

Chapter 1: I Told You So

I'm tired of spending all my time alone. If I told you that I realized you're all I ever wanted and it's killing me to be so far away, would you tell me that you love me, too, and would we cry together? Or would you simply laugh at me and say, "I told you so! Oh, I told you so! I told you someday you'd come crawling back and asking me to take you in. I told you so! But you had to go. Now I've found somebody new and you will never break my heart in two again."

Is it too late for us? It's been seven years since we've really talked. That's the same amount of time she spent liking me when we were kids. I never liked her back. I only saw her as my best friend's sister. Now the tables have turned. I was fine when I was away at college. But when she left for college, my fear of losing her for good made me realize my feelings for her.

I was so confused. I wondered why I never had feelings for her before. How did I not notice how sweet, smart, and sassy she is? She was always a better person than me, yet she spent seven years thinking that I was better than her. I know it seems crazy, but I'm in love with her. And she needs to know.

I'm not sure where to find her. Our moms are still kind of friends, so I know that she's out of college now and has an apartment somewhere. I'm afraid to ask my mom where, though. I'm living on my own, so it'd be weird if I randomly called her to ask her where Bella is. But I have to find her. I need a chance to make things right.

Maybe I can ask her brother. Hopefully that won't be as weird. We haven't talked in a while, but we have the kind of friendship where we can start talking again as if we never stopped. I grab my phone off my nightstand. It's my day off so I've been lying around my apartment just thinking about Bella. It seems like she dominates my thoughts. I dial Mason's number from memory and wait impatiently for him to answer the phone.

“Logan?” he answers, recognizing my number but sounding unsure of why I’m calling him.

“Hey, Mason, I have a question for you,” I tell him casually.

“Um, okay,” he mumbles, still confused.

I open my mouth to ask him, but then I think of how weird it would sound if I just asked him for his sister’s address.

I take a deep breath before saying anything.

“It’s been a while since I’ve seen Bella. Do you know where she’s living, so I can drop by and say hello?” I ask him, believing that’s the best way to word it.

“Um, yeah, I know her address. I could pick you up and we can drive there together. I haven’t seen her in a few months.”

His proposition catches me off guard.

“Actually, I’d prefer to go see her alone,” I tell him, hoping I don’t raise any suspicion.

He’s silent for a moment.

“Okay. I’ll text you her address in a minute,” he says, finally.

“Alright! Thanks, man!”

“Bye.”

He’s never been one for long phone conversations. I’m just glad that he’s going to tell me where Bella is. I’m still living in the town we both grew up in. I hope she’s not too far away. I stare at my phone screen, waiting for it to light up with a text that will be my first step in winning Bella over.

Sure enough, Mason texts me her address moments later. She’s living in Oklahoma City, near where she went to college. That’s, like, two hours from here. If I leave now, I can make it

there around 7:30. Depending on how long I'm there, I may need to spend the night at a hotel. I grab my wallet and keys and head out.

As I'm walking to my car, I put her address in the GPS on my phone. I don't know what I'm going to do when I get there, but I know that I have to go. I pull out of the parking lot and turn the radio on to try to slow my racing thoughts. "When I Was Your Man" by Bruno Mars is playing.

That song came out in 2012-nine years ago. I start listening to the words of the old hit. "Too young, too dumb to realize that I should've bought you flowers and held your hand. I should've gave you all my hours when I had the chance." Man, this song is making me feel worse. I turn the radio off, but the words stick in my head. Then I realize something.

I switch into the turning lane just in time to make it into the parking lot of the grocery store. I have to buy her flowers. There's no way I can show up to her door empty-handed after all this time. I have to make a gesture that shows that I love her and that I'm sorry for taking so long to realize it. I've spent years trying to ignore my feelings for her and find my missing piece. I believe now that she's what's been missing.

I quickly go inside and browse through the small selection of flowers. My eyes land on a pair of rainbow roses tucked away in the corner of the display. Bella was always into clichés like red roses, but she deserves better than a boring cliché. She deserves something as unique as she is. I can just picture her face lighting up when she sees the rainbow roses.

I pay for the bouquet, cursing inflation as I hand the cashier my money. I run back out to my car, not wanting to lose any more time. I get into the car and lay the flowers in the passenger's seat. I check the time again, then hit the gas. I have to hurry if I want to have any daylight left when I get there.

I turn the radio back on, hoping that it won't play another depressing song. Luckily, an

upbeat song blasts through the speakers. It's exactly what I need to get me in the right mindset to see Bella again. It's been so long that I don't even know what she looks like anymore. I'm sure she's blossomed into a beautiful young woman. I only hope that she's still the same bright-eyed, sassy girl I fell in love with.

