

BIRTHDAY GIRL

The word 'GIRL' is rendered in large, bold, sans-serif capital letters. The interior of each letter is filled with a photograph of a woman floating on her back in clear, blue water. She is wearing a bright pink bikini top and has her eyes closed, looking up towards the surface. The water around her is slightly rippled, and the overall tone is serene and aquatic.

New York Times Bestselling Author
PENELOPE
DOUGLAS

BIRTHDAY GIRL

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PLAYLIST

“Addicted to Love” by Robert Palmer
“All She Wants to Do Is Dance” by Don Henley
“Bad Medicine” by Bon Jovi
“Glory Days” by Bruce Springsteen
“Guys My Age” by Hey, Violet
“Hurts So Good” by John Mellencamp
“I Love Rock ‘n Roll” by Joan Jett & The Blackhearts
“I’m on Fire” by Bruce Springsteen
“Jessie’s Girl” by Rick Springfield
“Pity Party” by Melanie Martinez
“Poison” by Alice Cooper
“Pour Some Sugar on Me” by Def Leppard
“Run to You” by Bryan Adams
“The Girl Gets Around” by Sammy Hagar
“The Distance” by Cake

“When you grow up, your heart dies.”
-Allison Reynolds, *The Breakfast Club*

CHAPTER 1

Jordan

He's not answering. This the second time I've called in fifteen minutes, and I've been texting without any luck, too. Was he planning on still remembering to be here at two?

I end the call and glance up at the clock above the bar, seeing it's nearly midnight now. Still two hours before my boyfriend thinks I'm off work and need to be picked up.

And here I thought we got a lucky surprise tonight, me getting off early.

Shit.

I need to get my car running. I can't keep relying on him for rides.

The music fills the air around me, customers laughing to my right and one of the other bartenders filling the cooler with ice to my left.

Unease pricks at the back of my neck. If he's not answering, then he's either asleep or out. Both could mean he'll remember me after it's too late. He's not always unreliable, but this wouldn't be the first time, either.

That's the problem with making your friend your boyfriend, I guess. He still thinks he can get away with murder.

I grab my shirt and school bag out of the cabinet underneath the taps and slide my phone into my pocket. I pull on a flannel over my tank top, button it up, and tuck the front of the hem into my jeans, covering myself. I'll dress a little sexy for tips, but I'm not about to walk out of here like this.

"Where are you going?" Shel asks, peering at me as she draws a beer.

I glance over at my boss, her black hair with blonde chunks piled on top of her head and a string of tiny hearts tattooed around her upper arm.

"There's a midnight showing of *Evil Dead* at The Grand Theater," I tell her as I close the cabinet and slide the strap of my leather satchel over my head. "I'll go kill time and wait for Cole there."

She finishes pouring her beer and looks at me like there are a million things she wants to say but doesn't even know where to start.

Yeah, yeah, I know.

I wish she'd stop looking at me like that. There's a good possibility Cole won't be here at two a.m. considering he's not answering the phone right now. I know that. He could be three sheets to the wind at some friend's house.

Or he could be at home sleeping with the alarm set to come get me at two and his phone left in another room. It's not likely, but it's possible. He's got two hours. I'll give him two hours.

Besides, my sister is at work, and no one here can leave to drive me home. Work is slow tonight, and I got cut early because I'm the only one without a child to support.

Even though I desperately need the money just the same.

I grip the strap of the bag over my chest, feeling like I should be older than eighteen.

Well, nineteen now, almost forgetting what today is.

I take a deep breath, pushing the worry away for tonight. A lot of people my age struggle for money, can't pay bills, and have to bum rides. I know it's too much to expect that I'd have everything figured out by now, but it's still embarrassing. I hate looking helpless.

And I can't blame Cole, either. It was my decision to use what was left of my student loan money to help him fix *his* car. He's been there for me, too. At one time, we were all the other one had.

Turning around, Shel sets the beer on the bar in front of Grady—one of the regulars—and takes his cash, shooting me another look as she enters the sale into the register. "You don't have a functioning vehicle," she states. "And it's dark outside. You can't walk to the theater. Sex slavers are just looking for hot, teenage girls with blonde hair and shit."

I snort. "You need to stop watching *Lifetime Movies*."

We might be an easy distance to some larger towns, and Chicago is only a few hours away, but we're still in the middle of nowhere.

I lift up the partition and walk out from behind the bar. "The theater is right around the block," I tell her. "I'll make it in ten seconds if I run like I'm being graded."

