



Effortless (Thoughtless)

By S.C. Stephens

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From the #1 *New York Times* bestselling author S.C. Stephens comes the new adult series everyone is talking about—and a love triangle you won't forget.

After being caught in the middle of a love triangle that led to a devastating betrayal, Kiera pledged to learn from the mistakes she'd made. She was determined to never again inflict that kind of pain on anyone, especially the soulful, talented man who held her heart. But life offers new challenges for every relationship, and when Kiera's love is put to the ultimate test, will it survive? Love is easy...trust is hard.

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Editorial Review

Review

"Stephens has perfectly and with gut-wrenching honesty portrayed the reality of a love triangle, and the mess that ensues. *Thoughtless* is one of those books that leaves you thinking for days if not weeks after reading." (Tammara Webber, author of *Easy*, on *Thoughtless*)

"Wildly addictive, beautifully written, and uniquely captivating. *Thoughtless* is a simmering, slow burn." (Tracey Garvis-Graves, author of *On the Island*, on *Thoughtless*)

"From page one, this book is impossible to put down." (Abbi Glines, author of *While It Lasts*, on *Thoughtless*)

"This book has climbed right to the top of my list of favorites this summer and made itself cozy there." (A Turn of Page Blog, on *Thoughtless*)

"Really addictive. Could not put it down! This is my kind of guilty pleasure." (FashionandSarcasm.Blogspot.com, on *Thoughtless*)

"I felt like after *Thoughtless* I was climbing off of the longest, curviest, craziest roller coaster that I have ever virtually been on. Let me tell you, that is absolutely not a bad thing!" (The Indie Bookshelf Blog)

"This story tears your heart right out! The steamy scenes will get your blood boiling and the gut-wrenching emotional turmoil will bring tears cascading. If you're a fan of *Beautiful Disaster* by Jamie McGuire, I'd highly recommend this read! It's messy, dirty, raw, REAL! The story is beautifully written and keeps you interested with every turn of the page." (Book Snobs Blog, on *Thoughtless*)

"If you enjoyed *Beautiful Disaster*, then you will enjoy this series!" (Nightly Reading Blog, on *Thoughtless*)

About the Author

S.C. Stephens is the #1 *New York Times* bestselling author of the romantic trilogy *Thoughtless*, *Effortless*, and *Reckless*. All three titles are available from Gallery Books.

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Effortless

Chapter 1

MY BOYFRIEND, THE ROCK STAR

According to the Channel Four weatherman, it was the hottest summer on record in Seattle. Since I'd only been there a little over a year, I took the kind man's word for it. As I was jostled, smashed into, and bumped up against, I felt the afternoon heat in the clammy skin of every person who touched me. It was revolting to have strangers rubbing up against my body. It was even more revolting when some of those people decided

that being crammed together like sardines gave them the freedom to invade my personal space. I'd smacked more hands off my butt in that one afternoon than in the entire time I'd worked at Pete's Bar.

Sweat poured down the back of my T-shirt, and I momentarily cursed my fashion choice. As I glanced up at the cloudless, azure sky, the midday sun hit me square in the eye, blinding me. I rolled up the short sleeves of my midnight black shirt, then went to work tying a knot above my belly button, just like Mary Ann from Gilligan's Island.

But then I smiled, remembering why I was wearing it and what I was doing in this crowd of sweaty bodies. As I stared past the few rows of glistening people in front of me to an empty stage, I was overcome with nervous energy. Not for me. No, all my nerves were for my boyfriend. Today was his and his band's big day. In anticipation, I bounced on my feet as I waited for him to bound up onto that stage. I knew he was going to rush to that microphone at any moment, and the waiting crowd was going to let out an ear-splitting scream.

I couldn't wait.

Hands next to me grabbed my bare arms. "Can you believe it, Kiera? Our boys are playing Bumbershoot!"

I looked over at my best friend, my coworker and my confidante, Jenny. Her face wasn't pouring with sweat like mine; she looked gloriously dewy. The spark of excitement lighting up her eyes was identical to mine, though. Her boyfriend was also playing at the Seattle music festival for the first time.

