Christen can hear her. “No pressure.”

“I don’t think I’m cut out for this,” Christen says anxiously, feeling like an idiot for thinking that maybe she could be capable of doing this – dancing, being cool, pretending to be someone she’s not.

“Two more songs,” Ali compromises, reeling Christen in tighter so that they aren’t two feet apart and don’t have to shout to hear each other. “Two more songs, and if you still want to go, we can.”
So Christen gives it a chance, deciding that she’ll meet Ali halfway as a thank you of sorts for her kindness. She does her best to copy what Ali does, moving the way she does, swinging her hips just barely while trying to stay on beat. One song passes and she still feels awkward, like everyone around her knows that she’s not acting like herself and they’re all judging her for it.

It’s obvious, though, that Ali is having the time of her life. She’s a lot more coordinated than Christen is despite the fact that she’s not exactly great, but her enthusiasm makes up for her lack of ability. Slightly off-rhythm and beautiful even with a light sheen of sweat on her forehead, Ali is the sort of person that Christen wishes she could be.

Ali is smart, talented, and outrageously beautiful in a way that leaves nothing up for debate. She exudes pure happiness and kindness, and Christen doesn’t think she’s ever heard her utter a mean word about anyone. Even more so than all of that, Christen finds herself envying Ali’s confidence. Even out on a dance floor where she knows no one, Ali looks completely comfortable in her own skin. If she’s afraid of what other people think of her, she hides it well. Christen thinks about everything Ali said about Ashlyn: how she’d been able to admit that she’d been scared, but had done it all anyway.

Christen knows what it’s like to be scared. She’s terrified every time she looks at Kelley and sees her best friend, because that’s not all she sees. Underneath thick layers of comfort and familiarity, beneath memories of sticky summers on pool loungers and chilly winters when they roasted marshmallows in backyards, beyond everything that’s brought them as close as they are, Christen has discovered something else: a form of love that’s started to feel a little less platonic as the days pass by.

All it takes is a brush of skin and Christen feels like she’s gone skydiving without a parachute. Her feet get knocked out from under her and she looses her breath every time Kelley shows her the slightest bit of affection. Kelley’s been calling her babe for years, has been telling her that she loves her since they were kids, has been inappropriately handsy since high school, and had taken to pressing quick kisses to Christen’s various body parts after she joined her sorority and had discovered that other girls favored posing for pictures with their lips pressed against each other’s cheeks. Now it all feels weighted, like it means more to Christen than it has before and it’s never felt as real as it has right now, as she watches Ali dance in front of her while wishing that it was Kelley instead.

It only gets worse when she finds herself even closer to Ali, the growing crowd pressing in on them as Christen attempts to roll her hips against air the way Ali has been doing.

“See?” Ali says, edging closer so that Christen can hear her over the deafening music. “This isn’t too bad, right?”

Christen swallows, suddenly hot and sweaty. She can’t shake the thought of doing this with Kelley: going somewhere dark and sketchy, just the two of them amongst a sea of people who probably don’t even care what’s going on around them. No one says anything when Ali doesn’t back away, looking just as thrilled with herself as she has all night. Christen wishes she could be that sure of herself at all times.

“No,” Christen says, as her fingers fall from Ali’s, giving into the urge to stretch them up above her head the way everyone else is doing. Ali copies her, something that Christen finds funny because surely there’s no way she knows what she’s doing enough for Ali to want to imitate it. Maybe this was the key all along, Christen thinks, as a third song comes on and she finds herself not wanting to leave her spot.

Maybe she looks stupid – she has no idea. Maybe she’s making a fool out of herself and Ali is just
going to laugh at her later, but for now they dance close together. When Ali isn’t closing her eyes and tipping her head back in blissful laughter, she’s staring at Christen with curious, sparkling eyes. Christen can’t help but imagine Ali and Ashlyn together, wondering how it had all come together and how Ali had known that it was what she wanted. She feels the need to know if it had just been Ashlyn for Ali, if Ashlyn was the exception to the rule or if Ali’s rules are a little more flexible than that.

“How did you decide to take the risk?” Christen asks.

“What?” Ali says, shouting a little.

Christen stops moving for a second, stepping close to Ali so she can speak into her ear.

“How did you know?” she tries again, placing a hand on Ali’s shoulder for balance. She feels Ali’s hand come down to rest on her hip to steady her shaky stance. “How did you decide to risk it all?”

Ali pulls her head back a little to look at Christen intently, hand gripping tightly as she continues to sway back and forth. She’s right up against Christen, their bodies so close together that Christen blushes as she feels Ali purposefully move against her.

“What do you want to risk?” she asks, gaze unwavering.

Christen bites her lip, letting Ali’s hand lead her hips until they’re both in sync.

“Friendship,” she says, sweating from the conversation and the motions.

“It was worth it, you know,” Ali says, gaze so firm and arresting that it’s impossible for Christen to look away. “Risking things with Ashlyn. I wouldn’t take any of it back, even if she hates me forever.”

She brushes Christen’s hair away from her ear as she speaks, angling in so that she’s breathing against Christen’s neck in an attempt to be clearly heard.

Christen chokes on air, letting Ali grind their fronts together for the rest of the song. She breaks away after that, breaths coming out in shallow pants. Meanwhile Ali looks totally unaffected, not a single hair out of place as she jerks her head to the side.

“Ready to go?” she asks, and Christen nods eagerly.

Outside, the numbingly cold temperature and cruel winds bring Christen back to reality and she huddles into herself as Ali fumbles with her phone, muttering something about Uber versus calling in a favor to a friend. Christen reaches for her own phone, surprised to see two texts from Kelley waiting for her.

When will you be back? Want to cuddle before bed?

I’m waiting for you!

The last message is accompanied by a selfie of Kelley’s head against Christen’s pillows, the color of her linens a dead giveaway. She’s pouting adorably, hair fanned out all around her and her freckles on display against alcohol-flushes cheeks. It makes Christen smile as she tucks her phone away, mind running too fast to formulate a response.

“Hey,” Ali says, knocking Christen’s shoulder with her own. “Whatever you’re worried about is going to be fine.”
“I’m not worried,” Christen says quickly.

Ali raises an eyebrow.

“I might be a little worried,” Christen admits.

“Just be honest about whatever it is,” Ali suggests. “Honestly is the best policy.”

“Yeah,” Christen says slowly. “I’ll just be honest.”

“See?” Ali says, grinning sloppily. “Everything will be fine. I can guarantee.”

Christen isn’t sure if it’s the tequila or the dancing, the cold weather or the blinding smile in front of her, but she finds herself believing Ali.

If she’s honest, everything with Kelley will be fine.
With Kelley studying for the MCAT and Christen studying for the GRE, the two of them end up spending more time together than usual. With the soccer season having ended and Kelley only playing pickup on the weekends with some of her teammates or sorority sisters, Christen starts to see her around the apartment more often. It takes a bit of adjusting at first, having Kelley around all the time, but she grows used to it. The first example comes on a Sunday the weekend after Tobin gets drafted, when the national team is scheduled to play a game and Tobin is on the roster. Christen had planned on watching live with her GRE practice book in her lap, focusing on studying and only looking up at the screen when she heard Tobin’s name.

But that morning Kelley is in the kitchen bright and early, chopping a banana into slices and singing along to her phone as it plays a Taylor Swift song.

“This isn’t your typical music of choice,” Christen says sleepily, rubbing at her eyes as she slips a little on the hem of her too-long pajama pants.

“Careful, babe,” Kelley says mindlessly, scattering a handful of banana into the blender in front of her. “Kale or spinach?”

“Neither,” Christen answers, going to stand behind Kelley, resting her chin on Kelley’s shoulder and watching her take her knife to a green apple. “I’m having a Poptart.”

“You’re going to get diabetes,” Kelley says. “This is just what was up next on shuffle, you can change it if you want.”

“This is fine,” Christen says, yawning through her words. “I just thought it was a little weird to not hear Kanye blasting so early.”

Kelley has been waking up earlier than usual, no longer sleeping until noon if given the chance. It’s weird to see but Kelley insists that she’s got to crack down on her grades this semester (“I got a B in physics, Christen! That’s unacceptable!”), and that waking up early will give her a sense of balance and order in her life. It had made Christen scoff and roll her eyes at the beginning of the month, but now that Kelley has consistently been waking up early (early for her, at least) she’s been forced to admit that it’s nice to see her best friend before she leaves for class in the mornings. Kelley likes to make breakfast and she’s been on a bit of a smoothie kick for the past week or so, which Christen wouldn’t mind so much if she didn’t have to chew through the greens in order to get it down. Either way, Kelley tends to play loud rap music in the kitchen while she chops and blends. It’s funny to listen to her try and rap along, but Christen has to admit that she’d rather listen to Kelley sing along to Taylor.

“So,” Kelley says, “are you excited to watch Tobin play later?”

“I mean, if she even plays,” Christen says, moving away from Kelley in search of a breakfast that doesn’t involve half a salad mixed in. “She’s not really a lock, right?”

“She’s on the roster and they get six subs,” Kelley says matter-of-factly as she drops chunks of apple in the blender, skin still attached. “So there’s a decent chance she plays.”

“I hope so,” Christen mumbles as she decides against a pack of S’mores Poptarts and instead opts for a bowl of cereal. “I mean, that’s why we’re watching, right?”

“I’d be watching anyway,” Kelley points out, grabbing a carton of almond milk from the refrigerator.
“I’m actually very invested in soccer.”

Christen waits for Kelley to finish with the milk before pouring some into her bowl. She leans against the counter, spooning Cheerios into her mouth as Kelley runs the blender until it’s a fairly uniform mess of bright green sludge. When she’s done and the blender is unplugged, Christen considers her words carefully before speaking.

“Have you ever thought about playing professionally?” she asks tentatively, watching Kelley pour her smoothie into a large glass.

“No,” Kelley says, wrinkling her nose. “Why?”

“Because you’re good,” Christen says with a shrug, feeling mildly embarrassed at having asked.

“Not as good as Tobin,” Kelley says.

“You might not be national team worthy, but aren’t you good enough to go pro?” Christen asks.

Kelley stops at the other end of the kitchen, where she’s gone to retrieve a straw from a cabinet. With her back to Christen, is feels an awful lot like she’s shutting Christen out of the conversation.

“I’m studying for the MCAT, Chris,” Kelley says, her tone barely warning. “I’m going to med school.”

Christen decides to leave it.

“I was just asking,” she says, bringing her bowl to her mouth to avoid spilling her cereal on the floor. “Just wondering.”

Kelley’s pasted on a shallow smile when she comes back to face Christen, sticking her straw in her glass and sucking away.

“What time is the game?” Christen asks, looking at the time on the microwave.

“We’ve got a while,” Kelley says. “Want to study until then?”

The two of them bunker down on the floor of the living room, Kelley spread on her stomach while Christen sits cross-legged and hunched forward over her study book. It’s slow and tedious, reading the passages and circling her answers. Kelley has a tendency to whisper as she reads along, and Christen gets distracted easily as words like “endoplasmic reticulum” and “functional groups” worm their way into her ears. It’s mildly frustrating and Christen ends up having to reread more than a few questions, but she just reminds herself how nice it is to have Kelley home with her.

Around noon, Christen tears her eyes away from the small print to reach for her phone, firing off a good luck text to Tobin. They’ve been texting most over the course of the past week, but more is a relative term and Christen still finds herself impatiently waiting for a reply more often than not. Tobin is only slightly less miserable with her phone than she used to be, telling Christen when she has practices or meeting or anything else that might force her away from her phone for an extended period of time. She knows that Tobin won’t be able to respond until much later – game days are impossibly busy for the team, and Tobin prefers to focus on what’s ahead instead of her phone – so she tucks it away when she’s done, content with the knowledge that Tobin will at least see the message before kick off.

Christen isn’t normally the kind of person who gets excited for soccer games; she’s spent most of her years attending Kelley’s games with the sole purpose of seeing her best friend play. She’s never
looked forward to one or welcomed the start of the game. After several hours of studying though, monotony only occasionally interrupted by a snack break, Christen finds herself eager to close her study book and relax into the couch as Kelley flips through the channels, looking for the one airing the game.

“You know, I was going to just study through this originally,” Christen says, stretching out so that her foot nearly knocks the remote of Kelley’s hand.

“You’re so lame,” Kelley says, rolling her eyes but smiling softly. “You’d really sit here for two hours just for me?”

“And Tobin,” Christen says, maybe a beat too quickly.

Kelley slides her eyes over to look at Christen skeptically, but doesn’t say anything.

They already know that Tobin isn’t starting. Kelley had looked up the starting lineup earlier and read it off to Christen who hadn’t recognized a single name. Of course, Kelley has remained maddeningly optimistic that Tobin will get subbed in later.

Christen might not be doing her GRE practice tests during the game, but she finds it hard to pay attention and ends up messing around on her phone for the majority of the first half. The team scores a few goals that Christen mostly misses seeing the first time around, only half listening to the commentary and looking up whenever Kelley yells about something. Christen watches the replays but the game isn’t interesting enough for her to focus on and she finds herself relieved when halftime rolls around and she’s able to draw Kelley’s attention away from the screen.

“I was thinking of studying in the library with Julie after class tomorrow,” Christen says as Kelley attempts to hunt down something in the kitchen that they can fix for dinner. “Want to come?”

“No thanks,” Kelley says, head stuck in the fridge. “How do you feel about a smoothie?”

“As long as there isn’t an entire salad in it,” Christen says. “But why not? I though you wanted to get in as much study time as possible.”

“I’m going to the gym with Alex,” Kelley says, opening the freezer and pulling out bags of fruit. “Besides, we studied a lot today, I deserve a break.”

“A little extra studying never hurt anybody,” Christen reasons. “I mean, look at me. I studied a ton last semester and did really well.”

“Some of us like to relax a little,” Kelley tells Christen. “Will you wash out the blender while I get everything together?”

Christen hates that Kelley never washes up after herself and that she’s always left to do it, but she willingly runs hot water and cleans out the green mess from Kelley’s breakfast until the blender is sparkling clean.

When they’re settled on the couch again, both armed with giant classes of smoothie (Kelley had snuck in a little flaxseed when she thought Christen wasn’t looking but Christen had definitely seen it), it turns out that they’ve timed it perfectly so that the second half of the game is about to start. Christen is already brainstorming things to do while the game plays out, even considering picking up her study book again just for the hell of it, when Kelley places a condensation-laden hand on her bare forearm.

Christen jumps a little at the cold droplets running down her arm.
“What the hell, Kell,” she says, moving around to wipe the wetness on Kelley’s sweatshirt sleeve. “What was that for?”

“To get your attention,” Kelley says, and she’s grinning but something is off.

“I’m right here,” Christen reassures her. “You’ve always got my attention.”

“Good.” Kelley says, using her free hand to tuck a stray lock of hair behind her ear. “Because I have a proposition for you.”

Christen’s eyes move from the tv where the team is heading back onto the field to Kelley, whose smile is starting to look slightly more normal. She’s not sure if it’s the phrasing or the tone Kelley’s using – mildly provocative laden with determined casualness – but something has her half curious, half scared. It’s just Kelley though, she tells herself. There’s no reason to be scared.

“Yeah?” Christen asks. “What is it?”

“Well, we’ve been studying a lot lately,” Kelley starts, twirling the drawstring of her sweatshirt around her index finger. “So I was wondering – hold on.”

Kelley stops mid sentence, turning to look at the tv screen.

“What?” Christen asks, feeling like she’s dangling from a cliff. “Hold on for what?”

“I think Tobin is getting subbed in,” Kelley says, squinting. “I thought I heard – “

Christen feels torn, unsure of whether or not to look at Kelley or the television. On one hand she needs to know what Kelley was about to proposition her with, but on the other she wants to know if Tobin really is stepping onto the pitch.

“Yeah, that’s her,” Kelley says, and the way she speaks is mildly dismissive. “Anyway, like I was saying.”

Christen bites her lip, tearing her away from the screen where Tobin is indeed standing on the sideline, waiting for the opportunity to get on the field and play. Instead she focuses on Kelley, eyes locked with hers and desperately waiting for her to continue talking.

“I’m taking you out this weekend,” Kelley says, and the phrasing has Christen’s mouth going dry.

“Taking me out?” Christen asks, nearly choking on air. “What do you mean?”

“You know,” Kelley says, shrugging and taking a large sip of smoothie. Christen does the same, hoping it makes it a little easier to breath. “We’ll go out, do something together. I’ll plan it and take care of everything so that you don’t have to worry about a thing.”

Christen feels exposed even though she has barely said anything.

“Sounds like a date,” she says with a weak laugh, gripping her glass tightly.

“Kind of,” Kelley says, shrugging a shoulder as she sucks at her straw. “What do you think, though? Is that something you might be down for?”

“Yeah,” Christen says immediately, blushing as soon as the words leave her mouth. “Yeah, I’d be down for that.”

“Great,” Kelley says, and her smile relaxes into something genuine and familiar. “I’ll plan something
fun for us, okay?”


“Let’s finish the game,” Kelley says, reaching for the remote to turn up the volume. “See what Tobin can do.”

But Christen can’t focus on Tobin.

She’s too busy running Kelley’s words over and over in her mind, thinking about the implications of going on what sounds very much like a date with Kelley. She’s too busy wondering how Kelley means and what her intentions are. Christen is too busy to do anything more than stare blankly at the screen while ignoring her dinner, barely hungry now that her stomach is suddenly full of nerves. She’s too busy to track Tobin’s lanky figure with her own eyes, too busy to pay attention to every move she makes, too busy to even process that she’s missing Tobin have a great game that has Kelley cheering and pumping her fist.

Hours later though, she’s not too busy to slide a finger across her phone screen to read Tobin’s incoming message. It’s nonsense that Christen barely processes, something about thanking her for her earlier message that she carelessly reads while she hurriedly types out a message.

*I think Kelley asked me out on a date.*

She taps her phone impatiently as she waits for a response, lying in bed and winding down with a book before she falls asleep for the night. Five minutes later and Christen is just about to give up when her phone starts vibrating. It surprises her and she stares at her phone for what feels like forever before her eyes dart to the door, making sure that it’s closed. Her ears strain for sounds in the apartment, and when she’s established that it’s quiet and Kelley is in her room for the night, Christen answers the call.

“Hello?” she says gingerly.

“You think?” Tobin asks without preamble. “What do you mean, you *think* she asked you out on a date?”

“It was weird,” Christen says, doing her best to keep her voice down. She doesn’t quite understand why Tobin opted for calling her instead of texting back, but she does know that she’s thankful to have someone to talk to – someone to help calm her down so she stops freaking out about what happened. “She just told me that she was taking me out this weekend.”

“So she didn’t ask,” Tobin says, and she sounds vaguely disappointed in a way that has Christen’s shoulders slumping down from where they’ve been hunched up in all of her anxiety. “She told you she was taking you on a date.”

“She kind of phrased it like it was going to be a break from all of our studying,” Christen explains. “Like she was doing me a favor. Like she wanted to do this for me.”

“So it’s not really a date then,” Tobin says.


“Well?” Tobin asks. “What did you say to her?”

“I said yes, of course,” Christen says. Because really, what else was she supposed to say?
“Well, you could stop letting her think she can boss you around, for starters,” Tobin says, and Christen can just imagine her rolling her eyes.

“She wasn’t,” Christen insists, because despite the fact that she knows Tobin thinks she can’t stick up for herself or make decision without Kelley’s help, she’s feeling more capable and in charge of herself than she has in a while. Since she first thought she might like Kelley, actually. “That’s just how Kelley is. It doesn’t mean anything.”

“Fine, fine,” Tobin says, and it’s only then that Christen can hear the pure exhaustion in her voice.

“Aren’t you tired?” Christen asks. “I mean, you played almost the entire second half.”

The resounding yawn from the other end of the line answers her question for her.

“Well we don’t have to talk if you want to sleep,” Christen says.

“I call you,” Tobin reminds her. “I wanted to hear about Kelley.”

“And now we’ve talked about Kelley,” Christen responds. “So if you want to sleep…."

She trails off, giving Tobin an out but secretly hoping that she won’t take it.

“I’m good for now,” Tobin says, stifling another yawn. “Did Kelley have anything else to say?”

“She said that she’d take care of everything,” Christen says.

“Ooh,” Tobin says, and it would be taunting if only there was more energy behind it. “Look at you. Probably getting wined and dined and – “

“No way,” Christen cuts Tobin off, face burning red as she settles into her pillows. “It’s not like – Kelley isn’t – that’s not how – “

“Look at you,” Tobin laughs, and even though Christen is tongue-tied and embarrassed, she still finds herself smiling a little. “You’re so nervous and it’s not even a real date. What are you going to do if she ever asks you out for real?”

“She wouldn’t,” Christen mumbles. “There’s no way she would.”

“I don’t know,” Tobin says. “Sounds like there’s a decent chance that she might.”

She sounds wistful and as though she’s half asleep, and Christen plays with a loose thread in her bedspread as she thinks about what to say next.

“Kell said you played great today,” she offers up. “So congratulations.”

“And you?” Tobin murmurs. “What did you think?”

“I don’t know too much besides the basics of the sport,” Christen says, figuring that it’s probably for the best that she doesn’t disclose the fact that she spend most of the second half staring at Kelley’s
Tobin sighs, a little wisps of exhaled air, and the sound makes Christen cuddle further into her bed. It’s getting cold – Kelley must have turned the heat off before going to her room – and she just wants to feel warm as she huddles into herself for warmth, turning onto her side and drawing her knees up to her chest as she presses the phone as close to her ear as possible. It she closes her eyes – and she does – she can almost imagine that Tobin is in the same room as her, talking and rolling her eyes, instead of thousands of miles away, fighting post-game fatigue and yet still talking to Christen about her troubles for some unknown reason.

“Of course you do,” she says softly. “Why wouldn’t you?”

If anyone else had said it, it might have come off as accusatory. But when Tobin says it, it’s mild and gentle and sincere, and it makes Christen think that maybe what she’s done and the things she’s thought might not be as off the mark as she might think sometimes.

“Should I let you go?” Christen asks hesitantly, not really wanting to hang up but not wanting to keep Tobin awake if she’s falling asleep.

“I’m okay,” Tobin says through another yawn. “Just talk to me. I know you’ve got stuff to say.”

“It’s all about Kelley,” Christen warns. “I’m going to tell you about how she made a smoothie for breakfast and how she looks soft and warm in her sweatshirt and – “

Tobin lets Christen babble for a minute before laughing quietly.

“It’s okay, Chris,” she tells her. “That’s why I’m here: so you have someone to talk about her to.”

“You sure?” Christen checks one last time.

“Absolutely,” Tobin says.

So Christen, feeling a little bit guilty, starts telling Tobin everything she’s thought about Kelley since she woke up that morning.

On Saturday, Christen sleeps in. After what feels like weekends full of early wakeup calls and busy afternoons to full for naps, it feels gloriously refreshing to sleep in as long as she can. Of course that isn’t very long; she ends up awake around ten and isn’t able to go back to sleep, but it’s better than her standard morning. It’s all on Kelley’s instructions, because she’s ordered Christen to follow her schedule for their day together, and Christen hates to admit it but the fact of the matter is that she’s too whipped to protest.

She dislikes the phrasing, but Tobin had come up with it the night before when Christen had been texting her about the plans for the day. Kelley hasn’t given her any concrete instructions which makes it a little hard to go along with – Christen likes to know exactly what she’s doing, and going with the flow isn’t her style at all, and she knows that Kelley knows this – but she’s still willing to play along.

*You’d really do anything she asked you to, wouldn’t you?*

It had made Christen frown at first, but when she didn’t reply immediately, Tobin had elaborated.

Not in a bad way. But because you love her. Because she’s your best friend. You’re a little whipped
but it’s okay.

Christen had still been a little skeptical, thinking that it was slightly more offensive than maybe Tobin had planned, but she knew that Tobin wasn’t trying to hurt her feelings. She was just trying to offer up her perspective on it, and her good intentions weren’t completely unrecognized.

So when Christen wakes up and decides to laze around for the first part of the day, she’s a little disappointed that Kelley stays in her room, catching up on sleep. She knows that Kelley is tired – after all, she’d fallen asleep last night in the middle of one of her favorite movies – but that doesn’t mean that she doesn’t wish that she couldn’t spend the entire day at her side. To occupy her time, she decides to carefully get ready for their “date.” She feels a little silly, messing up her eyeliner so badly that she has to take it all off and start over again, but she just texts Tobin for reassurance.

Of course, Tobin is quick to deliver.

_You’re allowed to want to look good! Besides it’s not like Kelley will notice._

It makes Christen feel a little better, but she still worries that she’s making a big deal out of nothing when she texts Tobin for outfit recommendations. She knows that Tobin doesn’t have much to do: she’s flown home to spend a week with her family before she heads back down to start moving into her apartment for her new club team. Christen only knows because Tobin has been stressing about whether or not she’ll be on the roster for Olympic Qualifying, and has told Christen that if she is, she won’t have much time to get her living situation together.

“I want to be on the roster, but I’ll have like a week to move in,” she had told Christen when they’d caught each other Tuesday before Christen had sat down to eat dinner. “It will be worth it though, you know? Because preseason starts in March and I want to be there for as much of it as possible, but I also want to be with the national team.”

“At least you’ll be playing either way,” Christen had offered. “That’s all you really care about, right?”

“I want to be on the national team,” Tobin had said stubbornly. “I don’t want to get left off a roster or not be called up. I’ve worked my way in and I’ll be damned if I get left out now.”

So Christen feels a little better about bothering Tobin about this kind of stuff, because since she flew home the day after the game she hasn’t had much to do. She’s been surprisingly quick to reply to texts, sending random pictures of bowls of trail mix and empty stretches of New Jersey highway with captions like _picking out all the red M&Ms and my mom is dragging me to the mall with her, I’m bored already._ It’s a little funny, seeing how the chronically restless Tobin occupies her free time, but Christen just likes being able to see it firsthand. If she’d been left to figure out what Tobin was doing with her weeks off with the help of Instagram and Twitter only, she would have been at a complete loss. Once or twice she’s thought about how she nearly didn’t have this, about how she narrowly avoided losing contact with Tobin forever. That makes her feel immeasurably sad though, so she’s always quick to push it from her mind and move on.

By the time Kelley is ready, Christen has finally decided on an outfit that is both cute and weather appropriate (not an easy feat considering the dropping temperatures outside) and is more than eager to head out.

“So where are we going?” Christen asks. Kelley is driving her own car which is rare, but she hadn’t wanted to ruin the surprise by letting Christen drive.

“I’m not telling you,” Kelley says stubbornly. Christen is hoping that if she bothers Kelley enough
she’ll spill their destination. She can’t help that not knowing is driving her crazy with just a touch of
anxiety on top of it all, because she’s so used to being in control of their outings that handing the
reins over the Kelley is foreign. She hasn’t let Kelley be in charge for a very long time.

“Pretty please?” Christen tries. “I’ll be extra nice to you.”

The smile Kelley aims at Christen is charming and slightly dopey.

“You’re always extra nice to me,” she coos sweetly. “But there’s nothing you can do to get me to tell
you where we’re going.”

They’re headed away from downtown and towards the highway which makes Christen panic
momentarily, but she calms herself down by telling herself that there’s no way Kelley is taking them
out of town. It’s already afternoon and it doesn’t make sense to go that far for a simple evening.

“If you’re not going to tell me where we’re going, will you at least let me control the music?”
Christen asks.

“You never want to control the music,” Kelley says, eyebrows shooting up in a clear display of
surprise. Nevertheless, she hands her phone over. “Pick something we’ll both like, okay?”

Kelley has to unlock her phone before she hands it over, and when Christen has the device in her
hands, she starts scrolling through songs in search of something she can tolerate. Halfway through
Kelley’s library, weighing the benefits of playing a Justin Bieber song that Kelley will surely despise,
the phone vibrates in her hand and a notification appears at the top of the screen.

“Alex texted you,” Christen tells Kelley, swiping the message away to she can go back to browsing
through artists.

“What did she say?” Kelley asks, coming to a sudden stop as the car in front of them brakes.

Christen glances up, keeping her eyes on the road long enough to confirm that Kelley hasn’t
accidentally rear-ended anyone.

“I don’t know,” she replies, shrugging. “I didn’t look.”

“Oh,” Kelley says, hands coming off the steering wheel to rest in her lap. “Okay. I’ll check it later.”

Curiosity gnaws at Christen’s conscience, urging her to look at what Alex has to say. It would be so
simple to do and Kelley would never know – but she refrains. She thinks of Kelley reading her
messages, especially the ones between her and Tobin earlier, and decides to stay in Kelley’s music
library where it’s nice and safe and ignorant. She picks a song quickly – something by Drake that she
knows Kelley likes and that she can tolerate – and gives back the phone, eager to move on with their
plans and push Alex’s text out of her mind.

After all, it’s probably nothing. Alex and Kelley are friends. It’s probably something about soccer, or
something about hanging out. There’s no reason for her to feel weird about it.

“We’re here,” Kelley says after a couple more songs, pulling up proudly.

“Kell,” Christen says slowly. “We’re at a carnival.”

“I know,” Kelley says proudly, slowly down as she’s directed towards the parking lot by a gangly
teenager in a bright orange vest.
“In a mall parking lot,” Christen continues, twisting around in her seat to look around at the various rides and games booths set up. “Kell, I’m not – “

“You don’t have to ride the rides,” Kelley says quickly, practically reading Christen’s mind. “Not if you don’t want to. We can just throw mini basketballs and I’ll try to win you a giant stuffed animal. Or if you want, we’ll eat hot dogs and popcorn until we throw up. Just as long as you have fun and get out of your head for a few hours.”

Christen hesitates, peering out the window at the swinging pirate ship.

“Promise?” she asks. “Because you know the construction on these things – “

“Christen,” Kelley interrupts. “On a scale of one to ten, I currently have to pee like a pregnant woman. So can we go and negotiate the terms of our fun time once I’ve emptied my bladder?”

“Kell,” Christen says, scandalized. “I’m pretty sure they don’t have real bathrooms here.”

“I’m not afraid of a Port-A-Potty,” she says confidently. “Come on.”

So Christen follows, keeping a safe distance away as Kelley waits in line for her turn to use the bathroom. While she stands, she pulls out her phone and opens up her conversation with Tobin, typing out a new message.

*Kelley took me to a carnival*

Tobin’s response is immediate.

*That’s a good thing, right?*

*Kind of. Have you ever seen how these things are put together?*

*Just try and have fun, okay? Don’t stress about falling to your death or whatever it is you’re worrying about this time.*

Christen rolls her eyes before replying.

*People die on these things, you know.*

*Eat some cotton candy and relax. Have fun. Enjoy your cute date.*

*I like funnel cakes.*

*Noted.*

It’s then that Kelley appears at Christen’s elbow, hand outstretched and waiting.

“Ready?” she asks, making grabbing motions with her fingers. “I want to check out the water pistol station. Try and win you a stuffed puppy.”

“Ready,” Christen says, pocketing her phone. “Let’s go.”

She slips her hand into Kelley’s, whose hand is just as cold as her own, and walks off towards the rows of games, determined to have a good time.

*
What feels like many hours later, Christen finds herself waiting at a table while Kelley orders them dinner. She’s been assigned the task of marking their territory, an absolutely essential task according to Kelley who had already warned Christen of aggressive moms and rude teenagers who will more than likely try to steal their spot away from under her nose. Christen had just ignored Kelley, telling her to hurry up and get them their food before her stomach started digesting itself.

Bored and feeling like the group of teenage boys a few tables over keeps staring at her, Christen reaches for her phone again. She hadn’t replied to Tobin’s text earlier, and she starts typing as quickly as she can.

_We held hands. She’s buying us food. We went on one of the kiddie rides and she didn’t make fun of me when I thought I was going to throw up._

It takes a little while this time, but Tobin still replies before Kelley returns.

_Sounds like a keeper to me._

Christen smiles down at her phone, biting her lip as she thinks about how well her time with Kelley has gone so far.

_She tried to win me a stuffed animal but only knocked over enough bottles to win some Skittles._

_Did she at least let you eat the red ones?_

_What’s up with you and red candy?_

_Red is the best flavor, everyone knows that. And don’t you dare tell me that red isn’t a flavor._

Christen giggles at her phone screen, thumbs hovering about the keyboard as her teeth dig further into her bottom lip.

“What’s so funny?”

Christen hurriedly locks her phone, setting it on the table as Kelley sets their food down on the table.

“Nothing,” Christen says swiftly, reaching for the grilled cheese waiting for her. “Thanks for getting the food.”

“No problem,” Kelley says casually, using her teeth to tear open a ketchup packet. “So. Are you having fun?”

“A ton,” Christen answers honestly, peeling the crusts off her sandwich. “Thank you, Kelley. This was perfect.”

“Really?” Kelley asks, sounding a little surprised as she squirts ketchup over her fries. “I thought it was a little stupid. I wasn’t sure you would like it.”

“I love it,” Christen says encouragingly. “It’s actually a lot of fun. I kind of feel like a kid again.”

“That’s a good thing, right?” Kelley jokes.

Christen smiles brightly at her before taking a bite of her food.

They eat in silence for a few minutes, Kelley scarfing down her hot dog in nearly record time while Christen eats her crust in between bites of sandwich.
“These guys keep staring at you,” Kelley remarks, gaze locked on the table that had been bothering Christen before.


“Still legal,” Kelley hums as she reaches for the Diet Coke that they’re sharing.

“Gross, Kell.”

“Just saying,” Kelley says with a shrug. “As long as they’re sixteen…”

She trails off, wiggling her eyebrows suggestively.

“I would never – Kelley, that’s gross. Seriously.”

“What?” Kelley asks, the perfect picture of innocence as she holds her palms up defensively. “I’m just saying. It’s been a while. You need to get back in the game.”

Christen’s palms start sweating and she can feel the blush across her cheeks.

“Kelley,” she mutters, looking down at her food. “Come on. You know I’m not interested.”

“So what are you interested in, then?” Kelley prompts. “Older men? Do you need a sugar daddy?”

“Oh my god,” Christen says, rolling her eyes. “No. Kelley, no.”

“Someone your own age, maybe?” Kelley suggests.

Christen finds herself, nodding subconsciously, looking up at Kelley who is shoving more fries in her mouth.

“Well, that’s a good place to start,” Kelley says through a full mouth. “I can work with that. Preferably in college, right? Smart, I bet.”

She swallows, clearing her throat as Christen nods along. Technically she’s telling the truth, she thinks.

“Alright,” Kelley says slowly, watching Christen as she takes the soda. “I can’t tell if you’re being serious or not. Am I actually allowed to find you someone?”

“I’m kidding,” Christen finally says, cringing at the thought of Kelley trying to hook her up with someone. “You know I wouldn’t be down for that.”

“Yeah, I know,” Kelley says, grinning. “Besides, I can’t be letting anyone steal you away from me. If I found you someone, you wouldn’t have time for me anymore.”

“Kelley,” Christen says, aware of the fact that her voice sounds a little strangled. “You know that no one could steal you away from me.”

As she finishes her sentence, her phone screen lights up. Before she can get a look at it, Kelley is grabbing the phone.

“Tobin messaged you,” Kelley reads, finger swiping across the screen. “She stealing you away?”

Christen panics, thinking of her recent messages and how they all involve Kelley. She practically lunges across the table, reaching for her phone and clawing Kelley’s hand in the process.
“Give me that,” she says, wrestling it out of Kelley’s tight grip. “Come on, give it.”

“Whoa,” Kelley says, eyes wide as her grip loosens and she lets Christen have her phone back. “Calm down. I was joking, you know that.”

“I know,” Christen says, horribly embarrassed. “Sorry.”

Kelley, to her credit, doesn’t say anything as Christen recovers, her face slowly returning to it’s normal color.

“Want something for dessert?” Kelley asks when they’re done eating. “And then we can go try to win you a puppy again. Maybe even a goldfish.”

“Yeah,” Christen says quietly, gathering up her trash. “Yeah, let’s go.”

To her credit, Kelley spends at least twenty dollars over the course of the night in her attempt to win Christen a giant stuffed dog. She eventually settles for a small unicorn, presenting it to Christen with a flourish. Christen grins enormously, fingers sticky with powdered sugar from the funnel cake Kelley had bought her. With a surprisingly tentative smile and nervous eyes, Kelley wiggles the snow white unicorn with a sparkly pink horn in front of Christen’s face.

“For you,” Kelley says, almost bashfully. “What do you think?”

“It’s beautiful,” Christen tells her. “Thank you.”

“I know it’s not a big one,” Kelley starts, holding the unicorn so Christen can tuck it in the crook of her elbow, one hand still picking at her dessert. “But it’s better than Skittles, right?”

Christen laughs.

“Kelley, it’s from you,” she says, feeling unexpectedly light from the way Kelley’s nerves seem to be getting the best of her. “I’ll love anything you give me – even Skittles.”

Kelley hides her smile from Christen, reaching forward to pinch off a small chunk of Christen’s funnel cake.

“You better,” she says, soft but assured. “I put a lot of thought into this, I’ll have you know.”

Christen wants to tell Kelley that she knows, she knows that Kelley hadn’t done this on a whim. She knows that Kelley had carefully, uncharacteristically planned out their time together, and she hopes that Kelley knows how much she appreciates it.

She doesn’t get a chance to tell her that though, as Kelley brings the funnel cake to Christen’s mouth.

“I don’t know how you can eat all this,” Kelley mumbles, eyes focused on Christen’s mouth which has fallen open slightly, “and still look as good as you do.”

Christen feels suddenly powerless as she lets Kelley feed her, thumb and forefinger pushing between her lips. She doesn’t know why she does it – maybe it’s instinct, maybe it’s calculated, or maybe it’s nothing – but she closes her mouth around Kelley’s fingers, tongue sweeping forward to lick the sugary residue from the pads of her fingertips. Kelley stands still, patient as Christen goes slowly, tasting something faintly metallic underneath the sweetness. When she’s done, Kelley slides her fingers away at an agonizingly, deliberately unrushed pace.

She doesn’t even wipe them off, Christen vaguely registers. Kelley just lets her hand fall to her side,
eyes now burning into Christen’s.

It isn’t until Kelley clears her throat that Christen remembers to chew what’s in her mouth.

“‘We should probably head home soon,’” Kelley says, her voice sounding rough and scratchy. She clears her throat afterwards, tearing her eyes away to look around them. “‘I think people are leaving.’”

Christen just nods.

“‘Sounds good,’” she says, relieved to find her voice even. “‘Thanks, Kell.’”

Kelley’s eyes dart up to nervously look at Christen.

“‘You’re welcome, Chris,’” she says. “‘Did you have fun?’”

“I did,” Christen confirms, trying not to think about Kelley hand-feeding her what’s left of the funnel cake. “‘Yes, I definitely did.’”
When Tobin calls Christen in the middle of an especially chilly day during the first week of February, Christen doesn’t get a chance to answer the first time around. She’s gotten used to Tobin’s random phone calls, usually when she feels that talking would be more efficient than texting and sometimes when her hands are too busy to type. That doesn’t mean that they don’t come at inopportune times, though, and when her phone starts vibrating in the middle of a lecture, she bites her lip and wishes she could be the kind of student who is okay with stepping outside to take a phone call. As it is, she carefully texts Tobin (*in class, call you after*) and does her best to focus on the professor.

She tries calling when class is released, but Tobin doesn’t answer. Then she finds a missed call after she tucks her phone away while studying in the library with Julie, and an elaborate game of phone tag ensues until the following afternoon. It has Christen frowning – her and Tobin haven’t been this out of sync in a while – but when she finally gets a hold of Tobin once her classes are finished for the day, it’s sweet relief to hear her voice on the end of the line.

“Hey,” Christen breathes out, breath coming out in icy little puffs as she clutches the phone to her ear, other arm crossed against her chest in an attempt to conserve as much body heat as possible. “How are you?”

“I’m good,” Tobin says. “Good to finally hear your voice, though.”

“Yours too,” Christen says, hurrying along the paved brick sidewalk. “I feel like it’s been impossible to catch you.”

“I could say the same,” Tobin points out.

“I’ve had class!” Christen shoots back. “What’s your excuse?”

“I’ve been training!” Tobin claims defensively.

“Yeah, okay,” Christen says, rolling her eyes and biting her lip to hide her smile as she nearly trips over an uneven brick. “What’s so important that you want to talk to me about?”

“Well, as you know, I fly down tomorrow to get all moved in,” Tobin starts.

“I do know,” Christen said, nodding along. “Because you keep reminding me.”

She can feel Tobin’s faux annoyance through the giant sigh she heaves all the way in New Jersey.

“Anyway,” she continues. “How would you feel about trying to coordinate lunch together?”

Christen presses the phone even closer to her ear, trying to ensure that she’s hearing things correctly.


“No, maybe the day after,” Tobin suggests. “So Friday? I can’t do Saturday, I have a bunch of team stuff to worry about.”

“I have class on Friday,” Christen says, already feeling disappointment manifest in her chest.

“So skip,” Tobin says, and Christen can just feel the shrug on the other end of the line.
“I can’t,” Christen says, biting her lip. “One of my professors takes attendance and we’re only allowed one unexcused absence per semester and I don’t want to waste mine this early in the semester.”


Christen slows her speed, running a hand over her hair and thinking through her schedule.

“I can’t drive all the way down there,” Christen warns, and despite the fact that she hasn’t given into anything yet, she still feels like she’s caving.

“That’s fine,” Tobin says automatically. “Do you want to meet halfway? I can find a place.”

“Why can’t we do Sunday?” Christen asks.

“Roommate date,” Tobin says succinctly. “So unless you want to tag along on that –”

“No, no,” Christen says hastily, picking up her pace again, wanting to reach the parking garage before she turns into a popsicle. “So what, just you and I?”

“I mean, yeah,” Tobin says casually. “Unless you wanted to bring Kelley or something?”

Christen thinks about everything that she’s been feeling about Kelley and how she needs to tell someone before she bursts. She’s been updating Tobin regularly but the idea of being face to face and telling her everything that she’s been struggling with – that doesn’t even compare to their rushed phone calls. Of course, she can’t tell Tobin a word if Kelley is there, so Christen just shakes her head before realizing that Tobin can’t see her.

“No, just you and I is fine,” Christen says, feeling a little lightheaded at the idea. “I mean, it will be good to see you. It’s been a while.”

“For sure,” Tobin says confidently, and Christen wonders if she also is remembering their last encounter together. It had been relatively brief but intense, more so than any other goodbye Christen has ever had, and it had been more than enough to wipe the memory of what had happened while Tobin was off at the ACC championship from Christen’s mind.

Well, that isn’t true. Christen still remembers that, more vividly that she will ever admit to herself, but she pretends like she’s forgotten it entirely for the sake of her own sanity.

“So will you text me times and stuff?” Christen says, suddenly feeling a little anxious at the idea of seeing Tobin again. “Like where you want to meet up?”

“Of course,” Tobin says. “Do you care where we go?”

“No,” Christen says after a brief moment’s hesitation while she walks into the parking garage. “No, I don’t care.”

“Good,” Tobin says, and Christen grins into her phone. “I’ve got to go but I’ll text you, okay?”

“Yeah,” Christen says, an inexplicable lump in her throat as she heads for her car. “I’ll talk to you later. Bye.”

“Bye,” Tobin says, hanging up after a few lingering seconds.

Christen doesn’t even remember agreeing to meet up together, but she walks away from the conversation knowing that she would have given in eventually. It’s been too long since they’ve seen
each other and she misses her friend, the one who gives the best hugs and never judges her and is always there to listen to her. Though her and Tobin might not have much history together, Christen is already thankful for their close friendship and Tobin’s willingness to overlook the first month or so of standoffish behavior on Christen’s end. She knows that she hadn’t been nice and that Tobin never had to do the things she did, like sticking up for Christen at the tailgate or volunteering to be her confidante in all things Kelley or crush related. As much as it stresses Christen out, to know that Tobin is that much of a better person than she is for never needing an explicit apology or anything of the sort, she’s done her best to ignore the overwhelming need to do something about it.

Of course, on Friday when she finds herself parked in front of a chain restaurant and nervously staring at her phone waiting for Tobin to text her back and announce her arrival, she wonders if maybe it’s time for her to grow up and apologize, even if she doesn’t have to. Even if Tobin doesn’t need her to.

Five minutes and Christen sends another text. She’s wondering if she got the time or location wrong – after all, she’s in a strange town off I-75 in the middle of nowhere, and it’s entirely possible that she’s fucked up all over again. Just as she’s considering calling Tobin, thumb hovering over the little phone icon, a sudden rap on her window sends her jumping and screaming.

“Holy shit!” Christen yelps, holding a hand to her chest as her phone flies out of her hand and into her passenger seat. Tobin is laughing her head off and opening the unlocked door, eyes crinkling with the enormity of her smile. It does little to soften Christen’s determined scowl, and by the time Tobin notices, she still hasn’t stopped laughing enough to pull herself up from where she’s collapsed against Christen’s open door.

“Tobin,” Christen whines, feeling her heart beat frantically, the scare still sending her nervous system into overdrive. “Not funny.”

“I’m sorry,” Tobin gasps, clutching at her chest as her eye grow wet with mirth. “Oh, I really didn’t think you’d react like that.”

“What did you think I’d react like?” Christen asks incredulously, chest gradually feeling lighter. “Tob – stop laughing!”

“Okay, I’m sorry,” Tobin says breathlessly, wiping at the corners of her eyes. “I’m sorry. It wasn’t funny.”

Christen reaches for her phone and waits for Tobin to move so that she can get out of the car.

“I’m sorry,” Tobin says sincerely, and the way she makes direct eye contact makes Christen squirm uncomfortably. “I didn’t think you’d be that scared.”

“It’s okay,” Christen accepts begrudgingly. No matter how mad she wants to be with Tobin, it’s hard to keep frowning when Tobin is so eager and apologetic. “I know you didn’t. I forgive you.”

Tobin’s answering beaming grin is enough to force a small smile onto Christen’s face, and when Tobin swoops down to wrap her arms around Christen’s neck, it takes her by surprise but in a different way than before. It still makes her heart pound irregularly, but she feels more centered than before – more calm, more grounded, and a little less like she’s about to have her life taken from her.

“Hey,” Christen says in shock, snaking an arm around to wrap around Tobin’s back. The angle is awkward and Tobin’s knees are bent at an uncomfortable angle to reach Christen where she sits in the front seat of her sedan, but it’s warm and welcome. Tobin smells different and Christen wonders if she’s overthinking things, if Tobin seems different because it’s been a while and not because she’s
been flying all over the country and is a different person than the one Christen remembers.

“Missed you,” Tobin says warmly, still clutching close.

Christen chuckles, and it makes Tobin draw back with a confused smile on her face.

“What?” she says, brows furrowed and lips pursing. “What’s funny about me missing you?”

“Is this part of being your friend in real life?” Christen teases, Tobin finally backing up far enough so that she can climb out of her car with plenty of room to spare. “Scare tactics and random hugs?”

Tobin rolls her eyes.

“That wasn’t random,” she says. “I was saying hi. That was your welcome hug. Remind me not to give you a goodbye hug.”

“Well,” Tobin says, something in her voice strained. “I guess this lunch marks the consummation of our friendship.”

A smiling hostess appears before Christen can respond, and by the time they’re seated in a small booth, she’s forgotten what she meant to say in return. Instead she’s distracted by the large menu, flipping slowly and carefully through the menu while trying to agree with Tobin on a starter.

“Good,” Tobin says, nodding and messing with the straw wrapper, balling it up before tossing it in Christen’s direction. “I’m tired, but I figure that’s normal for someone who’s been moving into a new apartment for the past twenty-four hours.”
“How’s your apartment?” Christen asks, neatly swiping the wrapper to the side before reaching for her water. “How many roommates do you have? Do you like them? Have you met your teammates?”

“You have a lot of questions,” Tobin says observantly, arms stretched out so her forearms rest on the tabletop.

Christen blushes.

“I’m just wondering,” she says, wondering if Tobin doesn’t want to talk about this kind of stuff. “I mean, we don’t have to talk about it if you don’t want to. I figured that you’re probably tired of talking about Kelley though, so I thought I’d give you a break?”

“Isn’t that why we’re here?” Tobin questions, tapping her fingers against the table. “To talk about you and Kelley? I mean, you told me about your little date at the carnival thing but you never updated me after that.”

Christen shifts in her seat, uncomfortable with Tobin thinking that Christen only uses her to talk about Kelley. She knows that that’s what they spend the majority of their time talking about and that it’s what had brought them together in the first place, but she knows that their newfound friendship is based on more than that. At least she hopes it is. Christen hopes that she hasn’t spent the past couple of months talking about only Kelley.

“Kelley’s fine,” Christen says dismissively, ignoring the mental replay of the argument that they’d had when Kelley had discovered where Christen was going. “I just want to talk about you for once.”

Tobin looks taken aback and it makes Christen cringe, wondering if she’s really been that selfish and greedy with the time they spend talking. If Tobin is truly surprised that Christen wants to talk about her, it must be bad.

“Well,” Tobin says, drawing out the word. “I only have one other roommate. Her name is Allie.”

“Allie,” Christen repeats.

Tobin nods.

“She’s nice. I already knew her, actually. She got called up to the national team with me.”

“Really?” Christen asks. It’s hard to keep track of the goings on in the world of women’s soccer, but she figures that this is good news for Tobin.

Tobin nods. “Yeah, so that’s nice. We were kind of friends already because of youth teams and stuff. I haven’t met my teammates yet, that’s what I’m doing tomorrow.”

“Are you excited?” Christen asks. “Nervous?”

“Yeah,” Tobin admits, chewing on her bottom lip. “Both.”

“They’ll love you,” Christen says encouragingly. “I mean, you’re nice.”

Tobin laughs, the noise catching in her throat and turning into a snort halfway through.

“That’s not what I’m worried about,” she tells Christen. I mean, I’m sure they’ll like me. I’ll be their teammate. I’m worried about how I’m going to play with people with more professional experience than me.”
“Oh,” Christen says, her blush reappearing. “That makes sense.”

“Yeah,” Tobin says with a nod. “That’s enough about me, though. How have you been?”

“No, I want to hear more about you,” Christen says, doing her best to sound convincing.

“All this attention from you,” Tobin says cheekily, grinning and looking Christen directly in the eye. “What am I supposed to do with all this pressure?”

Christen flounders, searching for words that can’t seem to make it out of her mouth. Tobin seems to enjoy the way Christen struggles, the outer corners of her eyes crinkles as she smiles and maintains eye contact until Christen is saved by the appearance of their food. Once they’re both settled down, Tobin armed with her requested ketchup and Christen delicately winding pasta around her fork tines, things feel a little more serious and Christen feels like she can maybe speak now.

“I feel like I should apologize,” she starts out, tentative and quiet, perhaps mumbling more than she ever would normally.

Tobin’s brows draw together and she looks at Christen perplexedly, mouth full of food that she chews slowly and decisively. By the time she finally swallows and speaks, Christen is feeling nervous – like maybe she shouldn’t have said anything at all.

“What for?” Tobin asks, reaching for her water and sucking on the straw.

Christen shrugs hopelessly, wondering if what she’s doing is unnecessary. Maybe Tobin harbors no ill will towards Christen anymore and this is all a mistake. Regardless, it’s something that she feels like she has to do.

“You know,” Christen says, shrugging some more in an attempt to appear as though she doesn’t care about what she has to say. “For being mean to you.”

Tobin’s face softens unexpectedly quickly.

“Chris,” she says, “you weren’t mean. You didn’t want to talk to me and that was okay.”

Christen frowns.

“I was so rude to you, though,” she says, a little shocked at how gentle Tobin is being with her about this. “I mean, I had no good reason for the way I treated you.”

“I thought you had a good reason,” Tobin says, dragging a fry through a pile of ketchup. “I might not have liked that you ignored me the way you did, but it wasn’t mean and at least you had a good reason.”

“I did not have a good reason,” Christen says, growing increasingly confused. “Tobin, I thought that you were trying to steal my best friend away from me. Jealousy isn’t really a good reason for anything.”

Tobin has frozen with her fry halfway to her mouth, jaw dropped open and her eyes sliding over to lock onto Christen’s puzzled gaze.

“Wait,” Tobin says slowly, lowering her hand from where it rests in the middle of the air. “What are you talking about?”

“I’m talking about when I first met you,” Christen explains. “When we barely knew each other and
you kept tagging along even though I just wanted time with Kelley. What are you talking about?"

Tobin clears her throat, dropping the ketchup soaked fry on her plate and reaching for a napkin, wiping off her greasy fingertips.

“Nothing,” she mumbles, eyes on her fingers. “I was talking about nothing.”

But Christen’s curiosity is piqued, and she just can’t leave it alone.

“No, I want to know,” she says insistently. “What were you talking about?”

Tobin sighs, falling back to slump in her seat as she refuses to look at Christen, instead tapping her fingers against the edge of the table.

“You don’t want to know,” she says offhandedly.

“I do,” Christen presses. “I really do. Will you please tell me?”

Tobin sighs again, heavier this time, and slumps a little more before grabbing her original fry.

“I was referring to when you actively avoided me for all of November,” Tobin says, fast like she doesn’t want Christen to hear her. “You know, after you called me at the ACC championship game.”

“Oh,” Christen says, hot patches of red appearing on her cheeks. Instead of responding further, she stuffs her face with some more pasta.

“Yeah,” Tobin says, sounding a little embarrassed and defeated. “Forget about it.”

Christen does, chewing as slowly as she can.

“You don’t have to apologize though,” Tobin says, once it has become apparent that Christen isn’t going to continue the conversation anytime soon. “I get why you acted the way you did.”

“That doesn’t make it alright,” Christen can’t help but say, shaking her head. “I really was awful to you, and you didn’t deserve it at all.”

“Maybe, but you had a reason. Even if you think you didn’t, it made sense, what you did. It wasn’t like you actually hated me.”

“I did, though,” Christen says seriously. “I really did hate you at the time. I was convinced that you were what was keeping Kelley and me apart.”

“You didn’t even know me,” Tobin points out. “How could you have hated me?”

Christen blushed, not wanting to admit that Tobin might be right. Part of her wishes that she could see things like Tobin does, so simply and easily. Tobin is far too forgiving and nice when it comes to Christen, and she thinks about how she doesn’t deserve that.

“I just want to apologize, okay?” Christen says, embarrassed and thinking that she shouldn’t have brought it up at all.

Tobin’s hand shoots out across the table to land awkwardly on top of Christen’s.

“Thank you,” she says sincerely. “That means a lot to me.”

Christen just nods, food feeling too stuck in her throat for her to reply.
Tobin clears her throat before quickly pulling her hand back, dropping it in her lap.

“So,” Tobin says, her voice a little rough-sounding. “I have a proposition for you.”

“Yeah?” Christen asks, thankful for the subject change.

“So,” Tobin starts, going back to her food, “I don’t know what you’re doing for spring break, but the national team is playing a game in the area at the beginning of March.”

“Yeah?” Christen asks. “Are you going to play?”

“I mean, I’m pretty sure I’m going to get called up,” Tobin says with a nonchalant shrug. Her innate confidence makes Christen grin, because only Tobin could get away with saying something like that without being obnoxious or conceited about it. “But I was wondering if you’d want to come.”

“Oh,” Christen says, slightly taken aback even though it makes sense. Of course, if the team is playing within driving distance, Tobin would invite Christen. “Um, yeah. I’d love to.”

“Awesome,” Tobin says, grinning. “Who do you think would want to go?”


“Yeah, who,” Tobin repeats. “Like you’d want to bring Kelley, right?”

For a second Christen’s brain had stopped working, making her think that Tobin was inviting her, just her, to the game. Of course she wasn’t though, of course she wants all of her old teammates at the game.

“Right,” Christen says, drawing out the word as she thinks. “Yeah, I’d want to bring Kelley. Maybe Julie. Alex – you’re close to her, right?”

Tobin nods.

“I guess I’ll text people and find out,” she muses. “See if we can all hang out while we’re together.”

Something in Christen’s stomach drops.

“That sounds like a great idea,” she says, doing her best to smile.

“You guys would have to get a hotel,” Tobin continues. “But it would be fun, right?”

“Definitely,” Christen says tightly. “I’m going to go to the bathroom, okay?”

Tobin just bops her head in understanding and shoves more food into her mouth, and Christen gets up and does her best to ignore the sinking feeling inside of her.

When Christen gets back, after a few minutes of looking at her face in the mirror and wondering if maybe she shouldn’t have come, it’s to see Tobin grinning at the waitress and she hands her back the check, shiny card poking out of the top of the folder.

“Hey!” Christen exclaims. “You should have let me pay!”

“I asked you to lunch,” Tobin reminds her, as if Christen could forget. “You drove two hours here to meet me, so lunch is on me.”

“I’m paying next time,” Christen says warningly.
“I like that you think there’s going to be a next time,” Tobin jokes, propping up her elbow on the table and resting her chin in her hand as she shoots Christen her widest, most charming smile.

Christen blushing.

“So,” Tobin says, “how’s Kelley?”

“Good,” Christen says. Kelley is safe for her, something that she can talk about without feeling like she’s constantly squirming.

“I mean, are you making any progress?” Tobin asks.

“No,” Christen says as if it’s obvious, because it should be.

“You should tell her,” Tobin says, and it’s so steady and calm that Christen almost wants to listen to her.

“You know I can’t,” Christen says, shaking her head. “Where would I even begin?”

“No matter what happens,” Tobin begins, “she’s your best friend. If she’s really your best friend, she won’t care. No matter what happens, if Kelley is the person you think she is, she’ll still be there.”

“What if she isn’t?” Christen asks, heart picking up pace at the mere thought of telling Kelley how she feels. “What if I screw it all up?”

“You won’t,” Tobin says surely.

“I want to believe you,” Christen says, taking a deep breath to steady herself. “But it’s hard.”

“I know,” Tobin says, smiling sadly, softly. “But I really think that if you’re still stuck on her, you at least need to take a chance. It’s been months, Chris. This isn’t going away.”

Something about Tobin’s words feels wrong, but Christen just nods in agreement.

“I know,” she says past the lump in her throat. “I know it isn’t.”

Tobin signs the check when it’s brought back to the table and then they’re off, Tobin insisting on walking Christen to her car.

“So hopefully I’ll see you at the game next month,” Tobin says hopefully. “I’ll be at Olympic qualifying this month, but I’ll do my best to stay in touch.”

“You better,” Christen warns. “Who else will call me in the middle of my lectures?”

“I’ll get Alex to do it,” Tobin jokes, and Christen glares at her. “Okay fine, I’ll make sure to call you during each and every lecture of yours.”

Christen finds herself smiling despite herself.

“I’ll miss you,” she finds herself saying before she can help it.

“I miss you already,” Tobin says, and even though her tone is teasing and light and she’s smiling largely, Christen can detect just a hint of bittersweet underneath it all. It makes her feel a little better because she feels it too, feels reluctant to let go after getting Tobin back for such a short amount of time.
“We’ll see each other soon, right?” Christen asks, and she’s afraid that she sounds needy and clingy, but Tobin just reaches out her arms and looks at her expectantly. It’s harder than Christen would like it to be, harder than it should be to step forward and into Tobin’s embrace, but once she’s tentatively wrapping her arms around Tobin’s long torso and feeling the way Tobin gather her in and holds her close, she’s wondering what was holding her back.

“Definitely,” Tobin reassure her. “As soon as possible. Why else do you think I’m asking you to come to the game?”

Tobin is warm like sunshine, sunny and brilliant against Christen in the cold weather that February has gifted them with. It makes Christen want to crawl closer, underneath Tobin’s skin to soak up all of her warmth. Instead she settles for clutching at her tightly, feeling Tobin squeeze her even harder until they’re pressed impossibly close together. Christen hates the emotion that suddenly wells up in her, and she rests her face against Tobin’s jacketed shoulder and closes her eyes against the prickling of tears.

“I’m there,” Christen says, fingers clinging to Tobin’s sides, gripping as hard as she can.

“I know you will,” Tobin says quietly, stroking a hand down Christen’s back. Even though her thick jacket she can feel the little trails left behind. “Thank you.”

“Thank you,” Christen returns, hoping that Tobin understands that she’s thanking her for more than just the invitation to the game.

She’s thanking her for being there for her whenever she’s needed someone. For being her spine, for being there to confide in, for being there to give advice without Christen even having to ask. For encouraging her, for making her feel safe, for helping her step out of her box just enough but not too much. Christen is thanking Tobin for being her friend, for being a better person than Christen deserves, for making sure that she’s always there. She’s thanking her for everything, for being in her life and making it better.

Tobin seems to understand, pulling Christen back in when she goes to pull away. She buries her own face in Christen’s neck and holds still, refusing to let go, and Christen waits. She waits for a while, until Tobin’s grip slackens and Tobin straightens up, her face a little blotchy but her eyes dry.

“Text me when you get back safe,” Tobin tells her. “Don’t make me ask Kelley.”

“You too,” Christen says, getting into her car. “I’ll talk to you later, okay?”

“Okay,” Tobin agrees, and they wave at each other before Christen reluctantly backs out of her parking space and drives away.

* 

“On a scale of one to ten – “

Christen groans, yanking her earphones out of her ears.

“What?” Kelley asks, clueless.

“Kell,” Christen says through gritted teeth, frustration seeping through. “You know I hate it when you do that, especially while I’m trying to study.”

“Your test isn’t until Monday,” Kelley says dismissively. “Anyway.”
“Kell,” Christen says warningly.
Kelley ignores her.

“On a scale of one to ten, am I single, or am I single?”

“Kell,” Christen grinds out, picking up her earbuds to put them back in.

“No, seriously,” Kelley says loudly, throwing down her lab notebook. “I’m cute, right?”

“Very cute,” Christen deadpans.

“So then why am I all alone on Valentine’s Day?” Kelley asks, already indignant and ready to fight.

Christen sighs, setting her earphones down and pausing her music. She knows when Kelley is about to launch into a rant of hers, and clearly one is coming.

“It isn’t Valentine’s Day yet,” Christen reminds her as patiently as she can. “You still have a couple of days before, you might be able to get a date.”

Kelley scoffs. “It’s Friday,” she says bitterly, staring down at her notes and twirling her pencil between her fingers. “Who in the world is going to ask me out before Sunday?”

“You’re a catch, Kell,” Christen says carefully. “Even if no one asks you out, you’re still a catch.”

Kelley grumbles a little under her breath and Christen remains quiet, afraid that she’s already said too much. They work in near silence for a little while, with Kelley mumbling to herself as she rereads her lab report and Christen clicking away at her online practice test with perhaps a little more focus than needed.

“I mean, it’s Friday night,” Kelley bursts out less than five minutes later. Christen tries not to roll her eyes, knowing that Kelley will miss the fondness in the gesture. “It’s Friday night and I’m in the library with you right now, doing work that isn’t due until Tuesday. That’s how lame I am.”

“Thanks,” Christen says dryly.

“No offense,” Kelley says quickly.

“Your sorority sisters asked you to hang out earlier,” Christen points out. “You could have gone out with them. Found someone to take you out on Sunday.”

Kelley pretends to gag.

“No thanks,” she says. “I’d rather be alone.”

Christen doesn’t quite understand because Kelley used to love going out with all her sisters on the weekends – weeknights, too – but she just accepts it, dipping her head in a nod and going back to her computer screen. Of course that doesn’t last very long, as soon enough Kelley is heaving giant sighs and throwing her pen several feet away.

“I’m not getting that for you,” Christen says, not even blinking.

“Stop being mean to me,” Kelley whines.

“I’m not,” Christen says, looking up in surprise. “Kell, you’re being silly. We both know that a million people in the world would kill to be your valentine.”
“If there were, I wouldn’t be here right now,” Kelley says testily.

“How can I convince you that you’re a catch?” Christen asks rhetorically as she goes back to the last handful of questions.

“By getting me a date for Sunday,” Kelley moans, lying down on the library floor. “I’m desperate, Christen. Ugly and unwanted and desperate.”

Christen feels the heat rising in her cheeks as she peeks over at Kelley, eyes closed and lashes fluttering, lips soft and pink as they form words and pout in between sentences.

“You’re really not,” Christen tries to assure her. “You’re not ugly at all, and you’re definitely unwanted.”

“Well, no one wants me,” Kelley says dully, cracking an eye and looking over at Christen who is biting her lip and trying to hold back from telling Kelley how truly wanted she is. “Are you laughing at me?”

“No!” Christen says aghast, sure that her cheeks are flaming red. “I would never!”

“You are!” Kelley claims, pushing up on her elbows and angling her neck to look at Christen. “Christen, stop!”

“I’m not doing anything,” Christen denies, biting her bottom lip and shaking her head. “Really, Kell.”

“You’re making fun of me,” Kelley says accusatorily.


“So then what are you doing?” Kelley pushes. “Because you’re acting super fucking sketchy.”

“I’m not doing anything,” Christen says, praying that Kelley drops it.

“I feel like you’re lying,” Kelley says, pouting exaggeratedly.

“Kelley,” Christen says seriously, her heart sprinting along and her stomach flipping as she sets her laptop to the side. “I just think that anyone would be lucky enough to have you as their Valentine’s Day date.”

“Like who?” Kelley says testily. “Do you secretly know someone who wants to ask me out? Is that what this is about? You’re making fun of me because someone wants to ask me out and I’m bitching about nothing?”

“Yeah,” Christen says, feeling like she’s about to pass out, nodding along mechanically and looking at the carpet. “Yeah, I know someone that would love to ask you out.”

“Who?” Kelley asks, clearly not believing Christen.

Christen clears her throat a few times, and just before Kelley looks like she’s about to snap and explode, she utters a single word.

“Me.”

“You?” Kelley asks, confused. “What, you want to go on a friend date or something? Christen, if
you want friend time, you just have to ask.”

Christen feels like she’s dying, like her entire body is being burned alive in the frigid library. She tried and it didn’t work, and she should probably go with what Kelley is saying and forget all about Tobin’s advice. But Tobin has been texting her ever since their lunch together, little bits about how she believes in her and knows that she can do it, and Christen feels like she can’t disappoint Tobin who will be so proud of her when she hears what’s happened, even if it all ends up disastrously.

“No, Kell,” Christen says, her voice small and cracking. “I’d kill to be your valentine.”

Kelley still looks confused, but it’s a sort of façade that Christen prays isn’t hiding anything cruel.

“Christen,” Kelley says slowly. “I’m talking about a romantic valentine.”

Christen swallows difficultly.

“I know,” she says, her voice weak and betraying her nerves. Her palms are sweaty and so is the back of her neck, and she feels like she’s about to be sick in the middle of the library. “So am I.”

Kelley goes dead silent for what feel like ages. Christen waits, counting down the second in her head until she loses track at which point she just starts over.

“Christen,” Kelley says, suddenly sitting up and jumping into motion. “You’re kidding, right?”

Christen shakes her head slowly, deliberately back and forth so Kelley can see even though she’s determinedly looking elsewhere.

“No, Kell,” she says quietly, pretty sure that she’s going to be sick soon. “I’m not kidding.”

Kelley makes a strangled sort of indignant noise and she begins organizing her things, even crawling the short distance to retrieve her pencil from earlier.

“No, Kell,” she says quietly, pretty sure that she’s going to be sick soon. “I’m not kidding.”

Kelley makes a strangled sort of indignant noise and she begins organizing her things, even crawling the short distance to retrieve her pencil from earlier.

“Christen,” she says painfully. “I’m a girl.”

“I know,” Christen says, nodding and chancing a glance at Kelley’s face, scared and waiting for a punchline that isn’t coming.

“You don’t like girls,” Kelley says, tugging at her backpack’s zipper.

“I like you,” Christen says, and this time it’s a little stronger and something seems to jolt Kelley out of whatever trance she’s in, forcing her to turn and look at Christen. Kelley’s expression loses it’s frantic edge for a second, and Kelley is then entreating and apologetic.

“I don’t know what to think about that,” she confesses. “Christen, since when? How?”

“Since a while ago,” Christen admits shamefully, feeling the tell-tale prickle behind her eyelids and the sharp burn in her nose. “I’m sorry I didn’t say anything; I just didn’t know how.”

Kelley hesitates, bringing up a hand to scrub over her face as she lets out a long sigh.

“All right,” she says. “Okay. You’re sure about this?”

Christen nods.

Kelley scoots forward until she’s facing Christen, palms open and outstretched.
“I don’t know what to think about this,” Kelley admits. “So can I think about it for a bit?”

“Yeah,” Christen whispers, her voice failing her as she tries to hold it together. She feels like falling apart, but she can’t in front of Kelley. Not now.

“Just a little while,” Kelley promises. “I just want to think about it and then we can talk about this.”

Christen wonders what there could possibly be to talk about, seeing as how barely anything has been said thus far. Still, she nods along.

“Okay,” she responds. “Take as much time as you need.”

“Thank you,” Kelley says, cracking a smile. “Thank you. I knew I could count on you to understand.”

Christen offers up a weak smile and Kelley leans in – almost as if to kiss Christen’s forehead before she thinks better of it, pausing and scooting back.

“Love you, Christen,” Kelley says as she packs up.

Christen wants to say it back, but rejection is registering as Kelley gets up to leave and it chokes her up, clogging her throat and keeping her from returning the sentiment that has always felt as easy as breathing for the two of them.

She doesn’t cry like she thought she would, once Kelley is gone. Instead she fumbles for her phone, clumsily navigating her way through the screen until she eventually finds where she wants to be and presses call, the tinny ring grating on her nerves as she waits impatiently, airway swelling with emotion.

“Hey,” Tobin says, her voice happy and warm. “What’s up?”

That’s all it really takes for Christen to burst into sobs – loud ugly things that catch in her throat and take her breath away in the worst of ways. She feels sick as she cries and she can’t even stop long enough to explain what’s happened. Instead she just cries, only barely aware that the floor isn’t completely abandoned as she loudly sobs her feelings out, exposed and raw for Tobin to hear over the line.


And she continues like that while Christen cries, burying her face in her jacket and feeling sobs wrack her entire body until she grows too exhausted to continue.

It takes a while though, until she is coherent enough to form words. Tobin is patient though, and Christen thinks for a brief moment about how lucky she is to have such a wonderful friend.
what would you do if i kissed you?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

While trying to avoid becoming a complete cliché, that is exactly what Christen has turned into.

She really has tried to be strong. After crying to Tobin for what had felt like hours, long after the sun had set and Tobin had repeatedly asked if there was anything she could do (there wasn’t), she’d returned back to the apartment at a late enough hour that Kelley could have been asleep already. She hadn’t been asleep, though – she hadn’t even been there. It looked like she had come home at one point, her backpack dumped on the floor and a half-drunk water bottle sitting on the kitchen table. She had clearly left though, her car missing from the parking lot and evidence of clothes strewn all over her bedroom floor when Christen tentatively poked her head it.

Christen hadn’t been upset. She understood that Kelley needed some time to herself, no matter how much it hurt to delay the inevitable. There was no universe in which Kelley turned around and confessed that she’d had feelings for Christen all along. In fact, in all hypothetical scenarios that Christen dreamed up that night, she ended up hurt and disappointed and, ultimately, alone.

Tobin had been patient with her, reassuring her that she’d done the right thing.

“I’m sorry that it didn’t work out the way you wanted it to,” she’d said sincerely, clearly in the middle of something as she talked, attention only partially on Christen but still on her nonetheless. “But listen, at least it’s out there now. It might not feel like it now, but you no longer have to carry it yourself. It’s not a burden or a secret anymore. It might take a while, but you’ll feel better for having told her. I promise.”

Christen was skeptical of such a promise, unsure of how Tobin could so wholeheartedly promise her something like that, but she held onto it through the night and into the next morning. She made her way to the shelter the next morning, sniffing through her duties and appreciating Lauren and Amy’s easy willingness to attribute it to seasonal allergies. Sitting with the dogs had made her feel minutely better and a little less alone. Tobin had encouraged her to not be alone while upset, even going so far as to suggest that she call Julie, but Christen had shook her head.

“No,” she had said, wiping at her eyes as she climbed down the library stairs Friday night. “No, she’s off with her boyfriend for the weekend.”

“I can ask Alex to hang out with you, or Lindsey,” Tobin had offered, and Christen felt small and ashamed that she was so dependent on Tobin and Kelley that she couldn’t even be counted on to hang out with other people without their help. If Ali had still been in town Christen might have called her, but she’d left the week before to try and sort things out for her upcoming season in the league.

“I’ll be okay,” Christen had assured her through a sniffle. “I’ll go to the shelter in the morning.”

“You have friends there, right?” Tobin had asked. “That’s a good idea.”

Afterwards though, once Christen had stretched her time there out as long as possible, she’d been forced to return back to the apartment after a very slow trip through Target and then Publix. She’d been wary of returning to see Kelley, not wanting to face her without being able to prepare herself – although Christen wasn’t sure that she’d ever be prepared – but it turned out that her efforts in procrastination had been in vain. Kelley wasn’t home, and didn’t look as though she’d been back at
all. It made Christen anxious because she couldn’t remember the last time Kelley had stayed away for so long, and because she wasn’t prepared for what to do in case Kelley happened to walk in. So Christen holed up in her bedroom with a glass of water and a box of cheese crackers, watching tv and crying intermittently.

Tobin had texted, apologizing for being stuck in team stuff and not being able to call, and Christen had texted back feeling like an emotional zombie. It was quickly becoming numbing, the way she felt overwhelmed with tears. There were only so many times her and Tobin could rehash what had happened before it got exhausting.

Sunday, Christen spends at the library. Kelley still hasn’t returned to the apartment by the time Christen comes back home around dinner time, mentally worn out as she throws herself onto the couch with a pint of ice cream and scrolls through the tv channels until she finds something suitably sad enough to match how she feels, alone and rejected on Valentine’s Day. Halfway through a movie that she isn’t even watching, one eye on the screen while she mindlessly thumbs through her phone with the other, the mechanical clicking of the lock on the front door sends her heart rate skyrocketing.

Even before Kelley appears, Christen knows that it’s her. She looks run ragged and exhausted, heavy bags under her eyes and wrinkled clothes hanging off of her. It scares Christen for a half a second, in between the initial panic and the realization that she might not be able to avoid this confrontation any longer. Christen freezes from where she is on the couch, sunk in between pillows with a throw blanket covering here, spoon in the middle of digging out a chunk of brownie from her ice cream, and stares at Kelley who just stares right back.

“Christen,” Kelley says, her voice uncharacteristically tiny and nervous. “Chris, can I shower and then talk to you?”

Christen nods automatically, hope ballooning up in her even as she tries to stop it. She knows that only disappointment is coming her way, but some too-large part of her is irrationally thinking that maybe Kelley has spent the weekend thinking things over and has reached an epiphany, one where she has decided to give Christen a chance and not crush her best friend’s heart in the process. So Christen nods and Kelley offers up a weak smile in return, heading straight to her room without dumping her shoes or her bag by the door as she always does. Normally Christen hates it when Kelley does it, leaving her things out to be tripped on by anyone who enters the apartment, but the area looks a little lonely, occupied by only Kelley’s backpack for once. She hates it, the way she’s missed having Kelley around for the past forty-eight hours or so. They’ve spent longer apart before, Kelley has been gone from the apartment longer than that, but something about her absence has left Christen too much time to think about exactly how much she needs her best friend around. She cares less about Kelley rejecting her romantically than she does about losing her best friend, she recognizes this, but that doesn’t make preparing herself for the inescapable rejection any easier.

Kelley must take her time, because Christen has nearly emptied the pint of ice cream by the time the shower shuts off. She drains a glass of water while waiting, nervous and knowing that she’s dehydrated from all the tears she’s been crying. When Kelley finally emerges, she looks slightly more human, her hair pulled up and away from her clean face, wrapped in soft, warm clothes.

“I’ve been doing a lot of thinking,” she says, folding herself into the opposite end of the couch, down by Christen’s socked feet.

She wants to be patient, but Christen can’t help herself.

“Where were you?” she wants to know, trying to sound as neutral as possible.
Kelley shrugs but answers.

“With Alex,” she says. “And Syd. We went out, I guess. Alex has a nice bed.”

Christen’s stomach flip-flops and she feels sick at the thoughts that flood her mind despite the fact that she knows none of them are true.

“I didn’t know where you were,” Christen says pathetically, because she’d been wondering the entire time where Kelley was and whether or not she was okay.

“You didn’t ask,” Kelley points out, and she’s right. Christen had been too afraid of her to bother asking. It shuts her up, sending her scraping at the bottom of her ice cream container, eating all the melted dregs and bits left behind.

“I didn’t know that you felt that way,” Kelley picks back up. “You said that this wasn’t new. How long has it been going on?”

