

Step on a Crack

By Miles Ryan Fisher

When I walked into her party, the very first thing she did was introduce me to a group of her ex-boyfriends. Her *ex-boyfriends*. Guys from the Main Line or maybe even Manayunk dressed in tailored slacks and pricy polos and standing with such poster board posture beside the food table.

And that's where she left me, packed alongside those guys in her Center City condo as if we were all a bunch of sausage links jammed together. She went off, gliding around her party as if everything were okay—which I'd say was kind of a problem. Sure, maybe we were all pieces of sausage, just swappable links of floppy, pre-packaged meat. But that didn't change the fact that of all the pieces of meat out there, *I* was the one she now called her boyfriend.

I met all of them—or at least the ones who came to her potluck. There was Tucker, the investment banker. Kyle, the lawyer. Tyler, the other lawyer. And Todd, the real estate agent who didn't appear interested in helping people become first-time homeowners. And there I was—South, the high school teacher—standing amidst this made-for-fairway foursome. They probably assumed I was their caddy.

"You couldn't *pay* me enough to teach," Tucker said.

"Sure I could. That's why you're an investment banker." Okay, I didn't actually say *that*. I wanted to, but that's not the type of thing you say unless you're looking to start something at your girlfriend's party. And besides, I had a stock reply for that comment. "Well, you can't pay me any *less* to teach," I said, leaning forward during the "*less*" portion of the routine. The guys chuckled, and all I could think was *I can't believe she's fucked guys who chuckle*.

"So how do you know Abby?" Tucker asked me.

"We met at a wedding she catered. About a month ago."

"Oh you're just a month in."

"What's *that* supposed to mean?"

Tucker chuckled. Again.

"What do you teach?" Todd asked.

"Literature, actually."

"Why 'actually?'"

I glanced at my button-down shirt. "I usually look like I don't belong anywhere near books. I also coach the baseball team. That's more what people expect to hear."

Todd gave a quick assessment of all six feet, two inches of me. "You play in college?"

"Shortstop." Instead of mentioning the two years I played in the minor leagues, I pointed at the whole group of gents. "So you guys are still friends with Abby?"

"Kind of," Tucker said. "We're not so much here for Abby."

"As you are for the food?" I said.

He laughed. "You could call it that."

I gave a shrug like what the fuck.

"Look around," he said.

"What about it?"

"Don't you see? Abby's girls are *smoke-shows*."

"You're telling me you came for her friends?"

"They're not actually her friends. They're the girls she hires." He scanned the crowd. "I guess her catering company does better with hot servers."

He made a good point. The percentage of attractive girls at this party was so lopsided it was laughable. But their attractiveness wasn't even natural. It was, I don't know, manufactured you might say? Spaghetti-strap sundresses that rested in the middle of their thighs and straightened hair that draped over their bare shoulders and flawless tans that they probably got by lying naked on lawn chairs in their backyard. It sure wasn't Philly attractive. I was used to girls who wore jeans with holes in them and put their hair up with a pencil and had pale lines running through their tans because they were more interested in actually doing something when the sun was out.

"Be honest," Tucker said, "you're here for her friends, too."

"Why would I be here for her friends?"

"Don't tell me you're actually seeing her to," Tucker thought for a moment, "see *her*."

"Why *wouldn't* I be."

Tucker shook his head as if I were a caddy who'd just given him the wrong club. And in a sense, he was right—I had no experience. No experience as a caddy and no experience with Abby. But it wasn't his place to go talking about Abby like that. Yeah, I thought, I'd give your ass the wrong club.

"What'd you say?" Tucker asked.

"Say *what*," I said.

"You just said you'd give my ass the wrong club. What does that even mean?"

"I didn't say any—"

"I think there's old bay in these sliders," Todd interrupted.

"That's because there is," I said.

"You made them?"

"They're not that hard. Just some old bay and Worcestershire mixed in there. Anyone can do it."

"Well they're goddamn delicious," he said.

"What's delicious?" Abby asked, sliding into our group.

"The burgers South made," Todd said.

"You mean the pulverized cow cooked in its own fat?"

"That's exactly what I mean."

"Well enjoy masticating your future heart attack."