I pat Grady on the back as I leave, the gray hair of his ponytail swaying as he turns to wink at me. "Bye, kiddo," he says.

"Night."

"Jordan, wait," Shel shouts over the jukebox, and I turn my head to look at her.

I watch as she pulls a box out of the cooler along with a single serving box of wine and pushes them both across the bar at me.

“Happy Birthday,” she says, smirking at me like she knows I probably think she forgot.

I break into a smile and lift the small Krispy Kreme box open and see half a dozen donuts.

“It was all I could pick up in a hurry,” she explains.

Hey, it’s cake. Kind of. I’m not complaining.

I close the box and lift up the flap of my leather bag, hiding my loot inside, wine and all. I didn’t expect anyone to get me anything, of course, but it’s still nice to be remembered. Cam, my sister, will no doubt surprise me with a pretty shirt or a sexy pair of earrings tomorrow when I see her, and my dad will probably call me sometime this week.

Shel knows how to make me laugh, though. I’m old enough to work in a bar but not old enough to drink. Sneaking me some wine I can enjoy off the premises will be my little adventure tonight.

“Thank you,” I say and hop up on the bar, planting a kiss on her cheek.

“Be safe,” she tells me.

I nod once and spin around, heading out the wooden door and stepping out onto the sidewalk.

The door shuts behind me, the music inside now a dull thrumming, and my chest caves, releasing the breath I didn’t realize I’d been holding.

I love her, but I wish she wouldn’t worry about me. She looks at me like she’s my mom and wants to fix everything.

I guess I should’ve been so lucky as to have a mom like her.

The welcome fresh air washes over me, the late-night chill sending goosebumps up my arms, and the fragrant scent of May flowers wafts through my nostrils. I tip my head back, close my eyes, and breathe in a lungful as my long bangs tickle my cheek in the light breeze.

Hot summer nights are coming.

I open my eyes and look left and then right, seeing the sidewalks are empty, but cars still line both sides of the street. The VFA parking lot is also full. Their Bingo night usually turns into a bar scene this late, and it looks like the old timers are still going strong.

Turning left, I pull the rubber band out of my hair, letting the loose curls fall down, and slip the band around my wrist as I start walking.

The night feels good, even though it is still a little crisp out. There’s too much liquor in every crevice in there, seeping up into my nose all night.

Too much noise and too many eyes, as well.

I pick up the pace, excited to disappear into the dark theater for a while. Normally, I don’t go alone, but when they’re showing an older 80’s flick like

Evil Dead, I have to. Cole is all about special effects and doesn't trust films made before 1995.

I smile, thinking about his quirks. He doesn't know what he's missing. The 80s were fantastic. It's a whole decade of just good fun. Not everything had to have a meaning or be deep.

It's a welcome escape, especially tonight.

Rounding the corner and making my way up to the ticket booth, I see I'm a few minutes early, which is great. I hate missing the trailers at the beginning.

"One, please," I tell the cashier.

I fish out the wad of tips from my pocket that I made tonight and dole out the seven-fifty for the ticket. Not that I have money to spare with rent coming due and a small pile of bills on Cole's and my desk back at our apartment that we can't pay yet, but it's not like seven bucks will make or break me.

And it's my birthday, so...

Walking inside, I bypass the concession stand and head for the next set of double doors. There's only one theater, and surprisingly, this place has survived for sixty years even in the wake of the bigger twelve-theater cinema centers built in the surrounding towns. The Grand had to get creative with midnight showings of classic movies like tonight, but also dress-up events and private parties, too. I don't get down here much with my school and work schedule, but it's a nice, dark place when you want to get lost for a while. Private and quiet.

Stepping through the doors, I check my phone one more time to see that Cole hasn't called or texted yet. I turn my ringer off and slide it back into my pocket.

Some ads loop on the screen, but the house lights are still on, and I quickly scan the room, seeing a few loners spread out. There's also a couple sitting in the back row to my right, and a small group of guys are in the middle—young by the sound of their inconsiderately loud laughter. Out of about three hundred seats, two hundred eighty-five are still available, and I pretty much have my pick.

I walk down five or six rows, finding an empty one and slide in, taking a seat midway in. I set down my bag and quietly pull out the purple box of wine, reading the label in the dim light.

Merlot. I was hoping it was white wine, but I'm sure Shel needs to get rid of this stuff. We only serve it when there's an outdoor event and don't want glass outside.

