

# Byron & Valerie

## SAMPLE

Written by N. E. Fletcher

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Erotic Romance – Mature Audiences Only

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"Manners is like money. Don't waste it."

-Casey M. Lewis

"There is never a place for true love. It happens  
accidentally, in a heart-beat, in a single  
flashing, throbbing moment,"

-The Truth About Forever by Sarah Dessen

**Thursday, July 3, 2014**

I am high on happy and sore as hell. I can't stop smiling and blushing! If only my coworkers knew what I was thinking. Christ. I frown. I'm sleeping with our boss. Oh yeah. That'd be . . . peculiar to them, I guess. Completely against company policy. They'd probably think I'm a harlot or something. It's not even like that. When did I even fall in love with this man? It happened so fast I didn't even realize what was happening.

"I want you sore," I remember Byron whispering in my ear last night, "So you can always remember I was here."

*Oh.* He has a way with words.

"Valerie."

I jump, blinking, "Hi, Jack."

"You look beautiful."

"Thank you."

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"How are you? You've been kind of MIA lately."

"I'm well. Thanks. Just getting some stuff done."

Does he believe that *lie*?

"Up for lunch?"

"Um . . . sure."

"Cool," he grins.

Suddenly, I look up and see Byron on the other side of the room. He's watching me. Does he keep tabs on me when I'm here? What the hell? But beside him is Rose. Oh. I look away at my work. What the hell is *she* doing here? Christ, she's really freaking attractive too. Is he seeing her? He can't be seeing her. He can't. Are me and him an item? He did say once that he didn't do relationships. Does that still apply? Am I just another notch in his belt? I frown, running my hand through my hair. Here go the insecurities and doubts. There must be a valid explanation for what she's doing here. What should I really think of her being here?

"Val?"

"Hmm?"

"What time should we do lunch?"

"12-12:30 is good," I say quietly.

"Ok. Do you need help with those?"

"Please."

He helps me carry them pass the couple with another glance in their direction.

My mind still reels about Byron and Rose after lunch with Jack. I know she's more attractive, sexier, richer. All those things that I am not, things I cannot help. I can't take it. I have to confront him about it. I have to talk to him about it. I make my way to the elevator and press the button for his floor. A few people come on and exit before I reach the high floor. I am about to step out to head to Byron's office when I come face to face with another one of my nightmares. I am rooted in spot, my finger hovering over the down button. It all happens so fast: Byron and Rose murmuring before they hug, pulling apart a little bit just to—I turn around, hiding in the elevator before I press the button repeatedly. I don't know how to feel. Downstairs I grab my things and head out, straight home.

I mean, what the hell did I expect? A bachelor like that wanting me? Of course, he sleeps with me and just moves on to the next. I head straight to my room and slam my room at home like an angry, errant child. *Idiot*. What an idiot! I'm an idiot!

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"Mommy?"

"Valerie?"

"I just need a minute, please," I say quietly.

"Ok," Claire says, and I hear her talking to Peyton.

"But I want Mommy. *Mommy!*"

I wipe my tears before I go to the door to open it,

"Hey baby," I pick her up.

Claire narrows her eyes at me. I shake my head and mouth a 'later.' After Peyton decides she doesn't want to be with me anymore, I sit with Claire and tell her everything. I wipe my cheeks as I cry.

"You're overthinking things."

"I don't know. But I know what I saw."

"Are you—do you love him?"

I blink at her. Oh. I flush. I'll have to say that out loud now, huh?

"I am. I do," I say.

"But I'm pretty sure he feels the same."

"I think he said he doesn't do relationships. But that was so long ago, and now I'm unsure where we stand. I mean, what are we even *doing?*"

"Let him know how you feel. Talk about your feelings."

"I'm not about to—no!"

"How else would you approach this?"

"Um, I would avoid situations such as these altogether."

"Yeah, that's why you've been single all this while."

"And not heartbroken, I mean—is it healthy that my chest feels so hollow?"

She rolls her eyes, "Valerie, please."

I throw myself across the couch dramatically. Am I overreacting? Or are my feelings warranted? Why was he hugging her? There's no excuse for that. He said I was only his. He should be mine only, and I don't want him hugging another woman.

"When you feel better, I want to tell you something."

I turn my head to look at her, "Hmm?"

"I have a visitor coming."

I raise an eyebrow, sitting up, "Visitor?"

"A man."

"You like someone?"

This is rare.

"Rodney."