I think about her all the way to Oklahoma City. A lot can happen in seven years. Some things that I can imagine, and perhaps some things that I can't. I've missed out on a lot of her life, and I don't want to miss out on any more of it. What can I possibly say to her, though? What is there to say when I'm standing on her doorstep holding a bouquet of rainbow roses? Should I tell her I love her, or is that too forward? I don't want to scare her away. Maybe the flowers will speak for themselves. But I have to say something

I ponder this the rest of the drive. I get there at 7:40, but sit in my car, unable to move, for another five minutes. This is going to be harder than I thought. I take a deep breath, and then get out of my car and climb the stairs to her 2nd floor apartment. I hear noise inside, maybe from the TV. I double check the address before knocking lightly on the door.

I'm holding the rainbow roses and trying to get my hands to stop shaking. I wait for her to open the door, but a moment later I conclude that she didn't hear me knock. I knock louder this time, then I hear voices and footsteps. I grip the stems of the roses firmly in one hand to help stop the shaking. The tiny thorns cut into my skin. I hide my other shaky hand behind my back. When the door opens, I put on my best smile: the smile she fell for all those years ago.

Bella looks at me, wide-eyed. "Logan?!"

She's clearly surprised to see me. I look her over from head to toe. Her dark hair is down past her chest, which is way longer than it was when I last saw her. She still has the bangs that have always fit her so well, and her hazel eyes still glow with the same light. Plus, she's slimmed

down. Gone are her awkward teenage years. Now she's gorgeous. Instead of jeans and a t-shirt, she's wearing a navy-blue sundress. I bring my eyes up to her face. She still looks very confused.

"I bought you roses," I say, holding them out to her.

"What are you doing here?" she asks, ignoring my romantic gesture.

"I came to see you," I say, taking a step closer.

"Why, after all this time? It's been, like, I don't know, seven years."

"Because I love you," I tell her in a near whisper.

"You what?"

"I love you," I say, louder this time.

She rolls her eyes and looks away. "Yeah, right."

"I came all this way, though, and I brought rainbow roses."

"Keep your flowers, Logan. You're too late," she says bitterly.

Ah, the tables have turned. I was afraid of this.

"Can we please just talk?" I ask her, refusing to give up so soon.

"There's nothing to talk about, Logan. I'm engaged," she says, shutting me down.

Now I'm the one who's surprised. With one last look, she closes the door. Right then, I hear a crack of thunder. Then the rain comes pouring down. I stand there holding the flowers as I get drenched. I watch the petals start to fall to the ground under the weight of the rain. It's so ironic. Bella always loved clichés, now I'm living one.

I turn around and dash to my car. Once I'm inside, I toss the roses into the passenger's seat and let my tears flow freely. Yes, guys do cry. Guys feel just as much pain as girls, and sometimes it gets too hard to hold yourself together, so you fall apart.

My tears stream down my cheeks like the rain streaming down the windows. I was so stupid

for thinking that I could get her to love me again. It's been too long. Like she said, I'm too late. She's already in love with someone else. I rest my head on the steering wheel as I continue to sob. I came all this way for nothing. It's late, and I'm too tired to drive back home. I think about going to a hotel, but I decide that's too much effort.

Instead, I climb into the backseat and lie down. I grab a blanket from under the seat to cover myself with. I move around to try to get comfortable, but I don't think that's possible after what just happened. I pull the blanket up to my neck and curl up into a little ball. Then I cry myself to sleep like a pathetic mess of a dreamer.

Chapter 2: All You Had to Do Was Stay

Hey, all you had to do was stay. Had me in the palm of your hand. Then, why'd you have to go and lock me out when I let you in? Hey, now you say you want it back. Now that it's just too late. Well, could've been easy. All you had to do was stay.

I wake up the next morning to the bright sun shining through the windshield of my car. I sit up and bang my head on the ceiling. As soon as my eyes focus, I remember last night and how I ended up in the backseat of my car. I'm tempted to just drive back home, but I can't leave yet. I have to keep trying with Bella.

Part of me thinks that it's wrong to come between two people in love. I want Bella to be happy. But I want to be happy too. And I just can't imagine that happening without her. I open up the back door and climb out of the car. I leave the roses behind. They don't look as bright and cheerful as they did last night. Neither do I. I head up the stairs again, hoping for a better result this time. Distracted by my nerves, I lose my footing and fall face-first into the stairs.

I hit my head on the corner of one of the stair steps, and blood starts streaming out of the gash. I cry out in pain. Slowly, I push myself up and stumble the rest of the way to Bella's door. Wincing from the pain, I bang on the door. I hope she's home. A moment later, the door opens.