“Kelley,” Christen murmurs brokenly, shoulders slumping as she feels her heart drop into her stomach. “I just – I don’t want to talk about this.”

“You’re the one who said something,” Kelley says stubbornly. “You clearly felt something strong enough to tell me – “

“I shouldn’t have,” Christen interrupts. “I shouldn’t have said anything. I wish I hadn’t. I wish I’d kept it to myself, so can’t we just pretend that I didn’t fuck up?”

She winces at her own words and the way that Kelley flinches at them, looking like Christen has hurt her.

“Christen,” Kelley says, unusually patient and understanding. “I just want to talk about this. You kind of came out of nowhere with this, you know? I’m trying to make sense of it all but I can’t do that without you. You’re my best friend, Christen, and I thought I knew you better than anyone but it turns out that I don’t know you at all.”

It’s then that Christen sees tears pooling in the corners of Kelley’s eyes, and she struggles to sit up straight and lean forward, desperate for Kelley not to hurt just because of something so stupid.

“It’s not like that,” Christen says as quickly as she can. “You do know me Kell, I promise that you do. This was something that you didn’t know because I didn’t want you to.”

“Why wouldn’t you just tell me?” Kelley asks hotly, blinking furiously. “I thought that you trusted me. I thought that we’re supposed to tell each other everything.”

Something about that statement makes Christen laugh in disbelief.

“Kelley, you don’t tell me anything!” she says, scoffing. “You didn’t tell me when you had your first kiss, when you first got drunk, when you lost your virginity – you’re just pissed because for once in my life, I decided not to tell you something and instead keep it to myself. We don’t tell each other everything – I tell you everything. You might be my best friend Kelley, but you sure as hell don’t act like it sometimes.”

“Just because you overshare all the fucking time doesn’t mean that I’m any less of a friend to you,” Kelley snaps, and it makes Christen’s eyes sting and her blood boil. “This is a big thing, Christen. I deserved to know.”
“I didn’t want to tell you!” Christen cries out, praying that she can hold it together just long enough until this conversation ends. She doesn’t want to look weak, not in front of Kelley who is so strong and holding all the cards. The ball is in her court and Christen is vulnerable and she doesn’t like it, so it’s all she can do to hold tight and be as strong as she can, even if that isn’t very strong at all.

“Okay? I was trying to deal with it and I didn’t want you to know because you’d never like me back and I didn’t want to deal with that.”

“So then why did you tell me?” Kelley challenges. “Why decide to finally tell me after apparently a long time of knowing?”

“Because it was killing me,” Christen says quietly, falling back into her pillows as a single tear runs down her cheek. She turns her head to the side, pretending to get comfortable while wiping her cheek on her shoulder. “It was eating me from the inside. Every time I looked at you, it was all I could think about. It’s hard enough being your friend sometimes, Kell. This was all more than I could handle and I thought that just maybe if I told you, I might feel better. Clearly I was wrong though.”

Kelley falls silent, fiddling with her fingers and looking between her lap and Christen. She looks a little stumped, lost for words and out of steam for the time being. Christen knows that they’ve been saying nasty things to each other, things that they’ll have to apologize for later, but the fact of the matter is that everything they’ve said is true.

“Does it even matter when it started?” Kelley asks dully, reaching up to mess with her hair as she stares blankly at Christen.

“Over the summer,” Christen says heavily. “When you called me. Before that, I had no idea that you were into girls at all. It was like I couldn’t get it out of my head – the idea of you and some girl, naked, together. I kept picturing myself with you like that and I just knew, knew that it was something that needed to go away.”

“But it didn’t.”

“But it didn’t,” Christen agrees. “So I just couldn’t ignore it anymore.”

It’s like a light bulb suddenly goes off in Kelley’s head.

“Is this why you’ve been acting so weird ever since you came back into town?” she wants to know.

“Yeah,” Christen admits simply. It’s starting to feel a little easier, talking about this with Kelley. She still doesn’t like it, doesn’t like the fact that she’s exposed herself and is now laying herself out in front of Kelley for her to see, exposed and raw with nothing to protect her but herself.

She briefly wishes that Kelley was the kind of person who was just as worried about protecting Christen as she is about protecting herself. If she was though, she wouldn’t be Kelley and Christen probably wouldn’t like her as much as she does.

“So you’ve liked me since the summer,” Kelley marvels. “Ever since I – “

“Kell,” Christen says, her entire body cringing, “can we maybe not?”

“Sorry,” Kelley says, and Christen wonders if she really is or not. “I’m just trying to figure this out.”

“I thought that’s why you were gone all weekend,” Christen says. “Didn’t you say that you were thinking about things while you were gone?”
Kelley bristles.

“Yeah, Christen, I was trying to come to terms with the fact that my best friend since childhood has apparently been harboring a massive crush on me for months now,” Kelley spits out, volatile once more.

“What did you want me to do?” Christen begs, just wanting for Kelley to decide what she wants to do about this and make it easier on the both of them. “In a perfect world, what would I have done about it?”

“In a perfect world you wouldn’t have had a crush on me in the first place,” Kelley exclaims bitterly.

“Wow,” Christen says, a couple more tears slipping down her cheeks, stinging as they go. “Tell me how you really feel.”

“Christen,” Kelley says, suddenly small and timid, reaching forward and placing a hand on Christen’s leg. “I didn’t mean it like that, you know that. I just wish that things didn’t have to be so complicated now.”

“They don’t have to be,” Christen promises. “We can go back to how we were before. You can forget that I said anything, I’ll work on getting over you, and we can be nothing but best friends again.”

“God, Chris, I wish I could,” Kelley says miserably, fingers clutching tighter on Christen’s calf, her grip almost painful. “But it’s like the idea is in my head now, and I can’t stop thinking about it.”

“That’s how it felt with me,” Christen says softly. “Like I couldn’t ignore it.”

“That’s exactly how I feel,” Kelley says, bobbing her head in a nod.

Christen is nervous, her entire body on edge and feeling out of sync and only making her feel even more anxious about this conversation. Part of her just wants it to be over, for her and Kelley to reach a conclusion so that they don’t ever have to talk about it again. She wants for Kelley to learn to deal with it the way she had, privately and without letting it affect their friendship. The two of them can deal with the repercussions separately. It sounds like a good plan to Christen, and she’s just about to suggest it when Kelley rises up onto her knees, hand pressing down uncomfortably on Christen’s shin in the process.

“I can’t stop thinking about you,” Kelley says, eyes darting all over the place, from Christen’s head to toe. It feels like she’s being analyzed, being sized up. Christen just wants to pass whatever visual test Kelley is putting her through right now, so they can move forward from this hell.

“We’re best friends,” Christen says, feeling exhausted. “It’s okay for you to think about me. This will pass, though.”

“I don’t think it will,” Kelley says, shaking her head. “Am I really the first girl that you’ve liked?”

Christen nods.

“So how do you know that you like girls at all,” Kelley asks persuasively, pushing all of her weight into Christen’s lower leg. It’s starting to hurt, pins and needles spreading up towards her knee, but she grits her teeth and stays strong.

“I just do,” Christen says, thinking of that one time with Tobin and then pushing it from her mind – because that brings a whole new set of complicated issues with it that she doesn’t have time for. “It’s
not about liking girls or boys, Kell. It’s about me liking you.”

“So on a scale of one to ten,” Kelley says slowly, sinking down onto her haunches but somehow maintaining the unrelenting pressure on Christen’s leg, “what would you do if I kissed you?”

Every nerve in Christen’s body is called to attention, and she spend a good thirty second blinking at Kelley and wondering if she misheard her.

“What?”

“If you’re never done it before,” Kelley says neatly, tucking her hair behind her ear, “don’t you want to try?”

“Fuck you, Kelley,” Christen says angrily, wiggling out from underneath Kelley, the process only made harder when Kelley sits down firmly on Christen’s feet. “This isn’t a joke to me.”

“Chris, Chris, babe – “ Kelley says quickly, hands clamoring to hold Christen down.

“Don’t call me babe,” Christen cries out, half off the couch. “Kelley, you’re killing me! You keep making it worse with all your pet names and little kisses and the way you touch me and look at me – you’re killing me!”

“What?” Kelley asks, clearly taken aback. “What have I been doing?”

Christen wrings her hands, frustrated with wishing that there was someone more eloquent than her to step in and explain what she’s talking about.

“You keep kissing me,” Christen says, distressed and just about done with what she can take. “You say things that aren’t friendly. It’s confusing, Kell. I don’t know what to think. All it does is make me like you more. I like you so much, and it’s not a joke. I don’t want you to kiss me just to see if I like kissing girls. I already know that I’m going to like it, even if I’ve never done it before. I wish that I could kiss you all the time. So this isn’t a game to me. I’m not playing around with any of it. If you don’t like me, fine. Just say it and put me out of my misery.”

“Christen,” Kelley says warily, her tone and the look in her eye somehow gluing Christen to her spot. “Can I say something to you?”

“I don’t think I want to hear it,” Christen says stubbornly, but the hurt look on Kelley’s face makes her give in. “You can say one last thing though,” she relents. “After this though, I can’t do it anymore.”

“Just give me a minute,” Kelley pleads. “I need some time to think about this and make sure I don’t fuck it up.”

“I’m going to bed then,” Christen says, shaking her bed and wanting nothing more than to cry between the sheets, texting Tobin and whining to her as she tends to do.

“No, no,” Kelley says, shaking her head. “I meant like, I need thirty seconds to phrase this correctly.”

Christen sits where she is, pissed off and upset, yet somehow still hopeful.

Kelley takes a deep breath.

“I feel flattered that you like me. Flattered, and a little confused. But here’s the thing, Chris: I love
you. You’re the most important person in my life. Even if I don’t tell you everything, you mean more to me than I could ever put into words. I’m closer to you than my mom or my sister or any other friend I’ve ever had. You’re the only one who has stuck by me, you know?”

Christen nods, wondering where this is going and doing her best to be patient instead of giving into the urge to bolt.

“So if you like me, really really like me, I trust your feelings. And I love you Christen, enough to want to know if I could like you too,” Kelley continues seriously.

Christen’s heart stops, and her breath feels like it’s been snatched from her lungs.

“So I want to know what you would do if I kissed you,” Kelley finishes, looking anxious. “Because I want to try this. I want to know if whatever you feel for me is something that I can feel for you. I don’t want to fuck this up; I want to do this right by you. If you don’t want me to, I won’t do it. But I’d like to at least try, just so that I can tell you yes or no. Is that something that you think you might be okay with?”

An oversized hot air balloon full of hope has taken up residence in Christen’s chest and she finds herself nodding frantically.

“Okay,” Kelley said, nodding back in slow measured movements. “Okay. So when you’re ready, we’ll try it.”

“I’m ready now,” Christen says, strong and afraid of this moment slipping away, of Kelley changing her mind and coming back and telling Christen that she didn’t mean it. “If you are.”

“Are you sure?” Kelley asks, clearly hesitant. “I know that sometimes I’m not the best with your feelings, and I don’t want to do or say something that I shouldn’t.”

“Kell,” Christen says, already impatient, her heart beating rapidly. She’s nervous but ready. She wants to get it over with, just so that she can say that she has, and so that she doesn’t have to worry about it anymore. “I’m okay. I’ll be fine. Just – “

She doesn’t finish because Kelley is leaning forward awkwardly, reaching up a hand to curve along the back of Christen’s neck. She’s touched her like this before, casually and briefly, but the lingering fingertips spark goosebumps against the skin there and Christen had to remind herself to breathe.

There isn’t much warning. Kelley doesn’t waste her time – why would she? Kelley’s always been straightforward and impatient – before resting her other hand on Christen’s blanketed thigh, pressing down and using it as leverage so that she can creep forward slowly, staring Christen straight in the eye before letting her lids flutter closed. Christen can only see freckles, as far as the eye can see, before she feels thin but soft lips brush against hers.

Her own eyes close on instinct and the first thing she thinks is – oh. It feels nice.

Kelley’s mouth is soft and smaller than Christen is familiar with, and she smells like her perfume and deodorant. It’s a smell that she’s used to but she’s never had it permeating her senses like this before. She’s so used to the smell of aftershave or Old Spice when kissing someone, and it’s nice, almost, the stark contrast between kissing Kelley and kissing any of her exes.

Christen isn’t sure what to do. Kelley’s mouth moves slowly against hers, doing almost all of the work, and Christen panics and wonder if she’s maybe not living up to Kelley’s expectations before telling herself that Kelley already knows what she’s capable of. Kelley knows that Christen has never kissed a girl before, that she’s new to this, that she might not be good at this. It’s the only
thought keeping Christen going as she begins to shake, feeling like she’s lost her balance and can’t find her footing again.

“Hey,” Kelley murmurs between their mouths. “It’s okay. Just go with it.”

It’s not helpful and it mostly only serves to jack up Christen’s nerves anymore, but she tries to focus less on how it’s affecting her feelings and more on how it’s making her feel.

It’s slow, but eventually it starts to feel good.

Kelley is a good kisser, Christen can tell. She’s a little impatient and Christen supposed that maybe she isn’t used to taking it this slow, but that doesn’t diminish her skills. The way that she cradles Christen’s head in her hands and takes Christen’s top lip between hers before going for the bottom one speaks of her experience. It’s like she knows exactly what’s supposed to work, how everything is supposed to play out, how to make Christen’s heart beat faster.

Eventually, Christen gains the confidence to kiss back beyond the simple peck of her lips to meet Kelley’s. When she does, Kelley seems to take that as a cue to surge forward, parting her own mouth to fiercely deepen the kiss, sending Christen reeling backwards in fright and shock.


“It’s fine,” Kelley says, eyes glossy as she blinks against blurred vision. “Here, come back – “

Kelley coaxes her back, pulling her close by her jaw and kissing her without any hesitation, going in for the kill and sucking hard on Christen’s bottom lip. Christen lets her and does her best to reciprocate for a while, despite the fluttering butterflies in her stomach and the sweating of her palms where they sit limply at her side.

Eventually, Kelley backs off. She wipes at her mouth with the back of her hand and stares at Christen appraisingly.

“Maybe another time?” she suggests after a moment of silence, during which Christen turned bright red and wondered if maybe she’d been horrible at the entire thing. “Maybe when you’re less scared and I can think about how to do this a little more.”

“Yes please,” Christen exhales out, relieved beyond belief. “Another time. I’d really like to try that again.”

“Good,” Kelley says, grinning like she hasn’t all evening as she presses a quick kiss to Christen’s mouth before falling back onto her end of the couch. “Want to crack open some more ice cream and watch The Notebook?”

“That movie sucks,” Christen says, frowning. “And how do you know there’s more ice cream?”

“I know you,” Kelley says, getting up from the couch, her joints creaking noisily as she stretches her arms towards the ceiling and leans first to one side, then the other. “And I know about your ice cream stash and the way you cry at the end of every Nicholas Sparks movie.”

“I do not!” Christen cries indignantly.

“Do too,” Kelley says, eyes sparkling as she heads for the kitchen, tossing a quick look over her shoulder just for Christen to see. “Hey, I’m not saying that you like the movies. I’m just saying, they make you cry.”
Christen crosses her arms petulantly as she watches Kelley open the freezer door and go straight for the extra two pints of ice cream hidden behind the bags of frozen corn and cauliflower.

“I don’t want to cry anymore,” Christen says, keeping her voice low. “I cried a lot while you were gone.”

Kelley doesn’t say anything until she’s returned with the ice cream and a spoon, and is crawling under Christen’s blanket and feeding her a spoonful.

“Okay,” Kelley says simply. “We can watch whatever you want to. But tomorrow night, I’m in charge.”

“What’s tomorrow night?” Christen asks, puzzled.

“I’m taking you on a date,” Kelley tells her. “Not a friend date, but a real date where I pay for dinner and kiss you at the end and maybe get invited in to feel you up on the couch a little before you tell me that you’re a lady and I need to go home. How does that sound?”

Christen takes a moment to answer, her mouth full of cold ice cream that she has to swallow first. When she does though, she doesn’t even hesitate before nodding eagerly.


Chapter End Notes

I know that this one is a little short, but that’s because I didn’t want to ruin this scene by tacking on something else before or after. Also, I wanted a quick turnaround time for this one considering how the last chapter ended, so hopefully that makes up for the lack of length.
When Christen gets out of class on Monday afternoon, she returns home to an empty apartment. Kelley is gone – something about sorority duties and mandatory study hours – but that eases Christen’s nerves. She feels like she’s been on edge ever since Kelley came back the night before and it’s a relief to have some time to herself to think, especially before Kelley takes her out on a romantic date. Taking advantage of the time to herself is easy – she fixes herself a snack, rests for a while but is careful not to fall asleep lest she be groggy later, and takes her time doing her hair and makeup.

Kelley, of course, comes barreling into Christen’s room about half an hour before their scheduled time to leave, looking like a sweaty mess with her hair windblown and her jacket dangling from one shoulder. It’s still cold outside, a persistent chill in the February air and the sporadic rainstorms not helping the temperature problem at all, and Christen sincerely hopes that they’re going somewhere warm.

“You look pretty,” Kelley says, breathless as she finishes shrugging off her jacket. “Can you be ready to go in fifteen?”

Christen frowns, but it only lasts for a half a second because she ends up smiling as Kelley’s jacket zipper gets caught in her shirt.

“I thought that you didn’t want to leave for another half hour,” Christen says, pressing her phone’s home button to light up the screen and show the time. She has a text from Tobin that she ignores, too busy trying to wiggle a mascara wand along her eyelashes while talking to Kelley.

“I know, but I don’t want to be late,” Kelley says, hopping on one foot as she reaches down to take off a boot. “I made reservations.”

“Kell,” Christen says in awe, “no you didn’t.”

“Uh huh,” Kelley says, grinning proudly as she pulls off her other boot. “I totally did. So if we’re late and they don’t have a table for us, it’s going to be all your fault.”

She’s out of the room then, even remembering to close the door behind her. Christen smiles to herself from where she’s standing in front of her dresser, blinking mascaraed eyelashes at her reflection and reveling in her happiness for a few moments before starting on her second eye.

Wanting to look as good as possible for Kelley means that Christen pulls out all the stops. She knows what Kelley thinks looks good on her after years of getting fashion advice, so it’s easy to pull on clothes that she knows Kelley likes and pray that it’s enough to make Kelley want to kiss her at the end of the date. She knows that their first kiss was awkward. That was to be expected, but it doesn’t mean that Christen doesn’t have high hopes for their second.

It’s sixteen minutes later when Kelley knocks on Christen’s door, and Christen hurriedly pokes a pair of earrings through her lobes before calling out for Kelley to come on in.

“So Christen,” Kelley says, her voice loud but muffled through the door. “You’re supposed to let me in. This is a date.”

So Christen finishes with her earrings before smoothing out her sweater, fluffing out her hair and walking to the door. She nearly trips over herself in the process, grasping the doorknob with a clammy hand and opening it to find a widely grinning Kelley holding out a box of Raisinets and a
“I hate raisins,” Christen says automatically.

Kelley pouts, hands dropping to her sides.

“Those are for me, silly,” she explains. “The gummy worms are yours.”

“Oh,” Christen says, nodding slowly. “Is this like, instead of flowers or something?”

“No,” Kelley says, laughing as she attempts to hand over the candy again. “Listen, just put them in your purse.”

Christen isn’t dumb, and it doesn’t take her long to connect the dots and squint suspiciously at Kelley who is doing her best to look as sweet and innocent as possible.

“Are we going to the movies?” she asks, taking the candy and slipping them inside the bag slung over her shoulder.

“What?” Kelley asks, wrinkling her nose and pulling her jacket around her tightly now that her hands are free. “No. Why are you asking?”

“Because you would,” Christen says, a smile crossing her face. “Dinner and a movie, Kelley? Really? Of course you would do something so cliché.”

Kelley scoffs and rolls her eyes.

“I’m not that lame,” Kelley says. “You know me better than that, come on.”

Christen is doubtful. It’s not like Kelley goes out on a lot of dates, something that she knows for a fact. It kind of figures that she would default to the standard dinner and a movie date for their first time out together – at least in this next context – and while part of Christen is slightly endeared by that fact, she’s also a tiny bit annoyed that Kelley didn’t try harder.

Kelley drives, insisting that she wants Christen to relax. Christen isn’t sure that that’s going to happen anyway, what with her nerves driving her crazy and her heart refusing to settle down long enough to let her feel in control of herself. She feels tense and anxious, completely at Kelley’s mercy for the night. Her only hope is that the night starts out well, hopefully well enough that she can grow comfortable and find herself having a good time. As much as she tries to tell herself that it’s just Kelley, that they’ve done stuff like this before with just the two of them, it feels different because it is different. It’s not just the significance of it all, the different intentions, but it’s in the way that Kelley acts.

Like the way she offers to let Christen choose the music while she drives – Kelley normally never does that.

And the way that she asks Christen if she wants her seat warmers turned on, fussing with the warm air blowing from the vents to make sure that Christen is toasty but not sweating while they drive.

It’s in the way she hovers close behind Christen as they walk from the car to the restaurant entrance, opening the door for her and pressing an eager hand to the small of her back to guide her to the hostess station.

It has Christen feeling a little light-headed, like she’s not getting enough oxygen to her brain with every shallow inhale she takes in.
It’s not as though Kelley has taken her to a five-star restaurant or anything, but she has brought her to the nice Italian place in town that all students take their parents to for parents’ weekend. The food here is good, the ambiance can be interpreted as romantic depending on where the hostess seats you, and it’s someplace that they’ve been before in previous years. Feeling at least comfortable with the location, Christen slips into her chair at their little two-person table at the back of the restaurant with high hopes that this will all run smoothly.

Conversation comes easy as they look through their menus, falling into talking about their classes and how their families back home are doing. It’s nice and familiar, talking about the things that they normally catch each other up on whenever they get the chance. Even though they spent the weekend apart, Christen finds that she has surprisingly little to talk to Kelley about. It makes sense, given that she spent the majority of the time crying into her pillow, but she’s content with listening to Kelley moan and groan about her time with Alex.

“She’s so boring sometimes,” Kelley complains, stabbing the lemon in her water with her straw. “I swear, without Syd and I, she’d be a total stick in the mud.”

As someone who doesn’t know Alex nearly well enough to have an opinion on the subject, Christen decides to keep her mouth shut.

“I mean, I guess her and Syd have this special bond or whatever, and I know that she’s still a little down about Tobin not being here anymore, but that’s no excuse,” Kelley says. “Anytime Syd and I wanted to go out this weekend she’d be there, complaining about how it was going to be too cold or too crowded or something else.”

“Is she really that sad about Tobin leaving?” Christen asks. She knows that they were close, but with Tobin being older and them not having known each other for very long, she finds it a little difficult to believe that they’re really missing each other that much.

Kelley shrugs as their waiter comes over, setting down a basket of bread that Kelley immediately reaches for.

“I mean, she’s been broody about other things too,” Kelley allows. “But she’s like, unnaturally excited about getting to see Tobin in a couple of weeks.”

Christen thinks about how Tobin wasn’t sure which girls she was going to end up inviting and makes a note to ask her about it lately.

“Are you going?” Christen asks.

“I don’t know,” Kelley says, looking like she’s considering it. “Are you?”

“I mean, why not?” Christen says, reaching forward to grab a roll. “It’s going to be a nice way to kick off spring break, right?”

“We’d have to get hotel rooms,” Kelley reminds her, as though Christen doesn’t know. “We’re not allowed to stay at the same hotel as them though, Tobin was telling Alex.”

Christen frowns as she reaches to take a sip of water.

“She didn’t mention that to me,” she mumbles.

“You’re the only one old enough to get a hotel room,” Kelley explains. “So I don’t know how many of us can cram into one. I figure it would be you, me, Alex, maybe Syd if she can leave her stupid boyfriend – “
“I wanted to maybe invite Julie,” Christen says, and Kelley pulls a face. “Still, Kell?” Christen asks in disappointment. “I don’t even hang out with her as much as I used to.”

“I know, I know,” Kelley says, looking pained. “I just thought that maybe you could choose someone that I actually like hanging out with.”

“Well, do you have any suggestions?” Christen asks.

Something nudges her foot underneath the small table, and her legs jolts away for a second before stilling and coming to the realization that it’s Kelley’s foot, gently pushing against her shoe.

“You know what,” she says, smiling hugely, “I don’t care. As long as I’m there with you I think I’ll be okay.”

Christen’s heart swells.

“Really?” she asks, feeling a grin form on her face as she feels Kelley’s ankle hook around hers, smirking confidently as she stuffs her face with more bread.

“Yeah,” Kelley says thickly, speaking through the food in her mouth. “I mean, I’ll mostly be going for the game, but I guess it would be cool to go there too.”

“Well,” Christen says generously, “maybe we could let Alex pick the last person to go with us.”

“Maybe,” Kelley says after swallowing. “Or maybe we could forget about Alex and leave her here,” she says suggestively, winking at Christen.

Christen feels like she can’t breathe, like the air has been wrestled out of her chest, and it’s all she can do to exhale a shaky laugh and tear off a piece of bread to chew on, preventing her from having to respond.

“We’ll see though,” Kelley says a moment later, once it’s become apparent that Christen doesn’t know what to say. “See if there’s anyone Alex wants to bring. If not, we’ll have to see if she minds being a third wheel.”

Christen nearly chokes at that, the idea of her and Kelley being enough of a couple that anyone around them would be a third wheel, but then their food is being delivered before she can get out the jumble of meaningless syllables stuck in her throat and Kelley changes the subject to how she’s doing in her physics class. She suddenly wishes that maybe she’d called Tobin earlier, just for advice, or at the very least, a distraction. Christen has no idea how to navigate this, how to feel comfortable with Kelley in a less than platonic setting, especially when Kelley’s other foot has joined the party. It’s stupid – Kelley is wearing boots and neither of them can actually feel the other’s foot, much less any skin, and Christen doesn’t know what the point is but she does know that as soon as Kelley takes a bathroom break, she’s pulling out her phone and finally reading Tobin’s text from earlier.

Whatever happened with Kelley? I never heard from you last night, are you okay?

Christen doesn’t quite know how to respond. She feels a little bad for not keeping Tobin updated, but the truth is that she wasn’t ready to share the news. Telling Tobin about being hurt and upset because of Kelley is one thing, but Christen can’t help but think that telling Tobin about the immense joy and happiness she’s experienced in the few day or so at the hands of Kelley won’t go over particularly well, at least compared to how things have gone so far. So instead of being honest, Christen takes the easy route out in her reply.
Feeling better, I've just been busy. Think I could call you tomorrow after classes?

She’ll tell Tobin tomorrow, she tells herself. She’ll explain everything that’s gone down, ease her suddenly guilty conscience, get some advice, and find out how Tobin has been doing. It will be fine.

Her phone buzzes just as Kelley approaches, and Christen only gets a brief look at the incoming text before clicking her phone off.

Of course! Anything you need :)

It makes Christen’s chest clench momentarily, but that’s more likely due to Kelley’s reappearance.

“So,” Kelley says, getting comfortable in her chair. “Ready for the check soon?”

Kelley insists on paying for dinner, and she insists on opening Christen’s car door for her. It’s all strange and Christen isn’t quite sure how she feels about it, but she thinks that she might be able to get used to it. While they drive Christen tries to guess where they’re going, Kelley vehemently denying every suggestion that comes her way. It isn’t until they turn onto a side street that Christen knows where they are, and she fixes the side of Kelley’s head with a firm stare.

“Kelley,” she says, trying to keep her voice flat in order to avoid letting a laugh sneak through. “You told me that we weren’t going to the movies.”

“Well I couldn’t just tell you that we were!” Kelley exclaims defensively as she pulls into a parking spot in front of the movie theater. “It’s not fair that you had me all figured out before we even left the apartment!”

“Kelley,” Christen tries again, this time not even bothering to hide her laugh. “I’m your best friend. Of course I’d have you all figured out.”

Kelley pouts as the turns the car off.

“I wanted tonight to go well,” she explains.

“I have more fun when I know what’s happening,” Christen says encouragingly. “So I was right about this which makes it kind of funny, and next time, if there is a next time, you’ll know to tell me where we’re going ahead of time.”

“You could have begged me to tell you earlier,” Kelley tells her. “I would have.”

“No, you wouldn’t have,” Christen chuckles, unbuckling her seatbelt and moving to get out of the car.

“Christen?” Kelley asks tentatively, making Christen turn around with one leg out.

“Yeah?” she asks, blinking twice as she watches Kelley hook her car key ring around her index finger.

“Am I doing okay?”

Her voice is small and hesitant, and Christen finds herself grinning at the idea of Kelley – confident, self-assured, best friend since forever Kelley – being nervous and wanting to take Christen out on the best first date that she can. It’s different and it’s not the exact same Kelley that Christen has known for the majority of her life. Rather she’s dealing with a Kelley who doesn’t date, who isn’t interested in the people she hooks up with for more than a couple of nights at most, and who has no idea what
It’s a little endearing, if Christen has to be honest. As weird as it is, there’s a part of it that’s cute enough to make her grin.

“You’re doing just fine,” Christen reassures her, and when Kelley leans over the center console to press her lips to the corner of Christen’s mouth – well, Christen thinks that yeah, Kelley is doing more than just fine.

Kelley buys their tickets and refuses to allow Christen to contribute at all, not even towards the popcorn and sodas she buys. They settle into the theater while the previews are still playing, and thankfully the fact that it’s a Monday night means that there’s almost no one else around to block their view as they find seats in one of the back rows. The back has always been Kelley’s favorite place to sit.

“I almost can’t believe that we’re on time for this,” Christen comments in a lot mutter as she holds the popcorn in her lap, waiting patiently for Kelley to finish fishing through her purse to find the candy from earlier. “Your time management skills have really improved since the last time we had to be somewhere.”

“That’s another reason I wanted to leave earlier,” Kelley says, somewhat sheepish as she opens the bag of gummy worms before handing them off to Christen.

“Well, I’m glad that I decided to listen to you,” Christen says, situating all of her snacks around her and letting Kelley sneak a handful of popcorn from the bucket they’re sharing.

The movie isn’t something that Christen finds particularly interesting. It’s more Kelley’s style, a silly comedy that’s a little vulgar and Christen is more interested in eating her food and trying to ignore how full she already feels, as well as the text from Tobin sitting in her phone. Part of her feels bad for not replying, but she knows that Tobin will understand once she hears why.

Halfway through the movie, Kelley leans in close.

“This guy isn’t even cute,” she whispers obnoxiously loud, mouth nearly brushing against Christen’s ear as she speaks. It makes Christen go very still, and her breathing goes shallow as she feels Kelley’s hand comes up to her shoulder, fingertips pressing down. Even through the fabric of her jacket and sweater, Kelley still feels hot and electrifying.

“He’s alright,” Christen murmurs uncertainly.

She’s not sure how it happens, but Kelley leans over her to steal a gummy worm from where it’s sitting in Christen’s left cup holder and then Kelley’s left arm is sneaking around Christen’s shoulders, casually slung around so that Christen barely has to lean in towards her. They’re suddenly closer and Christen isn’t sure what to do, frozen in her seat and thinking that of all the things they’ve done tonight, this might be the most nerve wracking of all.

“I really thought this movie would be funnier,” Kelley whispers after she’s eaten the gummy worm, except this time her mouth is hovering just next to Christen’s cheek and when Christen turns to look at her, Kelley doesn’t bother moving in time to avoid their lips brushing together.

“Kell,” Christen says as quietly as possible, acutely aware of the couple of dozen other people in the theater. “Kell, what are you doing?”

“This is part of the cliché, right?” Kelley says, eyes appraising and her hand hanging down over Christen’s shoulder, fingers brushing against material. “Hooking up in a movie theater?”
Christen’s suddenly glad that she didn’t get the garlic shrimp at dinner, because Kelley’s warm mouth is on hers and she’s actually making out with her best friend in the middle of a movie theater.

Their mouths are slippery with popcorn butter and sweet like candy, Kelley quick to slot their lips together so that Christen feels the slickness there and how it almost makes it both easier and harder to keep at it. Something about where they are, in the dark and in a foreign place, surrounded by strangers and loud sound effects, makes Christen feel slightly more comfortable with this than she would be normally.

Maybe it’s because it’s with Kelley, she muses, when Kelley uses the arm around her shoulders to draw her in closer. Maybe that’s why she’s okay with it.

Determined to make this kiss a thousand times better than the last one, Christen does her best to be less reluctant to allow Kelley to run her tongue along her bottom lip, slipping inside her mouth with a sort of restrained eagerness that makes Christen wonder if she’s the reason Kelley is holding back. She wants to know what it would be like if Kelley gave it her all, but she’s also relieved that they’re taking it relatively slow. It’s not too much, letting their tongue tangle together and Christen prays that Kelley isn’t hating this, that Kelley thinks she’s decent at this at the very least. Instinct is what drives Christen to bring up a hand and cradle Kelley’s face with it, feeling flushed cheeks and soft tendrils of hair between her fingers. Kelley pulls back a little, but just enough so that she can gently tug at Christen’s bottom lip with her teeth before kissing it.

When Christen feels Kelley’s hand come to rest on her chest, her palm just over her racing heart. Christen worries that Kelley will notice how fast it’s beating, that she’ll notice and tease her about it, but she’s worrying about the wrong thing when Kelley’s hand slowly slips down and further into her open jacket to cup her breast, squeezing only slightly before holding the weight of it in her hand. Christen gasps into Kelley’s mouth, drawing back with a slick mouth and wide eyes. Kelley looks the same way, with dilated pupils and cheeks that look flushed in the unusually bright light of the movie theater. Christen glances to the side, looking to see that some scene in the movie is providing the white light and that it hasn’t ended and the overhead lights haven’t turned on, but they she turns back to Kelley whose hand hasn’t moved a single bit.

“Kell,” Christen whispers, thankful for this whisper that hides the catch in her voice. “What are you doing?”

Kelley bites her lips and shrugs, sending her hair cascading over one shoulder. Christen drops her hand to rest on her own thigh, wiping away the clamminess that has gathered.

“Feeling you up,” Kelley says lowly, leaning in to chase Christen’s mouth. Christen indulges her for a few long moments, forgetting why she even stopped, until –

Kelley’s hand is squeezing Christen’s breast through her sweater and bra, and Christen grows warm and pulls away again, shaking her head determinedly.

“Not here,” Christen says, and Kelley pouts before slowly removing her hand.

“Fine,” Kelley says, taking away the hand slung over Christen’s shoulders as she wipes her mouth on the back of her hand. “Later?”

“Maybe,” Christen whispers, and Kelley thankfully goes back to watching the movie without complaint. It’s almost over through, the credits rolling twenty minutes later, and while it wasn’t easy to sit through a movie whose plot she had completely lost, it’s even harder once they have to leave the theater and don’t have the distraction of gathering their snacks to throw away. They walk in silence to the car, where Kelley turns on the engine but sits with her hands on the wheel for a long
“Did I fuck it up?” she asks, just as Christen is about to ask her what the holdup is. “Should I not have done that?”

She stares ahead as she asks, her voice a little unsure in a way that only Christen would be able to recognize.

“No, Kell,” Christen says, reaching over to rest a hand on Kelley’s forearm. “I had a really great time, I promise.”

Kelley visibly swallows before turning her head to the side to look at Christen.

“I feel like I fucked up,” she confesses. “I wanted tonight to be perfect. Just so I could know – “

“I know,” Christen interrupts. “I know why you wanted it to be perfect.”

She knows that Kelley is still a little confused and trying to work through it all. She knows that she threw her a bit of a bombshell and that Kelley doesn’t quite know what to do with it. She knows that Kelley is trying her hardest to see if she can do this, and if she can do this with Christen in particular. She knows that Kelley is trying and that’s enough for her right now, even if she has to wait a while for Kelley to get her shit together.

“So how was it?” Kelley asks, smiling and moving her arm to put the car in reverse. Christen puts her hand back in her lap. “On a scale of one to ten, it’s up there with helicopters and diamonds. Right?”

“Definitely,” Christen says, giggling while rolling her eyes. “Kell, I hate it when you do that.”


Back at the apartment, Kelley kisses Christen outside her bedroom door. Christen’s purse is still hanging from her shoulder and Kelley goes slow, a cold hand on either side of her neck as she tilts her head up just the slightest bit, going slow and drawing it out until Christen is falling into it and thinking that maybe, just maybe, having Kelley feel her up again wouldn’t be the worst idea.

“We’ll leave the rest for another time,” Kelley says when she reluctantly draws back, grinning a little when Christen chases her mouth for one last kiss which Kelley indulgently allows her. “Go to bed, okay? It’s late and I know you have class tomorrow.”

“Okay,” Christen says, and even though she feels like she’s crawling out of her skin with residual nerves and anxiety, she’s starting to feel something inside of her calm down. “I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“See you,” Kelley says, surprisingly soft as she steals one last gentle kiss before turning around and heading for her own bedroom.

*

When Christen calls Tobin, the call is answered on the first ring.

When Christen calls Tobin, she stumbles all over her words in her haste to get them out.

When Christen calls Tobin, she doesn’t even register the excitement in her own voice and the muted enthusiasm from Tobin’s end.
When Christen calls Tobin, all she’s worried about is what Tobin has to say.

As soon as she finishes the story, having paused several times to gather her thoughts and let Tobin make appropriate noises or ask to have something clarified, she waits with baited breath.

“So,” Tobin says slowly, her drawl growing monotone in a way that Christen hasn’t heard in a while. “She doesn’t necessarily like you back, but she’s going to give it a shot.”

“Yeah, basically,” Christen says from where she’s sitting in the ice cold library, waiting for Julie who is supposed to show up after her class ends in a half hour. She’s thankful that there’s no one else around, because she hasn’t exactly been quiet or discreet in her story telling.

“I don’t know, Christen,” Tobin says. “What if it doesn’t work out?”

Christen’s thought about it a million times since her and Kelley’s conversation Sunday night, and she’s still struggling with answering that question.

“Then we go from there,” Christen says, shrugging and sounding much more confident than she actually is about it all. “We go back to being friends.”

“I just don’t want for it to not work out and then you two not be able to be friends again,” Tobin says, the concern seeping from every word. “Are you sure that you’re okay with this?”

“I’m sure,” Christen says, feeling vaguely annoyed. “Do you think that I shouldn’t be?”

“I just want you to be happy,” Tobin explains, her voice soothing and almost pacifying. “If you’re sure, then I am too. I was just checking.”

“I’m sure,” Christen repeats, this time with more confidence. “She wants to take me to your game, you know. Said something about just the two of us going together.”

“I invited Alex,” Tobin says. “And she wants to come.”

“I figured,” Christen sighs, feeling slight disappointment wash over her. “But it’s the thought that counts, right?”

“Yeah, Chris,” Tobin says. “It’s the thought that counts.”

Christen grins into her speaker.

“So what have you been up to?” she asks. “Where are you today?”

“Near Dallas,” Tobin tells her. “I’ve been here with the team for a few days now.”

“I can’t believe you,” Christen says, settling in and leaning against the wall, crossing her free arm over her chest. “You’re really competing to qualify for the Olympics.”

Tobin’s little laugh makes Christen wish she was listening to it in person.

“I really am,” she affirms. “Are you going to believe it if I actually go to the Olympics?”

Something burns hot in Christen’s chest.

“I’d be so proud of you,” she tells Tobin. “I’d buy you a – a – I don’t know what I’d buy you but it would be good.”
“Sounds great already,” Tobin jokes, and Christen grins again, a laugh bubbling out of her before she can stop it.

“I’ll think of something good, I promise,” she tells her.

“You’ve got about four and a half months until rosters are made,” Tobin says with a yawn.

“There’s no way you’re tired,” Christen says accusingly. “You’re only an hour behind me and it’s afternoon here.”

“I’m tired,” Tobin says. “We’ve been putting in so much work, Chris. Two-a-days and shit. I’ve never been so sore in my life.”

“It’s worth it, though, right?”

“So worth it,” Tobin says.

“So when you qualify – “ Christen starts, but Tobin quickly corrects her.

“If,” she says, “If we qualify.”

“What?” Christen asks in alarm. “What do you mean if? I thought this was basically a done deal!”

“I mean, it basically is,” Tobin says hastily. “But you know, I try not to get cocky.”

“Tobin,” Christen says exasperatedly, “you’re one of the cockiest people I know. You’re up there with Kelley, and that’s saying something.”

Tobin lets out a short laugh.

“I guess. I’m trying not to look at it like we’ll win that easily though. You’ve just got to take each game as it comes and give it your all.”

“So if you qualify,” Christen says, “what next?”

“Back towards you,” Tobin sighs, something in her voice sounding like sweet relief. “For a few days. And then we’re off to play two more games, and after those, I’m back with my club team for a month or so.”

“Maybe we’ll try to visit you again,” Christen muses.

“I’d really like that,” Tobin says.

“We’ll work something out,” Christen says.

“We will,” Tobin says, and Christen loves the quiet confidence in the way she says it. “Listen, I’ve got to go meet everyone for lunch, but keep me updated, okay? I want to know exactly how this all goes down.”

“I will,” Christen tells her. “I wanted to tell you when it happened, but I was still trying to process it and everything.”

“I know,” Tobin reassures her. “I know, it can’t have been easy to deal with when she talked to you.”

“I’m going to need your help from here on out though,” Christen tells her. “Can you handle that?”
Tobin takes a long moment or two to respond, and Christen checks to make sure that the call hasn’t dropped.

“Yeah, Chris,” Tobin says. “I can handle that. I’ve got to go but I miss you, okay?”

“Miss you too,” Christen says automatically, her chest going inexplicably tight as Tobin quickly says goodbye and hangs up.
Maybe it’s nervousness, maybe it’s her need to be in charge of everything. Whatever it is, Christen can’t help that she’s apparently getting on Alex’s nerves in her desire to kick off their spring break as perfectly as possible.

When Kelley takes her aside in the hotel lobby, after Christen has handed out room keys and is ready to carry her weekend bag up to the fourth floor, she tries not to be upset.

“What did Alex say, exactly?” Christen asks, reaching up to push a piece of hair behind her ear.

“Just that you’ve been a little tense today, and it would be nice if you could calm down,” Kelley says, a bright and reassuring smile on her face as she adjusts her backpack straps. “You’ve been a little…obsessive over things today, you know?”

“How?” Christen wants to know. “All I’ve done is ask that everyone follow the rules of the car and – “

“You asked Lindsey if she’d stop singing along to every song and told her that her pitch sucks,” Kelley cuts in.

“I did not!” Christen insists indignantly. “I said that maybe her pitch could use a little work, but it was a hard song to sing along to anyway! She didn’t need to get mad about that.”

“The point is,” Kelley continues, “that you seem a little stressed. Maybe you should try to nap before we head out later.”

Christen sighs, shoulders slumping. The weather has finally turned warmer, the early afternoon sun outside bright enough to make the idea of lounging out by the water incredibly appealing. They’ve all packed bathing suits in the hopes that the forecast would hold true, and so far it looks like decent enough pool weather for the rest of the afternoon.

“I thought we were supposed to go to the pool,” Christen grumbles. “Are you seriously telling me that I need a nap?”

“You don’t have to if you don’t want to,” Kelley says hastily, reaching the handle of her suitcase. “It’s just a suggestion. If you think that coming down with us will make you feel better, then let’s go.”

Christen sighs and Kelley leans forward to press a kiss to her cheek.

“Just calm down a little,” Kelley says positively. “You’ll get to see me in a bikini. That should cheer you right up.”

Christen just smiles faintly, praying that Kelley is right. She decides to go ahead and change into her own swimsuit just so that she can relax on a pool lounger at the very least, maybe sneaking in a nap if she’s lucky enough.

Really though, if she has to be honest with herself, she’s a little nervous about the game later on in the evening. They’ve got a few hours until they have to head to the stadium and while she’s excited
about seeing Tobin play, she’s more nervous for afterwards. They’ve got plans with Tobin and her roommate Allie who is supposedly very nice, according to Tobin, but Christen doesn’t do well with new people and she knows that her anxiety isn’t going to help that matter.

Once again, she’s going to be the odd one out. Just as she’d forgotten what it was like to be amongst a bunch of people who all have something in common that she just can’t be a part of, she’s finding herself in that situation again. Soccer season is over at school and it’s easy to hang out with Julie and Kelley, occasionally joined by Alex and maybe Syd, and forget that she spent the majority of the fall semester trying to fit in with people she had nothing in common with. Now it’s all going to be more of the same, especially since Lindsey has tagged along for the trip. She had claimed a massive passion for the team and Tobin had invited her anyway – apparently the two were close, Lindsey explaining that Tobin was sort of an older sister to her – but that only makes Christen more apprehensive about it all. Everyone else who will be there will have been teammates of some sort, and knowing about the close and unique bonds formed by those who play together, Christen can’t help but feel like she’ll spend the whole evening on the outside looking in.

It’s started already, once they’re down at the pool and they can only find three loungers in a row together. The other girls have already thrown their stuff down on the three chairs, and Christen shifts her weight around as she tries to figure out what to do.

“You can share with me,” Alex offers, pushing her sunglasses up the bridge of her nose. “I wanted to swim a little anyway.”

“I’m pretty sure the water is cold, Al,” Kelley speaks up, smoothing her towel out on the lounger. “I’m not sure you’d want to do that.”

“Well, I’m going to check,” Alex says determinedly, smiling at Christen and gesturing to the chair. “I’ve got a phone call to make, anyway. Here, Christen.”

Christen is unsure about taking the lounger, but after Alex reassures her that she doesn’t mind, she lays out her towel and carefully sits down. Lindsey and Kelley and already laid out with their eyes closed, soaking up the sun. It feels slightly awkward since Lindsey sits in between Christen and Kelley, but Christen just makes sure to pretend like she’s not worrying about the fact that her pseudo-girlfriend for the time being isn’t at all concerned about being near her.

It’s fine, Christen tells herself. It’s fine that they’re six feet away from each other instead of one. That doesn’t matter.

Despite the unease that has been sitting heavy in her chest all day, Christen manages to doze off, the hot sun lulling her into a warm and stick light sleep. She briefly worries about getting burnt, but thinks of the sunscreen she applied back in the room and sleeps on. It feels good, to release the tension in her neck in shoulders. When she final stirs, something nagging at her subconscious and causing her to blink slowly from beneath her sunglasses, it feels like she’s been asleep for hours. Rubbing at her eyes, Christen slowly rises up onto her elbows and squints around, looking to her side to find Lindsey and Kelley gone and Alex perched on the edge of the middle lounger, sitting so that she faces Christen while smoothing sunscreen into her arms.

“Hi,” Alex says, her smile only slightly less warm than it was earlier. “How was your nap?”

Christen clears her throat before talking, just to make sure that it doesn’t come out embarrassingly scratchy. Even though her and Alex have spent a ton of time in each others company at this point, Alex is still intimidatingly confident and cool and aloof, a combination that frequently leaves Christen apprehensive with sweating palms.

“In the pool,” Alex says, nodding in that direction. “It’s not as cold as Kelley thought.”

“Cool,” Christen says, relaxing minutely.

“You should come join us,” Alex suggests. “We’re thinking of going up to the room in like half an hour to get ready so you still have time to swim around with us.”

“Maybe,” Christen says. “Thanks for letting me use your chair, though. I didn’t mean to crash like that.”

“It’s honestly fine,” Alex says. “I mean, Kelley should have offered, but she didn’t, so.”

Alex shrugs and shoots Christen a look that she can’t quite decipher but seems a little judgmental.

“I wouldn’t expect Kelley to,” Christen says, sitting up fully. “I mean, she just wouldn’t.”

Alex sighs, finishing with her sunscreen and leaning forward, putting her hands on her knees as she does.

“Christen,” she says straightforwardly. “Let’s cut the shit.”

“What?” Christen asks, taken aback.

“Lindsey might not know what’s going on, but I do,” Alex says.

“We’re not hiding it,” Christen says in surprise, embarrassment prickling cold along her spine.

“Well, Kelley’s being real fucking sneaky about it,” Alex says, rolling her eyes and leaning back slightly. “She keeps looking around before she touches you, like she’s making sure that no one else is watching.”

Christen bites her lip, not having noticed that and wondering if it’s really true.

“I don’t mind if she doesn’t want everyone to know,” Christen says. “I mean, we’re taking this slow. She’s still getting used to it.”

“She’s using you,” Alex says bluntly, and Christen frowns.

“I really don’t think she is,” Christen says, shaking her head adamantly. “She knows that she didn’t have to do this. She’s the one who made this choice.”

“Christen,” Alex says in exasperation, “she’s your best friend. Please tell me you know her better than this. Tell me the last time you saw her maintain a monogamous relationship with anyone.”

“I’m not asking for a monogamous relationship,” Christen clarifies quickly. “Not right now. Right now, we’re just trying to see if this might be something that we both want.”

Alex purses her lips.

“You don’t really seem like the kind of person who does anything but monogamous relationships,” she says, reaching out to lay a hand on Christen’s wrist. “And Kelley knows that. And her doing this, while knowing that there isn’t a shot in hell she’s going to change anytime soon – she’s using you.”
“She’s not,” Christen tries to defend, but Alex is keeping on without regard for what she has to say.

“She gets to keep her best friend, have someone to hook up with, and not feel guilty about it because you’ve already agreed that this is just a trial. So that in case this doesn’t work out, she’s got an excuse to fall back on without you being able to say that what she did was wrong. She won’t be the one to blame if you end up hurt. Right?”

Alex is looking at Christen fiercely with those piercing blue eyes of hers, serious and intense, and Christen is wondering what she ever did to get on her bad side.

“Alex,” Christen says, measuring her words carefully, “I know what I’m doing. She’s not going to hurt me.”

“I hope so,” Alex says, expression softening for a millisecond before hardening again. “Because I don’t want you to get hurt. I might seem like I’m being a bitch, but I’m just looking out for you.”

Christen wonder if maybe she’s been reading Alex wrong this entire time, but she doesn’t get very long to think about it before Alex is springing upwards and extending a hand down towards Christen.

“Let’s go swimming,” she says. “The water will feel good after lying out in the sun for so long. Besides, Kelley keeps trying to splash me and I need you to stop her.”

“I don’t know that I can do that,” Christen jokes, but there’s a growing knot in her stomach. It only gets bigger when she slides into the water, Kelley instantly swimming over to her with her wet, slicked back hair and slightly red cheeks.

“How was your nap?” she fusses, sweeping Christen’s hair off her forehead with her dripping hands. “Do you feel better?”

“I think so,” Christen says, smiling weakly. “I guess we’ll see.”

Kelley presses a chlorine-soaked kiss to Christen’s lips, lingering for half a second before pulling back with a grin on her mouth but a strange look in her eyes. Christen wonders if she’s worried about anyone having seen them.

“Kell,” Christen says, feeling something inside her shift uncomfortably, something locking into place where it shouldn’t be, “could you maybe not do that?”

“Not do what?” Kelley asks innocently, blinking her wet and darkened eyelashes.

“Kiss me,” Christen explains, “in front of a ton of people.”

Kelley looks at Christen sweetly, smiling.

“Yes,” she agrees. “If that’s what you want.”

Christen isn’t sure if it is, but Alex’s words are ringing in her ears and Christen is thinking that she’d rather not find out if they’re true.

“Come on, lovebirds!” Lindsey calls. “We’re on this trip together. This isn’t a honeymoon.”

Kelley just rolls her eyes while Christen blushing, praying that she can pass off the color in her cheeks as the sun’s fault.

“Come on,” Kelley says, grabbing for Christen’s hand to tug her forward in the water. “Let’s have
fun. That’s what spring break is about, right?”

“Right,” Christen says convincingly. “Right.”

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“On a scale of one to ten, these seats suck ass.”

“Kelley!” Christen says, scandalized as they all shuffle down the row to find their assigned seats. “Don’t say that!”

“What?” Kelley asks cluelessly, stopping suddenly and causing Christen to bump into her. “I mean, they were free! They’re allowed to be shitty!”

“Don’t let Tobin hear you say that, though,” Christen protests. “She didn’t have to get us any tickets at all.”

“I think she wanted more of us to come,” Lindsey says from behind Christen. “But we took too long to get back to her and so I think that all the good seats were taken.”

Christen’s feel a bit of pity that only the four of them are there for Tobin, but she supposes that it’s better than nothing. Anyway, it wasn’t her job to make sure that the girls from the team could attend. That was left up to Alex, who apparently didn’t do that well at all.

After they sit down and get settled, Kelley jumps up and offers to go get food for everyone.

“Who wants to come with me?” she asks, taking orders.

“I’ll go,” Christen offers, because aside from the conversation in the hotel lobby earlier, she hasn’t really gotten a moment alone with her. As much as she tries to deny that the conversation with Alex has left her rattled, something in her just hasn’t sat right in her stomach since then.

“Come on,” Kelley says impatiently, motioning for Christen to come along with her. “Let’s go before the line gets long.”

The lines are already long, and Kelley spends the entire wait jabbering on and on about the game, from the lineup – which doesn’t include Tobin starting, much to Christen’s personal dismay despite that fact that she knew the chances were slim – to their opponent to how to get autographs afterwards.

“Can’t Tobin get you any autographs you want?” Christen wants to know.

“Trust me, I’ve tried,” Kelley groans. “Apparently she doesn’t want to come off like a lame fan? I don’t know, she said something like that. So I’ve got to do all the hard work by myself. Besides, it will be a good way to waste time while we wait for Tobin and her friend to come on out.”

“Allie,” Christen remembers. “Her friend’s name is Allie. I guess they’re roommates.”

Kelley just shrugs.

“You’d know better than I would,” she says nonchalantly. “I rarely talk to Tobin.”

This is news to Christen.

“I thought you two were close,” Christen says, confused. “I mean, she invited you this weekend.”
“Yeah, but we don’t talk a lot,” Kelley says as if it’s no big deal. Which maybe it isn’t.

“You two seemed so close while she was at school, though,” Christen pushes. “What happened?”

Kelley looks at her strangely.

“We’re just not super close anymore,” she says. “What does it matter to you?”

“It doesn’t,” Christen says quickly as the person in front of them moves, making them next up to order. “I just didn’t know.”

“It happens,” Kelley says before she’s ordering enough food to keep them all entertained for the first half despite the fact that they’d all eaten a late lunch and are planning on meeting up with Tobin and Allie after the game. Once Kelley has paid and they’re waiting for their food to be put together, she turns to Christen with an unidentifiable expression on her face.

“I know that you and Tobin are really close,” she starts, and Christen nods quickly, second guessing herself immediately and wondering if maybe she’s just a little too eager when it comes to Tobin. “And obviously you and I are really close. But that doesn’t mean that her and I have to be. Now that we’re not on the same team, we don’t have a lot in common anymore.”

“I guess that makes sense,” Christen says slowly.

“What do the two of you even talk about anyway?” Kelley asks nosily, crossing her arms across her chest. “You don’t have anything in common. You never did.”

Christen thinks about how they mostly talked about Kelley at first. She’s gotten better at not filling up conversations with gushing about Kelley and her feelings, making sure that Tobin gets a chance to talk without only giving advice. Instead, once Christen is done asking for help navigating whatever she has going on with Kelley, Tobin talks about her day and her teammates and her life in general. She talks about the scheduled phone calls she has with her mom twice a week (her mom isn’t worried about how she’s doing but still wants to hear ever detail about her life), how she’s doing in practice (she’s over the fear of being the newbie and thinks she’s been kicking ass and taking names during every session, something that makes Christen roll her eyes), and what her time off is like (lots of pool time and Netflix – she’s been trying to convince Christen to start watching a show with her, but they haven’t been able to agree on one yet).

“That doesn’t mean that we can’t get along,” Christen says, only vaguely recognizing that she’s been silent for just a few beats too long. “I mean, sure she doesn’t know anything about what I’m learning in my classes and I don’t know anything about soccer, but that doesn’t mean that we don’t want to hear about each other’s days.”

Kelley looks a little skeptical about how that could possibly work, but she doesn’t say anything, much to Christen’s relief.

Back in the stands, sandwiched between Kelley and Lindsey (Christen still doesn’t understand why they’re sitting like this, with Alex on Kelley’s other side, especially considering the slight awkwardness arising from the fact that Kelley can’t keep her hand off of Christen’s thigh), the atmosphere is like nothing Christen has ever experienced before. Sure, she’s been to football games at school before and those definitely draw larger crowds, and maybe it’s just because she knows someone sitting on the bench, but it makes her excited. From the moment the game kicks off she’s on the edge of her seat, peering through the few rows in front of her to watch the players. She’s seen soccer games before, and so it shouldn’t be a surprise that the women on the field seem smaller than they do on tv, but she’s still amazed by how human they look. They look like the three girls sitting
next to her – smaller, even, considering that Lindsey is fairly tall – with smooth ponytails and wrinkled kits, the occasional flash of colored pre-wrap and uniquely colored cleats that look like they belong on the players’ feet.

Neither team scores during the first half, despite valiant attempts on both ends. Christen does her best to focus on the movement of the game, ending up leaning in towards Lindsey who is much better at explaining what’s happening than Kelley is, who tends to get too absorbed in the game to tell Christen what’s going on. She still has trouble remembering who all the players are but she recognizes a few of them, like the ponytailed goalkeeper and Carli Lloyd, who sounds like she has an impressive resume. Tobin and Allie sit on the bench for the most part, occasionally getting up to stretch their legs or get a better view of the game, but they stick together and Christen can’t help but feel a little envious when she sees how they laugh close together, shoulders bumping as Tobin points something out and Allie cracks a smile.

She’s very pretty, Christen notes, even though she’s far away. The camera has panned to Allie and Tobin a few times and while Christen already knows what Tobin looks like, she’s a little perturbed to find that Allie, with blonde hair and cleats that match Tobin’s, is almost as pretty as Alex – if not equally pretty. It makes Christen fidget, praying that the humidity doesn’t ruin the hair that she’d painstakingly straightened earlier. While getting ready she’d tried hard to look her best, knowing that they’d be going straight from the stadium to dinner, but she hadn’t banked on a sporting event having the ability to completely ruin all the work she’d put in.

During half time, Kelley and Alex steal off to the bathroom and Christen tries to strike up conversation with Lindsey, urging herself to at least walk away from the trip with another almost-friend.

“Do you think Tobin will get subbed on?” she asks, sifting through the remnants of Alex’s popcorn.

“Maybe,” Lindsey says, pocketing her phone and kicking her legs up on the back of the chair in front of her. “I mean, she’s been subbing in consistently so it’s a definite possibility.”

“I just want her to start a game for once,” Christen says, watching the videos playing on the screen at the other end of the field.

“She’s still young, though,” Lindsey says. “She’s got time.”

“She’s good though,” Christen says.

“They’re all good, Christen,” Lindsey says, but it’s kind and conversational and Christen thinks that maybe, just maybe, she might be okay at this making friends thing. “That’s why they’re on the team.”

“I know, I know,” Christen says quickly, pushing past the slight embarrassment. “I know how it works. I’m not saying that Tobin is better than any of them or anything. I just like watching her play.”

Lindsey regards her with a smile.

“She’s something else, isn’t she?” Lindsey says aloud.

“Yeah,” Christen says with a nod. “She is.”

She gets subbed on in the sixty-ninth minute. It’s a little later than Christen would have liked, but from the moment Alex leans over to point out where Tobin is approaching the sideline, she’s enraptured. Tobin holds herself in a way that’s unique and it makes her easy to pick out from a
distance, much to Christen’s appreciation. Even though it takes her a while to get a first touch, Christen’s eyes still follow her from one end of the field to the other, watching as she jogs along before turning it up a notch and busts her ass trying to get where she needs to be.

Christen doesn’t know enough to be able to tell how well she’s doing, but Tobin looks like she’s doing a decent job of maintaining possession and connecting her passes. She gets knocked down during the seventy-seventh minute, causing Christen to sit on the edge of her literal seat and squint as best as she can to try and see if Tobin is getting up.

“Is she going to be alright?” Christen asks anxiously, watching Tobin grab her ankle.

“She’s fine. I think they’re subbing Allie in,” Lindsey says as one of Tobin’s teammates helps her up, another one arguing with the ref.

“Is she good?” Christen asks.

“She’s good enough,” Lindsey says, and Christen is about to rephrase the question until she sees that Lindsey is holding back laughter. “Christen. Just enjoy the game. This is a friendly. Tobin got subbed in, Allie’s going to get a few minutes, and we’re not losing. Don’t stress.”

“You’re so weird,” Alex says, leaning over Kelley again. Kelley hasn’t talked to Christen much, instead opting to converse with Alex about what’s going on in front of them. “If you’re not winning, of course you’re going to stress. Do you even remember what it’s like to play a game?”

Lindsey rolls her eyes and pulls a face. It works, making Alex sit back straight up in her seat and Lindsey elbows Christen’s arm, getting her attention as Allie finally steps onto the pitch and Tobin jogs over to where she’s supposed to be.

“What?” Christen asks, both eyes on Tobin as she moves further back in her seat, no longer worried about whether or not Tobin is okay.

“You’re all jumpy,” Lindsey says. “Just ignore Kelley and Alex and chill. Once we’re with Tobin and Allie, you won’t even remember that they’re here.”

Christen blushed, wondering if the tension between her and Kelley is really that palpable. She has no idea where it’s come from but something suddenly feels strange. Hopefully Lindsey is right and that having two more girls to keep them company will act as enough of a buffer to keep things from getting any weirder.

Some girl on the team scores in the eighty-fifth minutes, forcing the entire stadium to their feet. Lindsey screams loudly, hugging Christen tightly in joy. Christen hugs back, smiling widely as she watches Tobin, who just recorded an assist, throw herself into a pile of hugging teammates.

Christen kind of wishes she was down on the field in that moment.

The game stretches on for an eternity after that. Most of the team plays defense, trying to maintain their 1-0 lead and just end the game painlessly. Four minutes of stoppage time take even longer, and when the final whistle blows, Kelley grabs Alex and hightails it down to the edge of the stands, determined to put the sharpie in her hand to good use.

“What is she even going to have them sign?” Christen asks rhetorically. Kelley had already offhandedly mentioned convincing one of the players to sign her cleavage – not that she has that much to speak of, anyway – and while most of Christen doubts that she’ll actually ask, a part of her knows her best friend a little too well to rule out the possibility entirely.
“Maybe her ticket,” Lindsey says distractedly, thumbing through her phone. She has a boyfriend or something, Christen knows that much, so she doesn’t pry and instead pulls out her own phone, contemplating texting Tobin to congratulate her. It takes her a long time to formulate something that sounds enthusiastic enough for an international assist without going overboard, but eventually she thinks she nails it.

So proud of you! I knew you could do it :) Looking forward to seeing you soon!

She fires off a few texts, sending her mom a selfie that Kelley had insisted on taking of the two of them all dressed up back at the hotel. A quick scroll through Instagram tells her that Kelley has posted a picture of her and Alex that Lindsey had taken for them during halftime, after they’d come back from the restrooms. It isn’t the picture that bothers her, but the caption leaves behind a sick feeling in her stomach and send her heart into her throat.

Game day with the best! Don’t know what I’d do without my favorite gal.

Christen knows it doesn’t mean anything, but she looks down where Kelley is hip-checking a preteen to get closer to a player and she feels even sicker. She knows that Kelley and Alex are just close friends, that Alex isn’t interested in even the slightest – their earlier conversation had confirmed that Alex just wants everyone around her to be happy and drama free. But the idea that Kelley would rather post a public declaration of affection for Alex above Christen, neglecting the countless photos of her and Christen taken so far tonight, makes her think about what Alex said.

Christen doesn’t think that Kelley is using her, but she does think that maybe she needs to adjust her expectations and make them a little lower than they already are.

* 

They have to wait for Allie and Tobin outside the stadium, and it takes forever for them to emerge from the locker rooms. Tobin texts Christen to give her an ETA, and it makes Christen chuckle.

“What?” Kelley asks, peering over her shoulder and breathing hot puffs of air against Christen’s neck. “What’s so funny?”

Christen angles the phone towards Kelley, keeping one eye on it and wondering if Kelley is about to judge her for the exchange.

I’m ready but Allie is making me wait while she gets fancy, I’d rather be with you already.

It isn’t easy for Christen to hide the gigantic smile on her face, but the fact that Kelley isn’t looking at her makes it a little easier.

“We’re only going to a sports bar,” Kelley says, rolling her eyes. “Why does she need to get fancy?”

“Who, Tobin?” Lindsey asks.

“No, Allie,” Kelley says obviously.

“Don’t hate on a girl for wanting to look her best,” Alex says, peering into the front camera on her phone, checking her makeup and reapplying lipstick. “You never know who you’ll run into.”

“Like who?” Lindsey wants to know. “Zac Efron?”

“Ew,” Christen says, wrinkling her nose.
The rest of them burst into laughter.

When Tobin first emerges from the doors, Christen’s head snaps over to her. She’s missed Tobin, missed hugging her and talking to her in person. Phone calls don’t do her voice or laugh justice, and just seeing her gigantic smile while talking to Allie makes her smile right back. It only takes a few second for Tobin’s eyes to find Christen, and her smile grows even larger, if possible. Her and Allie amble along towards them, Tobin’s gait uncomfortably restrained like she’s a dog on a short leash who just wants to run free. Christen herself feels caged, cracking her knuckles and shifting her weight until Kelley backs off.


Christen doesn’t get much of a chance to respond, though. Tobin is suddenly within range – of what, Christen doesn’t know – and she finds herself quickly walking towards her, abandoning the girls for Tobin, who opens her arms wide and plants her feet for Christen, who doesn’t even know what she’s going to do until Tobin nods subtly, like she’s giving an okay. She jogs the last couple of feet, throwing herself onto her tiptoes so she can wrap her arms around Tobin’s neck. Strong arms wrap around her back and lift her off her feet for a moment, twirling her around.

“Tobin!” Christen squeals, the momentum preventing her from letting go and stopping Tobin’s madness.

“Hey, Chris,” Tobin mutters into her hair, exhaling sweetly as she stops moving but continues to hold on tightly, letting Christen’s feet dangle above the ground. She smells like sports drinks and water, her drying hair dripping all over the place and leaving damp spots against Christen’s forearms. “How’ve you been?”

“I’m better now,” Christen says without thinking, falling into Tobin who slowly lowers her back down until her feet are firmly resting on concrete. They stay wrapped around each other, Tobin’s angular frame relaxing into Christen’s softness until the clearing of a throat sends Christen reeling backwards, her brain snapping out of it as she sees Allie, who is ten thousand times prettier up close, looking at her with raised eyebrows.

“And you are?” she asks, and while the words could be considered rude, she is nothing but polite and friendly, if not a little stiff.

“Christen,” she says hurriedly, unraveling herself from Tobin who lets go, but not before squeezing Christen’s side gently. “I’m Christen. It’s really nice to meet you. I’ve heard a ton.”

Allie smiles, a close-lipped thing that reminds Christen of Alex.

She feels like they’ll get on well.

“Nice to meet you too,” Allie responds. “The other girls say that you have the keys – do you think we could head to the car?”

“Yes, sure,” Christen says, immediately slapping her hand against the back pocket of her jeans, making sure that her phone and her keys are still there. “Yeah, I didn’t mean to hold anyone up. We can go?”

“It’s fine,” Allie assures her, starting to walk to where the other girls are waiting for them in silence. “I just can’t wait to get out of here.”

Allie smiles again before walking ahead, leaving Tobin and Christen alone.
“I might have missed you,” Tobin says cheekily, grinning as she sidesteps Christen who takes it as a cue to get moving.

“I might have missed you too,” Christen says, feeling her cheeks pink. “Sorry.”

“Don’t apologize for anything,” Tobin says, her eyes bright. “That felt almost as good as my assist.”

“Now you’re just lying.”

“Am not!” Tobin protests. “I swear. You smell a lot better than a bunch of sweaty soccer players, anyway.”

“I’d hope so,” Christen says.

“Now tell me,” Tobin says, turning around to slowly jog backwards while Christen walks, slightly worried that Tobin is going to trip and fall. “Tell me that I smell good.”

“You just showered,” Christen points out. “Of course you smell good.”

Tobin’s perma-grin widens as she giggles, the sound even better than Christen remembers.

“Come on,” Tobin says, head jerking over her shoulder. “Allie gets grumpy when she’s hungry. Let’s get some food in her.”

They end up having to squeeze into Christen’s five-seater, Kelley insisting on sitting shotgun while the others cram into the back. Lindsey complains that she should have gotten to sit up front considering how tall she is and Alex bitches about her hair getting creased, but the ride isn’t a long one and Christen is more than relieved when they arrive at their destination, everyone impatiently falling out of the car.

“Kelley, you’re sitting in the back when we drop Tobin and Allie off,” Alex says threateningly, flipping her hair over her shoulder before following Allie and Lindsey to the restaurant entrance.

Kelley ignores her, turning to Christen, placing a hand on the small of her back and kissing her cheek.

“Is this okay?” she asks and Christen cringes, unable to ignore that Tobin is still getting out of the car, fixing her shoe.

“Yeah,” Christen says after swallowing. “It’s okay.”

“Good,” Kelley says with a suddenly soft smile, leaning in even closer to press a kiss to her lips. Kissing Kelley is just beginning to feel familiar, but there’s always a razor-sharp edge to her kisses that have Christen scared and hesitant. One day, she tells herself, one day soon it won’t be like this. One day Kelley is going to kiss her and it’s going to feel easier than breathing.

Tobin clears her throat, closing the car door behind her.

Christen ends the kiss, stepping away from Kelley but offering her hand in consolation.

“Come on,” Christen says, noticing the pointed look Tobin is giving to the parking lot asphalt. “Let’s go in.”

They sit in a booth, three to a side. Kelley slides in after Alex who sits across from Lindsey, leaving Christen sitting next to Kelley and across from Tobin. With her thigh pressed against Kelley’s, Christen flushes red as she opens her menu and avoids Tobin’s curious expression.
“I’m ordering a beer,” Allie says loudly, flipping through her own plastic menu. “Or wine.”

“Allie,” Tobin says, eyes not moving from Christen as she speaks. “No alcohol.”

“Just one glass!” Allie insists, holding up a single index finger that Tobin drags her gaze over to. “It’s not going to kill me.”

“Yeah but the coaches might,” Tobin says, shaking her head before finally opening her own menu. “It’s your own death wish.”

Kelley slides a hand over to grip Christen’s thigh, making her unable to focus on anything else besides the printed words in front of her face. She reads the same menu item nearly ten times over, vaguely aware of the rest of the table chatting while she remains silent. It’s hard to pay attention with Kelley’s hand squeezing – massaging, almost – her leg, ever so casually while she laughs along at something Alex says.

“What are you ordering?”

Tobin’s voice is quiet but sluices through all the noise in Christen’s head, as clear as crystal.

Christen clears her throat before speaking, looking up at Tobin and instantly feeling calmer.

“I’m not sure,” Christen says, looking back down to scan the menu briefly. “What about you? A burger?”

She says it teasingly and it has the intended effect, Tobin laughing with her crinkly eyes and perfect teeth.

“What’s it to you?” she asks.

“You always order one,” Christen says with a shrug.

“You know me too well,” Tobin says, and when Christen looks her in the eye, she sees sparkles.

“Maybe,” Christen says, thinking about everything Tobin has told her over the past few months.

Like she knows that Tobin doesn’t like cheese on her burgers, and that the thing from the library so many months ago wasn’t random: she falls asleep at the drop of a hat all the time. She knows that Tobin has a special pillowcase from when she was a kid, and she travels everywhere with it. She knows that Tobin has a massive sweet tooth and prefers tv to movies, and her and Allie first bonded over their love for Harry Potter.

Maybe she does know Tobin somewhat well.

A suddenly strong squeeze of Kelley’s hand diverts Christen’s attention.

“Want to share with me?” Kelley begs, putting on her best pair of puppy dog eyes. She blinks endearingly, pouting even going to whole nine yards.

“Share what?” Christen asks.

“Cheese fries,” Kelley says immediately. “And chicken tenders. And a quesadilla.”

“That’s a lot of food,” Christen observes.

“But you’ll share, won’t you?” Kelley pushes. “So I don’t have to make a decision?”
Out of context, the words make Christen’s chest seize up for a second.

“What?” she asks, suddenly breathless.

“So I can have them all,” Kelley explains, tapping her laminated menu. “You’ll share, right? For me?”

Christen nods blankly, holding a hand to her heart and trying to stop it from acting as though she’s just run a marathon.

“Yeah, Kell,” she says, closing her eyes for a few seconds, pressing her lids together before opening them. “You don’t have to choose. I’ll share with you.”

She closes her own menu without having really looked at it, but wonders if maybe there’s something in there she would have wanted.

She’ll never know.

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When they’re mostly full and just gossiping about life – Lindsey’s boyfriend is hilarious apparently, and so are Alex’s adventures in being single. She has too many stories about being hit on – something Christen has just about never experienced – and they make the entire table laugh while she smiles amusedly. Allie is nice, leaning on Tobin when she laughs and pulling her close to whisper in her ear every now and then. Once, Tobin catches Christen looking and she sends her a wink that has Christen looking away determinedly.

“So,” Allie says, during a lull in the conversation. She looks directly at Christen, her eyes pretty but fierce. “Christen. Did you have fun tonight?”

“Oh,” Christen says, caught off guard by the fact that everyone is now looking at her intently “I mean, yeah.”

“Just as our resident non-player,” Allie clarifies, smiling this time with teeth, and she looks a little kinder this way. “I mean, obviously these guys enjoyed it, but I know that you’re mostly here for Tobin.”

Tobin protests something, but Christen doesn’t register it as she feels Kelley’s hand slowly creep back onto her thigh.

“No, I mean Lindsey explained it all to me very well,” Christen says. “So I had a lot of fun. I like watched you both. You’re really good, you know. Lindsey says you work well together.”

Allie laughs at that.

“We do,” she says, glancing over at Tobin. “It probably helps that we’re such good friends.”

“I knew Allie at UNC,” Tobin explains, and suddenly everything makes a little more sense.

“So that’s why you two play so well together,” Lindsey says, nodding to herself.

“I’ve got to pee,” Kelley says suddenly, hand tightening before releasing. “Let me out?”

“I’m going to come with,” Alex says, scrambling to move as Christen gets up.

“Me too,” Lindsey says, and it takes a bit of maneuvering until it’s just Tobin, Allie, and Christen left.
“So,” Tobin says after a pause during which Christen looks at Allie uncertainly, trying to decide if she’s comfortable around her or not. “On a scale from one to ten, how glad are you that you came to see us play?”

“Like a million,” Christen says without thinking about it. “I know I’m not the best fan, but I still like watching when I know the people playing.”

Tobin just smiles and Christen smiles back, only looking away when Allie noisily sucks up the rest of her water through a straw.

“What?” she asks Christen.

“Nothing,” Christen says, a little embarrassed at having been caught staring.

Allie waits for a second, pursing her lips before turning to Tobin.

“You were right,” she tells Tobin. “She’s cute.”

This time, Christen isn’t the only one flaming red.

Chapter End Notes

i hope you guys like this one! i start my first big girl job tomorrow so i’ll have to see what the update schedule is gonna look like from here on out, but please be patient with me. i’m going to try my best to keep things at the same pace, if i can.
The morning after the game gets off to a late start. The girls aren’t planning on leaving the hotel anytime soon: they’re still planning on staying at the hotel for a few more nights, fully planning to take advantage of their spring break. Kelley is determined to obtain a tan that consists of more than a heavy splattering of freckles across her face and shoulders, and Alex is just relieved to have gotten away from Syd and Dom for a few days.

“They act like they’re married,” she’d said on the ride down the day before. “It’s gross. They know that none of us want to see that, right?”

Despite the fact that the rest of the room looks dead to the world, Christen finds herself unable to sleep anymore once the clock hits nine o’clock. She gets up quietly, careful not to wake Kelley as she rises and showers away the sweat and exhaustion left over from yesterday. Part of her is dying to head out and grab a coffee despite the fact that she feels an obligation to stay in the room with the people she came to town with, but an idea hits her while she’s in the middle of twisting her wet hair into a top knot and she finds herself unable to shake it.

It’s easy to arrange. A few texts, a scribbled note that she places on top of Kelley’s phone, and a quick swipe of mascara to make herself presentable. Just as she is about to slip out of the hotel room, armed with just her phone, wallet, and keys, she thinks that maybe Alex rolls over and cracks open an eyelid to look at her, but she tells herself to ignore it and keep going.

It’s a bit of a drive, but when she pulls up outside of the hotel that the national team is staying at, Tobin is already waiting outside. She’s wrapped up in clothes entirely too warm for the bright sun outside, a sweatshirt and sweatpants, a pair of sunglasses hiding her eyes from view as she stands with a relaxed stance. Her phone is in her hand but it hangs at her side, Tobin’s head up and alert as she clearly keeps an eye out.