Squealing in my growing eagerness, I clutched her arms in return. "I know! I can't believe Matt actually booked them here." I shook my head, impressed that my boyfriend was performing in the same venue that Bob Dylan would be playing at later tonight. Hole and Mary J. Blige were scheduled to perform in the next couple of days.

Jenny looked over when some stranger collided into her; he seemed completely stoned. Glancing back at me, her blond ponytail lightly flicking my face, she shrugged. "Evan says he worked really hard to get them this spot. And it's prime! Saturday afternoon on a perfect summer's day, smashed right in between two great acts. It doesn't get any better than that."

She tilted her head up to the sky. The sun's rays glinted off the white lettering on her matching black T-shirt, a T-shirt glorifying the full name of our favorite band—Douchebags—although they shortened it to D-Bags, for marketing purposes.

I nodded when her face returned to mine. "Oh, I know, Kellan said he—"

A sudden eruption of sound disrupted my conversation and my eyes automatically darted to the stage. Smiling broadly, I watched what had the raucous crowd's complete attention. Our D-Bags had finally decided to grace the crowd with their presence.

The assemblage before the outdoor stage started jumping and hollering as Matt and Griffin hopped onstage. Matt was his normal, contained self, acknowledging the fan fest with a small smile and a slight wave. He quietly walked to his microphone and strapped on his guitar. I hollered for him, but the cacophony of noise drowned out my voice, and the guitarist didn't hear me. His light blue eyes scanned the crowd nervously as he adjusted the strap on his shoulder.

On the opposite end of the spectrum, Griffin, Matt's attention-seeking horn dog of a cousin, ran up and down

the stage, smacking people's hands and pumping his fist in the air. His pale eyes scanned the crowd, and although I wasn't yelling for him, he actually heard me. Spotting Jenny and I back a ways from the front, he pointed at us. Then he lifted his fingers up to his mouth in a V shape and did suggestive things with his tongue that made my cheeks flame hotter than the steamy sunshine I was standing in. I immediately averted my eyes.

Several people around Jenny and I laughed and looked at us. My embarrassment tripled. Jenny saucily exclaimed, "Ewww, Griffin!" then started laughing with the crowd. I shook my head, wishing my sister, Anna, wasn't at her photo shoot for the Hooters calendar today so she could maybe attempt to keep her pseudo-boyfriend in line.

Evan entered during the middle of that display and, seeing Griffin sexually harass us, looked over our way. He smiled and waved, blowing a kiss to Jenny. She snatched it in the air and blew one back. His smile expanded, but once he acknowledged us, he twisted to take in the scene, and his dark eyes seemed awed by what he saw. I laughed at the look, happy that the good-spirited man was taking a second to enjoy his success.

Then the screams grew so loud my ears started ringing. I actually cringed in pain. The girls beside me, looking all of fourteen, started clutching each other and chanting, "Oh my God, there he is. Oh my God, he's so hot. Oh my God, oh my God, oh my God!"

I grinned and shook my head, amused at how my rocker boyfriend could affect people. Of course, I completely understood. Lord knows he had completely affected me in the beginning. Still did. Just watching him confidently strut onto the stage, the stage he owned with every fiber of his being, my body tingled for him.

Kellan slowly walked toward his microphone. Or perhaps it was a regular pace and my mind was operating in slow motion. For whatever reason, it seemed to take him forever to get to his destination. He raised one hand, waving to the electrified crowd clamoring for him, and he ran the other back through his thick, bed-head hair. The heat and sweat made the sandy-brown mess stick out even more haphazardly; he looked completely edible.

I bit my lip as he sauntered to his microphone stand. He scanned the crowd as he adjusted the height of the stand. I knew from experience just what the front row was feeling as those midnight blue bedroom eyes washed over them. Kellan had a way of looking at you that made you feel like no one else existed in the world, even if a crowd was around you. Add that to the sexy half-smile on his face, and you got a man who could ignite you with just a glance. He was igniting me now, and he hadn't even spotted me yet.

