

*Dear Chloe,  
I have to go away. I love  
you, and if you love me  
in return you won't look  
for me.  
Love, Ward*



# ***Looking For Ward***

## ***Looking For Ward***

An E-Novella

By Laurel Osterkamp  
author of *Following My Toes*  
[www.laurelosterkamp.com](http://www.laurelosterkamp.com)

To: [bethanyjones45@hotmail.com](mailto:bethanyjones45@hotmail.com)  
From: [chloelanglely@origingifts.biz](mailto:chloelanglely@origingifts.biz)  
Date: March 1, 2007  
Subject: Something weird has happened  
Hey Bethany...



I need your help. You need to tell me I'm freaking out over nothing. I'm having a day that can only be described as crunchy, like when you think you're getting a smooth PB&J, but you bite into it and there are all these unwanted chunks. Everything I do, think, feel, or see is just *off* and it scares me.

Why, you may ask.

Well, this morning my entire world was flipped upside down like the losing side in a coin toss.

I'll elaborate.

Last night Ward came over, we had dinner and talked about the wedding. He seems to forget that it's in a month, and I wanted to figure out the seating chart and talk about our vows. So I made Chicken Kiev and opened a bottle of wine, and soon things were finer than Hugh Jackman in a wet t-shirt. Afterwards we watched CSI and went to bed (although we didn't go to sleep, wink, wink, for sometime after). This morning he got up, took a shower, kissed me on the cheek, and said he'd call me later.

So I went to work. The store needs to be restocked, but I was in a lazy mood and things were slow, so I wasn't doing much – except checking my e-mail. My mom still e-mails a kazillion times a day about the wedding. ANYWAY, at about 10 am, Ward sends me this (I cut & pasted):

Chloe,

I have to go away. I'll explain later, but I'm not sure when that will be. I love you, and if you love me in return you'll let me have this time, and you WON'T look for me. If you do decide to track me down, I won't come back at all.

Please forgive me, and know I'll be thinking of you constantly.

Love,

Ward

I e-mailed back, but there's no response. I called his cell, same thing. Then I called his work, and they said he hasn't come in today, and he doesn't have any clients booked for the NEXT MONTH! He's the most popular personal trainer at the Y, so can that be?

Maybe this is a joke? If so - not funny! I mean, obviously the wedding means more to me than it does to Ward, but I would hope the marriage is important to him. And if he has a

problem, why wouldn't he say something instead of just sending a cryptic e-mail? I really don't get it.

Unless he's in danger? Or something terrible has happened? But who would want to harm Ward, and what terrible thing could happen that he wouldn't be able to tell me about? True, he's always been an enigma of sorts; do you think this could have something to do with how he spends his mysterious Saturdays?

Please write back and tell me I'm over-reacting. Say that everything is going to be okay, and Ward is just having a moment of kookiness that will disappear soon.

Thanks...

Love,

Chloe.

To: [bethanyjones45@hotmail.com](mailto:bethanyjones45@hotmail.com)

From: [chloelanglely@origingifts.biz](mailto:chloelanglely@origingifts.biz)

Date: March 2, 2007

Subject: Continued Confusion

Bethany –

It was tremendous to talk to you last night! With the two hour time difference it's so hard to coordinate phone chats, and I appreciate that you called. You really made me feel better. And I'm sure you're right that Ward just has pre-wedding jitters, and I'm going to do what you said and try not to worry about it. I decided I'm not going to mention this to anyone (other than you). I mean, my parents have already dropped THOUSANDS on this wedding, and at this point, most of it is nonrefundable anyway – thirty days notice and all. Besides, Ward will be back soon, so there's no need to say anything. He's got to be back soon, because there is just no other option.

But I haven't heard from him yet.

As soon as our conversation was over though, my phone rang. Of course I was hoping it was Ward, but it was Owen. Uhg. I could describe our conversation, but it's better to just recount it to the best of my memory:

Owen: I need to speak to Ward.

Me: He's not here.

Owen: Well where is he?

Me: I don't know.

Owen: He's not at work, or at home. I tried his cell too. I haven't been able to get a hold of him all day.

Me: What do you need to talk to him about?

Owen: Umm... Shouldn't you be a little more concerned about Ward's disappearance?

Me: Disappearance? What makes you think he's disappeared?

Owen: Umm...because he's nowhere to be found. Look, if you hear from him, tell him to call me, okay?

Me: ( in a resigned voice) Sure.

Click! Dial tone. Sound of fury raging in my ears.

He can be so rude! No goodbye, no thank you, and certainly no "How are you, Chloe?" You would think as Ward's best man that he could at least pretend to like me. I suppose given our history that's too much ask. But come on, it was years ago! Ward's forgiven me, so I don't see why Owen can't. His attitude should have been adjusted a long time ago.

Sigh.

Okay, I really should start on inventory. I'm already behind on stocking the cucumber soap (huge seller), and this afternoon I have to go sign the contract with the videographer. Ward was wondering if we really need our wedding filmed, and I was like, are you serious? The day will go by in such a blur, we'll want to relive it any way we can. That is, assuming of course that the day actually happens.

I'll e-mail you as soon as Ward resurfaces, which better be sometime today.

Take care, and have a great day.

I wonder what Owen needed to talk to Ward about?

-Chloe

To: [chloelanglely@origingifts.biz](mailto:chloelanglely@origingifts.biz)

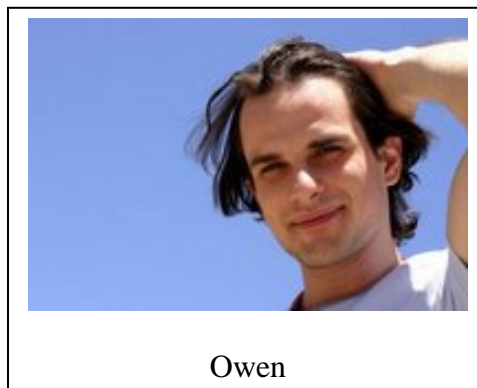
From: [owenphilps@yahoo.com](mailto:owenphilps@yahoo.com)

Date: March 3 2007

Subject: Ward

Chloe,

I need to talk to Ward. It's important. Still can't get a hold of him. Should I be worried?



To: [owenphilps@yahoo.com](mailto:owenphilps@yahoo.com)  
From: [chloelanglely@origingifts.biz](mailto:chloelanglely@origingifts.biz)  
Date: March 3 2007  
Subject: Re: Ward

Owen –

No, no worries. But about Ward – he has been acting weird lately. He's been so busy, especially on Saturdays, but he's vague about what he's up to. It's not that I don't trust him... of course I do. But truth is, I'm not sure what is up with him. So I'm curious what you need to talk to him about. Does it have anything to do with the wedding? Or me? Would you tell me if there was something I ought to know?

To: [chloelanglely@origingifts.biz](mailto:chloelanglely@origingifts.biz)  
From: [owenphilps@yahoo.com](mailto:owenphilps@yahoo.com)  
Date: March 3 2007  
Subject: Re: Ward

Chloe,

Honestly, no, I wouldn't tell you. You say I shouldn't be worried. Do you know where he is? When was the last time you saw/spoke to him?

To: [owenphilps@yahoo.com](mailto:owenphilps@yahoo.com)  
From: [chloelanglely@origingifts.biz](mailto:chloelanglely@origingifts.biz)  
Date: March 3 2007  
Subject: Re: Ward

Owen –

Of course I know where my fiancée is! He just seems to be going through something weird right now. It's like he's not even interested in talking to anyone and I don't know why. But I think you should just back off and give him some space. For real. I mean, I understand that you can't (or don't want to) help me. But I think you should respect Ward's wishes and not force the issue. Just tell me what you need him to know and I'll make sure he gets the message.

To: [chloelanglely@origingifts.biz](mailto:chloelanglely@origingifts.biz)  
From: [owenphilps@yahoo.com](mailto:owenphilps@yahoo.com)  
Date: March 3 2007  
Subject: Re: Ward

Chloe,

I never thought that "controlling" was among your many flaws. If WARD tells me to back off, I will. Where is he?

To: [owenphilps@yahoo.com](mailto:owenphilps@yahoo.com)  
From: [chloelanglely@origingifts.biz](mailto:chloelanglely@origingifts.biz)  
Date: March 3 2007  
Subject: Re: Ward  
Owen –  
I'll tell Ward to give you a call.  
Adios, Owen.

To: [bethanyjones45@hotmail.com](mailto:bethanyjones45@hotmail.com)  
From: [chloelanglely@origingifts.biz](mailto:chloelanglely@origingifts.biz)  
Date: March 3 2007  
(Forward) Subject: Re: Ward

Bethany –  
Can you believe him? I'd like to smack him upside the head.  
Who does he think he is?  
I know. I know.  
You're probably thinking I should have told Owen the truth.  
But if I did that, then he would have insisted on filing a  
missing person report. And Ward said not to look for him,  
and I'd sort of like him to come back some day. The thing  
about Ward is, he doesn't make empty threats. I have to  
assume he's okay. If there was some sort of trouble why  
wouldn't he have given a clue in his e-mail? You know,  
like "When I get back we'll go out for clams." If he had put  
that in I'd know something was up, since he HATES clams.  
That would have been a red flag, blaring alarm bell telling  
me something is wrong. But there was nothing like that.  
So I have to believe that Ward is fine, that he'll be back  
soon, and that there is a reasonable explanation for all of  
this.  
But Owen wouldn't get it. He'd insist on looking for him,  
and that would ruin everything.  
I just don't know how much longer I can keep this up.

-Chloe

P.S.  
Have you gotten your bridesmaid dress altered yet? I hate to  
nag you, but there is always the possibility that you'll need  
them to make more changes after your first fitting. Don't  
leave it till the last minute!



To: [bethanyjones45@hotmail.com](mailto:bethanyjones45@hotmail.com)  
From: [chloelanglely@origingifts.biz](mailto:chloelanglely@origingifts.biz)  
Date: March 4 2007  
Subject: Sunday dinner

Bethany –

I had to lie to my parents today. After everything they've done for me, I feel guilty just sneezing in their presence. But today I lied – and I told myself it was for their own good. If had done anything other than pretend that everything was just peachy then they would worry about me. And honestly, at this point, worry is a futile emotion.

So needless to say, there has been no word from Ward. By now I'm so angry I ought to be foaming at the mouth. The only reason I am not is because from time to time I experience moments of panic that either he's in danger, or that he'll never come back and my life will be ruined. This plunges me into despair and I forget about my anger for a moment. But then I am forced to endure things like Sunday dinner, and I remember how angry I am.

Do I sound hyperbolic? Believe me, I am not exaggerating my situation in the least. If you had been at dinner today, you'd know what I mean. So about that - rather than go into all the gory detail, I'm simply going to give you Chloe's list of the top five terrible things about dinner (in descending order):

5. My father was disappointed that Ward wasn't there because he had finished restoring the Porsche and he couldn't wait to show it off. The look on his face, when he discovered Ward wasn't coming, reminded me of Papa fish losing Nemo.

4. "How does Ward feel about the flower arrangements? I wish he was *here*. I hate leaving details like this up to chance." My mom said that FIVE times throughout the evening (seriously, I counted..)

3. We had broccoli and cheese as a side dish. Ward's favorite. I felt compelled to eat more to make up for his absence, and now I feel bloated.

2. "Is everything okay between the two of you? You seem a little off tonight honey."

"Everything is fine, Mom."

"You'd tell us is something was wrong, right Princess?"

"Of course I would, Dad."

Ahrgg!!

And #1 is .... Hawaii! That's right. My parents had invited us over for dinner tonight because they wanted to surprise us with tickets/hotel reservations to Hawaii. Can you believe it? They're not only shelling out for the wedding, but now they're spending what has to be thousands to send us on a first class honeymoon. I tried so hard to act thrilled, but underneath it all I was resisting the urge to visit the porcelain Goddess and pay tribute

with barely digested broccoli and cheese. I think my parents bought my act, but this is only the beginning.

I mean, Ward needs to call them and say thank you.

Bethany, do you have any advice? Should I just come clean? Tell me what to do and I'll do it. Right now all I want is to not have to think.

Gotta go. There's a knock at my door.

-Chloe

To: [chloelanglely@origingifts.biz](mailto:chloelanglely@origingifts.biz)

From: [lois\\_langlely@yahoo.com](mailto:lois_langlely@yahoo.com)

Date: March 5 2007

Subject: Flowers

Hi Hon.