"I will," Todd said and sank his teeth into his second slider in a way that made grease run down his chin before he smothered it with a napkin. I smiled and thought, 'Okay, maybe I could like *this* guy.'

After that, Abby went back to her party. She didn't introduce me or any of these guys to her other "friends," but that didn't faze Kyle or Tyler or Todd. And certainly not Tucker. Each of them immersed himself in one of Abby's girls. You know, nodding at whatever those girls talked about in that I'm-interested-in-what-you-have-to-say-because-I-want-to-stick-it-in-you kind of way.

I watched them and just rolled my eyes. I struck up a few random conversations with some of Abby's former clients and texted some of my buddies, though I didn't invite them over. Per Abby's request. She'd said that she wanted to take it "just us" first, to get to know me before meeting my friends and even before seeing my place. Now that I'd met her jackass ex's—the same ones going after her *friends*—I understood why a little better.

When the party started to dwindle, I gravitated back to the food table, sampling what remained of the assorted foods Abby had cooked. Mini crab cakes topped with a dollop of remoulade. Baked mushrooms stuffed with some sort of cheese and bread crumb mixture. Asparagus wrapped snugly in prosciutto. It was all so delicious, all so impressive—how much talent Abby had that she could use it to build her own catering company. She lived a life off her passion, and *that* wasn't something girls who lie on lawn chairs do.

Once the last of her friends finally left, she came right up to me. She grabbed me by my shirt and yanked me to her lips. She tasted sweet, like some sort of strawberry. But I pushed her away.

"What's wrong?" she asked.

"What do you mean 'what's wrong.'"

"I can't read your mind, South."

"You invited all your ex's. I'm supposed to be alright with that?"

"But I saw you—you made friends with them."

"Tucker's an asshole, for one. And why in the world would you invite them when you invited me?"

"I invited them before I met you, South."

"And you couldn't un-invite them?"

"I'm still friends with them."

"Are you? Because the reason *they* came wasn't out of friendship. They came because your friends are hot."

"So you think my friends are hot."

"That's not what I said. I'm not interested in your friends."

"That's not something you should have to tell me, South."

"I *know* that." I shook my head, annoyed.

She put her hands on the sides of my body. "I just wanted you to see how different you are than the guys I've dated in the past. You're not like them. And I already told you, you need to be patient with me."

"Patient with what?" She'd told me that she was working through some issues, and my response was, hey, we all have issues. Now I figured it was probably something to do with her ex's. I didn't know why she'd still be in touch with them, though. Much less invite them to her party.

"I don't want to talk about it," she said. "I want you to say that you won't just up and leave me like they did."

I looked into her burnt green eyes that pierced from out of her dark Mediterranean skin, her long pitch black hair that twisted into a propped up bundle, her button nose that glimmered from the little stud wedged in its divot. It all looked so beautiful, so striking, like she belonged on the cover of National Geographic. I wondered what lay within all that, but instead of pressing her, I leaned down and pressed my lips onto her collarbone. It was the perfect place. Her lips cracked a smile that I couldn't help but fall for. *I'm patient*, I whispered. *I'm not them. I'd never just up and leave you.*

The next morning, I woke up to an empty bed and the smell of breakfast wafting into the bedroom. I wandered into the kitchen half-asleep.

"Good morning!" Abby said. She placed her hands on my waist and lifted herself on her tippy-toes and pecked me on the cheek. "Now, I want you to sit down."

“What can I help with?”

“I don’t want you to help with anything. I just want you to sit down and let me bring you some coffee.” She smiled. “Pretty please?”

Okay, I said and left the kitchen. I fully woke up the moment I saw what was already on the table. The *Philadelphia Inquirer* sat in a neat little stack and right in front of a chair was the sports section. Not just lying there, either. It was spread open, right to the page where the Phillies box score was from last night’s game. “You’re kidding me.”

She peeked around the corner of the kitchen, pursing her lips.

“You went out and got the newspaper?”

“I figured you’d want to read about last night’s game since you didn’t get to watch it.”

I grinned and shook my head. As I dissected all the box scores of every game and perused the standings, Abby cooked.