As his face turned away, hopefully searching for me out in the masses, I studied his jaw line—strong, masculine, so freakin' sexy it hurt. The girls behind me obviously thought so too. From among the shrieking, I clearly heard, "That is going home with me tonight," and, "God, that man is completely fuckable." I resisted the urge to turn and tell them that he was mine and instead focused my gaze on him. I knew I shouldn't be jealous or irritated by his fans, but their remarks were a lot less cute than the previous comments from the pubescent girls.

As Kellan's eyes finished inspecting the first half of the crowd, they shifted over my way. Like magic, he spotted us instantly. Jenny waved, then whistled with her fingers in her mouth. I flushed and smiled as those amazingly intense eyes locked on mine. He nodded at me and mouthed, "I love you."

The idiotic girls behind me started moaning that he'd said it to them. I again ignored my desire to tell them that he was mine. It wouldn't change their feelings toward him one tiny little bit, and it would only create endless questions about our personal life. Questions I did not want to discuss with complete and total strangers. I'd put up with enough of that at school before Kellan and I had even started dating.

Instead, I discreetly mouthed that I love him too and gave him a couple of thumbs up. He laughed at my move and shook his head in amusement, clearly confident that he'd completely kick ass onstage. And he would. If anything, Kellan had spent his whole life preparing himself for this moment by playing small bars and clubs in L.A. and Seattle.

Slinging a guitar over his shoulder, he wrapped his hand around the microphone. The screams intensified when it became obvious that he was going to speak. Over the sound system, I heard his warm laugh, then, "Hello, Seattle!" The girls around me jumped and screamed his name. I laughed and tried to move away from some of the more excitable girls, but with nowhere to go, I only ended up colliding into a couple of guys in front of me.

I was muttering apologies when they glared back at me as Kellan's voice hit me again. "We're the D-Bags . . . in case you didn't know"—he paused for another long screaming session—"and we've got something for you . . . if you want it."

He raised an eyebrow and gave some of the women in the front row a look that was a little lascivious for my taste. But I knew it was an act. While his face clearly said, Screw me later, that wasn't what was in his heart. I was in his heart. Heck, I was tattooed over his heart. Well, my name was, anyway. I smiled, enjoying the fact that not a single woman here was aware of his hidden art. Well, besides Jenny.

He held up a finger to quiet the crowd. They surprisingly responded. "Do you want it?" he asked suggestively. The throng jubilantly indicated that they did. Jenny was hollering her answer through her hands, so I joined in.

I noticed Matt shaking his head, smiling as he flexed his hand. Evan was now sitting in front of his drums, moving his body to an unheard beat and spinning a stick in his hands. As Kellan eyed the crowd, I watched Griffin try to get a couple of girls to lift their shirts. I didn't keep looking to see if they did.

Kellan brought his hand up to his ear. "Well, if you want it, I'm gonna have to hear you ask for it." The audience hooted and hollered, and the girls behind me made more obscene suggestions, but I didn't care. I no longer cared about any of them, because Kellan was looking straight at me, and the pure joy I saw on his face was enough to make all of the audacious women, indecent men, and sweaty strangers, completely worth it.

It was like watching his soul come alive as he smiled down at me. He loved this. Aside from me, it was the one thing that Kellan really lived for. He acted like it didn't matter, that he did it just because it was something to do in the evenings, but after spending so much time with him, I was beginning to understand that that was just one of his coping mechanisms. A part of him feared that this would get snatched away from him. He hadn't grown up under the best of circumstances. Quite the opposite. He'd had a horror story childhood that would have left most people running straight for booze and drugs. But Kellan had found music, and music, along with a seriously healthy sexual appetite, had saved him from a life of mind-numbing addictions.

Kellan flicked his wrist behind him, and Evan, waiting for his cue, immediately began to play.

The song was fast, catchy, and even though I've heard it a bazillion times, I started jumping up and down with excitement. There was just something electrifying about the crushing, noisy bodies rubbing against me, the deafening vibrations of the amplified music; and the hot sun beating away on all of us. It gave me a rush. I could only imagine what Kellan was feeling.