Unscrewing the cap, I sniff the pungent scent, not sensing any of the fancy aromas in the least that sommeliers seem to grasp from wine. No hint of oak with a “bold aroma of sweet cherries” or anything like that. Sliding my tray in front of me, I take advantage of the empty row ahead and bend up my knees, fitting my Chucks in between the empty seats on the arm rest.

Setting the box down, I slip my phone out of my back pocket, just in case Cole calls, and plop it on the tray next to the wine.

But instead, it spills off the tray. It falls down between my legs and onto the floor, and I jerk up my knees to try to catch it, but they bump the tray and send the open box of wine spilling to the floor.

My mouth falls open, and I gasp. “Shit!” I blurt out in a whisper.

What the hell?

Planting my feet on the floor again, I push the tray off to the side and dive down to the floor, feeling around for my phone. My fingers dip in the spilled wine, and I flinch at the mess. Glancing up over the seats, I see the group of three guys a few rows down, dead ahead of me and right in line of the oncoming winefall.

I groan. *Great.*

A light layer of sweat cools my forehead, and I stand up, yanking my scarf out of my bag to dry off my fingers. I hate to ruin it, but I don’t have any napkins.

What a mess.

So much for escaping for two hours.

I look around for an usher with a light, pretty positive this theater doesn’t employ them, especially at this time of night, but the only flashlight I have is on my phone, and the floors are dark.

Seeing no one, I take my scarf and bag and travel up to the next row, bending down and peering under the seats to see if I can see my cell. When I find nothing, I move up to the next row and then to the next, pretty sure I heard it slide a ways. Since the rows of seats are on a decline, it could’ve gone far, too. *Dammit.*

Moving up to the next row, I set my stuff down and drop to my hands and knees, peering under the rows to my left and right, feeling with my hands. A pair of long, jean-clad legs sit ahead, and I look up, seeing a man sitting in the seat with fingers full of popcorn halfway to his mouth. He stares down at me with raised eyebrows.

“I’m sorry,” I whisper, tucking my hair behind my ear. “I dropped my drink and my phone went sliding down here somewhere. Do you mind...?”

He hesitates a moment and then blinks, sitting up. "Yeah, sure." He moves his tray aside and stands up, digging something out of his pocket. "Here."

He turns on the flashlight on his phone and squats down, shining it under the seats.

Immediately, I spot my phone under the seat next to his and snatch it up. *Thank goodness.* We both stand up, and my shoulders relax. I can't afford a replacement right now. I smooth my fingers over the screen, making sure I don't feel any cracks.

"Got it?" he asks.

"Yeah, thank you."

He kills his flashlight but reaches over, swiping his fingers over the bottom of my phone, and brings them to his nose, smelling.

"Is that..." he winces, "wine?"

I glance down at the floor, seeing he's standing in the drink I spilled three rows up.

"Oh, geez." I look up at him. "I'm so sorry. Is it everywhere?"

"No, no, it's fine." He lets out a chuckle, his lips curving more to one side with his smile as he steps out of the mess. "I didn't realize they sold alcohol here."

I grab my scarf and wipe off my phone. "Oh, they don't," I tell him quietly so I don't disturb others in the theater. "I just got off work. My boss gave it to me for a... um," I shake my head, searching for words, "to, uh... celebrate."

"Celebrate?"

"Shhh," someone hisses.

We both look to the guy one row back and far to the right who's shooting us a glare out of the corner of his eye. Neither the trailers nor movie have started yet, and we're not in his line of sight, but I guess we're disturbing him. I move away, back toward my bag.

The man helping me picks up his drink and popcorn and follows, the faint scent of his body wash hitting me. "I'm just going to scooch over, out of the mess," he says.

He sits a few chairs down and glances up at me and then back to where I was sitting when my phone and wine fell. "You're welcome to sit." He gestures to the seat next to him, probably figuring out I'm on my own tonight, too.

"Thanks," I tell him. "I'll just go..."

I don't finish. I back away and pick up my bag, turning to head to my own seat when I see a guy and girl enter the theater. I freeze, watching them veer

left for the back row on the other side of the room and plop down in the seats.

Shit.

Jay McCabe. The only other boyfriend I've had other than Cole, and he makes Cole look like a prince. Unfortunately, he still loves to take a bite out of me any chance he gets, and there's no way in hell I'm dealing with him tonight.

"You okay?" the guy with the phone light asks when I don't move. "I promise I'm not making a pass at you. You're too old for me."