“All done,” she said, her voice carrying a singsong inflection. She brought a couple plates in from the kitchen and laid one in front of me. I looked down and saw two sunny side up eggs right beside each other, their yolks looking back at me like two big, bright yellow eyes. Beneath them was a strip of bacon that curled upward. A smiley face. In the space where a cheek would be, red lips were planted on the white plate. I looked up and Abby curled her lipstick lips inward as she sat down. I traced invisible hearts with my index finger above the eyes, right where my breakfast’s thoughts would drift.

“I know how it makes you feel,” Abby said.

It makes me feel ... *special*, I thought. And she knew that. I’ve no doubt.

“Just one strip of bacon?” I asked.

“That’s all you get around me,” Abby said. “And after this, we’re going to the farmer’s market so I can pick up some healthy things for you to eat.”

“What about heading down to the ballpark? Only one week left in the season and I was thinking it’d be nice to take you to a game.” What I didn’t tell her was that I’d already bought her a pink cap with a big, curly white *P* on it so she could fit right in at the ballpark—and look damn cute while doing so.

“That’s okay, South,” she said. “I can go to the farmer’s market alone if you want to go to your game.”

“But I want you to come. That’s the point.”

“What time does the game end?”

“I don’t know. Four or five, maybe?”

“The farmer’s market will be closed by then.”

“Can’t we just pick up some healthy food from a store?”

“It’s really okay, South. You can go to the game.”

“I’d rather spend the day with you though.”

“A healthy day with me.” She smiled.

“What’s all this health stuff about?”

“South, I’m not going to cook things for you that would kill you.”

“I’d die happy.”

“But then what would I do? You’d leave me with no one to cook for.”

“I would *never* do that,” I said sarcastically.

So we took a walk down to a farmer's market, right by a bakery where I stopped and stood at the entrance, inhaling the scent of fresh-baked donuts. Abby placed a hand on my back and guided me away.

"The farmer's market, not the heart doctor's office," she said.

"Sometimes you gotta live."

"And I want you to live for a long, long time, South." She slipped her hand into mine. "South!" she yelled and jerked me back.

"*What?*" I was startled.

"Don't step on the crack."

"What crack?"

"In the sidewalk, South. Don't you know that it'll break your mother's back?"

We stared at each other, then broke out laughing. *Step on a crack, break your mother's back*, she giggled.

"You know where that comes from, right?" I asked.

"Was it about a little boy who did things to hurt his mother on purpose?"

"It was told to little kids who lived by cliffs because cracks indicate loose ground. So if they stepped on a crack, the ground might give and they might fall."

"And die?"

"And splatter in all sorts of directions."

"That's kind of morbid, South."

"But it's true. And just think, that saying was created to save little kids."

"So they can grow up for you to teach," Abby said and gave me a peck on the cheek.

"And make sure they don't slip through the cracks."

"Well what's *not* going to slip through the cracks is your health."

We danced over the many cracks in a broken Philadelphia sidewalk and into the farmer's market where Abby bought all sorts of homegrown produce—bell peppers for sautéing, acorn squash for baking, cauliflower for roasting. She skipped her way from stand to stand, and I held whatever she wanted. She insisted on buying the food for me and cooking it to keep me healthy. She wanted me to live a long, long time, she said again.

I wasn't going anywhere, I said back and kissed her.

A few weeks later we were in her kitchen, cooking some of the food we'd picked up from our now weekly visit to the farmer's market. I leaned back against an open spot of the kitchen counter, sipping my beer, watching her work. She moved around the kitchen with such fluidity. A pinch of pepper here. A sprinkle of salt there. Check the oven, adjust the stove, shake the pan. She glided with purpose, moving so directly that it boiled down to the most minimal of movements. When she took a step out of her picture perfect motion to plant a quick peck on my lips, my heart felt something special—that *I* was something special.

"This is *amazing*," I said when I took my first bite of chicken, a thick orange glaze oozing off the sides of the breast. "I mean really, really amazing."

"I wouldn't make you something that wasn't," she said.

"You know, I'd really love to cook for *you* sometime."

"That's okay, South. You don't have to. I don't mind cooking for us."

"I know I don't have to. I'm just saying that I *want* to."

"Do you even know how to cook?"

"I mean, I know how to follow a recipe. I've got a whole list of things that turned out pretty well."