"Oh," I smile, "You mentioned him before. You really like him."

"I do."

"Is he the one?"

"Not yet. I don't know."

"Hmm."



She smiles, "But I'll settle down eventually."

## **Saturday, July 5, 2014**

I have refused all of Byron's calls since Thursday. We were supposed to have a fun barbecue yesterday, and I just couldn't be around him with the thoughts I have going on in my head. I had Claire explain why I was angry, and he is to stay away from me for a couple of days, maybe weeks, so that we can think about this. I know it's not very mature, but the way my feelings are array, it's hard keeping up. So I've distanced myself at least--so I can think about it. He is a threat to my heart, and I must be careful, no matter how good the sex is. Plus, Peyton has grown incredibly attached to him, and I fear that if this ends badly, she will be hurt too, and I want to avoid that as much as possible. "Peyton, eat up," Claire says.

"Where's my daddy?"

What? Both Claire and I pause. What!? A chill runs down my spine. Oh, you don't have a daddy, Peyton!

"You don't have one," I say.

Claire shakes her head at me.

"Yes, I do. Everyone has a Daddy, Mommy."

"Peyton--

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"Byron is my Daddy. He's nice to me and buys me things and tucks me into bed and brushes my hair and calls me princess. Plus, he likes you and Aunt Claire."

I blink at her as my heart bleeds. I have nothing to say. Claire stares at Peyton with a terrified look on her face. I leave the room. What will I tell her when she grows up? She has no father, dammit. No monster will ever have a claim over my child. She has no father, and that's that! Everything is so difficult surrounding Peyton's birth, and I wish it weren't.

When the doorbell rings, I go back downstairs. Oh. My. Lord.

Rodney Chambers is tall, dark, and absolutely delicious. He's no Byron Shaw, but he's a sight for sore eyes. He has jet black hair against his dark, beautiful skin; he is polite and attentive with impeccable manners. He and Claire can't keep their hands off each other. Appropriately in front of Peyton, of course.

After breakfast, the four of us leave for a trip to the park. It's a lovely day out, with people still coming down from their Fourth of July high. It's a fantastic day out for riding. Rodney and I sit on the park bench as Claire brings Peyton around on her bike. Rodney and I make small talk. I realize how much easier

it is to converse with the opposite sex when you know a bit more about the opposite sex. He seems so cool too. I like him. He's very easy to talk to, and he's playful.

"What do you do?" He asks as Claire heads off to the restroom.

"Insurance builder. With this company not far from here. You?"

"I'm in law school right now. I work at my father's firm, though."

"Oh. How do you like that?"

He makes a face, and I laugh, "You know. It's . . . ok!"

"OK!? Just ok!?" I laugh out loud.

He laughs, "Yep," he looks up suddenly and pauses, so I turn too to see what he's looking at.

"Good afternoon."

Byron! *What the fuck?*

"Hello," smiles Rodney politely.

Byron narrows his eyes at Rodney before narrowing them at me, and I imagine what he's thinking. Ugh! It's not what it looks like! He's not even my type! He's a poster boy, for Christ's sake! Not that Byron isn't, but he's a little rougher around the edges, and I love that about him. I bite my tongue. *Lovely* direction my

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mind is heading in. I stand, and so does Rodney.

Byron's expression changes to one of hostility.

He's *pissed*, "Where is Peyton?" He looks around, worry etched on his face. But when he glimpses her, his face visibly relaxes. Then he turns back to Rodney, "Who are you?"

"Byron," I glare. Jeez, he's so rude, "This is Claire's boyfriend."

"Hmm," he says, "Oh."

"Oh," I roll my eyes, "Byron, this is Rodney, Rodney, this is Byron, my fr-

*Boyfriend.*"

"Friend," I correct.

"Byron!" Peyton rides up to us with Claire by her side.

Claire looks at me. Peyton hurries off the bike and into Byron's arms. "Mr. Rodney, this is my daddy."

I blanch, wanting the earth to open up and swallow me whole. I flush because I can't look at Byron. It's awkwardly silent for four seconds.

"Of course, I am; who else will be?"

I only hear the smile in Byron's voice.

"Are you still angry at me?"

"A little yes," I mumble and flush.

Hopefully, he doesn't know why I've softened my attitude towards him.

"A little?"

I shrug, "Boyfriend?"

"It was a pissing contest. I just said that to claim my territory."

"I don't belong to you."

"Agree to disagree."

"I'm not your property."