"Logan? Why are you back?" Bella asks bitterly.

When she sees that I'm bleeding, her expression softens. "What happened to you?" she asks, pulling me inside.

"I got in a fight with the stairs, and the stairs won," I joke as I sit down on her couch.

"Wait here! I'll be right back," she says, running off into another room.

She may be engaged, but at least she's not heartless. I look around at her place. The walls are painted a calming shade of green, and she has various posters of inspirational quotes. She has

definitely added her personal touch. The black leather couch that I'm on has a colorful fluffy blanket hanging over the top of it. On either side of the couch are two white lounge chairs with blue chevron designs. The different bursts of colors around the apartment actually blend together quite well. The place has 'Bella' written all over it.

Pain shoots through my head, so I rest it on the back of the couch as I wait for Bella to return. Blood trickles down my face and, not wanting to get any on her furniture, I carefully pull my shirt off and wipe my face with it. Then I hold it firmly against my gash.

Bella walks back into the room and stops when she sees me lying here shirtless. I smile when I notice that it's taking her a moment to form a sentence.

"I, um, got some stuff to clean you up," she eventually says, walking over to me. She kneels down beside the couch and pours some liquid onto a small towel. I wince when she presses it to my wound.

"Ah, it burns!" I screech.

"I'm sorry," she says, giving me a sympathetic smile.

She holds the towel there for a moment to disinfect the cut, then she sets the bloodied towel aside and begins to gently wrap a bandage around my head. After the bandage is secured, she stands up and smiles at me.

"It's definitely a fashion statement," she teases.

I chuckle softly as I sit up. "Thank you, Bella. It was very kind of you to help me."

"Well, I wasn't just going to leave you outside."

"You did last night," I remind her softly.

She pretends like she didn't hear me and walks off again. Before I can ask her where she's going, she comes back with a white t-shirt in her hand. She tosses it to me, and I notice that

it's a guy's shirt.

"Where'd you get this?"

"It belongs to my fiancé. He spilled something on it the last time he was over here so I washed it for him, and I haven't had the chance to give it back to him yet. You can have it."

"Oh, I don't want to take your boyfriend's shirt."

She scowls at me. "He's my fiancé," she corrects me harshly.

"Right. My bad," I say softly, looking down at the ground.

"Anyway, if it means that much to him then I'll just buy him a new one. But I doubt that he'll care once I explain the situation to him."

I nod, and then carefully pull the shirt over my head. I swear I hear Bella sigh once the shirt is on. I guess I made her lose her breath for a moment.

"Now that you're all fixed up, you can go," she says, walking over to the door.

When I don't move, she takes a deep breath. "Logan, please."

"Bella, I know that I hurt you all those years ago, and I'm sorry."

She averts her gaze from me. "I don't want to hear it, Logan."

"Would you please forgive me?" I ask her, sincerely. "I need for you to forgive me, because it's killing me inside to think that you're still upset with me."

She closes the door, finally accepting that I'm not leaving yet. "Logan, I forgave you years ago. I moved on. I'm not upset with you. I'm just a little annoyed that you decided to show up out of nowhere with horrible timing," she tells me, walking toward me.

"I had to see you. I couldn't just let you go."

She sighs as she sits down next to me. "Well, you're going to have to."

"Tell me about your fiancé. Tell me why he's better than me," I say, sounding like a

child. But I don't care. I'm desperate right now.

"I don't know if he's better than you," she says, making my eyes widen. "I do know that he was here when you were long gone."

I don't know what to say. There's a moment of silence before she continues talking.

"All you had to do was stay, Logan," she says, her eyes wandering around the room.

"I know. I never should've hurt you. I should've realized sooner how great you are."

I see a redness start to creep into her cheeks. It fades away quickly when she turns to look at me again.

"But you didn't," she says, standing up. "You know, you were all I wanted. I always told myself that if you showed up at my doorstep someday, I'd take you back in a heartbeat."

She paces back and forth in front of me. Her words give me hope.

"But things have changed, and as much as I didn't think it'd be possible, you're too late," she says, taking away my hope.

I'm still not giving up. I stand up so I'm face-to-face with her.

"How do you know that the man you're with now is the right guy? What if I'm the one for you?"

She seems to actually be contemplating my question. Then, to my surprise, she starts crying. She takes a step forward and lays her head on my shoulder. Shocked, I don't move for a moment.

Eventually, I slowly wrap my arms around her. I'm half-expecting her to push me away, but she doesn't. She clings to me as she continues to sob. I feel bad for making her cry. It's not like I said anything mean, but maybe I overstepped my bounds. Maybe I took it too far. When she starts to calm down, she begins talking.