"I bet it's a list of all hamburgers."

I laughed. Then she laughed, as if she were waiting for my reaction first.

"They're obviously on there," I said. "But all sorts of other things are, too."

"That's okay, South. I'll just cook for us. Like I said, I don't mind. It's my gift to you." She popped up from her chair, leaned over the table, and pecked me on the cheek.

"That reminds me," I said and hopped over to my bag and took out a book. *Good-bye, Mr. Chips*. A short, kind of sappy story about a teacher whose wife helps him become beloved by his students. "Here." I tried to hand it to her.

"You're assigning me a book?" She put her hands on the back of her hips. "Am I one of your students now?"

"It's a book you'll love. In fact, it'll make you cry."

"Why would you want to make me cry?"

"Not a bad cry. A good one."

"South, I'm an olfactory and gustatory person."

"A what?"

"Olfactory and gustatory. I thought you taught English."

"Are teachers supposed to know everything?"

"Olfactory relates to the sense of smell and gustatory to the sense of taste. I'm a smell-and-taste type person, South."

"So I should've gotten you a scratch-n-sniff book?"

"You know, sometimes you're not very nice, South."

I set the book down on a side table, the message I'd written inside its front cover remaining unread. It was a message that talked about how special she could make me feel and that I would be there for her just like I'd be there for the inner-city kids I taught, the ones I wouldn't let slip through the cracks. She could let her guard down, it said. She could let me in, it said. She could let me be there for her, it said. And here I was, picking my car keys up off the counter instead.

"Where are you going?" Abby said the moment she noticed.

"What do you mean 'where am I going?' I'm going home."

"Why?"

"Why? *WHY*? You just told me I wasn't nice. So *why* would you want me to stay?"

"South," she walked over to me, "sometimes I say things I don't mean." Her fingers climbed into my hand and pried the keys out of it. "I told you, you need to be patient with me. And you said that you would."

"And I am."

"By leaving me like those other guys?"

"You mean like Tucker and Todd? Why did those guys leave you, Ab? Better yet, why didn't *you* leave *them*?"

"I don't want to talk about it."

"Do you talk to *anyone* about it?"

"I just want you to say you'll stay. And if you're going to leave, I want you to take me with you. You know I still haven't seen your place yet."

I bit my bottom lip. *Now* she wanted to see my place?

“How about,” she continued, “you let me cook for you and then we go to your place and watch a movie.” Her index fingers slipped through separate notches on the front of my jeans and pulled me toward her. “And I don’t think we’ll make it through the whole movie.”

After dinner, we drove out of Center City and swung along Kelly Drive, a road that winds along the Schuylkill River and is lined with cherry trees and a paved path for runners.

“It’s really pretty back here,” Abby said. “I had no idea this existed.”

We drove past Boathouse Row, one of the more famous Philadelphia landmarks, the kind that appears on postcards. I wondered how anyone could live in Philadelphia without knowing about it, even if the houses weren’t lit just yet.

“You see those benches over there?” I pointed to some benches that faced the river. “That’s where I go and read.”

“Can we go sit on it and read sometime?”

I looked over, confused. “I thought you didn’t like reading.”

“But I like you. So whatever’s important to you is important to me. Can we go sometime?”

“Of course we can,” I said.

We pulled off Kelly Drive where life was scenic and onto Girard Avenue where life was barred up convenience stores and uninsured Toyota Camrys and my concrete apartment building. I lived in an area called Brewerytown, a part of Philadelphia that was still a few stops away from being next in line for gentrification.

“What is this, a prison?” she asked the moment we pulled into the lot.

“It’s kind of utilitarian.”

“Drab gray is utilitarian?”

I shrugged.

“It looks like the kind of building you’d live in,” she said.

“Because I’m a dreary person?”

“No, South. Because you’re a teacher and you don’t make a lot.”

“And that’s a problem for you.”

“South, I already told you that you’re different than the other guys I’ve dated. And it’s a good thing. Have I tried to change you?”

“Maybe you should.”

“That’s not nice, South.”

I opened the door and led her into my sparsely furnished apartment that I never really spent much time at, anyway. A futon that was well-used by friends who needed to crash for the night. A couple of wood side tables with knicks and scratches. A coffee table to match. All picked up second-hand, but they did the job. Besides, I was no interior designer. Nor did I care to be.