"Ok," he moves around the room, "So what about Rose makes you feel threatened?"

Oh, he's getting right to the point of his visit.

"Except for obvious reasons?"

"Obvious reasons?" He says absentmindedly. He snatches a piece of candy from the candy bowl, "What obvious reasons?"

"She's prettier, sexier . . . richer."

"That's what you think?"

"She is . . . all of these things," he says nothing,

"Did you sleep with her?"

"When?"

"When!? You did?" I get to my feet.

His eyes follow me, "Yes, when?"

He seems calm, and I am not calm.

"Yesterday," I stare at him.

"I did."

I refrain from pulling my hair from the follicles. I can't; I can't! Why would I even want to do this?

"How am I supposed to—I thought—Why did you sleep with her? I thought we were . . . something."

He stares at me, gauging my reactions, "I don't know. It just happened. I thought that I might try something."

He is so nonchalant.

"And how am I supposed to feel about this? What about me?"

"It was meaningless. I was making a point."

"And with me? Was that meaningless?"

"No, not at all. You're upset."

"Of course, I'm upset, Byron!"

"We haven't made it official yet, and I was—"

"Official? We fucked!"

"Valerie—"

"Don't touch me, please. Honestly."

He sighs, "I was being honest. I should have said I didn't sleep with her."

I pace the room now. Ok. Do I lay ground rules? Do I let this go? Will he do this again? Of course, he will; if he wants to, nothing is stopping him. Fine. I need

to go to bed; I have a headache. He hasn't even apologized. He doesn't have to, does he?

"Do you love her?"

"No, I don't."

*Do you love me?*

"Ok."

"Valerie I—

I shift from his grasp. I just think we have to be apart right now. I have confusing feelings about this. I want to be upset with him because I thought it was just us, doing our thing and taking it at our own pace, but then I don't want this to be a big deal because we never sat down and established that we were only for each other. But then again, isn't that supposed to be implied? I sigh. I hate this.

"I'm gonna go; I have work to do at home."

"Fine," I get up from the kitchen table to walk him out.

"Night," he says when he turns at the door, "Please don't be upset. I—

"Goodnight."

He sighs, "Are we going to be adults about this, please?"

"Your excuse is that we didn't make it official?"

"It's not an excuse."

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"How am I supposed to be ok with you sleeping with other women?"

"I'm not yours."

I glare at him, "Fine. Then I certainly don't belong to you," I slam the door in his face. *Bastard*. I hate him. Wasn't he the one chasing me? When did that change?

### **Thursday, July 17, 2014**

"You're being such a stranger," Jack smiles.

"Me? It's just been a long week."

The elevator dings and Jack steps aside, "After you, beautiful."

I flush, and my eyes widen as I notice who's also in the elevator. Byron. I haven't seen or spoken to him since Saturday. He calls to talk to Peyton, but I refuse to speak to him. I hate him. What he did was wrong, and he refuses to acknowledge that he hurt me. His excuse is that I was pushing him away, and he didn't know if I wanted to commit, so he wasn't committing either. I mean, I was scared, but at least I didn't step out!

"Mr. Shaw," I mumble as I step in. He just nods at both Jack and I. *Asshole*.



"How about Saturday? I can take you and Peyton for ice cream. Or if you'd prefer dinner."

"Um . . ." We're not even alone. Byron is right here! How is he so cool with this!? "Are you asking me out?"

"Sure."

So blunt!

"We should have this conversation elsewhere, Jack. Please."

I see Byron is well interested in our conversation, even though he might act like he's not.

"I'll call. What's your number?"

"Here. I'll take yours." I let him put it on my phone then he moves to touch a button on the elevator. It stops.

"I'm meeting a friend," he mumbles, then kisses my cheek softly, "I'll see you tomorrow."

Kill me! He did not just do that! But maybe I should be glad about it. To show Shaw that he's not the only man in the world. I say nothing more as he leaves, and Byron and I are the only ones left. He says absolutely nothing to me, and I want to cry because it tears at my heart. He really doesn't give a shit about my feelings. I thought he did. After all the back and forth between us? When did we get here?

As soon as the elevator opens, I hurry out to my car and start crying. This sucks! How did I end up with this end of the stick!? But I always get this end. I should have known that this was how this would end. It always ends badly for me; I should have known.

### **Saturday, July 19, 2014**

"I can't make it today," Jack says when I ask about our plans.

Oh, thank God!

I feign interest, "Why not?"