I need to know what to say to the florist. Should we go with the entry-way arrangements? What about a trellis? What did you and Ward decide? I need to know because I'm meeting with her in a few hours.

Love,

Mom

To: [lois\\_langlely@yahoo.com](mailto:lois_langlely@yahoo.com)

From: [chloelanglely@origingifts.biz](mailto:chloelanglely@origingifts.biz)

Date: March 5 2005

Subject: Re: Flowers

Mom –

Let's skip the entry way flowers, but I think we should do the trellis. I've always wanted to get married underneath flowers. Just tell her to use daisies, vines, and white rosebuds.

By the way, Ward says thanks for the trip. He had to go out of town suddenly for this physical trainer convention. He'll be back in a few days.

Love you!

-Chloe

To: [chloelanglely@origingifts.biz](mailto:chloelanglely@origingifts.biz)

From: [owenphilps@yahoo.com](mailto:owenphilps@yahoo.com)

Date: March 5 2007

Subject: Last night

Chloe,

Sorry. I should have called last night before I stopped by. It was rude of me not to.

Forgive me?

Owen

To: [chloelanglely@origingifts.biz](mailto:chloelanglely@origingifts.biz)

From: [owenphilps@yahoo.com](mailto:owenphilps@yahoo.com)

Date: March 5 2007

Subject: Re. Last night

Owen –

Sure. Whatever. At this point I don't really care.

To: [bethanyjones45@hotmail.com](mailto:bethanyjones45@hotmail.com)

From: [chloelanglely@origingifts.biz](mailto:chloelanglely@origingifts.biz)

Date: March 5 2007

Subject: Owen

Hey Bethany:

You're right. I ought to let my parents know, and last night as I was writing the e-mail that you've already responded to I was ready to tell them and everyone else. Then Owen showed up. He hadn't called, and I was pretty shocked to see him. He was all, "You've got to tell me what's going on, NOW. I'm Ward's best friend and blah, blah, blah."

He had caught me when my defenses were down, so I went ahead and showed him Ward's e-mail. Just in case you forgot what it said, here it is again:

Chloe,

I have to go away. I'll explain later, but I'm not sure when that will be. I love you, and if you love me in return you'll let me have this time, and you WON'T look for me. If you do decide to track me down, I won't come back at all.

Please forgive me, and know I'll be thinking of you constantly.

Love,

Ward

So Owen says, "You're not serious. He sent this to you several days ago and you haven't told anyone? What the hell is wrong with you?"

And then I lost it. I started to cry. I'm not proud of it, and believe me, it wasn't intentional. Because honestly, if anyone WASN'T going to be seduced by tears it's Owen, who has always felt I'm this spoiled little rich girl whose Daddy bought her a store (which is only partly true) but perhaps it was because my tears were so genuine that Owen was taken in. I was babbling on and on through my tears:

"I thought he'd be back by now." And "I don't know what to do. Do you think this is his way of dumping me?" And "What if he's in danger?" And "Why won't he tell me what's going on?" And "This is all so humiliating. I don't know what I should do about the wedding." And finally – "He said not to look for him. I love him, and I thought I should honor that. That's the number one reason why I haven't told anyone. I was afraid that other people wouldn't get it."

Throughout my tearful diatribe Owen just looked at me like I was made of Saran Wrap. Finally, after I calmed down a little, he spoke.

"Chloe, I get it. I won't tell anyone else. But I do think we should look for him."

"We should look for him," I asked.

"Yeah," he said. "I'll help you."

So now I'm more confused than ever. He didn't say how we were going to look for him. He left really soon after that, and today all I've heard is an apology for stopping by last night unannounced. Weird, huh?

Like everything else about this is so normal.

By the way, I just told my mom to spend \$500 on a flowered trellis for Ward and me to get married underneath. It's actually a bargain, and it will be beautiful.

Do you think I'm in denial?

Talk to you soon...

-Chloe

To: [chloelanglely@origingifts.biz](mailto:chloelanglely@origingifts.biz)

From: [bethanyjones45@hotmail.com](mailto:bethanyjones45@hotmail.com)

March 6 2007

Subject:: Re. Owen

Chloe –

Sorry I couldn't get back to you yesterday. I had the stomach flu and it was horrific. I did go the fitting for my dress, but I'll have to go back because I probably lost a few pounds; the last couple of days I've kept absolutely nothing down. However, nannies apparently don't get sick days, because I was still expected to watch after Emily and Ernie. Too short of notice for me to have the day off, they said. I should have complained more because I expect the kids will have caught my bug and we'll all be miserable again. Plus, it will be my fault (by consensus).

Anyhow, I was glad to read that you have let Owen in on your secret. It was too much for you to bear alone, and I can't help you very much all the way from NYC. I still believe you should tell your parents but I understand why you are resisting. Perhaps you are right, and it will all turn out sunny and happy and Ward will be back soon.

But Chloe – is that what you want? You have to be just a little bit angry. Even if he's fine and there's a perfectly good explanation, think about it. He's escaping the final stages of wedding planning, leaving you in the lurch and having to cover for him as well. It's not exactly a good way to begin a marriage based off of trust and openness.

Do you remember that night back in college when we went mini-golfing? Sophomore year, I think it was. You and Ward were in some sort of a fight, and I remember you let him win. Except Owen and I weren't willing to play along, so he only came in third, with Owen in second place and me having won. I remember only because that was the first night Owen ever kissed me. I had just scored a hole in one and I was performing a little victory dance when he pulled me behind the windmill and laid one on me. You and Ward weren't even aware, because I could hear you in the background, placating Ward as he was setting up his shot. I bring it up now because I remember thinking: is this what always happens? Do we start out attracting them with our wit and success, then finish by sacrificing ourselves to boost them up?

I realize it's an unfair analogy, and we've obviously all changed since college – most of all Ward. But think about it, Chloe. Because I would hate to think that what's happening here is that you're sacrificing your own game while Ward is off playing by his own set of rules. And I wouldn't be saying this if you weren't my best friend.

So don't be mad.  
Love,  
Bethany

To: [bethanyjones45@hotmail.com](mailto:bethanyjones45@hotmail.com)  
From: [chloelanglely@origingifts.biz](mailto:chloelanglely@origingifts.biz)  
Date: March 7 2007  
Subject: Ancient History

Bethany –  
I wanted to take some time to think about your e-mail yesterday before I wrote back. Truth? Yeah, I was a little peeved after reading it. You have to realize that the Ward I dated in college and the Ward I'm engaged to now are so different that they may as well be two separate guys. Old Ward was temperamental, but new Ward has turned his anger into something else. Lately he's into stretching, meditation, and reading about Buddhism. I don't completely get it, but I'm all for it. He doesn't hardly ever seem angry anymore, just distracted from time to time.

Besides, you can't forget; Ward forgave me for cheating on him senior year. True – it took him several years to forgive me, but in a way that was sort of good. It gave us both a chance to grow up, date other people, then return to each other. Because the nittygritty of the whole thing is after Ward and I broke up, I never was able to find anyone else who I loved more.

And I'm still scared I won't be able to now. Besides, I need stability. I know I can count on Ward, or at least I always thought I could. So yeah, when he comes back I'll still want to marry him. For my own sanity I have to believe there's a good reason for all this.

Anyway, I have some news, and it's unrelated to Ward or Owen or the whole wedding biz.

I sold a bracelet to a gallery owner!

Yesterday this woman came into the store, and she started looking at my jewelry rack. And she says to me, "This stuff is lovely, but what does it have to do with organic gifts?"

I said, "Well, I started the store out as being centered around selling organic stuff," (as you know, that was Ward's idea), "but I've always loved designing jewelry, so I thought I may as well display some of it here."

And she goes, "You're a jewelry designer?"

And I say, "Well, it's really just a hobby."

Then she pulls out her card. "I'm the owner of McCall's Gallery downtown," she says. "And we're looking to display jewelry by area designers in May. Think about putting something together."

So I'm trying not to gag on my tongue and keep it together, but on the inside I'm jumping up and down and screaming in delight. She did say that they would need something a little more fancy, rather than the semi-precious stuff I use for my pieces. One more expense on top of everything else. But Bethany, she thinks I'm talented! She even said so before she left, after buying that amber bracelet I sent you a photo of last month.

Can you believe it? Now I need to get to work on something – I'm thinking garnets!

Oh, and BTW, more good news! My parents are leaving for the cabin today. They're hoping to get some last minute skiing in before the season is over, THANK GOD! They'll be gone a week. Hopefully by the time they're back Ward will be back too, and I won't have to cover for him anymore. I started to cry with relief when my mother told me. She almost cancelled the trip because she thought they were stress tears from all the wedding planning. If only she knew!

Love,  
Chloe

To: [chloelanglely@origingifts.biz](mailto:chloelanglely@origingifts.biz)  
From: [owenphilps@yahoo.com](mailto:owenphilps@yahoo.com)  
Date: March 8 2007  
Subject: the plan

Chloe,  
Hope all is well with you. I think I figured out where Ward is. Can you meet for dinner tonight?

Owen

To: [owenphilps@yahoo.com](mailto:owenphilps@yahoo.com)  
From: [chloelanglely@origingifts.biz](mailto:chloelanglely@origingifts.biz)  
Date: March 8 2007  
Subject: Re: the plan

Owen –

I can, but don't leave me in suspense. Where is he? Just tell me and we can talk about the details tonight.

-Chloe

To: [chloelanglely@origingifts.biz](mailto:chloelanglely@origingifts.biz)  
From: [owenphilps@yahoo.com](mailto:owenphilps@yahoo.com)  
Date: March 8 2007  
Subject: Re: the plan

Fine. I wanted to tell you this in person, but here it is.

Ward isn't who he says he is. I don't know how much he's told you about his childhood, but he had some tough times. One night over a few beers he confided in me, and made me promise not to tell you. I've kept my word – until now.

I've done a little research, and after thinking about it, decided I'm not doing anyone any favors by keeping quiet.

Remember that Ward loves you and does his best with you. Sometimes things are just complicated.

How about we meet at the Red Dragon, say, 7:00? I'll buy you some eggrolls and a Mai Tai.

Hasn't that always been your favorite?

Owen

To: [owenphilps@yahoo.com](mailto:owenphilps@yahoo.com)  
From: [chloelanglely@origingifts.biz](mailto:chloelanglely@origingifts.biz)  
Date: March 8 2007  
Subject: Re: the plan  
Gosh Owen –

Did you take some “nice pills” with breakfast this morning?  
You and I have been on the outs for years, ever since that thing with your brother (which, by the way, Ward has forgiven me for even though you haven’t). So now you’re going to tell me all Ward’s secrets? Now I’m supposed to believe you’re going to help save our relationship? I don’t need you to tell me that he loves me, and I do know that Ward does his best with me, just like I’m doing my best with him.

I wish I knew what you wanted from me.

To: [chloelanglely@origingifts.biz](mailto:chloelanglely@origingifts.biz)  
From: [owenphilps@yahoo.com](mailto:owenphilps@yahoo.com)  
Date: March 8 2007  
Subject: Re: the plan

I don’t want anything from you. I’m just trying to be a good friend and a decent guy. That can be hard for me, especially when I’m around difficult people.

To: [owenphilps@yahoo.com](mailto:owenphilps@yahoo.com)  
From: [chloelanglely@origingifts.biz](mailto:chloelanglely@origingifts.biz)  
Date: March 8 2007  
Subject: Re: the plan

If it’s so difficult for you, maybe you should stop trying. I wouldn’t you to bust a blood vessel in your brain, or anything other horrific self-induced injury that would lead to your tragic and untimely death.

To: [chloelanglely@origingifts.biz](mailto:chloelanglely@origingifts.biz)  
From: [owenphilps@yahoo.com](mailto:owenphilps@yahoo.com)  
Date: March 8 2007  
Subject: Re: the plan

So... you don’t want to meet at Red Dragon?

TO: [owenphilps@yahoo.com](mailto:owenphilps@yahoo.com)  
From: [chloelanglely@origingifts.biz](mailto:chloelanglely@origingifts.biz)  
Date: March 8 2007  
Subject: Re: the plan  
I'll see you at 7:00. Curiosity alone is driving me there.