I shoot him a look, forgetting about Jay and the girl for a moment. *Too old for him? What?* I take in his more than six feet of height, the outline of muscles visible through his T-shirt, and his corded right forearm with a full sleeve of tattoos disappearing up his shirt. I've seen plenty of guys in the bar, and he doesn't look like any nineteen year old I've ever seen. He's got to be at least what? Thirty?

He snorts. "I'm kidding," he says, his mouth spreading in a wide smile that makes my face fall a little. "If you don't want to watch the movie alone, you're welcome to sit. That's all I meant."

I dart my gaze to Jay and whomever he's with, but then a group of guys suddenly push through the double doors, making a lot of noise as they enter the theater. I see Jay look away from the girl and toward the commotion, and I drop down in the seat next to the guy on instinct, not wanting Jay to see me.

"Thanks," I tell the guy next to me.

I feel my ex's presence in the theater, and the old memories surface, reminding me of how helpless I let him make me feel at one time. I just want one night where I'm not thinking about everything.

I sit back and try to relax, but then I peer out of the corner of my eye, the close proximity of a guy I don't know sitting next to me suddenly like a blazing bonfire and impossible to ignore.

I turn my head, eyeing him with apprehension. "You're not a serial killer, are you?"

He pinches his eyebrows and looks at me. "Are you?"

"They're usually anti-social, Caucasian men."

Good-looking male here all alone? Hmmmm...

He arches a sharp brow. "And they look just like everyone else," he adds, suspicion in his voice as he looks me up and down.

The light from the ads on the screen play in his eyes, neither of us flinch, but I can't take it anymore. I break into a quiet chuckle.

I finally hold out my hand to him. "I'm Jordan. Sorry about the wine."

"Jordan?" he repeats, taking my hand and shaking it. "Unusual name for a girl."

"No, not really." I relax into the seat and fold my arms over my chest, lifting my knees and planting my shoes into the crevice between the two empty seats ahead of me. "It was the name of Tom Cruise's love interest in *Cocktail*, remember?"

His eyebrows raise in question.

"Cocktail?" I repeat. "1988 movie about flair bartending?"

"Oh, right." But he has this unsure look in his eyes, and I'm not sure he knows what the hell I'm taking about.

"Do you like 80's movies?" I ask, gesturing to the film that we're about to watch on the screen.

"I like *scary* movies," he clarifies and holds the popcorn over to me. "This one's a classic. You?"

"I love the 80s." I take a small handful and put a piece in my mouth. "My boyfriend hates my taste in movies and music, but I can't resist. I'm here whenever they show something from the decade."

I feel awkward slipping in a random mention of a boyfriend, but I don't want to give the wrong impression here. I quickly glance down at his left hand, thankfully not seeing a wedding ring. It would be wrong to sit here with a married guy.

But he just looks at me knowingly. "*Breakfast Club* is your favorite, right?" he says. "And every other John Hughes creation?"

"You have something against *The Breakfast Club*?"

"Not the first ten times I saw it, no."

A smile pulls at my lips. It is on TV a lot, I guess.

He leans in. "The 80s was the age of the action hero," he points out, his deep voice close and hushed. "People forget that. *Lethal Weapon*, *Die Hard*, *The Terminator*, *Rambo*..."

"Jean-Claude Van Damme," I add.

"Exactly."

I bite the corner of my mouth, so I don't laugh, but my stomach shakes anyway, and I let out a snort.

He frowns. "What are you laughing at?"

"Nothing," I reply quickly, nodding. "Van Damme. Great actor. Very relevant films."

I can't keep the laughter off my face, though, and he furrows his brow knowing I'm full of shit.

Just then I hear a giggle somewhere behind me, and I turn my head over my shoulder, seeing Jay turned away from the screen and leaning into the girl, both of them full-on making out now.

"You know them?" the man next to me asks.

I shake my head. He doesn't need to know my business.

We fall silent, and I finish the popcorn in my hand, letting my head fall back as I look up to the high ceiling and the antique gold arches overhead. He sits next to me, and I breathe in and out slowly, despite the hammering in my chest.

Why am I nervous? Is it Jay?

No, I'm not even thinking about him at the moment.

People chat around us, waiting for the movie to start, but I can't hear what they're saying, and I don't really care. My skin feels warm.

"So, what are studying at Doral State?" he asks.

I shoot him a surprised look. How does he know where I go to school?

Serial killer.