Tobin is in the passenger seat in no time, grinning widely and settling into the leather.

“Hey,” she says, her voice raspier than Christen has ever heard it, sleep-laden and scratchy. “It’s good to see you.”

“You too,” Christen says, feeling her cheeks grow warm as she starts to drive forward. “Is it okay that you’re out like this?”

“It’s fine,” Tobin says, not even bothering to clear her throat as she slips off her sunglasses, setting them in her lap. “They’re not too strict about what we do as long as we’re where we need to be when we need to be there.”

“Nice,” Christen says softly. “Well, I’m glad you were awake.”

“My roommate wakes up early,” Tobin explains. “Normally I’d try to sleep in a bit.”

“Is Allie your roommate?” Christen questions.

“Nah, not this time,” Tobin says, shaking her head. “I think that they’re keeping us apart on purpose. They know that we get along too well.”

“So you’re really close to her,” Christen states.

“She was my closest friend at UNC,” Tobin says with a shrug. “I didn’t want to leave her, but I think
we got closer once I left and we got drafted to the same team. You know what they say – absence makes the heart grow fonder.”

Christen wonders if that saying might be applicable elsewhere.

Tobin still remembers the way Christen likes her coffee: two creams and one sugar. She volunteers to wait in a short line while Christen grabs a table, sitting down and watching Tobin as she slouches endearingly. She’s got horrible posture sometimes, something that Christen has ribbed her about before, but Tobin doesn’t seem to care that she’s going to end up like a hunchback if she’s not careful.

When they’re finally sitting down together, Christen taking a careful sip of her burning hot coffee before deciding to wait to drink anymore, it takes a moment for the two of them to focus and begin talking. Maybe it’s the sheer surprise at being alone together like this, in new city, knowing that there might be other people looking for them, that makes it hard to break the silence. It all feels so delicate, thin and breakable, that Christen doesn’t want to speak up and shatter the illusion of two people meeting in secret for a cup of coffee.

Something about it feels wrong, and Christen shifts in her seat before finally opening her mouth.

“I had a great time last night,” she offers quietly, tapping her fingers against her cup. Tobin is mindlessly twirling a stirrer around in her own coffee, the lid resting on the table and her eyes still on Christen.

“Good,” Tobin says, not even cracking a smile. Her face looks uncharacteristically serious. “That’s all I wanted.”

“I know that I’m not super into soccer,” Christen continues, the uncomfortable feeling increasing. “But I like watching you play.”

“Thanks,” Tobin says, stirring her coffee even faster. “I like playing.”

The conversation is stilted and Christen wonders if maybe she’s done something wrong. She pushes onwards, hoping that maybe Tobin is just tired from their late night.

“So where to from here?” she asks, trying to get Tobin talking.

It doesn’t work very well.

“Nashville,” Tobin says, and it’s not flat or rude but it is brief and Christen can’t pinpoint anything that might have happened between when they arrived at the shop and when Tobin came over for their drinks that might have caused Tobin to be so short with her. It’s unnerving, having her first awkward conversation with Tobin in what feels like months. It reminds her of when they barely knew each other, back before they were friends and confided in each other.

Except, Christen thinks, maybe Tobin doesn’t confide in her all that much. She thinks of Allie and how she didn’t even know she existed until a couple months ago when clearly she’s a very important person in Tobin’s life. It makes Christen wonder what else Tobin isn’t telling her. Not that Tobin is obliged to tell her everything that goes on in her life – no, Christen knows that she doesn’t have that privilege. She does however know that she wishes she would know everything, and suddenly she’s feeling like she knows nothing.

“And after that?” Christen prompts, desperate to keep the conversation going despite how it’s crawling along in the most boring and dreadful fashion ever.
“South Florida,” Tobin says, finally stopping her stirring. She lays her hands palm down on the table, still looking at Christen. Christen thought that Tobin had been looking at her intently, but the look in her eyes is suddenly rather blank.

“Oh,” Christen says, a little taken aback. “I didn’t know. Do you not want us to come to that one?”

“It’s a little far,” Tobin says awkwardly. “I didn’t want to ask.”

And while maybe it is a little far for them to travel, Christen still wishes Tobin would have asked.

“Well,” Christen says, “maybe next time.”

“Next time,” Tobin echoes.

Christen can’t take it anymore. She gingerly takes a sip of her coffee for fortitude and phrases the words in her mind over and over again until she’s sure she has them right. It means that there’s a long period silence, Tobin not saying anything as she watches Christen and ignores her own coffee.

“Did I do something wrong?”

It’s not much, but it’s the best Christen can come up with, her voice tentative and small.

“No,” Tobin says, finally lifting to her cup to her mouth, eyebrows raising as she touches it to her lips.

“Okay,” Christen says, lost for words or what to do.

Again, neither of them say anything for longer than feels comfortable.

Eventually, after several long pulls of her coffee, Tobin sets her cup down and speaks.

“How are you and Kelley?”

Christen is a little taken aback by the question, but perhaps she shouldn’t be.

“Fine,” Christen answers. Then, figuring that she needs to start doing her part in their friendship, she says, “How’s Allie?”

“I’m not dating Allie,” Tobin states quizzically.

“You’re still friends,” Christen says with a shrug. “She seems nice, though.”

“She is,” Tobin nods.

Christen is frustrated, feeling like she isn’t getting anywhere. She doesn’t regret asking Tobin along, not in the slightest, but she is wondering why Tobin agreed to come along if she was only going to be detached and uninterested the entire time.

“I feel like I did something wrong,” Christen says, her face burning as she gets the words out. “Are you sure – “

“Christen,” Tobin interrupts, a rare moment from her. “I don’t think we should talk about it.”

Christen can feel her face falling before it happens. She feels sick, like there’s a giant knot in her stomach and another in her throat. The smell of coffee makes her even more nauseous, so she carefully pushes it half a foot away from her nose and does her best not to breathe.

It’s not okay though; Christen can feel her bottom lip trembling as her mind races through everything she could have done wrong. She thought that she’d done everything right, and maybe she gets a little selfish sometimes and should care about Tobin more, but she’s honestly been trying her hardest.

Tobin sighs.

“Chris,” she says, “I don’t want to hurt your feelings. Can’t we just sit here and enjoy our time together?”

“I just want to know what I did,” Christen says timidly. “So I don’t do it again.”

Tobin sighs again, running a hand through her hair.

“It’s not anything that you did,” Tobin says, maybe a little too kindly. “It’s just me being weird. I’ll get over it.”

“Have I been a bad friend?” Christen asks, needing to know.

Tobin shakes her head, mouth opening like she’s about to say something, but Christen doesn’t pay too much attention to that.

“Are you sure?” Christen pushes. “Is it Kelley? Is it because you don’t like that I’m with her?”

“What do you mean?” Tobin asks, brow furrowing. “I never said that.”

“You didn’t have to,” Christen says, the knots only tightening. “I could tell.”

Christen tries not to think about it sometimes but it’s obvious. It was obvious back when Christen only had a crush, and it’s only become even more so since she called Tobin to tell her that Kelley had decided to take a chance on them. She knows that Tobin thinks Kelley pushes Christen around, that Tobin thinks they’re sometimes too dependent on each other, and Tobin thinks Christen shouldn’t waste her time on Kelley – but she likes to forget that most of the time. It’s easier to listen to Tobin be happy for her, be happy that she’s happy, and be a good friend. Tobin is one of the nicest people Christen has ever known, and sometimes Christen likes to focus on that instead of the fact that she spent far too much time unloading on Tobin without Tobin ever asking for anything in return.

“It’s not that,” Tobin says calmly. Her eyes are wide and unblinking, shining in the sunlight coming through the window behind her.

“Then what is it?”

“I just want you to be happy,” Tobin says, shrugging. “If that means being with her, that that’s all that matters.”

“But you don’t like it,” Christen says slowly. “She’s not awful, you know. She’s a good friend to me and that means that she’s taking this seriously.”

“I never said that she wasn’t,” Tobin says swiftly. “I know that you two are best friends and that anything she’s ever done to hurt you has been unintentional.”

“So then what is it?” Christen asks, growing mildly frustrated. “What did I do?”

Tobin lifts her cup, taking an incredibly long sip before setting it down and studying Christen.
“I think that you deserve better,” Tobin says simply.

The words hit Christen strangely, her heart clenching at the honesty in the statement.

“Better?” Christen asks, confused and slightly incredulous. “Better than my best friend who already loves me?”

“She loves you but she isn’t in love with you,” Tobin points out. “And yeah, I think you deserve better. Better than someone who isn’t even sure that they want to be with you.”

“She’s new to this,” Christen defends, face growing warm. “She’s trying for me. This is important to her. She might not be good at it, but that’s only because she’s never done it before. I don’t know about you, but that sounds pretty good to me.”

“Christen,” Tobin says, and Christen hates the pity in her tone. “You deserve so much more than someone who isn’t sure whether they want you or not. You deserve someone who knows that they want you more than they’ve ever wanted anything.”

Christen’s eyes burn.

“Yeah?” she challenges, fighting the urge to cry. “Where am I supposed to find that? Am I supposed to wait around for someone like that to find me? Because I’ve waited, Tobin. A long time. I’ve been alone. I’ve been lonely. I’ve been single. I’ve wished that I could find someone to love me. Just because Kelley doesn’t fit your idea of the perfect love doesn’t mean that she isn’t just that.”

“Christen – “ Tobin begins, but Christen shakes her head, effectively cutting her off.

“Some of us aren’t lucky,” Christen says, cursing internally when she feels a lone tear sneak down the side of her nose without permission, slipping down over her upper lip until she can lick it away. “Some of us aren’t pretty, aren’t talented, aren’t popular – not everyone can be like that and I’m not, okay? I have a hard enough time making friends, much less keeping them. Getting people to like me is rare. It’s happened like, twice in my life. But I’ve been trying to make the most out of what I have. You told me to stand up for myself, and that’s what I’ve been doing. I’m telling you that maybe Kelley isn’t your version of perfect, but she’s mine, and that’s enough for me. So don’t tell me that I deserve more. Not when there isn’t any ‘more’ out there for me.”

Tobin wordlessly hands Christen a napkin, which she uses to dab at the tears lining her eyes before they streak down her face, taking her hastily applied mascara with them.

It takes a little while for Christen to get herself under control again. Tobin remains quiet the entire time, waiting patiently before saying anything.

“I’m sorry,” Tobin says sincerely. “I shouldn’t have said anything.”

“I’m glad you did,” Christen says, neatly folding the napkin and setting it down on the table. “I just wanted to know how you felt.”

“I didn’t want to make you upset,” Tobin says, her voice nearly a whisper as she grips her cup tightly. Christen watches her knuckles go white and Tobin’s voice sounds precarious for the first time since Christen has maybe ever known her. “You mean a lot to me, Chris. I just want you happy, now and in the long run. We’re friend, you know. Friends usually want each other to be happy.”

Christen fidgets.
“I don’t think I’ve ever had a friend like you,” she confesses, her throat tight and her heart beating fast.

Tobin doesn’t say anything. She just looks at Christen sadly until her phone beeps from the depths of her pockets, and she exhales long and slow before reaching for it.

“Allie says I need to be back soon,” Tobin says heavily. “Are you okay if we head out soon?”

Christen nods.

“That’s fine,” she says, trying to keep her voice level. She doesn’t want Tobin to go, doesn’t want to leave each other with things like this, but if Tobin has to go, she has to go. Christen isn’t going to make her stick around, not when she has other things to worry about.

“Are you sure?” Tobin checks. “Because I can always send her to pack up my stuff so I can stay with you a little longer.”

“I’m fine,” Christen repeats. “Trust me. I’ll be okay.”

Tobin pulls a face like she can’t quite decide whether Christen is being honest or not, but in the end it doesn’t matter. Christen gets up with her half-full coffee and nods towards the exit, feeling like they might as well get going if this is how it’s going to be: Tobin too wonderful for Christen’s own good, and Christen always trying and failing to get it together enough to be a decent friend. Tobin follows along in an unhurried pace, her feet dragging as she heads to where Christen parked her car. Part of Christen doubts that Tobin even really wanted to sit with her longer in the first place, and that she wasn’t saying it just to be nice. Surely Tobin doesn’t want to sit there and hear about her non-relationship issues and low self esteem more than absolutely necessary.

They drive along in quiet, the only noise coming from the whir of the engine and the outside sounds. Christen doesn’t even bother putting on music, too melancholy to think of anything she wants to hear. Maybe she’s being dramatic, maybe her mind needs to calm down, maybe Tobin doesn’t actually hate her and really is just looking out for her – whatever it is, it doesn’t win over the part of Christen screaming at her to leave Tobin alone, to let her go on her merry way, to only work about Kelley who will never leave Christen for anything.

When they’re close to the hotel, Tobin places a hand on the center console, close to but not quite touching Christen’s resting forearm.

“I don’t want to leave you,” Tobin says quietly, eyes burning a hole in the side of Christen’s face. “I wish I didn’t have to.”

There’s something in Christen’s throat that she can’t speak past.

“You haven’t done anything wrong,” Tobin continues, “and sorry if I upset you. I just wanted to be honest with you.”

“Thank you for that,” Christen chokes out with far more effort than a simple few words should require.

“I hope that you have a good spring break,” Tobin says, a smile poking through her serious expression. “I don’t know when I’ll see you again, but we’ll make it happen, right?”

Christen just nods tightly. She pulls up in front of the hotel, leaving her foot on the brake instead of putting the car in park even when Tobin shows no sign of moving.
“Bye,” Tobin says eventually, after what feels like hours of her watching Christen expectantly.

“Bye.” It’s just a wisp of a word that Christen utters. She’s feeling too self conscious, too wretched, too upset to even contemplate saying goodbye to Tobin. She’s just thinking about how there’s no reason for her to ever see Tobin again, how they’re friends but not real friends, how they seem to do better apart than together, and how Christen doesn’t think she can be with Kelley if Tobin is to remain her friend. She has some thinking to do, but she doesn’t want to do any of it.

She resolves to save it for later, if she ever sees Tobin again. Because if she never does, then it was never a problem worth worrying about anyway.

But then Tobin leans over, hovering over the console like there’s something she wants to do. Christen can’t help the way her eyes unwittingly flit up to look at Tobin whose mouth is open and who is wearing a bewildered expression, even as she sinks back into the passenger seat and raises a hand to hover in front of her mouth, like she doesn’t want to believe herself.

“Text me, okay?” Tobin says after a moment, right hand reaching to open the door.

Christen just nods again before Tobin leaves.

She drives back to her own hotel in a bit of a daze, her mind going a million miles an hour. Their conversation keeps running through her head on a loop, with Christen trying to identify when everything went wrong and what she could have done.

Maybe there wasn’t anything she could have done. Maybe she can’t be friends with Tobin while she’s dating Kelley, and it just took a while to realize it.

She drags her feet up to the hotel room, which is bustling with activity as the other girls try to get ready for a day at the pool. It doesn’t take more than a second for her appearance to be noticed, Alex raising her eyebrows in Christen’s direction while Lindsey waves from where she’s rifling through her suitcase. Kelley rushes out of the bathroom at the sound of the door opening, hair tossed in a haphazard bun as she tries to tie her bikini top in a knot behind her neck. She looks silly, oversized denim cut-offs hiked up around her waist and white sunscreen smeared all over her chest and the visible top half of her stomach.

It makes Christen smile, despite feeling a little hollow inside.

“Hey!” Kelley exclaims, in front of Christen in no time. “When you said you’d gone to get coffee, I thought that meant you were bringing us back some.”

Christen coughs, letting Kelley kiss her cheek before she moves to the side, dropping her things on the edge of the unmade bed they’d shared and sitting down.

“Sorry,” Christen says. “I didn’t even think.”

“It’s okay,” Kelley says with an unbothered shrug. “Did you have a good time by yourself? I know that sometimes you just need – “

“Yeah,” Christen says, aware that Alex is mere feet away from them and totally capable of eavesdropping despite the music playing from her phone speakers as she rubs moisturizer into her face. “I’m fine.”

“Good,” Kelley says, finally getting her bathing suit tied up. “Because we’re taking on the lazy river today, and I’m getting a margarita in you if it’s the last thing I do.”
Christen just smiles weakly.

“Okay,” she says. “Inner tubes and margaritas it is.”

* 

When spring break ends, they all have to go back to class and Christen almost finds herself comforted by the familiarity of her routine. She’d missed it while they were out of town, and even finds herself eager to get back to class and her usual study sessions with Julie in the library. Kelley joins sometimes, something that Christen knows takes great effort on her part as she and Julie still don’t get along very much. The truth is that Christen is cracking down on studying for the GRE and Kelley is working on her MCAT practice tests, even enrolling in a prep class that takes her away from Christen in the evenings. It feels like they’re in a state of limbo, busy during the day and too tired at night from their mismatched schedules to do more than lie on the couch together while watching tv and eating dinner, their limbs nudged up against each other and Kelley leaning over for a kiss every once in a while.

It just takes time, Christen tells herself while getting ready for bed one night, after letting Kelley make out with her during the final ten minutes of an episode of The Office. It’s only been a month. Christen can’t reasonably expect the world from Kelley in just a month. And yet, she finds herself wanting more. She wants dates nights that don’t involve take out and sitting at the table instead of in front of the tv. She wants Sunday brunches where she can giggle at the whipped cream that will inevitably end up on Kelley’s face. She wants for Kelley to stop spending nights out with her sorority sisters, something she hadn’t done in a while but has suddenly taken up like it’s her job. It’s not as though she wants their lives to only involve each other, but it would be nice if the time they spent together was used a little more wisely.

It takes time. Things will work out. She just has to be patient.

So while she sits in the library with Kelley at her side on a Wednesday afternoon in the beginning of April, a rare enough occurrence considering that Julie is on her way to join them, she lets Kelley pull her laptop out of her lap and set it down on the floor a distance away from them. She lets Kelley swing her legs to drape over Christen’s crossed legs and cuddle as close as she can, pressing a kiss to her jaw in the process. Christen still feels weird about letting Kelley do that in public, but the floor is relatively deserted and it’s an innocent gesture. At least, it’s innocent until Kelley raises a hand to turn Christen’s cheek, bringing their faces together so Kelley can kiss her square on the mouth.

Kissing has gotten easier. Kelley still leaves something inside of Christen unsettled, but she thinks that maybe that’s a good thing, that those butterflies haven’t gone away. It just means that Kelley really does spark something in Christen that makes her nervous – in the best way – and that it’s here to stay.

That’s what Christen tells herself.

That’s what Christen tells herself when Kelley gently coaxes her mouth open with her lips and Christen panic. It’s not like Kelley hasn’t done this before, not like Christen hasn’t tasted Kelley before. She’s done it when she’s been minty fresh, when she’s just polished off half a box of pizza, and when she’s finished snacking on long stalks of celery. It’s not completely unfamiliar, but does make Christen freak out for a moment, jerking backwards like she hasn’t done in weeks. She tastes bile in the back of her throat, and swallows as she sees Kelley’s obviously displeased expression.

“What’s wrong?” Kelley asks, the frustration clear on her face.

“I feel like I can’t even kiss you,” Kelley says, her voice quiet but simmering. “That’s a huge part of this, and if we can’t even do that, then what are we doing?”

“I’m sorry,” Christen says immediately. “I don’t know. We can try again.”

“Is it because we’re girls kissing in public?” Kelley demands, keeping her voice low. “Is that the problem?”

“No,” Christen says as emphatically as she can, shaking her head. “Kelley, I swear that’s not the problem.”

“Then what is it?”

Christen struggles with her words, trying to phrase them so that Kelley will wipe that annoyed look at her face and act as if she isn’t ready to bolt.

“On a scale of one to ten,” Kelley says warningly, “if you don’t tell me, I’m leaving.”

“That’s not fair!” Christen protests. “Kell, I’m trying here! It’s just that I’ve never been the kind of person who is comfortable with stuff like this.”

“Stuff?” Kelley scoffs. “Like what, showing the person you want to be your girlfriend a little attention?”

“In public, yeah,” Christen says. “It’s fine when we’re back at the apartment or something.”

“I think it’s more than that,” Kelley says, removing her legs from Christen’s lap. “During spring break, when we shared a hotel bed for nearly an entire week? You barely even wanted to kiss me.”

“Alex and Lindsey were in the other bed!” Christen argues, cheeks flaming red. “I wasn’t about to start anything with them there.”

“Come on, they were asleep!” Kelley exclaims. “They never would have known!”

“You couldn’t have known that.” Christen counters. “And besides, we live in the same apartment, Kelley. Maybe if you got home at a decent hour everyday instead of coming home late because your stupid sorority – “

“What, do you want me to deactivate or something?” Kelley asks incredulously. “Christen, come on. I have duties. I’m set to be in office in the fall and I’m trying to take it seriously. We’re not married. You can’t tell me when to be home.”

Tears sting the corners of Christen’s eyes and she curses her emotions.

“I’m not trying to,” she says, frustrated. “I’m just saying, I don’t like PDA and you’re never home early enough to do anything.”

“So you’re saying that if I ever want a chance to get past first base I need to get home earlier?” Kelley asks.

That isn’t quite the message Christen is trying to get across but it’s better than nothing, she supposes, so she nods.

“Yeah,” Christen says. “Just, I get so tired, you know? I get home and shower and just want to go to bed.”
“Well, then let’s try tonight,” Kelley says determinedly, reaching for her things. “I’m going to skip studying because I already went to my MCAT session today, and head over to the house to get stuff done early.”

“Kell – “

“I do all of this for you,” Kelley interrupts as she packs up the few things she’s manage to spread out during their time there. “You know that? I sit here and watch you study after I’ve already studied. I come home and sit with you instead of passing out in bed because I’m exhausted, too. But I come home and want to spend time with you more than I want to sleep. Maybe you’re the one who needs to make more of an effort, because I am trying here. I’m the one who sits on the couch with you to watch your Netflix shows even though I’m not always up for it. So if maybe you could remove the stick up your ass and realize that I can’t cater to your wishes all the time, that would be really nice.”

Christen gapes up at Kelley as she rises from the floor with her backpack. She feels the tears coming so she blinks furiously, not wanting Kelley to see her cry.

“Julie’s here,” Kelley says, glancing over to the stairwell where Julie is stepping onto the floor. “I’m going to go before I have to say hi.”

With that she beelines for the elevator so she can bypass Julie completely. Christen takes a moment to wipe her eyes as discreetly as possible, taking a few deep breaths and sniffs to get rid of the urge to let out an ugly sob.

When Julie sits down a few moments later, Christen does her best to return her smile with as much enthusiasm as possible.

“How are you?” Julie asks, pulling out her giant GRE test book.

“Good,” Christen says, retrieving her laptop from where Kelley dumped it. “What about you? How’s Zach?”

“He’s good,” Julie hums, taking out a pencil. “What about Kelley? She ran out of here pretty fast.”

“She had sorority stuff,” Christen mutters, clicking away to try and reactivate the online practice test she was taking. It’s not timed, thankfully, or else she wouldn’t have let Kelley take it away in the first place.

Julie knows about Kelley, just because she’s borne witness to too many chaste kisses over the past month and a half. She’d asked Christen about it after the first time Kelley had just leaned over and puckered her lips for a goodbye kiss – which Christen had reluctantly given to her – and at first had been a little surprised, but then reasoned that it only made sense.

“You’ve always been a little obsessed with her,” she’d teased.

Once Christen had explained the entire situation. Julie had proved to be the only person on Christen’s side of it all.

“That makes sense,” she’d said, nodding in understanding. “I mean, it’s great that she’s giving it a chance.”

Now, though, Julie is looking at her concernedly as she tosses her hair up into a high bun.

“You look upset,” she observes. “Are you okay?”
“I’m fine,” Christen reassures her. “Just a little sad that she had to go.”

“Okay,” Julie says, head bobbing up and down as she twists a ponytail around her hair. “Just checking.”

It’s all that they say on the subject for a while, taking their separate practice tests and asking each other for advice on more difficult questions. Christen is better with the reading portions while Julie is strangely good with the math portions, blaming her business major boyfriend.

“He made me do his college algebra homework freshman year,” she’d sworn when they first realized how good she was with the questions. “If that didn’t kill our relationship, I don’t know what will.”

So when they finish and and Christen is waiting for Julie to manually tally up her points, it’s a little strange that Julie broaches the subject.

“I’m here to talk about Kelley if you want,” she offers kindly. “I won’t say anything if you don’t want me to. You can just talk.”

Christen thinks about it, biting her lip as she watches Julie flip between pages to mark her answers as correct or not.

“I used to talk to Tobin about Kelley,” Christen says slowly.

“So why don’t you talk to her?” Julie suggests, as though it’s an obvious solution.

Christen shifts around, trying to get comfortable.

“She kind of thinks that Kelley doesn’t deserve me,” she mumbles. “And I might have gotten defensive, so we really haven’t talked since.”

“You’re friends, right?” Julie asks encouragingly.

Christen nods.

“So just call her,” she says with a shrug. “If she just thinks that you deserve better than Kelley, that’s not a bad thing. Sometimes I think I deserve better than Zach. Like, someone who doesn’t smell like sweaty socks and doesn’t leave his boxers all over my floor when he stays over and actually puts the new toilet paper roll on the holder instead of the counter.”

“Tobin thinks I deserve someone who is in love with me.”

“That comes with time,” Julie says patiently, looking up from her book. “Love is a big thing. Zack tried to say it too early so I told him to slow down and wait until he meant it. Do you know how long I had to wait for him to say it and mean it?”

“How long?”

“A year,” Julie says importantly. “He first told me a month in, and I had to wait a year for him to mean it. Relationships aren’t easy, Christen. They don’t just magically work. You have to put in effort and suffer through the bad times if you want the good.”

Christen doesn’t say anything because Julie is right. If she wants Kelley, the good comes with the bad and she’s going to have to be okay with things like Kelley not understanding her dislike for PDA and saying that she has a stick up her ass. She knows that Kelley isn’t always a pretty and fun person, and dating her means that she’s going to see all of that on a regular basis.
“So you can talk to me,” Julie says, going back to her answer sheet. “Or you can swallow your pride and call Tobin. What are you scared of?”

“How’d you know – “

“I know you,” Julie cuts in apologetically, shooting Christen a small smile. “It’s been a while, Chris. You tell me more than you realize, and I’ve gotten really good at psychoanalysis since that social psych class. Your friends are important to you but you also don’t like it when they tell you things you don’t want to hear. Tobin said something that you didn’t want to hear. Be a grown up about it and text her at the very least.”

“We’ve been texting,” Christen mumbles. “It’s not like we’ve been completely out of contact.”

“Text her,” Julie orders. “Be a friend. Besides, I count slow so it’s going to take me a minute to figure out my scores.”

So Christen takes a moment to type out a carefully worded text, reading through several times before sending it. It makes her cringe when she sees that it’s been nearly five days since they last texted, and her heart aches a little when Tobin doesn’t immediately begin typing back.

_Sorry I’ve been weird, I’ve been feeling strange since we got coffee. I miss talking to you. I think you’re at practice now, but I’d really like to talk to you about Kelley and figure out a time and place to see you again. Miss you._

She doesn’t get a response after her and Julie compare their scores (Julie scores a mere point higher and Christen complains, insisting that her reading knowledge helped her win).

She doesn’t get a response when she walks to her car, turning up the air conditioning in the muggy April evening.

She doesn’t get a response when she arrives back at the apartment to see Kelley setting the table with a single sunflower in a tall, narrow glass and some pasta that Christen is pretty sure was stolen from her sorority.

She doesn’t get a response when Kelley grins at her throughout their meal, in a better mood and clearly excited for what’s ahead.

She doesn’t get a response when she lets Kelley press her into the length of the couch, covering her mouth with hers. Kelley settles one leg between Christen’s, grinding down ever so slightly on Christen’s thigh. She doesn’t wait long before moving to kiss the tender spot behind Christen’s ear, sucking the skin lightly while she raises a hand to come rest on top of Christen’s left breast. The weight of it makes Christen’s heart race and she finds herself wanting more, impatient for it all to start feeling good. All of it still feels like she’s balancing on a tightrope, a hungry lion waiting for her below with twelve-inch knives for teeth, just waiting to rip her apart. It’s nerve-wracking and Christen tells herself to just go with it, to enjoy it like she’s supposed to.

It’s not that Kelley’s a girl. That’s not the problem. It’s that Kelley’s her best friend and Christen is nervous and she does her best to block that anxiety out, raising her hands to come up and rest on Kelley’s waist, gripping tightly as she whispers for Kelley to kiss her again. Kelley obeys wordlessly, her lips wet but not too wet and her tongue warm as it snakes up against Christen’s own. Christen effectively seals their mouths together Kelley warm and all too willing to kiss her deeply as she tugs down the neckline of Christen’s cotton v-neck. She cups her breast through her bra, squeezing gently with firm fingers and slowly creeping up towards the edge where fabric meets skin.
“Kell,” Christen breathes into Kelley’s mouth, lips barely moving as she exhales. “Kell, just do it.”

“I want you to be ready,” Kelley mumbles back, moving to scrape her teeth over Christen’s bottom lip.

“I’m never going to be ready,” Christen confesses as Kelley releases her lip, trailing kisses along her jaw. “Just do it.”

So Kelley reattaches their mouths together, this time taking Christen’s top lip between hers and kissing her bruisingly hard and rough while she tugs down the white lacy cup, fingers brushing against sensitive skin as she tries to clear access to Christen’s breast. She barely manages to cover the area with her palm, Christen gasping audibly from the contact, before the sudden shrill ringing of a phone cuts through the room.

“It’s yours,” Christen says when Kelley breaks the kiss, looking around in shock. “Your back pocket.”

Kelley has to dig into the back pocket of her jeans to look at her phone screen, removing her hand from Christen and groaning when she does so.


Christen shakes her head.

“Talk to your sister,” she says as Kelley answers the call, slowly backing away and off of Christen who quickly readjusts her bra and shirt to lay normally. “Come see me when you’re done?”

Kelley nods distractedly, greeting Erin with a surprisingly minimal amount of frustration in her voice. Christen is grateful that she doesn’t seem to be bothered by being interrupted, and she gets up and head for her room to get ready for bed, snatching her phone up from the kitchen counter as she goes.

She gets a response from three minutes prior, when Kelley’s hand was on her chest and Christen was finally getting into it.

_It’s okay, it was a weird morning for both of us. I was at practice and am about to crash but I can call you in the morning before class? I’m thinking that you can come down for our home opener in a couple weeks – I’d love to have you there. I really missed you too._
Upon arriving at Tobin and Allie’s apartment, Alex collapses to the ground and nearly kisses the welcome mat.

“Thank God,” she weeps much to Allie’s amusement and Tobin’s bewilderment. “I thought it would never end!”

“What happened?” Tobin mouths at Christen who just shrugs and nods towards Kelley who is clutching her stomach in laughter.

“Do you know what Kelley’s driving is like?” Alex demands, sitting back on her heels, effectively blocking the doorway and keeping Kelley and Christen from entering and escaping the sweltering sun. “I kept having to swallow my own vomit.”

“You’re exaggerating,” Kelley says, her laughs coming to a sudden stop. “It wasn’t that bad.”

“Christen drives everywhere from here on out,” Alex orders, accepting Allie’s hand and using it to help herself up. “Okay? Also, Kelley, try cleaning your car every once in a while.”

Kelley protests at that, but Christen rolls her eyes and ignores it in favor of pushing past her into the apartment.

“So we were going to go to dinner,” Allie says, leading Alex and Christen to Tobin’s room, which she has generously offered up for the girls to fight over while she bunks with Allie. “Do you need to freshen up or something?”

“I do,” Alex says, pulling at the armpits of her shirt. “I was stress sweating for that entire car ride.”

“You had the air turned up all the way,” Christen reminds her.

“Unfortunately that didn’t combat the anxiety that Kelley’s driving causes me,” Alex grumbles. “That’s why it’s called stress sweat.”

Kelley comes in the room, wiping her sweaty baby hairs off her forehead and dumping her suitcase in the middle of the floor.

“I call not the couch,” she announces.

“Negative,” Alex says, already having set her bag down on the bed, rifling through it for her things. “Christen and I are getting the bed and it’s not big enough for three. Right, Christen?”

Alex looks up at Christen with her startlingly blue eyes, and Christen finds herself nodding without thinking about it.

“Right,” Christen says, looking at Kelley apologetically. “Maybe we’ll switch tomorrow night?”

Kelley mutters something about a bad back that Christen knows is untrue before turning to leave the room.

“So when do you want to leave to eat?” Christen asks Allie who is leaning against Tobin’s dresser
with her arms crossed and eyebrows raised as she watches the scene in front of her.

“Let’s leave in fifteen,” she says, pushing off the dresser. “Sound good?”

Christen nods and Allie turns to go, heading for her own bedroom.

“I’m going to the bathroom,” Alex says, waving her makeup bag in Christen’s direction. “I’ll be back.”

Alone, Christen takes advantage of the opportunity to observe Tobin’s room. For being a relatively small room in a rented apartment, it’s been personalized beyond what Christen would have expected. She’d never seen Tobin’s apartment back at school, never had a reason to, so getting a look into what the inside of her head might look like is infinitely intriguing.

It’s simple and not cluttered or messy, but there are a lot of things on shelves and wall hooks and a cute little strand of white twinkle lights strung around the window that Christen suspects weren’t entirely Tobin’s idea. The gray and white bedspread is surprisingly sophisticated, and so are the black-framed pictures sitting on various surfaces across the room, from her nightstands to her bookshelves to her dresser counter. She has shelves stacked with trophies and ribbons, the dates skipping around the years in a way that has Christen thinking that there are more tucked away in Tobin’s childhood home – an impressive feat, considering how many are in the room already. There are little dishes on the dresser full of ponytails and tiny earrings that Tobin rarely wears, a hairbrush and a comb sitting neatly to the side.

She’s busy poking through the earrings that she’s never seen before when there’s a knock on the open door, her head swiveling to see Tobin standing there with a cheeky grin on her face, tongue nearly poking out the side of her mouth. She leans against the doorjamb, looking a little smaller and less threatening than usual – not that she’s particularly large or threatening to begin with, but that doesn’t stop Christen from feeling that way sometimes. The feeling has lessened the more they’ve gotten to know each other, with Christen growing more and more comfortable in Tobin’s presence, but something about the fond look in her bright, crinkled eyes and her slouching posture as her arms dangle by her sides makes her look more open than ever. She looks so close, so soft and gentle and familiar, that Christen feels that last bit of fear slip away.

“Hey,” Tobin says, shoulders curving in on herself slightly. “Sorry I didn’t get to say hi when you got here.”

“Blame Alex,” Christen says, pulling her hands away from Tobin’s things. “She was being a little dramatic.”

“That’s what happens when you spend that much time with Kelley in a confined space,” Tobin jokes, but Christen’s eyes widen and Tobin hurried to apologize. “Sorry, that was rude of me.”

“It’s fine,” Christen tells her with a smile. “It’s funny, and you’re right. I mean, you’d know, wouldn’t you? After all those away games?”

“Yeah, but so would you,” Tobin acknowledges.

“Kelley is a bit over the top sometimes,” Christen says. “We all know it. And the heat was just stressing Alex out.”

“How did you keep from stressing out?” Tobin asks.

“I’m used to Kelley, for the most part,” Christen tells her. “Besides, Alex called shotgun so I was in the backseat and just tried to nap the entire way. I’ll probably be awake the entire night now, but at
least I didn’t have to hear Alex and Kelley bitch at each other the entire time.”

Tobin smiles.

“Good for you,” she says. “How are you and Kelley?”

Christen sighs, thinking of that morning when she had run into Kelley in the kitchen. She’d been on her way out the door, reaching for an apple to eat on the way to class as Kelley sleepily poured herself a cup of coffee. They’d been like passing ships, Kelley barely mumbling out a “hello” before Christen was leaving, shouting back a goodbye while trying to ensure that she hadn’t forgotten anything she’d need for her classes.

It had been perfunctory, like they were obligated to greet each other. Christen wishes that she’d had the time to kiss Kelley good morning at the very least, but she’d been running uncharacteristically late and was more focused on getting to class on time.

Kelley had made up for it later, at least. They were packing up the car before going to pick up Alex, and before locking the apartment for the weekend, Kelley had hooked an arm around Christen’s waist to press a kiss to her lips.

“You taste like coffee,” Kelley had told her, pulling back after a second. “Vanilla hazelnut – did you go to the bagel shop and not bring me back anything?”

“Sorry,” Christen had said sheepishly. “Are you mad?”

“I won’t be if you let me kiss you some more,” Kelley had said, reeling Christen back in and slipping her tongue alongside Christen’s.

It hadn’t lasted long but it had been enough to ease Christen’s mind and keep her from worrying too much about the fact that ever since she’d let Kelley feel her up on the couch that one night, they’d barely taken the time to get that far again. They’ve just been busy, with Christen registering to take the GRE shortly after the end of the semester and and Kelley starting medical school applications. Now, though, with Tobin asking, there’s an uneasy feeling in Christen’s stomach and she finds herself not wanting to talk about it. Normally she has no problem talking to Tobin about Kelley, aside from that little bump in the road where she’d been more worried about Tobin hating that her and Kelley were even dating in the first place, but for the most part she’s comfortable sharing things with Tobin.

Not today, though. Today she doesn’t want to talk about Kelley.

“Eh, the same,” Christen decides to say, not wanting to go in details. “I like your apartment.”

That perks Tobin up, and she stands up straight to come over and stand next to Christen.

“Thank you,” she says. “I know that it’s not that big or nice or anything, but it gets the job done.”

“It’s great,” Christen tells her. “Want to give me a tour?”

“Don’t you have to get ready?” Tobin questions, swiveling her wrist to look at the watch sitting there. “We’re leaving in what, ten minutes?”

“I am ready,” Christen tells her. “Alex was the only one stress sweating today.”

“Just checking.” Tobin says, and Christen is distinctly aware of being eyed from head to toe.
“Why, do I look like I need to change or something?”

“Not at all,” Tobin assures her. “You look great.”

Christen smooths out the fabric of her white shorts, hoping that they haven’t wrinkled too much over the course of the ride from school.

“Thanks,” she says, accepting the compliment as best as she can while still feeling a little unsure.

“I’ll give you the tour,” Tobin says. “We’ll start in the most important room in the place – my bedroom.”

Christen giggles.

“My bed,” Tobin says, gesturing dramatically. “It’s very nice, if you want my opinion. Spend hours picking out a mattress. Allie just about killed me – we were sharing her bed at the time and she just wanted me out of her room.”

“Is it nice?” Christen wonders aloud.

“See for yourself,” Tobin replies, and Christen goes to gingerly sit on the edge.

“That doesn’t count,” Tobin says, and then before Christen can see it coming, Tobin flings herself down the middle of the bed, nearly landing on Alex’s things and sending them flying. “Come here and see.”

She pats the space next to her and Christen finds herself moving up next to her, wiggling around to get comfortable while Tobin waits patiently.

“It’s nice,” Christen starts to say, but Tobin shushes her.

“Give it a minute,” she says in a stage whisper. “Sink into it. Feel the magic.”

Christen presses her lips together in a thin line, trying not to laugh at Tobin. When she turns her head to the side, she can see that Tobin has closed her eyes and folded her hands together on top of her stomach, her chest slowly rising and falling in tandem with her steady breathing. Instead of making fun of Tobin, Christen closes her eyes too and tries to appreciate the mattress underneath her.

She can’t quite focus on that though, not with the suddenly overpowering smell in her nostrils. It’s nothing like perfume or air freshener, and it’s not all bad. What it is, though, is pure, unadulterated Tobin, soaked into her pillowcases and sheets in a way that hits Christen way harder than she expected. Tobin has always smelled like shampoo and laundry detergent, and her bed smells the exact same way: fresh and fragrant, slightly soapy and sweet. Inhaling deeply makes Christen want to do it again, so her mouth falls open and she takes in lungfuls of the same smell that’s been there whenever she’s hugged Tobin or just gotten close to her.

The mattress is nice though, soft like memory foam without sinking in too much. It doesn’t quite conform to her body, but it does make her look forward to sleeping on it later on.

“Nice, huh?”

When Tobin speaks up, her voice is quiet and pleased. Christen slowly opens her eyes, only mildly embarrassed when she finds Tobin staring at her intently.

“Yeah,” Christen says, smiling before she can stop it. “I’m really glad that Alex and I got to it before
Kelley did.”

Tobin smiles back but something in her expression doesn’t sit right with Christen.

“You and Kelley didn’t want to share?”

“There’s no reason to,” Christen says honestly. “I mean, back at the apartment we still sleep in our own beds every night. We shared during spring break but that’s just because Alex and Lindsey were pissed at me when we got to the hotel.”

Tobin frowns.

“Pissed at you?” she asks, a hard edge to her tone.

“It wasn’t a big deal,” Christen tells her. “I wasn’t in a great mood and I was taking it out on them. We moved past it pretty fast. I think Alex might actually even like me now.”

“Alex is picky,” Tobin says, rolling her eyes. “She’s always liked you, though. Don’t let her fool you.”

“Don’t let who fool Christen?” Allie says loudly, and Christen sits upright as fast as she can, vision spotting due to the sudden change in position. She doesn’t know what to say, fumbling for words, but it turns out that Allie isn’t actually interested in an answer. “Are you two ready to go?”

“Yeah,” Christen says, quickly getting up off the bed, standing and straightening her ponytail. “Ready.”

“Me too,” Tobin says, slow to get up. “I’m ready.”

Allie doesn’t say anything, but when they end up next to each other in the backseat of Kelley’s car—Alex insists on shotgun again, and Tobin had forgotten her wallet in the apartment, causing her to dash back up while Allie ended up in the middle seat—she does stare at Christen without even bothering to be discreet. It makes Christen feel awkward, but after asking whether she has anything on her face and receiving a negative answer, she does her best to ignore it. Maybe Allie is just one of those people who like to stare.

They end up in a circle of food trucks, and after scouting what each one has to offer, Christen ends up at a taco truck with Kelley and Allie. It’s a strange trio, Christen thinks as Tobin waves goodbye before jogging to catch up with Alex, but Allie and Kelley manage to find common ground by talking about soccer and aggressively trash talking each other’s schools. Christen rolls her eyes when Kelley uses the argument that her teams’ kits are prettier to prove a point.

“So,” Allie says, once they’ve all placed their orders and paid, “are you two really dating?”

Kelley goes stiff, looking at Christen awkwardly.

“No,” Christen says, faint at first but then firm. “No, not really.”

Allie arches an eyebrow.

“That’s not what I’ve heard,” she says, and Christen wonders how much Tobin has told her.

“Technically, no,” Christen says, since it looks like Kelley can’t find words to speak at the moment. “We’re best friends.”

Christen can feel Kelley’s eyes burning a hole into the side of her face.
“Oh,” Allie says, surprise written in every inch of her expression. “I mean, I just wouldn’t have guessed.”

“What do you mean?” Christen wants to know. “What were you guessing?”

“You two just have that new, kind of awkward we-don’t-know-each-other-that-well-but-we’re-trying look to you.”

“I know Christen very well,” Kelley speaks up, looking mildly – okay, very – offended. “I’ve known her since kindergarten.”

“Tobin might have mentioned that,” Allie says, a thoughtful expression crossing her face.

Christen gets a weird feeling in the back of her mind, but then her order number is called, and she’s too preoccupied with getting her dinner to give it much thought. By the time they’re all sitting down in a circle on the grass, the only thing she’s worried about are the potential green stains on her shorts and the fact that Kelley is sitting in between Alex and Allie instead of next to her. Except she can’t even be too worried about that, because Tobin sits on Christen’s left and slides her fries to sit in between them.

“Want some?” she offers.

“I feel bad,” Christen says, looking down at her little tray filled with three tacos. “I don’t really have anything to give you in return.”

“That’s okay,” Tobin says with a shrug, picking up her burger and stretching out her legs in front of her. “I’m sharing them with you, no strings attached.”

Christen leans forward to carefully pick up two fries, hot and salty under her fingertips.

“Let me give you something,” Christen tries to convince her. “I’ll buy you dessert or something.”

Tobin takes a giant bite of her burger, chewing slowly.

“I like cupcakes,” she says once she’s swallowed.

“Deal,” Christen says, finished the fries and reaching for her own food, sitting carefully between her crossed legs. “Cupcakes it is.”

Christen asks Tobin about her team and her life in a new city, but Tobin insists that it’s feeling less new as the days go by.

“I hang out with the other girls on the team a lot,” she explains. “One of them hosts team nights at her place – she lives in a house, not a cramped apartment. Allie wanted to invite some of them tonight but I figured we should keep it small. I mean, this is nice, right?”

Christen grins as Tobin continues to ramble a little. It’s funny, almost, in a cute sort of way, to watch Tobin try and explain herself. It’s not often that Tobin isn’t calm and confident, but Christen smiles as it becomes clear that Tobin wants to assure her that her life here is going well. She doesn’t quite understand why, or why it’s making her babble when she’s normally a person who uses her words wisely, but she reaches out to put a hand on Tobin’s thigh. It serves its purpose and Tobin stops talking, instead grinning back at Christen sheepishly.

“Sorry,” Tobin apologizes.
“You don’t have to keep saying sorry,” Christen tells her, removing her hand and going back to her tacos. “You haven’t done anything wrong.”

“What about when I said that rude thing about Kelley?”

“Everyone says rude things about Kelley,” Christen says, rolling her eyes. “She’s rude sometimes, it happens. You didn’t need to be sorry about it.”

“Wow,” Tobin says, her grin turning cheeky. “I never though I’d see the day when you said a word against Kelley.”

“What can I say?” Christen says, feeling the top of her cheeks start to burn, but she thinks that that might be due to the sun still shining. “I can love her and still acknowledge all of her faults.”

“That’s pretty wise,” Tobin remarks. “Also – a sign of true dedication. You and Kelley still working on this whole thing?”

“Kind of,” Christen says with a shrug. “I mean, she’s trying. I appreciate that.”

“Just kind of?” Tobin asks with a frown. “I thought that things were going well.”

“Well then why does Allie think that Kelley and I are basically strangers?”

Tobin chokes on a sip of her drink. Christen hesitates, unsure of whether to thump her on the back or not, worried that that might be overstepping some sort of boundary here.

“Allie said something to you?” she splutters after a moment, still coughing and holding a hand to her heart. “What did she say?”

“Not much,” Christen says, watching Tobin carefully. “You okay?”

“Fine,” Tobin says with one last weak cough. “I just – what did she say?”

“I guess she doesn’t believe that we’re really dating,” Christen says, wiping her fingers on the corner of a napkin. “Said something about how we act like we barely know each other.”

“Well, you two are a little weird around each other now,” Tobin says, clearly hesitant. Christen wants to hear what she has to say though and looks directly at her until Tobin continues. “Like, Kelley isn’t sure whether she’s allowed to touch you or not which I get, you’re not really into that, but you used to let her do it all the time. So I kind of get what Allie is talking about.”

“How does Allie know how Kelley and I used to act around each other?” Christen asks. She thinks she knows, but she doesn’t want to accuse Tobin of anything. “And why would she act like she didn’t know?”

“She probably didn’t want to throw me under the bus,” Tobin says truthfully, and something in Christen’s chest loosens at the indirect admission. “Listen, Allie is a great friend, but she’s a little weird sometimes. She gets a little too in people’s faces and they don’t always like it, so I’m sorry if she offended you or something.”

“She didn’t,” Christen says definitively. “But you’re going to offend me if you keep apologizing.”

Tobin bites back a smile, reaching for a handful of fries. She opens her mouth, about to say something, but then Christen is pelted with a piece of ice she looks up abruptly, looking across their small circle to see Alex fastening the top back on her soda cup.
“I’m feeling left out,” she says primly, a wicked glint in her eye. “What are you two talking about?”

Christen leaves this one up to Tobin sharing a look with her before Tobin speaks up.

“Just thinking about dessert,” she says, and it’s not exactly a lie. They were discussing dessert earlier.

“I think I want an ice cream cone,” Kelley says loudly. “Christen, you want to get one with me?”

“Tobin and I wanted to get cupcakes,” Christen explains.

Kelley’s expression falls considerably.

“Are you sure?” Kelley asks. “I thought we could get a cone and take a walk or something.”

Tobin’s index finger reaches to nudge Christen’s where it rests between them.

“You can go with her,” she murmurs quietly. “I won’t mind. You can pay me back another time.”

“I already owe you too much.” Christen mumbles back. “Like from way back when – remember when you saved me at the tailgate? And when you carried me through the rain? And all those other times?”

“You don’t owe me anything.” Tobin whispers simply.

The clearing of Allie’s throat redirects Tobin and Christen’s attention.

“I’ll get cupcakes with Tobin,” she volunteers. “Alex, you want to come?”

Alex smiles slyly, looking around the circle before nodding slowly.


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Later that night, Kelley is dozing off in Christen lap as the third episode of Gossip Girl begins.

“I’m going to bed,” Alex says, standing up and yawning. “Christen, you coming in anytime soon?”

“I’m not quite tired yet,” Christen says. “Will I wake you up if I watch another episode?”

The show isn’t particularly good, but Allie and Alex had agreed on it and and Christen has found herself unwittingly sucked in by the overly dramatic plot and outrageous costuming. Of course, Allie had excused herself half an hour prior to take a phone call in her bedroom (her boyfriend, Tobin had explained) and now Alex is retiring for the night, rubbing her sleepy eyes and leaving behind those who didn’t even want to watch the show in the first place. Once Alex is gone, reassuring Christen that she’s a heavy sleeper, Christen pats Kelley’s hair and looks at Tobin who sits with her legs drawn up against her chest at the opposite end of the sectional.

“Should we let her sleep?” Christen asks, jerking her chin down towards Kelley who is breathing slowly and steadily.

“She’s sleeping out here, isn’t she?” Tobin asks. When Christen nods in confirmation, Tobin bites her lip and tilts her head to the side “We could, I guess. We could go to bed and let her sleep.”

“Maybe I should just send her in with Alex,” Christen thinks aloud.
“Then you’d have to sleep out here,” Tobin says confusedly.

“I wouldn’t mind,” Christen says, with a smile, looking down at Kelley’s head. “I’ve slept on couches before. Besides, this one is nice and big.”

“True,” Tobin says thoughtfully. “I’d feel bad, though, after hyping up my mattress for you.”

Christen laughs softly.

“I’ll try it tomorrow night,” she suggests. “Send Kelley to bed and then we can watch another episode or two, yeah?”

Tobin reaches for the remote, nodding and pausing the screen.

“Let’s get ready for bed,” she tells Christen. “Tell Kelley she can have the bed and we’ll meet back out here. What do you think?”

It’s perfect, Christen thinks as she gently shakes Kelley awake.

“Yeah?” Kelley asks sleepily as Tobin disappears to the bathroom.

“You want the bed?” Christen asks, brushing a loose tendril of hair behind Kelley’s ear. “I might stay up a while. I know that I got a chance to nap in the car earlier but you’re probably tired from a long day.”

Kelley looks confused, so Christen explains it again.

“So what, you’re sleeping out here?” Kelley asks, slowly sitting up and squinting in the dim light. “I don’t want you to have to do that.”

“It’s okay,” Christen tells her. “I’ll be fine. We can switch back tomorrow night.”

“Or maybe we can kick Alex out here tomorrow,” Kelley says through a yawn before leaning in to press a kiss to Christen’s lips. It makes Christen’ stomach do somersaults, and she is thankful for Kelley’s yawn for preventing her from making it any deeper.

“Maybe,” Christen says as they both get up from the couch to head for the bedroom. Christen still has to get changed and brush her teeth, and she does both things as quickly as she can and without running into Tobin. It isn’t until she leaves the bathroom that she bumps into Tobin coming out of Allie’s room, and she nearly falls until Tobin’s arms shoot out to steady her.

“Careful,” Tobin says, and Christen wants to giggle nervously but the sound doesn’t quite leave her dry throat. “Don’t hurt yourself. We don’t have time for a trip to the ER.”

“Right,” Christen says as she settles in on the couch.

“I have blankets and stuff,” Tobin says, going to the entryway closet. “You get cold easily, right? You want two blankets?”

“Yeah, how’d you know that?” Christen wants to know.

“I know you, Christen,” Tobin says, and there’s a funny undertone in her voice. “I know you pretty well.”

Christen doesn’t really have anything to say so she just waits until Tobin joins her on the couch, tossing a couple of pillows and blankets her way while keeping a blanket for herself.
“And here I thought you ran hot,” Christen comments, arranging herself to lie down comfortable.

“How’d you know that?” Tobin says teasingly, turning the question back on her.

Christen goes red, thankful that Tobin can’t see it, the room lit only by the light from the paused tv screen. She doesn’t know what to say, but she can see Tobin staring at her expectantly, a satisfied smile on her face.

“Shut up,” she settles for, and it’s not smart or witty but it does have Tobin laughing under her breath as she plays the show again.

*

When Christen wakes up, she’s not quite sure why she’s up. It seems early, the light outside hinting that she’s been woken by something besides her own circadian rhythm. When she blinks and her vision focuses, she spots the blonde ponytailed girl curled up into one of the barstools at the kitchen counter, phone in one hand and a mug in the other. Christen isn’t sure whether to get up or try to go back to sleep, ignoring Allie as she moves around her own apartment, but the sudden rustling of fabric steals her attention.

At the opposite end of the couch, curled up in a ball and breathing heavily, rests Tobin, with her hair having come undone from it’s ponytail and instead lying across the throw pillow her head is resting on. Christen’s heart comes to a stop for a second before speeding up, and she looks between Tobin and Allie several times, wondering if anyone else has been up this morning.

“I’m the only one awake,” Allie says quietly, setting her phone down on the counter and swiveling around to look at her seriously. Her gaze is familiar and makes Christen wonder if Tobin selects her friends according to how good they are at sending piercing blue stares. “It’s only half past six, barely.”

Christen tries to clear her throat as quietly as possible, conscious of Tobin’s unconscious body.

“Do you always wake up so early?” she asks, voice laden with sleep.

“Only on game days,” Allie explains. “I can’t sleep. I get too nervous and can’t stop thinking about it, just running through plays and stuff in my head.”

“Makes sense,” Christen says, and she tries to clear her throat again.

“I wondered where she was when I woke up,” Allie says, and she looks at Tobin before taking a sip from her mug.

“She didn’t mean to fall asleep out here,” Christen explains. “We were watching tv and talking and then it got late. I think I fell asleep right in the middle of a conversation.”

Allie hums as she sips.

“She is pretty good about falling asleep,” she says, reaching for her phone. “What about you?”

“Sometimes I take a while,” Christen admits, looking over at Tobin who hasn’t moved an inch. “But I think I was just really tired last night.”

“You did have a long day,” Allie allows, tilting her head towards Christen. “You should probably go back to sleep – today is going to be long too, with the game and everything.”
“I’ll try,” Christen says, eyes flitting to Allie for a second before going back to Tobin. Tobin sleeps with her lips parted just slightly and half her face smashed against her pillow, and it makes Christen smile fondly.

She hears the distinct sounds of chair legs scraping against floor and the clinking of porcelain against metal as Allie puts her mug in the sink, but doesn’t look up until she can sense Allie standing over her.

“I should wake her up,” Allie says, looking over at Tobin. “Take her to my room.”

Christen doesn’t say anything, but she knows that Allie is right.

“But she looks too peaceful to wake up,” Allie continues, looking down and smiling at Christen. It feels strangely genuine, like it’s the sincerest moment they’ve shared. “Doesn’t she kind of look like Sleeping Beauty?”

She kind of looks like a mess, with all her hair askew and what looks like a bit of drool on the pillow beneath her. Christen doesn’t understand how she can sleep curled up like that instead of all stretched out, but she just points her toes until they brush against the bottoms of Tobin’s feet.

She kind of looks like a mess, but Christen finds herself agreeing with Allie anyway, nodding.

“Yeah,” she says. “She kind of does.”

It’s easy for Christen to go back to sleep once Allie heads into her room, and when she wakes up a while later, the sun is bright and the apartment is alive. She’s alone on the couch which is slightly disappointing, but when a plate of pancakes and bacon is presented to her almost instantly, she can’t help but brighten up.

“Turns out Allie can cook,” Kelley announces, grinning and sitting down on the coffee table in front of Christen, one plate in each hand. “You hungry?”

“At the counter,” Allie calls out in her usual flat affect that still surprises Christen every time she hears it. “If you get maple syrup on that rug…”

Kelley rolls her eyes but stands up, beckoning for Christen to join her.

“Come on,” she says. “Alex will be out any second and we can all eat together.”

There are four barstools lining the counter, and Tobin sits at the one closest to the window, talking with Allie who stands in front of her, babysitting the coffee machine as the liquid drips slowly. Tobin has to have at least four pancakes stacked on her plate and is steadily making her way through them, cutting into them the way Christen has only seen in commercials before. She goes to sit next to Tobin but then notices that Kelley has sat down in the furthest chair, clearing her throat and nodding for Christen to sit next to her, leaving an empty chair next to Tobin.

“Thanks for breakfast, Allie,” Christen says, sitting and and accepting the silverware Allie slides her.

“No problem,” Allie replies, heading for the fridge. “Orange juice?”

She pours four glasses anyway, setting one at each seat. Alex emerges from Tobin’s bedroom as soon as Allie fixes a plate for her, and slumps into the open chair with impressive bedhead and half-closed eyes. She croaks out a demand for coffee and while Christen does her best not to laugh, Tobin lets one loose.
“It’s not funny,” Alex snarls as Allie fetches a few mugs. “Kelley kicks in her sleep.”

“I do not,” Kelley says defensively.

“What happened to you, anyway?” Alex says, kicking her foot into Christen’s shin. Christen winces but continues eating her pancakes. “You were supposed to sleep with me. You sleep like a log.”

“Kelley was tired,” Christen says, trying to keep her voice even and casual, trying not to look over at Tobin. “I didn’t want to keep her up with the tv on.”

Alex grumbles and snatches a mug full of black coffee out of Allie’s hand.

“Hey!” Allie cries out. “I was going to ask if anyone wanted anything in their coffee! Milk, sugar, creamer – ”

“I’ll take mine black,” Kelley says. “I’m simple.”

“Thanks for letting me know,” Allie says, shooting Alex a look as she moves to hand Kelley a mug. “Tobin, you can fix yours. Christen?”

“Two creams, one sugar,” Tobin mutters.

Three pairs of eyes slide down to stare at Tobin, and Christen goes pink as she focuses on taking a long sip of orange juice.

“Okay,” Allie says suspiciously, moving to the fridge.

“How do you know that?” Alex asks.

Christen does her best to tune out the conversation and ignore the way Kelley has gone still beside her.

It’s hard though, because even quiet and under her breath, Tobin’s voice still reaches her ears.

“Just do.”

Allie sets down the mug in front of Christen but keeps her hand wrapped around it, forcing Christen to look up into her eyes. They’re kinder and perhaps more understanding than Christen had expected, but that doesn’t make the situation anymore comfortable. She doesn’t say anything, just looks at her, but when she finally breaks the gaze and goes back to preparing her own coffee, Christen feels like maybe Allie knows more than she’s been letting on.

* 

Alex is the only one who caves and buys a jersey at the stadium. She vacillates back and forth between getting Allie or Tobin’s name and number on the back, but eventually decides on a plain one.

“Now I don’t have to choose,” she says once they’re in their seats and Kelley insists on selfies all around. She even solicits a preteen girl to take one of the three of them and Christen poses reluctantly, doing her best to smile through her nerves. She’s going to get to see Tobin play what will likely be a full ninety in a packed stadium for a professional league, and she’s pretty sure that the butterflies in her stomach are worse than Tobin’s have ever been. She feels a little ridiculous, opening Instagram as her and Alex wait in the bathroom line just to take her mind off it all.

“Kelley wants to know if you want a snack,” Alex says, nose glued to her own phone screen.
“Just water, please,” Christen replies, but she doesn’t register Alex’s response as her feed opens to the picture of the three of them taken minutes before. She thinks that maybe Alex has posted it, but a quick check tells her that Kelley has uploaded it with the caption *The only girls I’ll ever need :)*.

She’s not sure why, but something inside her grows tight at that. She’s been wanting to be a part of Kelley’s popular Instagram uploads for forever, always getting skipped over in favor of another picture with better lighting or something, and now that she’s finally made the cut, she finds herself wishing that she hadn’t. It might be the sentimental caption or Kelley’s brighter-than-her-future smile, but it doesn’t sit right with her and she closes out of the application before she can dwell on it for too long.

Watching Tobin take the field is magical. It’s easy to see that she’s one of the best players on the team, if not the best. She’s fast when she wants to be, creative when she needs to be, and dramatic when she can be. She’s selfless, mesmerizing, and effortless. It’s all Christen can watch, edging up further in her seat – a good seat, close to the front and giving Kelley nothing to complain about – and anxiously watching with fire in her heart as she prays for Tobin to win. Her prayers must be heard – either that, or Tobin is just too talented for her own good – because she notches two assists and essentially secures her team a victory. She launches out of her seat along with Alex and Kelley each time, cheering loudly until her throat feels sore. It all goes by too fast and by the time it’s over, she’s impatient for more. She wishes she could watch Tobin play all the time, but decides that this will have to be enough for the time being.

“I miss playing with her,” Alex sighs as they take their time getting out of their seats, waiting for the stadium to empty around them. “She sent in the best balls for me.”

“You two had a special chemistry,” Kelley muses as she lounges in her seat, feet thrown up on the back of the chair in front of her.

“Maybe they’ll draft me in two years,” Alex says, gazing longing out onto the field.

“So far from home?” Christen asks, thinking of Alex flying back to the west coast for holidays.

Alex shrugs.

“The goals I’d score off of her would be worth it,” she says. “Allie isn’t half bad, either.”

“Make sure you tell her that,” Kelley snorts.

“She’s not quite deserving of being on my jersey, though,” Alex tells them, the grin on her face saying otherwise. “She might need to rack up some points first.”

They find themselves at a bar with some of Tobin and Allie’s teammates afterwards, and something in Christen’s head feels hazy from the moment they walk in. She isn’t sure if it’s the cigarette smoke or the smell of sticky beer on the floor, the cramped area or the loud music playing, but she is thankful that she has Kelley glued to her side, just to keep her company. Alex is quick to get a couple of girls on the team to take shots with her, and Christen worries for a second that Kelley will join them, leaving her all alone. Instead, Kelley suggests they share a beer under the condition that Christen use Kelley’s money to buy it. They sit at a high table together, with the other girls who aren’t interested in drinking liquor, but Kelley sits close to Christen and drinks the majority of the beer, as Christen knew she would.

“Want to dance?” Kelley asks after a little while, nodding to the girls swinging their hips around and laughing with each other at their awful dancing. “I know it’s not your thing, but – “
“No,” Christen interrupts, wiping her hands on her bare thighs and shaking her head. “I’ll do it.”

Kelley looks surprised, but hops down from her stool and holds out a hand for Christen to determinedly grab.

Alex finds them immediately, her hair suddenly in a ridiculously high ponytail and her eyes sparkling with tequila.

“They want me,” she sighs blissfully, throwing her arms around Kelley’s neck. Kelley snickers, looking sideways at Christen who giggles.

“Do they?” Kelley asks doubtfully. “Did they say that?”

Alex nods.

“On the team, you assholes. They want me on the team. Get your minds out of the gutter.”

“You’re the one who said it, not us,” Kelley laughs. “Rethink your phrasing next time.”

Alex huffs before pulling away, and Kelley is quick to grab Christen’s hand with both of hers, facing each other so they can dance together – comfortably, a foot apart, and like laughing friends who can’t take each other seriously. Christen wonder if this is what she’s been missing all this time: the familiarity of her best friend. She thinks that maybe she’s been trying too hard to leave this part in the dust, the foundation on which some of the best relationships have been built. When she leans in after a couple of songs to kiss the corner of Kelley’s mouth, she draws back to find an unexpectedly shocked look on Kelley’s face.

“We’re in public, you know,” she reminds Christen, having to raise her voice in order to be heard.

“I know,” Christen says, shrugging and ignoring the suddenly sharp sensation in her chest. “But I’ve missed this.”

“Missed what?”

“Us,” she explains. “Just hanging out together. No pressure. I think I was so worried about making it work, you know? And I just realized that maybe that’s why things weren’t going so well. So maybe I just need to relax and act like we’re the same best friends still. The same Kelley and Christen we were in kindergarten.”

Kelley squints at her, motions slowing.

“Did you take some of Alex’s shots?”

Christen giggles at the ridiculousness of the situation, the sharp sensation hitting her harder and making her suddenly feel physically out of sorts.

“I have to go to the bathroom,” she tells Kelley. “Okay?”

“Hurry back,” Kelley tells her, and when she moves in to kiss Christen – hard and slow, a hand on her jaw to hold her face steady, Christen’s suddenly free hand coming up to clutch her stabbing chest – she looks prettier and more at ease than Christen has seen her since they’d left school.

In the dark bathroom, Christen braces her hands on the edge of the counter and closes her eyes, taking deep breaths and praying for the pain to disappear. She’s too young for a heart attack and doesn’t have a history of heartburn, so she doesn’t understand what’s going on. She brings up her
hand again to her chest again, pressing her palm to her heart and finding that it’s racing uncontrollably.

“You okay?”

Christen’s eyes fly open at the familiar voice, soft and concerned as Tobin comes out of one of two stalls.

“Fine,” Christen says, her voice even and normal as she smiles, though it comes out looking more like a grimace. “My chest hurts. I think it’s indigestion.”

“What did you eat?” Tobin asks, washing her hands in one of the sinks. “Was it Allie’s cooking? I told you, she once tried to serve me raw chicken.”

“No, I was feeling fine until five minutes ago,” Christen says.

“Sometimes food poisoning takes a few hours to kick in,” Tobin says, drying her hands with a wad of paper towels, a concerned look on her face contradicting her casual tone. “What’s up? You don’t look too well.”

Christen tries to smile again, but Tobin just frowns and brings up a hand to feel her forehead.

“If I’m sick, I think Kelley might be more helpful,” Christen jokes, but it falls flat when Tobin’s frown deepens.

“I’m just trying to help,” she says, unusually defensive as she takes a step back. “But I can get Kelley if you want.”

“No, no, it’s fine,” Christen says hastily. “I was just kidding. I don’t think I’m actually sick. I’ll be fine. Just give me a minute.”

Tobin still looks distinctly unhappy, but she stays where she is and waits while Christen measures out her breathing again until the pain lessens.

“On a scale from one to ten, how badly does it hurt?” Tobin asks warily.

“Like a two,” Christen says, standing up straight. “I’m better, I promise. I’m going to be okay.”

“If you say so,” Tobin says, clearly not convinced.

Christen smiles at her, and it feels more genuine this time. Judging by Tobin’s quickly softening expression, it must look more genuine as well.

“I’m good,” Christen reassures her. “Look, you fixed me right up.”

Tobin smiles, beautiful but small and making Christen miss the big smiles that make her eyes crinkle adorably.

“I didn’t even do anything,” Tobin deflects.

“You didn’t have to,” Christen says earnestly. “You don’t even have to try and you make me feel better.”

Tobin’s smile widens reluctantly, and Christen finds herself reaching forward to hug Tobin quickly, in the middle of a dingy bathroom with a chipped sink and cloudy mirrors. When she pulls back, Tobin is beaming, crinkled eyes and all.
“I do know you pretty well,” Tobin muses. “Don’t I?”


Chapter End Notes

i love the enthusiasm for this story and it's updates, i really do. i love seeing a ton of questions in my tumblr inbox and i have such a great time answering them all.

that being said, my new job consists of a wacky schedule with ~13 hours shifts and leaves me a little exhausted, so please be patient with me. i might take a while to get to all the questions, and updates might slow down. keep the questions coming, but try to understand if i don't always have sneak peeks ready or don't have any idea of when i'll update. thanks for being the best readers in the world and i'll see you next time!
Tobin’s mattress must be magical, because Christen sleeps like a baby from the moment she falls onto it until she wakes up. It’s early and she jerks awake, like something has woken her, but after straining her ears and hearing nothing aside from Alex’s steady breathing next to her, she calms and does her best to go back to sleep. She blames her internal clock, probably not used to sleeping in after mornings of waking up for classes and getting in extra study time before leaving the apartment. After all, it’s not as though she wants to be awake before seven.

Falling back asleep is a struggle though, as Christen ends up staring at the ceiling before rolling over, thinking that maybe a change in position will help. It doesn’t: laying on her stomach only makes her even more aware of every nerve ending in her body, her hair ticking her neck and her toes unable to find a comfortable way to rest. So she lays on her back again, head turned to watch Alex as she sleeps for lack of anything better to do. Alex is funny when she sleeps for no discernible reason. She doesn’t snore, doesn’t talk, doesn’t move around, but something about the way she sleeps like a log is amusing to Christen.

Around the time the sun’s first rays start poking between Tobin’s sheer curtains, Christen carefully slips out of bed – it doesn’t even matter, Alex wouldn’t wake up if a hurricane passed through – and heads for the living room, where a sliding door leads to a small and unused balcony. It’s easy to figure out the lock and even easy to slide the door shut, but the entire time she’s conscious of Kelley sleeping on the couch. She doesn’t want to wake her up either, but it’s less about letting Kelley get her beauty sleep and more about wanting to enjoy the quiet time to herself.

Of course, that idea is dashed when she hears the sliding of the door’s wheels on its track. The quick whip of her head reveals that it isn’t Kelley, nor Alex, but instead Allie. She’s yawning but otherwise looks wide awake, her eyes bright and her hair brushed into her usual neat ponytail. The contrast between her and Tobin makes their friendship even more baffling to Christen, but she accepts it for what it is. For all of her oddities, Allie seems like a good person and friend, and she supposes that that’s all that matters. Plus, she’s nice to Christen, which is definitely appreciated.

“Morning,” Allie says, not even her voice giving away an ounce of tiredness. They were out late and Allie claims that she isn’t an early riser, but Christen is so far skeptical. Allie seems to easily interpret the subtle rise of Christen’s eyebrows, though, so she offers an explanation. “Tobin isn’t the easiest sleep partner.”

“She’s seemed fine to me,” Christen says, still doubtful as she thinks of the night before and Tobin’s stock-still nap in the library many months earlier.

“Have you not had the pleasure of her being a kicking bed hog yet?” Allie asks, raising an eyebrow of her own, no attempt at subtlety. “Because I didn’t think she’d kicked the habit yet – no pun intended.”

Christen lets out a short laugh.

“I guess we’ve never shared a bed,” she says shrugging her shoulders. “So I guess I wouldn’t know.”

Allie doesn’t respond, and Christen leans against the railing, eyes fixed on the brightening sky as Allie twists her ponytail between her fingers.

“So what are you doing out here alone?” Allie asks after a few moments.
Christen wonders if Allie is one of those people incapable of being quiet for more than five seconds, but realizes that she only minds because she doesn’t have an answer for the question.

“Just didn’t really want to see anyone this early,” Christen says with a shrug. “And it’s not like anyone likes being up this early.”

Allie hums in acknowledgement.

“So,” she says, drawing out the word for longer than Christen thinks is necessary. “When are you going to tell her how you feel about her?”

Christen furrows her eyebrows and tries not to be offended, staring out into the pink and white-light streaked horizon.

“I have,” she says slowly. “We’ve talked about it.”

“So why haven’t you done anything about it?” Allie pushes. “It doesn’t seem like she knows. I didn’t think she knew.”

“How would you have known?” Christen asks, wondering why Allie thinks she should be privy to the complicated relationship between her and Kelley right now. “And I mean, if she doesn’t feel the same way, what’s the point in people knowing about it?”

Allie stares holes into the side of Christen’s head.

“How you do know she doesn’t feel what you do?”

“Because we’ve talked about it,” Christen reiterates. “How would you know how she feels? You don’t even know her.”

“Don’t even – I’ve known her for longer than you!” Allie exclaims, voice rising slightly. “Of course I know her!”

“Longer than me? Are you talking about Tobin?” Christen asks incredulously, turning to meet Allie’s intense stare.

“Who else could I possibly be talking about?” Allie asks as though it’s obvious.

“Kelley,” Christen says, suddenly feeling embarrassed.

Allie scoffs as politely as one can.

“You don’t feel anything for Kelley,” she says dismissively.

Christen tries not to be annoyed, but it’s difficult.

“How would you know?” she asks rhetorically. “I’ve liked Kelley for months. I’ve told her about it.”

“You and Kelley act like best friends, nothing more,” Allie says conclusively.

“Kelley is my best friend,” Christen says insistenty. “But that doesn’t mean that I don’t have feelings for her. It’s just that she doesn’t really have feelings for me. That’s probably why we come off that way.”

Allie pulls a face.
“Yeah, you’re right about her not having feelings for you. You want to know who does, though?”

Christen feels hot, wondering why Allie is doing this. Why she’s making stuff up, why she’s causing drama, why she’s decided that this conversation is appropriate for sunrise.

“Tobin doesn’t like me,” she says, shaking her head. “And if you’re insinuating that I like her – I don’t.”

“What makes you think that she doesn’t?” Allie wants to know. “She stares at you like, all the time. Can you not take a hint?”

“That doesn’t mean anything,” Christen denies. “I mean – does Tobin even like girls? She’s never said anything, not the entire time I’ve talked to her about Kelley.”

Allie eyes her speculatively.

“Maybe you should talk to her,” she says lightly. “While you’re at it, open your eyes a little. Clean your glasses. Realize that you don’t actually like Kelley the way you think you do.”

“Allie, Tobin and I are just friends,” Christen promises. “Trust me.”

Allie takes a deep breath, twirling her ponytail again.

“Okay. So how you know that Tobin is all about soccer?”


“The most important thing in her life, right?” Allie says, eyes wide and searching.

“Yeah.”

“When we’re not at practice, it’s all about you,” Allie tells her. “She spends all her time on the phone with you. Texting you. Calling you. Checking to see how long it’s been since you last talked. She used to spend all that time kicking the ball around the place and I’d want to cut her feet off if she knocked over another one of my mugs – I’ve worked hard on my mug collection, you know. Now she stays glued to her phone, her feet on the ground and the ball waiting for her like it should be.”

“That doesn’t sound good,” Christen says nervously.

Allie heaves an enormous sigh, as if Christen just doesn’t get it.

“The point is, you’ve given her something else to look forward to,” she tells her. “You’re something else important for her to think about – hell, you’re more important, sometimes. It’s not longer just soccer, all day long, every day. You’re the most important part of her day. And if that doesn’t mean anything to you, if you don’t see that and appreciate it, then maybe you don’t feel anything for her. Maybe I’m wrong. And maybe you don’t deserve the way she feels about you.”

Christen is gaping at Allie, her face unbelievably red, and disbelief coursing through her veins.

“I’ve got to go,” Allie says, glancing back through the sliding glass doors into the apartment. “I need coffee. Want some?”

“Sure,” Christen mumbles out.

Allie sends her a cocky smile.
“Two creams, one sugar – was that it?”

Christen finds her feet glued to the floor as Allie opens the doors, and she isn’t quite sure whether to hate her or ignore her.

*

After a leisurely morning during which Christen can’t tell if her mind is on overload or has simply shut down, it comes time to get ready to go. There is a week until finals start and Christen knows that even though this upcoming week is supposed to be the calm before the storm, she’ll still spend it in the library with Julie for a thousand hours, studying her little heart out until relaxing. She’s ready to focus on nothing but schoolwork, to put Tobin and Allie and Kelley and even Alex out of her head until she’s finished her last exam and has nothing else to worry about. Kelley, doing her best to be a courteous person who cares about the wants and needs of her best friend, has begrudgingly agreed to leave after a quick lunch so that they can get back to school early and Christen can get a good night’s sleep.

“Man, I don’t miss school at all,” Tobin says after Kelley explains why they’re leaving. They’ve finished eating and Christen just has to pack up her things, something that Kelley and Alex had done while she was in the shower earlier, so their time is running out and Christen almost doesn’t want to get up from her seat and prepare to head out. “It’s so nice to be done. Right, Allie?”

Christen has been carefully avoiding Allie all morning, trying her best to not let it be obvious, and while she isn’t sure whether it’s been working or not, she does know that she can’t keep staring at her nails every time Allie speaks.

“So nice,” Allie drawls. “Especially since you ditched me for that one semester – that kind of sucked.”

Allie smirks as Tobin throws a napkin at her, the paper fluttering and barely making it to its destination despite the journey only being a foot or so long.

“Christen, you better go get packed,” Alex says from where she’s been tapping away at her phone for the entire meal. “I’d like to make it there before sunset.”