Abby peered into my apartment, her steps creeping inches at a time. “Is that really your television? It’s so old.”

“Not as old as the movie we’re going to watch.”

“We’re watching an old movie? But you know I don’t like old movies.”

“Since when?”

“South, you need to start listening a little better.”

Her head drew back as she assessed where I lived. Her face wrinkled.

If only the television I never watched were some sort of flat screen instead of having a big-ass tube run through it. If only it were brand new—if only *everything* were brand new—then this all could've been avoided.

Heat spread across my face.

"What is it," she asked.

"I should've known you'd react like this."

"React like what? I'm just looking at your place for the first time."

"Like it's not good enough for you."

"What are you talking about? Did I say it wasn't good enough for me? South, haven't I told you that you're all I want?"

"When did you say that?"

"I say it all the time, South."

"Do you?"

"South." Abby reached her hand out. "Here."

"Here what?"

"Take me into your bedroom. I want you to show it to me and then I want to show you that you're all I want." Her hand felt slick, oily. Or maybe it was the sweat from my hand rubbing off on hers. It was hard to tell.

We got into my bedroom and she started looking around. Big-barreled baseball bats leaning in one corner, twin-tip skis posted up in another. Individual shelves mounted to the wall and packed with hardback books. Abby peered at what made me—*me*. She went over to the photos I'd hung on my wall, a whole array of frames with pictures from all different times in my life.

"Who's this?" she asked. She pointed to one of me and an old teammate after a college playoff game we'd won maybe six or seven years ago. We were caked in dirt afterward.

"That's me and Tony. He was the catcher on our college team, but I knew him since high school."

"He's hot," she said.

I didn't respond. Not even with the stock comment I had. "*Everyone* says that when they see this picture." To be honest, I thought it was funny how many people made that comment. Because I knew Tony far back, into a time when *nobody* thought that, into a time when he played catcher because he was too pudgy to play anything else on the field. This was the first time I didn't laugh though.

"Are you okay?" Abby asked.

"Why wouldn't I be."

"You just got quiet again."

"Were you looking for me to say something?"

"It's okay," she said and kissed me and ran her hands along the sides of my body. "Play with me," she whispered and stuck her tongue in my ear.

She rubbed her hand over my pants, and as if she knew, she slipped it straight in without unbuckling or unbuttoning them. The she stopped kissing me and leaned back. "Is something wrong?" she asked.

"No," I said. "Just keep going."

She kept going. Kept touching me. Pulled my pants down. Laid on top of me. Grinded into me. But nothing happened. No matter how hard she tried, nothing happened.

"Oh it's okay." She lifted her body off mine and let out a sigh. "I wasn't really in the mood anyway."

"What's that supposed to mean?" I asked, lying there exposed.

"What's what supposed to mean. I said it's okay."

"Well it's not. And what do you mean you weren't in the mood?"

"South, I said it's okay. How can I be more supportive than that?"

"For starters, you could try coming across like you mean it."

"They're your insecurities, not mine, South. Please stop projecting them onto me."

I shook my head, got up off the bed, and put my pants back on.

Abby sat up. "Where are you going? I just want you to be here next to me." She rubbed her hand over the sheets that I didn't want to be anywhere near.

"I'm going outside for a smoke."

"You really shouldn't do that to your body."

"There's a lot I shouldn't be doing to my body."

I shoved open the heavy side door of my apartment building and let it slam shut as I reached for my pack of smokes. I lit one and walked, continuing out of the parking lot and down the street and straight to The Trope, a dive bar that was known to be accepting of anyone no matter who you were or where you lived. I opened the door and walked into its stale musty smell that settled somewhere in the dimness. My sneakers stuck to the floor as I walked up to the bar, plunked down onto a stool, and ordered the "special." It was a citywide thing. A cheap pilsner and a shot of whiskey for jukebox money.

I was almost through my second special when I looked over and noticed none other than one of Abby's ex-boyfriends that I'd met at her potluck. Of *course*, I thought. I didn't go over to him or even give a second look. I just turned and faced the bar, pushing the sides of my beer can in and out, in and out.