“I’m worried that I’m going to marry the wrong guy,” she says between sobs. “I love Mark, but what if I’m not in love with him?”

She keeps crying. I rub her back to try to calm her. I hold her as she cries for a couple more minutes. Suddenly, there’s a knock at the door. Bella lets go of me and wipes away her tears as she goes to answer the door. Not knowing what to do, I decide to sit down on the couch. She opens the door and her eyes widen.

“Mark? What are you doing here?” she asks, rubbing her eyes to try to make it look like she wasn’t just crying.

“I just came by to check on you. What’s wrong, baby? Why were you crying?” Mark asks, seeing right through her.

I wish I could hide, but I know it’s only a matter of time before he sees me.

“I just...it’s a long story,” she says.

“Does it have something to do with him?” Mark asks, noticing me.

Bella gulps. Mark, angry at my presence, bursts into the apartment and marches over to me. He has short jet black hair and piercing green eyes. He’s really muscular and he makes me feel scrawny and small. I stand up and notice that he’s a couple inches taller than me. Now I’m scared.

I glance over at Bella and silently beg her not to let him hurt me. The anger suddenly disappears from Mark’s face.

“Hey, man, what happened to your head?” He asks me, sounding concerned.

I smile because he’s not trying to kill me.

“He fell,” Bella cuts in, walking over to us. “I was helping him get cleaned up.”

“Aw, how sweet of you,” Mark says, kissing her forehead. “I’m Mark, what’s your

name?” He introduces himself, holding out his hand.

“Oh, um, I’m Logan,” I say, shaking his hand.

His handshake is very intimidating.

“So, how do you know my Bella?”

Your Bella, huh? Well, buddy, that may be about to change.

“We were friends back in school,” I tell him.

But we were never really friends. She was just my best friend’s sister.

“Oh, I see. What brings you here?”

“I just dropped by to say hello,” I answer casually. “I was in town and I remembered that Bella lived here, so I thought I’d pay her a visit,” I say, partially lying.

“Logan was just about to leave,” Bella says, hinting that I should go.

“Yes. Yes, I was. But let me give you my number really quick. It’s changed since the last time we saw each other,” I say, even though I know that she’s never had my number.

“Yeah, sure. Here you go,” she says, handing me her phone.

I must say, I’m a little surprised that she’s actually letting me give her my number. I thought she’d come up with an excuse. Maybe I do have a chance. I just need to start all over. First, I have to regain her trust, and then I have to become her friend. After that, I can start moving toward being with her.

However, the ball is in her court right now. I gave her my number, but I don’t have hers. The only way we can get anywhere is if she makes an effort. The only reason she’ll make an effort is if she cares. I don’t know what I can do to make her care. Hopefully, something I did or said today has influenced her so that she’ll be willing to give me a chance. All she has to do is decide that she wants to be my friend. With that foot in the door, maybe I can make my way into

her heart.

I hand her back her phone, and give her a casual hug that she doesn't object to. I take one last look at them as I walk out the door. Mark has his arm around Bella's waist. They look like such a happy couple. For now.

Chapter 3: How You Get the Girl

And now you say, "I want you for worse or for better. I would wait forever and ever. Broke your heart, I'll put it back together. I want you forever and ever." And that's how it works. That's how you get the girl.

A week later, I get a call from Bella. I was starting to think she wasn't going to call. I guess all she needed was some time to gather her thoughts. I answer the phone enthusiastically.

"Hey, Bella, what's up?" I say, trying to sound casual.

"I, um, would like to see you," she tells me, sounding nervous.

Looks like something I said worked.

"When's the soonest you can be here?" she asks in a soft voice.

"Bella, what's wrong? Why are you whispering?" I ask her, concerned.

"I'm, uh, about to go out with Mark. He's here at my apartment waiting for me. He says he has a surprise for me. Logan, I can't do this. I was doing fine before you came into my life again and made me rethink everything," she says frantically.

I smile, but I feel bad for being happy when she's not.

"You have to follow your heart, Bella," I tell her.

"My heart is telling me that I'm about to throw up," she says in a warped voice.

"Hey! Calm down, it's okay!" I assure her. "I didn't mean to make you second guess marrying Mark."

Well, maybe I did.

"That's why I need to see you, Logan. I have to make my decision."

"Already? Are you sure you don't need more time?" I ask.

I wish she'd ask to see just me first, so I'd have a chance to charm her.

“I need to talk to you and Mark. Maybe knowing how you guys feel will help me figure out how I feel.”

Perhaps my problem lies with Mark, and not with her. If I can get rid of Mark, then I can focus my attention on getting her attention. Then again, what kind of person gets in-between a man and his girl? You know what? I’ll tell you what kind of person. A person in love. I am in love, and I’m not throwing that away.