“We’ll make it there before sunset anyway,” Kelley points out. “As long as we leave before, like, six...

Christen doesn’t really register the rest of their bickering as she quietly gathers her dishes, carrying them into the kitchen. She manages to make her way to Tobin’s bedroom without incident, tuning out everyone’s talking as she kicks the door shut behind her.

“Ow.”

Christen cringes, turning her head around to see Tobin pushing the door open, grimacing as she raises a hand to her face.

“I think you almost just broke my nose,” she jokes, gently closing the door behind her.

“Sorry!” Christen says, stricken despite the fact that Tobin is obviously okay. “I didn’t know you were behind me!”

“It’s okay,” Tobin reassures her. “I kind of snuck in after you. They were having an argument about daylight savings and I wasn’t about to sit through it.”
“Smart choice,” Christen says. “Kelley took an astronomy class our first year here and thinks she knows everything about the planet and our days that there is to know.”

“Astronomy sounds interesting, though,” Tobin says, getting up on the bed and folding her legs up underneath her as Christen leans down to grab her things, stacked neatly into piles of clean and dirty, ready to be placed inside her weekend duffel.

“It probably is when Kelley isn’t being pedantic about it,” Christen says, feeling bad about it an instant later.

“Ah,” Tobin says wisely, nodding her head and seeming to understand the sudden look of guilt on Christen’s face. “Well, I’ll keep that in mind whenever I talk to her.”

“Kelley just knows a lot of things,” Christen says. After her morning talk with Allie, she’s feeling a little defensive towards her best friend. “She’s smart, you know?”

“You’re smart too,” Tobin says.

“Not like her,” Christen says, shaking her head and quickly shoving a pair of underwear in her bag. “She barely even has to study. I swear, she has a photographic memory. All she has to do is scroll through the powerpoint slides once and she knows everything. Her GPA is like a 3.9, you know?”

“Really?” Tobin asks. “I mean, I knew she was smart, but that’s pretty impressive.”

“She cried when she got an A minus a year ago,” Christen tells her, looking at the door as if Kelley might be eavesdropping. “In organic chemistry.”

“No way,” Tobin says, looking a little in awe. “Kelley cried? Over a grade?”

“Yes,” Christen says, nodding as she shoves more intimates into her bag. She’s suddenly regretting the way she’d organized her clothes during the weekend. “We went to a restaurant and she cried over four Jack and Cokes while I ate pizza, and then I took her home and tucked her into bed and we never spoke of it again.”

Christen has told Tobin a thousand stories about Kelley before, trying to smooth out her rough edges and keep Tobin from disliking her entirely, but something about this particular story seems to make Tobin thoughtful, as though she’s finally reconsidering her stance on the subject. It’s something that Christen has been hoping for for months now, but as Tobin’s expression softens considerably, she finds herself wishing that she’d kept the anecdote to herself.

“Never again?” Tobin asks, a hint of sadness in her voice.

“I mean, she thanked me for being there for her the next morning when I brought her a glass of water for her hangover,” Christen says with a shrug. “Which is as good as it gets.”

“She really trusts you,” Tobin says quietly as Christen starts packing up her toiletry bag. “Doesn’t she.”

It’s a statement, not a question, and the idea that Tobin might finally be understanding their friendship is helping Christen. In some weird way, it’s helping Christen understand her dynamic with Kelley in a way that she never has before. It’s like everything has been spelled out for her, everything suddenly makes a little more sense and has a little more context to it, despite the fact that nothing Tobin says is revolutionary. So when Tobin tilts her head at Christen, smiling small but sincere, Christen’s insides start unraveling.
“Enough about Kelley,” Christen says. “We talk about her way too much.”

“Yeah?” Tobin says, straightening up. “What else do you want to talk about then?”

Christen shrugs.

“Anything you want,” she tells Tobin. “It’s up to you.”

“I’m really glad that you came this weekend,” Tobin says simply, as Christen zips up her toiletry bag, making sure that she isn’t forgetting anything.

“Me too,” Christen says honestly. “I had a great time.”

“Allie wasn’t too much for you?” Tobin asks.

Christen hesitates, thinking of their conversation that morning and how she’s still reeling from it. Allie had given her a lot to think about – namely, the very tiny possibility that Tobin might not have completely platonic feelings for her – and despite the fact that Christen thrived on overthinking things, something that she knew about herself very much, she was wishing that for once her brain would just shut up and leave her alone. She doesn’t want to think about it. She doesn’t want her brain to run wild with possibilities, analyzing everything until it hurts. She just wants to enjoy these last fleeting moments together before she has to go back to school and think about finals.

“I mean, she’s a bit much,” Christen says eventually, looking up from her packed bag to see Tobin’s eyes, engaged and alert, staring wholeheartedly at Christen who meets her gaze with a certain amount of hesitance. “But nothing that I can’t handle.

“Good,” Tobin says smoothly, smiling wide. “I’m glad. I worried, you know?”

“About what?” Christen asks in surprise.

“You,” Tobin admits. “I know that you’re not really comfortable with people you don’t know and I didn’t want her to overwhelm you this weekend. I just wanted you to have a good time.”

Something swells large and warm in Christen’s chest, touching her heart.

“I did have a good time,” Christen reassures her. “I like it here with you. In your apartment, watching you play, getting to see what you do and where you go all the time – it’s cool. I had a great time, really. And Allie wasn’t a problem at all. I mean, I wish you’d talked about her more because I would have liked to know about her, but I like her. She’s your friend and she’s cool.”

“Okay, good,” Tobin says visibly relaxing, her shoulders easing and her smile losing some sharpness around the edges. “I wanted to make sure. Just in case we do this again.”

“I’d come again,” Christen offers quickly, surprising herself. “I’ll even take the couch again if I have to.”

“I wouldn’t make you do that,” Tobin tells her.

“Yeah,” Christen says, tilting her head and looking pointedly at the bed. “Your bed kind of was awesome.”

“Told you,” Tobin says.

Christen wants to ask if she imagined the wink just then, but before she can open her mouth, there’s a soft rap on the closed door before it opens slowly. Tobin turns around to look at who’s there, and
Alex smiles at Tobin before lifting her eyes to Christen, a silent apology etched into the corners of her mouth.

“We’ve got to get on the road,” she tells them. “I really need to get back early tonight.”

“Okay, I’m coming,” Christen says, swinging her bag over her shoulder.

“I’ll walk you guys out,” Tobin says, quickly unfolding her legs and getting up from her spot.

Christen just barely catches the look Alex throws Tobin’s way, but it unsettles her more than she already is. She tries to push it away, just like her conversation with Allie, so that she doesn’t have to think about it.

Kelley lets Alex drive her car home on the condition that she sit shotgun, so Christen finds herself exiled to the backseat all over again. It’s boring and she tries to fall asleep just to pass the time. It doesn’t work, much to her dismay, and she’s left with Allie’s earlier words running through her mind on a loop. Christen doesn’t even know if she’s remembering them correctly – there was a whole lot said and not all of it was pretty, and some of it Christen would have rather not heard – but the general message that Allie was trying to give her has made its mark. If Allie wanted Christen to obsess over the possibility that Tobin might like her, in a more than friendly way, then she succeeded. Christen isn’t exactly happy about that. Her life is stressful enough, what with Kelley and finals and Alex’s baffling facial expressions. The last thing she needs is to be worrying about her relationship with Tobin.

Over the past few months, Tobin has become a steady constant in her life. She’s there when Christen needs her to be, whether through text or call, in a way that Christen doesn’t think anyone has ever been before. She’s there for Christen more than Kelley is, really. The thought pops into her head while Kelley turns up the volume on her favorite song despite the fact that Christen has a splitting headache from the sun bearing down on the car (and from Allie’s words from earlier, though she won’t give that excuse to Kelley and Alex). It’s a rather jolting thought, one that makes her stare into nothingness and wonder if maybe, just maybe, Allie might have been onto something.

It nags at the back of her mind until they drop off Alex at her apartment, at which point Kelley takes the steering wheel and Christen moves up front. The first thing Christen does is lower the volume of the radio, earning herself a perplexed and focused look from Kelley during a particularly long stoplight.

“Are you alright?” Kelley asks curiously. “You love that song.”

Christen listens harder.

“I didn’t even notice what song it was,” she confesses. “Sorry. I just have a giant headache.”

“That’s okay,” Kelley says slowly. “I was just wondering.”

Christen gives Kelley a tired smile and a half shrug while they wait for the light to turn green.

“Is it finals?” Kelley asks, her sympathy somehow seeming exaggerated. “Are you just sad that we’re back here and have to deal with school again?”

“I like school, Kell,” Christen says, just a touch exasperated and frustrated. “Otherwise I wouldn’t be signing up for an extra two years.”
“Right,” Kelley says, nodding and picking at her lip absently. “So do you want to talk about it?”

“Normally you don’t really care what’s wrong.”

Christen’s now sure what makes her say it, but the way that Kelley visibly recoils and looks at her with such hurt in her eyes makes her think that maybe she shouldn’t have.

“I always care,” Kelley defends, and Christen thinks that yeah, she definitely shouldn’t have said anything. She can deal with a clueless Kelley, has for years, but defensive and argumentative Kelley is never fun. “What the fuck kind of statement is that, Christen?”

“I didn’t mean it badly,” Christen says as the light finally turns, prompting Kelley to ease off her brake. “I just mean that you don’t always notice that something is wrong without me having to tell you.”

“I’m sorry I’m not psychic,” Kelley says, obviously annoyed.

Christen doesn’t know what to say that won’t upset Kelley more, so she sits silently until they pull up to the apartment.

“Thanks for driving,” she says carefully as she waits for Kelley to unlock the front door. “I had a great weekend with you.”

Kelley glances over her shoulder as she pushes the door open.

“With me? Okay sure, let’s say it like that.”

Christen’s brow furrows as she follows, frowning when Kelley dumps her things by the couch.

“Like what?”

“I don’t think you want to hear what I have to say,” Kelley says.

“Just tell me,” Christen pushes, something inside her tired of this little dance with Kelley where neither of them say how they really feel. It feels like they haven’t been honest with each other since that day where they decided to give it a try, but so much has happened since then. So much has changed, and Christen realizes that they haven’t talked about any of it. There have been a lot of kisses on the cheek and the occasional press of lips leading to them making out on the couch, but for the most part things have come to a grinding halt – have gone backwards, even – and Christen hadn’t quite been sure how to deal with that. Now, though, she’s thinking that something needs to be done so that it doesn’t feel like she’s flying blind and alone in this, and that can start with Kelley telling her what the problem is.

Kelley eventually spits it out, after kicking off her shoes and redoing the bun on the top of her head.

“You keep ditching me for Tobin,” Kelley says, flat and almost bored, like she’s trying to stay calm.

“No I don’t,” Christen says immediately.

“Well, you keep ignoring me in favor of her,” Kelley says. “I mean, does it matter? The fact of the matter is that you keep choosing her instead of me, which is how it’s supposed to be! Seriously Christen, do you think I’m an idiot?”

Christen’s face grown warm.

“No, Kelley,” she mumbles stupidly. “I don’t think that.”
“Then why didn’t you tell me that you weren’t interested in me anymore?” Kelley asks, her voice growing louder and louder as she grows desperate and upset.

“What?” Christen asks, red hot shame creeping up her neck. “Kelley, why would you say something like that?”

“Stop lying, okay?” Kelley demands. “Just be honest with me. Why didn’t you tell me that you didn’t want to try this any more? I would have been fine with it.”

“Because I didn’t know!” Christen cries out, shocking even herself as she does. “Because I didn’t know! Okay, Kelley? I didn’t tell you that I was over you because I didn’t fucking know, and you don’t get to be pissed with me for that!”

She feels like she can’t breathe, like she’s about to cry, and Kelley’s satisfactory smirk isn’t helping.

“There,” Kelley says, calm again. “Look at how easy that was.”

“Fuck you,” Christen says, shaking her head and feeling her vision blur with tears. “Don’t be an asshole, Kelley. I know that’s the only way you know how to be, but don’t. Not now. Not with me.”

“I’m not being an asshole,” Kelley says as Christen starts for her room. “I’m trying to help you.”

Christen just shakes her head, struggling to breathe in.

“You’re so scared that you won’t even ask for happiness when it’s knocking on your front door,” Kelley taunts, following her. “You’ve been suffering with me for months now and I’ve got no clue why, not when it’s obvious that you’ve been crushing on Tobin for even longer.”

Christen whirls around, furious with Kelley and herself and Allie and Tobin and even Alex, for fucking with her head and making her rethink everything she thought she knows. Everything she had carefully reasoned with and made sense of, they’d picked apart. Now she feels open and raw, played with and teased too much.

“My feelings aren’t a joke,” Christen tells Kelley, stepping closer until she can see every freckle on her best friend’s face. “They’re not something to be talked about. They’re mine.”

“Okay, but what about when they affect me?” Kelley challenges. “I’ve been trying so hard with you, trying to pull feelings for you out of thin air, and the entire time you’re not even half in this with me. You checked out of this before I even checked in, and you didn’t even have the decency to tell me.”

“I didn’t know,” Christen says again, because it’s the only thing she has left to hold onto. “I didn’t know, Kelley.”

Kelley softens.

“You do like her though, don’t you?”

A single tear falls from Christen’s right eye and she gives a small nod, but Kelley sees it and smiles.

“I’m not mad,” Kelley explains. “I mean, I’m hurt. I don’t like that you did this, but I mean, fuck, did you really know know?”

Christen shakes her head, feeling more tears slip down her cheeks.

“Everyone else knew,” Kelley says.
“So what, you’ve all been talking about me behind my back?” Christen asks miserably. “Great friend you are.”

“No,” Kelley says sharply. “We’ve been talking about how it’s a miracle that you hadn’t done something about it, like end things with me.”

Something about that makes Christen’s bottom lip wobble, and she bites it with every last scrap of determination she has.

“I really like her,” she mumbles, voice wavering. “I really do.”

It’s the first time she’s acknowledging it to herself, and Kelley seems to realize it as she pulls Christen’s bag off her shoulder and drops it to the ground.

“Come here,” she says, trying to pull her in for a hug that Christen reluctantly allows, and only because it lets her hide the tears running silently down her face. “Listen to me, okay? It’s okay to like her. It’s not the end of the world.”

“Allie told me that she likes me,” Christen says into Kelley’s shoulder.

“I thought Allie had a boyfriend.”

“Tobin, that Tobin likes me,” Christen says, a laugh bubbling in her throat but not quite making its way out.

“She probably does,” Kelley says, holding Christen tighter as she snorts. “She’s kind of obsessed with you. It’s a little gross to watch, the way she makes heart eyes at you whenever you’re in the vicinity.”

“What if she doesn’t, though?” Christen says in a small voice, doubt creeping up on her, joining the frustration and simultaneous relief. “I mean, she’s never said anything.”

“Probably because she knew about your big, giant, fat crush on me,” Kelley says, snorting again and releasing Christen, holding her at arms length. “Tobin’s got manners.”

“No, I understand why she wouldn’t say anything about that,” Christen says, blushing despite herself. “Just, looking past the incredibly far reaching idea that she does like me – she’s never said anything about liking girls.”

Kelley doesn’t speak, instead squinting at Christen and tightening her fingers on her shoulders.

“What?” Christen asks after a very pregnant pause, feeling uncomfortable, like she’s said something wrong.

“Tobin definitely is very into girls,” Kelley says, obviously confused. “You knew that.”

Christen can feel her blush deepening.

“No, I didn’t,” she says, annoyed at the way Kelley is making her feel like she’s stupid or has missed something. “I don’t like to assume things about people, and she’s never said anything one way or the other.”

“Probably figured that you knew,” Kelley says, rolling her eyes. “Which I thought you did, so….”

“How do you know?” Christen wants to know.
Kelley blinks once.

“Christen,” she says uncertainly, “if you don’t know, then I probably shouldn’t tell you.”

“What is it?” Christen asks, panicking at Kelley’s sudden unwillingness to share. “I mean, how bad could it be?”

“Chris – “

“Should I ask her?” Christen says, fingers itching for her back pocket where she knows she stashed her phone upon getting out of the car.

“No!” Kelley yelps, fingers flexing. “Okay, I thought that I told you this already.”

“Told me what?” Christen asks, anxious and impatient. “Just tell me, Kelley.”

She watches Kelley close her eyes and take a deep breath.

“Okay,” Kelley says, steadying herself and looking at Christen intently. “Just remember that you asked for this.”

Part of Christen wants to take it back and forget all about it, but she needs to know and she needs to hear it from Kelley right now.

“Remember how I called you over the summer that one time?”

It’s the time that doesn’t even need specifying because of course Christen remembers.

She remembers Kelley calling her, hysterically crying past midnight, waking Christen up in the middle of a deep sleep the night after a particularly grueling day in the lab. She remembers Kelley crying, sobbing, hyperventilating and going on and on about how she’d made a giant mistake. She remembers trying to reassure her, trying to get information about what happened out of her so she could calm her down properly. She remembers Kelley being too upset and incoherent to tell the story properly, the only words that Christen could string together coming together to tell her that Kelley had slept with someone, and that it had been a girl, and she’d regretted it instantly.

Christen remembers everything clearly, but right now all that registers is the enormous pit of dread settling deep in her stomach.

“Kell.”

It’s only a whisper, but Kelley’s reacting expression tells her everything that she needs to know.

“I’m sorry,” Kelley says, clearly at a loss for words. “I’m so sorry, Christen. I thought you knew. I thought it was why you’ve been so weird with her since the beginning and why you didn’t want to do anything about liking her.”

Christen isn’t even bothering with blinking back her tears anymore. There are too many, so it’s easier to let them run down her cheeks and neck.

“She never told me,” Christen says, and the raw hurt she’d been feeling just minutes before suddenly seems like nothing compared to the way her heart aches now. “She let me go on and on about you, and she never said a word.”

“What happened between us was a one-time thing,” Kelley says, gentle but uncertain. “She probably didn’t want to hurt you if she didn’t have to. I thought I told you, Christen. I’m really sorry.”
“What do I even do?” Christen asks, finally bringing up a hand to wipe her tears away with the heels of her palms. “I like her so much, Kell.”

“She likes you too,” Kelley says earnestly. “Christen, you don’t have to do anything. This doesn’t change the fact that you guys like each other.”

“So you want me to go for someone who might not even be interested in me, but also lied to me about something very important for months and months?” Christen asks. She knows that she sounds little incredulous, but the truth is that she doesn’t know what to do. She does like Tobin, even if she has been ignoring it for all this time, but she likes Tobin enough to know that she wants to hear her side of the story. She wants to know what happened and why they never talked about it.

Christen likes Tobin enough that the thought of letting her go over this makes her heart ache more than it does after hearing that she slept with her best friend.

“It was stupid,” Kelley says, hands falling to her sides as she shakes her head. “So stupid. We barely knew each other at the time. It was her second week here, Moe and Kling were having a party, and she looked hot. It happened before I knew it and I regretted it literally the moment it was over. I promise, Christen, it meant nothing and she knew that. We agreed to put it behind us. I – “

“Stop,” Christen says, shaking her head, unable to listen to any more of it. She wants to hear Tobin’s version of it –needs to hear Tobin’s version of it. She needs to know what happened, and she doesn’t want to hear Kelley’s half-assed version of what happened in the middle of a frantic attempt to cover her own tracks and make sure that Christen won’t hate Tobin in the morning.

Christen doesn’t want to hate Tobin in the morning.

Christen doesn’t want to hate Tobin at all.

“What?” Kelley asks immediately. “What did I do?”


“Okay,” Kelley says, nodding obediently. “Okay, that’s fine. What do you want me to do?”

Christen thinks for a minute, trying to talk herself out of it, but it’s impossible. It’s the only thing she can think about, and now that it’s in her head, it refuses to go away.

“I think,” she says, hesitant and not wanting Kelley to try and stop her, “that I need to talk to Tobin.”

“Yeah, okay,” Kelley says agreeably. “You probably do. Are you going to call her? Should I leave you alone?”

“No,” Christen interrupts, unable to ignore the itching anticipation underneath her skin. “I need to talk to her in person.”

“Okay,” Kelley says again. “I understand. So what, you want to drive down on Friday or something? Actually, fuck, I think they have an away game – “

“No,” Christen interrupts, unable to ignore the itching anticipation underneath her skin. “Now. I need to talk to her in person now.”

Kelley looks at Christen like she’s crazy, which is understandable. They just drove fours hours to get away from Tobin, it’s nearing six o’clock, and Christen has class in the morning.
But Christen doesn’t care about any of that. She’ll drive the four hours if she needs to. She’ll get there late, spend the night, and come back in the morning. She’ll miss her Monday classes, but they aren’t doing anything important besides reviewing, which Christen can do by herself. Or with Julie’s help.

Either way, Kelley isn’t going to stop her, and Christen tells her as much.

“Hey,” Kelley says, bending low to grab Christen’s bag, helping hoist it over her shoulder again. “I’m not going to stop you. It’s a little crazy, but it might work.”

“I just need to talk to her,” Christen says. It’s all she can think about, hearing the story straight from Tobin. She needs to hear what happened and why Tobin never told her, and to do it over the phone feels almost casually cruel for both of them.

Kelley pats down Christen’s flyaways and uses a thumb to wipe away her tear tracks before smiling.

“On a scale of one to ten,” Kelley starts, making Christen roll her eyes, “you need to go get your girl.”

“She’s not mine,” Christen says quickly, feeling her heart skip a beat at the very thought that she could be.

“She is,” Kelley says. “She’s been yours for a while now.”

It’s with that thought in mind that Christen grabs her car keys and leaves.

*

Christen isn’t sure what holds her together for the first three and a half hours of the car ride back down to Tobin. Maybe it’s the setting sun, maybe it’s Kelley’s words ringing in her ears, maybe it’s the sudden realization that maybe Allie wasn’t entirely pulling shit out of her ass earlier that morning, or maybe it’s sheer determination. Whatever it is, it disappears during the last half hour and leaves Christen emotional, crying and trying to blink the tears away so she can drive to Tobin’s apartment without crashing.

She arrives on the doorstep without her things, leaving them in her car in case it goes awry. She doesn’t want to seem presumptuous, but when Allie opens the door with a simple raise of her eyebrows before stepping back and wordlessly inviting her in, she wonders if maybe she shouldn’t have come at all.

“Tobin’s in her room,” Allie says, when Christen doesn’t move and keeps fidgeting with her keychain.

“Were you being serious earlier?” Christen asks, needing to know. “About me being the most important part of her day?”

Allie just eyes her in a way that makes Christen feel like she’s been laid bare, everything on display, all cards on the table.

“Caught yourself up, huh?” Allie asks, clearing her throat when it comes out a little rough. “She’s in her room.”

Christen goes – it’s been torture waiting there, knowing that Tobin so close yet so far – and forces herself to turn the doorknob instead of waiting, scared, like she wants to.
Tobin doesn’t notice her immediately, presumably because she’s humming to herself with a pair of headphones on as she turns the page of a book. It’s late, time for bed when there’s practice early in the morning, and Christen reconsiders for the millionth time. She’s ugly, her mascara all cried off and her eyes and nose all red from being so upset, but Christen moves forward for once, instead of backward.

“Hey,” Tobin says, looking up and seeing her before Christen can find the words to speak. “What are you doing here? Is everything okay?”

Christen can’t talk, emotional welling inside her. She’s afraid that if she talks, she’ll lose it and never manage to get out the words to tell Tobin what she now knows.

“Hey,” Tobin says again, concerned as she places her book on her nightstand, headphones and phone on top of it. She scoots off the bed and is in front of Christen in a flash. “Are you okay? Did something happen with Kelley?”

Christen can only nod, afraid that if she speaks she’ll burst into sobs. She’s tired of crying around Tobin, tired of asking to be put back together.

“Do I need to put out a hit on her?” Tobin jokes, but Christen shakes her head and the joke falls flat. “Chris, what’s wrong?”

“You,” Christen manages to get out.

“Me?” Tobin asks, the surprise evident in her tone. “What did I do? I’m sorry for whatever it is.”

Christen takes a deep breath – several, actually – before she feels like she has composed herself enough to explain herself.

“You slept with Kelley,” Christen says, her voice already unsteady. “And never told me.”

Christen watches Tobin step backwards to collapse onto the edge of her bed, making her small as she looks up at Christen with fear and regret in her eyes, amongst other things that Christen is too upset to identify.

“I was going to,” Tobin says in a hushed tone. “But then it was too late, and I figured it could stay a secret, and – “

“You don’t think I deserved to know?” Christen blurts out, and there they are, the tears that seem to love making their way down Christen’s face, wrecking any semblance of composure that she might have had. “At any point, you didn’t think that it would have been better to tell me?”

Tobin hangs her head in shame.

“I’m sorry,” she says, eyes barely meeting Christen’s. “I’m so sorry, Chris. I know, I know that it’s fucked, but you have to understand – “

“Make me understand,” Christen interrupts, sniffing and wiping at her nose determinedly. “Tell me what happened.”


“Tell me,” Christen says again, hard and demanding even through her snotty nose and teary eyes. “Tell me what happened. I can’t do this if I don’t know.”
“Do what?” Tobin asks, panic creeping into her tone.

Christen only thinks about it for half a second before deciding to go for it.

“You like me,” Christen says, waiting for affirmation before going forward.

“So much,” Tobin says miserably. “God, Christen, I like you more than you could ever imagine, and I’m sorry for it. I didn’t mean to.”

“Don’t be sorry,” Christen says, wiping her eyes with her fingertips. “I like you too.”

Tobin freezes then, not even blinking at she stares at Christen.

“What?” she asks, quiet, as though any audible noise might make Christen take it back.

“I like you too,” Christen says again. “But I’m only doing this if you tell me exactly what happened.”

Tobin rises from where she’s fallen, standing in front of Christen with the saddest look on her face.

“Hold on.”

She runs a loving hand over Christen’s cheek, briefly cupping her jawline before she moves on, leaving the room and a confused Christen behind. She’s back within a minute though, holding a box of tissues in one hand and a tall glass of water in the other.

“Sit down,” Tobin says, nodding to the bed with a resigned but optimistic look on her face. “Drink some water and let me clean you up, and I’ll tell you anything you want to know.”
how okay would you be with me never letting go?

After the first day of practice, Tobin thinks that maybe everyone just needs some time to adjust. She’s new, it’s hot out, and it’s been a while since everyone has had a day full of intense practice under the sun, so it makes sense that they’re all a bit short with her and don’t share looks with her during water breaks.

After the second day of practice, Tobin resolves to try harder. Maybe she’s intimidating, or maybe they’re waiting for her to approach them. All of the girls – even the new freshman – curse the coaches together as they pant and sweat under the summer sun, but Tobin stands there with her hands on her hips and tries to act like she too is winded and ready to fake a knee injury just to get out early.

Really, it’s not her fault that she’s in such good shape and some of the other girls have been slacking off in the off season.

After the third day though, during which Tobin attempts to strike up conversation with one of Lindsey’s friends (Lindsey is nice to Tobin, but they barely know each other and Lindsey is too busy bonding with the freshman to give Tobin much thought, which is fine), she considers the fact that maybe she’s the problem and she might have to do something about it.

She knows that it’s weird, transferring as a senior. It’s rare, not really allowed, and had earned her the silent treatment from almost all of her old teammates when they found out that she wasn’t returning. But Tobin wants to win. She wants to play a full 90 every week and get another call up to the national team. So when her team had failed yet again to win themselves another national championship, she began to entertain the possibility that maybe she’d made the wrong choice.

The fact that the coach of her new team had campaigned so hard to recruit her back in high school didn’t hurt either. It made things easy, as he went to bat for her and made the transfer relatively easy on her.

But she hadn’t entertained the possibility that her new teammates would resent her just as much as her old ones. Maybe it was naïve, to expect to be welcomed with open arms, but Tobin thought that they’d at least be happy to have her there. Instead, she’s been barely spoken to, and ends up with a reluctant partner every time they pair up for drills.

On the first Friday of preseason, a pretty sophomore who wears a pink pre-wrap headband like it’s the secret behind her ridiculous ability to get the ball in the back of the net no matter what, nails Tobin in the head with a ball.

It sounds bad, but it’s Tobin’s fault.

She’d been keeping her head down, unsure of how to go about this situation. Getting people to like her has never been a problem. Tobin knows that she’s likeable, funny and approachable, but clearly being herself wasn’t working so she was doing her best to stay under the radar (despite the coach’s constant praises) in order to get her teammates to stop looking at her as an outsider. She’d been pulling on her sneakers as practice finished, girls leaving the field as a few stayed behind to kick the ball around or practice their shots on goal. Normally Tobin would stick around too, but she wants to explore campus and maybe see if there’s a place to get coffee besides one of the million Starbucks in town. Besides, she’s not sure that she’s welcome.

The fact of the matter is that Tobin knows she shouldn’t be walking where she is once she’s got her
sneakers on. She has to walk around the field to reach the exit, and instead of taking the safe long way, she decides to pass behind the goal that a couple of girls are facing, lining up to take shots in what looks like some sort of competition.

Alex nails her in the side of the head, sending Tobin stumbling as she clutches her ear, her vision going blurry and making her wonder about a possible concussion.

“I’m so sorry!”

Alex jogs over with a stricken look on her face, clearly apologetic as she comes close.

“I didn’t mean to hit you! I mean, that would have gone in if Syd hadn’t distracted me, but I didn’t think I’d hit anyone!”

“It’s okay,” Tobin says, wincing as Alex comes to a stop in front of her, chest rising and falling with every breath as she peers concernedly at Tobin. “I’ll be okay. Nothing an ice pack can’t fix.”

“I feel awful,” Alex says wretchedly, clearly sincerely apologetic. “Are you sure you’re alright?”

“I’m fine,” Tobin reassures her.

Alex doesn’t look convinced as she stands there and eyes Tobin closely, but she doesn’t press the issue.

“I’m Alex,” she says after a moment during which Tobin finally lowers her hand from her head, deciding that continuing to feel the slight swelling by her temple won’t help matters. “The girl with the dark hair is Syd, and Kelley is the one who won’t stop pulling up her shirt to wipe sweat off her face.”

Tobin has noticed Kelley and her tendency to show off her bare abdomen as much as possible, but her eyes still flicker over to her to make sure that the name matches the face. She’s been able to put names to the faces of most of the girls on the team, which is how she already knows Alex, but it’s nice to be properly introduced.

It almost makes Tobin feel like Alex’s friend.

Turns out that Tobin’s feeling is right, because Alex becomes Tobin’s first friend on the team.

They start small, with grabbing smoothies in between practices on Saturday. They bring one back for Syd and Kelley, both of whom barely have time to thank them before the coach is at Tobin’s shoulder, wanting to talk to her about a drill he wants to run again. It’s mildly frustrating for Tobin, who normally wouldn’t care about whether or not her teammates like her, but she’s starting to feel a little lonely and thinks that it would be nice to have people to hang out with when she’s done with practice.

So at the end of practice, Alex asks to exchange numbers so they can maybe plan to do something tomorrow. They have Sunday off but return to the grind on Monday, and even though Tobin is used to lying around and doing nothing when given off days, she figures this situation might warrant an exception.

“We might go out to dinner or something,” Alex says distractedly, typing Tobin’s name into her phone. “With Kelley and Syd. I was going to ask Ali, but I guess she has plans.”

Tobin thinks she knows who Ali is, the pretty right back who is always smiling, and nods along as Alex looks back up with a smile on her face.
“Sounds good to me,” Tobin says with a grin. “I’m always up for food.”

Except Kelley and Syd apparently make plans of their own – both on dates, something that Alex seems rather bitter about.

“I only ever get asked out by assholes,” Alex complains over dinner, after finishing up a tirade on how Syd and her boyfriend are attached at the hip and how Kelley manages to date someone new every couple of weeks. “When will a decent guy ask me out?”

Tobin finds the whole thing amusing because Alex seems to be looking for Prince Charming to sweep her off her feet (something that Tobin thinks is a bit unrealistic), but she doesn’t dare laugh as she nods along and eats her burger. She’s just relieved to have a friend, really. Someone to talk to, to whom she can lace up her cleats with and complain about the coach with. She prays that Alex is her in with the team, that she’ll make a few more friends and feel a little less lonely and like she made the right decision.

Because Tobin doesn’t like doubting herself. She’s always so sure of herself, and she doesn’t like feeling like she might have made a mistake.

Of course, Tobin ends up making a mistake anyway.

It all happens because she’s uncharacteristically insecure. She’s rethinking her transfer, rethinking every decision she made that led her here. She’s even rethinking befriending Alex, who has invited her to a party but disappears the moment they arrive.

Tobin doesn’t know who Moe and Kling are, but she does know that they throw some pretty great parties. Despite the fact that she’s never been big on drinking, Tobin finds a lukewarm beer and nurses it in the kitchen where she can look out over the counter and survey the room of girls. It’s mostly the team and some of their friends, and alone in the kitchen, it’s easy for Tobin to think that she can belong. She doesn’t usually keep to herself; no, Tobin’s too easygoing and uninhibited to ever really worry about what others think of her, or to be too scared to initiate conversation with a group of people. But for some reason, even though Tobin can pick out at least ten people in the small crowd that she wants to approach, something keeps her glued to her spot in the kitchen, resting her hip against the counter as she takes small sips of her drink.

She recognizes most of the people from the team, and she makes a game of deciding whether or not someone is a teammate. Syd is recognizable, clutching Alex’s arm as they head outside, presumably never to be seen again anytime soon. So is Becky, their captain, who is always calm with tonight being no exception. There are a group of freshman crowded together on a couch, giggling over something.

Then there’s Kelley, who has been cornered by someone who definitely doesn’t look like a teammate. She wears a bored expression as she talks, lips pressed to the rim of her cup but unmoving as her eyes glaze over. Even when nearly bored to tears, Kelley still looks good. Tobin has been wondering if her freckles are a product of the sun or if they’re so prominent all year round. She is vaguely aware of the fact that she’s staring, but there’s no reason to be discreet about it, not when no one is looking at Tobin. Kelley definitely isn’t looking at Tobin, as she’s more preoccupied with slipping into a coma than looking around to see what everyone else is up to.

Or at least that’s what Tobin thinks until she finds a pair of hazel eyes boring into hers from across the house.

Tobin takes it in stride. Kelley doesn’t seem particularly bothered, but instead lowers her cup from her mouth and lets her lips quirk into a barely noticeable smirk, so Tobin doesn’t look away. They
stare at each other like it’s a game, like the first one to look away loses. Something cold runs down Tobin’s spine, chilling her and making her shiver as Kelley blinks slowly.

But then someone is in the kitchen and asking Tobin to move so they can get to the garbage can. She introduces herself as Morgan or Moe, and barely takes the time to greet Tobin while throwing out a collection of plastic cups before disappearing just as quickly as she arrived. When Tobin returns to her position against the counter, hating that Kelley won what was hopefully only the first round of their little game, she’s more than disappointed to see that Kelley isn’t where Tobin left her. In fact, as she scans the room, she can’t find Kelley at all.

“Boo.”

She says it quietly and Tobin doesn’t jump or even scream, but her heart does race a little bit as she slowly turns around, eyebrows raised as she sees Kelley standing a foot away from her, cup still in hand.

“Trying to scare me?” Tobin asks.

“Did it work?”

“No,” Tobin says, cracking a smile as Kelley grins. “Having fun out there?”

“Oh yeah,” Kelley says, rolling her eyes and reaching for the refrigerator. “So much fun. I love hearing about the merits of a mathematics degree. Not.”

Tobin doesn’t even try to suppress her hearty laugh as Kelley pulls out an ice cold bottle of beer.

“Your own secret stash?” Tobin asks.

“No,” Kelley says with a mischievous glint in her eye. When she reaches forward to grab the bottle opener from the far end of the kitchen counter, Tobin is more than aware of how her shirt rides up in the back, revealing a small strip of bare skin. “I like stealing from Kling’s secret stash.”

“That’s wicked,” Tobin says, eyeing the bottle as Kelley pops the top off. “Won’t she know it was you?”

Kelley surveys Tobin closely while taking a long pull from her bottle, wiping her mouth with the back of her hand when she’s done.

“That’s wicked,” Tobin says, eyeing the bottle as Kelley pops the top off. “Won’t she know it was you?”

Kelley surveys Tobin closely while taking a long pull from her bottle, wiping her mouth with the back of her hand when she’s done.

“No,” Kelley says with a mischievous glint in her eye. When she reaches forward to grab the bottle opener from the far end of the kitchen counter, Tobin is more than aware of how her shirt rides up in the back, revealing a small strip of bare skin. “I like stealing from Kling’s secret stash.”

“Not if I give you one too,” Kelley says, the glass making a sharp noise as she sets it down on the counter before going into the fridge again. “Then she won’t know how was behind it. Could have been you, could have been me, could have been anyone.”

“Right,” Tobin says, nodding. “I’m way more likely to help myself than you are.”

“Exactly,” Kelley says with a wide smile as she opens the second bottle, kicking the refrigerator door closed with her foot. “I’m so glad you agree with me.”

They clink bottles at Kelley’s request before taking a sip together, eyes never leaving each other as they drink. Tobin’s thinking that Kelley’s got too many freckles to count, but that doesn’t mean she wouldn’t like to try.

“So,” Kelley says, when half her bottle is gone and she’s mindlessly fiddling with the label. “How are you liking the team so far?”
Tobin shrugs, putting the bottle on the counter so she doesn’t end up with wet condensation all over her hands and fingertips.

“Good,” she says, trying to be positive about the whole thing. “You guys have some really awesome players on the team which is a positive. I’m obviously still trying to find my place with you guys, but that comes with time. I figure it’s a good thing we still have all of preseason and a few preseason games to work on that chemistry which is so important.”

“You’re kind of rambling,” Kelley points out when Tobin takes a breath.

Tobin is a little shocked with how blunt Kelley is, but she tries not to be embarrassed at being called out like that.

“Oh, maybe,” Tobin says, scratching the side of her neck. “Sorry.”

“What about the gals?” Kelley asks.

“The gals?”

“That’s what we call ourselves,” Kelley explains, chest puffing up in pride.

“Oh,” Tobin says, nodding in understanding. “Um, yeah, so far everyone seems really great. Alex and I are kinda friends, which is cool. She wanted you to come out to dinner with us on Sunday but I guess you couldn’t make it so we went alone.”

“Yeah, I had other plans,” Kelley says, and when she tilts her head so that her ponytail falls over her shoulder, Tobin can’t help but look at the curve of her neck. “Maybe another time.”

“Yes, maybe,” Tobin responds.

The conversation feels awkward, so Tobin just stares at Kelley’s mouth as she finishes off her beer.

“You going to finish yours?” Kelley asks when she’s done, nodding to Tobin’s bottle and licking her pink lips.

Tobin reaches for the bottle and takes a few swigs before handing it off to Kelley.

“Not big on beer?”

“Not big on drinking in general,” Tobin answers, feeling vaguely judged as Kelley raises her eyebrows in response.

“No?”

“No reason why,” Tobin says with a shrug, shoving her hands in the back pockets of her ripped jeans. “Just, never have been. Don’t see that changing anytime soon.”

“That’s fine,” Kelley says. “I can work with that.”

Tobin isn’t blind. She hasn’t been blind to the way Kelley has been predatorily eyeing her since they first saw each other tonight, and Tobin is guilty of the same. There’s something in her that wants Kelley, wants to be close to someone, and wants to stop thinking about whether moving here was a good decision or not.

So when Kelley moves closer under the pretense of setting the two empty bottles against the giant bucket of ice sitting on the counter behind Tobin, Tobin makes no move to back away and create
some more distance between them.

“So,” Kelley asks, tossing her ponytail over her shoulder. “What’s your major?”

Tobin snorts at that, nearly doubling over in laughter.

“Really?” she asks through her laughs, Kelley’s affronted expression more entertaining than anything. “That’s the line you’re using on me?”

“That’s not a line!” Kelley protests. “I’m genuinely curious.”

“No, you’re not,” Tobin says, shaking her head. “At least, right now you’re not. What, are you a frat boy?”

Kelley still looks offended, but Tobin isn’t buying it. She can feel that Kelley is pleased with herself, can see it in the way she stands up a little straighter and moves in a little closer.


“Oh,” Tobin says, suddenly serious.

“What?” Kelley asks automatically. “What’s wrong with that?”

“I don’t think I’ve ever known a sorority girl before,” Tobin says, even though that’s definitely not true. “This is new for me. I don’t know what to do with this information.”

“Hm,” Kelley says, and she moves even closer. Tobin stifles a laugh because as much as she’s enjoying this, the feeling of being wanted and the knowledge that Kelley is definitely at least as interested as she is, she’s wondering if Kelley’s ever going to make a real move or if she’s going to have to do it herself. “I’m not like most sorority girls, so that’s probably a good thing.”

“You’re full of shit,” Tobin says, shaking her head through a grin. “So full of shit.”

“Am I?” Kelley asks. “I think you’re the one who’s full of shit. I’ve been waiting for you to make a move since you neglected to save me from that awful conversation earlier. You’ve been staring at me all night, but I’m beginning to think that you wouldn’t know how to kiss a girl if your life depended on it.”

And well, if there’s anything that will make Tobin do anything, it’s a good old fashioned taunting.

So she takes a chance, but it’s not really risking anything as she does. When she leans forward to press her mouth against Kelley’s, she’s not worried about rejection. She knows that Kelley will kiss her back, in the middle of an empty kitchen in the middle of a crowded house, but she’s still pleased when she’s right.

Kelley tastes like beer and smells like flowers and has steady hands that she reaches out to hold onto Tobin’s waist. She isn’t shy, opening her mouth to Tobin and squeezing her own hands when Tobin reaches out to pull her closer by her elbows. The kiss turns hard, the both of them giving more than they were prepared to take. However, Kelley pulls away abruptly and that shocks Tobin more than the way she stares at Tobin’s lips as she talks.

“I don’t mind having sex with you but I’m not doing it in this kitchen,” she says plainly, and Tobin lets out a sharp exhale as she decides that yeah, she’s okay with what’s happening here.

“Well, if you have any other suggestions…” Tobin trails off, looking around. She doesn’t know the
house that they’re in and she assumes that Kelley does, judging by the fact that she knows about Kling’s secret stash.

“Yeah,” Kelley says, eyes darting around the room. “Come here.”

She heads past Tobin who follows closely, the two of them apparently unnoticed by everyone else in the house as Kelley leads her down a short hallway before making a left into a laundry room. It makes Tobin want to laugh but before she can, Kelley is twisting the door locked behind them and pushing Tobin up against the wall.

It shouldn’t surprise Tobin that Kelley is as aggressive as she is, shoving hands underneath clothes and barely caring if the entire article of clothing is gone before moving on. Tobin ends up with her jeans unbuttoned and her shirt hem askew while she struggles to still Kelley’s hands long enough to actually get anywhere.

It feels like an eternity but doesn’t last very long. Kelley’s bare skin is fire to the touch and Tobin feels like she’s having an out of body experience, aware of what’s going on but not able to soak it all up the way she’d like. It’s as if she’s experiencing it through someone else’s eyes, knowing what is happening without feeling like it’s happening to her.

Kelley gets Tobin off against the wall with her fingers, determinedly kissing Tobin like she has something to prove. It takes a bit of effort for her to get Kelley under control, to get her to relinquish control before making her come hard, until she’s breathless and jelly-limbed. Tobin waits until Kelley can stand on her own before speaking, the whole exchange having remained remarkably silent aside from their hushed moans and the sounds of their bodies moving together.

“Fuck,” Kelley says suddenly when she finally regains composure, patting down her ponytail which is messed up beyond repair. “Fuck.”

“What?” Tobin asks, suddenly self conscious about having done something wrong.

“We probably shouldn’t have done that,” Kelley says, scrambling to pull her pants up and straighten out her shirt.

“Hey,” Tobin says calmly, running a hand through her hair. “It’s okay. This doesn’t have to be a thing.”

“Fuck,” Kelley repeats.

“It really doesn’t have to be a big deal,” Tobin tries again, trying to understand what is going through Kelley’s head. “We’re still teammates, Kelley. We can just be teammates if you want to. Nothing more.”

Kelley takes a moment from pulling her hair into a loose bun to look at Tobin.

“We can be friends,” she says decisively. “You and I. We can be friends.”

“We can,” Tobin echoes.

“I’m going to go,” Kelley says, avoiding Tobin’s gaze as she finishes her hair and reaches for the door.

“I’ll see you at practice,” Tobin tries to call out as Kelley leaves, but she doesn’t get a response and she feels a little lost.
She wanders around a little looking for Alex, but Alex finds her first.

“I’m ready to go,” Alex grumbles, looking over her shoulder in irritation. “Syd’s been on the phone with her boyfriend for the past half hour and I’m tired of being ignored.”

“Are you good to drive?” Tobin asks, and once Alex nods, it’s not long before they head outside to Alex’s car.

Alex is far too intuitive for her own good, and it’s only a few minutes before she’s turning to Tobin at a stop sign and eyeing her suspiciously.

“So what did you do tonight?” she asks, and she doesn’t even bother to sweeten her tone or attempt to convince Tobin to tell her.

“Nothing,” Tobin says, but it’s quick and flat and Alex sees right through her.

“Right,” Alex says, narrowing her eyes. “Nothing. I’m sure.”

“I just kind of hung out,” Tobin says. “I got to talk to Kelley, so that was nice.”

“Do you have anything to do with why Kelley left the house on the phone with Christen in tears?” Alex asks, and Tobin looks at her in confusion.

“Christen?”

“Kelley’s best friend,” Alex says dismissively. “She’s not important right now. What’s important is what you said to Kelley to make her cry.”

“I didn’t think she’d cry,” Tobin says uncomfortably. “I didn’t think it was that bad.”

“What did you do?” Alex pushes, finally gassing it so they can keep driving.

The need to tell someone is overwhelming. Tobin is a private person, but considering the circumstances, this might be more than she can keep to herself.

“If I tell you, you can’t say anything, okay?”

“I would never,” Alex promises, and for some reason Tobin believes her.

When Tobin tells her – quickly mumbling the entire time – Alex just raises an eyebrow and accelerates to make it through a yellow light.

“Well,” Alex says, hand steady on the steering wheel. “I can’t say I’m surprised.”

Tobin is going to ask her about that comment later, but for the time being she’s more concerned about Alex not telling anyone. If Kelley is really as upset as she seems, there’s even more reason for it to not get out.

“I know it’s not the best way to start off here,” Tobin says.

“Kelley sleeps with a lot of people,” Alex says dismissively. “Honestly, it was just a matter of time before she found someone on the team. I’m just glad it was you and not a freshman.”

Tobin isn’t quite sure what to do with that information.

“Just don’t make it weird,” Alex tells Tobin. “Okay? I want to win this year and this better not fuck
Tobin thinks that Alex is perhaps a bit self centered, but maybe that’s a good thing.

By the time Tobin is finished talking, Christen feels like she’s cried herself dry.

She’s sat on the edge of Tobin’s bed the entire time, fidgety and bursting into sobs every time Tobin gets to a part of that story that’s particularly difficult to hear. Tobin has remained next to her, close enough to touch but just far enough away that Christen has enough space to breathe. She’s been ready with a tissue and a glass of water the entire time – Christen had gulped down the first glass like it would erase everything that had happened – and it almost makes it easy to forget, to let her in close and ignore the fact that she’d essentially had a one night stand with Christen’s crush and then neglected to tell her about it for months.

Tobin is waiting for Christen’s response, but Christen isn’t sure what to say. The story is self explanatory and Christen feels a little stupid for having driven all of four hours just to hear it from Tobin’s mouth, so she sits with a dry throat and swollen eyes and wishes she maybe hadn’t come.

When she begins to tell Tobin as much, her voice small and her words stilted, Tobin begins shaking her head before she can even finish speaking.

“No, no, please don’t wish that,” Tobin says entreatingly. “I’m really glad you came. I’m sorry that you’re upset because of something I did, but I’m glad that you came to me.”

“I just didn’t want to hear it from Kelley,” Christen mumbles, wiping at dried tear tracks. “It didn’t feel right.”

“Thank you for hearing me out,” Tobin says earnestly. “I know that you could have just written me off as soon as you heard, but you didn’t and that means a lot to me.”

Christen picks at her cuticles for the millionth time.

“I’m sorry I didn’t tell you,” Tobin says, softer, when Christen doesn’t say anything.

“Why didn’t you?” Christen asks, her voice a little stronger. This is the one thing she finds hard to forgive. She understands that what happened with Tobin and Kelley happened before Christen liked Kelley, before Tobin met Christen, before Tobin knew about her crush on Kelley. But afterwards, Christen can’t comprehend why Tobin wouldn’t tell her about it. She’s having trouble getting past that, no matter how many times Tobin claims that she did it to protect Christen.

“It was over and done with,” Tobin says, her eyes begging Christen to understand. It’s hard to look Tobin in the eye, but Christen finds herself drawn to look without even trying. Something about looking at Tobin makes Christen feel calmer; as if despite everything happening to her, everything will be okay because of Tobin. “I would have told you if it was important, but Kelley and I talked about it later on and agreed that we’d pretend like it never happened. We fucked up, and we wanted to move past it.”

“But you knew I liked Kelley,” Christen persists. “You didn’t think I deserved to know?”

“I thought it would hurt you more than it would help you,” Tobin says bluntly. “So I guess no, I didn’t think you deserved to know.”

Christen isn’t happy to hear that, so she sits still and stares off into space.
“I cared more about you being happy than you knowing the truth,” Tobin admits gently when Christen deigns to not reply. “And maybe that was wrong of me. I should have known that you’d want to know regardless.”

“I would want to know regardless,” Christen says. “I still want to know regardless.”

“I know that now,” Tobin says. “I’m going to remember that, okay?”

“Okay,” Christen responds with a single nod, looking at Tobin whose eyes are so large and open that it’s almost easy to wholeheartedly believe her.

“I cared more about you being happy with Kelley than I did about being honest,” Tobin says. Christen takes a deep breath before asking her next question.

“Do you really like me?”

“Of course,” Tobin says immediately.

“Why?”

It’s such a simple question but Christen kind of understands why it leaves Tobin lost for words.

“I just do,” Tobin says after a moment.

“Oh,” Christen says, nodding. “Okay.”

“Wait,” Tobin says, shooting out a hand to rest over Christen’s. “Give me a minute. Let me think about it.”

So Christen waits, impatient and praying that this isn’t a mistake or a fluke. She so badly wants this to be real that it scares her, and when taking into consideration how much room for error there is here, it’s terrifying. There are a million different ways this could go wrong.

“I like you because you’re a hard worker,” Tobin says eventually.

“That sounds lame,” Christen says, but Tobin shakes her head.

“No, I like it. You try so hard with school, Chris. Like you’re always studying so you can be the very best you can be, and I admire that. I’m kind of like that with soccer, you know? And some people don’t get what it takes to be the best. But you do. You get that it takes time and dedication and hard work. It’s not all about luck or skill or stuff like that. You work hard for what you want, and I like that about you.”

Tobin sounds so passionate that it leaves Christen a little speechless. Before Christen can think about it too much though, Tobin is continuing in the same impassioned tone.

“And you’re so good, Chris. To Kelley, to Julie, to the dog shelter you always visit. You’re kind and good and that’s something that not a lot of people have anymore. It’s so easy to be mean but you’re so nice, even when other people don’t deserve it. No matter how shitty Kelley treated you, you always acted like her best friend, and that’s rare. And I like that about you.

“You’re so beautiful and you don’t even know it,” Tobin goes on, making Christen blush. “I’ve known it from the moment I laid eyes on you, and it’s a shame that you don’t see it. Anyone would be lucky to be with you, Christen. You’re the prettiest girl I’ve ever known but you’re modest and don’t act like you know it and I like that about you."
“I like the way you make me feel. You make me happy. You make my days better and not a day goes by that I don’t wish you were right beside me. I hate that we don’t live in the same city anymore because whenever we’re together, I feel happier and lighter. Something about you changes something in me, and I don’t know how to describe it but it’s true. You make me want to try harder and be better and I like that about you.”

When Tobin finishes, Christen’s heart is pounding and she isn’t quite sure that she agrees with everything Tobin has said, but there’s a chance that Tobin meant every word of it and Christen almost can’t believe it.

“You really do like me,” she says, more to herself than anything, but of course Tobin still hears it.

“Of course I do,” Tobin says, smiling a little, and it’s just genuine enough to make Christen feel a little less wound up. She’s still upset but she’s beginning to calm down and feel like maybe she can actually do this.

“How long?” Christen asks, and for some reasons Tobin gets very embarrassed.

“Do we really have to talk about it?” she asks, and Christen can’t help be be intrigued.

“Yes,” she says, curious. “Why, is it bad?”

“Kind of,” Tobin says, looking anywhere but at Christen for a change.

“Just tell me,” Christen wheedles.

It takes a bit of persuading, but Tobin tells her.

“Remember when you called me at the ACC championship?” Tobin says guiltily.

Christen remembers – doesn’t like thinking about it, but still remembers – but she wishes that she didn’t. She turns deep red and suddenly understands Tobin’s behavior.

“Why would that have made you like me?” she asks, not eager to obtain eye contact anytime soon.

“Because I got to see a different side of you,” Tobin says, clearly uncomfortable but talking on anyway. “It’s not entirely about the sexual aspect of it – I mean, that was important but it’s not the whole picture.”

“So what is the whole picture?”

“You got confident,” Tobin explains. “You let go for a minute and I felt like I was getting to see a side of you that was always kept under lock and key. I felt close to you and I realized that very few people ever get to see that part of you, and I couldn’t help but feel something when I realized that.”

Christen sits where she is, a little stunned.

“Did I say something wrong?” Tobin asks, concerned.

“No, no,” Christen says shaking her head. “I just…. I thought it was going to be sexual. Like you didn’t see me that way before and then you did. I wasn’t expecting it to be that much.”

“Christen,” Tobin says, something funny in her voice. “I’ve always kind of seen you that way.”

“I’m not a sexy person,” Christen says, feeling like she needs to warn Tobin about this. “I’m not hot or sexy and I’m really not that beautiful either.”
“Hey.”

Tobin says it sharply but not harshly as she grips Christen’s hand with hers, flipping her hand so that they’re palm to palm, fingers interlocked. It feels almost too natural for Christen, who has never really been one for handholding. Tobin’s cool hand sits in hers perfectly though, reassuring and a grounding weight to remind Christen that she’s there right in front of her.

“I think you’re hot,” Tobin says seriously, like they’re talking about politics or religion. “I think that you’re very hot. Don’t offend my taste in women by saying that you’re not.”

Christen blushes, unable to look away from Tobin’s determined stare even though she wants to bury her face in her hands and maybe disappear forever.

“So yeah, I helped you get yourself off and it was incredibly hot and sexy,” Tobin adds, almost as an afterthought. “But I already thought those things about you. So even though that’s what made me like you, it wasn’t for the obvious reasons.”

Christen is blushing too hard to think about that anymore.

“So you’ve liked me for a while then,” she says for clarification.

“Yeah,” Tobin says, squeezing her hand. “I have.”

“So I have to ask you something but I don’t want to offend you,” Christen says tentatively.

“You won’t,” Tobin reassures me. “I want you to be able to ask me anything.”

It takes a while for Christen to phrase it as best as she can, so she doesn’t hurt Tobin’s feelings.

“Did you ever try to steer me away from Kelley for selfish reasons?”

“No,” Tobin says firmly. “I would never.”

“I wouldn’t blame you if you did.”

“I only ever thought that Kelley wasn’t good for you for reasons that have nothing to do with me and everything to do with you,” Tobin insists. “I know that she’s your best friend and I respect that, but I don’t think that she would be a good girlfriend to you and that’s all I ever wanted you to know. I would never try to sway you one way or another because of my own feelings.”

“Okay,” Christen says, breathing a little easier now that she feels like she has all of the information. “Okay. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome,” Tobin says. “You can ask me anything, Chris. That’s what I’m here for.”

“I feel stupid for coming here,” Christen confesses.

“Why?” Tobin asks.

“Because I drove so far just to hear something that Kelley could have told me,” Christen says reluctantly, unwilling to reveal herself to Tobin but wanting to be honest with her about her feelings. She’s spent long enough repressing them that it feels important to get it all out while she can. “And you probably have better things to do than listen to me cry and answer stupid questions.”

“They’re not stupid,” Tobin says stubbornly. “If they’re important to you, they’re important to me.”
It’s reassuring, touching Christen in a way she didn’t expect to be touched with so few and such simple words.

“Thank you,” she says, too full of emotion to say more.

Tobin smiles then, eyes all crinkly and so honest that Christen can’t help it when she unwinds their hands from each other to ask her next question.

“I didn’t really think this through, but I guess I’m sleeping on the couch,” she says.

“No,” Tobin says before Christen can move. “You’re staying here.”

“Um,” Christen says hesitantly, but Tobin clarifies.

“I’ll stay with Allie or on the couch,” she says. “But I’m not going to make you take the couch if you don’t have to.”

“I don’t want to put you out.”

“Trust me, I want you to sleep in here,” Tobin promises. “Are you tired? Is that why you’re asking?”

“Kind of,” Christen admits. “The drive took a lot out of me, and I always feel tired after crying.”

“Do you have your things?” Tobin asks, and when Christen tells her that they’re in the car, Tobin doesn’t let Christen move an inch away from the bed before taking her keys for herself. Once her things have been brought up, Christen changes while Tobin excuses herself and returns once Christen is ready for bed. She’s carrying a third glass of water for Christen – she’d finished off the second while Tobin was fetching her things – and a pack of Poptarts that she carefully opens before handing one to Christen keeping the other for herself.

“I have to ask,” Tobin says, as Christen eats around the edges of the frosting while leaning back into soft pillows. “You said that you like me.”

Christen goes pink and swallows hard, her throat dry from the pastry.

“That’s not a question,” she says thickly.

“I’m wondering if you really do,” Tobin says, and for the first time all night she sounds about as small as Christen felt when she arrived. “And if you’re really over Kelley, or if I have to worry about her.”

Christen realizes that it might be her time to step up and share her feelings, instead of leaving that to Tobin.

“I haven’t liked Kelley for a while now,” she explains, holding the Poptart but not eating it. “I didn’t want to admit it because it felt like failure. She didn’t like me back but she was trying, and I felt like I needed to see it through to the end.”

Tobin nods patiently.

“I do like you though,” Christen says, feeling her cheeks grow warm as she looks at Tobin who had folding her legs into each other as she sits on the foot of the bed, turned around to face Christen. “I mean, anyone would like you. You’re an easy person to like.”

Tobin, who is smiling kindly, just shakes her head.
“I don’t care about anyone,” she says. “I only care about you.”

“So what does this mean?” Christen, hating the way she needs to know.

“Whatever you want it to,” Tobin answers with a shrug. “I’ll take anything you want to give me.”

She says it so honestly, so heart wrenchingly that Christen feels herself melting from the sweetness of it all.

“I think I need some time,” Christen says, hoping that Tobin understands. “Just to mentally deal with all of this. See if I can do it.”

“That’s fine,” Tobin says, because of course she’s perfect enough to understand. “You take your time, do whatever you need to. Do what makes you feel okay.”

“I’m sorry,” Christen says, a little embarrassed. “I feel like I went about this the wrong way.”

“Luckily for you,” Tobin tells her, “there’s no right or wrong way.”

Christen eats her Poptart in peace, thinking about how much she’s missed Tobin and how she can’t believe how well they know each other. It feels like just yesterday they were meeting for the first time, but it also feels like time has stretched on for an eternity while they slowly learned to understand each other.

“Can I ask for something?” Christen asks, hating how needs she sounds but unable to deny herself the luxury of asking while Tobin is right in front of her.

“Whatever you want,” Tobin says.

Christen isn’t sure how to ask for it, so she just reaches her arms towards Tobin who thankfully takes the hint almost immediately. She wipes her fingers on her shirt hem before crawling up the bed on her knees, almost falling into Christen with the force of her body. She’s warm and solid in Christen’s arms, and the tightness of the hug makes her almost feel like everything is going to be okay.

The way she holds her makes Christen never want to be anywhere else.

“On a scale from one to ten,” Tobin says, voice muffled by the side of Christen’s head as she nuzzles closer, “how okay would you be with me never letting go?”

“Like a thousand,” Christen says with a deep, contented sigh. “Don’t leave me.”

“I’d never,” Tobin swears, clutching Christen close. “I’m not going anywhere.”

Christen thinks she falls asleep while they’re still holding each other, but it happens so quickly that she can’t be sure.
When Christen wakes up in the morning, she is both relieved and disappoint to find that she is alone. Part of her wonders what it might be like to wake up with Tobin next to her, but the other part of her knows that it probably for the best that that didn’t happen. Despite that, she finds herself needing to see Tobin, needing to be reassured that everything between them is okay.

Because Christen drove way too many hours to track her down, to interrogate her, to cry in front of her, and to force her to talk about something that she very obviously didn’t want to talk about. Because Christen is giving up on Kelley for this, admitting failure and admitting to herself that she may have played a part in how things derailed between them so quickly and completely. Because Christen admitted that she likes Tobin, that she feels for her, and even thought Tobin had returned the sentiment, it had been very sadly and Christen is worrying that perhaps she’s changed her mind between then and now. After all, Christen isn’t very pretty when she cries. Because even though Christen woke up without Tobin, she doesn’t know how long Tobin stayed there and judging by Tobin’s propensity for falling asleep at the drop of a hat, the possibility that Tobin fell asleep there is far higher than Christen is comfortable with.

So Christen needs to make sure that everything is okay with Tobin. She needs to make sure that nothing has changed, and they still stand were they did last night.

Thankfully, she doesn’t have to search very far. Tobin is standing in the kitchen with her back to Christen as she sticks her head into the refrigerator. She doesn’t emerge by the time Christen rounds the counter, and it’s impossible not to smile as Tobin hums a vaguely familiar tune while tapping her bare feet against the floor.

“Hey,” Christen says, a bit unsure and praying that Tobin can confirm that last night ended on the positive note that Christen is hoping for.

When Tobin straightens up, a container of yogurt clutched tight in her hand, her beaming smile and crinkly eyes begin to ease any doubts Christen might have had on where they stand together. She closes the door and sets the yogurt on the counter but then immediately picks it back up again, like her hands are itching for something to do.

“Hey,” Tobin says quickly, using her free hand to run her fingers through her hair, knuckles getting caught on tangles that make her wince just a little bit. “How’d you sleep?”

“Fine,” Christen says with a shrug, feeling awkward as she stands in the middle of the kitchen. “I didn’t kick you out of your own bed, did I?”

“Nah,” Tobin says, shaking her head and traveling across the kitchen to pull a spoon from a drawer. “I crashed with Allie, but it’s fine. You were tired.”

“I still feel bad,” Christen says, cheeks beginning to turn red.

Tobin walks closer, spoon and yogurt held in the same hand that dangles down at her side while the other reaches up, resting on Christen’s cheek. The palm of her hand is cool against Christen’s burning cheek, and it feels good. It manages to calm her, ground her, and tell her that no matter what happens between them, it’s all going to be okay. Tobin isn’t going anywhere, and as long as Christen stays with her, she can have this peace and this sense of ease that Tobin gives her.

“Is this okay?” Tobin asks quietly.
Her response gets caught in her throat and Christen doesn’t want to nod in case Tobin’s hand leaves her, so instead she forces herself to look Tobin in the eye and hope that it’s enough to reassure Tobin that yes, this is okay.

Thankfully, Tobin seems to understand what Christen is trying to wordlessly communicate, and she smiles before speaking again.

“Don’t feel bad,” Tobin tells her. “You’re here, and that’s more than I could have asked for. I’ll sleep in Allie’s room every night if it means that you’re here.”

Christen blushes even harder as Tobin pulls her hand away slowly, fingertips dragging as she goes.

“What do you want for breakfast?” Tobin asks. “I don’t know what we have, but we could always go out for something if you really want to.”

“Anything is fine,” Christen says, thinking of the day she has in front of her. She needs to get back to school, see if she can make it to a study session later in the afternoon and still squeeze in a few solid hours of studying. “I kind of was hoping to be able to get on the road soon, though.”

There’s a nearly imperceptible fall in Tobin’s expression, and when Christen notices it, she wonders when exactly she started reading her so closely and when she got so good at it.

“That’s fine,” Tobin says, nodding in understanding. “You told me that you’ve got finals next week, right? So you’re probably trying to study as much as you can.”

“Sorry,” Christen finds herself saying. “I know I just got here, but you probably want me out of your hair already so it all works out.”

“Nah,” Tobin says, shaking her head emphatically. “No, I like it when you’re all in my hair.”

Something about the phrasing has Christen relaxing all the way, letting go of the tension in her neck and letting out a soft giggle.

“Come on,” Tobin says, motioning for Christen to follow her to the refrigerator. “Let’s find something for us to eat for breakfast. You want some yogurt too?”

Christen looks down at the flavor that Tobin’s been holding onto, and wrinkles her nose.

“Blueberry?” she asks. “No thanks.”

Tobin laughs, tossing her hair back behind her.

“I’ll let you steal some of Allie’s raspberry,” Tobin compromises.

“Better,” Christen says with a smile.

“Alright,” Tobin says, digging in the fridge. “No to blueberry yogurt, yes to raspberry. Noted.”

When it comes time for Christen to leave, she’s a little surprised that she hasn’t seen Allie yet. Aside from opening the door for her, Allie hasn’t made an appearance at all, which seems very uncharacteristic of her. When she asks Tobin about her roommate’s whereabouts, Tobin just shrugs it off with a slightly sheepish expression.

“I might have bribed her to stay away,” she confesses as Christen gets into her car. “I didn’t want her
teasing you or anything, so I told her to go on a run and gave her ten bucks to get the fancy coffee she likes.”

“Why would she tease me?” Christen asks.

“Not because you’ve done anything to be teased for,” Tobin says quickly. “Sorry, I worded that wrong – she’d make fun of me.”

“Why?” Christen asks again, and with the way she’s sitting down low in her seat while Tobin leans against the car door above her, she suddenly feels small and silly, all of her insecurities flooding back in and whispering that she never should have come at all.

Of course, before those thoughts can take root, Tobin is stomping all over them and destroying them, reassuring Christen that coming back was more than worth the risk.

“Because,” she says, leaning down. “Because I’ve had this big, fat, giant crush on you for months now, and you ended up being the one to make a move. She’s going to laugh at me for days because of this.”

“I don’t want her to laugh at you,” Christen says, frowning.

“I can handle it,” Tobin reassures her. “Don’t worry – I’m used to it. Besides, it comes from a place of love. It’s how Allie shows me that she loves me.”

Christen is still skeptical.

“Besides,” Tobin continues, her eyes sparking even in the cloudy mid-morning humidity. “You make it worth it. I’d let her tease me forever if it means having you in my life.”

With that, Tobin leans down, hands on her knees for balance as she squats, and makes direct eye contact with Christen who finds herself not even wanting to look away.

“Sorry if this is too much for you,” Tobin says, and Christen wishes she’d stop apologizing. Maybe she needs to watch her reactions more and stop acting like a frightened little girl who is in danger of bolting at any second. She just wants Tobin to understand that even if she’s awful at showing how into this she is – and she’s only awful at it because she’s terrified that it’s all going to go to hell before it can even begin, that Tobin will change her mind or reveal that she never really liked Christen at all or end up having someone else that she’d rather be with or end up unable to commit – that she is very, very, very into this. Christen’s mind is already running away with ideas and fantasies of them being together, of Tobin holding her hand and telling Christen how much she wants to be together and meeting each others families and figuring out how to make this work long term despite the distance.

Christen realizes that she’s been so busy daydreaming about their potential future together that she’s missed what Tobin has been saying. Tobin is looking at her straight on, eyebrows drawing together in confusion as she chews on her bottom lip, looking adorably apprehensive and completely out of character.

“Sorry,” Christen says hastily. “What did you say?”

“I was just telling you that I’m sorry if I’m being too much for you,” Tobin says, as though she isn’t the slightest bit annoyed that Christen wasn’t listening. “I’d hoped that maybe one day I’d get my shit together enough to tell you how I felt about you, but I didn’t want to do that while you were still figuring things out with Kelley, you know? I felt like that wouldn’t be fair, to tell you that I like you while you were unavailable. So if you need me to calm down or slow down, just tell me. Because
I’m trying to not overwhelm you, but it’s hard.”

Tobin looks like she’s struggling to get all of this out, and Christen finds her heart clenching tight at the thought that maybe it’s not easy for Tobin to be honest and open with her about this. She prays that it’s because she means something special to Tobin and not because she means so little to her that it takes tremendous effort to make all of this up.

“You’re not overwhelming me,” Christen says, soft and earnest. “I mean, I’m a little overwhelmed, but not because of you.”

“Why, then?” Tobin asks curiously.

Christen wonders if Tobin’s thighs hurt from squatting awkwardly for so long.

Really, her mind is wandering because she doesn’t want to tell Tobin that she’s overwhelmed by her own feelings, but she swallows hard a few times and prepares her words over and over until she’s happy with what she’s going to say, aware that Tobin waits patiently the entire time.

“I like you a lot,” Christen says, staring at Tobin’s bottom lip so that she doesn’t have to maintain direct eye contact. “More than I thought I did. And that’s a lot for me to handle. I was prepared to let things with Kelley die out completely, because they already were dying, and then hang around and wait for someone to come and change my life the way I always imagined they would. But you’ve already changed my life. You’ve already come along and been the person I’ve wanted. In the back of my head I was thinking that if I wasn’t meant to be with Kelley, then I’d eventually find someone else who would like me back and want to be with me. That’s not easy to find, you know? Not when it’s real, at least. But I like you and think about being with you, and you say that you like me. So it’s overwhelming, to think that I might have that already.”

Tobin doesn’t say anything, so Christen raises her gaze and sees genuine shock and tenderness in Tobin’s eyes.

“Was that too much?” Christen asks nervously, already regretting what she said.

“No,” Tobin says, her tone hushed and her expression one of awe. It’s worrying Christen, who is convinced that she’s said more than Tobin wants to hear and that it’s all downhill from here since she’s exposed herself as someone who’s already a sucker for a girl that she’s never even kissed, a girl that she’s never been on a date with, a girl who is way too cool and gorgeous for Christen.

But then without faltering even slightly, Tobin leans forward to press a kiss to Christen’s cheek.

“That was just enough,” Tobin says, pulling away with the largest smile on her face, leaving behind a warm, pleasant, lingering sensation on Christen’s face. “You really think about being with me?”

Christen wants to keep Tobin smiling, wants to tell her yes, that she wants to be with her without a second thought. She doesn’t want to lie though, so she takes a deep breath and forges onward.

“I would like to be with you,” she says carefully. “Very much. I do think about it. But I also think about you not telling me about Kelley, and being worried that there are other things you aren’t telling me. Or that there are things in the future you won’t tell me.”

“There’s nothing else I’m keeping from you,” Tobin says absolutely, like it’s the gospel truth. “And I promise to never keep things from you in the future, unless I’m planning on surprising you with something good.”

“I don’t like surprises,” Christen warns.
“No surprises at all, then,” Tobin says resolutely. “I’ll tell you the good things too, like when I’m buying you flowers or diamond earrings.”

Christen blushes, not knowing how to respond to that.

“I’m kidding about the diamond earrings,” Tobin says, watching Christen closely. “At least, I’m kidding for now. Unless you don’t like diamonds.”

“I think everyone likes diamonds,” Christen manages to get out.

Tobin grins.

Christen’s phone vibrates from where it sits in her cup holder, and her eyes immediately flash over to the illuminated screen. She’s got a text from Kelley waiting for her, but what she notices is that it’s been almost twenty minutes since they walked outside of the apartment. Twenty minutes have passed and Christen is supposed to already be on the road, but she can’t bring herself to regret the conversation they’ve been having since Tobin had insisted on carrying her things down for her. She kinds of wishes she could stay and talk with Tobin, but she knows that it’s just not a possibility. School is waiting for her and there is no time to waste.

“I don’t want to leave,” Christen says in a small voice, wondering if there’s a way for time to warp so that this goodbye could stretch on for hours. She feels like maybe she hasn’t taken advantage of their time together, and that thought almost panics her.

It’s almost like Tobin can tell, with the way she places a hand on Christen’s knee – presumably for balance because she’s been half squatting for what feels like hours now, but her cool palm is still a reassuring weight against Christen’s heated skin regardless – and smiles at her.

“I don’t want you to leave either,” Tobin says, like she’s confessing a great secret. And maybe that is all a great secret, something to be held close to the chest and treasured, just for the two of them. Not because they don’t want anyone else to know, but because it’s too special to share.

The questions sit on the top of Christen’s tongue – when will they see each other again? When is too soon to visit next? When will their schedules line up, and is Tobin just as eager to plan for the next time as Christen is?

Thankfully, she doesn’t have to muster the courage to ask any of these questions because Tobin does it for her.

“When you’re done with finals, we’ll plan something,” Tobin promises, squeezing Christen’s knee tight. “Okay? We’ll look at our schedules and make something work.”

Christen isn’t even aware of how wet her eyes get until Tobin reaches up with the thumb of her other hand to brush at the soft and delicate skin right underneath her eye, smearing a single tear caught on her lower eyelashes.

“I don’t mean to cry,” Christen says hastily, rubbing at her eyes. Tobin just smiles in understanding, tangling her hand in one of Christen’s.

“It’s okay,” Tobin says patiently. “Cry if you need to. Just promise me that you’ll think about letting me see you again soon.”

“Of course,” Christen says immediately. “I mean, I need some time to think. But I really don’t want to leave you, and I really want to see you again soon.”
When Tobin rises slightly and leans forward just enough to press her soft lips to the curve of Christen’s cheek, Christen thinks that maybe Tobin has found a way to mess with time and give them more time together. It’s like everything stops and the only thing that exists in the world is the simple kiss, Tobin’s sweet lips brushing against Christen’s cheek in a manner that’s heartbreakingly delicate and careful. Christen’s eyes flutter shut, her eyelashes wet with tears of an emotion that she can’t quite name just yet, and she prays that it never has to end.

Like all good things, though, it ends too quickly and Christen is left feeling empty yet incredibly full at the same time. She feels like she’s bursting but there is a hollow feeling in her chest, a black hole of sorts that Tobin is about to leave behind when they finally part ways.

“Call me,” Tobin makes Christen promise when she straightens up and stretches, her body clearly aching from having been at Christen’s level for so long. “At least text me, so I know you get home safe. Don’t make me ask Kelley if you’re in one piece when you get back.”

Christen can see in Tobin’s face that she’s unsure of how to go about things that involve Kelley, not sure if she’s allowed to reference her as casually as she just did, but Christen shrugs off the small pangs of hurt than come along with it and resolves to be an adult about this. If she’s going to do this, think about being with Tobin despite the knowledge of what was kept from her when it shouldn’t have been, she’s going to have to be okay with the fact that Kelley is likely to be a constant presence in their life.

She can do that, she thinks.

“I’ll call you,” Christen promises.

“I miss you already,” Tobin says, happy but soft. “I wish you didn’t have to go.”

“I miss you too,” Christen answers, and the sense of wholeness that she feels inside is worth everything that it took to get where she is.

It isn’t easy to close the door and wave goodbye, and Christen might let a few tears fall as she drive off, but she thinks that it might be worth it.

She calls Tobin as soon as she pulls onto the highway, and when Tobin answers on the third ring with a fond but excited hello, she laughs through the wetness and thinks that yeah, this is definitely worth it all.

* *

The next two weeks feel like torture to Christen, and when she tells Tobin this in a moment of midnight bravery while driving home from the library the night before her first final (Tobin insists on staying on the phone with her the entire time, irrationally worried that Christen will fall asleep at the wheel or something as equally awful), Tobin reassures Christen that she feels the same way.

“I know, it’s awful,” Tobin tells Christen through a yawn. Christen knows that Tobin is tired, that she spent the entire weekend traveling and playing in an away game – a game that Alex had been nice enough to watch with Christen, claiming that she wanted a chance to look at the team she hoped to be drafted by one day – that had left her mildly jetlagged and physically exhausted. Christen knows that Tobin is happy with the win her team has returned with and that Tobin wants to go to bed, but is also concerned with Christen’s safety. It makes Christen’s chest feel tight as Tobin murmurs into the phone, and it’s easy to picture Tobin sleepily sprawled out across her bed with her phone pressed to her face and her eyes fighting to stay open. “Listen, I play again this weekend. Do you maybe want to come down for the day? Do a dinner afterwards?”
Christen’s heart skips a beat as Tobin’s tongue drags over the words, slurring together with sleep.