"South, right?" I heard him from over my shoulder and swiveled around. "Todd. From Abby's party."

"Todd the real estate agent," I said.

He laughed. "Is that what Abby calls me? Where is she?"

"Back at my place. Sleeping, I guess."

"Oh," Todd said and squinted. "Something happened, huh."

I grunted.

"I get it," he said. "It's not like I haven't been through it."

"Been through what?"

"The way she acts. Sweet one moment, cutting the next."

"She's protecting herself from getting hurt again."

"Getting hurt again?"

"Whatever you and those other guys did to her. Then up and left her."

"What *we* did to her?" He looked confused, shook his head. "What I'm saying is that she's probably doing to *you* what she did it to *all* of us. Me. Tucker. Those other guys. She draws you in, makes you feel good, then cuts you when you're close. Then when you back away, she does it again. It's like she can't decide if she loves you or hates you."

"No offense, but I'm different than you and those other guys."

"Not in this case you aren't." He patted me on the shoulder, which I didn't appreciate.

I looked around the bar. Everyone was so at ease, settled into who they were. Chatting with their hand sitting on their hip or shoulder leaning against a wall or feet swiveling their stool as they shot the breeze. Whiskey warming everyone's stomach. Meanwhile, my stomach lurched.

"Look," Todd said, "I'm not as bad a guy as you probably think. I'm just trying to help you out."

"I'm not the one who needs it. *She's* the one with the problems."

"Not ones that you can solve."

"Then *who* solves them? She solves them herself? Maybe that's why she's so scared of pulling someone closer—they'll find out too much and then jet."

Todd shrugged. He looked out of answers, and to be honest, I think he felt sorry for me. I didn't need his pity though.

"I gotta go, man," I said.

He pulled out his wallet and took out a business card. "If you ever want, just give me a call."

"I'm not really looking to buy a house."

"I meant if you ever want to meet here for a beer. I love this place. Come here all the time."

Taking that card made me feel bad for how I was treating him. If we'd met under different circumstances, I'm sure we'd have been picking out Guns N' Roses songs on the jukebox instead. I just shook my head. "*Fuck.*"

He slapped me on the shoulder. "Don't sound so defeated. Just the way it is."

We'll see about that, I thought.

I went back to my apartment and lay down beside Abby. I didn't touch her though. I just lay there, awake. Part of me wondered if she did the same, only pretended to be asleep, curled up topless beside me. I looked at the ridges on her spine, poking out of her back. I could see them move with each and every breath of hers. They stretched her skin as if each one of them were trying to crack through.

In the morning, I slid out of bed while she slept, the first time that'd ever happened. I sat at a table with my cup of coffee, doing some research on my computer.

Abby walked out, rubbing her face. I clicked off one browser so all that was on the screen was a page of baseball scores from the previous night's playoff games.

"What are you doing up so early?" she asked.

"I couldn't sleep."

"You disappeared last night."

"I went to the bar. Ran into Todd, actually."

"Who's Todd?"

"Your ex-boyfriend. The one I met at your party."

"You left me to go to the bar and hang out with my *ex*?"

"He just happened to be there."

"Is this something you do? Leave girls to hang out with their ex's?"

"*You* introduced me to him!"

She looked at me. A brief pause. Like something was on the tip of her tongue and she didn't know if she should say it or not. I picked up my car keys from the coffee table.

"You should get dressed," I said.

"For what? You're taking me home?"

I didn't say a word.

"Why are you so upset, South?" She walked over and put her hands around me. "I just want to cook breakfast for you. A happy face with *two* strips of bacon this time. A double smile."

I wrenched her arms off of my body. "We're leaving."

"Why are you taking me home, South. Tell me why."

But I refused to answer. We drove in silence, Abby pensive, staring out the window and refusing to look in any other direction. I wondered if she realized we weren't heading in the direction of her condo, though I wondered only to a certain extent. If she didn't know Boathouse Row when she saw it, then I doubted that she'd figure out I wasn't driving toward Center City. I finally pulled into a parking lot surrounded by a few office buildings.

"Why are we here," Abby said, still staring out the window.

"Because you're going to get some help."