“Can you come tonight?” Bella asks me. “I have to cancel with Mark because I’m so confused and conflicted right now. Then I’ll invite him over once you get here so I can talk to both of you.”

“Can’t you talk to us separately? Mark seems scary. What if he beats me up?” I ask her, worried.

She just laughs. Her laugh is so cute.

“He’s not going to hurt you, Logan. I won’t let him. Besides, he’s not that kind of guy.”

Maybe not yet, he isn’t. But if he sees me as a threat to his relationship, he may change his peaceful ways. Nevertheless, I’m not going to turn down a chance to see Bella.

“Okay, I’ll be there,” I say confidently.

“Great!”

I can practically feel the warmth of her smile.

“By the way, how is your head?” she asks.

“It turns out the wound was mostly surface, so it’s a lot better now. I just have a Band-Aid over it. Thank you for helping me. I could’ve bled out right there on the steps.”

“I wouldn’t have let that happen. I’m glad you’re getting better, Logan. I’ll see you tonight.”

With that, she hangs up. I have no way of preparing myself for what's about to happen. I just have to get in my car and go before I chicken out. I quickly change out of my pajamas and brush my teeth. Right as I'm about to walk out the door, my cell phone rings. It's my best friend, Jason.

"Hey, man, what's up?" I say when I pick up the phone.

"Hey, Logan, I need a favor."

"Oh, well can you make it quick? I'm about to leave town," I tell him as I lock my apartment door and head to my car.

"Leave town? Where are you going on a Monday night?" Jason inquires.

"I'm visiting someone in OKC," I tell him, remaining vague.

"Is this someone a girl?" He teases me.

"Maybe."

"Can you drive me to my girlfriend's place on your way there? Her dog just died and she's having an emotional crisis. I have to be there."

"Ah, I'm sorry to hear that! Give Jessica my best."

"I will! So, you'll drive me?" He asks anxiously.

"Of course, but what happened to your car?"

"It's in the shop," he tells me.

"That's a bummer! Well, I'll be by in 5 minutes. Be waiting for me."

I toss my phone into the passenger seat and start the ignition. I'm a man on a mission. I just need to take a quick detour to help another man on a mission. I check my watch and see that I have plenty of time to get to Bella's. However, I'd like to get there early so just Bella and I can talk. It's time for me to start giving Mark a run for his money.

Jason gets in the car with a big smile on his face.

“Why are you smiling? Your girlfriend's dog just died.”

“Because as much as I loved Chip, I have a chance to bombard you with questions about this girl you're going to go see,” he says as he buckles his seatbelt.

I sigh. “Save some of your breath to give me directions to Jessica’s house.”

“I'll put her address in your GPS. I want to know about your mystery girl,” he says, picking up my phone. “Here.” He sets it down in my lap a few seconds later, and it starts giving me directions.

I take a deep breath before telling Jason about Bella.

“Man, that's intense,” he says as we pull up in front of his girlfriend's house.

He reaches over and pats my shoulder. “I hope you get the girl.”

He smiles at me before getting out of the car to go console his girlfriend.

I arrive at Bella’s doorstep at 4 o’clock. She didn’t specify what she meant by “tonight,” but I’m assuming she’s not expecting me yet because she hasn’t called me. I knock on her door, deciding to surprise her.

“One moment!” I hear her call.

She appears in the doorway a minute later wearing a fluffy white robe. I try my best to keep my eyes on her face.

“Come in, Logan,” she says, smiling.

Oddly enough, she doesn’t seem at all surprised to see me. I walk past her and take a seat on the very couch that I laid my wounded head on last week.

“I figured you’d be here early, which is good because I want to talk to you about Mark,” she says, closing the door. “I’m going to go change. I’ll be right back,” she tells me as she walks

into her room.

I make myself comfortable on the couch. She walks out a couple of minutes later wearing shorts and a t-shirt. It's kind of like what she always wore when we were kids, except she looks a lot better in it now. Her white shorts are cuffed just above her knees, and her yellow shirt has a slight v-neck that a cross necklace drops down in. She's always looked good in yellow. It makes her eyes brighter.

How amazing is she that she can make me feel this way in just a t-shirt? I get up off the couch and walk over to her. I reach out and tuck a loose strand of hair behind her ear. Our faces are mere inches apart.

"What are you doing?" Bella asks me with a slight vibrato in her voice.

Without saying anything, I wrap my arms around her waist and pull her closer to me, enveloping her in a hug. After a moment, she hugs me back. Her dark, silky hair smells sweet and fruity. I would stay here forever, holding her and breathing in her aroma, but I can't. I have to start from the very beginning and win her heart like I did all those years ago. She pats my back before pulling away.