“I’ll see,” Christen says softly, more than thrilled with the idea but terrified of what it would mean for them. “I don’t like the idea of driving back and forth in one day.”

“You can stay over the night before,” Tobin offers through another yawn, this one more massive than the last. “If you want to.”

Christen doesn’t know what to say to that, already thinking about what would it be like to spend an entire weekend with Tobin. Just the two of them, no Kelley or Alex there to interfere. Sure, Allie lives with Tobin, but Christen has a sneaking suspicion that Tobin knows how to get rid of her when she needs to.

“Can we talk about it tomorrow?” Christen asks. “When you’re not delusional from lack of sleep and actually know what you’re asking?”

The line goes quiet as Christen pulls into the parking spot in front of her apartment, and she begins to think that Tobin has fallen asleep and she might as well end the call. Deep and steady breathing is all she hears, and as much as she appreciates Tobin staying on the line with her despite the late hour and her exhaustion, she doesn’t want to become the kind of person who refuses to hang up merely on principle.

“I always know what I’m asking of you,” Tobin says as Christen is just about to hang up. “I want you here for as long as you’ll stay.”

Christen swallows hard, already planning how she can get away with driving down Friday after her last final and stay with Tobin for as long as they can stand. Of course, that would require Christen deciding to forgive Tobin for everything and Christen isn’t quite sure that she can do that yet. She doesn’t want to cheapen whatever they both feel by leading Tobin on when she isn’t quite sure that she can do this, can devote herself to Tobin entirely, but she does want to spend as much time together as possible and it seems like driving to stay with her is the only way to make that happen.

“Let’s sleep on it,” Christen compromises. “We’ll talk about it in the morning.”

“Okay, fine,” Tobin responds, and Christen nearly rolls her eyes at the reluctance in Tobin’s tone. “Are you home yet?”

“Yeah,” Christen answers, getting out of the car and locking the door behind her. “I’ve just got to walk inside.”

“Alright,” Tobin says. “Well hurry on up so I don’t have to feel bad when I fall asleep on you.”

Christen smiles to herself, and rambles on about her plans for the rest of finals week while Tobin makes little noises of acknowledgement into the phone. When she’s finally in her room, sneaking past Kelley’s room the way she has been ever since she returned from Tobin’s the second time around, she tells Tobin that it’s okay to hang up.

“Miss you, though,” Tobin says sleepily.

“I’m right here,” Christen tells her.

“I know,” Tobin says, a slight whine to her voice that Christen has never heard before. “I still miss you.”

Christen bites back a smile and steadies her breathing before replying.
“I miss you too.”

The only reply is more deep breathing, and somehow Christen just knows that Tobin has fallen asleep. So she hangs up and goes to bed, dreaming of screaming stadiums and Tobin’s smile and herself in a jersey with a certain name printed on the back.

The next morning, Christen wakes up bright and early for her exam. She takes the time to prepare herself a leisurely breakfast while poring over her notes, and so she doesn’t notice that Kelley has entered the room until she’s standing in front of her and clearing her throat.

“Tobin’s texted you…three times,” Kelley says, squinting down at Christen’s phone as it rests face up on the kitchen table, off to the side from where Christen’s arranged all of her study materials.

“Oh,” Christen says quickly, reaching out to lock the screen so it fades to black before flipping the phone over. “Sorry?”

“Why are you sorry?” Kelley asks curiously, pulling out the chair across from Christen and watching her closely.

“Sorry that you saw,” Christen says, feeling self-conscious.

“I know that you talk to her,” Kelley says, a half-amused frown making its way onto her face. “You don’t have to pretend like you don’t.”

“Sorry,” Christen repeats.

Kelley leans forward, forcing Christen’s eyes on hers.

“You know, she texted me last night,” Kelley says conversationally.

Christen’s heart goes cold, clenching uncomfortably tight at the idea of Tobin talking to Kelley. Her mind is running wild in seconds, thinking of worst case scenarios including them hiding more from her or sneaking around behind her back, despite the fact that she knows she’s being ridiculous.

“Wanted to make sure you go home okay,” Kelley goes on. “I guess she was worried about you? I mean, I heard you come in late last night so I told her you were safe and sound.”

Christen stares down at her notes, blushing brightly at the thought of Tobin checking in to make sure that she got home okay.

“I know that you talk to her,” Kelley says, uncharacteristically gentle and softly earnest. “I don’t know what’s going on, and maybe we’re not at a place where we can talk about it yet, but I’m happy if you’re happy. You don’t need to hide that from me.”

Christen bites her lip before forcing herself to look up at Kelley and smile a little.

“Thanks,” she says quietly. “Thank you.”

The “Kell” that she uses so frequently sits on the tip of her tongue, not feeling quite right at the moment. The two of them have barely talked in the past week, silently agreeing that they need some time to work past what happened between them. It’s proven to be difficult for Christen, going from depending on Kelley for nearly everything to not having her for anything, but Tobin has proven a good shoulder to lean on in the meantime. So good, in fact, that Christen isn’t sure she’ll be stopping any time soon, even after she patches up things with Kelley. She supposes that maybe that’s what trusting somebody is about, and she’s trying to learn to trust Tobin the way she wants to.
It looks like Kelley is swallowing back questions, none of them coming forth for Christen to hear. Kelley ends up not saying anything else as she gets up, pushing the chair back in under the table in a way that she never would on her own. Usually Christen has to yell at her to do it, and even then it’s never a sure thing.

Once Kelley is gone, Christen checks her texts, smiling at her screen the entire time.

*You’ve studied plenty, you’ll be fine! I know you, smarty pants. Don’t overthink it and just roll with it. You’ll be fine.*

*Can I call you afterwards to talk about you coming down for the game?*

*I hope you don’t feel like I’m pressuring you, I just really want you to be there! I also kind of have a present for you, if that’s any motivation.*

Christen resolves right then and there to call Tobin back the second she gets a chance and ask if it’s okay for her to stay the entire weekend.

She shouldn’t be surprised when Tobin enthusiastically says that it’s more than okay, but she kind of is. She’s still getting used to this, but in the meantime she’s enjoying it far more than she thought she would.

*Christen drives down immediately after her last final on a Friday, a grin on her face as she slides into her car, phone already ringing as she waits for Tobin to pick up. They talk for nearly the entire first hour of the trip until Tobin has to go to practice, promising that she’ll be ready and waiting when Christen arrives that evening. She keeps her word, and upon Christen texting her that she’s pulled up in front of her apartment, Tobin makes her way to the car in record time and instead of opening Christen’s door to greet her, she slides into the passenger seat.*

“Hi,” Tobin says, all of her very straight and white teeth on display as she smiles wide at Christen.

“Hi,” Christen says, suddenly losing the anxious feeling she’d been holding onto the entire drive. She’d been nervous about making the trip, nervous about seeing Tobin and thinking that she has to make a decision about this. They can’t stay in this weird form of limbo together, both having feelings for the other but not quite doing anything about it. Christen needs to figure out how she wants to proceed, how to figure out of Tobin is worth all the trouble she caused Christen over the school year, how to go about telling Tobin what her decision is when she finally makes it.

She thinks she knows how she’s going to go about this, but she wants to take just a little bit longer with Tobin to be sure.

“Allie is being annoying, so I figured I’d spare you her company and take you out to dinner,” Tobin announces, tucking her damp hair behind her ears. She looks fresh and clean, bare and exposed in a way that touches Christen in a way she didn’t expect. It’s almost unfair, the way she can smell the water and soap lingering on Tobin’s skin. It makes Christen curious, but she pushes those thoughts from her mind for the moment and clears her throat before responding.

“I’m a little gross,” she says carefully, fairly sure that she smells awful and looks greasy, a consequence of barely getting any sleep the past few nights and spending too many hours in a car. “If you’re okay with being seen with me like this, I don’t mind going to dinner.”

“You look great,” Tobin says dismissively, eyes trailing the visible length of Christen’s body. “Don’t be silly.”
Christen blushes but merely puts the car in reverse as Tobin begins rattling off a list of places they can go for dinner. They end up deciding on a burger place – Christen is a little surprised that Tobin hasn’t turned into a burger yet – before heading back to the apartment. There had been a discussion about grabbing ice cream for dessert first, but Christen had accidentally let slip how few hours of sleep she’d gotten the night before after yawning for what felt like ten minutes straight and Tobin had insisted that ice cream could wait until the next day. Instead they camp out on the couch in front of the tv, scrolling through Netflix for something that they both don’t mind watching.

“So I’ll bunk with Allie tonight, and you can have my room,” Tobin says so casually that Christen almost doesn’t even register it.

“No way,” Christen says, shaking her head. “Tobin, you can’t keep letting me kick you out of your own room.”

“Well, I’m not going to make you stay with Allie,” Tobin says reasonably.

“You know what I mean,” Christen says, moving a leg from where it’s curled up underneath her to poke her toes into the side of Tobin’s thigh. “I can take the couch – I’ve done it before. It’s very comfortable.”

“There’s no reason you should sleep on a couch if you can have a bed,” Tobin says stubbornly. “Listen, I’m serious. I don’t mind staying with Allie. I can handle her bitching about it the next day.”

“Yeah, but still,” Christen protests weakly.

“Also,” Tobin says, glancing over at Christen with an abashed expression, “we can’t really share a bed. So it’s not like compromising is going to work. Just let me win this one, okay? You’ll be winning too, sleeping in my awesome bed.”

“Why can we share yet?” Christen asks curiously, knowing that she’d be mildly uncomfortable with that situation but wondering why Tobin would be.

“Because I don’t think you’d be okay with it,” Tobin says, and Christen wonders whether Tobin has learned to read minds or what. “You might say that you like me, but I don’t think you have any idea how much I like you. I want to kiss you, Christen. I want to hold you in the middle of the night and stay that way until we wake up. And I hate to say this, but I don’t know how much self-control I have. I can’t promise that I wouldn’t accidentally do something that you’d be uncomfortable with. I’ll always try to be careful and never do anything you don’t want me to, but I just don’t think you know how much I want to touch you. So I think that for now, we shouldn’t sleep together, no matter what. Even if we promise to stay on our own sides of the bed, I can’t guarantee that I won’t wake up half on top of you, and I don’t want you waking up to that if you don’t want to. Does that make sense?”

Christen just nods, pulling up her knees and tucking her chin into them as she looks at Tobin with wide eyes, trying her best to understand.

“Okay,” she says. “You’re right. I don’t think I’m at a point where I’d be okay with that.”

“So you’ll let me stay with Allie now?” Tobin asks, a smile pulling as the corners of her mouth as she feigns exasperation. Christen smiles reluctantly, nodding as best as she can.

“Yeah, I guess,” she says, rolling her eyes exaggeratedly as she turns to look at the tv. “If you insist.”

“Hey,” Tobin says, reaching out a hand to nudge Christen’s forearm and get her attention.

“What?” Christen asks curiously.
Tobin hesitates and Christen waits patiently, watching as Tobin licks her lips and plays with the neck of her shirt.


“Are you sure?” Christen asks as Tobin’s eyes meet hers for a brief second before darting away.

“Yeah, I’m sure,” Tobin says confidently. “Let’s finish this episode and then I’ll let you go to bed.”

Christen wants to know what Tobin was going to say but she leaves it alone, figuring that if Tobin wanted her to know, she’d tell her.

* 

Tobin has an early morning practice on Saturday, coming into her bedroom early to sneakily collect clothes and her gear bag. It wakes Christen who feels bad about it because Tobin is clearly trying her hardest not to disturb her, but she can’t help but peek through her half-open eyelids and watch as Tobin picks through a pile of clothes stashed in the dark corner of her closet.

“If you put them back where they’re supposed to go, you wouldn’t have to look for them,” Christen mumbles sleepily, feeble rays of sunlight providing the only illumination Tobin has to try and find her things.

“I didn’t mean to wake you!” Tobin whispers loudly, jerking upright and narrowly avoiding hitting her head on a closet shelf. “Shh, go back to bed.”

“Just turn on the light and find your things and go,” Christen says, pulling the covers up higher and letting her eyes close. “What time is it anyway?”

“A quarter to eight,” Tobin says guiltily, flipping on the switch. Christen only sees bright orange through her lids, but ignores it and pulls the covers over her head. “Sorry, I know you wanted to sleep in. I should have gotten everything out of here last night but I forgot.”

“It’s okay,” Christen says, but it’s muffled and she’s not sure if Tobin can hear it through the covers. “I’ll go back to sleep.”

Tobin scrambles around for a couple more minutes before the light switches off, and Christen’s ears strain for the sound of the door clicking closed. It never comes though, and instead she senses more than hears Tobin come crouch down beside her.

“Hey,” Tobin breathes softly, “practice might go past lunch but you’re welcome to anything in the fridge if you get hungry. Or you can go out and get something to eat, you have your car. I’ll leave you my set of keys on the nightstand here, okay?”

“Okay,” Christen says, still under the covers.

“Can I see your pretty face before I go?”

It’s quiet but it still makes Christen blush, eyes snapping open as she pulls the covers down just enough to peer at Tobin’s serene slight smile.

“Pretty?” Christen squeaks out.


They smile at each other for a moment, Christen’s eyes still barely open as she feels the last sands of
sleep cling to her brain.

“Alright,” Tobin says more to herself than Christen. “I’ve got to be off.”

She kisses Christen’s forehead before standing up, and leaves before Christen can pull her back down and ask her to do it again.

Christen ends up driving to have a late breakfast at a coffee shop nearby, Googling nearby places until she finds somewhere that looks like she can camp out with her laptop for a couple of hours while refreshing her classes’ gradebooks just in case grades are posted early. She gets a few texts from Tobin scattered throughout her morning, smiling at each one as she carefully types out replies.

*It’s too early and the sun is too bright. I’d rather be back at the apartment with you.*

*I just woke up, are you jealous?*

*Very much so. Allie’s bed is calling my name. Did you find my keys okay?*

*They were an inch from my face. I threw out the UNC keychain, hope you don’t mind!*

*You’re dead meat when I get back! If I have enough energy after this brutal practice, that is.*

*When do you think you’ll be back? I don’t want you to get home and I’m not there.*

*I’ll have Allie drop me off where you are, send me your location. We can go find somewhere to eat lunch and walk around or something. There’s this place where a ton of people like to walk their dogs and they’ll let you pet them if you’re nice enough.*

*Sounds more than good to me!*

When Tobin gets dropped off at the coffee shop, Christen feels herself needing to hug her. She hasn’t hugged her since she arrived, forgetting to do it since Tobin had gotten in her car instead of greeting her properly, and she finds herself missing the warm embrace of Tobin’s solid arms. Before she can get a chance to do so, though, Allie is shouting her name out of her open windows before Tobin has even undone her seatbelt. Christen walks around to talk to Allie, praying that she doesn’t look half as nervous as she feels.

“Listen,” Allie says seriously. “I’m a very nice person. Easy to get along with. I give great birthday presents and give all my single friends chocolate on Valentine’s Day.”

“Okay,” Christen says unsurely.

“But if you hurt her,” Allie continues, tone hardening as she points in Tobin’s direction, (Tobin just stifles a laugh, shaking her head as she lets herself out of the car) “then you’re going to find out what I’m like when I’m not being nice.”

“Um,” Christen says, a little petrified with fear but also confusion, “okay.”

“You don’t want that,” Allie says, somehow managing to look incredibly intimidating. “You don’t want to know me when I’m not nice.”


Allie turns around to glare at Tobin before whipping her ponytail around to look at Christen again.

“Anyway,” Allie says. “She’s a good person. Do right by her, and she’ll do right by you. She really
does like you, you know. I would never lie to you about that.”

“I know,” Christen says, her voice suddenly feeling choked.

She drives off, leaving Tobin and Christen to walk to each other in her wake.

“Allie doesn’t mean anything by that,” Tobin says dismissively.

“I have hurt a fly before, you know,” Christen tells her.

“I’m sure he deserved it,” Tobin says confidently, and it’s then that Christen can’t wait any longer. She throws herself at Tobin, wrapping her arms around her neck and rising up on her tiptoes slightly. It feels like sweet relief when Tobin responds almost immediately, arms tightening around Christen’s waist and holding her close.

“I missed you,” Christen says into Tobin’s neck. Tobin once again is freshly showered and slightly drier than she was last night, and Christen doesn’t think she’ll ever quite get over the fact that her bed smells just like her skin.

“I missed you too,” Tobin says, a hint of surprise in her tone. “How was your morning? I didn’t want to leave you alone but I kind of didn’t have a choice.”

“It was fine,” Christen says, knowing that Tobin can probably barely understand her as she speaks into the fabric of her shirt collar. “I missed you though. It was kind of nice to wake up to you this morning.”

Tobin doesn’t say anything, instead inhaling sharply and rubbing a hand up and down the length of Christen’s back. It feels good and almost makes Christen forget that they’re standing in a parking lot, and she relaxes into it for a little while before eventually pulling back and falling back onto solid ground.

“Come on,” Christen says to Tobin, motioning to her car. “I want to see the dogs.”

“Of course,” Tobin says, her eye-crinkling smile making an appearance. “Whatever you want.”

So Tobin buys her lunch and then takes her to sit on a bench where they can watch what feels like dozens of dogs pass in front of them. They take turns rating them on a cuteness scale, and Tobin gets offended when Christen rates a scruffy monster a four.

“He looks scary,” Christen explains. “I don’t want that thing in my bed! And he probably sheds a lot.”

“He looks like a sweetheart,” Tobin argues.

“It’s a good thing you don’t have a dog,” Christen thinks aloud. “I don’t even know what you’d pick out.”

“I have good taste, I’ll have you know. On a scale from one to ten, do you know what I’d rate you?” Tobin asks, and it’s bold and makes Christen turn her head away to hide her blushing smile. She wants to ask Tobin what she would rate her, purely for knowledge’s sake, but she’s almost afraid to know the answer.

With evening approaching and neither of them hungry for dinner yet, Tobin asks Christen if they can drive to a little community soccer field not far away.
“I like to come here and just kick around,” Tobin explains, pulling a ball out of her bag. It figures that she’d have one on her at all times, Christen thinks, smiling as she follows Tobin through the open gates and onto the grass. “It gives me extra time with the ball and helps me focus. I know that it’s probably not what you want to be doing, so we don’t have to stay long.”

“It’s okay,” Christen says quietly, watching at Tobin kicks the ball along with her as she walks towards the center of the field. “I don’t mind. I like spending time with you.”

“Yeah?” Tobin asks, looking up at Christen with a cheeky smile on her face. “Huh, I didn’t know that.”

“Stop,” Christen laughs, trying not to turn red as Tobin dumps her bag before dribbling the ball a little way away. Christen walks with Tobin, a few feet away to give her and the ball some space. “You did know that. I wouldn’t be here if I didn’t like spending time with you.”

“I’m going to have to think about what this means,” Tobin says, pretending to look intrigued as she holds back laughter. “You actually like hanging out with me? Even if I’m playing soccer and you’re just standing around looking pretty?”

“Stop,” Christen says, shaking her head and kicking off her sandals, feeling the cool grass on her bare feet. “I’ve hung out with you while you’ve played with the ball. Don’t act like this is some sudden development.”

“Yeah, but now I know that you don’t actually hate me,” Tobin says.

“I never hated you,” Christen says, shaking her head.

“It’s okay if you did,” Tobin says, suddenly serious. “It’s okay if you still hate me. I know that I probably should have told you what happened with Kelley, but I was just too scared too. I was constantly hoping that you’d never know and that we could live life like it never happened. I hope that you’ll be able to forgive me for that one day.”

“Tobin,” Christen says, shaking her head.

“I know, I know,” Tobin says hastily. “I probably don’t deserve your forgiveness. I should know better than to ask for it. I mean, you’ve probably never fucked up in your life. And I’m over here, fucking up all over the place. Liking you while knowing you liked Kelley, not telling you about Kelley, doing whatever we’re doing right now – I’m sorry. I like you a lot and I really hope that that means something to you and that you can look past everything wrong I’ve ever done, but I’ll understand if you can’t.”

“Tobin,” Christen says, thinking that this is the moment. Right now, with a red and orange streaked sky framing Tobin’s frustrated expression, is the moment in which Christen needs to decide. She can’t let them be in limbo anymore. She has to put the both of them out of their misery and make a decision one way or the other.

She can either tell Tobin that she can’t move past everything. That she can’t forgive her, that she can’t do this, that she’s sorry and she’ll face Allie’s wrath if she has to but she just can’t date Tobin.

Or Christen can say yes, she forgives her, and she can move on despite the fact that she’s terrified of this. Christen is terrified to give Tobin the power to break her heart, but she has to decide if it’s a risk she’s willing to take.

Christen has been thinking about this for much longer than she’s been willing to admit, but when she clumsily kicks the ball away from Tobin’s feet and steps closer to her, it seems like it’s been worth
the wait.

It’s slow and Tobin seems to hold her breath as Christen moves as close as she can, eyes closing at the very last second before making contact.

It’s a little scary. Christen kind of feels like she’s flying, her heart racing as she teeters on the edge of risk, waiting to see which way the scale tips. Whether it leans in her favor or not, leaving her feeling either thrilled or nauseated.

Thankfully, the warm press of Tobin’s lips against hers make up her mind for her. She feels excited as she uses her hand to steady herself, lightly latching onto Tobin’s firm bicep and feeling like she’s going to be okay. She feels wild, like she’s taking a shot in the dark here, but like it’s all going to be okay in the end.

And that’s before their lips even start to move.

Once Christen decides that this is worth it, that it feels good enough to not regret, she dives in head first and is more than thankful for the fact that Tobin is there to meet her every step of the way.

Tobin hooks the arm that Christen isn’t holding onto around her waist, reeling her in until their bodies are but a couple of inches apart. Christen kisses her softly, inhaling sharply at the sensation. Tobin’s lips are pillowy and she tastes like the mints Christen had shared with her after their lunch, something that Christen finds out when Tobin breathes through parted lips. It stays relatively chaste but lasts long, lips slotted together and kissing each other until darkness settles around them and Tobin makes a pained noise, her tongue suddenly slipping out to brush along Christen’s bottom lip.

Christen jerks back slowly, trying to keep her cool despite the fact that she’s a little shocked and afraid, afraid that Tobin will judge her for ending the kiss the way she did.

“Sorry,” Christen gasps. “Sorry I just wasn’t – it’s just a lot – I don’t know what I’m – “

“It’s okay,” Tobin says soothingly, rubbing a thumb against Christen’s back through the fabric of her shirt. “I’m sorry. I should be the only one apologizing here. I shouldn’t have done that.”

Christen takes a few steady breaths, aware that Tobin is watching her closely with a small and curious smile.

“I’m okay,” Christen tells Tobin. “I’m okay, I promise. I just – I’m still getting used to this. I didn’t really think past kissing you.”

“You’ve thought about kissing me?” Tobin asks in wonder.

Christen blushes, sure that she’s as red as the sunset that has mostly faded.

“More than I’d like to admit,” she says bashfully.

“Probably not as much as I’ve thought about kissing you,” Tobin says. “I’ve wanted to kiss you since the moment I saw you.”

Christen doesn’t know how to respond to that, so she makes a mental note to ask about it later. Instead, she tells Tobin what she’s been thinking about for the past couple of weeks.

“I like you,” she says, trying to stay strong. “And you like me, and I’m scared. But if you’re willing to be patient with me while I figure this out, I’d like to figure it out with you.”
Tobin starts nodding halfway through, a smile splitting her face in half.

“Whatever you want from me, you can have,” she says earnestly, and Christen wonders how she got so lucky to find Tobin. Tobin, who is so understanding and patient and appreciative. Tobin, who is carefully kissing her once, short but sweet and tender. Tobin, who is now looking at Christen like she holds the world in her eyes.

“I want you,” Christen tells her.

Because it’s true. Tobin is all that she wants, and that’s all that matters.
It turns out that the team Tobin is playing is the one that Ali and Ashlyn belong to, something that Christen only finds out once Allie brings it up the morning of the game.

“Are we still doing lunch with your friends?” Allie asks, leaning against the kitchen counter as she disinterestedly spoons oatmeal into her mouth.

“Oh,” Tobin says, looking carefully at Christen sitting next to her. “I forgot about that.”

“How do you forget about that kind of thing?” Allie wants to know.

Tobin just swings her legs back and forth, her foot brushing against Christen’s ankle a few times.

“I was kind of preoccupied,” she says, avoiding Allie’s eyes as she continues to look at Christen. “With other things.”

“What kind of things?” Allie asks, and Christen feels herself going red, wondering if Allie is truly oblivious or just likes attempting to embarrass Tobin.


Allie just shrugs, a closed smile on her face as she swallows the last of her oatmeal and sets the bowl down in the sink.

“Whatever,” she says. “Are we still going or not?”

“Yeah,” Tobin says, nodding as she picks up her glass of water. “I’ll let you know when I’m ready to go.”

Allie is off to her room after that, and Tobin’s eyes slide over to sheepishly find Christen’s as soon as she’s gone.

“Sorry,” Tobin says. “I totally forgot about them. I’d cancel, but they’ve really been looking forward to it.”

“That’s okay,” Christen says quickly, nodding as she brings her toast to her mouth for another bite. “I’m sorry if me being here made you forget.”

“Don’t be sorry,” Tobin tells her, reaching over to reassuringly run her fingers over the top of Christen’s hand. “I’m glad that you’re here. I’d rather be having lunch with just you, but I don’t want to be rude.”

“We can go,” Christen tells her, not wanting to be the reason that Tobin skips out on lunch with her friends. Besides, she’s kind of looking forward to seeing Ali again. “We’ll have fun, right?”

“Right,” Tobin says, grinning at Christen wildly, her hair still a sleepy mess and her eyes a little droopy. Her and Allie had complained about having to share a bed, Allie claiming that Tobin’s sleeping habits were becoming insufferable. Christen can’t help but find it all rather adorable, despite the fact that she feels bad about being the reason behind them sharing a bed.

“I go have to go back tonight,” Christen says, reminding Tobin of something that she’d tried to bring up in conversation last night. Tobin had changed the subject rather quickly, talking about the upcoming game with an irresistible and infectious brand of excitement that Christen had never
“Don’t remind me,” is Tobin’s immediate response, and Christen holds back a smile as Tobin’s fades.

“I can’t stay,” Christen says softly, leaning in closer to Tobin who instinctively moves towards Christen. “I have to go back to school and pack some clothes so I can go home and visit my parents. I haven’t seen them since winter break.”

Tobin groans into the pile of grapes on her plate.

“I know, I know,” Tobin mopes. “I don’t want you to leave, though.”

“I’m still here for most of today, though,” Christen tells her. “You still have me for a little while longer.”

Tobin suddenly looks up, shocking Christen into backing away a few inches.

“I have you,” she says slowly, trying the words out on her tongue as she begins smiling again. “Here with me.”

“Yeah,” Christen confirms, nodding. “And listen, I don’t want to leave either.”

She blushes as she says it, but she feels like it’s important to communicate.

“But I can come visit whenever, okay? My parents only live a few hours from here and if our schedules match up, I’ll come here to see you.”

“I don’t want it to be about our schedules matching up,” Tobin explains, uncharacteristically stubborn. “I want to see you all the time. You don’t know how badly I don’t want to let you go right now.”

“I’m not going anywhere right now,” Christen tries to reassure her. “I’m not going anywhere anytime soon – not really. I’ll be here whenever I can.”

“I’m serious about you,” Tobin says importantly. “About this, about us. I want it so badly.”

“I do too,” Christen says, and then Tobin is leaning over and tugging her in close, making it easy for Christen to hug her and receive a pair of arms wrapped tightly around her in return.

“Come back to me,” Tobin says, and Christen wonders if Tobin is just a natural at this, or if it has something to do with her. If Tobin is so comfortable with the idea of wanting someone, of knowing how to act when around them, with the idea of being with someone to the point where you refuse to let them go.

Because that’s what Tobin is doing at the moment. She’s holding on for dear life, refusing to let Christen go.

Christen thinks it might be her, though. That she has something to do with the fact that Tobin is being open and honest with her about what she wants, and how she only wants her.

“I will,” Christen promises. “As soon as I can. Give me a few days with my parents and tell me when you’ll be in town, and I promise I’ll come back to you.”

“You promise?”
Tobin’s voice is muffled in Christen’s hair, and Christen almost shivers at the sudden closeness she feels. Of course there is a physical closeness there that they’ve only experienced a few times – hugs aren’t unfamiliar to them, they’ve had a few scattered here and there and when looking back Christen should have realized how much more there was to every one than a simple hello or goodbye – but the emotional intimacy is new and has Christen’s heart rate going through the roof as her hands press against the soft cotton of Tobin’s t-shirt. There’s solid stretches of muscle underneath her palms and fingers, firm and unyielding, just like Tobin’s presence in Christen’s life.

“I promise.”

It shakes something in Christen, making her clench her fingers in the cotton and tears appear in the corners of her eyes. She closes them shut, suddenly overcome with something overwhelming, and the way Tobin responds by holding on even tighter and breathing shallowly against her neck makes Christen understand exactly where Tobin is coming from. Leaving is going to hurt like hell, and Christen momentarily contemplates living off of only the clothes she’d packed for the weekend so she doesn’t have to drive away later, before losing herself in Tobin’s embrace and inhaling deeply to steady herself and keep from crying.

It’s not easy, and when Tobin goes to pull away, Christen digs her fingers into taut muscle to wordlessly tell her not to move.

“Okay,” Tobin says gently, thumbs brushing little arches against Christen’s spine. “Okay. I’m not going anywhere.”

Christen isn’t sure how long she holds onto Tobin (Tobin holds her back just as much, and knowing that the need to be close isn’t one-sided breathes new air into Christen’s lungs while managing to take her breath away at the same time), but eventually her arms grow sore and she reluctantly recognizes that they can’t stay like this all day. They have a lunch to go to and Tobin has a game to play in, and Christen has to pack up her things so she can leave once the game is over. It’s stressful, thinking about needing to get back in her car and drive the long hours back to school while Tobin stays in the little apartment that somehow has started to feel more familiar than the one Christen left behind, but Christen tries to take it all one step at a time.

Pulling away from Tobin is an unwelcome but highly necessary first step.

Letting Tobin take care of their breakfast dishes is the second step, and letting her guide Christen to her bedroom with a soft touch to the elbow is the third. Christen has to pack and Tobin sits calmly on the bed while she does, and it reminds her of the first time she had to leave this apartment.

“So, lunch with Ashlyn and Ali,” Christen says, trying to pick out an outfit for later.

Tobin hums in acknowledgment.

“Are they on good terms?”

Tobin shrugs.

“Hell if I know. I don’t talk to them too much, but Ashlyn reached out about meeting up before the game so I didn’t give it too much thought,” she explains.

“Last I heard from Alex, they’d decided to move in together and try to be grown-ups about the whole thing,” Christen says, cringing at how it sounds like she’s gossiping. It’s not her intention, but she is curious to know how it will affect their lunch.

“Yeah, I heard that too,” Tobin says. “I don’t know, I don’t know everything going on between
them, but I was hoping that they could work things out.”

“Yeah,” Christen says softly, rubbing the hem of a shirt between her thumb and forefinger. “Me too.”

Christen holds up a pair of shorts for Tobin to look at.

“What do you think?” she asks. “Is white a bad or good idea for a stadium?”

“Oh!” Tobin exclaims, suddenly shooting up off the bed and scrambling on her legs to the closet. “I have a present for you!”

Caught up in the excitement and anxiety of the visit, Christen had nearly forgotten that Tobin had promised her a present in exchange for coming down for the game.

“Oh yeah,” Christen says, watching Tobin disappear into the closet. “What is it?”

When Tobin emerges, both hands tucked behind her back and a wide grin on her face, Christen feels a little nervous.

“What is it?”

“I didn’t wrap it or anything,” Tobin says. “I hope that’s okay.”

Christen giggles because it would be completely out of character for Tobin to take the time to wrap a gift and just nods.

“Yeah, that’s fine,” she tells her. “You really didn’t have to get me anything, you know. I would have come for the game anyway.”

“Oh, it’s not a real present,” Tobin says. “I didn’t have to go out and buy it or anything. Here.”

She’s pulls out a mess of fabric from behind her and thrusts it in Christen’s direction. Christen takes it, watching the anticipatory look on Tobin’s face instead of looking down at the material in her hands.

“I’m sorry if it’s stupid,” Tobin blurts out.

“It’s not,” Christen tells her, finally glancing down.

She shakes out what looks to be a jersey, eyes going wide as she realizes what she’s holding.

“I thought you might like something to wear to the game today,” Tobin says helpfully.

“Is this yours?” Christen asks, breath catching in her throat.

“Well, yeah,” Tobin says, looking confused. “I mean, that’s my number on the front there. And if you turn it around, you’ll see my name on the back.”

“No, no, I know that,” Christen says hastily. “I mean – did you wear this?”

“Oh,” Tobin says, looking mildly embarrassed. “Yeah, I did. Sorry. I would have bought you a new one, but this is the one I wore for the game you and Alex and Kelley came to and I liked the idea of you having it.”

“No, I like this one,” Christen says, turning the jersey around and laying it out on the bed to get a
good look at it. Her finger traces the letters at the top, mouthing Tobin’s last name as she goes.

“So you’ll have it?” Tobin asks hopefully.

“Yeah, of course,” Christen says, picking the jersey up into her arms and resisting the urge to bring it close to her nose to smell. “Am I supposed – do you want me to – can I wear this to the game today?”

“That’s what it’s for,” Tobin says kindly, not even reacting to Christen’s fumbled words. “For you to wear to all my games. I’ll get you a national team one too, okay?”

Christen just blushes and smiles, eyes torn between Tobin and the jersey.

“This was yours,” she mumbles.

“And now it’s yours,” Tobin affirms.

The vibrating of a phone tears Tobin’s attention away, and it takes everything inside Christen to put the jersey down and continue packing.

“Ash says that her and Ali are leaving their hotel soon,” Tobin says, eyes flicking between the screen and Christen’s face. “We should probably get ready to go.”

“I’ll get dressed,” Christen says, picking up a pair of shorts. Her hand then shoots out towards the jersey, hesitating at the last second.

It’s kind of a statement, at least to those who know her. Anyone who knows Christen knows that she’s been toeing the line with Tobin for months, since long before Christen was brave enough to admit it to herself. Putting on her jersey makes a statement, that Christen has gotten her shit together and moved them out of limbo, finally making a decision and going for what she wanted. Part of her is nervous about that. It’s been a while since Christen mattered to anyone in the way she matters to Tobin, in the way Tobin matters to her. It’s not one sided, it’s mutual, and it’s a little scary to let everyone know that by deciding to wear a few choice letters and numbers on her back. Because the truth is that Christen wouldn’t do this for anyone else, not even Kelley. Christen can’t remember the last time she wore Kelley’s jersey, if she ever even did. Even then, it wouldn’t have been the same. It wouldn’t have meant what it does now.

And Christen thinks that Tobin gets it, because she scoops up the jersey and pushes it into Christen’s arms.

“Wear it,” Tobin tells her, an encouraging smile on her face. “That’s why I want you to have it. So people don’t think you’re rooting for Allie.”

Christen giggles.

“Find me when you’re dressed,” Tobin tells her, getting up and starting for the door. “We’ll leave when you’re ready.”

It takes a few more minutes of staring at the jersey, blood rushing to her cheeks as she pictures wearing it around the stadium, everyone knowing but not really know how important Tobin is to her. It’s like a secret, but the good kind.

When she pulls it on, Christen thinks that she should have done so sooner.
Lunch with Ali and Ashlyn is easy enough. It gets a little confusing with Ali and Allie, both of them turning their heads every time they hear their name, but that’s it. They all order, Allie stopping Tobin from ordering a burger by claiming that it won’t sit right in her stomach and she needs to be in peak condition for the game in a few hours. Christen orders the burger instead, letting Tobin sneak more than a couple fries. She feels Tobin’s hand skim across her knee as she thanks her, leaning over to whisper in her ear so that Allie doesn’t hear, and tries to keep calm so that no one else notices that something is up.

She isn’t sure whether it’s because of the jersey, the blush on her face, the satisfied smirk on Tobin’s mouth, or a combination of all three, but when Ali clears her throat and makes eye contact with Christen, she isn’t surprised to hear the question that falls from her mouth.

“So,” she says, drawing out the word and ignoring the way Ashlyn lightly tugs on the back of her shirt as if to tell her to stop. “When did you two get together?”

Christen is feeling flustered, like she doesn’t have an answer to the question. She doesn’t know how to sum everything up in a sentence and she doesn’t want to ramble, so she reaches for a sip of her water to stall.

Of course, Tobin comes swooping in like her knight in shining armor.

More like her knight in grass-stained athletic shorts, but that’s just a technicality.

“Yesterday,” Tobin answers nonchalantly, simple and easy like the way she stretches an arm out along the back of Christen’s chair.

“Really,” Ali says, but it’s not a question as her eyes bounce back and forth like a ping pong ball between the two of them.

“Al,” Ashlyn says gently. Christen has never heard her talk very much, but something about her voice is soothing and calming. “Al, leave it alone.”

“What?” Ali asks, turning to Ashlyn with wide, innocent eyes. “I’m just saying.”

She faces Tobin and Christen again, and when Christen squirms in her seat, Tobin uses the thumb of the arm slung over the back of the chair to rub tiny little circles into her shoulder.

“Really, Ali,” Tobin confirms, and when she leans over to press a gentle kiss to Christen’s cheekbone, Christen feels the tension begin to leave her body.

“So is she the one you were asking me about back in January?” Ali asks, directing her question to Christen who feels mildly taken aback.

“January?” she asks in surprise.

“Yeah,” Ali nods. “Remember, when we went out for margaritas?”

“You went out for margaritas?” Tobin murmurs into Christen’s ear, distracting her so that she almost forgets to answer Ali.

“Yeah, I remember,” Christen says, remembering getting too close to Ali and asking questions all night long. She doesn’t even remember what she was asking, but she does remember doing it under the pretense that she was helping Ali think through her situation with Ashlyn.

“So were you asking me about Tobin?” Ali pushes.
“I – maybe,” Christen says, avoiding Tobin’s gaze as it rests on the side of her face.

“Wait, January?” Allie asks, dark amusement in her voice. “Christen, you didn’t like Tobin back then.”

It’s all coming back to Christen, memories of feeling like she had to do something about her crush on Kelley before it killed her. She’d been asking Ali about Kelley, trying to weigh the risks of just coming out with it and telling Kelley the truth, and she remembers gaining the confidence to finally tell her about it a couple of weeks later.

Of course, Christen doesn’t want Tobin to know all of that. She just wants to put that chapter of her life behind her.

“I don’t really remember,” Christen lies convincingly, and Ali just frowns as she settles back in her seat.

“Well,” she says, picking up her fork, “I definitely didn’t see this coming.”

Ashlyn snorts.

Christen registers Tobin’s spine straightening as she sits up, arm pulling away from Christen so she can keep eating.

“So, Ash,” Tobin says conversationally. “Congrats on the girl.”

Ali’s head jerks up from her salad, eyes narrowing in Tobin’s direction.

“You too,” Ashlyn says, nodding at Christen who just offers a small smile in return. “You’ll have to tell me all about it later.”

“So will you,” Tobin returns.

“Okay, okay,” Allie says loudly. “I get it, I’m the fifth wheel here. Let’s please not act like it, though. I’d really appreciate that.”

“Oh Allie,” Tobin says cheerfully, reaching over to blatantly grab for another one of Christen’s fries. Christen wants to protest – Tobin’s had entirely too many and she keeps slathering them in ketchup, which is just gross – but she keeps quiet and the way Allie’s eyes roll far back into her head as she lets out a loud groan is worth it. “Stop crashing our dates then.”

“This is not a date,” Ali says emphatically. “Tobin, please tell me you take her on nicer dates than this.”

Tobin angles her body so she can look at Christen, dazzling her with her beautifully wide smile as she reaches for another fry. Christen slaps her hand away, raising her eyebrows so that Tobin just studies her intently for a few moments. Her smile falters before returning in full force, crinkles appearing by her eyes, and this time when Tobin leans close, her lips land a little closer to the corner of Christen’s mouth.

“Can I please have another fry?” she asks sweetly, and it’s hard for Christen to resist.

“I don’t know,” she says, looking down at her plate. The burger is half eaten and the fries are almost gone, mostly the scraps left, and she thinks that’s all thanks to Tobin. “You’ve already had so many, and like Allie said, you really shouldn’t.”
When Tobin pouts, it’s even more difficult for Christen to not give in.

“Fine,” Tobin mopes, slumping down in her chair.

She shoots Christen a secret smile and wink though, and it almost makes Christen give her the rest of her lunch entirely. Thankfully Allie and Ali find some common ground to discuss while Tobin and Ashlyn talk, and Christen takes it all in while Tobin repeatedly dances her fingers along her lower thigh and forearm until the checks are paid and they’re ready to go after lingering for way too long.

Christen drives her own car to the stadium, Tobin insisting on sitting in her passenger seat. She worries that it will upset Allie and that it’s not convenient for Tobin, but when she says so out loud, Tobin just reaches over to pat Christen’s thigh.

“Listen, Allie will get over it,” she tells her. “Besides, she’s so much worse when her boyfriend is in town. This is just the beginning of payback.”

That makes Christen’s cheeks flush for some reason.

“And I might have to walk a little further, but it’s not a big deal,” Tobin continues. “It’s worth the extra time with you.”

The girls have to get to the stadium early for things like warm ups and whatever goes on behind the scenes that Christen will never understand, but Tobin reassures her that the gates will be open and she can find her seat.

“I’ll be looking for you,” Tobin promises when Christen pulls into a parking spot.

“You’ll see me after,” Christen excuses. “Just focus on playing.”

“Nah, I need to see you here,” Tobin says, shaking her head. “You’re like my good luck charm.”

“You don’t know that,” Christen protests.

“Oh, yes I do,” Tobin tells her. “You’ve come to my games before and I always play better when you’re watching. Mostly because I’m so focused on impressing you, but still. You’re my good luck charm.”

Christen tucks her chin into her chest, trying to hide the red streaking her cheeks.

“You don’t have to impress me,” she mutters.

“Yeah, but I want to,” Tobin says. “Hey, come here. You know what would really make me play well today?”

Christen warily looks up to see Tobin grinning cheekily at her.

“What?” Christen asks. “Do you need more good luck?”

“Yeah,” Tobin says. “I need a good luck kiss.”

Christen just stares at her, a little dumbfounded. She isn’t sure whether to pull an Allie and roll her eyes, or whether to laugh it off.

Of course, there is a third option.

She could just kiss her.
She chooses that one, unbuckling her seatbelt so she can lunge forward a little roughly, one hand pressed against the center console to steady her while the other cups the back of Tobin’s head, tangling her fingers in silky strands of hair while bringing their lips together. It’s a little rough, the both of them overeager and Christen is suddenly wondering why she hasn’t been doing this all day. Tobin’s lips are pliant and bending to Christen’s will, letting her do what she wants which is a relief because Christen doesn’t think she could hold back if she tried. Their first kiss might have been perfect for a first kiss, sweet and stretching on for seemingly hours without any other intentions, but this kiss is the kind that promises more. It’s a glimpse into what could be if they let themselves wander down this road together.

It doesn’t late long though, Christen pulling back with a gasp just as Tobin brings up a hand to cup the side of Christen’s neck.

“Wow,” Tobin says, the grin she wears even cheekier than before. “Yeah, I definitely think I’ll have a good game now.”

Christen lets herself roll her eyes this time.

“I’m holding you to that,” she says, rifling through her bag as she gets out of the car.

Christen smiles to herself as she turns off the car, and feels her heart skip a beat when her door suddenly opens.

“Come on slow poke,” Tobin urges her, holding out a hand for Christen to take. “I don’t have forever, you know.”

“You don’t have to wait for me,” Christen says, quickly grabbing her bag before accepting Tobin’s open hand. She always feels so cool against Christen’s sweaty palms, her grip firm but not too tight as she helps Christen to her feet on the asphalt.

“I just wanted to do this,” Tobin explains, and then she’s hugging Christen, pressing a hard but tender kiss to her lips before she’s stepping away and tugging on the straps of her bag. “I’ll come find you when I’m done, okay?”

“Okay,” Christen says, a little dazed. She watches Tobin walk away, wondering how the hell she got where she is and thinking that leaving is the absolute last thing that she wants to do.

* * *

Tobin nabs an assist sometime halfway through the second half, after earning herself a yellow card in the final minutes of the first half. The game is extremely physical and intense and watching Tobin play is a very different experience when she’s playing for club and not country. She’s a little more aggressive, something that Christen can’t help but be intrigued by. She just about bites her nails to shreds every tie Tobin commits a foul after her first yellow, but she behaves and finishes the game on a positive note. When she throws herself into a team hug after the goal, her eyes scan the crowd wildly. Christen is on the end of a row behind the bench, halfway up the stands, and she almost doesn’t believe that Tobin’s found her until she shoots a sudden thumbs up into the air along with her ecstatic smile.

Christen just knows to send one back, and the subsequent crinkling by Tobin’s eyes lets her know that she did the right thing.
The wait for Tobin takes forever, with Christen dragging her feet as she slowly makes her way back to her car. She’s one of the last to leave her seat and stops to use the restroom, and Tobin finally texts her as Christen steps out into the humid early evening air.

_Hope you like them sweaty_

Christen frowns at the screen in confusion, fingers flying as she responds.

_Like what sweaty?_

There aren’t too many cars left in the parking lot, just a handful scattered about. Christen knows that Tobin said they’d meet at her car but had apologetically explained that she couldn’t really anticipate when she’d be out, blaming her coach and his tendency to ramble on forever despite how fast he talked. She’s impatient to see Tobin again, but she’s also dreading it because they’re only meeting to say goodbye. Christen’s bags are packed in her trunk and she’s ready to make the drive back to school even though Tobin had attempted to convince her to stay another night.

“I’ll even let you sleep on the couch,” she had begged shamelessly. “Just stay.”

It had been near impossible to say no, but common sense had decided to make an appearance against and Christen was at least going to attempt to do the smart thing.

“The sooner I leave, the sooner I can come back to you,” she had promised.

It had done little to pacify Tobin, but she’d just make Christen pinky-swear to not make her wait very long to see her again.

Christen thinks about the night before, after they’d gotten back to the apartment armed with takeout and plans to camp out in front of the tv. They had sat close together and laughed late into the night until Allie had come out of her room, grumpy and telling Tobin to get some sleep because it was the night before a game for crying out loud. It had been nice, Christen thinks, rounding the back of her car to get to the driver’s side.

She gasps when sees Tobin already there and waiting for her, hands shoved in the pockets of her team-issued zip jacket as she leans against the door. Her text begins to make sense as it’s clear that Tobin hasn’t showered, hair dripping with sweat and plastered to the back of her neck. It makes Christen’s stomach feel funny, especially when Tobin looks up and a smile spreads wide across her face.

“Hey,” Tobin drawls.

“Hey,” Christen greets her. “Good game.”

Tobin moves to the side so Christen can dump her things in the front of the car before shutting the door.

“Did I manage to impress you?” Tobin teases, and Christen’s missed this side of her: the confident bordering on cocky athlete side of her, the one who winks at Christen and walks around with a casual assertiveness in her posture. It’s even better when aimed at her, now that Christen has discovered she’s the sort of person to bargain with kisses and use any means necessary to get one, even if it’s ridiculous and laughable. Somehow, with Tobin, it manages to be a mix of sweet and unbearably attractive. It sets off butterflies in Christen’s stomach and makes her heart beat fast, but she’s pretty sure she likes it.

“I don’t know,” Christen pretends to think, doing her best to keep a straight face and not laugh. “I
was kind of expecting a goal in my honor.”

“Next time,” Tobin says, pushing her baby hairs up and off her face. Her hair is in its standard game time ponytail, and of course she manages to make something so simple look so good. Christen wonders how she made it so long without staring at Tobin every step of the way, because it’s suddenly become impossible to ignore how attractive she is in everything she does. “I’ll get you a goal next time.”

“Then you can impress me next time,” Christen tells her, and the way Tobin’s face suddenly falls is almost laughable.

“But I wanted another kiss,” she whines, reaching forward for Christen who merely shrugs.

“Well,” she says, “I mean, you did do that thing in the eightieth minute that made everyone scream for you.”

“Wasn’t that awesome?” Tobin says, her face brightening immediately. “Did you like it?”

“Was it for me?” Christen asks in surprise.

“Of course it was for you,” Tobin says, as though it should have been obvious. “I told you I would be trying to impress you.”

“Well in that case,” Christen says, but she doesn’t finish her sentence as Tobin edges closer and puts a hand on her waist.

“You look really good in my jersey,” Tobin says seriously.

Christen’s tongue feels thick and heavy in her mouth, and she has to swallow hard before answering.

“You look really good in yours,” she tells Tobin, and it feels like the air has been stolen from her lungs when Tobin moves to kiss her, pressing her against the car door so that Christen can’t think of anything else besides kissing Tobin.

Tobin waits though, free hand coming up to rest on Christen’s warm cheek, her fingers curving around her jawline and thumb brushing over soft skin. Unlike their first kiss, Tobin seems ready to make the first move, and Christen waits for her. She lands solidly but gentle against Christen’s lips, slowly dragging them until they’re slotted together. Christen inhales sharply as Tobin digs her fingers into her jaw, clutching tight as her mouth begins to move and Christen opens up just enough to let Tobin’s bottom lip slide between hers just a touch.

Sweat, water, and the faint taste of sports drinks fill Christen’s senses. It’s heady and intoxicating, the way Christen can taste it as Tobin’s lips move slowly, kissing Christen’s top lip before dragging down slowly to suck lightly on her bottom lip. Christen fumbles with her hands, unsure of what to do with them but eventually landing on reaching one up to tug on Tobin’s jacket collar while the other wrapped around her side, pulling her closer than she even thought possible.

Tobin takes advantage of Christen’s momentary distraction to deepen the kiss, quickly refocusing all of Christen’s attention. She keeps kissing her, Christen doing her best to reciprocate as the kiss grows wetter and hotter, and then she starts squirming underneath Tobin’s body. Up against the car, she finds herself antsy and unsettled and needing something but not being sure of what that something is. Frustratingly, Tobin seems determined to keep the kiss relatively chaste, switching it up and then pausing briefly just to press her parted lips against Christen’s to breathe into her mouth.

That’s when Christen decides that she’s had enough.
She moves her hand from Tobin’s side to the back of her neck, acutely aware of the lack of hair falling around Tobin’s face, acutely aware of the fact that there’s nothing to hide them. Christen cradles the curve of the top of Tobin’s spine, trying to forget that they’re where they are and instead remember that they’re pretty much alone. It’s easier than it should be for her to not care, clutching Tobin closer and licking her tongue along Tobin’s bottom lip. Tobin opens easily, soft and sweet as Christen goes further, licking into her mouth and falling further into it, head swimming with a mess of both sudden and pent up desire, the likes of which she doesn’t ever remember feeling before.

Tobin responds enthusiastically, letting Christen’s tongue ease into her mouth and find hers. They meet hotly, sliding together messily as neither of them are focused or concerned with technique and instead just preoccupied with enjoying the moment. Hands grip and slide, Christen fumbling with the drawn zip of Tobin’s jacket as Tobin drops her hand from Christen’s face to instead wrap around her face and pull her close until not a wisp of air can pass between them. Christen doesn’t know much in this moment, head cloudy and not exactly in charge of her actions, but she does know that there’s a heat building within her with every second that she lets Tobin kiss her, eager and willing. She pulls at the zipper, fingers brushing sweat-soaked jersey underneath while her other hand slides into the hair at the nape of Tobin’s neck, bringing her closer until breathing begins to feel unnecessary and more like a chore than anything.

That’s what makes Christen draw back. It’s embarrassing, the way her head smacks against the car in her haste to get away and take a few gulps of thick air.

“You okay?” Tobin asks, voice low and rough but still tender as she moves a hand to slot underneath Christen’s head. Christen knows she’ll be fine, but it hurts and it feels good to have Tobin’s cool fingers combing through her hair and massaging her scalp. “Sorry, did I do something wrong?”

“No,” Christen says, shaking her head and closing her eyes for a second. “No, you were perfect. I just needed to breath for a moment.”

They wait to catch their breath, Christen only seeing the fading glowing orange of the sunset from underneath her eyelids as Tobin caresses her head.

“I don’t want to go,” Christen whispers, thinking that maybe if she doesn’t open her eyes, she won’t have to deal with the fact that it’s time to drive off.

“Hey,” Tobin says, a little firmer. “Look at me.”

Christen does so reluctantly, eyes glued to Tobin’s. Her eyes are warm and comforting, brown and golden and easy to get lost in.

“I don’t want you to go either,” Tobin says, her voice nearly breaking. “But you have to, and I understand that. It sucks, but I understand. Hurry up and leave so you can hurry back to me, okay?”

“That’s what I said to you,” Christen murmurs.

“I know,” Tobin says, cracking a smile. “It’s what I keep telling myself.”

Christen reaches for a hug and Tobin obliges, stroking Christen’s hair and sighing contentedly.

“I’ll miss you,” Christen whispers against the base of Tobin’s neck.

“I’ll miss you more,” Tobin says.

“No way,” Christen says, smiling into Tobin’s skin and shaking her head. “I’ll miss you the most.”
“I’ll miss you times a billion.”

“I’ll miss you to infinity and beyond.”

The small bubbling giggle that comes out of Tobin’s throat is unexpected and foreign, nothing like Christen has ever heard from her before.

“Did you just giggle?” Christen asks in amazement, pulling out of Tobin’s arms.

“No,” Tobin says instantly.

“You did!” Christen insists, delighted.

“You quoted Toy Story!” Tobin cries out in defense. “How could I not?”

Christen giggles right back, and before she knows it, they’re giggling together and the sound almost makes up for the fact that it’s happening while Tobin tucks her into the driver’s seat and refuses to let Christen do up her own seatbelt.

“So,” Tobin asks, clearly procrastinating closing the door and saying goodbye. “On a scale from one to ten, where does that kiss rank?”

“A one,” Christen tells her, and it’s almost too easy, the way Tobin predictably protests.

“A one?” she whines. “All that tongue and you give me a freaking one?”

“Okay, okay,” Christen says though laughter. “It was at least an eleven, okay?”

That pleases Tobin enough to send Christen away with one last kiss and a promise to call so she doesn’t get lonely on the road.
how much do you mind if i call you that?

It’s barely a week, but it feels like a year.

Christen tells herself and Tobin that it’s going to be a quick trip. She just has to go back to school, pack enough things to get her through most of the summer while carefully avoiding Kelley who has gone back to spending too much time at her sorority house, visit her parents long enough to keep from feeling guilty about how long it’s been since she’s seen them, and then head back to Tobin. It’s supposed to be a quick trip, but it drags on in a way that makes her feel like she lied.

The only way to describe the week is bittersweet. She misses Tobin horribly, in a way that clenches at her chest cavity and takes her off guard so suddenly that she almost can’t breathe with the force of it. It should be unexpected, the way Christen misses her so intensely, but Christen isn’t surprised at all. It’s like the finally has the words to explain how she’s felt all this time and the courage to just let go and feel it. It’s like breaking through a dam, dropping all her walls and just accepting that it’s okay to miss someone like this.

Most importantly, it’s okay to miss Tobin like this.

Tobin, sweet Tobin, who has never been anything but patient and supportive and caring. Christen isn’t sure that she’s ever been brave enough to miss someone so much, to the point where she finds her phone glued to her hand so that she doesn’t miss a single text Tobin sends her way. She misses her so much that when they end up on the phone to discuss dates and logistics on her second night home, she finds herself smiling into the receiver while Tobin talks in circles, always going off on a tangent thanks to her beautiful but easily distracted mind. One moment they’re talking about a good time for Christen to arrive in town later that week, and the next Tobin is telling some rambling and pointless story about something Allie did at practice that day.

Christen isn’t sure how long they talk, but she knows that the next night they talk for even longer.

It assuages the ache in her heart, makes the longing just barely tolerable. The desire to be back with Tobin is like a constant slow wave washing over her, but every once in a while it swells and knocks her off her feet so that she feels like she’s got salt water in her sinuses and has to take a moment to recover. The first time it happens is when Christen is halfway back to school and has to pull over at the next rest stop so that she can focus on deep breathing and call Tobin for ten minutes to calm down. It happens at least once a day, and on the night before she’s due to leave her parents’ and head back to the one person who always manages to settle her and thrill her at the same time, it happens unexpectedly.

Her mom is just flipping through the Netflix options, trying to find a movie for the two of them to watch, when Christen catches a glimpse of a movie that her and Tobin had watched together once when they were hundreds of miles apart and still trying to be friends way back when. It tugs at Christen’s heart and makes her breath catch in her throat, and she has to excuse herself to shakily navigate her phone screen to call Tobin who picks up almost instantly, like she’s sitting there waiting for the call.

She’s really just waiting for a text back, waiting for Christen to continue their conversation about how they can’t wait to see each other tomorrow, and Christen hopes that she doesn’t mind her continuing it this way.

“Hey.”
Tobin’s voice is always calm and reassuring, grounding Christen in a way that nothing else has ever been able to. She always makes it a little easier to breathe, even when she’s taking Christen’s breath away. It’s strange and Christen wants to explain it to Tobin, if only just to find out whether she’s the only one of them who feels that way, but for the time being she’s still trying to find a way to put it into words in her own head.

“Hey,” Christen says in a soft exhale.

And that’s really all she needs. She could stay on the line forever, listening to Tobin breathe into the speaker while she does the same, but that seems like a waste when they could be talking, hearing each other’s voices and telling each other how much they’re missed.

They don’t talk for long. Christen has to get back to her mom, but Tobin takes the time to reassure that sometimes her chest gets tight too, and it hurts in the same bittersweet way.

“I miss you,” Tobin murmurs as the short conversation comes to a close. “You’ve been gone for too long.”

“Remember when we would go like, a month without seeing each other?” Christen asks, and she’s mostly playful but she can almost hear Tobin frowning on the other end.

“We’re never doing that again,” she makes Christen promise, and she refuses to let Christen hang up without telling her that she misses her, too.

Christen was planning on telling her anyway, but the vulnerability in Tobin’s voice when she demands the words anyway make her heart balloon with affection and fondness and she thinks that she never wants to let this feeling go.

The feeling she gets when she wakes up the next morning and realizes that she gets to see Tobin before the end of the day is another that she wants to hold onto. She’s excited, full of anticipation that spreads out to her fingertips and has her more antsy and impatient than usual as she counts down the minute until she can get on the road and head back to the one person she wants to see most on the entire planet.

It isn’t until she pulls out of her driveway and calls Tobin to let her know that she’s on her way that she realizes how deep into this she is. She’s never felt this way about someone before, that much she knows. Christen knows what it’s like to be in a relationship, to have someone to depend on and share feelings and deep thoughts with, but it’s different with Tobin, It’s on another level. The things they talk about in the middle of the day are just as meaningful as they things the talk about in the middle of the night. She keeps thinking that it’s too good to be true, and maybe it is, but for now she just wants to hold onto it for as long as possible. It feels okay to tell Tobin things that she’d never tell anyone else – how this is different with her, how she feels overwhelmed but reassured at the same time, how brave she’s trying to be to keep Tobin at her side – and in return Tobin tells her things that she promises she’s never told anyone else – how she didn’t know it was possible to miss someone so much, how she didn’t know it was possible to miss someone so much, and how she wasn’t expecting Christen to come along and everything to suddenly make sense.

“I’ve never wanted to be with anyone before you,” Tobin says casually, as Christen navigates onto the highway. “I’ve never wanted to spend so much time with just one person.”

It’s almost frustratingly casual, and it would be so easy for Christen to brush it off and not let Tobin’s unaffected tone touch her deep inside, but she takes a moment to let the words sink in as she accelerates without caution. She thinks about Tobin, always floating around in a group of friends, always drifting along and switching schools without much concern for what it would mean and how
it would make her feel. Christen thinks about Tobin, so confident in every inch of herself both inside and out, taking the time to have feelings for Christen and bare her soul for Christen, but only once she was sure that Christen wouldn’t leave her lonely and hurt.

Because really, Christen thinks, Tobin might be more sensitive than either of them thought. Maybe she still doesn’t come close to how sensitive Christen can be, maybe this isn’t as hard for her as it is for Christen, but it’s still a marked change for her and Christen wonders what it’s like to deal with that. Tobin hadn’t said a word about her crush on Christen until she was confronted about it, until there was at least the tiniest bit of hope that maybe Christen felt the same way. As confident as Tobin is, there is a part of her that feels so incredibly deeply that she was scared of rejection and wanted to hide how she felt.

So instead of brushing it off, Christen considers Tobin’s words carefully before replying.

“You’re the only person I’ve ever went after,” Christen tells her, quietly and calmly despite the fact that her heart is racing with nerves from the confession. “You know how I came to you after Kelley told me?”

“I know,” Tobin says, and it isn’t as though she’s just saying that just to say it. Christen gets the feeling that Tobin really does know, knows that she’s the only person Christen has ever went after, knows what that means. “I know.”

Eventually the conversation circles back to seeing each other later in the day.

“I have a surprise for you,” Tobin tells Christen. “When you get here?”

“You’re not allowed to give me anymore presents,” Christen protests. “Not without warning me, so I can get you something too.”

“No, it’s not a present,” Tobin tells her. “Just…keep an open mind, okay?”

Christen is a little skeptical, but no amount of begging gets Tobin to give in and tell her what she has planned. Eventually Tobin has to hang up, but not before Christen has agreed to call her when she’s close to the apartment.

It’s almost funny, the way her hands start shaking and her heart picks up pace as she gets closer. Christen knows the route off the highway to Tobin’s apartment like the back of her hand at this point, and she almost doesn’t even have to think about it as she drives, right hand carefully pressed to her chest as though it will calm the frantic nerves growing within her. It’s just Tobin, she tells herself. It’s just Tobin, who has never given Christen much reason to be afraid or to not trust her, who has only given Christen reasons to believe in her and feel safe and comfortable. She thinks that maybe the nerves are a good sign, meaning that she can’t wait to get back to the one person who has changed her for the better, who has shown her more within herself than she ever thought she could see. Tobin has slowly coaxed Christen open, with careful hands and a warm heart, so that she can bare herself to her in return for Tobin doing the same.

Maybe that’s why Christen’s nervous, she thinks, pulling into a parking spot and seeing Tobin almost immediately, bouncing on her toes almost imperceptibly from her spot at the sidewalk. She’s nervous in a good way, because she gets to see the person she wants to see most in the world. Christen only gets a moment to process this as she shifts into park before Tobin is bounding forward, an infectiously large smile stretching from ear to ear as she dazzles in the sunlight.

“Hi,” Tobin says, throwing Christen’s door open. Christen is ready this time, already unbuckled and rising from her seat. “How was your drive?”
“Good,” Christen says, and the question is a little ridiculous because Tobin was on the phone with her for nearly half of it and knows exactly how it went, but it’s mostly ridiculous because it seems silly to be bothering with words when they both know that talking isn’t what they really want to be doing at the moment. Thankfully, Tobin doesn’t waste more than a couple of quick seconds before she’s launching herself at Christen who nearly stagers back with the force of the embrace.

The kiss is immediate. Tobin is on her, kissing her fiercely, and if Christen had ever stopped to doubt how much Tobin missed her while they were apart, the kiss would easily have erased all of those thoughts. Christen grabs at Tobin, hands missing the feel of her solid body underneath them, feeling at home once they’re settled on her sides and pulling her tight. There’s something about being so close to someone that makes Christen’s thoughts run wild, overcome with emotion in relation to the significance of having feelings for someone and having those feelings be reciprocated and then acting on them, and so when Tobin eagerly licks at the seam of Christen’s lips to kiss her deeply in the middle of a parking lot, half pressed against Christen’s car once again, she can’t help but not mind. Christen just lets Tobin open her mouth and kiss her, the tiniest sigh of contentment escaping one of them – Christen isn’t even sure which one, but it doesn’t really matter – until they slow down into a series of lingering kisses, just lips pressed together and eyes closed and mouths upturned into irresistible smiles.

“I missed you,” Christen says quietly, her voice small as Tobin pulls back just far enough to press their foreheads together. Eyes open, staring into each other and Christen thinks she might be going cross-eyed from the close proximity, but she really doesn’t care.

“I missed you too,” Tobin says, and she sounds warm and it’s like Christen is melting in her arms, mouth searching for Tobin’s lips again because now that she knows what it’s like to kiss her – soft and exciting, intense and calming, all at the same time – she doesn’t think that there’s anything else on Earth that even comes close to being as wonderful. It’s an experience, every time they lean in and touch each other. Everything else kind of melts away and Christen wonders if maybe she shouldn’t become so enveloped in something as simple as a kiss, but then she looks at Tobin and thinks that if there’s anyone she’s okay with becoming lost in, it’s her. Tobin is the person she trusts to hold her up, to support her and take care of her. Tobin is the person Christen is okay with kissing in broad daylight and in nightlight, in soft evening air and hopefully everywhere else.

It occurs to Christen, as Tobin leaves with her one last dragging kiss before slowly pulling her arms away from Christen’s body, that she’d like to kiss Tobin just about everywhere. She leans against the doorframe of her car, hand coming up to push fallen hairs away from her face as Tobin circles around to the trunk to grab Christen’s bag.

“Come on,” Tobin calls, hoisting the straps up onto her broad shoulders like she’s carrying sacks of air instead of shoes and hair products. “I have a surprise for you, remember?”

* 

The surprise involves a patch of grass, a slab of concrete with two canvas folding chairs, Tobin in a pair of extremely short shorts, and a bottle of bug spray.

“I really don’t know if you’re doing this right,” Christen says anxiously, peering over Tobin’s shoulder as she attempts to hammer a plastic stake into the ground. “I think that you’re supposed to set up the inside first, otherwise you’ll never figure out the dimensions of the – “

“I know what I’m doing,” Tobin interrupts her, and she’s looking adorably grumpy as she frowns down at the black plastic and rope. “This isn’t rocket science, Christen.”

“I know, I know,” Christen says, and really, she’s trying to be supportive and helpful, but Tobin’s
stubbornness is making is difficult. Not to mention, she’d bet Christen that she could get the tent up in less than fifteen minutes, and it’s already been sixteen. “I’m just saying, I have the instructions if you want them.”

“I don’t,” Tobin grunts, picking up the mallet again and swinging it in a way that has Christen biting her tongue so that she doesn’t give into the urge to ask Tobin to step away and mind her toes, exposed in a pair of flip-flops that look way too dangerous for the great outdoors.

It was going to be their first official date, Tobin had declared in the car, after she’d suckered Christen into packing an overnight bag and telling her to leave her straightener and cell phone charger behind. Camping, she informed Christen, was an excellent bonding activity.

“If you don’t hate me at the end of this, we’re good to go,” she’d said enthusiastically, climbing into her own car for once with the excuse that her tires were better suited for the campground’s road conditions. Christen had merely raised a skeptical eyebrow, figuring it wouldn’t hurt to go along with the idea but give Tobin a hard time about it in the meantime.

“Camping?” she’d asked dubiously tapping her fingers on the frame of the car as Tobin tried to convince her to hurry up and get in. “I don’t know. It’s already afternoon and the forecast says it might rain later, and I’ve never done this before. Besides – overnight?”

She’d been blushing as she said it, giving away her thoughts without needing to voice them.

“It’s just a first date,” Tobin had emphasized. “Totally casual. One of us can even sleep in the car, if you want. I just thought it would be fun, you know?”

“Ah,” Christen had said wisely, nodding as she finally got in the passenger seat. “I see. I’m not fun, so you need to take me camping to have fun.”

Tobin had backtracked immediately, not noticing the thin line Christen’s lips pressed into as she desperately tried to keep from laughing and giving herself away.

Now, Tobin refuses to let Christen help put up the two-person tent and it’s both frustrating and amusing to watch. Christen very much wants to gently push Tobin aside and take over the job, but she wants to injure Tobin’s pride and ego even less. So instead of interfering, Christen watches Tobin’s tanned legs as she squats and tries to push from her mind the fact that this tent may or may not end up collapsing on them.

“So you put a lot of thought into this?” Christen asks, looking at the packed bags they’d unloaded from the car upon arrival. Aside from a change of clothes, Tobin apparently had the foresight to bring blankets and pillows – Christen recognized the throw from the couch back at the apartment – as well as snacks. Armed with the little booklet of instructions, a thin coating of sunscreen in the sticky humidity, and a water bottle, Christen thinks that while this wouldn’t be her first choice of first date locations, she’s actually enjoying herself.

“Of course,” Tobin says distractedly, straightening up and using her hand to wipe back the hairs falling into her eyes, damp with perspiration. “Why wouldn’t I?”

“I mean, it’s just a first date,” Christen explains. “You could have taken me to dinner, or something.”

“We’ve been to dinner before,” Tobin says, reaching for piece of framing. “I wanted to do something special.”

“It would have been special anyway,” Christen points out, “because it would be just the two of us.”
Tobin’s frown deepens, but Christen thinks that it’s due to her struggle with the tent and not the conversation.

“Are you not convinced that this is a great idea?” Tobin asks, taking a step back to look out upon her progress. She’s successfully hammerd down the four corners of the tent, but she’s been having trouble getting the framing strung through the center of the fabric.

“I’m sure it’s going to be great,” Christen says. “I’m having fun, promise. I’m just thinking that this is more work for you than anything right now. Are you having fun?”

Tobin glances back at Christen before doing a double take, a sly smile crossing her face as she drops the framing and jogging the ten feet or so back to where Christen is sitting.

“Get up,” Tobin tells her, and even though Christen’s brows furrow in confusion, she slowly rises from her seat.

“What?” she asks uncertainly, wondering if Tobin has finally decided to let her help. Instead, Tobin just flops into the chair, completely ignoring the other one and staring up at Christen with something akin to expectant warmth shining on her face.

“Come sit,” she says, and Christen glances at the empty chair before realizing that Tobin is patting her thighs with an impatient sort of restraint. It’s weird, the way that Tobin seemingly always holds back, but Christen saves that thought for another time and slowly lowers herself onto Tobin’s lap. She goes gingerly, not wanting to crush Tobin’s legs as she starts with a hand on Tobin’s cotton-covered shoulder.

As soon as she’s sitting, Tobin winds her arms around Christen’s waist and tugs her closer. Her chin finds a place to rest in the crook between Christen’s neck and shoulder, lips lightly pressing against the side of her neck almost on instinct, like she can’t hold back. Palms press flat against Christen’s stomach and it makes her tense, every nerve ending in her body on edge and alert as she tries to relax into Tobin’s hold.

“What are we doing?” Christen asks awkwardly, and Tobin just hushes her with another kiss to her neck, chaste and slick from the sunscreen and sweat.

“I’m showing you how much fun I’m having,” Tobin says, her breath almost uncomfortably warm against Christen’s already heated skin. It makes her blood boil, thrumming in her veins just under the surface, but in a way that’s more pleasant than not.

“We’re just sitting here,” Christen says. “How is that fun?”

Tobin shushes her again.

“Shh. Just give it a moment.”

So Christen takes a moment, breathing in deeply and letting her eyes close for a moment before taking in the view in front of her. There are countless trees with sunlight streaming down between them, everything quiet aside from the gentle rustle of leaves as the lightest breeze passes through. It’s calm and it’s easy, but something inside Christen is burning hotter than the early summer sun.

“Aren’t you having fun?” Tobin asks after a little while, her hold still tight as she breathes steadily against Christen’s neck. It makes Christen feel like maybe Tobin doesn’t want to let go, like maybe the two of them sitting right here is all they need.

“Yeah,” Christen sighs out, the tension finally completely leaving her body as she slumps into Tobin.
“It’s like we’re not even really doing anything, but it’s still fun.”

“That’s what I mean,” Tobin says, relief just barely detectable in her voice. “Even though I’ve been working on the tent and complaining to you, I’ve still been having fun. And I hope that even though you’ve been sitting here, listening to my pathetic complaining ass, you’ve still been having fun.”

“I have been,” Christen says, because now that she’s slowed down for a moment, it’s easy to see how unbothered she’s been this entire time.

“I could do nothing with you and it would be fun,” Tobin says earnestly, nudging her nose against Christen’s cheek. “I could sit on the couch for hours and have the time of my life. We could road trip together and it would be just as much as watching a soccer game. I’d have fun with you just shopping for food. It’s about being with you, Chris. I didn’t want to take you to something stupid like dinner and a movie because one, that’s not my style, and two, because it’s just fun, okay?”


“You brought your sneakers like I told you to, right? There’s trail I want to try out later.”

Christen groans, but it just makes Tobin laugh and hold her tighter.

“It’s not going to be like, hardcore hiking, right?” Christen asks, wrinkling her nose as Tobin gently pats her thigh in a signal to get up.

“Nah, nothing too strenuous for you,” Tobin says with a ghost of a wink. “Only what you can handle.”

“I’m hoping that you brought some other shoes,” Christen says, staring at Tobin’s rubber flip flops.

“I figured you would have brought two pairs of sneakers,” Tobin says nonchalantly as she goes to finish up the tent, and but the time Christen has realized that she’s making fun of her, Tobin is already laughing a deep belly laugh and coming back to Christen.

“Just a kiss,” Tobin begs, her mouth wide with an unstoppable smile. “Please? Please, Chris? Please?”

“Not if you’re going to be mean to me!” Christen exclaims, but Tobin lands her lips on the corner of Christen’s mouth and it’s hard to not fall into an easy kiss after that.

Christen thinks that maybe Tobin has made her soft. Immeasurably weak and malleable, bending to Tobin’s every whim in a way that’s almost embarrassing. But she watches the gentle, genuine smile on Tobin’s face as she goes about completing the tent setup and thinks that maybe it’s okay if it’s the same way for Tobin. Maybe the thought that Tobin is soft on her too, indulgent and giving and the sweetest ways, is enough to keep Christen from stressing about it.

Because yes, maybe this is all new and intense and a lot for her to handle, but maybe it’s like that for Tobin too.

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It turns out that Tobin did bring sneakers along for the “trail,” a term that she should have let Christen know she was using loosely, as she insists on breaking about ten minutes in.

“We’ll find our way back,” she says confidently, staring Christen in the eye, pleading for her to give in. “Come on, don’t you trust me?”
It feels a little like Tobin is taking advantage of her trust, something she voices suspiciously after approximately twenty seconds off the beaten path, but Tobin just swings a lanky, tanned arm back for Christen to grab onto.

“Here,” she says, her long strides shortening for a few seconds so that Christen can catch up and clumsily reach her own hand forward. “I’m not going anywhere without you. We’re in this together.”

Their hands are sweaty and faintly dirty from all the earth being kicked up around them, the air shimmering with dust and other worldly particles, but Tobin doesn’t let go once their fingers are casually interwoven. It keeps them at each other’s side, something that they have to adjust to, but soon enough they make it work so that it feels natural, like something they’ve been doing all along.

The first leg of the trail is upbeat, with Tobin humming and Christen pointing out every little animal she sees (mostly squirrels, but there’s a frog or two thrown in that make Tobin yelp which in turn makes Christen giggle at her). Soon enough though, conversation switches to childhood fears – storms and the dark for Tobin, sharks and heights for Christen – and from there it only gets more involved, their strides slowing as the hike becomes more about learning each other and less about exploring the wilderness.

“You really like your family then,” Tobin says, once Christen’s finished telling her all about the past several days she spent at home. She’d texted Tobin about it, talking about everyone during their texts and phone calls, but there’s information that only presents itself during an in person conversation.

“Yeah, I do,” Christen says. “It’s hard to be away from them so much while I’m at school, but I talk to them as much as I can.”

“Do you wish you had more time with them?” Tobin asks.

“Yeah, but it’s not like I can’t live without them, you know?” Christen asks, and Tobin nods. “I love them, and I spend as much time with them as I can, but I do okay without them.”

“So if it weren’t for me begging you to come back here, you’d still be with them?” Tobin jokes, but it’s just serious enough for Christen to answer her honestly.

“I’d rather be with you right now,” Christen says, feeling her cheeks redden, and she prays that Tobin attributes the color to the physical activity.

“Wait, is that what you told your parents?” Tobin asks, and it almost feels like Christen is being teased.

“It’s not funny,” Christen says, and she can see Tobin’s face immediately turn apologetic as she tightens her hand around Christen’s. “Normally I would be staying with them. Just like normally I would have spent spring break with them.”

“No, I know it’s not funny,” Tobin says hastily. “Sorry, I’m not trying to make fun of you or anything.”

Christen doesn’t say anything, determinedly looking at her feet, navigating over raised roots and trying not to trip.