His voice cut through the music, perfectly on time. No matter what he was feeling off the stage, Kellan was a professional on the stage. The countless practices and small shows around the area had paid off well; his voice was spectacular. A high-pitched, feminine squeal surged throughout the crowd as his voice drifted throughout the arena. He was singing an older song, a D-Bag classic, and several people around me were singing along. Since I'd watched Kellan write songs before, it was awe-inspiring to witness his lyrics being repeated back to him, especially by a crowd this size.

He beamed as he strummed and sang. A distractingly sexy half-smile was on his lips. It never failed to amaze me that he could play his guitar and sing at the same time. Me? I could barely do just one of those things. Jenny waved her hands in the air and cheered for her man. I did the same, happy that I could come out and support him today—support them all today. Well, maybe not Griffin.

The song ended with a thunderous reaction from the crowd, even impressing the guys directly in front of me. I was ecstatic for Kellan and the boys. They deserved the success. Kellan put his guitar away for the next song, and popped the microphone off its stand. This stage was wider than Pete's, and with more room to walk around, Kellan also had more room to flirt. Moving into the next song, his eyes seduced the crowd in ways that I was only used to them seducing me.

It annoyed me a little, but I let it go. He was just excited to be here, eager to play. He'd slipped back into the aggressively sexy guy that I'd first seen onstage. The salacious behavior had seemed over-the-top to me on that very first glance that I'd had of him, but the audience here was eating it up. Hands were stretching out to him from everywhere, even from rows behind me. I wasn't quite sure what those women expected him to do. Stage dive? I furrowed my brow, hoping he didn't do that. He could get hurt . . . or fondled to death.

As he propped a foot on a speaker and leaned out to grab a fan, I idly wondered why that one? Did he like her hair? Was she the most excited one in that section? Did she have the biggest . . . voice? Shaking my head at my insecurities, I pushed them out of my mind. He had so many things to concentrate on up there, he probably wasn't thinking at all. Just reacting to a fan asking for more attention. And they could certainly touch him. I wasn't such a jealous harpy that I couldn't handle a few caresses. Within reason, of course.

And Kellan was good with keeping most of his flirtations on the stage. He would never look or act that way in our daily life. You wouldn't even know he was practically a rock star when he wasn't performing. Really, he seemed a little lazy to the untrained eye. But I knew his mind was always busy, even if he was just slinging back cold ones at the bar.

As the temperature increased throughout their set, I wondered if Kellan might strip down. It wasn't a preposterous notion; he'd done it before while singing onstage. A couple of times, from what I'd heard. He was wiping off the sweat with the lower half of his shirt whenever he got the chance, pulling it up to reveal his gloriously defined abdomen. With the eruption of screams when he did that, I was sure the crowd would approve if he chose to remove it all together. The bulk of them anyway.

I wasn't sure how I felt about women ogling my boyfriend in that way. I wasn't sure how I felt about his tattoo being exposed either. That idea almost bothered me more. But after a quick wipe, he always let his plain white T-shirt fall back into place. I preferred to believe that he liked keeping his tattoo a cherished

secret, shared only by the two of us. And it should be. Even though it was on his body, it was incredibly personal for each of us. It kept him connected to me while we were apart. It also helped seal us when we reunited.

Once their allotted time was over, the band members each gave small bows and Kellan thanked the crowd for listening. He was happier than I'd ever seen him as he backed away from the stand. His eyes flicked down to mine in the crowd. No, I was wrong before. The look he was giving me now was the happiest look I'd ever seen on him.

The crowd around us started shifting, some staying to watch the next show, while others left to check out another venue. Bumbershoot had dozens of artists playing at any given time, from the big names to the locals like the D-Bags. After attending the show last year with them, when Kellan and I were merely friends, well, as much of friends as we'd ever been, it was a little surreal to see their name on the lineup posters. I'd snagged about three dozen of those posters as mementos.