Her head pivoted and stopped with a glare, those burnt green eyes searing me as if I were lying on some sort of griddle. "*What.*"

"If you won't tell me what's going on, then you should at least tell *someone* about it."

"Where. Are we."

"There's a therapist on the fifth floor of one of these buildings. I already checked. She's open on Saturdays. We can at least go in and make an appointment for you."

She sat there. Silent. And I wasn't going to break it. I was going to wait and wait and wait until she did something. She finally opened her mouth, but looked straight ahead.

"I told you that I needed you to be patient," she said. "And you said that you would."

"And I *am*. I'll drive you here every week and wait in the parking lot for as long as it takes. I'll wait and I'll wait and I'll wait. *That's* what patience is, Ab."

"Taking me without my permission to a therapist is not patience."

"But it's what you need."

"What I need is for you to take me home."

"No. I'm not going anywhere until—"

"Take me home *NOW*, South."

I bit my bottom lip and stared out the windshield and shook my head. Part of me wanted to sit there for as long as it took until she agreed to go in. And maybe I should've done that. Maybe I shouldn't have turned the ignition.

I parked a couple blocks away from her place, and we got out in complete silence. I really didn't know what was left at this point. We walked to her building, and she went up a couple of the front stairs before she turned around, probably realizing that I wasn't following her in. I stood there, my feet planted in the sidewalk, not really sure what to do.

"What's going on with you, South."

"What's going on with *me*?"

"I don't like this." She shook her head. "Uh-huh, I don't like this one bit."

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"I don't like not knowing what's going on with you, South."

"What does *that* have to do with anything? This isn't about *me*. It's about *you*. And getting help."

"South." Her burnt green eyes, those burnt green eyes. "I'm already going through therapy." She took a step down toward me. "I have a personality disorder, South. I'm diagnosed with borderline."

I'm diagnosed with borderline. Her words slugged me in a lax stomach. At the time, I didn't know exactly what borderline meant or that it referred to something so severe. I didn't know that those who suffered from it experienced emotions they couldn't control. I didn't know that those emotions could lead them to act in ways that didn't make sense. I didn't know that those actions could all but ensure the one thing they feared most: abandonment.

I didn't know that there was no cure.

But I did know enough to realize just how wrong I'd had it all along. And that her issues extended further than any ex-boyfriend. "Why didn't you say something," I said.

"It's not something I want to tell everyone about. That's why I asked you to be patient. I wanted you to just understand. But you're no different. You abandoned me just like the others did."

"I didn't abandon you," I said. "Look, I'm right here."

"You can abandon someone even when you're right in front of them, South. And what you just did" She shook her head.

"I did what I did because I'm *not* like them."

"I wish I could believe that."

That's when I started backing away, slowly retreating.

"Where are you going, South," she said. "South, where are you going."

But I didn't answer. She stood there, on the steps. I could hear her voice repeating my name. *South. South. South.* Over and over and over. As if my name were the only way she could identify me because I was so much like the rest of them.

"South, where—"

"Stop saying my name." I kept backing away. "Stop saying my goddamn name! If I'm just like everybody else, then who gives a damn *what* my name is."

My heart pounded, my lungs gasped. I turned to face a sidewalk that was covered with cracks. Every step I took away from her seemed to land on one. Yet somehow, the ground didn't give way. With all the weight I carried, it didn't give way.

When I got to the first intersection, the walk sign turned into a halting hand. It flashed. And it flashed. And it flashed. I glanced back at Abby, still standing there on the steps, her hands clutching the railing.

I wanted to go back. I wanted to apologize. I wanted to convince her that I wasn't like the others. That as long as she opened newspapers to box scores and arranged my food into happy faces, that I could be the one who was patient. The one who understood.

Her lips cracked a smile, a sight that I always fell for. And it was then I realized: *that* was the crack that would give way. It'd open up to words, ones that would lure me in until they were close enough to turn on me, puncture me, dig into me. Words that would, in the end, treat me the same way that they treated everyone else no matter how much more than them I wanted to be.

I glanced at the intersection's halting hand, and it stopped flashing. A firm bright orange hand telling me to stop. I looked at the line of cars inching forward, anticipating the green light. And right when the light turned, I dashed in front of the cars, barely making it across the road. A road that I'd never cross again.