“I just really was wondering what you told your parents about me, or if you even did,” Tobin says, once it becomes clear that Christen doesn’t have anything to say. “Because I know that supposedly we’re adults and everything, but I know that when you’re close to your parents like that, they still ask about what goes on in your life. And when you normally spend a ton of time with them and then
pass up an opportunity to hang together, most parents get a little curious. When I would go home for the summers and then a friend from school would invite me to hang out for a weekend or whatever, my mom always wanted to know what I was up to. So I know what it’s like, and I was just wondering what your parents know about me. If they even do know about me, because you totally could have told them that you’re just at school with Kelley or whatever.”

Christen thinks that Tobin is rambling, but she lets her continue until she finally takes a deep breath and stops in her tracks, looking sideways at Christen with a guilty look on her face.

“I’m sorry,” Tobin apologizes. “I didn’t mean to make fun of you. I guess I just don’t know the situation, or how serious this is for you. Like, serious enough to tell your parents. You know?”

“I know,” Christen says, and this time she’s the one squeezing Tobin’s hand in hers.

They keep walking as Christen thinks about what to say.

“Do you parents know about me?”

“I asked you first,” Tobin jokes, but she’s clearly deflecting and she doesn’t even bother to hide that.

Christen organizes her thoughts for another minute before speaking, not wanting for it all to come out wrong.

“So I don’t know how serious this is,” she starts off, watching as Tobin struggles to keep quiet. “But my parents do know about you.”

“Really?” Tobin blurts out, like she just can’t help it, and it makes the corners of Christen’s mouth turn up in a smile.

“Yeah,” Christen breathes out. “Yeah, I kind of had to tell my mom about you.”

“You didn’t have to,” Tobin says, and it looks like she’s squirming internally. “Not if you didn’t want to.”

“I usually don’t visit random people, and I don’t ever ditch my parents and sisters to do so,” Christen explains to her. “So my mom was like, ‘you’re on the phone all the time and you’re going to visit some girl you say you met through a friend of a friend, what’s going on?’”

“So you told her?”

“So I told her,” Christen confirms. “I mean, it’s pretty obvious and that and I aren’t just friends. Right?”

“Obviously,” Tobin agrees quickly. “Listen, I’m sorry, but I think I’d die if you told your mom we were just friends.”

“I would never,” Christen stresses. “Besides, I can’t lie to my mom. She always sees right through me.”

Tobin clears her throat.

“So what does she know? Is she okay with it all?”

Christen shrugs, their hands swinging between them.

“Yeah, she’s okay with it,” Christen says, eyes ahead of them as they continue to stroll along. She’s
given up on trying to mentally track where they are in relation to their little tent, figuring that in a worst case scenario she can just call 911 or use her phone and attempt to navigate that way. “I mean, she’s a pretty cool mom. She’s pretty understanding. She mostly just wants me to be happy, you know?”

“Yeah,” Tobin says, and she looks so soft and fond in that moment that Christen just wants to kiss her. “I want you to be happy too.”

Emotion unexpectedly washes over Christen, and it tightens her throat so that she feels like she can’t speak, even though she needs to. She stops walking and turns to face Tobin, who looks at her curiously in wait.

“You make me happy,” Christen chokes out, and the warm smile on Tobin’s face reminds her that she’s allowed to kiss her. So she does, reaching forward to grab the back of Tobin’s hand with her free hand and yank her closer until their mouths meet.

It’s tender, so tender. It’s every little look and glance that Christen has caught from Tobin, all of the little ones that are so meaningful even if Christen doesn’t know what they mean. It’s every flipping feeling that Christen gets in her stomach and chest when Tobin looks at her that way, gentle but butterfly-inducing and just exhilarating enough. Tobin’s lips are a little chapped but addicting, and Christen is starting to think that she has a problem where she can’t get enough of kissing her.

Maybe it’s not a problem, though, because Tobin is kissing her back just as sweetly, everything slowed down just enough so that they can take it in and enjoy it. Tobin’s free hand comes to rest on Christen’s hip, sliding up to her waist before pulling her close. Christen doesn’t think it’s possible for them to be close enough, she muses, as she smiles into the kiss.

Something wet hits Christen’s arm, where her forearm rests on Tobin’s shoulder, but she shrugs it off and keeps kissing. Tobin always tastes like herself underneath everything else she might taste like, and Christen is just about to slide her tongue into Tobin’s mouth when another larger, unmistakable droplet lands on her upper arm.

She reluctantly detaches her lips from Tobin’s just enough so she can open her eyes and look upwards.

“I think it’s – “

She doesn’t even get to finish her sentence before a bright white flash of lightning splits the sky in two, only a few seconds passing before an enormously loud crack of thunder booms overhead.

“Chris – “

She can hear the slight whimper in Tobin’s voice, and Christen finds herself thankful that their hands never separated as she clutches Tobin’s hand tighter in reassurance.

“Do we need to run back to the campsite?” Christen asks, and she’s half joking because they have no idea where they’re going, but she figures Tobin will make it work.

Tobin just nods, holding Christen’s hand in a death grip.

“Ready?” Christen asks. “I can’t go very fast though, remember.”

“I’m not leaving you,” Tobin says resolutely as a few more drops fall. It’s barely drizzling, but it’s quickly becoming dark overhead and it’s clear that this is about to be more than a typical sun shower.
“Yeah, because I can’t find my way back without you. I need you,” Christen says, but Tobin shakes her head.

“No,” she says, voice as firm as it can be. “Because I need you.”

Christen kisses her once, twice, before they’re off and running, careful to land solidly with every step. She’s not sure of where they’re going, if Tobin has any idea, but she follows her with blind faith and trusts that they’ll end up where they belong.

The rain drenches them as they run, even as they hide under tree cover and go as fast as Christen can manage. It’s clear that Tobin is holding back a little, but she doesn’t let go of Christen even as her shoulders cave in with fear with every crash of thunder. There’s a moment in which Christen thinks about telling her “I told you so,” but she decides about it and lets Tobin guide her back to their little tent, thankful that she had the forethought to store all their things out of the open air before they’d left earlier despite the fact that Tobin had thought it would all be safe on its own.

They barrel into the tent, Christen quickly pushing the blankets to the far end of the small tent so that they don’t end up ruining everything but getting it just was wet as they are. The lightning is still visible through the thin fabric and the thunder is as loud as ever, barely muffled, but the rain falls down in heavy sheets that miraculously don’t bring down the top of the tent and instead create a soothing soundtrack that Christen uses to focus as she tries to catch her breath.

“Well, I guess the forecast was right for once,” Christen gasps out, clutching a fading stitch in her side.

Tobin doesn’t answer, sitting with her legs pulled up to her chest and her arms wrapped around her knees, eyes wide as she stares somewhere behind Christen.

“Hey,” Christen says, scooting forward so she can put a tentative hand on Tobin’s wrist. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah,” Tobin says, but Christen can barely hear her over the rain. “I’ll be fine.”

Christen knows that Tobin doesn’t like storms, so she leaves her hand where it is and waits.

“I guess you were right,” Tobin says after a few long minutes, straightening her spine and flipping her hand over so that Christen can hold it firmly. “About the forecast.”

“I was going to ignore that part,” Christen says, smiling a little. “I didn’t want to shove it in your face that I was right.”

Tobin just looks at her, and Christen doesn’t mind until she starts giggling.

“What?” Christen says, cheeks turning warm in the cool rainy air still trapped inside the tent. “I didn’t do anything this time.”

“Oh, babe,” Tobin says, her voice so full of affection that it makes Christen’s chest ache and seize up. “Look at your hair.”

Christen freezes, her hand immediately shooting up to feel her hair which, thanks to the humidity and rain, has turned into a strange mess of frizzy yet slick curls.

“Stop,” she says, embarrassed. “I hate it when it’s like this.”

“I like it!” Tobin exclaims, body opening up to welcome Christen to her. Christen follows, moving
infinitesimally closer between Tobin’s spread legs. “It’s cute! I don’t think I’ve ever seen it like this, actually.”

“You know I usually straighten it,” Christen mumbles as Tobin reaches out to wrap a ringlet around a finger. “You’re adorable,” Tobin tells her. “And beautiful. And there’s no one else in the world I’d rather be stuck in a small tent with during a thunderstorm.”

“Really?” Christen asks, looking at Tobin through rain-heavy eyelashes.

“You made me giggle,” Tobin says, and she’s smiling like she can’t help it, but she also looks a little pained. “Do you think I do that a lot?”

“No,” Christen admits reluctantly. “I don’t.”

“You do things to me,” Tobin says, her eyes wide and bright.

“You called me babe,” Christen says. “Is that something that you do a lot?”

Tobin smiles even bigger.

“That’s something I’ve never done before,” she tells Christen. “On a scale from one to ten, how much do you mind if I call you that?”

“A zero,” Christen answers way too quickly. “I don’t mind at all.”

“Good,” Tobin says before looking around them. “You know, babe, this tent is a little small. You might have to sleep on top of me so we can both fit.”

Christen blushes but doesn’t bat an eyelash as she responds. “Well, you did say one of us could sleep in the car,” she says, and she’s only kidding, but it’s well worth the shocked look on Tobin’s face and the mutual giggles that they dissolve into.

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After a trip to the campground showers – Tobin thankfully doesn’t say anything when Christen declines to leave her stall in anything less than her pajamas – and a packed dinner or peanut butter and jelly sandwiches and apple slices, complete with cosmic brownies that spark an entire conversation about childhood lunches, the stars are twinkling in a cloudless sky and Christen is thankful that the entire storm had only lasted an hour or so before rolling away. She’s a little nervous about sleeping next to Tobin in a space about the size of a king mattress, but Tobin has promised to be on her best behavior. “I mean, you didn’t have to make it so hard on me,” she’d said, eyeing Christen’s pajama shorts and tank top. “But I’ll keep it clean.”

That goes to hell pretty quickly.

It starts off innocent enough, the two of them exchanging brief kisses as they talk about their day and Christen admits that this might be the best first date ever, no matter how unconventional it is. But Tobin is up on her elbows gazing down at Christen with longing in her eyes, dilating her pupils as Christen bites her lip and wonders if the feeling she has low in her abdomen is something she should act on. It’s something she hasn’t felt in a very long while, the very visceral tug that has her exerting
effort just to concentrate on their conversation and her breathing, but it’s not unwelcome in the slightest.

One kiss goes on for too long, and suddenly Christen finds herself leaning up to wrap a hand around the back of Tobin’s neck to hold her steady. It gets heated, their tongues tangling and everything a mess of swirling desire and the knowledge that it wasn’t supposed to go this far. They were supposed to behave, Christen reminds herself, as Tobin’s hand that isn’t holding herself up sneaks over Christen’s waist. Her shirt is still blocking skin on skin contact and she’s only holding tight, fingers switching between grabbing at fabric and spreading out to cover more area, but it’s clear that Tobin is restless and Christen is tempted to indulge her.

All Christen means to do is lay down and make it a little easier on them both. She just wants Tobin’s tongue in her mouth and a hand smoothing over her back, fingers trailing along her spine and sending shivers to her toes. The swooping feeling in her stomach won’t go away, every once in a while returning with a vengeance and reminding Christen what it feels like to want someone. Christen can’t remember the last time she wanted someone so badly, if she ever has, and in the midst of a frantic kiss and poorly restrained hands, it serves as a notice that this is okay. This is something she wants and it feels right and it’s okay.

That’s probably why she pulls Tobin down with her, unintentional but very much appreciated.

From there it escalates, with one of Tobin’s thighs falling between Christen’s. Christen’s hands smooth down Tobin’s back, hard and muscled even through her loose t-shirt, and she sends a prayer up for the fact that Tobin is wearing sweatpants so that she doesn’t have to feel smooth thighs and firm calves up close and personal. That’s where it goes to hell though, when Tobin shifts to steady herself and ends up slipping on her elbow, instead falling onto Christen so that her thigh brushes up between Christen’s. It makes Christen keen into Tobin’s mouth, back arching involuntarily.

Tobin draws back, but only barely.

“Are you okay?” she asks, her voice rough and lower than Christen has ever heard.

“Yeah,” Christen says quickly, afraid of her voice cracking. Up until now it’s just been heavy breathing and the rustling of clothes and body parts, the steamy tent making Christen feel like she needs to strip off all her clothes.

“So I can do this, and you’re okay with it?” Tobin asks, and she sounds a little strained and wrecked at the same time, hips purposefully grinding down once on Christen’s thigh. It makes Christen gasp, her own hips tilting upwards in search of something, preferably Tobin’s very toned thigh between hers.

“Yeah,” Christen breathes out, her voice thin and airy, easily swallowed up by the atmosphere surrounding them.

But then Tobin keeps doing it and Christen can’t breathe, her heart skittering along as she tries to keep from moaning while Tobin tucks her face in Christen’s neck, lips open and pressed to the skin there.

“Fuck, babe,” Tobin mumbles into wild and dark curls. “I can’t stop unless you tell me to.”

It’s almost obscene, the way Tobin is riding her thigh, but Christen can’t even mind. Her head is angled towards the sky as she fights for air and tries her best to get enough friction to alleviate the ache between her legs. She can feel it, feel how much her body wants this and maybe it’s because
she isn’t used to feeling this way that she’s let it carry on this far.

But something about Tobin’s words make Christen’s voice of reason speak up, the rational side of her brain telling her that this is far enough, that if Tobin is okay with stopping than they should.

Christen wants Tobin, but not like this. Not like an afterthought, rough and sloppy in a tent after promising to keep things under control. Right now, she’s pretty sure that neither of them are in control.

So she tells Tobin to stop, her voice cracking, and she’s embarrassed but Tobin stops moving and kisses Christen until they’re both tired and can barely stay awake much longer.

“Sorry,” Tobin whispers once they’re lying next to each other, Tobin turned towards Christen. “I got carried away. I couldn’t help it.”

“It’s okay,” Christen whispers back. “I got carried away too.”

“You’re just so hot,” Tobin murmurs, kissing the exposed skin of Christen’s shoulder before brushing a leg up against Christen’s. “I couldn’t stop on my own. I have poor self-control.”

Christen blushes but doesn’t say anything.

“You have more than enough for the both of us, though,” Tobin continues.

“I really don’t,” Christen admits, her voice shaky and still recovering. “I didn’t want to stop, but I didn’t want it to happen like that.”

“Me neither,” Tobin exhales in a contented sigh, sliding a hand across Christen’s stomach to hold her close. “Another time, yeah?”

“Yeah,” Christen mumbles, but Tobin is asleep and dead to the world and Christen thinks that even if they need to continue this conversation tomorrow, at least it started off as well as it could have.
Allie might have been exaggerating slightly, but Tobin isn’t exactly the ideal sleeping partner.

She steals the blankets, snuffles in her sleep like an adorable puppy, and swings her limbs about like she can’t get comfortable even when unconscious. It wakes Christen up in the middle of the night but only partially so that she has barely enough presence of mind to swat Tobin’s forearm away from her face and steal back enough blanket to cover her body before drifting off again. When she wakes for good, the sun weak but sending out enough light to poke through the tent, she cracks an eye open to try and help orient herself. It takes a while, tracking her limbs and trying to figure out if she’s brushing up against blankets or sweatpants.

It’s almost embarrassing, she thinks as she nuzzles the side of her face into her pillow, trying to shake the last dregs of sleep from her brain, how close her and Tobin still are after several hours. Sleeping next to someone for the first time is an experience (Christen isn’t counting that one time on the apartment couch) and even while her eyes search for each of Tobin’s body parts, she can’t help but ignore the swell in her chest as she realizes that they’ve done this. They’ve spent an entire night together, hands searching each other out while legs tangled and faces turned towards each other. Tobin’s face is angled towards Christen, her breathing deep and steady as she sleeps on.

The last thing Christen wants to do is move. Tobin looks soft and beautiful, the way she feels when she’s looking at Christen in that way that makes them both melt. There’s none of the bravado, of the confidence and assuredness that Tobin carries with her almost everywhere she goes. It’s like seeing her soul. It’s like the inside of her head is painted on her body for Christen to see, to get a good look at so that she knows Tobin hasn’t been making this up the whole time.

For the most part, Christen trusts Tobin. She trusts her not to lie to her about the little things, and the mostly trusts her when it comes to the big things, but she can’t help her hesitance. Christen can’t help that maybe Tobin overestimates her own feelings, or that the wrong things have driven Tobin to her in the first place. Maybe Tobin just wants to kiss Christen and is willing to handle the things that come along with that. Maybe Tobin doesn’t understand how deeply she’s pulled Christen under, how afraid Christen is that she’ll never break through the foggy haze Tobin has her in. Christen worries that she herself is too far gone to ever recover from this, and that Tobin in her casual way is simply pursuing a girl that she has a crush on. Because for all that Tobin tells Christen about how she feels, about how she needs her and how Christen is different, that doesn’t mean that Tobin understands what Christen needs from her.

Because Christen needs so much from her. Christen needs Tobin soul in her hands, given to her to hold onto with utmost care. Christen needs Tobin in her entirety, from beginning to end, from A to Z, from negative infinity to infinity. She needs everything Tobin is, because she’s scared and learning how to trust and doesn’t know how to trust anything less than everything. Christen watches Tobin as she sleeps, pulse quickening as she thinks of ever not having this, and she tries not to panic at the realization of how much Tobin has come to mean to her in such a short amount of time.

But then Tobin’s breathing turns shallow and her lashes flutter, and before Christen can back away and maybe run away from the intimacy of being the first thing someone sees when they wake up, Tobin is awake and gazing dopily at Christen.

“Hey,” she says, her voice scratchy and laden with sleep.

“Hi,” Christen whispers back.
“Kiss me,” Tobin demands, and it’s syrupy sweet and thick, the corners of her mouth turning up into a tired smile even as she tries to look firm. Christen hesitates, but then Tobin is puckering her lips and looking like someone Christen never wants to leave, and she’s powerless to resist. It’s fast, the way she nudges forward to press their lips together in the most precious kiss either has ever experienced. It’s short – lasts barely five seconds, really – but it leaves them both a little breathless and in disbelief that something so small can feel so big.

“Good morning,” Christen chokes out, swallowing oceans of emotion so they don’t all come rushing forth.

“Good morning, babe,” Tobin says, and she’s sleepy and soft, so soft that Christen has to bite her tongue and keep from blustering something out that she hasn’t really thought through, that she doesn’t know if she’s ready to say. “How did you sleep?”

“I slept okay,” Christen says quietly, not wanting to raise her voice even minutely and end up ruining the delicate balance they’re maintaining between them.

“I didn’t wake you up, did I?” Tobin asks, and she looks a little sheepish. “I know that I wake Allie up sometimes.”

“Maybe once,” Christen says, blushing as Tobin rolls her tongue over her bottom lip. “But only barely. I went right back to sleep.”

“Good,” Tobin says, moving forward to kiss the tip of Christen’s nose. “Listen, I’d love to stay here with you, but I’ve really got to pee. You think we can grab our stuff and head to the restrooms?”

“Yeah, of course,” Christen says, slowly sitting up. As much as she’d love to stay with Tobin too, she’s feeling restless, like she needs to move and maybe put a halt to the overly serious and affectionate air in the tent.

From there Christen tries her best to maintain distance and keep from being too familiar with Tobin, but she fails massively. They brush their teeth with their elbows brushing, and share Christen’s bottle of contact solution when Tobin shamelessly admits that she forgot hers.

“At least you remembered your toothbrush,” Christen says dryly. “I wouldn’t have shared that with you.”

At that, Tobin widens her eyes and acts offended.

“Christen,” she says dramatically, holding a hand to her chest. “I’ve had my tongue in your mouth, but you wouldn’t let me borrow a simple toothbrush from you?”

Christen can’t help but giggle at that, even more so as Tobin continues to pretend to be affronted.

They change out of their pajamas and begin the walk back to their campsite, trying to plan the rest of their day.

“I thought that we might go to the lake, but I don’t think you have a bathing suit,” Tobin says, glancing at Christen. She’s insisted on carrying both their bags, which Christen thinks is kind of ridiculous, but she tried to change her mind yesterday to no avail.

“Yeah, I don’t.” Christen says, looking at her own bag and trying to remember if she packed one at all and just left it behind at the apartment.

“Maybe later this week or something,” Tobin hums under her breath. “We have a home game, so I
“So how long can I stay with you?” Christen asks a little nervously. She doesn’t want to overstay her welcome, shacking up in the apartment while Allie and Tobin have their own things to do, but she also wants to maximize their time together and she’s praying that Tobin feels the same way.

“Until I have to leave for our next away game,” Tobin answers. “I mean, it’s not strictly one home, one away, one home – you know? So right now we have two home games in a row, so you can stay with me until I have to fly out next. And I mean, technically you don’t have to leave then. You could always stay in the apartment while we’re gone, but you’d be so bored and probably wouldn’t want to. You probably have better things to do with your summer anyway.”

She’s rambling, like she does sometimes when talking to Christen, and it’s endearing enough that Christen can’t resist stopping as they approach the tent to slip a hand on her cheek and turn her face to kiss her. When she pulls away, biting her lip and blushing a little, Tobin chases her lips for a moment, for one last kiss before they keep walking the last few yards.

“I love kissing you,” Tobin says happily.

“I love kissing you too,” Christen mumbles as they sit down. Tobin scoots her chair as close to Christen’s as possible, knees bumping together as they get comfortable. Breakfast is simple, granola bars and water bottles, and Christen peels open her wrapper as Tobin speaks.

“Do you think I could kiss you again later?”

She says it funny, like she’s not sure if she can and it makes Christen frown a little, wishing she hadn’t put her hair up in a ponytail so she could swing it forward to hide her embarrassed face.

“Of course you can,” she says, trying to keep the affront out of her voice. Really, she knows that she’s done nothing wrong, but Tobin is giving an impression that maybe she has. “Why wouldn’t you be able to?”

Tobin shrugs, unscrewing the cap of her water.

“I don’t want to push you,” she says offhandedly. “I feel kind of bad about last night.”

Christen’s cheeks are on fire now, and hiding them seems pointless because while they must be glaringly obvious, Tobin also isn’t looking at her.

“Don’t feel bad,” Christen says automatically.

“I do, though,” Tobin says, and it’s quiet but earnest at the same time. “I let things go too far and then I couldn’t control myself.”

“I let things get that far,” Christen maintains. “I knew that I really just wanted to kiss you, but I let it get further than that. That’s my fault.”

“No, no no,” Tobin says emphatically, shaking her head determinedly. “It was my fault and you know it. Don’t try to take the blame.”

“I knew I wasn’t ready,” Christen argues, embarrassed that she’d had to stop things the way she did, that she can’t be normal and let things progress naturally, that she can’t let Tobin have what she clearly wants, that she’s holding them back from furthering whatever connection they have between them. “I wanted to be, I thought I could be, I tried to be, but I wasn’t. So I feel bad and I’m sorry for that.”
So that she doesn’t have to meet Tobin’s eye after that, Christen tilts her water bottle up to her mouth and begins drinking, thinking that she’d rather drain the bottle than face Tobin’s disappointment.

“Wait, no,” Tobin says, and she sounds a little frantic, a little urgent as she moves even closer to Christen, on the edge of her chair as she plants a cool palm on Christen’s lower thigh. “Babe, no, don’t be sorry for that. You don’t have to worry about being ready or anything, I don’t care if you’re ready. I’ll wait for you as long as you need me too.”

Christen blinks up at the cloudy sky as she swallows, throat bobbing and refusing to stop.

“Talk to me,” Tobin wheedles. “Chris, do you really think that I wouldn’t wait for you? Or that I’m not going to be happy because you stopped me because you weren’t comfortable? I don’t want to do this if you aren’t one hundred percent sure, please trust me on that.”

The water bottle half full, Christen slowly sets it down in her lap and secures the top with shaky hands before Tobin keeps talking, this time slipping Christen’s hands between hers.

“Because I’d just kiss you for a million years,” she says seriously. “I wouldn’t care about anything else. I mean it, I love kissing you. I’d do it forever. Do I want all of the other fun stuff that comes afterwards? Hell yeah. Do I want it if you don’t? No.”

“I just feel stupid,” Christen mumbles, looking down at their hands. Tobin’s hands always feel so nice and calm against Christen’s hot palms, her fingers so strong and steadying. She feels a little like she’s going to be sick, but something about Tobin’s skin on hers makes it a little easier. “Because you’re so experienced and I’m not. I don’t want to be really bad and have you never want to do it again.”

“That’s not happening,” Tobin says, sounding so sure that Christen almost believes her.

“How do you know, though?” Christen asks.

“Because,” Tobin says confidently. “The only thing better then you being amazing in bed – which you don’t know that you aren’t, by the way – would be me getting to go through that learning process with you.”

“There’s no way that would be better,” Christen says, face burning. She wants out of this conversation, but now Tobin is swinging up a leg to hook over Christen’s knees, and it’s clear that she’s not allowed to go anywhere.

“It would be way hotter,” Tobin says, and the way her eyes glaze over for half a second almost makes Christen laugh. “Is that what you’re worried about? Because if it is, I want you to know that you shouldn’t be.”

Christen takes a few moments trying to psych herself up to keep talking, chewing on her granola bar while Tobin watches with great interest.

“There’s something else,” she says eventually, and Tobin doesn’t look surprised in the slightest.

“Okay,” Tobin says expectantly. “Hit me.”

“I don’t like….do this a lot,” Christen starts out, fumbling for words. “You probably know that already.”

“Okay,” Tobin says, and she’s open and patient and everything Christen could hope for but she still feels nervous. “Yeah.”
“It’s kind of...important to me,” Christen tries to explain.

“Are we talking about sex?” Tobin asks directly, and she doesn’t look ashamed in the slightest, something that Christen is kind of envious of. “Or are we talking about liking each other and having feelings for each other?”

“Both,” Christen says. “I think I’m just afraid that it’s going to mean more to me than it will to you.”

She says it in a rush of words, praying that Tobin understands her so that she doesn’t have to repeat herself. However, Tobin seems to understand perfectly, mouth falling open as she processes what Christen is trying to say.

“Oh babe,” Tobin says, leaning over to kiss Christen’s cheek. “Babe, that’s not going to happen.”

“How do you know?” Christen asks, cheek burning where Tobin’s lips linger. “How do you know how much it will mean to me?”

“Because,” Tobin says seriously, reaching up a hand to twirl Christen’s ponytail, “there’s no way it could mean more to you than it would to me. That’s how much it means to me. That’s how much you mean to me.”

Christen buys herself a minute to respond by chewing a few bites of granola bar, washing it down with water.

“You mean so much to me,” she admits, glancing up to Tobin who is looking at her firmly, steadily, like she isn’t about to go anywhere any time soon. “It’s a little scary.”

“I know,” Tobin says, and Christen actually believes her, actually believes that Tobin knows what it’s like to be a little scared of your own feelings for someone. “I know. I feel the same way.”

Christen isn’t sure where the sudden burst of bravery comes from, but she’s opening her arms and reaching for Tobin who responds enthusiastically, welcoming the hug and squeezing her tightly.

“You don’t have to worry about any of it,” Tobin whispers fiercely into Christen’s ear. “You take as long as you need to be ready. I’m not going anywhere.”

Christen believes her. She isn’t sure why she does, but she trusts Tobin enough to believe what no matter how long it takes, Tobin will still be there.

* 

All she wants to do is hide, but Tobin is making that pretty impossible.

It’s just a day trip, she tells herself. It’s just the beach. She’s been with friends a million times, and just because she’s with Tobin (and Allie and their teammates, but she’s been ignoring that part pretty well) doesn’t mean that she can’t enjoy herself. Sure, Tobin’s never seen her in a bathing suit before, and she’s more than a little nervous about shedding her cover-up in front of the one person whose opinion matters, but that shouldn’t keep her from having fun.

She wants to have fun, but she also wants to hide. Tobin clearly has a preference for what she wants, insistently pulling on Christen’s hand and jerking her head back towards the sparkling waters.

“Come in the water with me,” she begs.

“We literally just got here,” Christen says, looking around them. The beach is moderately crowded,
families posted up on colorful towels and Tobin’s teammates in the middle of slathering themselves with tanning oil, and even though Christen doesn’t think anyone is staring with her, she’s still panicking about what Tobin will think.

“Do you want to lie down for a while?” Tobin ask hesitantly. She’d been on a roll the entire trip to the coast, spending most of the hour and a half talking about getting in the ocean. It’s clear what she wants, and Christen doesn’t want to deny her.

“You can go ahead,” Christen offers, slipping off her flip flops and gently taking her hands back from Tobin so she can lay down her towel. “I’ll be with you in a minute.”

“Are you sure?” Tobin asks. “I want to hang out with you, I don’t care if it’s up here instead of down in the water.”

“Just give me thirty seconds,” Christen promises. “Let me take this off, and I’ll come in with you.”

It only takes a little more persuading, but eventually Tobin heads down the sand. As soon as her back is turned, Christen quickly whips off her cover-up and begins walking down behind Tobin.

Of course, just before Tobin hits the water, she turns around – her mouth open, clearly about to shout out a question – and upon seeing Christen, promptly trips over her own feet until she falls into the foamy shoreline.

It’s embarrassing, enough so that Christen wants to melt into the crushed shells beneath her feet while Allie’s recognizable laughs rings out.

“Tobin!” Allie shouts as everyone else starts laughing. Tobin is still spluttering, saltwater probably up her nose as she struggles to stand. “Tobin, get it together! She’s only a girl in a bikini!”

“You guys are assholes!” Tobin calls out, finally up on both feet as Christen blushes intensely. She doesn’t know if she’s ever felt this embarrassed in her life, which is saying something. It only gets worse as Tobin jogs up towards her, looking unfairly attractive in her swimsuit, and a kind of determination on her face that has Christen standing still and wishing she’d never stripped down at all.

“Come here,” Tobin says purposefully, brows furrowed at she barely looks at Christen before wrapping her arms around her waist, pulling her in just close enough to kiss. The gesture is sweet and reassuring, but something about Tobin’s bare arms against her skin has Christen’s nerve endings on fire, crawling with anxiety and anticipation. “They’re just being jerks to me, okay? Don’t worry about them. It has nothing to do with you.”

“They’re laughing,” Christen says against Tobin’s shoulder, head dipped down in the hopes that she’ll be able to shrink enough to disappear. “They’re laughing at me.”

“They’re laughing at me,” Tobin says insistently. “You haven’t done anything except look way too hot for your own good and make me literally fall head over heels for you.”

“I’m not even hot,” Christen excuses, but Tobin isn’t having any of it as she kisses her again, hard and hot before straightening up, slipping her hand into one of Christen’s.

“Yes you are,” she says firmly, pulling her down towards the ocean. “You’re very hot. We’re not arguing about this.”

“I’m not trying to,” Christen says, yelping when her toes come into contact with the water as it washes over their feet. It’s not as though the water is cold, but it’s a shock compared to the burning
sun overhead.

“Listen, just forget about them and hang out with me,” Tobin says, forging onward until her ankles are covered, then her shins, then her knees. Christen sticks close, hands coming to hold onto Tobin’s strong biceps. She feels a little silly for clutching onto Tobin so tightly, for clutching onto her at all, but she doesn’t know what else to do with herself. Besides, Tobin doesn’t seem to mind, holding out her arm to make it easier for Christen.

“I want you to be able to hang out with your friends if you want to,” Christen says, glancing back to where they’re all mashed together in a sea of towels and half naked bodies. “You don’t have to stick close to me.”

“I want to,” Tobin says stubbornly, stopping once the water hits her waist. Christen stands with her, shaking her ponytail off of the back of her sweaty neck. “Listen, I get to see them at practice almost every day. I only get to see you whenever you’re in town. Besides, I don’t like them even half as much as I like you. And they don’t let me kiss them either.”

Christen bites her bottom lip and looks at Tobin who, as usual, is looking open and earnest and honest. If Christen ever doubts Tobin, she thinks, all she needs to do is look into her eyes to be reassured of what the truth is.

“Do you want to kiss them?” she asks, and she isn’t sure what makes her say it, but as soon as she does she realizes how much she needed to.

“No way in hell,” she says vehemently, shaking her head and reaching for Christen who comes easily. “You’re the only person I’ve even thought about kissing for a very long time now.”

When Tobin kisses her, Christen can’t help but smile.

*

Tobin likes the water, Christen comes to find out.

Actually, she loves the water, but when Christen mentions it, she downplays it and tries to act casual. Tobin’s spent the better part of their time in the water with her arms wrapped around Christen from behind. Sometimes they’re around her shoulders and sometimes they’re around her waist, but they’re always around her and Tobin is always pressed up against her. It feels close, close and intimate so that Christen almost doesn’t even mind when Allie and all the other girls come to hang out with them. They hover in the water in a circle and Tobin laughs when appropriate but mostly spends her time presses wet and salty kisses to Christen’s neck and shoulder while the others talk.

With Allie in the middle of telling a story about her and her boyfriend, Tobin sighs and moves Christen’s ponytail from one side of her neck to the other so she can kiss the skin there. Christen squirms, a little uncomfortable with how Tobin can’t stop kissing and touching her in front of everyone else, but it feels too good to stop.

“You really like the water, don’t you?” Christen murmurs so that only Tobin can hear her. She doesn’t want to be rude and make it clear that the two of them couldn’t be any less interested in the conversation at hand, but she also can’t help that Tobin seems to be determined to keep them wrapped up in their own little world.

It’s kind of nice, she has to admit to herself. She tilts her head to the side and exhales as Tobin kisses her neck once more, arms tightening around her waist.
“Yeah,” Tobin answers, her voice low and content. “Love it, really. We have the shore up in Jersey, but it’s not quite the same. This is way better.”

Christen digs her toes into the sand below them so that they don’t start drifting, pressing back into Tobin as she does so.

“I hope I’m not keeping you from having fun,” she replies. “I mean, you’re probably super bored just standing here with me.”

“Listen, it’s either stand here with you or listen to everyone else gossip about their boyfriends. What do you think I’d rather be doing?”

She knows that it’s mostly rhetorical, but Christen shrugs her shoulders against Tobin’s and answers anyway.

“I don’t know, maybe actually swimming or something?” Christen suggests, leaning back into Tobin. Something about her broad, muscled shoulders and warm tanned skin has Christen feeling unexpectedly comfortable. With the clear blue water surrounding them and the cloudless sky above them, it’s kind of like paradise. It’s hard to remember the last time she felt so happy, so at peace with everything going on in her live, and Christen takes half a second to marvel at the fact that that’s because of Tobin, someone she never expected to be so close to in the first place.

“Nah, I’d rather be kissing you,” Tobin says, and Christen almost feels bad for making Tobin support all of her weight, but she’s feeling way too relaxed and it’s all she can do to stand on her own. Thankfully, Tobin doesn’t seem to mind. Besides, Christen’s too busy enjoying feeling how close Tobin is to her. There’s no space between them, and while slipping into this kind of nearness is rather intimidating, it also feels natural in a way that has Christen’s heart thumping along without worrying her.

“I feel like they’re watching us,” Christen whispers, turning her head back towards Tobin who rewards her with the smallest of kisses pressed to her lips. “Like they’re judging us.”

“They’re not,” Tobin whispers back. “If they’re watching us, the only thing they’re thinking about is how jealous they are that I get to touch you and they don’t.”

Christen blushes, legs weakening at the knee for a second. Tobin bends to catch her, hoisting her up and laughing low in her throat as she does so.

“Stop it,” Christen tells her. “Stop saying things like that. They’re definitely not jealous.”

“They’re definitely jealous,” Tobin says matter-of-factly, a chuckle still caught in her throat despite her attempts to stifle it. “I mean, look at you and what you’re doing to me. If you rub your ass against me one more time, I’m going to start making some pretty embarrassing noises.”

Christen feels her cheeks burn and she’s pretty sure it’s not because of the bright summer sun.

“I’m not doing that,” she says, just as she adjusts her stance to keep her balance.

Oh, wait –

“Yes you are,” Tobin says, and this time when she laughs, it sounds a little strangled. “I’d be sorry, but it’s your fault that you have the most amazing ass I’ve ever seen.”

Christen slowly turns around in Tobin’s arms, coming face-to-face with a clearly flustered Tobin. It’s strange to see her like this, mildly embarrassed and reluctant. Still, that doesn’t stop Tobin from
holding Christen close, bare abdomens jammed up against each other. It makes Christen’s heart jump into her throat, pulsing wildly and she feels too hot all of a sudden, like the water around her is boiling. It’s almost too much, but Christen doesn’t want to move a single millimeter.

She wonders if it’s humanly possible to be any closer to Tobin. It seems almost impossible, but she feels like they’re too far apart as it is.

“I do not,” she says stupidly.

“You do so,” Tobin says seriously, looking into her face even though she kind of looks like she’d rather not explain this to Christen in the middle of the ocean, her friends and teammates mere yards away. Despite Christen’s best efforts, they’ve been drifting slowly, but she’s definitely not complaining. “I don’t want to be, like, crass about it, or anything. But you’ve been killing me with it since we got in the water. You really didn’t know?”

“I had no idea,” Christen says, and they’re both embarrassed but they’re both holding on tightly, and something about that realization makes Christen grow even warmer. “I won’t do it again.”

“Don’t you dare say that,” Tobin tells her. “I like it. A lot.”

Christen’s lips search out Tobin’s – partly because she doesn’t know what else to say on the subject, but partly because she just wants to. The kiss is scorching, with Tobin’s mouth moving frantically and Christen responding as eagerly as she can. It’s wet and sloppy, blistering and impatient, and Christen isn’t at all cognizant of the fact that she’s got her tongue as far in Tobin’s mouth as she can manage while Tobin’s hands run frantically up and down her bare back, fingers getting caught on the string holding her top together before reaching down to press into the twin dimples above the waist of her bikini bottoms. Her hands keep moving restlessly, up and down as Christen grips the back of Tobin’s neck with one hand, holding her tight so that she couldn’t get away even if she wanted to. Her other hand rests on Tobin’s cheek, thumb smoothing along her cheekbone while she arches into Tobin’s grip on her hips.

Tobin’s wandering hands slide down to Christen’s ass, and while it feels better than she’d ever imagined – and Christen would be lying if she said that she hasn’t imagined this many, many times – she stiffens anyway, painfully away of where they are as she slowly pulls back from the kiss. Christen is gasping, chest heaving against Tobin’s which is moving just as deeply, and she doesn’t quite know what to say. They’re both breathing irregularly, and Tobin can barely keep her eyes open, lids heavy with desire as she licks her own kiss-swollen lips and stares at Christen’s mouth before trailing downwards. Christen blushes as she realizes where Tobin’s gaze stops, feeling like maybe she should cover up what little cleavage she has, but instead she runs her hands down Tobin’s arms, marveling at the toned muscle and the way it all flexes as Tobin’s hands play with the edge of the fabric of Christen’s bikini bottoms.

“Is this okay?” Tobin asks eventually, each word sounding like it takes a tremendous amount of effort to get out. Her voice nearly cracks on the last word and she clears her throat once she’s done speaking, eyes finding Christen’s and looking at her expectantly.

“I mean, I think so,” Christen manages to say. “I just – we’re in public and – “

She struggles with words after that, stammering until Tobin shushes her with a gentle kiss, fingers stilling and pressing into the small of Christen’s back.

“I’m not trying to push you,” Tobin says, and the small bit of insecurity in her voice is both sobering and intoxicating to Christen’s thoughts.
“It’s okay,” Christen says, trying to take a deep breath. “I’m okay. It’s just a lot, and we haven’t done this before, and we’re where people can see us.”

“Right,” Tobin acknowledges with a nod, looking like she’s slowly gathering herself together. “I liked it, though.”

“I did too,” Christen says, and the way Tobin looks at her – hungry but tender – overwhelms her, so she throws her arms around Tobin’s neck and rises up on her tiptoes. She can feel Tobin’s arms tighten reflexively, holding her tight and hauling her a few inches up and out of the water, strong forearms wrapped around Christen’s back.

“I like it when you touch me,” Christen mumbles, burying her face into the side of Tobin’s face. “But it feels like too much for right now.”

Tobin squeezes her tightly.

“I know,” she says patiently. “I understand. We can go as slow as you need to. Trust me, you already give me more than I could ask for. I’ll wait as long as you need to.”

“Thank you,” Christen breathes out, and her chest feels tight with emotion but it’s a little easier to inhale as Tobin slowly lowers her to the bottom of the ocean. “Can we go hang out with your friends for a while?”

“Yeah, of course,” Tobin says with a smile, brushing back stray hair into Christen’s ponytail. “Whatever you want. They’ll probably make fun of me, though, for ditching them to make out with you.”

“I thought you said they weren’t watching!” Christen exclaims.

Tobin laughs, loud and beautiful with her head thrown back as she shuttles Christen sideways back to where her teammates are bobbing in the water.

“I lied,” she says, only looking a little bit guilty. “They’ve been staring this entire time and they’re going to tease me so hard.”

“Should I have stopped?” Christen asks nervously, clinging to Tobin who swiftly walks them through the ocean.

“No way in hell would I have let you,” Tobin declares, and when she grins at Christen, it’s easy to decide that she’s willing to stick by Tobin’s side through the teasing if it means getting smiled at like that.

* 

Christen is seriously wondering if she’s honestly that gullible.

“Let’s watch a movie,” Tobin had suggested.

Christen had agreed, and after settling into Tobin’s bed with popcorn and water bottles, they’d only gotten through about half an hour of movie before Tobin had snuggled up to her.

“Just one kiss,” she had promised, but Tobin’s mouth is like a gateway drug and Christen should have known better than to let her.

Maybe it’s because the room is dark, or maybe it’s because they’re watching a movie that they’ve
both seen a dozen times (the down side of watching a classic together, she’s realizing), but Tobin is way more interested in pressing Christen down into the mattress and Christen can’t exactly blame her. With Tobin solidly on top of her and sucking lightly on her neck as Christen tries to catch her breath after endless minutes of making out and sporadic grinding, she’s only thinking that she wishes they’d done this sooner.

Sure, they’ve slept in Tobin’s bed together ever since they got back from the camping trip. It had seemed pointless to be separated, but aside from PG-rated makeout sessions, things hadn’t gone very far. Now, though, after spending an entire day mashed up against Tobin’s bikini-clad body and having had her ass grabbed by the most talented hands she’s ever had the fortune to come across (and they haven’t even really gotten to show her what they’re capable of, Christen marvels), it’s hard to resist each other.

Their hair is still damp from showering, bodies still laden with heat and a sort of satisfied but bone deep exhaustion that only comes after a day in the sun. It tampers down the desire radiating from both of them, but only so much can be done when Tobin is licking a wide stripe up the column of Christen’s neck. She nearly moans in response, but clenches her teeth instead.

“I really wish you weren’t wearing this,” Tobin mutters aimlessly, tugging at the hem of Christen’s oversized t-shirt as she pushes it up near her waist, fingers brushing purposefully against the skin exposed above the band of her underwear.

“I don’t have to be,” Christen grasps out, hips jerking up into Tobin’s, and the way that Tobin suddenly freezes has her worrying that she said the wrong thing.

“Chris,” Tobin says slowly. “Chris, babe, you’re not wearing anything under this.”

She tugs at the shirt again, and Christen blushes. She knows that, she knows that Tobin knows that, she knows that she’d forgone one in favor of comfort and that Tobin had started eyeing her chest the moment it had become apparent. So she’s not exactly surprised that Tobin pushes herself up on her palms to stare at Christen’s chest, even while covered by her t-shirt, her mouth open and her tongue wetting her lips in a way that feels dirtier than it really is.

“I know,” Christen says, her voice quiet. “I know I’m not.”

Tobin slowly uses one hand to push up the hem of the shirt, fingers trailing along the skin of Christen’s stomach. Christen’s intake of breath makes her abdominals contract instinctively, and Tobin’s corresponding sharp inhale relaxes Christen in a way. She’s not the only one feeling some kind of way about what they’re about to do.

When the shirt reaches the top of Christen’s stomach, just below her chest, Tobin pauses.

“Are you sure this is okay?” she asks, eyes locked on Christen’s with a dark kind of intensity that has Christen biting her bottom lip and wondering if Tobin’s always affected her this strongly and she just refused to acknowledge it. She just nods in respond, and Tobin surges down to kiss her squarely on the mouth as she swiftly pulls the shirt up. The kiss doesn’t last long, as they have to move to get the shirt off, and the sudden blast of cool air across her chest makes Christen reconsider the entire thing.

Tobin just stares. Her eyes rove Christen’s entire upper body, from her collarbones down to her hips, stopping to stare at her exposed breasts and linger over the dip of her bellybutton. Christen lets her look, thinking about she’d probably do the same thing if their positions were reversed, but after a few minutes she begins to feel awkward, especially as her nipples begin to harden in response to the hungry glazed-over look on Tobin’s face
Christen clears her throat, and it’s like Tobin snaps out of it.

“Sorry,” she apologizes unnecessarily, leaning down to kiss Christen briefly. “You just – you look so fucking good, babe.”

Her voice breaks on the last word, but Christen ignores it as Tobin kisses her again and brings a hand up, smoothing over Christen’s stomach as it goes. Tobin’s hand is warm as it comes to cover a breast, squeezing for a few moments before a thumb moves to sweep over a nipple. She busies herself with feeling Christen up for a while, rolling nipples between fingers and tugging lightly, and Christen gasps into Tobin’s mouth during a particularly rough tug.

“I’ve been thinking about this,” Tobin mumbles against Christen’s lips, breathing heavily into her mouth. “Fuck, I’ve been thinking about this for so long.”

“How long?” Christen asks shakily, arching her back just enough to press her chest into Tobin’s hands.

Tobin keeps cursing under her breath, a hand on each boob as she trails kisses along Christen’s jaw.

“Since you called me,” Tobin says, determined but breathless, “and I helped you get yourself off over the phone.”

“Oh, God.” Christen keens. “Can you – more?”

So Tobin amps it up a little, sucking on Christen’s collarbones while pinching roughly at her nipples until Christen’s not sure whether she’s feeling pain or pleasure. Maybe it’s both, she thinks, biting her bottom lip and trying not to cry out.

“I can’t stop thinking about your voice on the phone,” Tobin says against skin. “Telling me how your nipples looked like they needed to be sucked on. About how you like it when they’re bitten. Is that what you want from me now?”

“Yeah, please,” Christen fights to get out. She’s breathing shallowly, grasping fistfuls of sheets and praying that Tobin never stops because it all feels too good. It feels so good that Christen is lamenting never having done this with her before, and the moment Tobin’s tongue darts out to swipe over a nipple, Christen thinks she might bite through skin with how hard she’s trying to stay quiet. Allie’s in her room, and definitely doesn’t need to know what’s going on.

“Is this okay?” Tobin asks, looking up at Christen through long lashes and dark eyes.

Christen just nods frantically, wanting her to keep going. Thankfully, Tobin seems to understand and it’s like sweet relief, the way her mouth closes over Christen’s nipple. Her back arches off the bed and she takes a deep steadying breath, but nothing is enough for Christen to adequately steel herself for the barrage of sensations that hit her as Tobin relentless works on her chest. One breast is being squeezed tightly while the other is being tortured by Tobin’s mouth, her teeth applying the perfect amount of pressure before soothing Christen’s aching nipple with a kiss and her tongue.

When she switches to the other, deft fingers tugging roughly on Christen’s swollen and spit-slick nipple, Tobin alternates between sucking on her other hard peak and scraping her teeth over it, refusing to let up as Christen clenches tightly, one hand on Tobin’s hair and the other in the fabric of her own shirt. Christen can feel wetness between her legs and maybe that’s what makes her moan out, just a little, but enough so that Tobin can clearly hear. She knows she does because Tobin moans in response, quiet but vibrating through Christen’s chest. It’s hot, so hot that Christen doesn’t even mind when Tobin sneaks her free hand underneath her to find Christen’s ass, squeezing and
pulling her hips up until they’re perfectly positioned to slow grind it out.

Another moan falls from Christen’s mouth, but she does her best to suppress it before it can get too loud.

“Stop that,” Tobin mutters against Christen’s chest, tongue and lips doing awful things to Christen’s nipple as she speaks. “I want to hear you, okay?”

All that does is make Christen moan even louder, and this time she lets herself feel it, the rolls of pleasure making it difficult to even think about being ashamed of the noise. Tobin grabs her ass harder, moving against her rougher like she’s out of control, and Christen decides that something needs to change here.

She’s never felt so close to someone in her life, but she’s also never been so turned on in her life. It’s too much and she’s feeling overwhelmed, grabbing at Tobin’s shirt and thinking that as long as their bottom halves stay clothed, it’s okay to even the playing field.

Tobin’s skin is tan and smooth, toned muscles soft and hard underneath Christen’s fingertips as she pushes the fabric of her shirt up and over solid abdominals.

“Are you sure?” Tobin says, pulling away from Christen’s chest to ask, moving up to stare her in the eye.

“Yeah,” Christen says, and she wants it so badly that she doesn’t even bother blushing “I do. I just really want to feel your skin on mine.”

So Tobin swallows thickly, nodding slowly as she lets Christen gradually work her shirt up and off her torso. When it’s gone, it doesn’t take long for Tobin to fall onto her in a crushing embrace. Christen would rather have gotten a nice long look at Tobin’s naked body, been able to commit every line and curve to memory, but that will have to wait until another time because Tobin’s rock hard nipples are brushing against her own and her hips are moving against her own. It’s almost too much, breathing hitched and sense all over the place. Christen’s eyes fall closed as Tobin kisses her frantically, shallow and desperate as Christen clutches onto her tightly, hands finding purchase on her sides just by her breasts.

“Listen,” Tobin gasps into her mouth. “Listen, babe, listen.”

“I’m listening,” Christen answers pleadingly, not sure of what Tobin needs but willing to do almost anything asked of her in this moment.

“We’ve got to stop,” Tobin groans, like it’s the last thing she wants. Her breathing is heavy and she can barely get it all out, but that doesn’t stop her from trying. “Listen babe, I want you so bad but not like this. Okay?”

Christen slowly stops moving, trying to catch her breath as Tobin backs off infinitesimally, still keeping their bodies aligned but relocating her face to bury itself in Christen’s neck.

“I’m too close,” she says, voice muffled. “I’m too close, but not like this. When we do this, I want it to be for real. Special. I want to strip you naked and take my time. I want to kiss every inch of your body and not have it just because you got the best of me. Okay?”

“Okay,” Christen exhales, a hand coming up to stroke Tobin’s hair, wild and beautiful as it falls down her back. “Okay. I want that too.”

“Good,” Tobin says, pulling her face out of Christen’s neck. “Good. Because I really want that.”
Tobin kisses her a few times – lingering kisses that neither of them want to let go of – before scrambling off of Christen, throwing something in her face after a few moments.

“What’s this?” Christen asks, trying to sort through – ah, it’s her shirt.

“Thought we might as well get dressed and settled in for bed,” Tobin says with a shrug, turning her shirt right side out.

“What if,” Christen says, feeling her chest and face grow hot, “we just forgot about the shirts?”

In slow motion, Tobin lowers her shirts and studies Christen in disbelief.

“Like…sleep without them?”

“Yeah,” Christen says, very aware that she’s sitting up topless, in nothing more than a pair of lacy boy shorts. “Would that be okay with you?”

“On a scale from one to ten,” Tobin says, staring at Christen intensely, “my level of okay with that is an eleven.”

“Good,” Christen says in relief.

The speed with which Tobin chucks both hers and Christen’s shirts across the room is almost alarming. It makes Christen laugh, and by the time they’re snuggled under the covers, they’re both giggling.

“Here,” Tobin says, pushing Christen forward to get comfortable behind her. “Like this.”

“Why?” Christen asks. She doesn’t mind, but Tobin’s persistence is a little suspicious, especially when she goes quiet all of a sudden. “Tobin, why?”

“Because,” she says, burying her face in Christen’s hair. “Because I like your ass, okay?”

Christen bursts out into more giggles, smiling so hard that it makes her face hurt.

“You’re ridiculous,” she tells Tobin, relaxing into the light grip she has on her hip.

“Yeah, but you’re smiling anyway, aren’t you,” Tobin says confidently. Her bare chest is pressed against Christen’s naked back and it’s intimate without being overly sexy.

“Yeah,” Christen admits reluctantly. “I don’t get why you’re so obsessed with it though.”

“Want to hear a secret, babe?” Tobin whispers, already drifting off to sleep.

“Yeah.”

“I’m smiling too.”

* *

When Christen wakes up, it’s to sun streaming through the window and an empty but still warm spot beside her.

She takes a moment to stretch and find her shirt from the night before, and then slowly pads out to the rest of the apartment. Tobin doesn’t have practice this morning, she remembers, and figures that she’s probably in the kitchen with Allie. She’s spot on about that, walking in to see Tobin hitting
Allie’s arm.

“It’s not funny!” Tobin protests, Allie cackling away as she narrowly avoids another blow. “Allie, come on! We really were just watching a movie!”

Christen clears her throat as her cheeks pink, and the speed with which Tobin straightens up and sends her a beaming smile is remarkable.

“What are you guys talking about?” Christen asks curiously, even though it’s pretty obvious.

“Nothing,” Allie says casually, leaning against the counter away from Tobin who is busy shoveling scrambled eggs into her mouth. “But hey, keep an eye on this one for me, okay?”

“Okay,” Christen says slowly, not quite understanding. “Sure thing.”

“She had trouble standing sometimes,” Allie says solemnly. “Especially around you.”

Tobin groans around a mouthful of egg and Christen shifts her weight around awkwardly.

“Allie,” Tobin says plainly once she’s done chewing, “shut up. Christen, come here?”

She phrases it as a question but Christen goes anyway, welcoming the good morning kiss Tobin leaves on her cheek.

“What’s going on?” Christen asks quietly as Allie goes back to her seat and her own breakfast.

“Nothing,” Tobin says quickly, but Christen isn’t buying it.

“Why don’t you want to tell me?” Christen asks with a frown. “It’s about me, right?”

“Yeah, but it’s not important,” Tobin says.

“I feel like you’re laughing at me.”

“Babe, no!” Tobin says, eyes going wide. “We’re laughing at me! Look, I’ll tell you but you have to promise not to laugh, okay?”

“I won’t,” Christen promises.

“It’s stupid, really,” Tobin says, faking nonchalance as she shrugs and continues eating. “Allie’s just making fun of me for falling yesterday.”

“Oh,” Christen says, feeling a little disappointed. “That’s it?”

“She’s like a teenage boy around you,” Allie speaks up, carrying her cereal bowl to the sink. “She’s horny like, all the time. All she does is stare at your ass and think about your boobs. It’s gross.”

“Oh, that’s enough from you,” Tobin says, reaching around Christen to smack Allie again. “Get out of here and stop embarrassing me here. I’m trying to be cool, okay?”

Allie rolls her eyes and mutters something about how Tobin isn’t cool at all, but she leaves the room without complaint.

“You’re not laughing at me, are you?” Tobin asks Christen.

“No,” Christen says, shaking her head. “I wouldn’t ever. I just can’t believe that.”
“It’s true,” Tobin insists.

“You’re not kidding?” Christen asks nervously, worrying that maybe it’s all some joke that she’s not in on.

“Babe,” Tobin says, dumping her empty plate in the sink and swigging from her glass of water. “Come here.”

So Christen steps closer to her, and within seconds, Tobin’s lifted her up and hoisted her on the kitchen counter.

“Tobin!” Christen squeals.

“Babe!” Tobin squeals in response. “Listen. I need to know something.”

“Okay,” Christen asks, heart beating quickly. “What is it?”

“I know we kind of already are, but I figured I’d ask for real just in case,” Tobin says, and she’s doing that rambling thing again. “Just in case I was being presumptuous and you don’t actually want this. I figured you deserve to be asked. Even if we already are. So, I have something to ask you.”

“Tobin,” Christen says impatiently, “just say it.”

Tobin takes a deep breath and pecks Christen on the mouth before speaking again.

“Will you be my girlfriend?”

Christen thinks her heart stops.

“Wait, really?”

“Yes, really,” Tobin says, looking slightly offended. “Do you think I’m joking?”

“Me?” Christen asks, motioning to herself. “Are you sure?”

“Do you want to say no?” Tobin asks, and she looked a little crushed. “Because you don’t have to say yes.”

“Of course I’m saying yes,” Christen says instantly. “As long as you’re sure.”

Tobin smiles the world’s biggest smile, leaning in to press her forehead against Christen’s.

“I’ve never been so sure of anything in my life,” she declares. “I’ve never wanted anything as much as I want to call you my girlfriend.”

“Can I call you my girlfriend?” Christen wonders, and when Tobin kisses her hard, she figures she has her answer.

“Hell yeah,” Tobin says when they break apart, and Christen dives back in to deepen the kiss, moaning into her girlfriend’s mouth.

Her girlfriend.

Tobin is her girlfriend.

Christen shivers, resting her elbows on Tobin’s shoulders as Tobin plants her hands on Christen’s
knees.

“Yeah, sure,” a voice sounds sarcastically as the refrigerator door shuts. “I’m sure the two of you do things besides make out. Right, Tobin?”

“Leave me and my girlfriend alone,” Tobin shoots back, and Christen is blushing but Tobin is kissing her again and she almost doesn’t even care about Allie.

It’s hard to care about anything when her girlfriend is holding her tight around her waist, tight like she never wants to let go.
i know i would be looking at you

When Christen realizes that she’s going to have to break the news to Kelley, she moans and groans and begs Tobin to do it instead.

“She’s your best friend,” Tobin refuses as politely and sweetly as she can, so much so that Christen almost stops asking. “Besides. Her and I kind of aren’t talking right now. It’s up to you to break the ice.”

“But you’re my girlfriend,” Christen whines, realizing that maybe she’s abusing the use of that word and all the privileges that come along with it. “Aren’t you supposed to do things for me?”

“Absolutely,” Tobin says, looking a little less sure of herself as Christen slides a hand up Tobin’s thigh. “That’s why we’re watching your favorite movie right now, and not mine. Tell me again – what do you have against Harry Potter?”

“The two of you need to shut your mouths,” Allie says plainly from the armchair in the corner. “I have no idea what’s going on.”

So Christen shuts her mouth and blushes, but it’s not the last time they have the discussion – so called because Tobin doesn’t like arguing and refuses to label their conversations as such.

They have it again that night in bed, when Tobin is more preoccupied on slipping a hand under Christen’s shirt and complaining about the amount of clothes they’re wearing.

“Remember the other day when you let me take this off,” Tobin mutters into Christen’s neck.

“I’ll let you do it again if you talk to Kelley for me,” Christen tries to negotiate, but the giant groan that Tobin lets out is one more of exasperation than arousal.

“She’s your best friend,” Tobin tells her, slowly calming down until she’s nestled into Christen’s side. “She deserves to hear it from you. If you let me tell her, you’ll regret it forever.”

Christen hates considering that she might be wrong about this, but Tobin has a point. However, Christen won’t be telling her that.

“I won’t,” she tries to tell Tobin. “I’d be forever grateful that you did this for me.”

“Nope,” Tobin mumbles. She’s falling asleep, Christen can tell, and she’d be more annoyed if Tobin didn’t look so soft and adorable, lips pouting slightly as her eyelashes flutter closed. “Not doing it.”

“Just tell Alex already, so she can let Kelley know and I don’t have to do this,” Christen tries again, but Tobin just barely shakes her head before going slack, clearly no longer awake.

By the time Christen works up the courage to shakily call Kelley’s number, she’s asked Tobin to do it for her approximately thirteen times, and Tobin has gently refused her the same number of times. She really doesn’t want to do this, but she knows that she has to. Tobin is right, that Kelley deserves to hear it from Christen herself instead of from Tobin or Alex, but that doesn’t make the situation any less nerve-wracking.

Kelley still doesn’t know that Christen has a girlfriend. They haven’t talked since they were last in the apartment together, and even then it was more polite obligatory small talk than anything, but there have been a few Instagram likes to let the other know that they’re not dead and don’t hate each other.
It’s awkward, mostly because there’s no clear explanation to what Kelley had done wrong, just a vibe that she’d acted wrongly. Maybe it was because she’d told Christen about Tobin without meaning to, or maybe it was because she’d let Christen think she had a choice when she really didn’t, not at all. Regardless of why, the strange feelings between the two had led to stilted communication, effectively preventing Kelley from knowing the private and recent developments in Christen’s life.

She’s never really been the sort of person to splash her life over social media, not like Kelley. Christen is more private and cautious, only posting occasionally when something is especially worthy. She’d snapped a picture with her sisters during the few days she’d been home and ended up posting after they had convinced her too, but otherwise Christen hasn’t bothered her. All of her followers have no business knowing about Tobin, and while Christen isn’t ashamed of her, she just wants to keep things private. She’s never been the sort to make obnoxious posts about how obsessed she is with her significant other, anyway.

So when she calls Kelley, she figures that even if Kelley suspects something, she won’t know for sure.

The phone rings long enough that Christen starts to think this was a waste, that it will go to voicemail because Kelley is still upset and doesn’t want to hear from her. Maybe they’re just not best friends anymore – it happens. As the thought occurs to Christen, it’s like someone has reached through her chest to grab tightly at her heart. Her chest feels tense and painful, like she’s panicking and having trouble breathing. All Christen can think about is how much she misses Kelley, even though she’d forgotten. Being with Tobin, as wonderful as it’s been – like something straight out of a fairytale, really – has provided a distraction from Kelley, and Christen hasn’t even been aware of it this entire time. Instead of stressing about Kelley, Christen has been frolicking about with her new girlfriend, and she feels rather bad about that.

She’s thinking the worst, about Kelley never wanting to talk to her again, when the ringing suddenly stops.

“Christen?”

Christen feels choked up, like she can’t speak.

“Christen? Hey, did you mean to call?”

Kelley sounds a little out of breath, and Christen has to take a deep, shaky breath before finally speaking.

“Hey, Kell,” she says, and the first tentative waves of relief start to hit her.

“Chris,” Kelley says, and she sounds just as nervous as Christen feels. “Hey. What’s up?”

“Not much,” Christen says. She’s standing in the front of the apartment, slowly pacing back and forth while knowing that Tobin is waiting for her just inside in case she needs her, in case this doesn’t go well. “How are you?”

“Good, good,” Kelley answers. “I wasn’t expecting you to call.”

“I wasn’t sure you’d pick up,” Christen admits, clutching the phone tighter. “I thought you weren’t going to.”

“My phone was on vibrate and I didn’t hear it,” Kelley tells her. “I had to run across the room to answer in time.”
“Thank you for answering,” Christen says a little awkwardly. “You didn’t have to.”

“You’re my best friend,” Kelley says plainly, like Christen is confusing her. “Of course I have to answer.”

There’s a stretch of silence before Christen speaks up again.

“Are you busy?”

“I’m never too busy for you,” Kelley says smoothly. “I’m hanging out with Alex and Syd, but they’re too busy arguing over this week’s episode of The Bachelorette to care about what I’m up to.”

“Okay, cool,” Christen says, nodding to herself for reassurance. “So, can you talk for a little bit?”

“Of course,” Kelley says again. “What do you want to talk about?”

Christen cringes a little at that, at knowing that their friendship has become so strained that she clearly can’t call without an ulterior motive. It’s true, yes, but she makes a mental note to change that if this phone call ends successfully.

“I’ve missed you,” she says, instead of starting out by dropping a bombshell.

“Me too,” Kelley says, and it’s nearly the most serious she’s ever been, which makes Christen feel a little better. At least she’s not the only one who’s been missing their friendship.

“I kind of have something to tell you and something to ask you,” she says, and she’s clearly stalling, but for once Kelley doesn’t call her out on it.

“Which do you want to do first?” Kelley asks, and she’s patient and Christen wonders if Kelley’s changed in the few weeks since they talked last.

“Tell you,” Christen says, and she’s trying to psych herself up to get the words out, but it’s harder than she thought it would be. “You know Tobin?”

“Yeah, I know Tobin,” Kelley says with a chuckle.

“I’m kind of dating her,” Christen says, almost dreading Kelley’s reaction.

Kelley doesn’t react badly. In fact, she barely reacts at all.

“Oh,” she says. “Well, that’s good.”

Christen frowns, a little disappointed, and that’s what gives her the confidence to continue.

“She’s kind of my girlfriend,” she tells Kelley.

“Oh, Chris,” Kelley says, and Christen thinks that Kelley almost sounds happy. “Is she really?”

“Yeah,” Christen says, and she smiles to herself, just thinking about Tobin and the fact that she gets to call her her girlfriend. “She is.”

“Good for you,” Kelley says, and it sounds genuine. “I mean, I figured it would happen, but I’m glad for you.”

“Thank you,” Christen says, and her smile softens with relief at Kelley’s reaction. “I was worried that maybe you’d be mad.”
“What would I possibly be mad about?” Kelley asks. “I basically sent you off to go make this happen. If you two didn’t end up together, I’d be mad.”

“Really?” Christen squeaks a little.

“Yeah,” Kelley says, light laughter in her voice. “Christen, the two of you really liked each other. I don’t know how you didn’t see it.”

Instead of dwelling on that – it’s in the past, it’s something that she’s talked about with Tobin, it’s not something she wants to think about – she moves on.

“So we were wondering if you wanted to come down this weekend for her and Allie’s game,” Christen says.

“’We’ were wondering, huh?” Kelley asks.

Christen blushes.

“Well, Tobin wanted to invite Alex,” she tries to explain. “But I’ve been hanging out here, and Tobin thought that I should be to one to invite you, and before doing that I realized that you needed to know that Tobin and I aren’t just friends anymore – “

“I get it,” Kelley interrupts her. “I do. You guys are really a couple now, aren’t you?”

Christen blushes deeper. “Kind of.”

“So this weekend?” Kelley asks. “Alex and I?”

“Yeah,” Christen confirms. “Is that okay?”

“Yeah, I think that will be fun,” Kelley laughs. “I mean, a game and my best friend. What more could I ask for?”

“I hope you’re talking about me,” Christen says, smiling and feeling lighter than she has all day.


“You’re mine too, Kell,” Christen responds, just as sincere. “Love you.”

“Love you too.”

They hang up not too long afterwards, and Christen is quick to make her way back into the apartment. Tobin is sitting at the kitchen table with Allie, laughing as she spoons applesauce into her mouth, but the moment Christen comes into view, Tobin is looking at her.

“Hey, babe,” she says brightly. “How’d it go?”

Christen doesn’t say anything – she just approaches Tobin who sets her applesauce down and welcomes her onto her lap, holding her tight while Christen burrows into her.

“Badly?” Tobin asks worriedly. “Did she not take it well?”

Overwhelmed with happiness, Christen can only shake her head.

“What happened?” Tobin asks, rubbing a hand up and down Christen’s back. “Tell me, babe.”
“She took it well,” Christen mumbles into Tobin’s neck, hair in her mouth. “Really well.”

“That’s amazing,” Tobin says, kissing the top of Christen’s head. “I’m really proud of you for calling her.”

Christen grins, barely kissing Tobin’s neck before slowly unraveling herself from their embrace.

“You guys are so gross,” Allie says, chair legs scraping on the floor as she gets up. “Honestly. I’m going to need a puke bucket as long as you’re both here.”

“I’m sorry,” Christen says, embarrassed. “We’ll stop.”

Allie pauses, fingers drumming on the tabletop as she fixes the two of them with a considering look.

“Nah,” she says finally, shaking her head. “Be happy. Just try to be less obnoxious about it.”

Tobin clutches Christen tighter as Allie heads for the garbage can in the kitchen.

“So,” Christen says, lowering her voice so that Allie can’t hear them. “I feel like I deserve a reward for doing that.”

Tobin’s eyebrows shoot upwards.

“A reward?”

“Yeah, since I called her like you asked me too,” Christen says, slowly wrapping her arms around Tobin’s shoulders.

Tobin adjusts them so that Christen is more comfortably settled sideways in her lap, feet dangling down above the floor.

“What kind of reward do you even want?” Tobin asks, and she sounds a little wary, but Christen thinks that if she tries enough, she can get what she wants out of her girlfriend. Maybe that’s bad of her, but she has a sneaking suspicious that Tobin will be completely okay with this reward.

“A million kisses,” Christen answers instantly.

“That’s a lot of kisses,” Tobin says seriously. “That’s a pretty big reward for doing something that you were supposed to do anyway. You want a million kisses just for doing the right thing?”

Christen tries to hide the sneaking smile on her face, pouting instead.

“A million kisses,” Christen answers instantly.

“That’s a lot of kisses,” Tobin says seriously. “That’s a pretty big reward for doing something that you were supposed to do anyway. You want a million kisses just for doing the right thing?”

But can I have them?” Christen pushes.

Tobin heaves an exaggerated sigh, eyes crinkling at the corners as she smiles affectionately at Christen.

“Yeah, fine,” she says in mock defeat. “But it might take me a while. I don’t know if you have the kind of time for that.”
“That’s okay,” Christen assures her. “I have all the time in the world for kisses. I’m not going anywhere.”

“Can I give you a million and one, then?” Tobin asks, and that’s when Christen knows. “You know, while I’m at it?”

Christen just knows, from the way her heart feels entirely too large for her chest and the way she can’t wipe the smile off her face. She knows from the way she leans in to kiss Tobin who’s smiling too, from the way she feels exhilarated and secure at the same time. She knows from the fact that she’s nearly forgotten that Allie is in the other room, as evidenced by the sounds coming from the tv. She knows because she’s slipping her tongue into Tobin’s mouth, one of Tobin’s hands clutching at her ass as best as she can as she hoists her more safely into her lap. She knows from the way she tangles a hand into Tobin’s tangled hair, from the way her heart races, from the way she pauses only to have Tobin reach her other hand up to Christen’s face to hold her close, to keep her from moving away and breaking the kiss.

Christen just knows, and that’s how she knows.

* 

At first she’d been thankful that she had people to watch the game with, preventing her from hanging out in her seat like a loser loner. Now, though, Christen is rethinking that train of thought and seriously considering ditching Alex and Kelley in favor of a nice and peaceful second half.

It’s beyond nice to have them around, even for a short time. Kelley had thrown herself at Christen the moment that they’d seen each other, and it had been just like old times. Any lingering awkwardness between them had dissolved almost instantly and Christen was more grateful than words could express. However, Christen was just as grateful for the way that Kelley seemed to so easily accept her and Tobin’s relationship. She knew that it couldn’t have been too easy for her – it had never been easy in the past, with Kelley always rudely insisting that Christen deserved better and complaining about the time together that inevitably ended up being sacrificed – but somehow she seemed to be okay with Tobin.

Maybe it was because she knew Tobin so well. Maybe it was because she was a more mature person than she used to be. Maybe it was because Allie and Alex were there to entertain her. Regardless of the reason why, Christen was still grateful. At least this way, Kelley didn’t seem to mind too much when Tobin snuck in a few of the million kisses she owed Christen, or when Christen found herself whining for Tobin to come sit down next to her.

Not that she needed to do that. Tobin would have sat down by her anyway.

But at the stadium, Kelley seems to have suddenly joined in with making fun of how attached Christen and Tobin are to each other. Alex and Allie have been doing it since the moment they’d seen each other, much to Tobin’s irritation and Christen’s embarrassment, but she’d been hoping that Kelley would keep the conversation focused on the game going on in front of them and not the fact that Christen is proudly sporting Tobin’s jersey, hair pulled up in a bun to make sure that everyone can read the name and number on her back.

That had been too much to ask for. They’ve been teasing her about the jersey and the ten minutes it had taken for Christen and Tobin to say goodbye upon Tobin’s departure for the stadium. Instead of all of them driving together and heading on over early, Allie and Tobin had left the apartment before the others and it killed Christen to be separated from her. It still was killing her, but seeing Tobin step back out on the pitch after heading in for halftime makes the ache in her chest lessen slightly.
Christen misses her so much. She doesn’t know how they’re ever going to do this long distance thing. In less than a week, Tobin is due back with the national team for a pair of pre-Olympic friendlies, and Christen is less than equipped to handle that kind of thing. Tobin isn’t just a friend anymore, isn’t just a crush – she’s Christen’s real live girlfriend, whom she’s become accustomed to waking up next to every morning and kissing goodnight, and taking a step back from that is going to be near impossible to live though. She can barely survive a handful hours apart now that they’ve basically become a package deal, and despite the fact that the never wanted to turn into one of those girls who can’t bear to be without their significant other, she wouldn’t have it any other way.

After all, Tobin isn’t just a faceless significant other. She’s Christen’s girlfriend, her everything, her world. And Christen likes it that way, wants it to stay that way.

That’s the only thing that makes it possible to make it through the teasing: the knowledge that Tobin is hers, and she is Tobin’s.

“You’re drooling a little.”

That snaps Christen back to attention, away from where Tobin’s stretching while talking to a few of her teammates.

“Am not,” Christen says immediately, instinctively raising a hand to wipe at her chin just to make sure that Alex is, in fact lying. Christen doesn’t drool, not even over Tobin, and she’s not about to start.

“You might as well be,” Alex says, rolling her eyes. “Listen, I know she’s hot, but you know that there are other players on the field. Right?”

“Alex,” Kelley says, sending Christen a sympathetic glance. “Give her a break.”

“Yeah, Alex,” Christen echoes. “Give me a break.”

“I mean, can you really blame her?” Kelley continues, and Christen frowns. “Like, look at that hamstring stretch.”

“True,” Alex says thoughtfully, tapping her chin. “And she did adjust her shorts earlier. That was totally swoon worthy.”

“You guys are making fun of me,” Christen says, trying not to pout.

“We would never,” Alex declares, but the mischievous glint in her eye says otherwise.

“Can’t we all just enjoy the game?” Christen begs. “Without all of this extra conversation?”

“We can enjoy the game,” Kelley says, pointing to herself and Alex. “But you’re too busy staring at Tobin’s ass.”

Christen blushes deeply.

“I’m not,” she says, shaking her head. “I’ve been watching, I promise. I promised Tobin to try and learn the game more so I can understand what she’s talking about. Right now it kind of just goes in one ear and out the other.”

“You two are so gross,” Alex says, but it’s with a soft sigh that implies she might not be as disgusted as she says she is. It reminds Christen of Allie and the way she talks to Tobin and Christen about limiting the level of affection allowed in public areas of the apartment – fond but exasperated, like
she’s happy for them but is tired of watching them stick their tongues in each other’s mouths at any
given moment of the day.

It really isn’t Christen’s fault that her eyes stay glued to Tobin when she’s on the field. The benefit of
going to her club games is that she plays every second of every game – she’s a rookie, but she’s that
good – and Christen can admire her play for a full ninety minutes plus. She’s pretty sure that she’s
not the only one watching her and she way she backs herself into corners before beating two or three
defenders to coast along towards goal, doing her damn best to get someone a goal and herself an
assist. Tobin is eye-catching when she plays, and that really isn’t Christen’s fault.

Besides, she hasn’t been staring at Tobin’s ass. She’s been staring at the calves and the way her
socks keep slipping further down them, but she’s never going to admit that to anyone in the world.

The game ends in a draw, 0-0. It’s a bit of a disappointment, but Christen is more worried about
Tobin than anything.

“I hope she isn’t too pissed,” she says nervously as Alex and Kelley gather their things, straightening
out hemlines and flipping hair over their shoulders before filing out of their row. Tobin doesn’t
exactly guarantee first row tickets during games, but she usually sits Christen behind the bench with
a decent enough view so that she isn’t straining to see the action. “I know that she really wanted to
keep up their winning streak.”

“It’s still the beginning of the season,” Kelley tries to say, but Alex is snorting.

“Kelley, you know damn well that it doesn’t work that way,” she says, turning around and walking
backwards, something that has Christen worrying for her life as they slowly descend a small flight of
stairs. “Would you be telling yourself that if you were playing?”

Kelley looks like she’s considering Alex’s words, and then looks over at Christen apologetically.

“She’s going to be pissed,” she confirms. “Knowing Tobin...”

She lets her words trail off, a meaningful look on her face, and Christen has to hold back a groan
because she does, in fact, know Tobin. Painfully competitive at times and ruled by emotion when she
plays, Christen knows that Tobin is going to be far less than pleased with the result. Christen has
been lucky so far, mostly seeing Tobin come off of wins, and she’s praying that Tobin isn’t too
upset.

The sudden buzzing of her phone in the back pocket of her shorts seems to be a positive sign,
though. When Christen pulls it out and looks at it, she bites her lip and stops in her tracks, attempting
to decipher Tobin’s tone through the few words she’s chosen to type out and send.

“What’s wrong?” Kelley asks immediately.

“Tobin,” Christen says absently, chewing on her bottom lip as she reads the screen. “Texted me.”

“Is it dirty?” Alex asks enthusiastically, elbowing Kelley to get closer to Christen and attempt to peer
at the screen. “Your face says it must be dirty.”