Giggling, Jenny locked her arm with mine and pulled me toward the side of the stage. The guys were alternating between acknowledging the fans and unplugging their stuff. Kellan grabbed his prized guitar, and with a smile and a nod at me, ducked behind the stage. Jenny and I approached a metal railing fencing off the backstage area from the rest of the populace. And if the fence wasn't enough of a warning, a couple of yellow-shirted security guards were there to shoo people away.

Waiting in the spot where I knew Kellan would eventually appear, I, for a moment, wished I were adventurous enough to sneak behind the fence. I wanted to go to Kellan and give him the huge congratulatory hug that was bursting my prideful stomach apart. But it was off-limits to normal folks, and I didn't want to cause a scene by getting busted by the burly guys who put Pete's bouncer to shame.

I sighed as I watched Evan and Matt disappear from the stage, while Griffin leaned over to suck face with some blonde before he too vanished. I again wished my sister were here. Anna was hot, by most men's standards, and she could get into places closed off to ordinary girls like me.

After what seemed like an eternity, Kellan came out, sans guitar and the rest of the guys. Rushing up to me, he leapt over the metal rail. The security guards glanced at him, but they were more interested in keeping people out, not in. A small scream erupted from the knot of people also waiting for their rock-god, but he headed directly for me.

His arms were immediately around me, sweeping me into a hug. With his exuberance, I thought he might sling me over his shoulder and twirl me around. If I hadn't been sure that he'd also smack my bottom a few times, turning my face beet red, I might have let him do it. But I'd prefer it if those sorts of things occurred in a more private setting. And Jenny and I weren't the only girls waiting around back here for the band.

So, giggling as he lifted me up, I made sure to sling my arms firmly around his neck so he couldn't get too carried away. His smell hit me instantly. That undeniable aroma that was purely him. Clean, manly, seductive . . . it was a scent that lingered with me, even in my dreams.

Kellan laughed and squeezed me tight, the air compressing from my lungs until he set me down again. Pulling back, his impossibly blue eyes glowed at me. "That was so much fun! I'm so glad you were here. . . . Did you like it?"

His eyes sparkled in a shaft of sunlight as he grabbed my shoulders and squatted down to look me square in

the eye. I giggled more at his question. Really? Of course I liked it. I loved watching him perform. His expression was so sweet, his joy childlike . . . almost innocent. Cupping his warm cheeks, I nodded. "I loved it. You guys were amazing! I'm so proud of you, Kellan."

His face beamed at my praise, then he seemed to notice something that he hadn't before. His fingers around my arms pushed me back a little and his eyes traveled down my chest. I swear I felt the heat increase in a straight line down my body by his gaze alone. Stopping at my exposed navel, his lips twisted devilishly and he peeked up at me from under his so-long-it-wasn't-fair eyelashes. The smoldering desire in his eyes was enough to quicken my breath. Kellan's innocent moments never lasted very long.

"I like your shirt."

His voice was melted sex. Yes, melted . . . sex.

I flushed all over. He could still make me feel like he was looking at me for the first time, not the thousandth time. He still gave me butterflies.

Just as I was about to come up with some response to his comment, Kellan was attacked. Not literally, but female hands did grab his arms and twist him around. Laughing adorably, he let go of my shoulders and basked in the affections of his fans. Some of them looked at me with raised eyebrows but then ignored me. That was fine. I'd rather not be in Kellan's spotlight, if I could help it.

While Kellan signed autographs and had his picture snapped with cell phones, I shook my head at the surreal situation before me. I constantly forgot that he was a little famous. I mean, I was used to the girls at Pete's, but this wasn't Pete's. Watching that popularity follow him to such a public venue was kind of hard to wrap my head around. As I watched, the next girl in the crowd clamoring for him to notice her pulled down her tank top to expose the cups of her bra. She begged him to sign her chest. He glanced back at me really quick, but then he did it . . . and there was plenty of room to sign his full name, if you know what I mean.

My cheeks flamed hot, and I felt a knot of tension in my stomach. Yeah, I tried to be cool about his lifestyle, but his face in her chest while he signed away with a Sharpie was a little much. As were her hands on his ass. Just as I thought to shove the vixen away, a firm hand rested on my shoulder.