-Chloe

To: [chloelanglely@origingifts.biz](mailto:chloelanglely@origingifts.biz)  
From: [rex\\_langlely@yahoo.com](mailto:rex_langlely@yahoo.com)  
Date: March 9 2007  
Subject: Insurance

Are we adding Ward onto your health insurance through the store? God knows his insurance through the Y can't be any good.

Let me know. The sooner we figure this out the better.

Dad

To: [bethanyjones45@hotmail.com](mailto:bethanyjones45@hotmail.com)  
From: [chloelanglely@origingifts.biz](mailto:chloelanglely@origingifts.biz)  
Date: March 9 2007  
Subject: Dinner with Owen

Bethany –

I feel like I've been taken over by an alien, and it's not just because I ate greasy Chinese food and drank too much last night. However, the four Mai Tais I had probably have something to do with this raging headache of mine. Ever since Owen's e-mails yesterday I've been in this kumfumbled state, and it hasn't gone away. The alcohol only made it worse.

So, here's what happened. I got to the Red Dragon last night just a little early. Traffic wasn't as bad as I had thought it would be. So I take a seat and order a Mai Tai. I was really thirsty, and they are mostly fruit juice. So the first one went down really quick. I order another one. I'm about half way through it when my cell phone rings. It's Owen, saying he's been held up, and he's going to be late (it's now about 7:15, so I'm like, you already are late!) Well, I finish the second one just as easily as I finished the first. Then the waitress brings me another. I hadn't ordered another one, but it turns out that this guy sitting at the bar did. I'm starting to feel really relaxed, so I don't mind when he comes over to talk to me.

Because, honestly, the last few days have been pretty stressful.

I don't remember much about the guy, except that he had long hair. But I'm listening to him go on about his job when Owen finally shows. I was sort of tipsy by this point, but I remember pretty clearly the look on Owen's face when he saw I was hanging out with this dude.

Okay – so his hand happened to be resting on mine. But I wasn't even aware of it until Owen's horrified face was looming in my own. Owen practically pushes the guy out of his chair, and takes a seat across from me. He doesn't say anything, but the evil eye he's throwing me says it all.

“We were just talking” I say.

“Some things never change, do they Chloe?”

By now I've finished my drink, so I say to Owen, “Where's the Mai Tai you promised me?”

Owen goes to the bar ( I don't think he realized I had already had three drinks) and brings me back another Mai Tai. Soon some eggrolls appear, and Owen is talking but I'm having trouble making sense of what he's saying. Something about Ward's childhood and his birth certificate.

Then he goes –

“So that's what I had to talk to Ward about. You can understand why he didn't want you to know.”

And I'm like, “Uh, can you repeat that?”

Owen's disgust is palpable; I can feel it despite how drunk I am. But all he says is, “Come on, I'll drive you home.”

That's sort of all I remember. The next thing I know I'm awake in my bed, drenched in sweat because I'm sleeping in my clothes, and I'm rushing to the toilet to be sick.

Luckily I made it to the bathroom.

But I have no idea what Owen told me about Ward.

And please, please, do not write back and tell me what a huge idiot I am. I already know.

-Chloe

To: [owenphilps@yahoo.com](mailto:owenphilps@yahoo.com)

From: [chloelanglely@origingifts.biz](mailto:chloelanglely@origingifts.biz)

Date: March 10 2007

Subject: Sorry

Owen –

Now I understand how Brittany Spears must have felt the night after she married that friend of hers – you know, the one she divorced right away? I mean, I understand how it feels to regret your actions and feel like you made an ass of yourself for the entire world to see. In Brittany's case, it was the entire world. In my case, it was really only you. But

that's enough. It would almost be easier if it was everyone in the world except for you. They probably wouldn't be as hard on me.

Anyway, it's been over twenty-four hours since our ill-fated meeting. My hangover is beginning to subside but my embarrassment is increasing as I'm left with these questions:

1. Did I throw up on you?
2. What happened in between my third Mai Tai and when I woke up, several hours later?
3. What did you tell me about Ward, and are you willing to repeat it all?

The answer to number three is obviously the most important. But Owen, please know that there was nothing between that guy with the long hair and me, and I really have changed since that time with your brother. I love Ward, and I'm begging you to give me another chance and tell me what you know.

PLEASE!

Love,  
Chloe

To: [chloelanglely@origingifts.biz](mailto:chloelanglely@origingifts.biz)

From: [owenphilps@yahoo.com](mailto:owenphilps@yahoo.com)

Date: March 10 2007

Subject: Re: Sorry

Chloe,

1. No you didn't throw up on me, but you did drool quite a bit. Are you a mouth breather?
2. I took you home and put you to bed. Then I left.
3. I don't really want to meet again, so here it is:

Ward has a lot of secrets. A few weeks ago he confessed some of them to me. I'm not ready to tell you all about them, but they are about his childhood. He has some issues with his parents that he needs to resolve, and he needs to deal with some of the lies he has told. In addition, there's this woman he works with at the Y. She might know stuff.

That's all I can tell you. Ward asked me to keep his secrets for him, and especially after your behavior last night, I feel compelled to.

And Chloe, please don't respond. I will look for Ward myself, and I'll let you know when I find him.

Take care...

Owen

To: [chloelanglely@origingifts.biz](mailto:chloelanglely@origingifts.biz)  
From: [bethanyjones45@hotmail.com](mailto:bethanyjones45@hotmail.com)  
March 11 2007  
Subject: Owen again

Chloe,

I've been thinking about our conversation ever since we got off the phone yesterday. I agree with you that Owen ought to tell you what he knows, but I can't really give you any tips on how to get him to do that. He can be a hard nut to crack. He's never really cared about being liked, but if *he* likes someone than he'll go to great lengths to make that person happy. I think it has to do with how badly his dad used to treat his mom; he'll do anything not to turn into his father.

Anyway, believe it or not, he likes you. I know he doesn't always show it, but he does. Don't believe me?

Several years ago, when Owen and I were still living together – and you and Ward weren't together at all - we were going to have a party, and I really wanted to invite both of you. Owen said no, it has to be one or the other. I thought that was an immature attitude, and told him so. Owen got all bent out of shape, how dare I call him immature! He just didn't want anyone to feel uncomfortable; couldn't I see that he was just looking out for everyone's feelings?

I said, "Owen, don't you think their feelings will be hurt if we don't invite both of them? How do we get around that? We just invite them both, and let them know there is a possibility that the other one will be there."

But he kept saying no, that wouldn't work.

Finally, after much argument, I lost my temper and just cried, "Well then we just won't have a party at all!"

The next day Owen told me he had an idea – we could have two parties, and invite each of you to one of them. I said, "Isn't it sort of ridiculous to have two parties, just to save them from a little bit of awkwardness, embarrassment, or hurt feelings?"

And Owen simply said, "No."

So we had two parties. I thought it was pretty silly, until I began to think of all the other times Owen has gone out of his way to avoid conflict. I realized he does it a lot, although it may not seem like it because he comes off as being kind of abrasive. But his dad's main source of entertainment is making other people feel uncomfortable; I noticed this whenever I went to their house for holidays. He liked to tease and embarrass Owen and his brother a lot, but he really picked on Owen's mother. And if ever there was a mama's boy, it's Owen. There's nothing he wouldn't do for her. More than anything, he is

intensely loyal, and if you do something to offend someone he cares about then it takes a really long time for him to forgive you. (Which as you know, is why we broke up!)

I hope that helps. Hang in there.

Love,  
Bethany

To: [chloelanglely@origingifts.biz](mailto:chloelanglely@origingifts.biz)  
From: [rex\\_langlely@yahoo.com](mailto:rex_langlely@yahoo.com)  
Date: March 11 2007  
Subject: Insurance again

You never answered my e-mail. What do you want to do about adding Owen on?

Dad

To: [rex\\_langlely@yahoo.com](mailto:rex_langlely@yahoo.com)  
From: [chloelanglely@origingifts.biz](mailto:chloelanglely@origingifts.biz)  
Date: March 11 2007  
Subject: Re: Insurance again

Hi Dad.

Sorry I didn't get back to you. Ward is being kind of weird about the insurance thing. Chalk it up to masculine pride. Let me talk to him about it more and I'll get back to you. There's plenty of time.

Love,  
Chloe

To: [bethanyjones45@hotmail.com](mailto:bethanyjones45@hotmail.com)  
From: [chloelanglely@origingifts.biz](mailto:chloelanglely@origingifts.biz)  
Date: March 11 2007  
Subject: call me Veronica Mars  
Bethany –

Thanks for the lowdown on Owen. I guess I feel a little better.

But I'm not going to try and contact him. I've decided to smoke out the whole Ward mystery on my own. The first thing I did was go to the club where he works. I went this morning, and this blonde tootsie was working at the personal trainer desk. Her nametag

read “Mandy”. Wouldn’t you know she would be named Mandy? Our conversation went something like this:

Mandy – Hello. Are you here to set up an appointment for personal training?

Me – Um, actually, I just have a question.

Mandy – Sure, how can I help?

Me – Well, I’m looking for Ward, who works here. Have you heard from him at all?

Mandy – Gosh, no! He hasn’t been in for like, forever... (she looks through the appointment book) and he doesn’t have any clients scheduled for the next few weeks.

Me – Did he quit?

Mandy – Um, I don’t know. We sort of just work on like, a freelance sort of basis? He only gets paid if he has clients.

Me – Yeah, but surely if he was bailing for good he would have let someone know.

Mandy – Yeah... I don’t know. I only started about a week before he took off. But Janey might know something, she and Ward are pretty tight.

Me – Who’s Janey?

Mandy – Our yoga instructor.

Me – Does she take individual appointments?

Long story short, I’ve signed up for an hour long consultation with “Janey” who I guess is really “tight” with Ward, but whom he has never mentioned! Of course I’m wondering if this is the chick that Owen said Ward was “involved” with. I never got the idea Ward was cheating on me. But if he was, I’ll crucify them both. And get this – Janey’s standard rate for an hour long session is \$85! She’d better have some good info for me! Hopefully Mandy won’t mention that I was in looking for Ward. I’d rather not have her know that I’m engaged to him... so I signed up for my session under the code name of “Zoe”. Pretty clever, huh?

The session is tonight, after I close the store. Then I really need to work on my jewelry.

Oh, and our hand-made party favors arrived today. They’re little bags of pastel colored mints tied with ribbons that were supposed to say, “Chloe and Ward, March 31 2007”. Only I have to send them back because they say, “Chloe and Word”. Can you believe it? Some people are so incompetent. So do you think I should get a refund or have them replaced? I wish I knew what to do. I’m going to kill Ward for this.  
-Chloe

To: [bethanyjones45@hotmail.com](mailto:bethanyjones45@hotmail.com)

From: [chloelanglely@origingifts.biz](mailto:chloelanglely@origingifts.biz)

Date: March 12 2007

Subject: All bent out of shape

Bethany –

So I show up for my yoga session, and the first thing Janey says to me is, “Oh hi! You must be Ward’s girlfriend. I always thought you were named Chloe, not Zoe.” She says

this to me with this peaceful superior type grin, like she is above being embarrassed or uncomfortable about anything. She has long brown hair in twin braids, is super tan (but not fake, orange tan), and she's wearing these yoga pants and midriff-barring sports top that shows off her perfect figure. In other words, I hate her instantly.

She goes on to tell me that Ward showed her a picture of me, and Mandy had mentioned that I was in looking for Ward, so she of course put two and two together. Then she says, "Let's grab a yoga pad and do some stretching out."

I follow her lead and soon we're facing each other on the floor. She says, "Now Mandy made it clear to you that my clients are all pretty experienced in yoga, right?"

I'm like, "Sure."

"Great!" she says. "Then let's do a real workout! I hope you're ready to have some fun."

We have the studio to ourselves. She turns on this Enya-type music, and pretty soon she's leading me through various positions like "down dog" and "worshiping the sun". Only she assumes I know what these positions mean when she barks them out. I try to pretend that I do, and take a guess at how I should move or stand. But if I get it wrong, and most of the time I do, she shoves me into the correct position. I'm on my back with my legs over my head, trying to touch my toes to the floor, when Janey comes over and stands above me.

"You're doing great, Zoe. Ward never told me how good you are at yoga."

"Yeah?" I say with a gasp. "Well, Ward didn't know I do yoga, that's why."

"It sounds like you and Ward keep a lot from each other."

With as much dignity as possible, I manage to get my ass out of the air and onto the floor.