But then he gestures to my bag on the floor, and I see the keychain hanging off it with the university emblem emblazoned on the face.

Oh, duh.

I sit up. "Landscape Design," I tell him. "I want to make outside spaces pretty."

"That's nice. I work in construction."

I flash him a half-smile. "So, you make inside spaces pretty then."

"No, not really."

I laugh at his forlorn tone like he's so bored with what he does.

"I make them *functional*," he corrects me.

He turns hazel eyes on me, warm and piercing, but then his gaze drops to my mouth for a split moment, and a flutter hits my stomach. He quickly looks away, and I drop my eyes, having a hard time catching my breath.

Clearing my throat, I bend down and pull out the box of donuts from my bag and place them on the tray, swinging the little table in front of me and lifting the lid.

The sweet scent immediately hits my nose, and my stomach growls.

I glance back at the projection window, wondering if the movie is starting soon, because I was saving these for that, but now I'm starving.

I feel the guy's eyes on me, and I glance at him, explaining the donuts, "It's my birthday. In addition to the wine, my boss gave me the only cake she

could get at a drive-thru.”

I pick one up and lean back, putting my feet back on the arm rest in front of me.

“You’re going to eat all six donuts?” he questions.

I stop the pastry two inches from my mouth and glare at him. “Would that disgust you or something?”

“No, I’m just wondering if I get one.”

I smile and wave at the box, telling him to help himself.

He picks up the plain glazed, and I’m not sure if he’s the no-frills type or just trying to save the special sprinkle ones for me, but either way, I kind of like it. We sit back and eat, but I can’t help stealing glances at him every once in a while.

His brown hair is light, and his eyes look blue, green, or hazel depending on what kind of light is flashing across them from the screen. He has a little stubble on his oval-shaped face, a sharp nose, and my gaze is drawn to the way his angular jaw flexes as he chews. There’s the faintest of lines around his eyes, so he might be more than thirty, but it could just be all his time working in the sun, too. He’s tall, strong, fit, and tan, and his eyes suddenly flash to the side as if he senses me staring. I turn my eyes forward again.

Dammit.

That’s okay, right? It’s normal to find other people attractive. It happens. I mean, Scarlett Johansson is attractive. That doesn’t mean I’m interested in her.

I take another nibble of my donut, my gaze darting to the side again, taking in his arms and the various tattoos. Black gears and bolts, like a robot skeleton, some tribal work that definitely says he was a 90’s kid, and I can just make out what I think is a pocket watch that looks like it’s trying to break free of his skin. It’s like a hodgepodge without any discerning theme, but it’s beautiful work. I wonder what the story is behind them.

I take another bite, the pink glaze and rainbow sprinkles sending electric shocks to the back of my jaw and making me crave the whole damn thing in my mouth at once.

“You know, I really kind of want abs,” I say, chewing, “but these are really good.”

He breaks into a laugh, looking at me and chuckling.

“What?”

“Nothing. You’re just...” He looks away as if searching for words. “You’re just kind of, like, interesting or...something?” He shakes his head. “I’m sorry,

I don't know what I mean. And then he blurts out, "Cute," as if just remembering. "You're cute, I mean."

My stomach flips, and heat warms my cheeks like I'm in fifth grade again when it was such a compliment for a guy you like to tell you you're cute. I know he means my personality and not how I look, but I kind of like it.

He finishes the donut and takes a sip of his soda. "So, what are you?" he asks. "Like twenty-three, twenty-four?"

"Sure, eventually."

He breathes out a laugh.

"Nineteen," I finally answer.

He takes a deep breath and sighs, something far off in his gaze.

"What?" I take the last bite and brush my hands together, slouching and leaning my head back on the chair.

"To be that young again," he muses. "Seems like yesterday."

Well, how old could he be? Nineteen couldn't have been that long ago for him. Ten years? Maybe twelve?

"So, you'd do some things differently if you could go back?" I inquire.

He quirks a tight smile and looks down at me, his eyes serious. "Let me tell you something.... A little advice, okay?"

I listen, looking up at him and my gaze locked with his.

"Hit the ground running," he tells me.

Huh?

He must see the confusion on my face, because he goes on.

"Time passes by you like a bullet," he says, "and fear gives you the excuses you're craving to not do the things you know you should. Don't doubt yourself, don't second-guess, don't let fear hold you back, *don't* be lazy, and don't base your decisions on how happy it will make others. Just go for it, okay?"