"He loves you, Kiera. He's just playing."

I looked over my shoulder at Evan. He'd come out from behind the metal fence while I'd been preoccupied with watching Kellan. Kellan could do that to me—make me oblivious to the world. My habit of getting so wrapped up in him that everything else around me blurred into the background was sort of a weak point in me. I was working on it.

Evan grinned at Kellan as he slung his tattooed arm around Jenny's waist. The perky blonde gazed up at Evan with adoration. Being the front man, and drop-dead gorgeous besides, meant Kellan drew a lot more attention than the other guys, but Evan certainly had his followers too. They were behind him now, waiting for the sweet teddy bear of a man to disengage from his girlfriend.

His warm brown eyes glanced down at me as he pointed his other tattooed arm at my boyfriend. "It's sort of his job, you know, to keep the fans wanting more."

I glanced over at Kellan, now smashed in between two girls kissing his cheeks while a third forever captured

the moment with her camera. I was certain the photo would be on the Internet within hours. I sighed. At least he drew the line at them kissing him on the lips since he'd become my boyfriend. He didn't used to. And yes, those pictures were on the Internet too.

Looking back up at Evan, I shrugged. "I know. . . . I just wish he wasn't so good at it." My voice came out a little sullenly and Evan chuckled, clapping my shoulder as he finally twisted to acknowledge his fans.

With Jenny by his side, Evan signed autographs and made playful small talk with complete strangers. Jenny did too. Standing back from the mayhem, I marveled at how comfortable they both looked. Me? I'd rather die than make multiple introductions over and over again.

My eyes darted to Kellan's broad back. A woman had her hand resting inappropriately low on his backside. I quickly averted my eyes. There was no point fueling my jealousy by watching. Instead, I glanced over at where Matt had quietly joined the fray. He looked just as uncomfortable as I felt. He enjoyed playing, being on the stage, and creating and making music. That was where his passion lay, not in the people-pleasing part. But he nodded politely, posing for a couple of pictures and signing a couple of T-shirts.

Attached to Matt's arm was his equally quiet girlfriend, Rachel. She was a beautiful mix of Latin and Asian, with bronze skin and deep brown hair. She held the hand of her spiky-haired, blond boyfriend, not looking jealous by the attention he received, but not looking like she wanted to partake in the socializing either. Not one for crowds, Rachel had watched the show from the lawn nearby. She was reticent and far more bashful than I . . . which was saying a lot. Rachel was Jenny's roommate. She and Matt had started seeing each other last spring, around the same time Kellan and I had officially become an item. The low-key pair was still going strong. Their personalities blended very well. They were adorable together.

The last D-Bag to stroll into the waiting crowd was not so adorable. I rolled my eyes as Griffin sauntered into my line of sight, his hands fondling anything that he could. Some girls smacked him, others giggled. He always returned to the giggling ones. His form of signing autographs usually involved tongue. It turned my stomach watching him. Honestly, I didn't get what my sister saw.

Matt's near-identical-looking cousin released a girl he'd just deep-throated and swung his head around, looking for more prey. Unfortunately, his horny eyes fell on me. His thin lips twisting into a familiar curl, he started walking over my way. I instinctively started backing up. Griffin was one person who I liked to keep some distance from. He had a tendency to be a little . . . grabby. Tucking his chin-length blond hair behind his ears, he threw his hands out to the side, conveniently brushing against a fan's breast as he did.

"Kiera, my future lover! I'm thrilled you came to check me out." His hand went down to his cargo shorts and cupped his . . . stuff. "Did you like what you saw?" he asked, tilting his head.

Wanting to gag, I twisted to leave. Close enough to grab me, he sidled up and snatched my hand. I thought he was going to place my palm on his junk, and my eyes widened in horror. Suddenly, my fingers were torn away from his. Stepping between us, Kellan shoved Griffin's shoulder back. "Fuck off, Griffin," he muttered, shaking his head and rolling his eyes.

The bassist shrugged and found some other girl to touch him. I breathed a sigh of relief and sank into Kellan's side. "Thanks."