"Zoe," she says, her voice matching the new-age music in its tone, "We're not done yet. You need to stretch out your entire your body in order to become centered."

I stand up and face her. "Come off it, Janey. You and I both know I'm not here for the yoga."

She smiles. "You're hoping I can tell you where Ward is."

I gulp. I am reminded of the time in Jr. High when Missy Braxton stole my underwear while I was taking a shower after gym class. I had to beg her afterwards to let me know where it was. Then I remembered – I'm not some poor, wet Jr. High girl wrapped in a towel. I'm me, and this is too important to give into weakness.

"Yeah," I say. "I'm worried about him. For some reason Mandy seems to think you might know something. So maybe you could pretend to be a nice person for a minute or two and help me out?"

"Why didn't you just call me? Signing up for a yoga session is an awfully expensive way of going about this. And what's with the fake name?"

"I thought you'd be more forthcoming if you didn't know who I was."

"Why? Why would I care? It's not like Ward and I are involved or anything."

"That's not what I was suggesting."

“Yeah, right.” She laughs, and goes to turn off the music and undims the lights. She stands by the door, as if to indicate it’s time for both of us to leave. “Ward is a great guy, and anything he told me is confidential. If I were you, I’d be more worried about myself than Ward.”

“Thanks for the advice. Do you know where he is, or not?”

Janey just gives me one more of her ethereal smiles, says “Don’t forget to pay on your way out,” and walks away.

What a tart! This is not the end of this, let me tell you. She obviously knows something, and why she’s not willing to fess up is beyond me. But there are 19 days left to my wedding. I’m going to get whatever it is out her. Soon.

I have my methods.

Tomorrow I have to confirm with the caterers. Wednesday I go in for my final dress fitting. My shower is in less than two weeks.

I think I’m losing my mind.

Love,  
Chloe

To: [chloelanglely@origingifts.biz](mailto:chloelanglely@origingifts.biz)

From: [lois\\_langlely@yahoo.com](mailto:lois_langlely@yahoo.com)

Date: March 13<sup>th</sup>

Subject: Mints

Hon,

I’ve thought about it, and I think we should insist they redo the gift bags. After all, it’s their mistake, and having mints that aren’t in bags is a little tacky. Besides, it’s your day and I want everything to be perfect.

What time is your fitting tomorrow? My day is pretty light, so I think I can come with. Is Ward back in town yet?

Love,  
Mom

To: [bethanyjones45@hotmail.com](mailto:bethanyjones45@hotmail.com)

From: [chloelanglely@origingifts.biz](mailto:chloelanglely@origingifts.biz)

Date: March 13 2007

Subject: Chicken Rollatini or Beef Wellington?

Bethany –

I’m supposed to be meeting with the caterers in 15 minutes to confirm the menu and to pay in advance (non-refundable). I want the Chicken Rollatini and Ward wanted the beef Wellington – it’s sort of been a point of contention between us. But you know what? The other day I read in *In Style* that the big thing now is to have appetizer buffets instead.

Maybe I'll make a last minute change. I mean, who doesn't love bruschetta and mini eggrolls?

Have you heard from Owen at all? Just curious...

Love,  
Chloe

To: [chloelanglely@origingifts.biz](mailto:chloelanglely@origingifts.biz)

From: [bethanyjones45@hotmail.com](mailto:bethanyjones45@hotmail.com)

March 13 2007

Subject: Re: Chicken Rollatini or Beef Wellington?

Chloe,

Go with the appetizers. That way (and I hate to say it) if the wedding doesn't happen, you can throw some sort of cocktail party to celebrate how fabulously single you are. Does that sound callous? Don't be mad. I'll be there for you no matter what.

As for Owen, I actually talked to him last night. He still calls me when he can't sleep. But he didn't tell me any secrets about Ward. Honest. Not that I didn't try to pry them out of him. However, he did tell me he's going out of town on Friday. I got the feeling it was to go and look for Ward.

Hope that helps.

Bethany

[bethanyjones45@hotmail.com](mailto:bethanyjones45@hotmail.com)

From: [chloelanglely@origingifts.biz](mailto:chloelanglely@origingifts.biz)

Date: March 13 2007

Subject: Re: Chicken Rollatini or Beef Wellington?

Bethany –

I never made it to the caterers. I meant to drive there, but somehow I wound up at the Y instead. I walked in and found Janey hanging out at the front desk, flirting with the young buck who was manning it.

She saw me and said, "Are you back for more yoga?"

I said, "No, I'm back to finish our conversation. How about I buy you lunch?"

We went to the smoothie place down the street, where I bought her a health explosion special and a carrot cake bar, which she told me is what she eats for lunch everyday.

Then she says to me, "Look, I'm only here because I have no money and I wanted lunch. Believe me, there's nothing else I can tell you."

I respond with, "Then how about this? I'm going to ask you a series of questions, and you can answer with a yes or a no. That's not too hard is it?"

She said, "Why would I want to answer your questions?"

I said, "Because I'm not going to leave you alone until you do. I'm very good at harassing people, especially when they have something I want – like information.

I think something about my near insane state caused her to feel just a little bit in danger, so she relented.

Here were the questions.

1. Are you and Ward sleeping together? Answer – no
2. Do you know anything about Ward's childhood? Answer – not really
3. Have you heard from Ward in the last 13 days? Answer – no
4. Do you know where Ward is? Answer – yes.
5. Where the hell is he?

“That's not a yes or no question,” she said.

“Come on!” I cried. “Just tell me!”

She throws away her now empty smoothie cup and turns to face me. “I'm not telling you anything. Ward's where he wants to be, and I have to honor that.”

What's with this “having to honor” Ward's wishes? Owen used that line on me too, and it's really getting on my nerves.

Anyway, Janey pushes her way out of the smoothie shop and was walking down the street. I caught up with her.

“Okay,” I said. “One other question. Are you in love with Ward?”

She sighs and said, “Yes.”

“Is he in love with you?”

“That's two more questions,” she said. She picked up her pace, and I let her go.

I need to call the caterers. I'm thinking you're right, I'll go with the appetizer buffet.

Love,

Chloe

To: [owenphilps@yahoo.com](mailto:owenphilps@yahoo.com)

From: [chloelanglely@origingifts.biz](mailto:chloelanglely@origingifts.biz)

Date: March 13 2007

Subject: Your trip

Owen –

Bethany told me you're going out of town this Friday. Is it to find Ward? Because if it is, I'm coming with you.

Love,

Chloe

To: [bethanyjones45@hotmail.com](mailto:bethanyjones45@hotmail.com)

From: [owenphilps@yahoo.com](mailto:owenphilps@yahoo.com)

Date: March 14 2007

Subject: Chloe

Bethany,

Chloe came over to my house last night, demanding answers. Why did you tell her I was going out of town? Whose side are you on?

To: [owenphilps@yahoo.com](mailto:owenphilps@yahoo.com)  
From: [bethanyjones45@hotmail.com](mailto:bethanyjones45@hotmail.com)  
Date: March 14 2207  
Subject: Re: Chloe

Owen,

I didn't know this was about sides. You're a good friend to Ward, but Chloe loves him. I think you should tell her what you know and let her help you find him.

To: [bethanyjones45@hotmail.com](mailto:bethanyjones45@hotmail.com)  
From: [owenphilps@yahoo.com](mailto:owenphilps@yahoo.com)  
Date: March 14  
Subject: Re: Chloe

I think Chloe's going to change her mind about Ward. If his disappearance doesn't change it, then finding out everything about him will.

To: [owenphilps@yahoo.com](mailto:owenphilps@yahoo.com)  
From: [bethanyjones45@hotmail.com](mailto:bethanyjones45@hotmail.com)  
Date: March 14 2007  
Subject: Re: Chloe  
Why?

To: [bethanyjones45@hotmail.com](mailto:bethanyjones45@hotmail.com)  
From: [owenphilps@yahoo.com](mailto:owenphilps@yahoo.com)  
Date: March 14  
Subject: Re: Chloe  
I would tell you but you'd probably just tell Chloe.

To: [owenphilps@yahoo.com](mailto:owenphilps@yahoo.com)  
From: [bethanyjones45@hotmail.com](mailto:bethanyjones45@hotmail.com)  
Date: March 14 2007  
Subject: Re: Chloe

Christ Owen! So what if I do? If she's going to find out eventually, what difference does it make? Why not just get it over with and tell her? I don't know if this has occurred to you, but Ward is putting you in a terrible position by giving you his secrets and then disappearing. Perhaps he doesn't deserve your loyalty.

To: [bethanyjones45@hotmail.com](mailto:bethanyjones45@hotmail.com)

From: [owenphilps@yahoo.com](mailto:owenphilps@yahoo.com)

Date: March 14

Subject: Re: Chloe

Bethany,

- A. You seem to be forgetting, I don't know where Ward is.
- B. If I tell Chloe what I do know, she'll be very emotional about it, and she'll probably get in the way of finding him.
- C. I don't want to be the person responsible for hurting Chloe. This is Ward's mess. He can be the one to stick it to her.

To: [owenphilps@yahoo.com](mailto:owenphilps@yahoo.com)

From: [bethanyjones45@hotmail.com](mailto:bethanyjones45@hotmail.com)

Date: March 14 2007

Subject: Re: Chloe

You don't want to hurt Chloe, but you want Ward to stick it to her? Okay, either you really hate her, or what I've suspected all along is true, and you still have a thing for her.

To: [bethanyjones45@hotmail.com](mailto:bethanyjones45@hotmail.com)

From: [owenphilps@yahoo.com](mailto:owenphilps@yahoo.com)

Date: March 14

Subject: Re: Chloe

Don't be ridiculous.

To: [owenphilps@yahoo.com](mailto:owenphilps@yahoo.com)

From: [bethanyjones45@hotmail.com](mailto:bethanyjones45@hotmail.com)

Date: March 14 2007

Subject: Re: Chloe

Come on, Owen! Why won't you just admit it? I can understand why at first you wouldn't – we were going out and you didn't want to hurt my feelings. But I'll always remember how furious you were after she hooked up with your brother. Even someone as loyal as you wouldn't be so angry on a friend's behalf. I think you should just tell her how you feel.

To: [bethanyjones45@hotmail.com](mailto:bethanyjones45@hotmail.com)

From: [owenphilps@yahoo.com](mailto:owenphilps@yahoo.com)

Date: March 14

Subject: Re: Chloe

Bethany,

Even if I did have feelings for Chloe, I wouldn't move in on my best friend's fiancé in the middle of his disappearance. But I don't have feelings for her, so the point is moot. Now, I'm looking for Ward on my own, and I would appreciate it if you wouldn't meddle anymore by telling Chloe anything.

To: [owenphilps@yahoo.com](mailto:owenphilps@yahoo.com)

From: [bethanyjones45@hotmail.com](mailto:bethanyjones45@hotmail.com)

Date: March 14 2007

Subject: Re: Chloe

Fine. I won't "tell" her anything. I'll just forward her our e-mails.

Take care Owen!

Love,

Bethany

To: [owenphilps@yahoo.com](mailto:owenphilps@yahoo.com)

From: [chloelanglely@origingifts.biz](mailto:chloelanglely@origingifts.biz)

Date: March 15 2007

Subject: Bethany forwarded me your e-mails

Owen –

Bethany can come up with some pretty zany ideas. I don't know where she got the notion that you have feelings for me, but I realize how crazy that is. So please, PLEASE, don't hold what Bethany thinks against me.

Also, I'm sorry about the other night. I just really need some answers. Owen, I know how much Ward depends on and trusts you, and I also know you'd never betray that. Maybe one day I'll do something that inspires such devotion from you, but in the meantime, perhaps you could give me a little on good faith? You're the only person who can help me.

Which is why I am going to confess something to you – in the hope that by doing so, you will finally forgive me for hurting Ward.

So here it is: back in college I liked you before I liked Ward. I actually had a pretty big crush on you for a few days, and I guess it was powerful enough to haunt me from time to time. I still remember meeting you. You were wearing a green and blue rugby shirt with dirt stains and your hair was sticking up in different directions. I was looking for a place to sit in the crowded dining hall and you offered to let me share a table with you and

Ward. You were eating cereal for dinner and Ward was angry because your team had beat his at touch football. Then Ward started flirting with me and I always suspected that you didn't compete because he was already in such a lousy mood. And I thought to myself, "Who are these guys, and why would I want to get with the moody one?" But Ward was the one who asked for my phone number, which I gave to him partly because I thought maybe you would be the one to call.