I stare up at him, and unfortunately, that's all I can seem to do. I want to smile, because my heart is swelling, and it feels good, but I'm also filled with something I can't place. It's like a dozen different emotions flooding in at once, and all I can manage are short, shallow breaths.

"Okay," I whisper to him.

I'm not sure if what he said was what I wanted to hear or needed to hear, but I feel my shoulders square a bit more and my chin rise with readiness. For however long it lasts, I'm a little braver, and he's my new hero.

I watch as he pulls out a small box and proceeds to light a match, the small flame burning bright. He sticks it in one of the donuts, all the pink

frosting Shel asked for, because she knows it's my favorite color, glowing in the light. I feel my heart warm at the gesture.

Taking my feet down, I lean forward, close my eyes, and ask for what I want in my head, and then I blow out the flame.

I didn't wish for what I usually wish for, though. My mind is suddenly blank, and I'm not remembering all the things I need and want right now outside of this theater. Just the only thing I can think of.

We both sit back and settle in, each having another donut as the lights finally dim, and the surround sound hits us from both sides of the theater.

Over the next ninety minutes, we eat and laugh, and I hide my face a couple times when I know something's coming. I jerk here and there and laugh at him when he does, too, because he looks embarrassed. After a while, I notice my head lays inclined toward him, and he has his foot up on the empty chair ahead of us with his head laid back, as well, and we're completely comfortable. It hasn't even occurred to me to keep a certain distance.

I don't watch a lot of movies with other people. I'm not used to just sitting in silence with someone else. Cole's and my schedules don't always mesh, my sister, Cam, doesn't have any free time anymore, and most of my high school friendships didn't last past graduation about a year ago. It's nice to hang out.

By the time the credits roll, I'm not sure I remember much of the movie. But I haven't been this relaxed in a long time. I laughed and smiled and joked around and forgot everything that's going on out there, and I needed that. I don't really want to go home yet.

The lights start to come up, and I slowly sit up, bringing my feet back to the floor as I swallow the lump in my throat and glance over at him. He sits up, too, but he barely meets my eyes.

Standing up, I hook the strap of the bag over my head and pick up my garbage.

"Well, they're showing *Poltergeist* in a few weeks," he says behind me, rising and taking his trash with him. "If I see you, I'll make sure to sit at higher ground."

I laugh under my breath, thinking about the wine. We both exit the row and walk for the doors, and I notice Jay and his date aren't in their seats anymore. They must've left already, but truth be told, I forgot they were here a long time ago.

Poltergeist. Does that mean he'll be here then? Is this his way of nonchalantly letting me know in case I just happen to want to come, too?

But no, he knows I have a boyfriend.

I can't help but think, though, if for some reason Cole and I didn't make it another month, would I come to the movies then, knowing he'd be here?

I blink long and hard, guilt washing over me as I trail up the aisle. I'd probably be here. There aren't a lot of "catches" in this town, and I had fun tonight. This guy is interesting.

And good-looking.

And employed.

I should set him up with my older sister. How he's gone by undetected under her radar all this time is a mystery to me.

We push through the door, the last ones out of the theater and stop in the lobby, tossing away all our trash.

I look up at him, my heart skipping a beat at seeing him in the brighter light and standing tall in front of me. Hazel eyes. Definitely hazel. But more green around the outside of the irises.

His hair is styled with minimal product and just long enough to run your fingers through, and I drop my eyes to his smooth, tan neck. I can't see if there's a tan line under the collar of his T-shirt, though. Is he like that all over? An unbidden image of him hammering and hauling lumber without a shirt on flashes in my mind and I...

I close my eyes again, shaking my head. *Yeah, whoa, okay.*

"Um, I better head back," I tell him, gripping the strap of my bag. "Hopefully my boyfriend is waiting at the bar to pick me up by now."

"Bar?"

"Grounders?" I answer, thinking he probably should know the place. It's one of only three bars in town, although many favor Poor Red's or the strip club over the dive I work at. "I got off a little early tonight—unexpectedly—but he's my ride, and I couldn't get a hold of him. He should be there now, though."

He pushes the door open, holding it for me as I leave the theater, and follows me out.

"Well, I hope you had a good birthday, despite having to work," he says.

I move to the right toward where Grounders is, and he veers left.

"And thanks for keeping me company." I tell him. "I hope I didn't ruin the movie for you."

He gazes at me for a moment, his breathing growing heavier as a torn look crosses his face. Finally, he shakes his head, averting his eyes. "Not at all," he says.