"Let's talk, Logan," she says, walking over to the couch.

I sit down next to her, but not too close. I don't want to come on too strong. After all, she is still engaged, and there's no guarantee that's going to change. Bella takes a deep breath before she begins talking.

"You know that I've always been a very neat and organized person. I find peace in order. I prefer that everything be a certain way."

"Yes, I know," I say, unsure where she's going with this.

"But you," she says, turning to face me, "have always been so spontaneous. I've never

known what to expect from you because you've never known what to expect from yourself. You were never afraid to put yourself out there and take risks. You never cared what people thought of you. And so many people ended up loving you, including me."

She pauses. I'm assuming she's waiting for me to say something. I clear my throat.

"I'm still that guy. Only, now, I won't treat you like I did back then."

She smiles, but it fades away quickly.

"Do you really expect me to leave Mark for you?" she asks.

Her tone isn't bitter, just inquisitive.

"Ah, the million-dollar question," I say, trying to lighten the mood.

Bella just keeps looking at me, waiting for an answer.

"I don't know. I can't imagine what you're feeling right now. Mark has the upper hand because you love him, and you aren't even sure if you know me anymore," I answer her.

"I'd like to get to know you all over again, Logan," Bella says with a small smile on her face. "Except this time, I want to get to know you because you want me to, not just because I want to."

"Deal!"

I say, holding my pinky out in a childish gesture. I'm fairly sure that I have a goofy grin on my face, as well. Bella rolls her eyes playfully and then hooks her pinky with mine. Our moment is cut short by her phone ringing. She releases my pinky and reaches for it.

"It's Mark," she mouths as she answers the call. "Yeah, come on over. Love you, too. Bye."

"He's coming now?" I ask, even though I already know the answer.

She nods.

“What are you going to say to him once he sees me?” I ask her, curious and a bit scared.

“I’ll cross that bridge when I get to it,” she says as she fiddles around with her necklace.

I look at her hand, and for the first time, I notice her engagement ring. I don’t know much about that sort of thing, but it looks expensive.

“How long have you and Mark been engaged?” I blurt out.

She starts to play with the ring, moving it up and down her finger. “Almost two months.”

“Have you set a date for the wedding, yet?”

“We’re thinking about having it next spring, but we haven’t decided.”

Well, that’s a relief. I’d feel even worse about coming between them if they were already deep into planning their wedding. Breaking off their engagement would be mean either way, though. We sit in silence as we contemplate our thoughts and feelings. Time passes quickly, and before I know it, Mark is at the door. My first instinct is to run and hide so that I don’t have to face him, but I love Bella too much to give up and go.

“Logan, what are you doing here?” Mark asks when he sees me.

His tone is friendly, but I have a feeling that’s about to change. I open my mouth to say something, but Bella cuts me off.

“He’s here because I need to talk to both of you. Would you two sit in the lounge chairs?”

I can see Mark growing suspicious. “Why can’t I sit next to you, babe?” He asks, putting his arm around her.

She sighs. “I don’t know how to explain,” she answers him as she wiggles out of his grip.

Once everyone is seated in separate places, Bella starts talking again.

“Mark, why do you want to marry me?” she asks softly, probably not knowing what to

expect.

“What kind of question is that?” Mark snaps.

“Please just answer it,” Bella tells him calmly.

“I want to marry you because I love you, Bella.”

She waits for him to say more, but he leaves it at that.

Bella turns to me. “Logan, why do you love me?”

That’s when Mark goes ballistic and all hell breaks loose.

“Wait? What?!” He exclaims, leaping out of his chair.

“Mark, please sit down,” Bella says, trying hard to remain calm.

“I demand to know who he really is!” Mark yells.

“He’s somebody I used to know.”

Sensing that Bella isn’t going to tell him anything else, he turns his wrath on me.

“Who do you think you are, barging in and trying to steal my fiancée?”

His face burns with rage as he moves closer to me. A sudden burst of confidence comes over me, and I know what to say to him.

“I’m a man who deserves a chance to be with the woman I love just as much as you do,” I say firmly.

“Well, you’re not going to get that chance!” Mark yells in my face.

“Actually, I just might,” I retort, managing to stay surprising calm in the literal face of danger.

“Bella, why would he think that he has a chance with you?” Mark asks her with fear-filled eyes.

Now we’re both looking at her, waiting to hear her answer.

“I...this...” Bella begins, before bursting into tears. “Why does it have to be like this?” She cries.

Instead of consoling his fiancée, Mark focuses his energy on blaming me.

“This is all your fault! We were doing perfectly fine before you showed up!” he roars.