We both know that's not how it turned out. And obviously it's for the best, because once I got past his quirks I fell in love with all his good qualities, like how resilient and kind and smart he is. But Ward and I had our ups and downs, and I was thinking of breaking up with him even before that time with your brother. Meeting Jack was like going back in time; he was a younger version of you. I felt as though it was freshman year all over again, and I was back at our table in the dining hall, only this time I could make myself clear and you would be more than a friend. Not that it excuses my actions, but it's what I was thinking at the time.

Don't get me wrong. I love Ward. Just last night I was asking myself why I'm still holding on. I couldn't form an answer that consisted of words. Instead I just kept thinking of the time I made spaghetti and accidentally dropped the entire bowl on his kitchen floor. He had spent the day scrubbing it, and I thought he'd be pissed. But he wasn't. Ward just got out some parmesan cheese and two forks. He handed one to me, and we sat down and ate. After we were done, we did other things on that kitchen floor. I won't go into detail, but it was one of the best nights we ever had together. It's why I think we're supposed to be together. Ward offers me everything I really need: security, acceptance, and love. And I believe I'm good for him as well. He needs someone, and God knows he hasn't had good luck with his parents dying so young.

Speaking of parents, mine will be back in a couple of days, and I'll need to finalize the wedding plans with them. I've been able to stall them up until now, but they're going to figure out soon that Ward isn't around. I can't keep up this charade much longer. But even more than that, if there is something I should know about, either with Ward's past or where he is right now, I'm begging you to tell me. Even if you don't particularly like me, at least you could put yourself in my place and realize how much is at stake here. I don't want to make a mistake that could ruin Ward's life, or my own.

Please Owen, let me come with you this weekend to look for Ward. On the way to wherever we're going, you can tell me what you know. I'm not going to give up until you agree.

Love,  
Chloe

To: [bethanyjones45@hotmail.com](mailto:bethanyjones45@hotmail.com)  
From: [chloelanglely@origingifts.biz](mailto:chloelanglely@origingifts.biz)

Date: March 16 2007

Subject: This weekend

Bethany -

I finally got Owen to agree to take me with him this weekend. He hadn't responded to my e-mail yesterday so last night I called him. Our conversation was something like this:

Me: You never responded to my e-mail.

Owen: I had a busy day today.

Me: Oh, well, that's okay. Just tell me what time we're taking off on Saturday morning.

Owen: I still don't think you should come.

Me: Why?!

Owen: Because you're obviously not that committed to Ward.

Me: (stunned) Excuse me?

Owen: Chloe, I don't know what you were thinking, but writing that you once were interested in me only makes me less on your side. This whole thing is about finding Ward. I'm only up for helping you if I think that you're in this to help him. After reading what you wrote, I'm not convinced.

Me: Oh, come on! Owen, I only told you I was interested in you so you'd understand my motives. It was years ago...

Owen: You were being manipulative. You thought you'd get what you want by appealing to my ego.

Me: That is so unfair! Look, if I wasn't up for helping Ward I wouldn't be begging you to let me come. I actually have a lot of work to do.

Owen: In your daddy's store?

Me: Well, yeah, and on my jewelry. I have to prepare a piece for a gallery showing. This is a big deal for me, and it couldn't be happening at a worse time.

Owen: I didn't know you still did jewelry.

Me: There's a lot you don't know. You think you're so above us all, Owen.

Owen: Not true. I think less of myself than I think of most people.

Me: Except me?

Owen: (long pause) I've always thought a lot of you, Chloe. That's why I'm so hard on you. You could be a lot more.

Me: A lot more than what?

Owen: A lot more than a woman who works at a store she doesn't care about and is engaged to a guy who ran off a month before their wedding with no explanation.

Me: Ouch.

(longer pause)

Owen: Sometimes the truth hurts. (longest pause) Look – if you really want to come with me, be at my place Saturday morning at 7:00. Bring coffee.

Then he hung up. So I guess we're going to look for Ward this weekend. I know I should feel like I've made some progress, but what he said to me still stings.

Talk to you soon.

Love, Chloe

To: [chloelanglely@origingifts.biz](mailto:chloelanglely@origingifts.biz)  
From: [bethanyjones45@hotmail.com](mailto:bethanyjones45@hotmail.com)  
March 16 2007  
Subject: Re: this weekend

Chloe,

I guess I'm happy that you got what you wanted. But be careful. Just remember that you are in this to find Ward, not to finally gain Owen's approval. Also remember that it is very uncool to sleep with your best friend's ex, who also happens to be the best friend of your absentee fiancé. I'm just saying...

So don't be mad.

Love,  
Bethany.

To: [bethanyjones45@hotmail.com](mailto:bethanyjones45@hotmail.com)  
From: [chloelanglely@origingifts.biz](mailto:chloelanglely@origingifts.biz)  
Date: March 16 2007  
Subject: Re: This weekend

Bethany –

I'm mad.

How can you even suggest that I'd sleep with Owen? I love Ward. And I love you. Come on!

I'll let you know how everything went when we get back.

-Chloe

March 17<sup>th</sup>, 2007

Dear Ward,

Even if I knew where to send this to, I don't know that I would send it. What I learned today makes me so sad and crazy I feel like I'll spontaneously combust at any moment. Boom! No more Chloe. If that happened, you wouldn't even know about it though, now would you? So what I want to know is, are there more lies that you have been covering up, or do they stop at the ones about your name, childhood, and family life?

Today Owen drove me to your real hometown, and I met your parents. Funny, for being dead (as you had told me they were) they sure seemed awfully ALIVE! They were certainly capable of speaking – and they spoke quite a bit! You'd be amazed at what they told me. It seems you have spent time in juvenile hall, dropped out of high school, and ran away from home when you were seventeen. Oh, and your name isn't Ward Sanders.

If I ever see you again should I start calling you Will Sampson? Did you choose your new name so you wouldn't have to order different monogrammed towels?

Your parents swore up and down that they haven't heard from you for the last 14 years. That would make you 31 years old; another lie, huh? Where do they end? Perhaps when I find out where the hell you've been all this time the deception can stop. Of course, I will have to kill you after I finally find out the truth. But it will all work eventually.

Oh Ward. I never would have cared had you told me the truth from the beginning. But why did you keep all this hidden? How could you think we could possibly start a life together if you hadn't been honest with me about the most basic stuff? Maybe you thought I wouldn't love you anymore. If that's the truth, then I fear for our relationship all the more.

I don't know where you are or when you'll be back. But I have to break up with you, now. I thought maybe writing it out would make my decision feel more real. And I need you to know, I'm not ending things because of what I found out, but because I didn't find it from you.

So tomorrow when I get back into town I'll tell my parents first, then I'll notify the church and the caterers and the band and I'll send out a big mass e-mail to all our guests. Of course they'll all want to know where you are and I'll have to tell them the truth. Then everyone will think I'm awful for keeping your absence hidden for so long.

That's not the worst part though. The worst part is I'm breaking up with you via a letter that you'll probably never even read. I think I'm going to go bawl my eyes out now.

Love,  
Chloe

Here's what happened later that night between Chloe and Owen .....

### **Part 1 - Chloe**

I am indulging in a really good cry when I hear a knock on the door of my hotel room. There is only one person it could be, and I don't know if I am up to speaking with him. But I open the door anyway. Sure enough, he is standing on the other side, looking as benign as I've seen him look for a while.

"Hello Owen."

"Hey, Chloe. You doing okay?"

"No. I just broke up with Ward."

"You talked to him?!"

“I did it via letter. He obviously hasn’t read it yet, but I’m officially breaking up with him.”

“Oh,” says Owen, as he steps past me and into my room. He approaches my bed, which is still made but the covers are crumpled, and it is littered with used tissues. In the center lays the letter of which I spoke. Somehow I have positioned it just right so the light in the ceiling is shining down on it and bouncing off the pages, giving it an almost luminescent glow.

“Can I read it?” he asks.

“Before Ward does? Do you think that’s right?”

“Probably not. But I already know you’re breaking up with him before he does.” He gives me a questioning look.

“Go ahead,” I say, and he sits down on the easy chair next to the bed and begins to read. After he is done he puts the letter down on the table, and says,

“Are you sure this is what you want?”

“Owen, I don’t really have a choice.”

“You could wait until he comes back; hear his side of the story.”

“In theory, yeah. But I have a wedding coming up, with guests and expenses and those stupid little mints! I need to tell everyone the wedding is off. There will be no ceremony, no party after, and no pastel colored mints left on the tables.”

I am pacing the room, and catch sight of myself in the mirror as I do so. My eyes are red and puffy, my hair is a mess; basically, I look worse than Star Jones’ ass. But Owen is pretending not to notice.

“Uh huh,” he says. “How about we get something to eat? I haven’t had dinner yet, have you?”

“What?” I reply. “No. I guess I haven’t. But I’m not really hungry.”

“Chloe, I bet you’re hungrier than you think, and you shouldn’t be making major life decisions on an empty stomach. Come on, let’s go.”

He grabs my hand and leads me out the door. We walk in silence across the parking lot to the diner that is attached to the hotel, holding hands the entire short distance. I am in too much of a daze to recognize how unusual it is to be holding hands with Owen, but I am together enough to notice how dry, warm and firm his grip feels. Holding onto him feels like drinking a strong cup of coffee after a sleepless night, and by the time we sit down across from each other in the brightly lit booth, I am brought down to earth (or at least am closer to the ground than before).

A waitress appears, and Owen orders a cheeseburger, fries, and a chocolate shake. That sounds great, so I order the same. He raises his eyebrows in surprise.

“Don’t look at me like that,” I say. “I no longer have to worry about fitting into my wedding dress, so I can eat whatever I want.”

“Let me ask you something,” he says. “If Ward walked through that door right now, able to explain everything, would you still want to marry him?”

“I can’t imagine that happening.”

“But if it did?”

“How could he possibly justify all the lies and the disappearing? And what about that girl he works with? It’s so obvious that he’s sleeping with her. I’ve been the classic gullible girlfriend.”

Owen shifts and gives me a nervous smile. “Why do you say that?”

“You should be asking me why I haven’t said it sooner. All those times he wasn’t working on Saturdays, but was mysteriously busy, or that he’s been so worried about money when he doesn’t seem to be spending any at all, or just that’s he’s been so distracted. I’ve been a fool, Owen. I’ve only been seeing what I’ve wanted to see and I’ve willingly lived in a state of denial. It’s time I grew up.”

Owen rubs his temples. Tension is dancing on his face, and his lips are pursed, as if they are fighting letting words out. The he sighs and his face relaxes. “Chloe,” he says on his exhale, “There are things only Ward should tell you about himself. If I told you, it could ruin everything between him and me, but more importantly, between the two of you. But, I will tell you one thing. I don’t think Ward was sleeping with anyone but you.”

“How do you know?”

“I don’t, not for sure. But I think he would have told me if he was. I called Janey, you know, a couple of days after Ward took off. She wouldn’t tell me anything. I think it’s because she doesn’t know where he is.”

Unexpectedly, anger bubbles inside me. “That’s not what she told me. According to Janey, she does know where Ward is, she just isn’t willing to fess up.”

Owen leans forward, his weight concentrating on the Formica table. “Why didn’t you tell me you contacted her?”

My eyes squint, and squeeze out aggression. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“There wasn’t anything to tell. She’s evasive and she’s a liar.”

“Then we should let it go.” I sigh. “At this point, I’m starting not to care. I can’t figure what’s more important to me now anyway, getting Ward back, or getting some answers.”

“I’m sorry, Chloe.”

“Don’t be. It’s fine. I just don’t understand why you’re trying to talk me out of canceling the wedding.”

“Because I believe Ward loves you. I’m betting he’ll come back, and when he does I hope you give him a chance.”

“Why? Just last week you were convinced I wasn’t good enough for him.”

“It’s not about what I think. Ward loves you; he’s my friend, so I want the two of you to work it out.”

I look down and study the pools of light reflected in the table-top, and play with my fork. For some reason I feel tears beginning to form. “Ward must have done something really great to deserve such undying loyalty from you.”

Owen chuckles. “You know he did.”

I look up. “Huh?”

Owen stops laughing but his smile doesn’t fade. “You know what he did. I’m always going to owe Ward. Always.”

“Actually, I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

Owen’s smile goes away. “My God, Chloe. I had no idea you didn’t know.”