Christen has no idea how her face could possibly communicate that when she’s pretty sure that the
only thing her face is giving away is that something isn’t right, but she just locks the phone screen
and tucks it back in her pocket.

“It’s not,” she says. “She just wants me to meet her by the gate. Is that okay with you guys?”
Alex heaves an exaggerated sigh and rolls her eyes.  

“What, can’t survive without each other?”

Christen blushes.

“No, we’re fine,” she insists, even though Alex clearly isn’t buying it. “Just – maybe you guys could join up with Allie and take her car to the restaurant, and Tobin and I will take my car.”

“I can’t believe it,” Kelley says, pretending to be hurt. “I come into town to see my best friend, for just a couple of days, and she decides to spend the entire time making out with her girlfriend. Okay. I see how it is.”

“Come on, Kelley,” Alex says, elbowing her hard enough for Kelley to scowl and rub at her arm. “Clearly this is the only time they have together.”

“Oh, right,” Kelley says slowly, nodding her head at Alex and shooting Christen a sideways look. “I forgot. It’s not as if they’re shacking up or anything.”

“Nope,” Alex says, shaking her head. “They barely get to see each other. Let them cherish this time alone.”

Christen just stares at them in disbelief, cheeks permanently red as she waits for them to finish.

“Are you done?” she asks. “Or should I just leave you to it?”

“Nah, we’re done,” Kelley says. “You go get her, tiger.”

Ignoring Christen’s protests that she isn’t a tiger (she isn’t even a cat person!), Kelley leans forward and wraps her arms around her tightly.

“See you at dinner,” she says. “Be good, okay?”

“Kell,” Alex says, stifling a laugh. “Come on. Don’t be as bad as she is.”

Kelley sticks her tongue out at Alex, but lets go of Christen easily and heads out of the stadium.  

Thankfully, Christen knows where to go. She’s dropped Tobin off at the gates before, and security isn’t tight at all, which makes it easy to walk just outside of them and wait. While she keeps an eye out for Tobin, the other is glued to her phone, rereading the text Tobin had sent.

*Really need you asap. Meet me at the gates? Alone?*

It kind of reminds Christen of the last home game back at school, the one during which she had anxiously waited for Tobin in the freezing cold. She had waited for what felt like forever, watching all the other team members filter out of the locker room before finally spotting Tobin with Alex. It’s almost like that now, except the sun is hot, sweat dripping down Christen’s back and plastering her jersey to her skin, and it’s not just her waiting for Tobin.

It’s also Tobin waiting for her.

Christen feels embarrassed, almost, by how much she’s missed Tobin in the few hours they’ve been apart. Every time someone walks out of the building her head perks up, searching for the messy hair and pretty eyes that she’s come to know almost as well as her own. She’s disappointed over and over again, wondering if Tobin already left, or if she remembered that Christen is waiting for her.

Hopefully Tobin isn’t wallowing in frustration, as Christen suspects.
Eventually, she sees Tobin come out, and it’s like they lock eyes immediately. Tobin gives a small but genuine half-smile, brighter than anything Christen has seen all day. It makes her heart balloon in her chest as she smiles back, waving childishly as Tobin jogs the short distance between the door and the gate. Really, it’s not necessary for her to jog – as soon as Christen finishes waving, she’s speed walking the few yards to the gate and then, as soon as Tobin’s close enough, she throws herself at her.

“I’ve got you,” Tobin mumbles, and she does.

Christen doesn’t mean to jump on her, but she can’t help herself. She can see the disappointment in Tobin’s face but the soft warmth there when she looks at Christen, and all Christen wants to do is make her girlfriend happy. She knows that Tobin won’t be happy with herself, with the way she played, with the result, and the way her team had lost steam in the last ten minutes. Christen knows that she can’t erase any of that, but she can certainly help Tobin move past it.

So she does the only thing she can, wrapping her legs around Tobin’s midsection and tucking her face into Tobin’s wet hair, clutching tightly as Tobin holds her back just as tight. Christen can feel the tension leave Tobin’s hunched shoulders, feel the vestiges of a grimace leave her face. She rubs the knots in Tobin’s deltoids, breathing in the scent of soap and shampoo and Tobin.

“Proud of you,” Christen mumbles into Tobin’s hair, because it’s true, and it’s all she thought while watching her play. “You’re so good, you know that?”

“I could have been better,” Tobin whispers, her voice small and quiet, like she doesn’t want anyone else but Christen to hear her admit it.

“You were the best,” Christen tells her, pulling back a little to look Tobin in the eye. “MVP, for sure.”

Tobin laughs, but it’s soft and almost shy.

“Player of the match, we call it,” she corrects gently.

“You’re my player of the match,” Christen says fiercely.

Tobin lets Christen kiss her, hard and passionate and breathless. Christen just needs Tobin to know how proud she is of her, how she saw her work her ass off on that field for every second she was out there. Christen needs her to know how amazing she is, and how much she means to Christen. She isn’t sure how else to tell her, but the kiss seems to be doing the job pretty well as Tobin cradles Christen’s face with one hand and responds just as fervently.

So when Tobin suddenly breaks away, Christen is a little confused.

“Did I – “

“Shh,” Tobin says, pressing her fingers to Christen’s lips. “I hate interrupting people, especially you, but you’ve got to let me speak.”

Christen just nods in confusion, looking at Tobin’s slightly desperate expression.

“Chris,” she says, “you’re the best thing that’s ever happened to me.”

Christen goes to speak, but Tobin just presses more firmly against her mouth and shakes her head.

“Let me do this, okay?”
She doesn’t wait for Christen to even nod before launching onwards.

“I never saw you coming,” Tobin says, like this is important, like she has to get it all out or she’ll spontaneously combust. It’s a little how Christen feels inside, but for her it’s more like she needs to kiss Tobin or else she’ll explode. “I’d never wanted to date anyone until you. I’d never wanted a girlfriend before you. You changed everything for me, do you know that?”

Christen doesn’t know what to say, so she stays quiet, looking at Tobin with wide eyes and wondering where this is going.

“You changed my world,” Tobin breathes out. “Okay, babe? You changed everything for me. You’re the best thing that ever happened to me, and I’m so in love with you.”

Something catches in Christen’s throat, and for a moment she feels like she can’t breathe, like she isn’t sure if she’s dreaming or not.

But Tobin is looking at her with big, hopeful eyes that only confirm what she’s just said, and Christen clutches her even tighter.

“You are?” she asks, and Tobin just nods.

“Yeah,” Tobin says, and she’s nervous but smiling so big. “I love you so much, baby.”

She isn’t sure whether it’s hearing it a second time around, or whether it’s being called “baby,” but it sparks something in Christen who leans down to press her lips to Tobin’s without any hesitation.

“I’m in love with you too,” she confesses, and suddenly, everything feels right.

The sun is shining just the perfect amount, and her jersey isn’t sticking to her uncomfortably anymore. Everything inside Christen feels settled and at ease, while feeling alive and free at the same time. The sky is a little bluer and the grass a little greener, and everything slots into place and Christen finally understands what love is like.

This is it. Being held by the only person she’s ever trusted with everything, including her heart. It feels right to trust Tobin with this, and it just confirms everything that she knows.

She’s in love with Tobin.

And Tobin is in love with her.

Tobin twirls Christen around, giggling with sparkling, crinkly eyes. She only stops long enough to kiss her, and Christen has never felt as alive in her life as she does in this moment.

*  

It almost feels like a secret, when they get to dinner. Something special and shared between just the two of them, who walk up to the table holding hands and laughing over the fact that Christen had nearly run a red light because Tobin had been distracting her by kissing the knuckles of her right hand. They’re laughing and barely aware of where they’re going, Christen narrowly avoiding walking smack-dab into Kelley’s chair.

“Nice of you to join us,” Allie drawls from where she’s shaking out her menu, reading it with a raised eyebrow. “Take a seat, lovebirds.”

It makes Christen blush – they don’t know, how could they possibly know? – as she takes her seat,
Tobin following to her left almost immediately.

“You didn’t give me a chance to pull out your chair for you,” Tobin says, leaning over to whisper in Christen’s ear as she scoots their chairs closer together.

“I can do it myself,” Christen reassures her.

“You shouldn’t have to,” Tobin says, and she’s nearly pouting as she sits back in her seat, stretching her limbs loose and long as she opens a menu.

“Have you guys been here long?” Christen asks, praying that they haven’t been holding the girls back.

“Only long enough to order water for everyone,” Kelley says, sitting across from Christen and pushing a glass in her direction.

“Glad to see you made it here okay,” Alex says, and Christen dreads what she’s going to say next. “I figured you’d still be making out in the car right about now.”

“Please,” Allie says, rolling her eyes. “They’re saving that for later, when we all have a front row seat to the action.”

“Oh, goody,” Alex deadpans.

“Hey,” Tobin says defensively, right hand sneaking underneath the table. “We’re not that bad.”

“So you’re telling me that I didn’t catch you with your hand in Christen’s bra when you were supposed to be making dinner the other night?” Allie asks rhetorically.

Christen blushes.

Maybe they are that bad, especially considering that Tobin’s hand is currently resting on Christen’s thigh. Sure, it’s down by her knee, but it’s still skin-on-skin contact, and the bread hasn’t even arrived yet.

“How did you even eat after that?” Alex marvels. “How did you still have an appetite?”

“Please, they weren’t making dinner,” Allie scoffs. “They got about as far as the fridge before they couldn’t keep their hands off of each other. We had to order in that night.”

“Listen, that take out was excellent,” Tobin argues. “Now stop teasing Christen.”

Allie and Alex exchange a look, but they quiet down until they’ve all ordered.

“So,” Kelley asks, drumming her fingers on the table, eyes flashing between Christen and Tobin as she draws the word out. “What’s it like?”

“Kelley, you know what it’s like,” Alex says. “A lot of gross PDA.”

“No, no,” Kelley says, shaking her head. Her eyes focus on Christen before she speaks again. “What’s it like being in a relationship?”

She says it a little quietly, and Christen’s hand, which has been intertwined with Tobin’s on the top of her thigh for the past ten minutes, gets squeezed in encouragement.

“Really nice,” she admits, looking sideways at Tobin. “Better than I thought it would be.”
Tobin’s dopey smile is infectious, and Christen doesn’t even realize that she’s grinning until Kelley calls her out on it.

“You can’t stop smiling,” Kelley acknowledges. “You look happy.”

“I am happy,” Christen admits, and this time she’s the one squeezing Tobin’s hand.

Kelley’s eyes shift to Tobin.

“Take care of her, okay?”

“I will,” Tobin promises earnestly, and it all suddenly feels a little too serious for the light atmosphere. Alex must think so too, with the way she speaks up next.

“So,” she says, fixing Christen with a look that spells trouble. “Does Tobin make you wear that shirt so the other girls don’t flirt with you?”

Tobin groans and Christen blushes.

“The other girls don’t flirt with me,” Christen says carefully, as Tobin’s fingers start rubbing tiny circles into her thigh. Something about her touch is growing more and more electric, and while part of her wishes it wasn’t so distracting, she isn’t about to stop her anytime soon.

“The other guys, then,” Alex suggests.

“Nope,” Christen says. “Not them, either.”

“Tobin,” Allie says, reaching diagonally to smack Tobin’s left hand, casually playing with her silverware on the tabletop. “You haven’t told your girlfriend about all the pretty girls and boys that can’t stop staring at her?”

“Be quiet,” Tobin says, unimpressed. “Or else she’ll notice and leave me for one of them.”

“Not happening,” Christen says automatically, and everyone else laughs. “Besides, no one looks at me.”

“Babe,” Tobin says, turning her head to kiss Christen’s cheek, “everyone looks at you. It’s a miracle that you decided to be with me when you could literally have anyone you want.”

“Not true,” Christen says. Being around everyone doesn’t seem healthy for her blood supply, seeing as how most of it seems to be ending up in her face. “Listen, I’m not the kind of person that people look at.”

“Take it from me,” Kelley speaks up wisely. “As someone who spends a lot of time eyeing up girls, you’re definitely the kind of person that people look at. On a scale of one to ten, I know I would be looking at you.”

Christen squints at Kelley, unsure if that was a weird compliment. “Thanks, Kell. I think?”

“You’re welcome,” Kelley says breezily, like she’s done Christen a favor.

“You know that the jersey was Tobin’s, right?” Allie interjects, refocusing everyone’s attention.

“What?” Alex asks, jaw dropping.

Allie nods smugly.
“Yeah, she wore it to the first couple of games and then decided to ‘lose’ it so she could give it to Christen. Coach was so pissed, Tobin’s lucky she’s his favorite.”

“None of this is true,” Tobin defends.

“I don’t know,” Christen says. “You did tell me that this jersey had been yours.”

“Thanks for having my back, babe,” Tobin groans, and Christen’s cheeks pink in a strangely delightful way as Tobin winds her fingers out from in between Christen’s to slip down and rest further down on her inner thigh.

It works out nicely, that Tobin is left handed while Christen is right handed. It means that Tobin can continue to trace abstract patterns on the inside of Christen’s bare thigh while still eating, and that Christen can hold her hand when it gets to be too much, wandering over to the rips in Tobin’s jeans when she’s feeling in control of herself.

Tobin has the nicest legs, Christen thinks absently, stroking Tobin’s exposed knee. Strong and lean, unbelievable calves leading up to muscled thighs that curve into the tightest ass. It almost makes Christen wish that Tobin was back on the field, stretching her body into the most torturous positions.

When dinner is done and they’re all just settling the checks, Allie tries to plan out the rest of the night.

“The girls want us to head out to a club with them,” she reads from her phone, fingers hovering over the keyboard. “What do you think?”

“I’ll go,” Kelley volunteers.

“Me too,” Alex says. “I need to be kissed like, yesterday.”

Tobin looks over at Christen, meaning in her eyes and subtext in the way she licks her lips, and she doesn’t even need to dig her fingers into Christen’s thigh for her to get the memo.

“I’m not really one for clubs,” she excuses.

“Yeah,” Tobin says, and it wouldn’t be suspicious if it weren’t for her uneven breathing. “I think Christen would rather have a quiet night in, right babe?”

“Right,” Christen confirms.

“Boring,” Allie says, rolling her eyes and texting rapidly. “Fine. But we’re coming back to change, so hold off just a little longer, you sex monkeys.”

Christen jumps in her chair at the forwardness of Allie’s comment, making Alex and Kelley burst into laughter.

“What?” Christen asks, alarmed. “What are you talking about?”

“We’re not blind” Alex informs them. “Just let me change into my slutty clothes and we’ll be out of your hair.”

True to Alex’s word, it doesn’t take long for the three of them to change into tight clothing and put on some lipstick. The entire time, Christen nervously hovers in the kitchen with a glass of water Tobin had gotten her, drinking steadily and trying to ignore the sudden weight of the situation. As soon as the door shuts, with Allie joking that they’ll be back later so keep it to the bedroom, Christen
feels awkward.

“So,” Tobin says dropping onto the couch and drawing her legs up with her, looking soft and inviting in her loose jeans and white t-shirt. “What do you want to do tonight?”

Christen licks her licks nervously, debating whether to set the water glass down in the sink or refill it.

“Um,” she says, no having any clue.

“We can do whatever you want,” Tobin offers. “It’s up to you. I know that you really didn’t want to go out with the others.”

“Did you?” Christen finds herself asking.

“Did I what?” Tobin asks, tilting her head in question.

“Want to go out with the others,” Christen asks, cheeks burning in embarrassment. “I mean, you didn’t have to stay here tonight just because I didn’t want to go.”

“I wasn’t going to leave you here all alone,” Tobin says, almost rolling her eyes as though it’s obvious. “That would be rude of me.”

“Yeah, but if you want to go, I don’t want to be the reason why you don’t,” Christen says.

Tobin frowns.

“Can you come here?” she asks, patting the couch cushion next to her, and Christen carefully sets the glass down in the sink before making her around the corners and through to Tobin. She sits down gingerly, not wanting to jostle Tobin too much, but it’s just about pointless as Tobin turns towards her and wiggles closer until her lanky legs are almost completely in Christen’s lap.

“I want to be with you,” she says earnestly, tucking a loose piece of hair behind her ear. She’d pulled it up after the game, into that stupid half-bun thing that Christen hates to love, but had taken it down once Christen had casually mentioned on the drive over to the restaurant that she was sad that she couldn’t run her fingers through it. “I don’t want to go to a stupid club. I want to stay at home with my girlfriend and kiss her and tell her I love her because I do.”

Christen swallows apprehensively.

“I love you, too,” she says.

Tobin leans forward to kiss Christen who meets her halfway, the both of them smiling into it.

“So,” Tobin mumbles against Christen’s lips when they pause for a second, neither willing to move any further away, “why on earth would I want to go with the others, when I can be here doing this with you?”

Christen feels her bottom lip wobble nervously, but she just tilts her head so she can keep kissing Tobin. It feels a little rushed, but maybe that’s just in her own head. She feels like things need to slow down, like her heart is racing too hard and she needs a moment to think. When she pulls away to see a smiling Tobin with her eyes still closed, kind of like she’s savoring the moment, she can’t help but smile too. Christen is still getting used to this, the feeling of having someone to depend on and be with at any given moment of any day, but she’s still loving all of it.

But then Tobin opens her eyes, and Christen’s nerves come flooding back.
“You want to be here too, right?” Tobin asks.

“Of course,” Christen says. “Where else would I be?”

“Good,” Tobin says, smiling and settling back into the couch. “So what do you want to do? Watch a movie? Find something on tv? Prank call Alex?”

Christen thinks long and hard, biting her bottom lip as Tobin watches her expectantly.

“I’m kind of hungry,” she admits.

“Okay,” Tobin says, nodding along like they didn’t just get back from dinner. “What do you want?”

A thought occurs to Christen, and she wonders if it really is this easy with Tobin. If they can just do whatever Christen wants, when she wants.

That’s how they end up in the car five minutes later, the both of them barefoot after deciding that they don’t actually need to go inside the McDonald’s that’s five minutes down the road.

“Don’t tell Allie,” Tobin says, as they wait in the drive thru line, the summer sun slowly setting around them. “If she finds out I had anything but a salad – “

“I won’t tell her,” Christen promises.

“What if she sees the wrappers in the trash or something?” Tobin says, distractedly looking past Christen at the menu.

“Tell her it was all me,” Christen tells her, a laugh caught in the back of her throat but not quite making it out.

“She’ll never believe that,” Tobin mutters under her breath, before speaking up. “Can I get a chocolate milkshake instead of a soda?”

“Yeah,” Christen says, easing off the brake so they can pull forward and order. “But you just made me want one.”

“So get one,” Tobin says, leaning over the center console to kiss the corner of Christen’s mouth. “I’m paying, anyway.”

So Tobin gets her chocolate milkshake and Christen gets her vanilla, and they start to drive to the apartment with a bag full of fries and burgers that Christen won’t let Tobin touch while in the car.

“No eating in the car,” she warns as Tobin sneaks another fry.

Tobin groans loudly.

“You’re killing me, babe,” she complains.

“Think of Allie,” Christen suggests. “And how disappointed she’d be.”

“Fuck Allie,” Tobin says loudly.

Christen bites her lip for what feels like the millionth time, the nerves creeping back up on her now that they’re headed back to the apartment.

“What’s up?” Tobin asks when Christen doesn’t say anything.
“Nothing,” Christen says, but there are too many butterflies in her stomach to make it sound convincing.

“You can tell me,” Tobin says reassuringly, reaching over to take Christen’s right hand and gently hold it with hers. “Did I do something wrong?”

“No,” Christen says.

“Will you tell me?” Tobin pleads. “Please?”

Christen takes another two red lights to gather herself, take a deep breath, and tell Tobin what’s been bothering her.

“Alex called us sex monkeys.”

“Alex is an idiot,” Tobin tells Christen. “She’s been going on with us since she got here. Want me to tell her to stop?”

“It’s not that,” Christen says, shifting in her seat as she waits for the light to turn green. She almost wishes she hadn’t said anything, but the way Tobin is suddenly on her side makes her feel relieved that she did. “I don’t mind the teasing. It’s just…we’re not really having sex.”

“Well, Alex doesn’t know that,” Tobin says reasonably, stroking a thumb over the back of Christen’s hand. “Unless – do you want me to tell her that?”

“No,” Christen says, squirming in her seat. “That’s not really what I want. I was just wondering, if maybe, that’s what you want.”

“Do I want to tell her that we’re not?” Tobin asks, perplexed. “Is that what you’re asking?”

Christen is thankful when the light finally turns green, buying her a few moments to answer.

“No,” she says, deciding to just go ahead and say it. “Do you want to be having sex?”

“Oh,” Tobin says, surprised.

Then –

“Oh!”

She looks shocked and guilty at the same time, her eyes widening as she turns to look at Christen to meets her gaze for a brief second before looking away, embarrassed.

“Not if you don’t want to be,” Tobin says.

“I figured that you wanted to,” Christen says, hating every second of this conversation but knowing that Tobin is the only person she could have it with. Tobin is the only person on earth that Christen has felt comfortable enough with. “But I haven’t been ready, and I’ve felt bad for stopping things.”

“Don’t ever feel bad for not being ready,” Tobin says adamantly, squeezing Christen’s hand tight. “I wouldn’t ever want to do anything that you aren’t ready for.”

“So you haven’t been secretly resenting me?” Christen asks, and it’s mostly a joke, but Tobin responds seriously.

“No way in hell,” she says, shaking her head. “Christen, I love you. I can wait forever if you need
Christen’s throat goes tight as she turns into the apartment complex.

“I think I’m ready,” she manages to say.

Tobin’s hand grips hers even tighter.

“Yeah?” she asks, and Christen can’t help but smile a little at the poorly concealed enthusiasm in her voice. “Are you sure?”

“I love you,” Christen says, and it’s a little choked, but she determinedly keeps on. “Very much. There’s nothing else I’ve ever been more sure of.”

Tobin leans over as Christen shifts the car into park, and the way she’s kissing Christen just confirms that she’s right and that she’s ready.

“Come on up,” Tobin says, a hint of teasing in her voice. “Let’s prove Alex right.”
They dump the food on the kitchen counter, and Tobin waits patiently for Christen to deposit her car keys and wallet on Tobin’s dresser before saying anything.

“They won’t be back for hours,” Tobin says, carefully closing the door. Christen doesn’t miss the way she quickly locks it shut behind her. “So you don’t have to worry about that. I know you don’t like them teasing you, so I’ll try to make sure there’s nothing for them to make fun of. If you want, I can text Allie and ask her to stay out even later or something, I don’t know, I could probably blackmail her with this old picture from our freshman days. Do you think I should? Do you want me to?”

She’s anxious, something Christen wasn’t anticipating.

“Hey,” Christen says, walking over to her and immediately reaching for her hands. They’re just as cool and reassuring as ever, but they’re shaking a little and that’s when Christen knows that she’s not the only one in the room feeling nervous about what’s happening. “Save the blackmail for when we really need it.”

Tobin laughs but it’s short and unsteady as she grips Christen’s hands for dear life.

“Are you nervous?” Christen asks quietly.

“Yeah,” Tobin exhales, and it’s like she’s clamming up but staying as open as she knows Christen needs her to be.

“I feel like I should be the nervous one here,” Christen says, attempting to joke with Tobin, who only smiles weakly in response. “Did I do something wrong? Do you not want to do this anymore?”

“No, no no no,” Tobin says hurriedly. “That is absolutely not it at all.”

“So then what is it?” Christen asks curiously. She didn’t really think that Tobin had changed her mind, but the sudden change in behavior is a cause for concern.

“I want you so much,” Tobin starts, and the adoration in her voice is more than enough to convince Christen. “But I love you too.”

“That doesn’t sound like a problem to me,” Christen responds.

“I just want this to be perfect,” Tobin says, and she’s looking so uncharacteristically shy that Christen’s heart beats a little faster for her. “You know? I want this to be perfect for you.”

Christen doesn’t quite know what to say to that, so she holds Tobin’s hands tighter.

“I’m a little scared,” Christen admits.

“Yeah?” Tobin asks, sounding a little surer of herself.

“Yeah,” Christen says with a confident nod. “Like, what if I suck at this? I want to be perfect for you too.”

“You won’t suck,” Tobin promises her. “I would never think that you suck. I swear, I’m just honored that you want me to do this with you. You’re way too good for me, like I can’t even believe that you’re here with me right now.”
“I’m not too good for you,” Christen says, voice softening. “You’re just right for me.”

Tobin just smiles at her, looking at Christen the way people look up at the stars, or at sunsets, or at any vast open space that is too special and beautiful for words.

Christen feels loved, the weight of it lifting her off the ground.

“It will be perfect because it’s with you,” she says, and the way Tobin nods at her lets her knows that this is going to be okay.

This is going to be perfect.

And it is, Christen thinks, beginning with the moment she leans forward to kiss Tobin’s mouth. Her lips are all red and bitten from nervousness, from the way she’s been pulling at them and rubbing them together in the past ten minutes, but Christen’s has never wanted to kiss anyone nearly as much as she wants to kiss Tobin in that moment. She just goes for it, with Tobin leaning in to meet her, and it’s familiar enough that Christen calms down enough to reach her arms around Tobin’s waist to pull her closer.

It’s kind of strange like this, with Christen leading the kiss and Tobin following willingly. Something about the amount of trust Christen can feel Tobin placing in her reinforces that this is it, that this isn’t just sex. Tobin isn’t just going to lay her down and fuck her. It’s strange because Christen hasn’t ever felt this close to someone, hasn’t experienced intimacy on this level. She just knows, the same way she just knew that she loved Tobin, that this will be like nothing else she’d ever had before. Tobin is different for her, and Christen thinks that perhaps she is different for Tobin as well.

Christen wonders if Tobin has ever let anyone kiss her like this before, soft and tender and slow, like it’s building to something beautiful. She has a hunch that the answer is no, that Tobin’s only really been one for rough, quick, lustful that were a way to occupy her mouth in the middle of it all or as a prelude to the main event. Sure, this kiss, is leading to something and they both know it, but something about the way Tobin presses herself closer to Christen like she can’t bear to be apart from her makes Christen realize that Tobin would be okay if they left it at this.

Tobin would be okay with just kissing Christen forever, and that thought makes Christen tighten her fingers on Tobin’s waist, cotton bunching under shaky fingertips as her breathing catches in her throat. In response, Tobin raises her own arms to clutch at Christen’s biceps, holding her still where she is in front of her so she can’t go anywhere. It feels like a prayer, a pleading request for her to not go anywhere, to stay with Tobin the way Tobin never wanted anyone to stay for her before.

She’s not going anywhere.

“‘I’m here,” Christen mumbles against Tobin’s mouth. “Okay?”

“Don’t go,” Tobin entreats desperately. “Please?”

She’s asking, not telling, and something in Christen’s heart fills up more than she ever knew it could. She doesn’t pull away, only moves her head enough so that Tobin can breathe heavy against the flushed skin of her cheek, foreheads pressed together.

“Because you love me,” Christen says quietly, feeling content and yearning at the same time. She’s so full, but there’s so much more to come.

“I love you so much,” Tobin says, and it’s almost with a whine to her voice, the way she tells Christen.
“And I love you,” Christen says, stroking her fingers against Tobin’s waist. “I’m not going anywhere.”

“You’re staying?” Tobin asks, and she moves to look Christen in the eye – big, scared, beautiful brown eyes.

“I’m staying,” Christen tells her, hoping that Tobin understands. “I’m not going anywhere.”

Tobin crushes herself to Christen, lips meeting in a bruising kiss, and it’s frantic and begging and Christen’s heart aches, wondering if Tobin has ever had anyone stay.

If she’s ever wanted anyone to stay.

Christen willingly opens herself to Tobin, opening her heart and her mouth until Tobin’s tongue is brushing tentatively against hers, because for all of her enthusiasm, Tobin is just as considerate and careful as ever. She’s never forced anything with Christen, never asked for more than Christen can give, and there’s a certain sort of harmony and balance in that which makes Christen slowly pull on Tobin’s shirt as she takes a small step backwards. They’ve done this before, made out and fallen on the bed all tangled and willing, but this weighted situation makes Christen guide Tobin slowly as they both maintain the kiss, neither willing to separate if they don’t have to.

It’s a slow, meandering path to Tobin’s bed. Christen loses herself in kissing Tobin, letting Tobin apply pressure when she wants and taking her lips between hers, letting Tobin do whatever she wants and somehow still feeling like she’s the one leading here. It’s a strange feeling, like she’s calling the shots even as she backs up to the mattress until she feels it hit her thighs. She falters a little, but Tobin’s hands go to steady her, gripping her biceps before traveling to cradle her shoulders.

“I’ve got you, baby,” Tobin chuckles wetly against Christen’s mouth, seeming more confident than before. “Come on, you told me you weren’t going anywhere.”

Christen laughs with her, jerking her head back to look at her, smiling uncontrollably as she does.

“I’m trying to get in your bed,” she jokes, but she’s serious too. “I thought that’s what you wanted.”

“It is, it is,” Tobin groans, and she drops a hand to grab a handful of Christen’s ass. It pulls Christen in closer, and she can’t help but let out a short squeal as Tobin grins down at her, the nerves all but disappeared. She slaps Christen’s ass – brief, and not at all hard – before winking at her as Christen gasps sharply. “So come on, get on up there.”

“Ask nicely,” Christen says, and it’s mostly instinct – the kind of thing you retort with when someone is being cheeky, which is definitely what Tobin is being now – but the way Tobin’s expression changes to one of complete and utter seriousness somehow manages to turn Christen on just as much as the ass grab.

“Chris, baby,” Tobin says, her voice low and slow. “Do me a favor and get on that bed so I can touch you. Okay? Can you do that for me?”

Christen thinks she might whimper a little, might be feeling wet between her thighs, might be trembling from how Tobin can reduce her to a puddle of thrilled lust and love within a matter of seconds. She’s not complaining, not in the slightest, but it’s foreign for her and she figures that maybe this is what it’s like being with another girl.

Christen has never done this with another girl, she thinks, panicking for a second as Tobin stares at her expectantly, impatiently, longingly, like she would wait if she had to but really doesn’t want to. She’s kissed Kelley, made out with Tobin – hell, she let Tobin get a hand on her bare breast in the
kitchen the other day. It’s not a question of what Christen wants, but of how she’s going to make it happen. Months have passed since Christen called Tobin and let her coach her through what was one of the most amazing orgasms she’s ever had (thus far, she tells herself, eyes darting down to Tobin’s hands and imagining all the things they’re capable of), and though she’s had more than a handful of repeat sessions since (without Tobin, of course, and therefore not nearly as satisfying as the first time), there still something about applying knowledge to a new situation for the first time that’s a little nerve-wracking.

She knows what to do, she thinks, watching at Tobin licks her lips in anticipation. But that doesn’t mean she’s going to be good at it.

Fuck it, Christen decides, as Tobin waits patiently, waiting for Christen to go ahead and take the next step, take things further, take things to where they both want them to be. She’s letting Christen give them the go-ahead, and if that doesn’t mean that Tobin is completely committed to this, she doesn’t know what does. Christen knows that Tobin doesn’t wait around to see if someone is ready, but she’s letting Christen take her time as she thinks about this. Christen is sure, is ready, wants this to happen, but as Tobin looks at her with adoration and hunger, Christen becomes comfortable.

She becomes comfortable enough to press a quick kiss to Tobin’s mouth before sitting down on the bed, trying to make her way to the top as naturally as possible. It feels awkward, to be this far from Tobin in the middle of the heavy atmosphere in the room, but Tobin doesn’t waste time when it comes to following her up the mattress.

“I don’t know what I’m doing,” Christen reminds her. “I mean, I know, but I can’t promise I’ll be any good at it.”

“Babe,” Tobin says, looking pained as she climbs over Christen, hands on Christen’s shoulders to hold her up as she lowers herself to sit on Christen’s lap. The sudden pressure makes Christen shift infinitesimally, previously unaware that something so simple could feel so good. “Literally all you could do is touch me and I’d be coming for you. Don’t worry about that, okay?”

Christen can feel her cheeks redden as she bites her lip.

“You don’t know that,” she mumbles out as Tobin experimentally rolls her hips against Christen’s. It’s hard to keep from moaning out, so Christen lets her lids flutter shut as she clenches her jaw to keep quiet.

“I do know that,” Tobin says firmly. “Do you have any idea how many times I’ve touched myself while thinking about you?”

Christen’s eyes snap open to find Tobin looking pained, like she’s holding back despite the fact that all she wants to do is barrel forward.

“What?” Christen gasps in surprise, wondering if Tobin is kidding around.

“Yeah,” Tobin says, and she rolls her hips again in a way that’s so seductive, so hot, that Christen can’t help but reach to grab hold of them. She pushes at the hem of Tobin’s shirt, pushing it out of the way so she can feel her soft skin. It’s electrifying, cool under her hands but lighting Christen’s insides on fire. “All the time. After you called me and I helped you get off, I thought about it all the time. I couldn’t stop thinking about what you sound like when you’re coming and how I wanted to hear it again, and again, and again.”

Christen’s hands guide Tobin’s hips, widening her legs so that they can get a better angle on this. Tobin seems to understand what she’s going for, adjusting her stance while applying pressure on
Christen’s shoulders until she’s steady again.

“Will you tell me more?” Christen pleads, because this right here, with Tobin telling her this, might be the hottest thing in the entire world.

Tobin steadies herself with a deep inhale, but exhales shakily like she’s steeling herself for something that she doesn’t know whether or not she can handle.

“Can I tell you a secret?” Tobin asks, and her eyes are boring into Christen’s like this is important, like whatever she’s feeling and is about to say must be handled with care. So Christen just nods, hands moving around to curve around Tobin’s hips, pulling her harder into her. “So, you remember that night, right?”

Christen can only nod again, throat clogged with expectation and desire. Tobin is still wearing her jeans, and Christen is wearing denim shorts, but through all of the thick fabric is enough friction against Christen’s center to make her feel overwhelmed. It’s not like it’s suddenly too much too soon, but it’s as though she needs more. She’s been living off of mere scraps, interrupted views of Tobin’s naked body and flashes of pleasure, but she can’t take it anymore. She wants the real thing, all of it. There isn’t much longer to wait, thank god, but in the meantime it feels like she’s being tortured with Tobin seemingly fine with taking her sweet, sweet time with this emotional confessional, as though it’s some kind of foreplay.

Which it kind of is, Christen thinks, pulling Tobin’s hips closer to her so that she can get just a little more tension between them. It’s doing exactly what it should: making her ready for more.

“Would you hate me if I told you that I was touching myself while we were on the phone?” She can’t help the groan that escapes her, loud and aching, because of all the things Tobin has said to her tonight, this might be the most tortuous.

“No,” Christen says, lost for words but knowing that she has to say something to erase the almost scared look on Tobin’s face, the expression almost lost amongst the lidded eyes and swollen lips that she keeps running her tongue over.

“I couldn’t help it,” Tobin says, her breathing rough and ragged. “Knowing exactly what you were doing, thinking about you getting wet, hoping that maybe I was a part of the reason you were so turned on and were finally able to get off – I couldn’t help it, babe. I had one hand pressing the phone to my ear and the other on myself. I didn’t want to, and I felt so bad because it was wrong. I was just supposed to be helping you, but instead I was the one so damn close to coming.”

“Did you?” Christen needs to know. “You helped it happen for me. I couldn’t have done it without you. Did I help it happen for you?”

“Oh yeah, baby,” Tobin says, groaning while she throws her head back, raising a hand to run through her hair, pushing it off her face. “I came so hard after you hung up.”

Christen can’t take it anymore. She moves her hands, pushing Tobin’s shirt up – up, up, up past her stomach, past flexing abdominals and a heaving ribcage, past round and perfect breasts and muscled shoulders. She doesn’t stop until Tobin is shirtless and the vague realization that Tobin hasn’t been wearing a bra all night barely even registers because she’s too busy staring at the work of art in front of her.

She’s fit, tight and taut in all the right places but soft to the touch as Christen traces from the waist of her jeans, thumb running along tanned skin as the rest of her fingers spread out to cover as much as
possible. Tobin is hot, almost too hot for Christen to handle, but she shoves down her own insecurities in favor of pulling her girlfriend down to her level.

“Kiss me,” she asks, and Tobin doesn’t even hesitate before doing so.

This is when it gets messy, with teeth nipping and tongues slipping and Christen’s head feels clear but so full, aware of what she’s doing but crowded to the brim with thoughts about what she wants to do to Tobin, and what she’s praying Tobin will do to her. Tobin pulls her jersey off with a bit of a struggle – one that has Christen straining her head up off the pillows to help get rid of it while Tobin’s fingers linger for longer than Christen would expect.

“It had to come off eventually,” Christen says helpfully, as Tobin looks at the crumpled fabric in her hands for a few seconds before carefully tossing it.

“But you looked so good in it,” Tobin says with a pout.

“I’ll wear it again,” Christen tells her. “For your next game. The jersey isn’t going anywhere.”

“One day,” Tobin tells her, “I’d like to fuck you in that jersey and nothing else.”

Christen doesn’t know how to respond, swallowing thickly before reaching for Tobin, tugging her closer.

“You’re really hot,” Tobin mutters into Christen’s mouth, kissing her distractedly, while her hands smooth across Christen’s stomach. “Did you know that?”

Christen blushes but is thankful that Tobin can’t see it, too busy kissing a line down her neck.

“I mean, did you wear this on purpose?” Tobin keeps talking, and Christen wasn’t expecting her to be this vocal, but she’s not complaining.

“Wear what?” Christen asks as Tobin sucks gently on the dip between her collarbones.

“This,” Tobin says, tugging at Christen’s bra strap. “Do you have any idea how you look in this?”

It’s lacy, just something pretty that Christen bought on a whim once. It’s black and nothing that she’d thought twice about pulling on while getting dressed earlier, opting for it instead of a sports bra on the basis that all of hers were dirty and she’d been too lazy to do laundry lately. She’s suddenly thankful for having picked it up out of the half dozen bras she’s got in her bag, because Tobin is looking at her hungrily and it makes Christen squirm.

“How do I look?” Christen wants to hear.

“So fucking good,” Tobin moans, and she kisses down the valley between Christen’s breasts. Everywhere her mouth lands is electric, sending little sparks and waves of heat through Christen’s body. It’s almost unreal, the way she’s feeling, like she can’t catch her breath but doesn’t even care because it feels so good. “It’s just – do you want me dead?”

“Maybe,” Christen sighs out, melting into the bed as Tobin keeps moving down, taking her time with Christen’s cleavage. She kisses slowly, wetly, hotly – she’s taking her time, worshipping Christen exactly the way she said she wanted to. It’s easy to turn into a puddle of wetness, with Christen wondering how she’s going to be able to handle it when Tobin finally touches her. It’s something that she’d worried about before, how she’d react and how Tobin would treat her, but everything that’s happened has only given her the greatest confidence that this is going to be as perfect as she anticipates. “I just want to be the best for you.”
“You are the best for me,” Tobin mutters, moving past Christen’s bra to mouth against her stomach. “In every way. And don’t you forget it.”

For a moment Christen feels suffocated, but love and affection and the weight of what they’re doing. This isn’t fucking, this isn’t just sex, this isn’t for fun or satisfaction or selfishness. This is everything. This is the two of them being so in love and so attracted to every part of each other that they can’t imagine it any other way. Christen just knows, knows without asking, that Tobin hasn’t done this before. She’s never loved anyone, has never wanted to be close to them for the reasons she wants to be with Christen. And Christen knows that she’s never wanted to be with someone the way she wants to be with Tobin. It’s not about doing it because the other person wants it.

Rather, Christen is doing this with Tobin because she can’t imagine them not doing it.

She can’t imagine not wanting Tobin’s hard nipples brushing against her lower stomach as she kisses along the ridges of Christen’s ribs, fingers pressing into the spaces between them to hold her close. She can’t imagine not wanting Tobin’s mouth to travel lower, tongue darting out to lick the edge of her bellybutton before moving on. She can’t imagine stopping Tobin’s talented fingers as they play with the button of her shorts, teasing only long enough for Christen to impatiently run her hand through Tobin’s hair. She can’t imagine Tobin not popping the button through its hole, unzipping the shorts as she sucks lightly on the skin over Christen’s hip. She can’t imagine not using her hands to pull Tobin’s hair into a makeshift ponytail, giving her eyes uninterrupted access to the unbelievably sexy sight of Tobin slowly wiggling Christen’s shorts off of her.

Christen has to help, lifting her ass off the bed enough for Tobin to pull the denim down. It blocks her view of Tobin’s face for a second, but she’s rewarded with an awestruck expression when she settles back down.

“What?” Christen asks, unable to stop nervousness from creeping to her voice as Tobin does nothing but stare at the juncture of her thighs.

Tobin doesn’t answer, seeming struck speechless as she stares at the scrap of lace covering exactly what she’s been working towards.

“What’s wrong?” Christen asks, trying again after Tobin stays silent.

Tobin clears her throat, and when she finally speaks, it sounds like it’s painful for her to get the words out.

“I don’t think I’m going to make it,” she confesses, entirely serious. “I’m going to spontaneously come just from looking at you, and then I’m going to die.”

Christen squirms again, rubbing her thighs together and unable to deny how affected Tobin has her.

Tobin slowly moves up Christen’s body until they’re face to face, and she looks so intimidatingly focused that it’s hard to maintain eye contact. Despite the fact that she’s unsure of why, Christen finds herself turned on more than she thought possible, considering how little they’ve really done so far. Maybe it’s the way Tobin had undressed her, maybe it’s because Tobin is half naked, maybe it has to do with the fact that Christen wants this more than she ever imagined. She’s never been so ready, so ready to be naked and sweaty and intertwined completely.

It’s not her first first time with someone, but it’s the most important first time with someone Christen has ever had.

“I want to make you feel good,” Tobin says.
“Do it,” Christen says, her words both a bold challenge and a desperate request.

Tobin unclasps her bra and throws it away to join the rest of their clothing, and doesn’t waste any time before she’s tonguing at one of Christen’s nipples. She goes slow but not too slow, impatient but restrained as Christen moans loudly and arches into her touch.

“Is this okay?” Tobin croaks out, fingers deftly rubbing over Christen’s other nipple. Everything feels so sensitive, like Christen is about to combust because it all feels almost too good.

“More than okay,” Christen says, and she can’t help but think about something, deliberating over it for a long second while weighing the pros and cons. On one hand, she doesn’t want Tobin to stop squeezing her boob. On the other hand….

“Take these off,” she orders, reaching down to tug at Tobin’s waistband. She can feel the fabric of her underwear against her fingertips, the soft cotton still tantalizing as she imagines pulling them down her legs later. Later, after Tobin has finished scrambling to obey Christen’s order and her jeans are on the floor, strong legs flexing as she moves. She feels a little bad for being so demanding, but she feels a little more relaxed and willing to reach for Tobin’s hand, stopping it on its path back to Christen’s chest.

“What?” Tobin asks, eyes darting up to meet Christen’s. “What did I do wrong?”

“I think I want your hand somewhere else,” Christen tells her, and the way Tobin’s face changes when Christen guides her hand down her torso is worth the nerves she had to push aside to vocalize her need. She looks awestruck, adoration clear in her loving gaze.

“I am so lucky to have you,” she chokes out, struck by emotion and want. “So lucky.”

“I’m lucky too,” Christen assures her, lifting her head to kiss Tobin slowly. Tobin’s fingers tighten around Christen’s hand, knuckles brushing the soft skin above the waist of her lace underwear.

“I’m luckier,” Tobin says with determination and conviction, and Christen wants to argue that that’s patently false, but before she gets a chance, Tobin is gently pulling her hand away from Christen’s and traveling south to cup her through the fabric.

It should feel like relief, but instead it feels like torture as Christen tilts her head back and inhales deeply. Her breathing feels shallow, like she can’t take breaths large enough to feel her lungs inflate sufficiently and she’s being crushed by Tobin and her single, unmoving hand. With a racing pulse and tense muscles, Christen fists her hands into the sheets and curses low under her breath. If Tobin hears, she doesn’t give any indication. She keeps staring at Christen, captivated as she rests her fingers against damp underwear.

“Will you look at me?” Tobin asks, her voice rough but pleading, like she’s powerless even though Christen is lying underneath her. “I want to see your face when I touch you.”

“You are touching me,” Christen manages to say.

“When I touch you for real,” Tobin murmurs, lips brushing along Christen’s jaw as her fingers press harder, the pressure doing absolutely nothing to help Christen. It’s so much worse than before, and she actually prays for Tobin to do something because she’s not sure how she can last any longer. It’s like her prayers are answered though, because Tobin moves to slowly tug her underwear down her thighs, past her knees, until Christen’s impatiently kicking them off and snapping her eyes wide to stare at Tobin who is laying over her like she’s about to do the most important thing she’s ever done.

She doesn’t even have to say it. Christen just knows how much this matters to Tobin. She nods her
head minutely, hoping that Tobin understands that it means just as much to her.

Tobin goes slow but doesn’t falter, sliding her fingers through Christen’s wetness as Christen suddenly feels breathless. It’s like she’s paralyzed while Tobin takes her time, dragging fingertips through sensitive folds and keeping her eyes wide and on Christen’s face as she goes. Even though it feels impossible, like it’s the hardest thing she’s ever done in her life, Christen maintains the eye contact as Tobin’s index finger comes up to brush against her clit – just barely, soft and gentle with barely any force behind it, but enough contact to make her feel like she has died and gone to heaven. She feels stuck in this moment in time, like they’re the only ones who matter, who exist, in these long seconds, like the world has stopped spinning as a courtesy to Tobin’s dragging fingers.

“I love you.”

Christen’s not sure what makes her say it, what makes her initiate it. All she knows is that she loves Tobin, and here, with Tobin stroking her up and down and her touch growing steadily heavier, is exactly where she wants to be. She feels safe, she feels desired, and she feels loved.

Christen has never felt like this before, and she’s pretty sure that Tobin never has either.

Tobin uses her free hand to tilt Christen’s mouth to hers, covering her lips hungrily and kissing her more passionately than she’s ever been kissed. It’s like she’s breathing life into Christen, giving her everything she never knew she was missing, and when the pads of her fingers stop to rub against Christen’s clit with a kind of tender firmness that seems so impossible to manage that Christen wonders how Tobin does it, Christen can’t help but whimper into her mouth. But then the kiss is over just as abruptly as it began, leaving Christen frowning and feeling like she’s been left bereft. But then –

“I love you, too,” Tobin says, and the corner of her mouth is quirked up into a smile that Christen only gets to see for a second before Tobin is kissing her hard, hand moving to slip a single finger inside of her.

Christen is barely aware of the way her back arches instantly, Tobin drawing her face back to stare at her in wonder. It’s a struggle to keep her eyes open, to watch Tobin watching her, but Christen manages it through fluttering eyelids. Tobin is still going slow, still easily slipping a long finger in, and Christen almost wishes that she would just get on with it so Christen can feel like she’s got control of her body again. Right now it feels like she’s completely at Tobin’s mercy, victim to someone that she’s imagined doing this to her for months.

She’s thought about this before. She’s touched herself, images of Tobin leaning over her appearing unbidden in her mind. She’d always told herself that it was because of that phone call, but Christen knows now that it was more than that. She’s known for a while how much she’s wanted Tobin.

“I want you to look at me,” Tobin whispers when Christen’s eyes close for a moment, lost in the feeling over Tobin’s finger finally fitting inside of her fully, leaving her feel strangely satisfied yet empty, as though now that she’s gotten a taste she can’t wait for more. She’s slid it in as far as she can, palm curving up to press against Christen and grind down slightly against her clit. It moves her finger just a little, and Christen takes in a deep shuddering breath of air as she forces herself to look.

The way that Tobin looks at her is impossible to look away from. She looks almost as pained as Christen does, but in the best way possible. Like she too wants more, and can’t believe that she’s actually here. It’s like they’re both sure, but that isn’t stopping them from being amazed that they are.

“I want more,” Christen tells Tobin, finding her voice and her confidence.
“Like what?” Tobin asks. “Tell me.”

“Move your finger,” she says, and Tobin doesn’t hesitate before listening. Christen clenches instinctively, but she’s wet enough that Tobin can thrust her finger in and out with a sort of controlled enthusiasm, biting her bottom lip as she refuses to look away from Christen’s face.

“How does that feel?” Tobin asks.

“Good,” Christen moans out as Tobin curls her finger inside of her before drawing it back out. “Really good.”

Gradually, a smile spreads across Tobin’s face until she’s ducking her head down into Christen’s neck, smiling wide and pressing the flat of her teeth against the delicate skin there.

“You feel really good,” she admits, and now that she’s done looking at her, Christen can let her eyes fall closed as she moves a hand to Tobin’s side, gripping bare skin and trying not to dig her fingernails in and leave behind crescent-shaped marks. “You’re soaked, baby. Just soaked.”

“You do this to me,” Christen gasps out, her voice unintentionally raising an octave as she squirms against Tobin’s hand. “You make me so wet.”

“I do?” Tobin asks, and her voice sounds a little strangled as she scrapes her teeth over Christen’s carotid.

“You do,” Christen says through yet another moan. She’s never been loud before, always mindful of where she was and who might hear her, worried about being judged by even the person she was in bed with, but this is different. She knows that Tobin wants to hear her, and just knowing that is making her louder than she’s ever been. She wants Tobin to know how much she’s enjoying this, how much she wants this, how good it all feels. “Sometimes I’m just watching you, or thinking about you, and I get really wet. Like I’ve never felt like this before about anyone. I would – ”

She cuts herself off, swallowing thickly as Tobin groans nearly silently against her skin while carefully working a second finger into Christen’s tightness alongside the first. It feels tight but not too tight, just enough for Christen to need to take a moment before continuing.

“I would think about you,” she says quietly, so quietly that she’s almost whispering. “Every time I touched myself, I couldn’t help it. I thought it was because of the phone call, like my brain didn’t know how to get off without thinking of you. But then I realized how much I liked you, and how hot you are. You’re so hot, Tobin, and I’ve never been so turned on by anyone in my life. Fuck, I feel like I need more.”

“What more do you need?” Tobin asks, muffled as she continues to mouth at Christen’s neck. In the back of Christen’s mind she’s worried about her leaving a mark behind, but that thought is pushed out quickly as Tobin begins working her fingers harder, faster, sloppier, so that Christen can feel her own wetness smudging between her thighs. Tobin seems like she’s falling apart and Christen..
up in rhythm with Tobin’s hand, meeting her thrust for thrust, and she’s whining into Tobin’s mouth and wishing for something, anything to press against her clit. She can’t ask for it, almost doesn’t want to ask for it because even though she knows she won’t get off from just this, it feels so good and she doesn’t want to stop.

“I want to taste you,” Tobin moans into Christen’s mouth, the words barely decipherable in between the heavy breathing and the moving of their bodies.

That might be the tipping point for Christen, who decides that she can’t take this anymore. She’s had Tobin’s hands all over her tonight, but what she really wants is to get her hands on Tobin.

“Stop, stop,” she says, and unintentionally alarms Tobin, who halts immediately, fingers stilling deep inside of Christen.

“What?” she asks, sounding almost panicked. “What did I do?”

“Nothing,” Christen says, pressing a tender kiss to Tobin’s face, lips accidentally brushing against her eyebrow instead of her temple. Tobin thankfully doesn’t say anything, instead looking too anxious to do more than bite her lip and slowly pull her hand away. It’s awful, the sudden feeling of being empty and without Tobin who attempts to sneakily wipe her dripping fingers on Christen’s hip, but it’s worth it when she continues speaking and gets to see the expression on her face “I just want to do you.”

Tobin looks like she’s about to pass out, breathing quickening and her chest heaving. It’s a good thing, Christen thinks with an internally smug grin. On the outside, she maintains a serious face and waits for Tobin to respond.

It doesn’t take long.

“Are you sure?” Tobin asks, and as soon as Christen nods, Tobin is falling off of her and onto the mattress.

“I’ve been wanting this so badly,” Tobin pleads, a question hidden in her words that Christen hears. She almost takes pity on Tobin, crawling over her so that while Tobin lies flat on her back, Christen can straddle her right thigh. “I can finish you first though, it’s not like you have to – “

“I want to,” Christen says firmly, fingers hooking in the waist of Tobin’s underwear. It’s white, a stark contrast to her impossibly tanned skin, and when she begins to see the first hint of a tan line, her mouth pools with saliva that she has to forcibly swallow. She leans down to kiss down Tobin’s torso, trying to take her time, but she’s a little nervous and impatient so she can’t help but catch up with her descending underwear rather quickly.

They’ve spent enough time on foreplay, Christen knows this. She can sense it and even smell it, pausing at she presses a lingering kiss to the sensitive skin right above Tobin’s sex to take in the heady scent of someone else’s arousal for the first time. It’s nothing like what she’s ever experienced before, different from hers but familiar in a way that feels comfortable, almost like home. It doesn’t feel scary, and instead of upping her nerves, it rather reinforces the idea that this is what she wants. She might not really know what she’s doing, but she knows that that doesn’t matter, and she figures that Tobin is still going to love her at the end of this no matter what.

“Chris, baby,” Tobin chokes out from above her. Christen glances up, enough to see Tobin’s rapidly heaving chest. “You’re killing me.”

“You smell good,” Christen mumbles, feeling a little shy as she says it. “I just – I just want to know
what it’s like to taste you, but I don’t know if I’m ready for that.”

“Oh, fuck, babe,” Tobin says, head tilting up to stare down at Christen who closes her eyes for a second and inhales deeply, both to take in as much of Tobin as she can and to gather her wits about her before proceeding. “You look so good down there that I don’t even care what you do.”

Tobin helps Christen divest her of her underwear, and those too are lost to the floor. Now they’re both naked, something that’s never happened, and rather than feeling scared and vulnerable, Christen feels safe and thrilled. She’s exactly where she wants to be, taking a moment to hover her body along the length of Tobin’s before carefully lowering herself. Tobin groans tortuously as she splay her hands across the top of Christen’s ass, squeezing gently and holding her close at the same time. Christen kisses Tobin’s lips softly, forearms steadying herself on the mattress as she relishes the feel of Tobin’s bare torso against hers.

“I love you,” Christen murmurs faintly, reaching a hand up to brush Tobin’s hair off of her sweaty skin, away from her collarbones and forehead. She’s looking like a bit of a mess, but the hottest mess Christen has ever envisioned. It makes her heart swell a hundred times its size, filling up her chest easily. “So much. I didn’t know I could love someone as much as I love you.”

“Oh, baby,” Tobin says, blinking rapidly. “I didn’t think I would ever love anyone before you came along.”

Christen bites her bottom lip, futilely trying to restrain the soft smile breaking out on her face.

“You’ve changed my life,” Tobin says reverently, and even though she’s already said something to that effect today, it hits Christen with a brand new sort of poignancy that has her wondering if this is normal, to feel this emotional and in love and loved in the middle of sex. She then decides that she doesn’t care, because she likes it and if Tobin likes it too, that’s all that matters. “I love you.”

Suddenly understanding the appeal, Christen focuses on Tobin’s face as she eases a hand down to touch her. They both gasp upon contact, and Christen can’t believe how effortlessly she can stroke her fingers along Tobin’s folds. She takes her time feeling everything and getting used to touching someone that isn’t herself, exploring as she continues to straddle Tobin’s thigh and leans into her side, heads turned to gaze into each other’s eyes. Tobin’s mouth seems sealed shut, lost for words or even sounds as she breathes heavily, chest rising and falling rapidly out of the corner of Christen’s eye. Tobin is wet, and Christen wonders if she feels this good to Tobin. The slickness coats her fingers and it’s easy to ease the very tips of her fingers around Tobin’s clit before skimming them down to feel just past her entrance.

Tobin’s hand suddenly shoots up to wrap around Christen’s wrist, the one attached to the hand that’s weaving fingers through Tobin’s messy hair.

“Christen,” Tobin says, eyes widening frantically. “I need your hand.”

Somehow she manages to understand, shifting to adjust the way she’s balanced so she can let Tobin interlock their fingers. Tobin holds on tightly, nails digging almost painfully into the back of Christen’s hand. Christen just looks at Tobin, feeling something huge and immeasurable between them. It must be the same thing that Tobin is feeling, because as she finally takes the plunge and slides a finger inside of her, they both gasp at nearly the same time.

“Hey,” Christen mumbles, head angling to press a kiss to Tobin’s cheek. “It’s okay. Stay with me.”

“I’m here,” Tobin says, before repeating herself like she needs to. “I’m here.”
“You’re here.”

Christen’s lips form words against Tobin’s skin, half lost in the love between them. She’s consciously focusing on her other hand though, trying to commit the way Tobin feels to memory. Everything is slick and tight, nearly indescribable in its perfection. It feels so right, not at all terrifying like Christen had thought it would be, and the way Tobin is panting serves to confirm that she’s not the only one whose heart is racing for all the right reasons.

“Tell me if I’m doing okay,” Christen whispers, almost hoping that Tobin doesn’t hear. She’s a little unsure, but confident in the knowledge that between the two of them, it’s still going to be perfect on both sides.

“You’re so good,” Tobin manages to moan out. “Another finger. When you’re ready.”

So Christen listens, gently slipping two fingers inside. She thinks that maybe she’s being too careful, so when she tentatively asks Tobin if she can try another, she’s a little relived by the way Tobin’s jaw tightens before she nods in response. They’re still holding hands, Christen still exhaling air against Tobin’s cheek as she blinks absentl. It feels a little surreal, like she wants to pinch herself to make sure this is real. But the way Tobin unexpectedly cries out when Christen starts moving is enough of a reminder, because there’s no way she could ever dream up something this amazing. The way Tobin has started sweating, beads of perspiration soaking her hairline as Christen tries not to grind herself down against Tobin’s thigh, is mesmerizing. Christen has to focus on that, focus on Tobin’s immense pleasure to keep herself from making it about her the way she’s tempted to.

Maybe it’s because she knows that if she asked, Tobin would switch to take care of her in a heartbeat.

She moves her head to look at Tobin again, eyes finding her lips which are moving soundlessly. They look like curse words, but it looks like they’re meant in praise as Christen moves her wrist – mostly an accident, because it’s getting mildly uncomfortable for her down there – and hits something that has Tobin groaning loudly, her head abruptly thrown back to tell Christen that whatever she’s doing, she needs to keep doing.

“Baby,” Christen says softly, trying to keep Tobin with her. She looks so immersed in the experience that Christen is almost worried about her slipping away, but then she moves her fingers harder and Tobin looks at her with a ferocity that’s overwhelming. “Stay with me.”

“I’m here,” Tobin says through labored breathing, forehead sweaty and her fingers clenching hard against Christen’s. “I’m here, I promise.”

“Okay,” Christen says, tilting her forehead to press against Tobin’s. They’re nose to nose, and as Tobin begins letting loose a stream of *fucks*, Christen gazes into her unfocused eyes.

They seem a little wet, Christen thinks in wonderment. The lighting in the room is dim and they’re so close that it’s hard to tell for sure, but Tobin’s eyes glisten with a sort of shine that Christen has never seem from her.

It doesn’t seem like a bad thing, though, so Christen waits until Tobin is desperately scraping her fingernails against Christen’s skin and jerking her hips up into her hand with a sort of disorderly passion to pull her fingers out and immediately place them on Tobin’s clit. She can no longer help the way she’s sliding her own slick sex along the firm muscle of Tobin’s thigh, mindlessly grinding down as she focuses on Tobin reaching orgasm. The way Tobin whimpers, the voice too high and desperate in the back of her throat, lets Christen know that she might be close as she rubs in small, firm circles. She applies pressure carefully, harder then, until Tobin grows louder and grabs at
Christen’s ass with the hand that’s been half under Christen’s side the entire time.

“Chris,” Tobin says, and her name sounds like a prayer off her girlfriend’s lips. “Christen, baby. Keep going.”

“Is this good?” Christen asks in a hushed voice. “Is it working?”

“Shit,” Tobin curses low, under her breath. “Don’t you dare stop.”

So Christen doesn’t, sighing long and shaky against Tobin’s lips as she gently kisses her. She keeps her fingers persistent, feeling Tobin’s clit practically throbbing as it begs for release. Their kiss is distracted but comforting and Christen wishes she wasn’t so scared, wishes that her head was between Tobin’s strong thighs so she could taste her and make her come that way, but she just makes a mental note to do that later. She wants this, want to make Tobin come hard as she closes her eyes and kisses her with stars in her eyes. In the back of her mind, she’s beyond thankful for all the times she practiced on herself, nights beginning with frustration but eventually ending in satisfied exhaustion as she got herself off over and over, left with only relief and the vague notion that Tobin’s phone call might have had something to do with it.

Her hand might be cramping and she might be so turned on that she’s sure she’s leaving a puddle behind on Tobin’s thigh, but it’s so good and she prays that this is good enough for Tobin. It’s almost a magical experience, keeping up with the motions on Tobin’s slippery clit, and even though this is the first time, Christen can’t wait to do this again and again. From the way their hardened nipples press into each other’s chests to the unexpectedly feminine sounds Tobin keeps making when she’s not swearing in that low, rough way of hers, Christen is wondering why she never did this sooner. There’s something about the girl underneath her that’s heady and intoxicating, making her lightheaded as Tobin grips her hands with a bone-shattering hold and bites down on her bottom lip.

“You’re so hot,” Tobin chokes out, and when Christen gets a glimpse of her face before their lips meet, she could swear she sees a shining trail making its way down the side of Tobin’s face. Before she can focus on that though, Tobin’s tongue is in her mouth and she’s enthusiastically licking the taste of herself from Christen’s mouth. Christen doesn’t mind, responding eagerly, and it’s so sudden, the way Tobin flips them over before shoving Christen’s legs apart with no preamble. She’s not wasting any time, and she looks up at Christen with hungry, lustful eyes tempered by the obvious love in them.

“I want you to come hard for me,” she says, and Christen feels herself tremble. All she can do is nod before Tobin’s mouth is on her, and she’s suddenly fisting Tobin’s hair in her hands and moaning, arching her back up off the mattress as she feels nothing but pleasure. She’s done this before, been at the mercy of someone’s tongue and lips, but never like this. Tobin seems to know exactly how to torture her, making her feel more than she’s ever felt in her life.
This is right. This is exactly what Christen had been waiting for, and it’s worth the wait. This is the best night of her life so far, and as Tobin bring up a hand to thumb at her clit, still working her too talented tongue, Christen feels exhilarated and so close to peace that it’s so tempting to fall over the edge and let herself have this.

She can’t even worry about what Tobin is doing. All that she knows is that she’s crying out, feeling impossibly turned on to the point where she doesn’t care how loud she is, or that she’s pulling hard at Tobin’s hair. It’s too much, too much at the hands of the only person she’s even felt this with. She’s in love and she’s placed all of her trust in Tobin, and she’s so glad she made that decision, because it feels like heaven.

Tobin’s hand presses down on Christen’s hips as they thrust against the press of her tongue, and the way it all unravels is something worthy of remembering forever.

She’s never felt like this before. Christen has never come so hard, so completely. She feels it in her toes, entire body tensing before relaxing, melting into the mattress as Tobin crawls up her body to slump against her chest. It’s tough to get enough energy to say anything, her vision hazy as it wears off, but the way Tobin kisses her shoulder and languidly runs a hand up and down the length of her torso manages to break through the fog around her head.

Surely it’s all too good to be true.

“I love you, babe,” Tobin rasps out, her voice nearly shot from their night. Christen doesn’t remember her being that loud, but she must have been.

“I love you too,” Christen answers contently, feeling drowsy and heavy.

“That was amazing,” Tobin exhaled, resting her head on Christen’s chest and securely latching her hand around Christen’s middle.

“I know,” Christen breathes out, eyes drifting closed.

“Don’t fall asleep on me,” Tobin jokes. “That better not be all I get out of you tonight.”

Christen giggles faintly, too exhausted to exert anymore effort for the moment.

“Give me a moment to recover,” she tells Tobin.

“Okay, because I’m not done,” Tobin says.

“Shut up and hold me,” Christen says, a smile curving across her face as she runs her fingers through Tobin’s hair.

“I will,” Tobin says, sounding completely blissed out as she cuddles into Christen. “Anything for you, babe.”

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An hour later finds them on the kitchen floor, Tobin wearing nothing but a pair of boxer shorts as Christen wears a spare college shirt of Tobin’s. Tobin had thrown it at her reluctantly after they’d taken turns peeing, asking if she could just stay naked the entire night.

“Someone might walk in,” Christen had worried aloud. “I need shorts or something.”

“I’m texting Allie,” Tobin had said, eventually fishing her phone out of her jeans back pocket. “I’ll
tell them all to stay away and we’ll lock the front door. Okay?”

Christen had been slightly alarmed by the fact that the front door hadn’t already been unlocked, but the way Tobin pulled her close by her hips to kiss her thoroughly had distracted her from saying anything.

Tobin leans against the fridge, hungrily chewing her burger as Christen straddles her, Tobin’s legs preventing her bare skin from coming into contact with the floor. She looks amazing without a shirt, Christen thinks, idly bringing up the hand that isn’t holding a plastic cup to hold a breast and slowly drag a thumb over a nipple.

“Babe,” Tobin says, snapping her back to reality. “Food. Remember?”

“Yeah,” Christen says, biting her lip and almost regretting the decision to fuel up before doing anything else. She hadn’t wanted the food to go to waste, and thankfully the milkshakes and burgers were still in good condition. The fries were cold and beyond saving, but Christen was willing to overlook that in favor of Tobin sacrificing her maraschino cherry.

“Unless you’ve changed your mind,” Tobin says hopefully.

“Nope,” Christen says, shaking her head. “I’m finishing my milkshake, and then we can do whatever you want.”

“What about what you want?” Tobin pushes, raising an eyebrow. “I vaguely remember you telling me something that you wanted to do to me.”

“Oh yeah?” Christen says, feigning confusion. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Don’t tease me,” Tobin grumbles, biting off more burger as her free hand reaches around to rest on Christen’s ass.

Christen thinks she might be able to get used to this. McDonald’s on the floor with the girl she loves after the most amazing sex of her life. It might not have been flawless – Tobin might have cried, Christen might have not been able to make the most of the experience, they both might have been impatient and a little too emotional before rushing things at the end – but it was perfect, and that’s all Christen cares about.

“I’m not,” Christen says. “Who knows what I might have said? I was a little out of it.”

“You know,” Tobin says, nudging Christen’s ass. “Before you started fingering me.”

The blunt phrasing of it makes Christen blush, but the smile on Tobin’s face makes it impossible to shut down.

“I do want to,” Christen admits, a little shy now that they’re no longer in the heat of the moment.

“Want to what?” Tobin presses.

“Want to taste you,” Christen mumbles, and she’s a little embarrassed but it’s worth the look on Tobin’s face: a mixture of adoration and lust.

“You’re so hot,” Tobin says, and her face goes slack as the hand holding her burger falls to her side.

“Finish eating,” Christen says, “or else it’s not happening.”

“Yes babe,” Tobin says, straightening up and winking cheekily.
Christen is so in love, and when she trails a hand down Tobin’s taut abs while sucking on the straw of her milkshake, she partly does so out of sheer tenderness for her girlfriend.

Tobin is her girlfriend.

She still can’t get over it. She’s her girlfriend, she loves her, and she successfully made it through their first time without a major hitch. She feels her throat swell with emotion, and no matter how much she wants to keep on with this, she needs to ask something first.

“Hey, Tobin?”

“Hey babe,” Tobin says, switching over to her chocolate milkshake. “What’s up?”

“On a scale from one to ten,” Christen asks carefully, acutely aware of her burning red cheeks, “where would you rank what I just did?”

“Christen, babe,” Tobin says seriously, resting her cup on Christen’s knee. “I can’t even count that high. I’d say a ten, but that just feels inadequate.”

Christen beams at Tobin, leaning forward to kiss her and lick chocolate ice cream from her lips.

“I want to eat you out,” Christen says, blushing even harder but not caring at all.

“Okay,” Tobin says, beckoning Christen’s mouth back to hers. “Give me a minute and we can go back to bed.”

“I don’t want to wait,” Christen says, taking their cups and setting them to the side before rising up onto her knees and moving. “I want to do it here.”

“On the kitchen floor?” Tobin asks, eyes alight with interest as she scrambles to reposition herself. “Fuck, baby. I love you so much.”

Christen waits until Tobin is nearly flat on the ground before kissing her again. “I love you more.”

“No way,” Tobin says. “Not possible.”

“I’m doing this on a probably dirty kitchen floor,” Christen points out. “I wouldn’t have even dreamed of this a year ago. Trust me, I love you more.”

“Hey, babe?” Tobin says, catching Christen’s wrist to keep her from moving away.

Christen looks her in the eye, and suddenly understands.

“You cried,” she says, a lump in her throat.


“You love me,” Christen says, suddenly more confident of that than she’s been of anything.


And with a not-so-gentle smack to Christen’s ass, they go for it all over again.
how much do you miss me already?

When Christen wakes up, it takes a moment to orient herself.

She doesn’t open her eyes right away, snuggling into the pillow under her head. Everything feels soft and there’s a smile on her face, the air warm under the covers and just a hint of humidity touching her bare skin. There’s nothing but happiness in her head, and she nearly drifts right off to sleep again because she’s just so unbelievably content.

But then she takes a moment to take stock of all her limbs, and everything comes back to her clearly as she carefully catalogues last night in her memory. Christen’s smile softens, somehow more precious in its gentle curve as she nuzzles her cheek into her pillow and breathes in the faint sweat and sex still stuck to Tobin’s ribcage. She’s not quite sure how they ended up like this, almost picture perfect in their early morning embrace. Tobin lays flat on her back, an arm wrapped around Christen’s shoulders. Her breathing is deep and even, clearly still asleep with her head turned towards Christen. Messy hair flows free and wild, and Christen brings up her hand from Tobin’s lower stomach to between her exposed breasts, eyes opening just a peek so her fingers can tangle in the golden-brown strands of hair just above the edge of the blanket.

Christen inhales slowly from where she lays on her side, nestled into Tobin as closely as possible. The tip of her nose is pressed against Tobin’s side, and she tilts her head closer to kiss the soft skin there as delicately as she can. She doesn’t want to wake Tobin up, but she can’t help herself. Her senses are full of last night, from the taste of Tobin still on her tongue to the feel of Tobin’s fingertips on her body. The morning is quiet and fuzzy, perfect for reflecting on how full and satisfied Christen feels.

There’s also a part of her that’s exhausted. She twirls Tobin’s hair around her fingers, eyes fluttering shut again. After the night before, she can’t help but feel completely spent. She’s content, yes, but Tobin had been more than appreciative for everything and it had been hard enough to get them back to bed, much less to sleep. Tobin hadn’t wanted to calm down enough to drift into unconsciousness, insisting on keeping Christen awake with her, but eventually she’d been forced to concede defeat when Christen had straight up yawned into Tobin’s mouth.

She’d been a little disappointed, but hadn’t needed much more convincing before letting Christen close her eyes. They’d both fallen asleep quickly after, with Tobin more ready for sleep than she had been willing to admit. In fact, Christen absently thinks that she’s rather surprised that Tobin isn’t awake yet. She’d have thought that Tobin would be bouncing off the walls, eager to cover Christen’s body with her own once again.

This is just as nice though, Christen decides as she closes her eyes again and cuddles further into Tobin’s side. Tobin doesn’t stir, just continues to breathe deeply, and Christen doesn’t feel bad at all about going back to sleep. There are soft rustling noises coming from outside the bedroom door, but Christen doesn’t feel like investigating and instead welcomes dreams of Tobin holding her close forever.

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The next time Christen wakes, it’s exactly as she envisioned. Not that waking up in Tobin’s gentle embrace was less than ideal, but this is how she pictured it. With Tobin half-leaning over her, propped up on an elbow with hair falling in a curtain around her grinning face. She’s backlit by sunlight, almost ethereal in how beautiful she looks staring down at Christen with nothing less than unadulterated love and adoration.
Christen blinks a few times, clearing her eyes of any haze and letting her own smile overtake her. Her cheeks hurt, like she hasn’t been able to stop smiling, even in sleep, but she can’t help it. There’s nothing that can be done to diminish her happiness, and as soon as her and Tobin lock eyes, she feels done for. She feels her soul sealing itself to Tobin’s, and there’s a sort of finality to it that closes the door on life before Tobin. This is the last piece Christen needed, the last step to get it all in order. She felt complete last night, but right now what she feels is indescribable.

She feels as though Tobin is her soulmate, and here in the morning light, the universe is confirming it.

It’s the only explanation for how everything has so perfectly come together. Despite the long months it took, the frustration and Christen’s inability to recognize her own feelings, combined with hurt and the knowledge that neither of them were free of flaws, it all feels perfect. Christen wouldn’t trade it all for anything else in the world, and looking up at Tobin, she feels that maybe Tobin feels the same way.

“Hey,” Tobin says, and her voice is tender as she brings up a hand to brush over Christen’s cheek, thumb smoothing over the skin there.

“Hey,” Christen whispers, her lips barely finished mouthing the word before Tobin is kissing her, gentle and with the slightest hint of pressure. Tobin pulls back within seconds, studying Christen’s eyes for the briefest of seconds before leaning down again. The whole thing is chaste, closed mouths lingering as they press against each other. It almost feels magical, and Christen finds herself welcoming the fluttering butterflies in the base of her abdomen. Sure, she feels happy and secure and assured that Tobin is hers and not going anywhere, but she can’t help the thrill of nervousness that runs straight down her spine as she thinks about what happens now. No matter what happens, she knows it will all turn out right, but that doesn’t mean that she isn’t a little apprehensive.

The others are back, and when Christen thinks about what that means, she carefully kisses Tobin away. Tobin mumbles an unintelligible complaint under her breath as she tries to chase Christen’s lips, but eventually pouts as her lashes rise and give way to the wonderfully loved up gaze that belongs to Christen alone. It isn’t that Christen doesn’t want to kiss her girlfriend, but she’s a little drained – emotionally and physically – and they have a few things to discuss first.

“Thank you for last night,” Christen says, her words coming out in a surprising rasp that scrapes along the back of her throat. It feels rough and raw and honest, but also a little unsettling. It’s like Tobin undoes her completely, from her head to her toes, inside and out. Part of their love is giving into that, but Christen’s still getting used to it.

“I should be the one thanking you,” Tobin exhales in one long wisp of sound, bowing her head to press her lips against Christen’s collarbone. She merely speaks against the curve there, shaping syllables that Christen feels as much as she hears. “Best night of my life, no doubt about it.”

Christen can already feel her blush rising as Tobin gives into herself, letting her restlessness come into play. She slides a hand around Christen’s waist, slowly dragging it down to her hip until her fingers wedge between the beginning round of Christen’s ass and the mattress she’s pressed into.

“It was the best night of my life, too,” Christen manages to say, pushing past any residual embarrassment. “So far.”

“So far,” Tobin agrees. “It only gets better from here.”

“Tobin,” Christen sighs, sifting her hands through Tobin’s tangled hair.
Tobin inclines her head in acknowledgement, hand stilling in the middle of its determined journey to cup Christen’s ass as entirely as possible.

“Tobin, I hate to say this,” she starts.

“So don’t,” Tobin suggests, the pout making its way back onto her face.

“But I’m a little tired, and a lot hungry,” Christen explains.

Tobin drops her head to groan against Christen’s chest, moving her hand to securely hold her girlfriend to her.

“Babe,” Tobin whines, stretching the word out. “Are you sure?”

“Very sure,” Christen tells her. “You can’t hear it, but my stomach is about to start growling and you’re not going to find that very attractive.”

“You’re always attractive to me,” Tobin insists, leaning up and puckering her lips until Christen gives in to a short kiss.

“Still hungry,” Christen reminds her.

“I can think of something you can have for breakfast,” Tobin says suggestively, adjusting so that she can firmly wedge a thigh of hers between Christen’s. Just the movement has Christen’s eyes falling closed, nearly rolling into the back of her head as she remembers last night – the way Tobin had tasted, how wet and silky she’d been on Christen’s tongue, how she’d been so reluctant to move away even as Tobin begged for a turn of her own, the way she’d become so wet between her legs throughout it all that when Tobin finally got her hands on her it had been almost comical how easily her fingers had slid in. It’s tempting to give in, to gather the strength to flip Tobin onto her back and disappear between the sheets for another round with the most addictively delicious person she’s ever been with.