“Were we, though?” Bella asks softly.

With a wounded look on his face, Mark turns to her.

She regains her composure and says, “Our love is comfortable, but that’s it. There’s no passion, no spark, no fun. You make me feel like I don’t have to worry about things changing. But life is supposed to change. Life is supposed to feel a bit unsafe sometimes. If I stay with you then I’ll be stuck in a bubble for the rest of my life. I’m afraid that if I am, I’ll miss out on so many adventures. It’s time for me to quit worrying about order and enjoy the unescapable chaos. It’s time for me to live instead of just existing.”

“Unbelievable! This is just...unbelievable!” Mark bellows, incredulous. “I cannot believe this is happening! I refuse to believe it’s over! I love you, Bella!” He exclaims as tears fill his eyes. He runs his hands wildly through his hair. “How could you do this to me? I...that’s it. I’m going to go,” he says weakly.

He starts to walk toward the door, but Bella stops him.

“Wait! Wait, Mark, don’t go!” she says to him, clearly on the verge of crying again.

“Don’t go?” he says, exasperated.

“Please! I don’t want you to leave.”

“Really? Because every word you just said practically screamed ‘get out!’” he shouts.

“So, I’ll go,” he says, throwing his hands up in surrender.

“Wait, Mark! Please, please stay!” Bella begs him.

“Give me one good reason why I should,” he says through clenched teeth.

“Because...because...” Bella stutters.

“That’s what I thought.”

Mark shakes his head and opens the door.

“It can’t end like this! We can’t end like this!” Bella cries out.

“Bella, it’s simple. Who do you want: me or him?” Mark asks, tears quietly rolling down his cheeks.

“I want him,” Bella answers.

“Then it’s settled. I’m leaving,” Mark says coldly.

Tears pour freely out of Bella’s eyes as Mark storms out.

He turns to her one last time and says, “Good-bye. I’ll always love you.”

He slams the door and the sound echoes throughout the entire apartment. Bella collapses on the couch in a puddle of tears. I go over to her and gently rest my hand on her shoulder.

“It’s okay, Bella. You made the right decision. I’m going to take care of you,” I say, trying to comfort her.

She sniffles and then turns her head to look at me.

“You’re right. I did make the right decision,” she says, standing up.

I wipe the tears off her face with the back of my hand. She takes my hand and smiles up at me.

“It’s you, Logan. It’s always been you.”

Chapter 4: Drive All Night

I ain't looking for a free ride home, back to the middle. I need a new locale. I need a girl that calls me baby. I need to know if she can save me. I need somewhere I can drive all night, out into the darkness, follow the headlights down.

I want to help Bella feel better about her decision because I'm sure it wasn't an easy one to make. She had to give up what she knew for what she doesn't know. She's taking a chance on me, and I don't want her to regret it.

Taking a step away from her, I say, "Do you want to go for a ride?"

She smiles and fiddles with her thumbs. "Where to?"

"Wherever the road takes us!" I say enthusiastically, throwing my arms up in the air.

She giggles, and wipes a stray tear off her cheek.

"Okay! Take me away from here, Logan!" she says, grabbing her purse.

She follows me out to my car. I open the door for her and help her in before walking around to my side of the car. My only goal is to make her happy, genuinely happy. I want her to forget about Mark and her ordinary life.

I want to take her on an adventure. As long as she's willing to go with me, I'll take her anywhere and everywhere. Her boring, routine days will be a thing of the past. I'm going to give her something to look forward to. I'm going to give her a love that she'll never want to lose.

"Can we listen to music?" Bella asks me as we pull out of the parking lot. "Or would you rather talk?"

"Pick your poison," I say as I flip on the radio.

It's not that I don't want to talk because I do. Just not yet. I think we could both use some time to let everything sink in. Before I know it, upbeat pop music is blasting through the

speakers. For the full effect, I roll down the windows and watch the wind blow through Bella's hair as we speed down the road.

I really don't know where we're going. I don't see why it matters. Life is never about the destination, it's about the journey. So, we'll drive all night. After a few songs without a single word exchanged between the two of us, Bella reaches over and turns down the radio.

"Thank you, Logan, for showing up in my life again when you did," she says. "If I had married Mark, then I would've been comfortable, but not happy. My life would've been mundane. Thank you for making waves in my calm seas and promising me adventure," she continues, placing her hand on my knee. "I'm excited to see where this goes, where you'll take me."

She looks out the window and sighs. Her hand is still on my knee. I don't know what to say to her. I just hope I can be everything she expects me to be, and more. A moment later, she turns to me and says,

"You know, Logan, you've changed."

What is that supposed to mean?