## Part 2 – Owen

“I thought you knew. I was sure Ward had told you.”

“I have no idea what you’re even talking about.” Chloe looks across the table at me. Her eyes are bloodshot from crying; the redness brings out the green. Her eyes are like two giant saucers, testing me for colorblindness. I’ll pass only if I can tell her what the hidden symbol is inside of them. It’s a test that 99% of the human population would have no problem with, but I’m lost. “What did Ward never tell me?” she presses.

“He made me promise never to talk about it. That’s why I never have. For some reason he’s ashamed. But I’m the one who should be ashamed.”

“Owen, just tell me. I’m sure if Ward ever comes back, he’ll understand.”

I take a deep breath before I begin. I shift my sight away from Chloe’s face. I’ll get through this, but not if I have to look at her. I look at the table, the clock behind her, the jukebox in the corner – anything but her.

“It was fall of freshman year. Ward and I went to a frat party the second weekend of school. I still barely knew him, but since we had been assigned as roommates... you know, we hung out. Anyway, I was having a good time, drinking lots of beer. Not Ward. He was sort of hanging back. After a couple of hours he was ready to go, but I wanted to stay. So Ward walked back alone and I stayed and kept drinking. By 1am I was about to black out. This girl I had been flirting with took me upstairs. It’s all kind of fuzzy, but she said something about going into her boyfriend’s room. I asked her if that was a good idea, wouldn’t he get jealous? She said she hoped he would. I was a drunk, horny eighteen year old, so my judgment was not the best. The next thing I remember is waking up to screaming. The girl’s boyfriend found us naked together in his bed.

“I ran out as fast as I could. The guy was distracted enough by his girlfriend that he didn’t get a good look at me. But the next day he was able to find me; all he really needed for that was my name, which I guess he had pried out of his girlfriend’s mouth. He parked himself outside of the freshman dorm, and when Ward and I were on our way to lunch he stood in our way.

‘You raped my girlfriend.’ He said.

I could do was stammered in shock and fear. I tried to tell him that I didn’t rape her, that it was consensual.”

“Was it... consensual?” Chloe’s question forces me to look at her. I meet her eyes.

“Yes,” I whisper. “I heard later that I wasn’t the first guy she had hooked up with just to set her boyfriend off.

“But why...?”

I finish Chloe’s question for her. “Why did she call it rape? Because this guy was violent, and finding her in his own bed with another guy was too much for him. So she said what she needed to, to save herself.”

“Oh, Owen.” Her voice is full of pity, which I hate. But I know that the rest of the story is only going to make it worse. If Chloe ever respected me, she certainly won’t by the time I’m done.

### Part 3 – Chloe

Owen still won't look at me. I know telling this story is difficult, but I need to hear the rest. "So then what happened?"

"The guy grabbed me. I had never been in a fight and it was obvious. So Ward stepped in. He punched him in the face, the guy fell back onto the ground."

"Ward hit someone? That's not like him!"

"He hit him hard, like he knew what he was doing. He said, 'You want to mess with someone, mess with me.' Then we walked away. Owen sighs and squirms in his seat, then stirs his melting shake with his straw. "But it wasn't over. Turns out Ward broke the guy's jaw with his punch. So two days later his fraternity brothers found Ward and beat him to a pulp, putting him in the hospital for a couple of days. They broke his collar bone and a couple of ribs. Ward doesn't tell the authorities what happened though, thinking this is the end of it, that he can protect me."

"Oh my God," I say.

"It gets worse." Owen scratches his head and rubs his eyes. "The girl decides to press charges against me for date rape. But Ward steps forward and gives me a false alibi, and gets me off the hook. He risked a lot doing that, but it worked because the only person who could remember seeing my face after Ward left the party was that girl. Even her boyfriend couldn't swear it was me he saw in her bed. All it would have taken is one person to say no, they saw him leave the party early and alone. We both could have gotten kicked out of school, or worse. After that – well, I'll never be able to completely repay him."

Owen says nothing for a moment, and I cannot guess what he is thinking. "Owen, you're Ward's best friend. You've already repaid him, even if you don't realize it."

"Are you done eating?" He asks. I don't know what to say to him, so I just nod my head. Owen insists on paying, and we leave. Again, we walk silently through the parking lot back to the hotel, but this time our hands don't meet. Owen follows me to my door, and stops outside of it.

"Are you going to be okay?"

"I think so," I answer. The outdoor orange ceiling light should make Owen look creepy, but his skin is almost glowing. Hearing his story made me light-headed, but I also think, maybe I finally, sort of, understand him.

"Ward's a really great guy. He deserves a second, third, and fourth chance." He says.

I look down. "I know," I say. And I do know. I picture myself going inside and ripping up that letter.

Then Owen is hugging me. It's a tight, warm hug – the first one we've ever shared in all the years we've known each other. In his arms I feel safer than I have felt since getting Ward's e-mail eighteen days ago, which is why when Owen tries to pull away I tighten my grasp around his shoulders. Then, somehow, his lips have found mine and for a moment we are kissing. A wonderful moment passes, and the realization of what's happening hits me like a punch in the stomach, and I pull away.

Many emotions are competing inside of me, all wanting to be felt. Attraction, happiness, guilt, confusion: they're all contenders. Yet anger wins out.

"What do you think you're doing?" I demand.

"Sorry," he mumbles.

“I don’t cheat,” I say. “Not anymore. Do you really think so little of me that you’d assume...”

He cuts me off. “I assume nothing. Forget it happened, because I honestly didn’t mean for it to.”

Before I can respond he turns his back to me, and I watch him walk to his room, unlock his door, and disappear from sight. I suppose now I’ve ruined everything.

To: [chloelanglely@origingifts.biz](mailto:chloelanglely@origingifts.biz)

From: [owenphilps@yahoo.com](mailto:owenphilps@yahoo.com)

Date: March 19 2007

Subject: what happened

Chloe,

I know I was quiet on our drive home – just had no idea what to say to you. I’m not mad and I hope you’re not either. I just lost my head for a minute. If you forgive me I promise it will never happen again.

Good luck deciding what to do about Ward. I still think you should give him another chance.

Take care,

Owen

To: [bethanyjones45@hotmail.com](mailto:bethanyjones45@hotmail.com)

From: [chloelanglely@origingifts.biz](mailto:chloelanglely@origingifts.biz)

Date: March 19 2007

Subject: a mess

Bethany –

Sorry I didn’t call you last night. I got your message, but frankly, I was too tired and depressed to talk. If ever I’ve been down for the count, it’s now. I have no idea what I should do, not that I really have any options.

By the way, did Owen ever tell you the story about how Ward saved him freshman year? Am I the only one who didn’t know?

I was going to call the whole engagement off until Owen told me that story. But now I can’t; somehow I can’t bring myself to do that to Ward, despite what he’s putting me through. I know that makes me an idiot. But what if he shows up with a good explanation? Besides, where else am I going to find someone who forgives my many flaws the way Ward does? If he can put up with everything I’ve put him through, surely I can get through this disappearance of his.

As for what happened this weekend, I’m not going to go into details. The Cliff Notes version is I discovered Ward has a secret identity, and that he and Owen are both really

good at confusing me. Oh, and I'm weak, capricious, and unsure of absolutely everything and most everyone in my life. Hopefully you like me anyway.

The one thing I do know is I need to finish my jewelry for this art show. Somehow when I'm working on it all my problems melt away. I wish I had more time for it. Anyway, for the next few days I'm going to hibernate and think of nothing else except how to blend silver, amethyst, and platinum into something unique and beautiful. And, in 12 days if Ward hasn't shown, then everyone who does show up for our wedding will be surprised, but treated to a fabulous party nonetheless.

The one concession I will make is telling my parents about what's going on. In fact, I'm going to sign off now and give them a call. Wish me luck!  
Chloe

To: [owenphilps@yahoo.com](mailto:owenphilps@yahoo.com)  
From: [bethanyjones45@hotmail.com](mailto:bethanyjones45@hotmail.com)  
Date: March 20 2007  
Subject: What Happened?

Owen ,

I got this strange e-mail from Chloe where she said, quote – “I am weak, capricious, and unsure of absolutely everything and most everyone in my life.”

What the hell?

Now she won't return my e-mails or my calls, claiming she's going to work on her jewelry and not worry about the wedding. I don't know what is up with her, but here is what I do know:

- 1.) Her wedding is in 11 days.
- 2.) Her shower is in 6, and I sent her some lovely mauve towels since I can't be there.
- 3.) I'm coming into town in 9 days, and on the night I get in I'm supposed to take her out for her bachelorette party.
- 4.) When Ward supposedly shows up and they supposedly get married, you and I are supposedly going to stand up with them as their best friend while they declare their love to each other and the world.

Now my question is this:

Did you and Chloe hook up while you were out of town, or did you just want to?

To: [bethanyjones45@hotmail.com](mailto:bethanyjones45@hotmail.com)  
From: [owenphilps@yahoo.com](mailto:owenphilps@yahoo.com)  
Date: March 20  
Subject: Re: What Happened?

Bethany,

I could play games and tell you nothing happened, but you always see through me. So I'll just be honest, mostly to save us both a lot of time and energy. We kissed briefly. We were both sad and confused. It didn't mean anything, so don't be mad at Chloe.

After the kiss we both went into our separate hotel rooms, and the next morning we drove back, barely talking the whole way.

Owen

To: [owenphilps@yahoo.com](mailto:owenphilps@yahoo.com)  
From: [bethanyjones45@hotmail.com](mailto:bethanyjones45@hotmail.com)  
Date: March 20 2007  
Subject: Re: What Happened?

You doubt it meant much to Chloe, or to you?

To: [bethanyjones45@hotmail.com](mailto:bethanyjones45@hotmail.com)  
From: [owenphilps@yahoo.com](mailto:owenphilps@yahoo.com)  
Date: March 20  
Subject: Re: What Happened?

What difference does it make, and why do you care?

To: [owenphilps@yahoo.com](mailto:owenphilps@yahoo.com)  
From: [bethanyjones45@hotmail.com](mailto:bethanyjones45@hotmail.com)  
Date: March 20 2007  
Subject: Re: What Happened?

How can you even ask me that? You know very well why I care. Pardon me for being so petty, but you broke up with me because of your mother. Don't you think you're being a little hypocritical now?

To: [bethanyjones45@hotmail.com](mailto:bethanyjones45@hotmail.com)  
From: [owenphilps@yahoo.com](mailto:owenphilps@yahoo.com)  
Date: March 20  
Subject: Re: What Happened?

Sorry, but I don't see the connection. And you've got it wrong. We fought about my mother. I broke up with you because the feelings just weren't there for me anymore. I hate to be so harsh, but as we're being so honest today, I may as well.

To: [owenphilps@yahoo.com](mailto:owenphilps@yahoo.com)  
From: [bethanyjones45@hotmail.com](mailto:bethanyjones45@hotmail.com)  
Date: March 20 2007  
Subject: Re: What Happened?

I always thought one day you'd realize the mistake you made by letting me go. I don't know what hurts more, that you don't love me, or that you might love Chloe.

To: [bethanyjones45@hotmail.com](mailto:bethanyjones45@hotmail.com)  
From: [owenphilps@yahoo.com](mailto:owenphilps@yahoo.com)  
Date: March 20  
Subject: Re: What Happened?

I don't know what to tell you. Chloe and I are just friends, and you and I were over a long time ago.

To: [owenphilps@yahoo.com](mailto:owenphilps@yahoo.com)  
From: [bethanyjones45@hotmail.com](mailto:bethanyjones45@hotmail.com)  
Date: March 20 2007  
Subject: Re: What Happened?

We've been over for a long time? Is that really what you think? You still call me every time something is wrong, or you need to talk, or you can't sleep, or something good has happened, or the weather sucks, or WHATEVER. You're still the person I trust more than anyone. Before I moved to New York you were my emergency contact, for God's sake. I've watched as relationship after relationship hasn't worked out for you, and I always secretly hoped it was because you still loved me. Yet I've always secretly feared it was because you actually love Chloe. And you do, don't you? I mean, you and Chloe have NEVER been friends. So the fact that you're now claiming to be, well, that speaks volumes.

Good bye, Owen.  
Bethany

To: [bethanyjones45@hotmail.com](mailto:bethanyjones45@hotmail.com)  
From: [owenphilps@yahoo.com](mailto:owenphilps@yahoo.com)  
Date: March 20  
Subject: Re: What Happened?