She almost does, tilting her head back so Tobin can trail kisses down her neck and back up until she finds her pulse point, sucking hard without any preamble. But then there’s more sound from the outside world, and Christen groans as she squeezes her thighs together. That of course does little to discourage Tobin, who rather thinks it’s an invitation to continue attempting to leave a small mark behind on her neck, and Christen curses her own body for betraying her. She hates how good it all feels, telling herself that this isn’t the time to be incredibly turned on by Tobin’s ridiculously cheesy and dirty comments. Rather, it’s the time to have a conversation about what time it is, what they’re going to do with their friends outside in the apartment, and whether Christen can have anything to eat that doesn’t involve a side of Tobin’s orgasm and fingers pulling at her hair.

There will be plenty of time for that later.

For a second Christen marvels as how comfortable she feels, letting Tobin scrape her teeth over her growing hickey and thinking about getting to continue this as soon as possible.

“Not with everyone in the apartment,” Christen says, resting a warning hand on Tobin’s hip as she attempts to grind down. “They’ll know.”

Tobin chuckles into Christen, the vibrations sending shivers through Christen’s body.

“Chris, babe, they’re not stupid,” she mumbles. “They know what we were doing last night.”

Christen stiffens instantly, and Tobin can clearly tell from the way she pulls back and looks down at
Christen with urgency in her eyes.

“I didn’t mean it like that – “

“I don’t want to be like, obvious about it,” Christen says, feeling her bottom lip tremble involuntarily. “I thought it was between you and me.”

“It was,” Tobin swears. “It is. It’s between us. I mean, they don’t really know. I didn’t tell them anything, I promise. I just told Allie and asked if they could stay with a teammate or something, and she said okay. That was it.”

“Like it was my first time with you,” Christen says, voice hushed, the emotions finally hitting her strong. She feels bowled over with the force of it, and from the way Tobin quickly gathers her in her arms, she can tell that she gets it. “I don’t want anyone else to be a part of that.”

“No one else is,” Tobin reassures her quietly, holding her tight. Christen closes her eyes, trying not to cry as Tobin’s smell and very being envelopes her. “I don’t want anyone to care about what they think. It only matters what you think.”

Christen sniffs.


“Eh,” Tobin says with a shrug and a smile that she shows Christen, pressing their foreheads together preciously. “What you think matters more.”

Christen can’t help but smile back, and Tobin carefully kisses her watery eyelashes before yawning and rolling away, stretching her lean limbs out in a way that’s liable to get Christen drooling. Her body is more than unfair at this point, a complete dream that Christen still can’t believe belongs to her. She almost doesn’t dare reach out for it, but decides to risk it at the last second before Tobin rolls off the other side of the bed, hand gripping a firm bicep in a way that clearly means for her to stay.

So Tobin stays.

“Yeah, babe?” Tobin asks through another yawn, hair an absolute tousled mess that Christen is kind of in love with.

“I love you,” Christen says, sitting up and scooting her way behind Tobin. She holds onto her from behind, snaking her arms around Tobin’s bare abdomen and resting her cheek and temple against her strong back. Tobin grasps her hands firmly, relaxing against Christen’s chest and letting out the sweetest exhale.

“I love you, too,” she says, and Christen thinks that this is one place she wouldn’t mind staying in forever.

*

When they finally emerge from Tobin’s room, showered and dressed, it’s to the ridiculous sight of the other girls lounging around the living room like they can’t be bothered to get up. It’s just before noon – Christen had let Tobin set the pace of their morning, leisurely taking turns in the bathroom while Christen texted her mom and Tobin arranged flights for her travel to and from the upcoming national team camp – and definitely time to find something to eat, but Christen takes a moment to giggle at the way Alex groans loudly at their appearance.

“No, no,” she complains. “Not now. I can handle the sex monkeys right now. I just can’t.”
“We haven’t even done anything,” Tobin says in confusion.

Kelley hushes them loudly from where her head rests on Alex’s thigh, eyes closed and middle finger raised.

“Don’t even start,” she croaks out. “Just because you’re not hungover doesn’t mean that the rest of us aren’t.”

Christen giggles and unthinkingly wraps her arms around Tobin’s waist, the cotton of her t-shirt soft against Christen’s forearms. It’s all so domestic and loving, familiar and easy, and she pushes aside her nerves to whisper into Tobin’s ear.

“I’m really hungry,” she confesses, and Tobin just says “okay” before kissing Christen on the nose and starting to pull her into the kitchen.

“No way,” Allie states, struggling to sit up. “You two aren’t doing this. Not now. We gave you all night, for crying out loud.”

Tobin and Christen pause, torn between ignoring Allie (Tobin) and giving their friends some consideration (Christen).

“Come on,” Tobin mutters under her breath, doing her best to keep from moving her mouth too much as she speaks. “If we’re fast enough, she won’t notice.”

Christen bites her bottom lip in hesitation.

“Yes, I will,” Allie says louder, looking bleary-eyed with smeared mascara and hair all askew. “Tobin, don’t you dare go in that kitchen just to make out with Christen some more.”

This time it’s Tobin who hesitates, shifting her weight so that her and Christen aren’t leaning into the kitchen.

“So what are we allowed to do?” Tobin asks petulantly.

“Come hang out with us,” Alex says, cracking an eye open and looking gorgeous but completely exhausted. “Sit down. Let me tell you about the guy I made out with last night.”

Tobin’s eyebrows shoot up into her hairline and steps away from Christen, whose loose arms fall from around her waist.

“You never hook up with anyone,” Tobin says in awe. “What happened?”

Alex grins smugly as Tobin goes to plop down on the couch next to Allie, and Christen’s heart begins to pound with every second Tobin isn’t by her side, and she involuntarily makes a small noise in the back of her throat as her eyes scan the living room, searching for a place to sit. Kelley and Alex are spread across one of the couches, occupying the entire space. Christen doesn’t really want to sit with them, but there isn’t enough room between Allie and Tobin for her either. Her chest aches as she tries to figure it out, looking at Tobin who is busy rearranging her limbs so that her legs are spread wide.

Now there definitely isn’t room for Christen next to her.

“Babe,” Tobin says, finally looking up expectantly. Her warm eyes meet Christen’s, and instantly Christen feels calmer. “Want to come sit with me?”
She pats the space between her legs, and something about the way she asks politely when she clearly wants Christen to sit nowhere else makes Christen feel like she’s on fire.

It makes her feel like she wishes no one else was in the room.

But she swallows down the desire, carefully walking towards Tobin and praying that the others can’t tell what she’s thinking as she folds herself into Tobin’s lap. The two of them fit together, making what should be an awkward position feel comfortable and natural. Tobin wraps her arms around Christen’s shoulders protectively to pull them close together, and Christen wonders why she ever worried about anything to begin with.

Tobin loves her. Christen knows it and feel it as she’s held, and nothing has ever been so reassuring. She listens distractedly as Allie and Alex fight to tell the story of their night, talking over each other in a way that makes Tobin chuckle. The vibrations of her chest rumble through her so Christen can feel them against her back, and it’s warm and safe and soothing. It would be so easy to feel claustrophobic, being caged in by Tobin the way she is. Instead, Christen feels anything but.

“I’m pretty sure it’s because she was a little jealous of you two,” Kelley interjects halfway through the story of the guy who kept buying Alex drinks – much to her underage delight. “That’s the only reason she was giving him any attention.”

Alex bops Kelley on the head, wrinkling her nose in distaste.

“I wanted to get drunk, Kelley,” she says bluntly. “I’m not jealous of the sex monkeys.”

Christen freezes, and Tobin presses a kiss to her hair as if she knows exactly what’s running through her mind.

“Hey, Alex,” Tobin says casually. “How about you stop referring to my baby and I as sex monkeys?”

Christen peeks over at Alex and Kelley, only to realize that Kelley’s been staring at her for a while, judging by the glazed over look on her face. It makes her a little self conscious, but mostly curious. She’s not sure why Kelley’s staring, wondering if she knows that something has changed. Wondering if she knows what happened last night, and how it happened for the first time.

“Why?” Alex asks, glancing at them as she twirls Kelley’s hair around her index finger. “I mean, you are. Aren’t you? You weren’t just playing board games all night, right?”

“Alex,” Allie says warningly as Tobin winds her fingers between Christen’s. Christen can tell, from her grip and the flex of her hands, that Tobin isn’t pleased with Alex’s comments.

“Their sex life is private, Alex,” Kelley murmurs from where she’s still staring at Christen who is doing her best to pretend that it doesn’t mean anything. “Just because they kicked us out so they could have sex, doesn’t mean that we can talk about it like that.”

The sympathy and understanding in Kelley’s eyes as she speaks makes Christen think that maybe she does understand, and Christen feels a rush of gratitude towards her best friend who doesn’t owe her a single thing but is sticking up for her anyway. It’s a bit of a revelation, as she realizes that Kelley is still her best friend and her being with Tobin doesn’t have to change that. That makes Christen realize that maybe she can trust Kelley with this, the things that she doesn’t really want anyone else but Tobin to know.

Like how emotional last night was, and how it wasn’t just a wild night of sex for them. It was tender and significant and simultaneously the hottest thing they’ve either been a part of. To Alex and Allie,
it probably seemed ridiculous that they wanted the apartment to themselves. But maybe Christen can trust Kelley with everything that happened, and maybe Kelley can be supportive and willing to accept that what happened last night was the biggest thing in Christen’s life.

Tobin’s hand relaxes in Christen’s as Alex begrudgingly agrees to stop before she carries on with her story.

Kelley doesn’t look away from Christen, her expression turning curious as Christen’s eyes dart between her and her and Tobin’s interlocked fingers. She watches Tobin rub her thumb along her skin, slow and smooth and almost absently as Tobin continues to give Alex grief about her drinking. It’s like touching Christen is so natural, so automatic and necessary for Tobin that it would be impossible for her to not do so.

“At least he wasn’t ugly,” Allie says as Alex finishes her story. “Otherwise we really would have been judging you.”

“Listen,” Alex says defensively. “He was attractive. You shouldn’t be judging me.”

“Was he actually that attractive?” Tobin asks, and Allie shakes her head as discreetly as possible while Alex vehemently agrees. Christen laughs automatically, but she’s too busy being wrapped up in Tobin’s embrace.

“Tobin,” Christen mutters as Alex begins arguing with Allie. “Tobin, baby.”

“I’m here,” Tobin responds quietly, and as Christen tilts her head to the side, Tobin meets her for a soft kiss. “I’m here, babe.”

When they separate, it’s because Allie and Alex have started yelling at them instead.

“Alex really is just jealous,” Tobin tells Christen under her breath, loud enough so that the girls can hear her. “She’s jealous that we get to kiss each other whenever we want, and we don’t have to get drunk to do it.”

“I’m never telling you guys anything ever again,” Alex threatens. “See if I tell you the next time I hook up with someone.”

“Alex,” Kelley says, rolling her eyes and finally sitting up. “You say that like it’s going to happen again.”

Tobin and Allie laugh as Alex begins defending herself, but Christen can’t help but notice Kelley still looking at her with more focus than before.

* *

It pains Christen to leave Tobin, but when Kelley quietly asks if the two of the can grab coffee alone together, she reluctantly agrees.

It’s not so much that she doesn’t want to, but it’s hard to leave Tobin even just for an hour or so. Before she leaves, she makes sure to kiss her girlfriend hard and hug her tight and promise that she’ll be back.

“I can’t handle losing you,” Tobin jokes with a twinkle in her eye and a serious undertone. “You’ve got to come back to me, babe.”

“I promise I’ll be back,” Christen tells her while Kelley waits patiently.
Christen drives them, and Kelley feels like a different person as she sits patiently next to her. She doesn’t fiddle with the music or the air, doesn’t turn either of them up until Christen can’t stand it. Kelley just listens to Christen’s music on low and occasionally taps her fingers on her thigh. It could be awkward, but it isn’t. Instead it feels like their friendship has finally been equalized, like Christen has as much say in it as Kelley does. It feels respectful, like Kelley finally is thinking about Christen before herself. Christen thinks that it’s a little sad that it took a failed attempt at romance between them to get them here, but she’s not about to complain about the journey she’s been on. She’s in a good place now – a really good place, actually – and she’s strangely thankful for every step it took to get here.

“I like this song,” Kelley says when they’re at a red light and her fingers are still.

“Thanks,” Christen says. “Tobin showed it to me.”

Kelley just hums in response, like of course Tobin did, and bobs her head in acknowledgement. It’s a stark difference to the way Kelley would normally react to Christen’s music, either blaring the songs she liked or skipping the ones she didn’t. It makes Christen a little anxious, but then her phone vibrates in her cup holder and Kelley is glancing at it like she always has, and things feel a little more normal, like they used to be before all of this.

“Tobin texted you,” Kelley says, and Christen can’t quite decipher her tone. She can’t tell if she’s bitter or neutral or happy for Christen, but she does know that the way Kelley refrains from grabbing the phone to figure out what Tobin has to say is a relief. Christen doesn’t mind if somethings stay the same, but she also doesn’t need for Kelley to find out that she doesn’t have the same passcode on her phone anymore. It’s nothing against Kelley, but Christen doesn’t want anyone reading her conversations with Tobin. They’re private, just like their relationship is.

“It’s funny, how they can be so affectionate with each other and open about their feelings while still feeling like it’s entirely theirs. No matter how much they show the other girls, Christen knows that they’ll never understand what it’s like to be in love with your best friend. Christen is so completely and entirely in love with Tobin, and now that she knows Tobin feels the same way, it feels more and more like they share this thing that’s just theirs. Maybe that’s one of the reasons she’s so okay with so much hand holding and kissing and hugging – because she knows that it only shows the most superficial layer of what it’s like to be together.

“Thanks,” Christen says, and even though she can’t wait to see what Tobin’s sent her, she focuses on driving until she’s parked at the coffee shop. Kelley waits patiently as Christen smiles at her phone while re-reading the message over and over before replying.

_I don’t like this at all, babe. Miss you. Love you._

_Me neither baby :( I can’t wait to see you again_

Kelley pays for their iced coffees and they find a small table in the corner that’s directly under an air vent. It’s hot out and Christen’s hair is sticking to the back of her neck, but she doesn’t even notice as she swipes at her phone to look at Tobin’s next text.

_I can’t wait to kiss you again_

It makes Christen blush a little, and Kelley carefully clears her throat in a way that makes Christen decide to lock her phone and respond later.

“It’s good to see you,” Kelley opens with, and Christen feels the pressure slowly release from her muscles as she does her best to slip into the casual familiarity they’ve always shared. She remembers
the days when Kelley was the one who was able to take her mind off of things and help her relax a little. Kelley has never been able to do it the way Tobin has, but she’s the only person who has ever come close.


It’s feeling a little like the conversation they had on the phone earlier in the week, and Kelley must feel that way too because she pulls a face that makes Christen laugh a little.

“Sorry,” she apologizes. “I know that we’ve said all of this already. I just really mean it.”

“I know, Christen,” Kelley says, fiddling with the plastic top on her coffee. “You’ve never been anything less than honest with me.”

“Okay, good,” Christen says, pulling her legs up underneath her. “I just wanted to make sure.”

They make small talk for a little bit, with Kelley filling Christen in on the parts of last night that Alex hadn’t already talked about. Christen talks about how her summer is going so far and how her family is doing, and when she plans to come back to school to stay with Kelley again. Their plans aren’t matching up completely, but that’s just part of getting older. Best friends aren’t meant to be attached at the hip forever – not that Christen and Kelley ever really have been.

“So how is Tobin?” Kelley asks during a lull in conversation. “You haven’t really talked about her a lot, which is kind of surprising. I thought you wouldn’t be able to shut up about her.”

She’s joking a little, but Christen bites her lip and blushes anyway. It’s true, she’s gone to great lengths to avoid Tobin in their conversation, but only because she worries that she won’t be able to hide everything the moment they do talk about her.

But that’s why they’re here, isn’t it? They’re here to reconnect and enjoy each others’ friendship, but they’re also here because Christen is bursting at the seams to talk about last night and Kelley is the only person besides Tobin that she trusts enough to talk about it with. While she’s talked about it with Tobin – and will probably continue to talk about it with Tobin, if she’s being honest – there’s somethings that need to be said to an impartial third party. Christen needs to tell someone how it was, and Kelley is the person to tell.

So she takes a deep breath and starts small, as she usually does.

“She’s kind of amazing,” she admits, feeling the burning in her cheeks begin to recede. “I just don’t want to talk about her all the time, you know? That wouldn’t be fun for you.”

Kelley shrugs and leans back in her chair, limbs falling loose around her.

“I can tell that you need to talk about her, though,” Kelley says. “So what’s up? Is it good, or do I need to kick her ass?”

Christen can tell that Kelley is joking, but she still laughs rather nervously.

“Please don’t kick her ass,” she says. “That’s definitely not necessary.”

“So tell me what’s going on,” Kelley says, managing to look interested and nonchalant at the same time. “I can tell there’s something.”

“How can you tell?” Christen asks curiously, wondering when Kelley became so in tune with her surroundings. She’s always done a rather good job of being oblivious in regards to Christen’s
feelings, never realizing that something was wrong unless Christen told her outright. It’s such a
difference, and Christen thinks that she must have been particularly obvious if Kelley of all people
realized that something was up.

“I don’t know,” Kelley says, shrugging and looking a little self-conscious. “Just, the way you two
touch each other. And the way you don’t want to be apart. Like when Tobin sat down next to Allie,
you looked like someone had torn your heart out of your chest. And then when you went to go sit
with her, you made a 180. Your face changed completely.”

Christen blushing, swinging her ponytail down to try and hide her burning cheeks.

“I’m not that bad,” she mumbles, embarrassed that her emotions must have been all over her face for
Kelley to read them.

“It’s not a bad thing,” Kelley says earnestly, resting her elbows on the tabletop. “I mean – you love
her, right?”

The smile that involuntarily spreads across Christen’s face is too quick and too large to even attempt
to deny. It answers Kelley’s questions for her, but Christen says “yes” anyway.

“Anyone can see that,” Kelley says, and she’s smiling too. “You’re in love, Chris, and it’s kind of
beautiful to see.”

Christen forces herself to look at Kelley, and they just smile at each other for a while. Kelley looks
encouraging, and perhaps that’s why Christen says what she does.

“We had sex last night.”

“I figured,” Kelley says, holding back a laugh rather successfully. Before, Kelley would have let one
loose without regard for Christen’s feelings. “I mean, I know Alex was being kind of rude earlier,
but I really do hope that you weren’t just playing Monopoly.”

“No, like…” Christen trails off, gathering the courage to finish this explanation of sorts. “For the first
time.”

“Oh,” Kelley says in a hushed voice, eyes wide as she freezes halfway through reaching for her
coffee. “Like – “

“Yeah,” Christen says, not giving Kelley a chance to finish, nodding quickly. “Tobin and I. For the
first time.”

Christen can see the million of questions bubbling up in Kelley’s throat, can see her carefully sorting
through them before she opens her mouth again.

“How was it?”

Christen thinks about it, thinks about how it started and how it felt this morning and everything in
between, and nearly melts down onto the floor. She doesn’t feel the dreamy smile on her face until it
starts to hurt her cheeks, and she blinks slowly before answering.

“Perfect,” she admits, not daring to look up at Kelley’s face. Christen fiddles with her straw, focused
on her coffee. “Just…perfect.”

“I’m really happy for you,” Kelley says quietly. “Really happy, Chris.”
“Thanks,” Christen says, and she can’t help the way she can’t stop thinking over last night, Tobin’s naked, sweaty body under hers and on top of hers. Of Tobin’s fingers between her thighs, Christen’s mouth between Tobin’s. It’s all so vivid, seared into her memory forever, and Christen wouldn’t want it any other way. “It was just kind of everything it should be, you know?”

“Were you nervous?” Kelley asks, and it’s a thoughtful question, one that surprises Christen. It’s not the kind of question she expected Kelley to ask, but it’s one that she instantly has an answer for.

“Kind of,” Christen says. “But like, I trust Tobin. I know that she loves me. And I knew that no matter what happened, it was going to be amazing and I was going to be okay.”

“You two are gross,” Kelley teases, and Christen laughs as more of the Kelley she used to know comes back out. “Honestly. The two of you are so in love and it’s gross.”

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry,” Christen says through a laugh. “I can’t help it!”

“It’s okay,” Kelley says, and there’s a bittersweet look on her face. “Just – please tell me she made sure you had a good time.”

“We had an amazing time,” Christen reassures her.

Kelley rolls her eyes.

“No, Christen. Tell me that she made sure to get you off.”

This time it’s Christen’s turn for her eyes to go wide, both at Kelley’s bluntness and the thought of discussing the finer details of what happened between the sheets and on the kitchen floor.

“Oh,” she says, nodding more to herself to anything. “Okay. Listen, Kelley, this conversation stays between us, okay?”

“Did she not?” Kelley asks, looking mildly violent. “Do I need to go have a talk with her?”

“No, no!” Christen exclaims, hand shooting across the table to touch Kelley’s arm. “No, Kell. She took care of me, I promise. Tobin’s really good at making sure things are fair and equal.”

“On a scale of one to ten, am I making you uncomfortable?” Kelley asks, looking more intrigued than anything.

“A little,” Christen admits. “But I mean, I think I might need to talk about this with someone who isn’t Tobin. If that’s okay.”


And well, Christen doesn’t tell her everything, per say. But she does tell her more than she’s ever told her before, and it feels good. It feels good to get it out, and in a weird way, it brings them closer together and helps them begin to stitch back together the ripped and ragged pieces that make up their friendship.

Christen feels bad, but she’s nearly forgotten about Tobin by the time they pick up and get ready to leave. She’s got four unread texts, each of which she reads carefully while she waits for Kelley to finish up in the restroom.

There are other things that I can’t wait to do to you later, too
Do you think I can convince Allie to leave the apartment again tonight?

Okay, enjoy your time with Kelley. I see how it is.

I'm kidding, babe. Seriously, enjoy your time with Kelley. I know you miss her. I love you. I'll see you at home.

Something about the word “home” makes Christen’s chest feel tight and warm, and she rapidly types out a reply before Kelley emerges.

I love you too and can’t wait to see you again. We’re leaving now, you better be ready with kisses when I get home!

“You ready to go?” Kelley asks brightly upon emerging from the bathroom. “Get back home to your lover?”

“Stop, Kell,” Christen says, feeling a little embarrassed. “Don’t make it weird.”

“It’s only weird if you make it,” Kelley says cheerfully. “Now come on. I can tell from your face that you two have been apart long enough. Let’s go.”

The drive back to the apartment feels way too long. Christen feels like they get stuck at every red light and taps her fingers against the steering wheel while she waits for it to turn green, and when she finally pulls into the apartment complex, she’s almost disappointed that Tobin isn’t waiting for her. She has to walk all the way to the apartment door, with Kelley behind her teasing her for being in such a rush, but she tries not to let it bother her. She would rather see Tobin, and there’s nothing wrong with that. She's been waiting long enough.

Of course, Tobin makes the wait worth it.

When Christen sees her, she can’t help but fling her arms around Tobin’s neck. It’s just inside the apartment – Tobin is there waiting for her, rather impatiently by the split-second look that Christen gets before she’s attacking her – with Kelley still behind Christen, waiting to enter, but they don’t really care. Tobin is lifting Christen off her toes, arms firmly secured around her middle as she buries her face into her neck. Christen can’t see her smile, but she can feel it pressed into her skin and it’s so reassuring to know that she isn’t the only one here hating the hour that they just spent away from each other.

“You guys are so gross,” Alex says loudly, from somewhere in the apartment. Christen’s eyes are closed in happiness as she smiles, and she keeps them that way so she doesn’t have to feel Alex’s glare and Allie’s knowing grin.

“Don’t listen to them,” Tobin speaks into Christen’s neck. “I love you.”

“I love you too,” Christen says, and it feels like more of a promise than anything.

What kind of promise, Christen isn’t sure. She’s only sure that this right now is the only thing she wants forever. She’s never been so sure of anything the way she’s sure of how much she wants to never let Tobin go.

*

Not many days pass before Tobin and Allie have to leave to head to national team camp again. It’s bittersweet and makes Christen cry the night before, embarrassed and ashamed when Tobin finds her on the balcony after a phone call with her mom, tears streaking down her face as she attempts to
“Hey,” Christen says, hurriedly wiping her face dry as Tobin squeezes past the door, closing it tightly behind them.

“How’s your mom?” Tobin asks.

“Good,” Christen says, letting Tobin take her into her arms for a loose hug. It feels good just to lean her head on Tobin’s shoulder, feel Tobin’s easy breathing and warm embrace around her. “She’s glad that I’m coming home tomorrow. I told her I’d go straight there from the airport.”

“Probably the best plan,” Tobin exhaled against Christen’s hair, hands pulling at the hem of Christen’s shirt and lifting it just enough to press her warm fingertips against the soft skin at the small of her back. “She probably hates me for stealing you away.”

“She’ll love you for making me the happiest I’ve ever been,” Christen corrects her. “I mean, she’s still getting used to it, and she wants to meet you, but she’ll love you. My whole family will.”

“I hope you’re right,” Tobin says, and Christen can feel that it’s a subject that makes her nervous, so she leaves it for the moment.

“Thanks for taking us to the airport,” Tobin says awkwardly. “I know it’s really early and everything, but thank you.”

“I’d do anything to get ten more minutes with you,” Christen says sincerely, and she really would. It’s not an exaggeration – she has no problem going out of her way and keeping them from leaving a car at the airport if it means she gets more time with her girlfriend.

The two of them take a moment, just enjoying standing there together. Tobin does that thing where she hums a nameless tune under her breath, except this time Christen knows that she doesn’t have a single particular song in mind. She’s just humming because she’s content, and that fact makes Christen smile. They know each other so well, and Christen isn’t exactly sure of when it happened, but she’s so thankful for it. Somewhere along the way, they paid attention to everything there was to know about each other and now they’re putting it to use. Like how Tobin waits a few minutes before asking Christen about the tears she’d seen upon walking out, knowing that Christen needs that time to come to terms with that fact that she’d been spotted. Normally Christen wouldn’t mind being caught crying, but she doesn’t want Tobin to feel like she’s the cause behind her tears. Which she kind of is, but not in a bad way.

“Are you okay?” Tobin asks gently, not moving at all. She just holds Christen, acting like nothing is wrong. Acting like they aren’t about to be separated from each other for nearly two weeks.

“Yeah,” Christen sighs. Because really, she’s going to be fine.

“You were crying.”

“I know,” Christen breathes out, and she has to swallow more tears. This isn’t how she wants to spend their last night together. After they want to talk about this, she wants to go back inside and eat their leftover Chinese food before heading for Tobin’s room to make out before falling asleep. That sounds perfect, and she isn’t going to ruin it by falling apart over something that can’t be changed.

“Is it because of me?” Tobin asks, and she sounds so apologetic that Christen almost feels bad.

“I just don’t want you to leave,” Christen tells her. It’s something that they’ve talked about a million times over, and how it provides Christen with the perfect opportunity to go and visit her family so
that she doesn’t end up abandoning them for Tobin completely, but that doesn’t make it any easier. They’ve lived in each other’s laps for the past couple of weeks, and while it’s been wonderful, they know that it’s not sustainable. “I mean, I know that you don’t really have a choice, but that doesn’t make it any easier.”

Tobin laughs a little, hoarse and low in the back of her throat

“Oh, babe,” she says, finally pulling back just enough so that they can look each other in the eye. “I don’t want to leave either.”

The next morning starts bright and early, the sun rising on the way to the airport. Allie is dozing in the backseat, hair hilarious tied in a sloppy ponytail, while Tobin lounges in the passenger seat with Christen’s hand tucked firmly in hers.

“Don’t go,” Christen says, a lump in her throat as they drive down a completely empty stretch of highway. “Don’t leave me here without you.”

Tobin doesn’t answer, just squeezes Christen’s hand tighter. When Christen looks over at her, she can see the tightness in the tendons of her neck and the stubborn tears in the corner of her eyes. She knows that Tobin will do her damn best to keep them from falling, but that doesn’t make this any easier. Christen knows Tobin well enough to know when she wants to cry, and that fact alone makes this ten times harder than it already was. Seeing Tobin cry might be the worst thing Christen has ever seen, she thinks, sneaking another glance as Tobin blinks determinedly.

“I’ll miss you,” Tobin says eventually, her voice wet and thick. “So much.”

“I know,” Christen says, rubbing her thumb over the back of Tobin’s hand. It brings Christen comfort whenever Tobin does it, so she’s hoping it might work both ways. “I’ll miss you too.”

“We’ll talk every day, right?” Tobin asks, suddenly looking over at Christen with her unshed tears still covering her eyes.

“Every day,” Christen confirms.

Tobin raises their hands to kiss Christen’s knuckles.

“I love you,” Tobin tells her.

Christen suddenly feels so choked up that telling Tobin, “I love you, too,” feels like much more of a chore than it normally is.

Allie does the polite thing at the airport – she takes her suitcase inside to go and check it while Tobin and Christen say goodbye curbside. And oh, what a goodbye it is. Tobin is quick to hug Christen’s tightly, face buried in her neck and the wetness Christen feels there tugs at her heartstrings so badly that she isn’t sure how they’re supposed to go on from here. It feels like they’re never supposed to be apart, like this is a cruel twist of fate. She knows that this is going to happen a million more times, that Tobin isn’t giving up her soccer career anytime soon, and Christen can only hope that it gets a little easier every time.

“I love you,” Christen tells Tobin, ignoring the stares from the airport employees, clearly wishing that Christen would hurry up and move her car. She rubs her hands along Tobin’s back, feeling lax muscles underneath thin cotton and finding small comfort in knowing that at least Tobin is relaxed when she’s in her arms. “Okay? I’ll talk to you every day and we’ll text and I’ll pick you up from the airport when you get back in a couple of weeks.”
“I love you, too,” Tobin says in between tears. She’s still refusing to move her head, hiding her tears as best as she can from everyone but Christen. “I don’t want to not wake up to you every morning.”

“Call me every morning,” Christen offers. “I’ll be here for you, okay?”

It’s the most painful thing she’s ever done, pull apart from Tobin as slowly as she does. They start slow, foreheads pressed together as Christen gently wipes tear tracks from Tobin’s face. Tobin keeps her eyes closed for that part, and Christen keeps quiet so she doesn’t embarrass her. Next, they step away from each other and only let their hands linger.

They’ve said all they need to say, but when Tobin slowly back up to the automatic sliding doors as Christen watches, she still mouths an, “I love you,” that feels just as important and meaningful as every other time she’s said it.

In the car, Christen finds herself practically sobbing as she navigates back onto the highway. She can only just see through the tears, and even considers pulling over until she can get herself together. They can do this, she knows it, but it’s still the hardest thing she’s ever done. Now that she knows what it’s like to be with Tobin, she never wants to be without her.

Never.

Her phone rings fifteen minutes later, and Christen finds herself sobbing in laughter as she answers the call.

“On a scale from one to ten, how much do you miss me already?”
If there’s one question that Christen asks herself every day, it’s why she made the decision to become an Introduction to Psychology TA.

It’s not as though she doesn’t remember what it’s like to be a freshman. She remembers not yet knowing how seriously to take classes, and texting Kelley in some classes while studiously taking notes in others. So when she sits at the front of the classroom and watches the kids ignore the professor like they aren’t paying to attend this lecture, she bites her tongue and resists the urge to imitate them by pulling out her phone. She’d been texting Tobin towards the beginning of class, complaining about having to behave and put her phone away for an entire hour.

There’s a test next week, and the professor speeds through the review slides. A few students tap away on their laptops – though Christen knows that they’re most likely using iMessage instead of jotting down important information – and others scrawl away with traditional pen on paper. The lecture room is kind of huge, one that Christen has been in a million times over the years, and she knows that some of the kids aren’t going to be psych majors – they’re just taking the class to fill a slot in their schedule. She tries to not let that matter, though, as the lecture period draws to an end.

Applications are a whole other monster that Christen can’t even begin to think about, for more reasons than the obvious ones.

But then, she hates the parts where the professor draws attention to her and she’s forced to interact with the couple hundred students in the lecture hall. He always insists on her standing up and waving and reminding everyone of where and when they can find her for extra help, and every time she does it she blushes and painstakingly enunciates every syllable so that she doesn’t end up stumbling over her words and embarrassing herself in front of a million freshman. Of course, that’s exactly what happens, and as soon as she sits back down she takes out her phone and texts Tobin as she waits for the professor to finish up. She doesn’t care that it’s unprofessional, but she’s a senior and a competent TA and a few texts aren’t going to change that.

I hate him. He always makes me stand up and talk at the end of every class. As if any of these kids care who I am.

Tobin’s response is immediate.

Hey babe, it’s okay. They’re too busy staring at how gorgeous you are to care that you said a word wrong.

Christen’s response is even faster.

Not gorgeous.

I’ll take a poll, then. I bet the whole class is gonna agree with me.

Christen bites her lip and tries to stop grinning as the clock finally signals the end of class. She stays in her seat for a minutes, waiting for the professor to finish packing up his things and bid her
goodbye before getting the hell out of this lecture hall. It’s not like she has much to look forward to, just staring at her laptop as she contemplates scrapping the entire grad school idea all together, but she’d rather be bored out of her mind at her apartment than here.

Stop it. I can’t wait to get back in bed and forget that this week ever happened.

Tobin will understand what she’s talking about: Christen has spent ages complaining about the stress of this week, with essays due and quizzes to prepare for and extra review sessions to host in preparation for this class’ exam. She’s felt bad for unloading in the days leading up to today, the day she finally gets to finish with all her obligations and relax for a weekend before it all starts over again, but Tobin has been so perfectly understanding the entire time. They’ve been apart for far too long at this point, with Christen busy with school and Tobin fulfilling her national team duties as she continues to be a regular call up, but phone calls and constant communication are their saving graces.

I bet you could have left already and instead you’re saying goodbye to your stupid professor.

Her girlfriend knows her too well, and sometimes Christen hates it.

Among the other things Christen hates is the fact that their schedules won’t sync up until Thanksgiving. She’s invited Tobin to stay for the holiday – they have to start meeting each other’s’ families at some point, right? – but Tobin has been reluctant to commit. It’s annoying, and even though Christen understands that it’s half because of Tobin’s desire to spend time with her own family and half because she’s too nervous to make a decision, that doesn’t mean that a part of her isn’t thinking that maybe Tobin doesn’t want to see her that much.

She gets it, she really does. She understands that telling your parents about a new relationship can be the scariest thing in the entire world, but part of her wants to tell Tobin that it’s like ripping off a bandaid. It’s painful, but best done quickly because it’s for the best. It’s not even that Christen really needs Tobin at her house for the holiday – she just wants to spend any available time together, and that’s the only viable option right now.

I’m just trying to be a good TA! Besides, my bed isn’t going anywhere.

Head full of thoughts about whether this is a topic worth discussing with Tobin on the phone call they have planned later, Christen just barely manages a quick conversation with the professor about how she’s going to help students prepare for the exam during her office hours. By the time she’s slung her bag over her shoulder and is hurrying to weave between crowds of students, Tobin still hasn’t replied and Christen is frowning at her phone screen, wondering if maybe she’d accidentally said something to offend her.

But then a rough hand is wrapped around her bicep and Christen is jerked into reality, eyes flashing in panic as she attempts to yank her arm away and instinctively look to whoever is grabbing her. She clutches her phone tightly, wondering who the hell would dare to randomly grab someone in the middle of a crowded college campus, and turns her head just as she manages to free her arm.

For a split second she thinks she’s hallucinating, her eyes going wide as she just barely registers the person in front of her. There’s no way –

“Tobin!” Christen cries out, holding a hand to her pounding heart. “What are you doing here?”

“Give me a hug, baby,” Tobin says, grinning and opening her arms.

Christen doesn’t even think twice before pouncing on her girlfriend, wrapping her arms around Tobin’s neck and jumping onto her. Tobin catches her easily – they’ve done this so many times that
it’s almost like muscle memory at this point – and secures Christen with arms around her waist. Her legs come up next and as soon as they’re completely and entirely attached, Christen feels all of the remaining tension left over from the week leave her shoulders. She almost doesn’t even realize it, can barely comprehend what’s happening, but there’s a part of her that just knows that everything is okay now that Tobin is here.

“What are you doing here?” Christen asks into Tobin’s neck, closing her eye and taking in the soft smell of laundry detergent and deodorant. It feels and smells like home all of a sudden, and the constant ache in her heart when Tobin goes away begins to fade. “I thought that you still had the game tomorrow!”

“I knocked my ankle in practice yesterday and decided to give myself a break,” Tobin says, and Christen pulls back to look at Tobin, panicked and attempting to look down at the ground.

“Are you okay?” Christen asks worriedly. “Do you need to put me down? I don’t want to hurt you. Are you going to be okay? What happened? Is it serious?”

Tobin laughs for a split second, but before responding, leans forward to catch Christen’s lips with hers.

It’s soft and sweet, Tobin’s lips slow against hers. It’s just enough to distract Christen, to focus her attention on the kiss and nothing else. She’s missed kissing Tobin – it’s been far too long since it happened last. Nearly a month, but that doesn’t matter as she lets Tobin slot their lips together and apply just enough pressure to make Christen’s heart rate skyrocket. The kiss doesn’t last long – they’re both aware of where they are, as well as the fact that PDA isn’t really appreciated in the middle of campus no matter who you are – but it’s enough to ground Christen, to slow her mind and clear it of the confused haze that it had entered the moment she’d felt Tobin grab her.

“Put me down and tell me about your ankle,” Christen demands gently. “How bad is it?”

Tobin laughs as she sets Christen down on the ground before straightening up, taking a deep breath and running a hand through her hair before speaking.

“I just landed on it wrong and tweaked it a little and it’s fine,” Tobin tells Christen. “Really, it’s not a big deal. I could carry you to your apartment and it would be fine. I’m missing the game and it sucks, but I’ll get over it. I’ll watch the game from your couch and be back for next camp.”

“I just worry about you hurting yourself,” Christen says, readjusting her bag and forcing her face to smooth out and lose the concerned look. “Do you need Kelley to look at your ankle?”

“Kelley is a pre med student, not a doctor,” Tobin says with amusement. “I really don’t know what she’s going to be able to do for me.”

“Rest, ice, compression, elevation,” Christen says, thinking hard about what to do for injured joints.

“Now I definitely don’t need Kelley,” Tobin says with a bit of a smirk, and Christen just shoves at her before Tobin motions for them to walk.

“Speaking of Kelley,” Christen says, glancing to the side as Tobin’s hand finds hers, fingers weaving together, “she drove me to campus today. She’s coming to pick me up.”

“Not anymore she isn’t,” Tobin says breezily, grinning proudly. “I told her to leave us alone and leave me to pick you up in your white carriage.”

“Did you drive here?” Christen wonders incredulously. “Tobin, what the hell did you do?”
“Hopped on a plane as soon as they told me I’d be sitting out tomorrow’s game,” Tobin says succinctly. “I figured I could watch from your couch or the bench. And babe, I sure as hell wasn’t going to miss an opportunity to spend a few days with you when I haven’t seen you in forever.”

“Yeah, but why didn’t you fly in here?” Christen pushes. “Or at least tell me you were coming?”

“There wasn’t a direct flight coming in here, and I wanted to see what you’d do when I showed up,” Tobin explains, a shit eating grin on her face.

Christen rolls her eyes a little, but still slips her hand into Tobin’s for the walk to Tobin’s car. She’s parked illegally – no surprise to Christen, who forces her to move as soon as possible.

“You’re not a student anymore,” she tells Tobin, who pulls a face as she pulls out of what is decidedly not a visitors’ spot.

“Please,” Tobin says. “I gave this school so many assists last year, I should have a reserved parking spot.”

Christen laughs so hard she snorts a little, and she would be embarrassed but she’s too happy that Tobin is here.

“I got you a little something by the way,” Tobin says, nodding at the backseat. “Figured I’d leave it behind, seeing what you did to the last ones I got you.”

Christen turns around to look, finding a rubber-banded bouquet of flowers. She grins without thinking about it, reaching for the stems to bring them into her lap and run the yellow petals between her fingers.

“Babe, they’re so pretty,” Christen says, staring at the tulips. “Did you pick these out?”

“Wanted something to brighten up the apartment,” Tobin explains. “Besides, I know how much you love when I get all sappy and – “

Christen doesn’t let her finish before leaning over and kissing her cheek, feeling the corners of Tobin’s mouth curve up as she lingers.

“You’re sweet,” Christen declares.

“Anyway,” Tobin continues determinedly, “you ended up crushing the flowers I gave you last time, so I thought leaving them in the car would prevent that from happening again.”

“I was excited to see you!” Christen defends emphatically. “Of course I just went for the hug!”

“The flowers ended up all smushed and on the ground!” Tobin refutes. “I paid good money for those things! Last time I buy you roses.”

“Babe,” Christen says, smiling as she sniffs the bouquet. They smell like flowers, earthy and floral and fresh. It’s refreshing, tickling her nose and encouraging her as she speaks. “I want roses. I want lots and lots of roses.”

When Christen glances up through soft lashes – dark but bare from a late morning, courtesy of a phone call with Tobin that had kept her up far later than expected – she can see Tobin biting her tongue, trying furiously not to smile or let loose a sarcastic reply. Instead she just shakes her head gently, and Christen tries again. It almost reminds her of back when they barely knew each other, back when Christen would have done almost anything to get a reaction from Tobin. Back then she


was just annoyed by Tobin’s casual nature, but now she wants something very specific from her girlfriend.

“Babe,” Christen says, whining just a little bit. She reaches over, trailing just a finger along the length of Tobin’s relaxed forearm as it rests on the center console. They’re almost home, and this could wait, but she knows it’s way less likely to happen if Kelley is around, which she probably is. “Babe, I like roses. I still want you to buy them for me.”

“Nope,” Tobin says, shaking her head. “You’ll just ruin them again; I’m not going to waste – “

“Babe,” Christen says again, whining fully this time. “Please.”

“No,” Tobin says firmly.

“Babe, I want roses,” Christen says, and she wonders if maybe she’s lost her touch a little. If maybe she’s done this too often, if Tobin’s gotten used to this.

“Christen, baby,” Tobin says, turning into the apartment complex. It’s attractive, the way her left arm and hand flexes as it maneuvers the steering wheel, and Christen can’t help but stare and temporarily forget about the flowers in her lap. “Are these flowers not good enough for you?”

“They’re more than good enough, babe,” Christen insists. “But babe, I want roses too. I really like roses.”

Christen can see Tobin’s steely resolve melting as she pulls into a parking spot.

“Chris,” Tobin says slowly, turning off the car. “I’ll get you roses, okay? If that’s what you want, I’ll get you roses.”

She tries not to smirk, but it’s near impossible as Tobin’s irresistible smile spreads slowly across her face. It all happens so fast but so slow, the way Tobin undoes her seatbelt and pushes it away from her before leaning over the console. She rests an elbow on the leather before grabbing Christen’s face with both hands, holding her head and pulling her towards her. It’s a little rough and abrupt but Christen is too busy focusing on the look in Tobin’s eyes, hungry and arresting and enough to draw the air out of Christen’s lungs. It’s intense and longing, full of something that Christen suddenly realizes Tobin has been holding back since the moment they saw each other today.

So Christen welcomes the hard kiss. She lets Tobin kiss her aggressively, not even waiting before nipping sharply at her bottom lip and then slipping her tongue into Christen’s mouth. Tobin doesn’t hold back, giving it her all, and Christen feels like she’s covered in flames with how hot her body feels. It’s like she’s powerless, yielding to Tobin’s lips and the passion flowing from them, but Christen doesn’t even mind. This is what she wanted.

Christen wanted her to break. Christen wanted to see Tobin crack a little, to give into her feelings and stop maintaining her cool for just a moment. Christen wanted to push Tobin just far enough to tip her over the edge, to force Tobin to act on the fact that she would do absolutely anything for Christen.

Their friends say she’s whipped, and even though Tobin will never ever admit it to anyone besides Christen in the deep dark recesses of her bedroom in the middle of the night when they’re both half asleep and more in love than ever before, Tobin is. Christen knows that Tobin would hand over her heart and soul if Christen asked her too, and sometimes she just wants to see it.

Sometimes Christen wants to see Tobin love her with everything she has.
“You’re going to kill me,” Tobin pants into Christen’s mouth, fingers curling into the little hairs at the nape of Christen’s neck. She tugs just a little, desperation evident in the grip she maintains. “Baby, you’re going to kill me. I’ll buy you all the roses you want.”

Christen doesn’t get a word out before Tobin’s kissing her again – not that her mind would be able to formulate a single thing to say.

This kiss drags on, like time has stopped. It’s hard and almost painful, teeth accidentally knocking together once or twice in pure desire. Christen feels like this is too much for Tobin’s car in broad daylight, but Tobin is pushing forward and cradling her head with such devotion and care that, as per usual when it comes to displays of affection with Tobin, she doesn’t care very much at all.

They pull away with gasping breaths, heaving chests, and swollen lips. Christen stares at Tobin with wide eyes, the same sort of gaze looking back at her. It’s like neither of them can really believe it, believe that they’re here together and making out in Tobin’s car as though they weren’t just discussing flowers ten minutes ago.

“I want to take you upstairs and fuck you,” Tobin says unabashedly, not even bothering to hold back.

“Kelley’s home,” Christen says, her voice hushed and hoarse. She feels raw, like she’s not wearing anything and Tobin can see every inch of her. Tobin’s seen her naked before, but this is different somehow. She’s still clothed, but isn’t sure why.

“Later,” Tobin relents, and it’s clear that she’s not happy about it. “Later. I want to take you out tonight.”

“Take me out?” Christen asks, confused as to the change in subject.

“I want to take you on a date,” Tobin clarifies, her breathing slowly regulating. “A proper one, with wine and flowers and heels. One where I get to come back here and kiss you goodnight before you invite me in and I end up fingering you before we even make it to the bedroom. A date where I get to stare at my sexy girlfriend all night and be so fucking amazed that she’s mine.”

“I love you,” Christen blurts out.

“I love you too,” Tobin says, reaching forward to smooth out Christen’s hair. Christen lets her, ducking her head so Tobin can reach. Her cheeks are burning at Tobin’s words, unable to deny how much she wants all of that. She gets a quick kiss on the mouth before Tobin is moving like lightning, jumping out of the car and bouncing around to Christen’s door.

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“Kelley’s home,” Christen reminds her once her door has been opened and Tobin is offering to take the flowers off of Christen’s hands. Christen refuses, clutching the bouquet closely and instead kicking her bag in Tobin’s direction. “No funny business.”

“What do you mean?” Tobin asks, feigning ignorance. Christen nearly wants to scowl in reply, but it’s hard to maintain a straight face when she thinks of what happened the last time Tobin came to visit. “I’m always well behaved around Kelley.”

She’ll never be able to erase Kelley’s face from her memory, and though the situation was awful and embarrassing, the way it had all happened made it nearly impossible to be mad about.

“Tell that to Kelley,” Christen says, finally getting out of the car once Tobin has Christen’s bag swung over her shoulder. “I’m pretty sure she’s regretting ever letting us meet.”
“She should have known what would happen,” Tobin says agreeably, but Christen knows that she’s just being ridiculous. “She definitely should have known that taking you to that party and letting me talk you up in Kling’s kitchen would lead to her being forced to witness me attempting to seduce you on the living room couch.”

“You literally came on top of me!” Christen yelps out as Tobin walks ahead of her. She nearly trips over her own two feet trying to catch up, indignant that Tobin is leaving her behind while downplaying the seriousness of the incident.

“She doesn’t know that!” Tobin says, and if Christen didn’t know her so well, she’d think she was pissed. Instead, Tobin is merely defending the situation – she’d been embarrassed enough to get off like that, fully clothed and grinding into Christen’s thigh at six o’clock in the morning. There’d been a soccer game on, time zones forcing the early wake up call, and Christen had been decidedly half asleep until Tobin decided that the game was boring and she’d rather greet the day with a bang.

Tobin’s one small saving grace is that Kelley had walked in just as Tobin was finished, panting into Christen’s neck and delirious from her orgasm, babbling nonsense and trying to get Christen to allow her to reciprocate. Kelley had been horrified, on her way out to practice, under the impression that Tobin was only trying to convince Christen into something and not wrapping that something up.

“Babe,” Christen says, and with just enough sadness tinging her voice, Tobin stops in her tracks and immediately holds out a hand without even looking back.

“I’m here,” Tobin says begrudgingly. “And I’ll behave in front of Kelley.”

“Thank you,” Christen says, taking her hand and squeezing it gently, flowers clasped to her chest. “And thank you for coming here. And thank you for the flowers. Yellow is really pretty.”

“Reminded me of you,” Tobin mumbles, and with the way she looks down at her feet as they walk up to the apartment.

“Yeah?” Christen asks, squeezing Tobin’s hand.

Tobin knows what she wants, squeezing back before elaborating.

“Yellow like the sun,” she explains, suddenly as shy as she gets. Which isn’t very shy, if Christen’s being honest, but it’s always touching to see. “You’re my sun.”

Christen nearly trips again but catches herself – and if she hadn’t, Tobin is right there, clutching her hand tightly with her other hand ready to steady her.

“Don’t fall,” Tobin tells her importantly.

Too late, Christen thinks. I’ve already fallen head over heels for you.

* * *

Of all the ideas Tobin has ever come up with, this might be the worst. The good intentions are there, Christen knows, but she’s just not happy with the way this is going. She’s not used to doing this alone, not when she knows that Tobin is so close by. Whenever Tobin is close, Christen is used to having her at her side. Normally Tobin doesn’t even want to leave her to begin with, but apparently this time is different. If Christen had known what she was signing up for, she wouldn’t have agreed in the first place.

It would be fun, Tobin said. Getting ready separately, like Tobin was coming to knock on her door and pick her up before taking her on the nice, fancy date she had planned for them. Traditional,
Tobin had said. She’d knock on the door right on time (Christen had scoffed at that, Tobin wouldn’t know what on time meant if it smacked her in the face) and Christen would open the door, ready to go.

Well, Christen is going to be ready, but she isn’t going to be happy about it.

She takes the time with her eyeliner, almost annoyed with how straight and even she manages to keep the black line. Normally when she’s getting all dolled up like this, Tobin is lounging on the bed behind her and cracking jokes that have Christen laughing at the most inopportune moments, leaving her with smeared eyeliner and lipstick down her chin. It’s a shame, how easily she can concentrate on picking out a dress and matching shoes.

Black, she decides. Something little and black and classic. If Tobin wants traditional, that’s what she’s going to get. Black and tight, hitting at mid-thigh with shoes that keep her from looking like they’re planning on hitting the strip after their meal. She tries her hardest, thinking that she might as well take advantage of their time together. Tobin doesn’t get to see her like this very often – they’re not big on fancy dates, definitely not – so Christen wants to make sure to go full out.

She wants this to be a night worth remembering.

Not that every night with Tobin isn’t worth remembering, Christen thinks, studying herself in the mirror one last time. She’s impatient, almost wanting Tobin to ignore the time they’d set and knock on her door earlier than arranged. There’s only five minutes to go, and Christen tucks her curled hair behind her ears in an attempt to waste some time.

Of course, Christen isn’t the only one here wishing to see her girlfriend as soon as possible. Tobin knocks on the door – quick and hard, clearly bouncing off the walls in her excitement here – and Christen smiles to herself while crossing the few feet to twist the handle. Tobin is the kind of person who is always running late for everything, but here she is, early and eager with her jaw dropping open as soon as Christen comes into view. Christen can feel herself blushing instantly, face red and embarrassing as Tobin stares at her from head to toe.

“I am literally the luckiest person in the world,” Tobin blurts out when she finally finds her voice.

“I don’t think so,” Christen says, shaking her head. She almost feels shy, and the only thing stopping her is the fact that the adoring look in Tobin’s eyes is one that she is very familiar with.

“Forget about dinner,” Tobin says, finally looking at Christen directly. “Let’s just stay in tonight.”

“We’re going to dinner,” Christen says firmly. She’s been looking forward to this ever since Tobin mentioned it. And besides, she didn’t get all dressed up for Tobin to dismantle it all instantly, which is exactly what is going to happen if they don’t get out of the apartment soon.

“Fine,” Tobin says, pouting. “But only because I made us reservations.”

“You made us reservations?” Christen asks in amazement. “Babe, that’s so unlike you.”

“I can be romantic!” Tobin protests indignantly.

“The other day you wanted to know why I wouldn’t respond to your sexts in the middle of my lecture,” Christen reminds her.

“I can be romantic and want to talk about your ass at the same time,” Tobin grumbles. “Anyway, that reminds me.”
“What?” Christen asks warily, a little scared. “What could that possibly remind you of?”

“I need to do this,” Tobin explains, and she’s slow in the way she moves, letting Christen see it all as it happens. It’s for Christen’s benefit here, the way Tobin gently fits her hands on the curve of her hips while stepping close. She leaves a handful of inches between them, leaning in to softly kiss Christen on the cheek. It kind of steals the breath right out of Christen, leaving her still with eyelashes fluttering closed as Tobin’s lips linger before slowly drawing away. Tobin keeps her hands on Christen, fingers lightly digging into fabric in a way that reassures Christen that she’s there, but nothing more.

Tobin waits, uncharacteristically patient as Christen blinks a few times and then opens her eyes. Christen has to clear her throat before speaking, not wanting to stumble over her words or for them to come out all scratchy and embarrassing.

“We should go,” she says carefully, before she changes her mind. Tobin is so good at this, always has been. She’s so good at making it easy for Christen to change her mind, to go along with what she wants. Tobin is so good at coaxing Christen out of her comfort zone and into things she would never consider by herself. Before Tobin, she never would have even thought about putting off a dinner reservation in favor of making out with her girlfriend until the two of them couldn’t even remember their own names.

Hell, before Tobin, she’s not even entirely sure that she would have ever seriously considered having a girlfriend. Sure, there was Kelley, but Christen knows that never would have happened. Not for real. Not with any kind of permanence. Not the way things with Tobin have happened.

“Sounds good to me,” Tobin says, and there’s an irresistible kind of grin on her face that she can’t get rid of, one that’s soft and subtle but impossible to ignore or erase. Christen feels like she might be the reason behind that smile, a feeling that makes her wonder if she’s a little cocky or something, but she doesn’t miss the way Tobin refuses to take her eyes off her as they walk towards the apartment front door and she knows that even if she’s cocky, she’s still right.

The feeling only grows stronger when they walk down the stairs and to Tobin’s car, with Tobin insisting that Christen walk ahead. It seems polite, but Christen bites back a laugh because she knows it’s so Tobin can stare at her ass for the minute or so it takes them to reach the car. Christen lets Tobin pull out all the stops, like opening the car door for her and holding her hand while she drives. It’s not often that Tobin’s allowed to take the wheel – her tendency to get distracted makes Christen more than skeptical, often reaching for her own keys and relegating Tobin to the passenger seat – but tonight is an exception. Tonight Tobin wants to do things her way, wants to treat Christen right and be the best girlfriend she knows how to be. It’s all a little cheesy, the way Tobin goes about it all, but it’s classic romance to a tee and they’re both lucky that Christen’s a sucker for classic romance.

The restaurant is dark and sets the mood, lit by small candles on small tables. Tobin’s fingers brush against the small of Christen’s back as she gestures for her to sit down first, and they spend entirely too long staring at each other until the waiter has to clear his throat and ask if they’d like anything to drink.

Tobin nervously asks Christen if it’s okay to order a bottle of wine, and Christen nearly swallows her tongue in surprise before nodding yes.

“I know we’re not huge drinkers,” Tobin starts once the waiter has walked away, “but I thought it might be nice to try something.”

“That’s a nice idea,” Christen says, trying to settle into her seat. It’s hard because she’s buzzing with excitement, this low hum that runs through her body and thrills her. It doesn’t quiet, not for a second,
as she looks up at Tobin in between reading her menu. Their knees brush under the table, and with every bit of contact, Christen’s cheeks pool with warmth that isn’t from the candle’s close proximity.

“You look really nice,” Tobin says, catching Christen’s eyes as she taps her fingers against the tabletop. It looks like Tobin’s already decided on something, first to decide as usual. She’s the decisive one between the two of them, usually. She’s the one who knows what she wants to eat at all times, the one who picks the tv show when they sit down to relax together, was the one who knew she wanted Christen beyond a shadow of a doubt. “I know that you probably already know that, but I wanted you to hear it. You look really beautiful.”

Christen blushes harder, if that’s even possible.

“I mean, I wanted to look nice for you,” she explains. “We haven’t really had time to do this kind of thing lately. But you look good too.”

Tobin is about as dressed up as she gets, which involves the one lip gloss she keeps in her toiletry bag and a curling iron. The dress she’s wearing is a deep red, something that Christen could swear she’s been missing for months now. She makes a mental note to ask Tobin about that later, but doesn’t feel like risking it in case the number of clothes Christen’s stolen from Tobin’s closet happens to come up in conversation.

“‘Good,’” Tobin mimics. “A girl puts on a dress for you and that’s all she gets.”

Christen’s first instinct is to roll her eyes, but she reaches a hand across the table to rest on top of Tobin’s tapping fingers. Tobin’s hand stills and she looks at Christen head on, expression visibly softening and spreading into a smile.

“Baby,” Christen says, and even she is shocked by the tenderness in her voice. “You’re beautiful. Thank you for taking me out tonight so that everyone can know that you’re mine.”

Tobin flips her hand over so Christen can fit their palms together, fingers curling around each other and squeezing.

“Of course,” Tobin says, and she’s brushing it off a little, acting just a touch too casual compared to the amount of emotion that was just present in Christen’s words, but Christen can see the tightening of her eyes and the wobbling of her lips and know, just know how much it means to Tobin. “Got to show everyone that I bagged such a hot piece of ass.”

Christen squeezes Tobin’s hand, this time warningly, and Tobin tries again.

“You’re gorgeous, babe,” she tells Christen. “Absolutely stunning. And you bet your ass that I want everyone we see to know that I’m taking you home tonight.”

It’s so classic Tobin, the way she perfectly combines true feelings with the side of her that really is a horny teenage guy, and Christen smiles hugely until Tobin reminds her that she needs to pick something to order.

“I think that waiter is going to kill us if he comes over to see you and your goo-goo eyes one more time,” Tobin jokes, and this time Christen does roll her eyes.

“Help me decide,” Christen says, pulling her hand back to turn the menu over. “I’m stuck between these two and I want to know which one you like so I can get the one you don’t.”

Tobin narrows her eyes at Christen.
“Rude,” Tobin says. “You know I’ll eat whatever you order, anyway.”

“Oh yes, I do know, you human garbage disposal,” Christen says. “At first I thought you wouldn’t touch anything that wasn’t burger flavored, and I was really excited. Then I learned you just prefer kiddie food, but will actually eat anything as long as it’s on someone else’s plate. This is especially true if it’s my own plate.”

“Well you didn’t have to call me out like that,” Tobin mumbles, and it’s almost adorable, the way her nose scrunches a little as she talks.

Christen wishes she could just lean across the table and fit her lips against Tobin’s, the way she’s done a million times, but the table is just a little too wide and she doesn’t want to mess up her red lipstick and she figures that there’s plenty of time for that later. Instead she just smiles stupidly, the same lovesick smile she’s worn for months now, and wonders what she could have done that was good enough to earn this. Being in love and being loved, Christen thinks, is the most amazing thing in the world and she wouldn’t trade it for anything.

*

Once they’re all settled in with their food and Tobin has finished inhaling half her plate, the subject comes up. The one subject that Christen was really hoping to avoid for a multitude of reasons.

“So how are applications going?” Tobin asks conversationally, reaching over to snag some of Christen’s pasta. Christen tries to use her fork to push Tobin away, but it doesn’t work. Tobin is always too persistent, as this conversation shows.

“You sound like my mom,” Christen says, hoping to divert Tobin and dissuade her from searching for an answer.

“Your mom and I care about you,” Tobin says, like she’s reminding Christen and it makes her snort. Her parents met Tobin briefly, at dinner after one of Tobin’s post-Olympics club games back at the beginning of the semester, and Tobin likes to act like they’re all best friends now. Sure, Tobin had been on her very best behavior and they’d liked her well enough, but Christen still doesn’t buy that they’re that chummy after one meeting. “We just want to make sure that you’re all up to date on everything and doing what you need to do.”

“I’m up to date on everything,” Christen assures her. “No need to worry about you.”

“I’m not worrying, don’t worry!” Tobin says quickly, defensively. “Listen, missy, your eyes are going to get stuck that way if you keep rolling them.”

Christen does her very best to keep her eyes on Tobin’s, setting her fork down on the table and putting a great amount of effort into participating in this conversation. If she can steer around the landmines and navigate successfully, maybe Tobin will recognize how good she’s been and reward her for that.

“I’ve sent most of them in, don’t worry,” Christen says, trying to be as patient as Tobin has been all night. “Had most of my supplemental materials sent in, paid most of the fees, got most of my ducks in a row. Just a couple left to finish up, and then it’s waiting time.”

Tobin chews on her bottom lip for a second, looking like she’s holding back from saying something.

“Make sure you don’t wait too long to finish them all up,” she finally says, once Christen’s gone back to her pasta. “The earlier the better, right? Isn’t that what you told me?”
“Yes,” Christen says, resisting the urge to add a “mom” at the end. She knows she’s being sensitive and a little immature, but she’s perhaps a little sore from the way everything has played out thus far. Maybe Tobin’s finished with the subject though, and they won’t have to go through this argument again.

It’s really the only argument they’ve had since getting together, the one about where Christen should go for grad school. It’s the one thing they can’t agree on no matter how hard they try, and Christen is praying that Tobin won’t open that can of worms tonight.

Of course, as soon as she thinks she’s in the clear, Tobin clears her throat and Christen braces herself.

“Have you thought about what we talked about?”

It’s tentative, and Christen curses herself for being so negative about the entire thing. Really, Tobin isn’t the bad person that Christen is making her out to be. It’s just that Christen is scared and a little reluctant to give into her despite the fact that her resolve has been torn to shreds at this point. Maybe it’s her pride, maybe it’s her desire to prove a point, Christen’s not sure what it is. All she knows is that she doesn’t even know why she’s putting her foot down anymore, because really, Tobin just wants what’s best for them.

“What do you mean?”

Christen tries to play dumb, wanting Tobin to come out and say it so she doesn’t have to. This is the wrong move though, seeing as Tobin’s jaw tightens with frustration before taking a long sip of her wine. When she finally sets her glass down, Christen can see how hard she’s trying to keep calm.

“I’m talking about what I suggested the last time we talked about where you wanted to go to school,” Tobin says, like it’s something she’s been rehearsing in her head for the past minute. “Have you given any more thought to the university near me?”

Every word is polite and controlled, and Christen hates that Tobin is exercising this much control around her. She hates that Tobin feels like she can’t be open and honest about this, and that it’s come to stiff words and roundabout conversations once a month.

They’re better than this, Christen thinks to herself.

Still, she finds herself repeating all the reasons why it would be a bad idea.

“It’s not my top choice,” Christen says apologetically. “And I mean, I’m applying and I’ll consider it, but like….”

She trails off, hoping that Tobin understands.

Tobin sighs, defeated.

“I know,” she says, and Christen hates the way she looks, shoulders dropping. “I know. It’s not in your top three, you can’t predict my professional future, you’re not going to pick a school just for me, I just – I know.”


“Why don’t you want it?” Tobin interrupts, sudden and loud and so unlike her. She never interrupts Christen, never gets fired up like this, never gets so desperate that she’s angry. It makes Christen wonder if all of this is worth it.
“Tobin,” Christen says quietly, reaching for Tobin’s hand. When she has it in hers, Tobin calms almost instantly. She’s still quivering with anger and frustration, Christen knows, but at least on the outside she doesn’t look like she’s about to blow up. “Tobin, baby, I do want it. You know that.”

“You just don’t want it enough,” Tobin says, dejected and hollow. “I know, you’ve said it all before.”

Christen shifts uncomfortably, using her free hand to reach for her wine glass and take a few gulps. She knows she should be more dignified about it, but she can’t be bothered right now. She needs something, and somehow wine feels like the right thing.

“I know you hate it when I talk about this,” Christen says, voice dropping impossibly low and praying that maybe Tobin doesn’t hear her. “But there aren’t any guarantees. You might get traded or something. I might not even get in. We could break up. There are so many variables here – “

“I want to come home to you,” Tobin says, and Christen’s heart nearly breaks when she sees the tears being held back. Tobin won’t cry in public, Christen knows, but that doesn’t make it hurt any less. “I’ll settle for you getting your own place but Christen – Christen, I love you. I don’t want us to have to be apart. With my schedule and stuff, it just makes sense.”

“I don’t want to make a decision based on one thing,” Christen whispers, so fucking scared of letting her relationship with Tobin dictate the beginning of the rest of her life and it all falling apart. “I don’t want us to have to be apart. With my schedule and stuff, it just makes sense.”

Tobin blinks slowly, eyes shiny with wetness, before taking her hand back and shaking her head. “I love you,” she mumbles into her lap. “I want to wake up to you every morning. I’d follow you if I could, Christen. I’m sorry for asking this of you, but if you really don’t want to, you don’t have to. I won’t make you.”

Christen suddenly feels confused, unsure of the turn this conversation has taken. It feels final, like Tobin’s said her piece and is done with it now, but Christen isn’t happy with the conclusion. She’s kind of won, in that Tobin isn’t badgering her to move in with her and Allie and shack up together in the hopes that they’ll be together forever, but it feels like she’s lost.

It feels like she’s gotten what she wanted, but is finding that it isn’t quite what she wanted after all.

The rest of dinner is quiet, with Tobin eventually calming herself enough to smile at Christen with dry eyes and make her laugh. Christen laughs shakily, feeling unsure and unsteady of where they stand right now, praying that they can salvage this evening and weekend and keep from letting this argument ruin their precious time together. Christen drinks most of the bottle of wine, and after reassuring her that she’s good to go, Tobin pulls out the keys and escorts Christen back to the car. She stops before opening the door, staring at Christen with a silly kind of smile as she just stands there.

“What?” Christen asks self-consciously.

“Nothing,” Tobin says, shaking her head before opening the door for her girlfriend. “You’re just kind of stunning. So the usual, really.”

Christen doesn’t have anything to say as she gets in, and they start driving off in silence before Tobin finally breaks it.

“I just want to know,” Tobin says, “do you see me in your future at all?”
She feels like maybe Tobin’s being a little dramatic, but that doesn’t stop her from feeling like she’s got a knife through her heart.


“I really don’t know,” Tobin says, shaking her head. “I mean, I thought we were on the same page, but we’re not some stupid high school relationship. We’re more than that. I don’t ever want anyone but you. So I really don’t know what you think of us together.”

“I want you,” Christen attempts to say, but she’s weak and doesn’t want to upset Tobin any more than she already has as they drive back to the apartment.

“I met your parents,” Tobin says, looking directly ahead and clenching the steering wheel tightly. “I’ve never done that before, Christen. I would never have done it for anyone but you, and that’s because you’re more to me than just my girlfriend. I love you.”

Something inside Christen feels like it snaps. She’s tired of trying to tiptoe around Tobin, tired of wording things carefully and making sure that Tobin doesn’t get her feelings hurt. She needs to be honest now.

“You can’t keep telling me that like it means something!” Christen explodes, and as soon as the words leave her mouth, she knows she’s fucked up.

She knows from the way Tobin gasps sharply, from the sick feeling she gets in her stomach, from the way the words ring in her ears like they’ll haunt her forever if she doesn’t fix this.

“Tobin – “ she hurries to say, but Tobin is one step ahead of her.

“Well I’m sorry,” Tobin drawls sarcastically, practically spitting fire as she speaks. “Sorry that for me, love doesn’t mean what you think it should. Sorry that it doesn’t mean purposefully putting distance between me and the person I’m in love with.”

“That’s not what I meant – “

“I’m sorry for telling you how I feel, for thinking it might mean something, for thinking it might make a difference,” Tobin keeps on, turning sharply. “I’m sorry for telling you ‘I love you’ every day for the past how many months with it amounting to nothing, rather than, at the very least, something.”

“You keep saying it like it’s supposed to fix something!” Christen exclaims loudly, unable to sit still in her seat as she turns to look at Tobin. “Like it’s supposed to change my mind and make me want to jump the gun and move in with you and fix everything!”

“Because it is supposed to!” Tobin cries out, and the sudden scratch at the back of her throat gives her away, tells Christen that she’s past the point of no return. “Because at the end of the day, that’s all that matters to me. I love you and you love me, and that’s more important than any what ifs or worries or preconceptions about what it means to move in with your girlfriend too soon. I love you, Christen, more than I could ever tell you. And I’m sitting here, pouring my heart out to you, while you fucking refuse to give us the benefit of the doubt and give us a fighting chance. Instead, you’re there, telling me that I can’t tell you I love you when it’s the only thing I’ve ever been this sure of.”

They’re lucky that the apartment is right there, that Tobin pulls into a parking spot just as she gets the words out, that she flings the car into park just as she collapses over the steering wheel with her hands pressed to her face. To anyone it would look like she’s merely slumped there, nothing else, but Christen can feel the tears running down Tobin’s cheeks and feel the sobs that she’s keeping quiet.
It’s dark out, the complex lit by a few overheads, but Christen can still see the rise and fall of Tobin’s back as she cries hard.

She doesn’t know what to do. She’s trying not to panic, trying to shed her pride and just do something, anything, to let Tobin know she’s not alone. She knows how vulnerable Tobin has been with her, that it hasn’t been a piece of cake for either of them, and Christen knows that she has to fix this before it gets worse.

So she starts with her heels, pushing them off. Then comes the lipstick, the remnants of which she hastily rubs off with a napkin tucked into the side of the door. She unzips the dress but leaves it on, pulling her feet up and reaching over to turn off the car and pull the keys out of the ignition before dropping them in the cup holder. Christen can feel Tobin starting, upset but always attuned to whatever Christen is up to, so she moves quickly and as smoothly as she can.

“I love you,” Christen says first, soothing and gentle as she awkwardly maneuvers herself over the center console. She goes legs first, ass landing on the console as she carefully attempts to situate herself. It all goes quickly, the way she ends up with her legs wrapped around Tobin’s middle while only half in her seat and repeating those words over and over.

“I love you.”

She brushes Tobin’s hair back from her face, pulling the disheveled curls into a makeshift ponytail.

“I love you.”

She presses a kiss to her temple, half her mouth pressed against the edge of Tobin’s hand.

“I love you.”

She takes the hand that isn’t holding Tobin’s hair and rubs it in wide circles up and down her back.

“I love you.”

She wiggles around to get a little more comfortable, bringing her forehead to rest against Tobin’s shaking shoulder.

“I love you.”

She loses track of how many times she says it, when Tobin finally shifts to her, and that’s the first time things have felt right since dinner started. Tobin clings to her like a child to its mother, crying silently, and Christen has to choke back tears of her own. She has no right to cry – she did this. She in all her stubbornness and determination to do the right thing, made this happen, and she’ll do whatever she can to fix it.

When Tobin’s shaking stills, she looks up at Christen with red eyes and trembling lips.

“I love you,” Christen tells her, tucking Tobin’s hair behind her ears.

“Will you kiss me?” Tobin asks.

So Christen does, kissing her deeply and passionately and trying to ignore the way Tobin tastes of salt and sadness. She loves Tobin, so much, and she hates that she could make Tobin doubt that for even a second.

Tobin easily gets into it. She shifts in her seat to pull Christen into her, hands firmly on her ass and
grabbing hard. Christen opens her mouth and is immediately matched, with Tobin kissing her almost roughly with the way her tongue pushes against Christen’s. Suddenly it’s too much, with Christen gasping into the kiss and feeling something pull in her lower stomach as she runs a hand along Tobin’s shoulder, up to grab the back of her neck and hold her there.

It’s like her hands can’t stop moving. She starts at Christen’s ass, one staying there while the other slides up her back. Once she finds the open zipper, her hand presses against bare skin, hot and electric. Tobin spreads her fingers, feeling along Christen’s back and it’s good, too good, and Christen has to arch into her touch and moan into her mouth when Tobin digs in for a split second.

It’s all too fast, too messy. Tobin wrestles with Christen’s dress, pulling the top of it down off her arms and pushing it up around her hips so she can firmly palm at her ass. Christen wonders how they got here, how this happened, if Tobin can handle all of this, but Tobin doesn’t seem concerned at all as she trails sucking kisses along Christen’s jaw and down her neck until she reaches the edge of her bra. Her hand is already pulling at the fabric there, slipping inside to roughly squeeze and moan against Christen’s chest. It vibrates deep inside of her, and Christen suddenly feels okay, like Tobin knows what she’s doing and she’s present and okay too.

“Tobin,” Christen murmurs, when Tobin’s other hand starts pushing at her underwear. “Tobin, I love you.”

Tobin stops moving for a second, going still and breathing hard.

“Look at me,” Tobin asks, and it’s pleading in a way that’s impossible to refuse – not that Christen wants to.

Her eyes are wide and black, pupil dilated and this is familiar, this is a Tobin that Christen knows.

“I love you,” Tobin tells her.

“I love you, too,” Christen responds.

Because she does. She loves Tobin. She’d move halfway across the world for her, if she asked. And maybe even if she didn’t.

But before she can say any of this, Tobin is saying something else.

“Can I show you?” Tobin asks, and Christen nods before Tobin is kissing her again.

To try and count how many times they’ve done this would be close to impossible, because for as rarely as they get to see each other now, they take full advantage every time. It’s always amazing and thrilling and safe and comfortable, and neither of them can complain about that kind of consistency. They’re still learning the little things about each other’s bodies, but they know the things that matter: the things to help each other get off as quickly as possible.

For Christen, it’s quickly slipping in each finger one at a time. Tobin gives her just enough time to adjust, underwear pushed to the side, before wordlessly entering another. Once Christen feels full, she moans loudly and lets Tobin pull down her bra to tongue at a nipple. From there it’s fast and mind blowing, the way Christen rides her fingers exactly the way she wants. Tobin still does her job, mouth busy and a thumb pressing on her clit as soon as Christen begins to tighten around her. This is what does it for Christen, and knowing that Tobin knows it without even asking makes it even sweeter when she finally comes. It’s hard and with a particularly loud cry that Christen orgasms, with Tobin immediately kissing her as soon as Christen can focus.

“I’ll move in with you,” Christen pants desperately, pulling away for a second. “I’ve been stupid and
selfish and too proud to change my mind, but I want to come home to you too. You’re my home now, Tobin. If I get in, I’ll move in with you.”

“Baby,” Tobin says, eyes squeezing shut before kissing her again. “Baby, thank you.”

They don’t question it, not now. Right now, Christen has some business to attend to. Namely, business that involves quite a bit of rearranging until they’re both in the backseat, both uncomfortable, but knowing that this is going to be worth it. It’s not the kind of thing Christen anticipated loving, having her head between Tobin’s thighs and until she comes against her tongue, but she does love it. She loves tasting her, feeling how wet Tobin gets whenever Christen fucks her with her tongue. She loves the way Tobin’s hands always end up in her hair, loose and tender at first before she loses all self control and really goes for it. The way it all happens in the backseat is fast, just like it was for Christen, with Tobin whining lowly and moving her hips against Christen’s mouth. She loves Tobin’s clit, pays it special attention until Tobin is letting go in a way that’s beautiful. It’s when she’s most beautiful, Christen thinks, keeping at it until Tobin is whining for a different reason and has to gently pull her away.

“Sorry,” Christen mutters, crawling up until they’re aligned, clothes a mess and bent at awkward angles. She always says that the time in the car is the last time, but that never ends up being the last time. Tobin knows that before, Christen never would have dared to go at it in such a risky place, but something about the two of them together makes it impossible to wait and impossible to resist. “You just taste so good, I could do that forever.”

“Fuck,” Tobin curses, and it isn’t two seconds more before she’s hungrily licking into Christen’s mouth.

Eventually, they calm down. They fix their clothes and get the car in order, and when Tobin stops Christen from getting out, she knows what she has to do.

“I’m serious,” Christen tells her. “If they’ll take me, I’ll go. I’ll move in with you after I graduate. Because Tobin, you’re right. I want to see your stupid face before I fall asleep and as soon as I wake up.”

“You love my stupid face,” Tobin counters.

“I love you,” Christen tells her.

“Do you know what I love?” Tobin says suggestively.

Christen bites back a groan.

“Do I want to know?”

Tobin wiggles her eyebrows and smiles before bursting into laughter, kissing Christen quickly.

“I love your ass,” she tells her, grinning as Christen playfully smacks her upper arm. “But most importantly, I love you.”

She’s right. Regardless of what happens, regardless of how hard it gets, regardless of anything, what’s important is that they love each other.

That’s what’s most important.
End Notes

talk to me at softanticipation.tumblr.com!

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