Chuckling, Kellan kissed my head. "No problem. I know how much you love conversing with Griffin." I cringed as Kellan waved goodbye to some of the lingering fans who were possibly hoping he'd stay behind

and chat with them all day. No, Griffin was about my least favorite person to talk to.

Rotating us around, his arm firmly attached to my waist, Kellan started walking us away from the private area and back to the main part of the park. Almost subconsciously, like they'd follow him anywhere without giving it a second thought, his band members started trailing after him. Looking back, I watched Matt and Evan strolling along with their arms around their girls. Griffin strolled along with his hand scratching his privates. In a way, they did follow Kellan anywhere. When his parents had died, Kellan had ditched everything to come up here, and they'd all followed him without a moment's hesitation. They'd been here ever since.

Fixing my focus back on the man beside me, I slung my other arm around his waist, cinching him tight. I couldn't imagine what that day must have been like for him. It was true that Kellan had good reason to hate his parents; they were abusive, cold-hearted bastards, blaming Kellan for all of the miseries in their lives, but still . . . they were his family. The only close family he had. Their death had deeply affected him.

He was only nineteen when they died. Tired of their abuse, Kellan ran away to Los Angeles right after high school. Right after the graduation ceremony, from the way he told the story. He didn't tell them he was leaving and they didn't bother searching for him. Kellan told me once that when he finally called them a few months after his disappearance, to tell them of his whereabouts and to let them know he was, at the very least, still alive, their response had been apathetic. It was as if they'd completed their jobs and he could live or die on his own. It was a miracle Kellan wasn't completely messed up.

Jerks.

It took Griffin coming up and clapping Kellan on the back to snap me out of my dark thoughts. With Matt and Rachel behind him, he pointed to a band playing in the distance. I could hear the heavy rock beat in the sweltering air. "We're gonna go check out some of the other bands. Comin'?"

Kellan looked back at Evan and Jenny, but they were happily gazing at each other, too absorbed in their own quiet conversation to hear the discussion through the multitude of bodies walking back and forth around our group; a few females passing by looked at the four guys like they seemed familiar, but none of them stopped for more than a couple of seconds.

Looking down at me, Kellan started to ask me what I wanted to do. My body answered for me. My stomach growled so loud that even Jenny broke away from her tender moment to laugh. I closed my eyes for a moment while I felt Kellan's body chuckling softly at me. Cracking just one eye open, I attempted to glare at him. He found that even funnier and laughed a little harder.

Glancing up at Griffin, Kellan shook his head. "I think we'll get something to eat first." Smacking Griffin's back, he added, "We'll catch up with you later."

After watching the physically similar cousins walk off, melding into the crowd around them, Kellan smiled down at me. "Should we get some food in you, Noisy?"

I smirked and rolled my eyes, but then his lips were on mine and I couldn't have cared less that he was teasing me. With his hand brushing over my cheek as he ran his fingers through the hair above my ear, his warm lips expertly leading mine as he forced a small space between our mouths, and the tip of his tongue flicking out to briefly touch mine, I didn't care about much of anything anymore.

My hand reached up to securely tighten in his hair. I tried to angle him so his gently probing tongue was all over mine. All over my body would be nice too. Chuckling, he broke free from my mouth. Just that brief intimacy had my heart racing, my breath quickening. It took so little for him to turn me on.

Grinning crookedly, he tilted his head. "Do you need a minute?" he whispered, raising an eyebrow.

Gathering my senses, I smacked his chest and started to storm off. Wasn't I just thinking earlier that I needed to work on not letting Kellan completely absorb me? Hmmm, I had a feeling I'd be working on that one for a while. Feeling a little dazed, I headed off to where I thought the food was. Laughing a little harder, Kellan grabbed my elbow and twisted me in the other direction.

Smiling in that seductive, devilish way that he could, he nodded his head at the concrete path, opposite of where I was going. "Food's that way." His smile widening, he added, "Unless you had something else in mind?" I instantly pictured finding a secluded spot on this massive campus and letting that tongue do . . . all sorts of marvelous, wondrous things to me. My breath hitched.