I'm sorry.

Look, I'll call you tonight. This isn't a conversation we should be having via e-mail.

To: [chloelanglely@origingifts.biz](mailto:chloelanglely@origingifts.biz)  
From: [bethanyjones45@hotmail.com](mailto:bethanyjones45@hotmail.com)  
March 21 2007  
Subject: difficult

Chloe,

It's 3 am and I just got off the phone with Owen. We had a marathon conversation, and we broke up for the last time, finally, completely, for good.

You're probably thinking that we couldn't break up if we weren't actually together, but you're wrong. We were still together in my mind, and in my heart I believed he was the one. The sad part is I still believe he *is* the one for me, but I no longer believe I'm the one for him.

He loves you. He never actually said it, but he wouldn't deny it when I asked him.

It's not your fault, and I'm not even angry at you for kissing him. But I can't forgive you yet for capturing the love of the one guy I've ever really wanted. The fact that you weren't trying to make him love you only makes it worse.

I know you need me right now, and I will try to be there for you in a few days when I get into town. But do me a favor, and don't call me before then. I just need some time to digest all this.

Sorry to do this via e-mail. It's too late (or early) to call, and I needed to get this out before I lost my nerve. I may be both physically and emotionally exhausted, but deep down I know that if I keep this buried, we'll both regret it eventually.

We'll talk in person when I get into town.

Love You (still),  
Bethany

March 22

It's 12am and I can't sleep. Who could blame me? My wedding is in 10 days, my fiancé has been AWOL for weeks, and now my maid-of-honor is furious with me.

I've read Bethany's e-mail over and over, resisting hitting the reply button. Actually, I've hit it several times, but I never get very far. I have no idea what to say. So I'm practicing my inner-monologue full of proof that there is nothing between Owen and me, as I sit and bend wire into earrings to match the bracelet I've almost finished. I can identify with this bracelet. After months of dieting and spa treatments in preparation for my big day, I've never been more confident of my outer beauty. Yet I'm as gnarled and twisted as the shiny wire that connects these precious stones.

Then there is a knock on my door.

My heart flutters and I jump over to the mirror hanging in my entryway. I tuck my hair behind my ears and smooth out the stray wisps. Owen had called me on his cell phone a few minutes before, asking if we could talk. He's close by, he said. Stop on over, I told him. I open the door to find him live and in person.

"Hey," he says. "Sorry to do this so late."

I step aside so he can walk in. "That's okay, I was up."

He wanders into the living room and takes a seat on the couch. I sit opposite him on my oversized armchair that looks like it's from Pottery Barn, but was actually found at a Slumberland outlet store.

I smile at him as I cross my legs, which are covered by the flannel pajama pants I'm wearing. "What were you doing out at this hour?" I ask.

He sighs. "I worked late. Then I went to work out – you know how Lifetime stays open so late? After that I went to some bar and got a drink and a hamburger. Then I drove around. I just couldn't face the silence of my apartment tonight. I drove down your street and saw the light in your window, so here I am."

"Are you okay?"

"Yeah," he says. "I'm fine. But have you talked to Bethany?"

I look into his eyes, which are large, brown, and watery. "She e-mailed me and told me about your conversation." I look down and away, but his voice follows me.

"Did she tell you that I'm in love with you?" he nearly whispers. I try to respond but words catch in my throat, so I nod my head in reply. He lets out an exasperated sigh. "Sorry," he says.

"For what?"

"For making things even more complicated for you."

He leans forward, and I'm sure if I reach out my hand I'll be able to feel the current rippling between us. But I stay leaned back in my chair as I reply.

"It's okay. I just wish I had known sooner..." I look up and catch the pensive look on Owen's face. It looks like the power of darkness came in and sucked all the life out of him. "What?" I say. "What is it?"

"You didn't *believe* her, did you?"

I force out a fake laugh, which sounds more like a bark. “What? No. Of course not. What I was going to say is I wish I had known sooner that *Bethany* thinks you’re in love with me. I mean, obviously that’s ridiculous, but if I had known, maybe I could have done something to keep her from getting upset.”

“Good,” he says. “Because obviously there’s nothing between you and me. There can’t be.”

“Of course,” I respond. “I mean, even if you did love me, which you don’t, but if you did, you’d hate me for letting anything happen because then you’d be with someone who would cheat on her fiancé with his best friend, and then where would we be?”

“I wouldn’t hate you, I’d hate myself.”

“Right, well, whatever. Same difference. Same outcome. Nothing can ever happen between us. Besides, I still love Ward, and I have a feeling he’s coming back.”

Owen sighs again, this time in relief. “Good. So you’ve decided to give him another chance.”

“I don’t know how not to.”

I can’t read Owen’s expression, but something makes me want to reach out and hold his face in my hand. He looks up at me and our eyes lock.

“You’re making the right decision,” he says. “I’m so relieved, maybe now I can face going home.” Owen gets up and heads for the door.

“Great!” I follow him back into my entryway. “Well, thanks for stopping by.”

He turns around to face me. The space between is very close, and I can smell the mint on his breath.

“Did you just eat a mint?” I ask.

“Um,” he sort of laughs. “I had one when I left the bar. Why?”

“No reason,” I say. But suddenly, I am as sure he’s lying as I’ve ever been of anything. He ate the mint because he was coming over here. I know date breath when I smell it. Then I do something that contradicts everything I have been trying to disprove about myself to him; everything I have been trying not to be for so long is negated in this one simple action.

I lay my right palm flat against his cheek, then gently stroke his face with my hand. His head drops down, and my other hand raises up to better catch it. Owen’s arms move slowly around me. With his arms around my waist he leans back, then his hands move up to my hair. I grasp his shoulders, then my head is in his hands as he leans in to kiss me.

I know I should be thinking about Bethany and Ward. But I can’t, I won’t. Instead I kiss him back, holding him as tightly as I can, my chest pressed against his. And my heart is beating so fast that it spreads an amazing warmth throughout my entire body. It is perfect, when it should have been a perfectly repentant moment.

To: [chloelanglely@origingifts.biz](mailto:chloelanglely@origingifts.biz)  
From: [loislangley@yahoo.com](mailto:loislangley@yahoo.com)  
Date: March 23 2007  
Subject: countdown

Good Morning, Hon.

Your father and I talked last night, and we both agree, we need a plan of action for the next few days. Once we got over the initial shock and anger of all the lies and half-truths you've been telling us, we began to realize how difficult the last few weeks must have been for you. That doesn't forgive or excuse your behavior, but for now we are going to look past it so we can all make it through the next week. Now, you know your father isn't big on apologies, so let me just say that from the both of us, we're sorry about the unkind things we said the other night. Perhaps you are right to be holding on. We know how much you love Ward, and God willing, he's okay and will come to his senses and return ASAP.

However, all the good thoughts in the world will not change the cold, hard facts. And the fact is, you are in a very unusual situation here, and it is time to make some decisions. Your father and I will not begrudge the money we have spent on this wedding even if there is no wedding, but we do need something from you, and that is for you to make up your mind about the following:

1. What exactly will we tell people (and I mean people like your great-aunt Ermine, who is not very understanding) if Ward doesn't show? Remember, a lot of people are spending a lot of money on plane tickets and hotel rooms come to here for this wedding. They will need an explanation.
2. How long do we wait before we cancel the wedding? 24 hours before? 48 hours? Please don't say something like 10 minutes before, Chloe. This isn't a Julia Roberts movie, and I don't want you walking down the aisle if there is no groom to meet you.
3. If Ward doesn't show, how are we going to track him down and make him pay for both the emotional and financial hardship that he is inflicting on us?
4. Finally, and most importantly, if he DOES show, what are you going to do? Under what conditions will you take him back? It is very important that you think about this NOW, because the closer you get to your wedding day, the more emotional and stressed you are going to be, and you don't want to make a life-altering decision based on a whim of the moment.

So please think about all this and get back to me. And remember, no matter what, we love you.

Mom

P.S. You are going through with the shower, by the way. I expect you to do so with a smile on your face.

March 24<sup>th</sup>, 2007

Dear Ward,

Another letter you will probably never get. But I need to talk to someone, and right now my options are extremely limited.

My mother wants me to form a plan of action for our wedding day, deciding in advance what I will do both if you show up and if you don't. I haven't answered her yet, because I have no idea what to do. Things are so messed up right now that I can barely decide what to eat for breakfast, let alone who I should spend the rest of my life with.

I'm afraid Owen and I might be in love with each other. I never used to think it was possible to be in love with two people at once, but now I'm not so sure. Not that it's getting me anywhere. You would think with two guys in the picture I wouldn't feel so alone, but the opposite is true.

Meanwhile, I can't talk to Bethany either. She's devastated about Owen. I don't know what makes someone's heart beat for someone else; I suppose it would be easier if we could choose who we love. But we both know that's not possible.

I need to finally admit to myself that things were weird between us before you left. That argument we had about kids – I just didn't understand why you wouldn't want to have them. Now, knowing what a screwed up childhood you had it makes more sense. Yet lately when I've been trying to hate you, my mind is filled instead with memories of all our good times, like when you took me fishing, or when you took care of me when I had the flu. Or Florida. I have entire mental photo albums devoted to our relationship, and my mind refuses to stop paging through them.

I worry that all we have left are our memories. I'm beginning to wonder if you are part of an entire phase of my life that it's time to leave behind. I guess I'm just trying to figure out if I do still love you, or if I'm holding onto something that is already gone. If you happen to know the answer, please let me know. It will help me form the plan of action that my mother wanted me to have completed yesterday.

Where are you? I need you to come back.

Love (I think, still...)

Chloe

To: [chloelanglely@origingifts.biz](mailto:chloelanglely@origingifts.biz)  
From: [owenphilps@yahoo.com](mailto:owenphilps@yahoo.com)  
Date: March 25<sup>th</sup> 2006  
Subject: No Subject

Chloe,  
How are you? You've been sort of quiet.

I'm not complaining. Maybe it's better if we don't talk about the other night. At least not until after your wedding day.

I think there's a lot at stake here, and people are at risk of getting hurt.  
You most of all.

I'm not asking you to make any big decisions or to tell to me how you feel about me. I don't really expect you to know how you feel about me. But (and I ask this as a friend), how do you feel about Ward? Do you still love him? If he still wants to marry you, will the wedding happen?

The last thing I want to do is put pressure on you. I still feel terrible about what happened. Not because I didn't enjoy it or because I don't have feelings for you, but because the timing is all off. And I'm not sure that the timing wasn't the only problem, but separate that from how I feel about you, and everything is still confused.

Anyway, call me. Please.

Owen

To: [owenphilps@yahoo.com](mailto:owenphilps@yahoo.com)  
From: [chloelanglely@origingifts.biz](mailto:chloelanglely@origingifts.biz)  
Date: March 25 2006  
Subject: Re. No Subject

Owen –

I can't call you. Sorry. There is just too much going on right now, my mother is pressuring me to make all these decisions about the wedding and Ward, and according to her I'm already two days late. I can't think about Ward and you at the same time. I hope you can understand. I promise I will call as soon as I have something worth saying.

Love,  
Chloe

To: [lois\\_langley@yahoo.com](mailto:lois_langley@yahoo.com)  
From: [chloelanglely@origingifts.biz](mailto:chloelanglely@origingifts.biz)  
Date: March 25<sup>th</sup> 2007  
Subject: I've made some decisions

Hi Mom.

I tried calling you this morning, but your cell must be turned off, and I know how bad you are about checking messages. Anyway, I need to talk to you, in person.

I was up all night last night – couldn't sleep if my life depended on it. But I came to some decisions. Not just about Ward and the wedding, but everything. The store, my jewelry, the direction of my life. I think it's best if you, Dad, and I sit down and talk. Can I come over tonight? Can you call me as soon as you get this?

Love (very much)

-Chloe

To: [bethanyjones45@hotmail.com](mailto:bethanyjones45@hotmail.com)  
From: [owenphilps@yahoo.com](mailto:owenphilps@yahoo.com)  
Date: March 26<sup>th</sup> 2007  
Subject: plans

Hey...

When do you get into town? Will I see you? I would like to, even though you're probably still mad. But forget what I said about Chloe – I don't know what I was thinking when I told you I loved her. Probably just a case of wanting what I can't have.

Please see me. I've had time to regret everything I've said and done.