"The executives want me to attend a business trip in Europe; I'm surprised myself it's so last minute."

"Oh well, go! That sounds exciting."

"Yeah. But are you sure you're ok? I'm missing our date."

Date?

"I'll be fine."

"Maybe next time."

Maybe *not*. I most certainly will not be doing this with another man. *Nope*. My heart is again currently recovering from what a man did to it.

"Yeah . . . next time."

"Ok, I have to go."

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"Of course. Enjoy your trip."

The doorbell rings.

"Yeah. Thanks."

I hang up the phone and head downstairs. I realize Peyton has opened the door.

"Peyton!" She's in Byron's arms. I pause, "What did I tell you about opening the door!?"

"But it's Byron, Mommy."

"Go to your room. You're on time out. You *never* ever open the door. *Ever!*"

"No, Mommy!" She starts to cry.

"It's OK," Byron says, "You'll be fine," Byron sets her down.

"Don't leave Byron, please."

"Alright," he says, then she turns and runs up the stairs.

I fold my arms across my chest, "What are you doing here?"

"I wanted to come by. Where's Claire?"

"She's gone out with Rodney."

"Can I come in?"

"It's your condo," I mumble.

"Hmm."

I step aside to let him come in, and we walk to the kitchen.

"Something to drink?"

I might as well be polite.

"Hard liquor sounds good right now."

"Vodka?"

"Please," he sits around the island. His eyes follow me as I get a glass and the bottle so I can pour him some of what he's requested.

"Anything else?"

"Nope. Thanks."

"Yeah," I mumble. He sips the liquor, "Why are you here?"

He smiles, "Many reasons."

"Is something funny, Byron? Because your smug attitude is really fucking pissing me off."

He frowns, "What the fuck is your problem?"

"My problem? What kind of asshole thinks it's ok to screw their ex when they're with someone else!?"

"Is that why you've been ignoring me for a week? I apologized. I told you it meant absolutely nothing. It happened quick, and there really wasn't any thought behind it."

I hiss my teeth.

Honestly?

We are quiet for a while.

"What happened to your date tonight?" He asks after a while.

*What?*

"It got canceled."

"Oh. Do you like that guy?"

"Um. He's my friend. Yeah. He's really sweet to me."

"Do I need to fire him?"

"What? Why would you do that?"

"I can and I will if I have to."

"If you have to . . . he's a good employee . . . did you send him on the trip?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Because I can."

"Because of me." He sips the liquid. You're kidding!

"So it's ok that you fuck other women, but I can't even go out with a friend! You're so fucked up!"

"I regret it, ok!? Honest to God, one hundred percent. I regret it! Why are you tripping Valerie?"

Is he kidding? I hiss my teeth, turning away from him. Whatever. Fuck this. It doesn't matter because we're over--if we ever were a thing.

"Do you love him?"

"Don't be ridiculous; he's been my friend for years."

"But you're agreeing to go on dates with him."

"Byron, he's my friend."

He raises an eyebrow and then finishes his vodka. He disposes of the glass, brushing against me, and I feel it down there. My throat closes up. Don't cry, don't cry. Who would have thought this is the emotion his touch elicits? He smells good, too. I blink.

"You should go," I say quietly.

"Why?"

Because I hate you right now.

"Because . . ."

Because my body seems to want to betray me even though I'm angry at you.

"Peyton has asked me not to leave."

Great excuse.

"Why are you at my place, Byron?"

"I—

"Don't want to spend the night with Rose?"

"No, actually," he says softly, pinning me in the kitchen corner. My heart is in my throat. Why does my body crave him? He's so bad for me. He's bound to hurt me. "I came to ask for something," he cups my cheeks. I try to pull from his grasp, but he holds me firm. What does he want from me? His scent makes my eyes flutter, and at this moment, I swear I'd give him everything he asked for. His hands travel down and around my body to

my ass, and he kisses me. He tastes sweet, and his lips are so soft. I grab him and lock my hands around his neck and my fingers into his hair. If this is to be our last kiss, let's make it memorable.

"Mommy!?"

Byron and I pull apart, just our lips, though. Our arms are still wrapped around each other.

"Yes!" My voice cracks, and I clear my throat, "Yes, baby?"

"Where's Byron, Mommy? Can I come down?"

"Sure, sweetie," I step away from Byron as Peyton walks into the kitchen. She's in her nightgown with her teddy bear.

"You changed?"

"Yes," she goes to Byron.