Shaking the steamy thoughts out of my head, I started marching up the path toward the one craving I was willing to cave into here. I was not about to indulge in public sex with my rock star boyfriend. As much as he would like that, I did have some self-control.

Still chuckling, still amused by me, Kellan easily caught up and slung his arm back around my waist. Smiling down at me as Evan and Jenny fell into step behind us, he murmured, "So adorable. What am I going to do with you?"

By the time we reached the pizza stands, I'd thought of at least a half-dozen things he could do to me.

Once we were all full of food and music, and enough memories to cement this day into our brains forever, we rendezvoused back at the staging area so the band could collect their instruments. Except Evan. Due to the cumbersome nature of drums, all the bands used the same set. The big acts were the only exception to the rule, as they preferred to use their own drums.

With guitar cases slung over their backs, our group garnered more attention than before. Despite a designated park exit for band members, Griffin, being Griffin, insisted on heading out the main gate. Out of all of them, Griffin enjoyed the limelight the most. He was already living up his fifteen minutes.

Stopping to sign more autographs and take more pictures with fans, it seemed to take forever to get to the parking lot. But eventually, we did. Jenny gave me a quick hug and informed me that she'd see me at work tomorrow. Evan also gave me a huge bear hug, and jokingly told me that he too would see me at work tomorrow.

Smiling at them, I waved goodbye as they headed off together in Jenny's car, probably on their way to Pete's, as it was a work night for Jenny. I'd taken the night off so I could spend the evening with Kellan. Because of their afternoon gig at Bumbershoot, Kellan and the guys were taking the evening off from performing at the bar. Not that that would stop the rest of them from spending the night there anyway. They could never be peeled away from Pete's for long.

I congratulated Matt as I gave him a loose, one-armed hug. He wasn't as overtly affectionate as Evan, and I tried to respect the level of endearment that he was comfortable with. Smiling shyly at me, he thanked me for coming, while Rachel merely smiled and waved goodbye as she and Matt put away Matt and Griffin's

instruments and hopped into Griffin's Vanagon.

Griffin, perhaps noticing that I was doling out hugs to D-Bags, decided that he wanted to be a D-Bag too. Checking his breath in his palm, he started striding toward me. I put my hand out to stop him, but I think it was Kellan clearing his throat, quite loudly, that gave him pause. Rolling his eyes, Griffin waved his fingers instead. "We're going to Pete's. Catch you guys later."

Kellan laughed and clapped him on the back before twisting to open the door of his sleek muscle car. A 1969 Chevelle Malibu from what Kellan had repeatedly told me. Shiny black with chrome all over, it was possibly the only possession, aside from his guitars, that Kellan cared about. He'd found the car cheap in L.A. and spent a considerable amount of time that first summer of his newfound freedom restoring it. It was his pride and joy . . . and he hadn't allowed me to drive it ever since the one time that I'd stolen it.

Sliding onto the leather bench seat, he glanced over at me as I slid in too. "Your place or mine?" he asked, exaggerating the huskiness in his voice.

I laughed as I leaned over to kiss him. Still trying to keep our relationship on an even keel, instead of bursting right into the red-hot zone that we so easily could dip into, Kellan and I were still living apart, still taking things slow. "Mine," I breathed, trying to be as sexy as he was, but probably failing horribly. Although he did bite his lip as he looked at my face. Flushing instantly, I sat back and tucked a loose lock of hair behind my ear. "Anna's gonna be late tonight, so we'll have the place to ourselves."

His grin widened as he started the car, the hearty engine roaring to life, its growl as sexy as Kellan's smile. Feeling the heat on my cheeks, I shook my head and added, "School is starting soon, so I should start going through my stuff."

That wasn't really what I wanted to do tonight, but his intense gaze was rousing my body up, and I hated how much he could see himself affecting me. I wished I could be more subtle around him.

Twisting his lip, he seemed to contain a laugh. "Uh-huh, school stuff. All right. I'm great at . . . school stuff." His mouth breaking out into a heart-stopping grin, he pulled his car away from the place he'd just completely rocked.

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