"In a good way," she adds, reassuring me. "When we were younger, you were a free spirit. You still are, except now you actually care about things. You are more mature."

"Well, Bella, you gave me something to care about," I tell her, taking one hand off the steering wheel and placing it over hers on my knee.

I don't need to say anything else. I can tell she already understands how I feel about her. When I say that I love her, I really mean it. I'm not one of those guys who is only after one thing. I'm not driven by a desire for her body, but for her heart. I love her for who she is on the inside.

Part of me wants to just go crazy with her, and another part of me just wants to cuddle on

the couch and watch funny movies. I'd do anything with her, just as long as I'm with her. I messed up big time before, and I'm not going to let that happen again. I'm not going to lose her.

I fix my eyes on the road, and try not to think too much about our hands touching. Bella turns the music back up, then sticks her head out the window and lets the wind play with her hair. I love her smile. It's so genuine. I can tell that she's truly enjoying herself. Cautiously, I intertwine my fingers with hers. She squeezes my hand. Deciding on a change of scenery, I guide the car off onto a side road, unaware of where it will take us.

"How well do you know this city?" I ask Bella over the sound of the music, my voice muffled by the whipping wind.

"Enough," she says, smiling.

She sees where we are and frowns. "Where are we going?" she asks, sounding worried.

"Someplace that isn't on the map," I say confidently.

The road is bumpy now, and I can see that the gravel is about to give way to dirt. We're surrounded by trees, with the sliver of a moon peeking through them. It's pitch black out, now. I guess the time got lost in our dust. I turn my brights on as I navigate the dirt road. Suddenly, the music doesn't seem as fitting. Apparently feeling the same way, Bella turns the radio off.

"Are you scared, Bella?" I ask.

She shakes her head hesitantly. "I trust you," she says with just a hint of doubt.

We continue making our way through what I guess you could call a forest. We reach a clearing, and I stop the car. Bella abruptly sits up, taking her hand off my knee. My hand feels cold at the loss of her touch.

"Are we out of gas?" She gasps.

I chuckle. "No, no. Nothing like that. I just thought we could take a break and stargaze," I

say as I get out of the car.

Bella gets out, too, before I have a chance to open her door. Right now, I really wish I had a truck so we could lie down in the back, like you see in movies. Ooh, that reminds me. I have a blanket in the backseat.

“Hold on a second,” I tell her as I go get it.

Bella sits down on the grass, and tilts her head up at the stars.

“I’ve never seen the stars so clearly,” she says as I lay the blanket out next to her. She scoots over to sit on it.

“Lie down. Take a load off,” I encourage her, as I sprawl out on the blanket.

I cross my arms behind my head, and smile up at the stars.

“The skies are clearer out here,” I observe.

“So is my head,” Bella sighs as she lies down next to me.

Her arms are at her sides, and I want to reach out and take her hand. My hands are behind my head, though, and it’d be too obvious if I moved them. Instead, I watch her hand as she points out the constellations.

Why pay attention in astronomy class when you can have a pretty girl show you what Orion’s Belt looks like? When she gets tired of pointing at the night sky, her arm falls back to her side.

“Can we stay out here?” she asks softly.

“We can do whatever you want,” I say, smiling at her.

Deciding to seize the opportunity, I surreptitiously slip my hand out from under my head and reach down to take hers. Her hand twitches, probably because she’s not yet used to my touch. Still, she lets my fingers slide in between hers and gives my hand a tight squeeze. I’ve

been wanting this for so long.

She probably wanted this for the seven years she was in love with me. I can't imagine how this must feel for her. I show up out of nowhere, and tell her that I love her, and a week later we're lying under the stars holding hands. It must seem so surreal to her. I know it does to me.

"Isn't this nice?" I ask, hoping I know her answer.

"It's better than 'nice.' It's exactly what I needed," she says.

She turns her head to look at me. Our faces are inches apart but I'm not going to kiss her. As much as I want to, it's too soon for that. I was her first love, and I broke her heart recklessly for seven years. When you've caused someone so much pain, you can't fix it with a kiss.

I can tell that she's close to letting her guard down, but I'm not going to take advantage of that. I'll let her take the lead. We're lying on a blanket in a forest clearing in the middle of the night on the outskirts of town. She has trusted me to this point, but will she trust me with her heart? I'll go as slowly as I need to. After all, her heart is fragile and precious.

I finally break away from my racing thoughts and see that Bella is asleep. She's still holding my hand, but her grip has loosened. I quietly get up, and step off the blanket. I take my half of the blanket and cover her with it. I lie down next to her on the grass. It's a warm summer night, but the breeze leaves a chill in the air. Facing Bella, I curl up into a ball, and drift off to sleep under the stars.