"I'm sleepy, daddy," she rests her head on his shoulder.

"Come on, I'll tuck you in," Byron says gently.

We head upstairs to her room, where Byron takes his time to tuck her in and read her a story. I watch them from the doorway talking about the book in hushed tones. She's gotten so attached to him, and it worries me constantly. Calling him *daddy*? Argh! It's bad. It's so bad. If Byron and I won't work, she will be devastated, and I don't want that to happen. This has

to stop, I think. When they're done, he kisses her forehead, and we head back out the room, pulling the door to a close.

"We should just be friends," I mumble when we stop in the hallway.

"Friends?" He smiles a little.

I swear to Christ, I'll slap that stupid smirk off his gorgeous ass face.

"Yes. It's—Peyton—I don't want her to get hurt. She's completely smitten with you."

"And I her. She's very easy to love."

How come you don't love me!?

"I know."

"Are you sure this is what you want?"

"Yes," I swallow.

"Ok. I'll stay away."

"Thank you."

I try not to be disappointed that he doesn't fight this.

Byron kisses my forehead softly at the front door,

"Goodbye."

"Bye," I say quietly and watch him leave.

I stand at the door for thirty whole minutes before I start crying. Again. I love that man, but it's too dangerous for Peyton and me. Claire comes home an hour



later and finds me drinking in the kitchen. I am a little tipsy, and she has to assist me to bed.

"Let me talk to him."

"No, Claire, please. It's just—  
I sigh.

"You cry every day. *Everyday* nonstop. When did you start crying so much . . . over a *man!*?"

"He's just—made an impact on my life—a very significant one. I mean, he's the first man since college that I let in. I'm just worried because he doesn't seem to feel the same about me."

"I don't think that's true, Valerie. Do you two even talk?"

"It's whatever. I hate this. I don't want to do this anymore. I hate that I've let myself fall in love with a man completely out of my league."

"He's not out of your league."

"What can I offer him, Claire, except problems and stress? And I have a whole kid."

"You're so insecure, Valerie; you don't even understand how amazing you are."

I bury my face in the pillow. Blah blah blah, let the darkness take me now, please.

"Ugh, just get some rest."

"Hmm," is all I say and turn to stare at the wall.

I wish my mind weren't racing so much, and I could get some peace to sleep. I feel it when Claire gets up from the bed and hear when she closes the door gently. I lay in the dark, trying hard to shut down. Nothing. I close my eyes and let myself believe. What if things were different? What if I had met Byron back in college? Oh, I would have loved that. I'd give everything to just have him without complications or years of emotional pain. I sigh. Whatever.

I'm not sure how long I'm lying here thinking up things that will never happen, but I suddenly hear the commotion outside my door. Is Peyton up? Why would she be? It's way past her bedtime.

I sigh and sit up as someone opens my door.

Byron!? What the hell? He switches on the light. I wipe at my cheeks as I notice he's in a different set of clothing and his hair is wet. He's really quite handsome. It's annoying.

"What are you doing here?" I sniffle.

"Claire called. She said you were upset and crying and that I was the reason," he closes the room door and comes over to sit on the bed.

I flush, "I'm sorry. I told her not to call."

"Why don't you just be honest with me?"

"I am honest with you."

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"You're not."

"What exactly did Claire say?"

"Valerie, you literally just told me hours ago to get the fuck out and that you didn't want me in here. And now your best friend is blowing up my phone telling me *I'm* the one pushing *you* away."

"What does it matter what I say to you? You don't do relationships."

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"You said that you didn't do relationships, and I wonder what kind of a future we might have together if you never claim me. You slept with someone else so quickly, for Christ's sake."

"Claim you?"

"Byron, stop looking at me like I'm crazy or I'm going to slap you."

He takes a deep breath, "Let's start at the beginning."

"Fine."

He brushes a thumb across my tear-stained cheeks, "You want me?"

I flush. Damn, just like that?

"Do you want me?"

"I thought we were moving pass the games?"

"Yes . . . I want you."

"Then, why did you tell me earlier that you didn't want to see me again?"

"Because I'm scared you don't—feel the same way I feel about you."

"But I bet I do."

"How come you slept with Rose?"

"I was experimenting."

"*Experimenting!?*"

"It meant nothing. I want you. I've wanted you since the very first moment. Especially that day when you cursed me out in your office."

"You told me days ago that I do not belong to you; who says that? And then ignoring me days after? Not talking to me in the elevator?"

"Honestly, I was pushing your buttons when I said that, and I was definitely pushing your buttons ignoring you and your little boyfriend in the elevator, but I didn't know you'd turn into an emotional rollercoaster of mess."

"This isn't funny, Byron! That's not mature."

"I'm not trying to be funny."

"You are emotionally abusing me!"

"Valerie," he breathes, frowning.

"I mean," I burst into tears, "What is happening? I thought you *wanted* me!?"

"Valerie," he scoots closer to me, wrapping his arms around me.

"After everything we discussed, and I told you I didn't want to do this shit. I don't want to feel this way," I sob.

"I'm sorry, Val, I really am. But you don't communicate with me; you just come at me angrily, throwing accusations around."

"What accusations? You admitted you slept with your ex!" I push him away.

"Horrible judgment on my part," he sighs, "I mean that. It was an in-the-moment thing and--"

"It won't happen again?"

"It will never happen again."

"Do you want me?"

"I have wanted you since I saw you. I swear."

"Then why are you being so cavalier about hurting my feelings?"

He opens his mouth to say something but then closes it,

"I--" Byron blinks, "I didn't know I was. I'm very sorry. You yell a lot; I'm not too fond of it when you yell at me. It makes me not want to talk. That's why when you come at me a certain way, I just don't answer."

"And you couldn't have just *said* that?"

"I should have; I apologize. But again, not something I've ever had to deal with."

"Do you think it makes me feel good that you slept with me and then started acting differently?"

"Valerie--"

"No, seriously! Because you had me in my head and *everything!*"

"I'm an idiot. You keep throwing these things in my face; all I can do is apologize and make sure it never happens again."

"God!" I sob; I hate being emotional.

"Why did you tell me you only wanted to be friends?"

"Because you don't seem to want what I want, and even though I said that you didn't even fight it, you just left."

"You kicked me out, Val, and it seemed like you meant it. And I wasn't going to fight you on it."

"You should always fight Byron."

"Fine, I'll know not to take you seriously next time."

"It's not just taking me seriously, I told you to get out, and you didn't fight me? You didn't think about how a decision like that would affect Peyton? I don't want to hurt Peyton Byron. I won't put her through that, so it's either you are going or coming."

"I'm coming," he says simply.

"And if that is such an easy decision, what's been up these past few weeks?"

"I don't know, Val; you blew up on me and then started to ignore me, so I thought I'd give you your space."

"I didn't want space; I wanted you to tell me things I wanted to hear."

"Like?"

"Like, you love me because I love you, Byron."

"You mean the world to me, Valerie," he says before kidding my forehead, "And when I said I didn't do relationships, I didn't know that you would make me want a relationship."

"I was so scared that one day you would decide that you didn't want me anymore."

"Never," he pulls me close.

I take a deep breath. I feel as if a weight has been lifted from my shoulders. "I am only yours."

"I am only yours," he repeats, and I believe him.

"And Peyton . . ."

"What about Peyton?"

"She thinks you're her dad."

"I know."

"I'm sorry."

"You don't need to be sorry. I am flattered. She's a wonderful kid, and I have no problem owning up to that role. She's mine as far as I'm concerned."

"Are you done experimenting?" I pull away to look at him.

"I am only yours. Scout's honor," he smiles a little.

"Scout's honor," I say dryly and roll my eyes.

He chuckles, "Valerie when you want something from me, all you have to do is ask."

"Tell me you love me."

He smiles, "I am yours as long as you want me, Valerie."

"You're deflecting. Use the 'L' word."

"You want me to tell you I love you?"

"I just said that."

"And if I don't mean it?"

"Mean it. Lie."

He chuckles, "I want it to be completely true without faults when I say it, Valerie."

"It's just a word."

"If it is, then you wouldn't want me to say it so bad," I huff, "Will you give me time? Please. I might not deserve it, but I'm asking. That way, when I'm ready, I won't disappoint you. I do not doubt my feelings for you, but there's just something about that word . . ."



"It's harmless."

"It's not," he brushes my hair back, "Otherwise, I wouldn't feel the way I do when I look at you."

My heart warms, "Will you stick around?"

"Nothing will ever tear us apart again. Not even you."

"You promise?"

"I promise. Can I stay the night?"

"I'd be upset if you didn't."

He gets off the bed to strip down to his boxers before he comes under the sheet to spoon with me. He wraps his arms around me.

"A relationship will never work if you don't communicate. Please don't hesitate to talk to me."

"OK."