And I'm ready to grovel.

Love,

Owen

To: [owenphilps@yahoo.com](mailto:owenphilps@yahoo.com)  
From: [whoskins@lycos.com](mailto:whoskins@lycos.com)  
Date: March 26<sup>th</sup> 2007  
Subject: Hi

Hi Owen.

Hope all is well.

First, I owe you an apology. That night I spilled my guts to you I never let on what I was actually planning to do. Taking off like I did was something I had been thinking about for a while.

I just got scared, and things were piling up, and then Janey laid all this pressure and guilt... I know this excuses nothing.

But I'm wondering what all you've told Chloe. Did you tell her everything? Part of it? I won't blame you if you did, but I need to know before I contact her.

Does she still want to marry me? I've had a lot of time to think, and despite everything I still love her. But I need to know if she still loves me before I come back.

Please let me know...and please do it without letting her know that you've heard from me. You're the only one I can ask – Bethany would blow my cover instantly. But you also know that I'd do the same for you. Friends till the end, right?

I'll talk to you soon, and I promise I will supply all sorts of details.

Take care Man,

Ward.

To: [owenphilps@yahoo.com](mailto:owenphilps@yahoo.com)

From: [bethanyjones45@hotmail.com](mailto:bethanyjones45@hotmail.com)

Date: March 26<sup>th</sup> 2007

Subject: Re: Plans

Owen...

You don't have to beg me to see you. Just promise me that you won't be seeing Chloe.

You know how I feel about you, but I don't yet trust how you feel about her. I hope you understand, but if you want to be "friends" with me, you can't be friends with her too. It's a lot to ask, I know. But it's my one and only condition.

Let me know...

Bethany

To: [chloelanglely@origingifts.biz](mailto:chloelanglely@origingifts.biz)

From: [owenphilps@yahoo.com](mailto:owenphilps@yahoo.com)

Date: March 27 2007

Subject: Not about us

Hi Chloe.

I know I am supposed to wait to hear from you. But what I have to say supersedes that and once you read this I think you'll agree. This is complicated, so bear with me.

1. For everyone's sake, including our own, I think we should see and talk to each other as little as possible. Of course we will run into each other in the next few days if your wedding happens as planned. And, if you and Ward do get married, we'll have to deal with each other from time to time. But other than that, we can't

- be friends. Too much has happened for us to have a casual relationship, so I believe it's an all or nothing sort of deal. Once you are past all this wedding business and have a chance to see straight, I'm sure you'll agree.
2. Ward still loves you. Don't ask me how I know this, because I can't tell you. But he's fine, he's thinking about you, and I'm guessing he still wants to marry you. So what do you think? Will you take him back?
  3. Finally, I have a favor to ask. Please don't tell Bethany about what happened between us. It will serve no purpose other than to hurt her. I'm trying to feel the way about her that she wants me to, and I think I can get there. It's the way it is supposed to be – you with Ward, me with Bethany.

So please respond, and take care.

Owen

To: [owenphilps@yahoo.com](mailto:owenphilps@yahoo.com)  
From: [chloelanglely@origingifts.biz](mailto:chloelanglely@origingifts.biz)  
Date: March 27 2007  
Subject: Re. Not about us

Owen...

Thanks so much. I was feeling confused and alone, and your e-mail made me feel so much better. Now everything is as clear as mud.

DID YOU HEAR FROM WARD??!!??

If you did, and you're not telling me, I swear to God I will wring your neck so hard that you'll no longer have a place to put your head. And that's just the beginning.

You don't want to see or talk to me, fine. That's FINE! Blame this all on me, hate me the way you hated me after I slept with your brother. But don't tell me what I can or can't say to my best friend. And by the way, I think she deserves better than a guy who is "trying to have the right feelings" for her. Just leave her alone and move on already. You can't stand to give up the security of her friendship, and you're too weak to go for something you really want. Call it loyalty, but you wanted me for a long time and you did nothing until now. Now that something has finally happened you want to bail and go back to the status quo. Why? Why are you so afraid of conflict? I understand not wanting to hurt people. But I also believe we have a responsibility to ourselves. And I intend to do what I need to do in order to be happy. If you think that's selfish, well maybe you're right, and we really don't belong together.

Anyway, if we're no longer friends than it is none of your business how I feel about Ward. All I'm going to say is that I have made some major decisions about Ward, the wedding, and my life in general, and at one point they may have included you. However,

now you will just have to hear about them second hand, and I expect at some point you will.

I'd tell you take care, but since we are no longer friends, what's the point?

-Chloe

To: [chloelanglely@origingifts.biz](mailto:chloelanglely@origingifts.biz)  
From: [lois\\_langlely@yahoo.com](mailto:lois_langlely@yahoo.com)  
Date: March 28 2007  
Subject: Fwd: Cancellation confirmed

Chloe,  
I just got the confirmation, so there's no going back now. I hope it feels good, knowing the wedding is definitely off.

By the way, mark your calendar for June 14<sup>th</sup>. Your father and I are going to throw a fabulous 32<sup>nd</sup> anniversary party for ourselves.

Love,  
Mom

Forwarded Message:

Dear Mrs. Langley,  
As requested, your cancellation for a wedding reception on Saturday, March 31<sup>st</sup> from 6PM to Midnight has been processed. As agreed per our contract, the deposit of \$1500 is non-refundable. However, if you wish put that money toward an event with us sometime within the next year, please let us know. We still have some dates open.

We wish you well.  
Sincerely,

Patty Korliss  
Edina Country Club Events Coordinator

To: [bethanyjones45@hotmail.com](mailto:bethanyjones45@hotmail.com)  
From: [chloelanglely@origingifts.biz](mailto:chloelanglely@origingifts.biz)  
Date: March 28 2007  
Subject: Hawaii

Beth...

I miss you. I know you're still mad, but I hope you haven't cancelled your trip yet. I need to see you. I think I might be falling apart, and the only glue I know of is you.

Actually, speaking of cancelled, my wedding is. I did it. Contacted all the relatives, friends, etc, except for you, Ward, and Owen. I didn't contact Ward for obvious reasons; Owen said he doesn't want to see or talk to me anymore, and you... well, I didn't want to give you an excuse for not flying out here.

Because I have a proposition for you. I paid my parents for the trip to Hawaii leaving on April 1<sup>st</sup>. Want to go? We could lie on the beach, drink Mai Tais, and erase all memory of the men in our lives. What do you think? Please say yes.

Love,  
Chloe

To: [chloelanglely@origingifts.biz](mailto:chloelanglely@origingifts.biz)  
From: [bethanyjones45@hotmail.com](mailto:bethanyjones45@hotmail.com)  
Date: March 28 2007  
Subject: Re. Hawaii

Chloe –

The only way I could go to Hawaii is if I quit my nanny job. Things have been strained lately, and I think they're looking for a reason to get rid of me. That's okay though, I never wanted to be doing this for long anyway.

I could go to you with Hawaii, then move back to Minneapolis. I'm starting to hate New York. And don't judge me, but I need to be closer to Owen. He said some things that make me believe we might have a future after all.

So anyway, YES, let's go be beach bums for a week, and while we're there we can try to fix each other's screwed up lives.

By the way, I'm sorry about everything – how things turned out with Ward, and how I treated you lately. Forgive me?

Love,  
Bethany

To: [whoskins@lycos.com](mailto:whoskins@lycos.com)  
From: [owenPhil@hotmail.com](mailto:owenPhil@hotmail.com)  
Date: March 29 2007  
Subject: Re: Hi

Hello Ward.

You probably thought I wasn't going to e-mail back. I just have no idea what I should say to you.

How about this? Where are you and why did you leave? Do you have any idea what this is doing to Chloe? I understand that you had some stuff to work through before you were ready to tie the knot, but man, why all the mystery?

After I realized you were gone I tried to get inside your head and figure out what exactly you would tell me to do, if you were going to tell me to do something. I figured you'd want me to protect your privacy and Chloe at the same time, so that's what I tried to do. It wasn't easy, and I can't say that I succeeded on either front. In fact, I pretty much failed.

Chloe now knows everything I knew about your past, and she's even met your parents. Also, I told her the story of how you saved my life, which I thought she knew already. She wrote you this letter that explained all the reasons why it was over between the two of you. I don't think she ever thought you would read it, but she had to write it to make herself feel better. You broke her heart – whether that was your intention or not.

Now, I don't know. I did what I could to convince her to keep an open mind and perhaps give you another chance. But of course, there is that one thing that she doesn't know about, that thing I promised I would never tell her. Although I wish I had never sworn to you that I wouldn't. So I'm begging you now, tell her yourself.

Because I think she still loves you. Because she deserves the truth, and she deserves to be happy. That's not to say she hasn't had major doubts about marrying you. Yet, if you hadn't ever left I'm confident she never would have thought twice about committing her life to yours. So whatever doubts she has, it's up to you to alleviate them and make her trust you again. It'll be difficult but not impossible, and the first thing you need to do is come home, and explain everything.

Ward – come home now. Drop whatever it is you're doing and just come home. I have a feeling that the longer you wait, the surer you are of losing her. So if you don't want to lose her for good, make up your mind to do the right thing. And keep this in mind – if you don't, I will.

Your Friend,  
Owen

To: [owenphilps@yahoo.com](mailto:owenphilps@yahoo.com)

From: [whoskins@lycos.com](mailto:whoskins@lycos.com)

Date: March 29 2007

Subject: Re: Hi

Owen, what happened while I was gone? Since when do you worry about Chloe? You sounded sort of *protective*. Is something going on that I need to know about? (Just kidding – I know you'd never do anything like that.)

I get that it was uncool of me to disappear so soon before the wedding. But you know me well enough to realize that I wouldn't have if it wasn't totally necessary. I have my reasons. You know how Janey can be. She threatened me, man. I had to make a decision fast.

I do appreciate you looking after Chloe, but now what? She probably hates me for all the lies I've told. Once she hears the rest of it I'm sure things between us will be OVER. I don't know what to do. I can't tell you what to do either. I guess you just need to ask yourself: who are you more worried about, me or Chloe?

To: [owenphilps@yahoo.com](mailto:owenphilps@yahoo.com)

From: [chloelanglely@origingifts.biz](mailto:chloelanglely@origingifts.biz)

Date: March 30 2007

Subject: one more favor

Hi Owen...

I know I was pretty angry in my last e-mail, but I've had some time to think and to cool down. You say you want to see/talk to me as little as possible. Okay. You're probably right, especially considering how I now know Bethany feels about you. But I have one last request before I promise to leave you alone.

I know there's something you're not telling me, something else that you know about Ward. I just really need to know what that is. I don't think I can let go and move on until I'm fully informed. This has been one huge mess, and I can't clean it up before the final spill has happened. I expect I'll find out one way or another, but if I hear it from you at least I'll know that you at least respected me enough to tell me the truth.

I can't say that all my feelings for you have evaporated the way they seem to have with you for me. Oh well, I guess it's for the best... otherwise things would be way too complicated. But please, if you ever liked me even just a little, tell me what you know.

Then I promise – I'll forget about you and everything that happened between us.

Love,

Chloe

To: [chloelanglely@origingifts.biz](mailto:chloelanglely@origingifts.biz)  
From: [owenphilps@yahoo.com](mailto:owenphilps@yahoo.com)  
Date: March 30 2007  
Subject: Re: One last favor

Chloe –

My feelings for you haven't evaporated, it's just complicated and for the best if we end things. But I do like you, I always have (more than I should).

So I'll tell you what I promised Ward I wouldn't tell you. Just remember, we're all human.

Ward has a daughter with Janey. She's 5 years old, so obviously she was conceived when you and Ward were broken up for a while. As far as I know, they haven't been involved for a long time, not since he got back together with you. Why he never told you about this, well... you'll have to ask Ward about that.

I hope you hear from him soon.

Love,  
Owen

**March 30<sup>th</sup>, 2007. 5:00 PM.**

**Bethany**

“Let's go out. Sitting around my apartment is just too depressing.”

Chloe says this to me almost as soon as we arrive back at her place after picking me up from at airport. I barely put my bag down before she decided that we must go out.

“It's only 5 o'clock,” I say. “Shouldn't we wait a little while?”

“Wait for what,” she demands. I look at her, arms across her chest, impatiently tapping her foot as she slouches on her couch. “I have nowhere I'm supposed to be for the next few days, other than at the airport in approximately 48 hours. Why not get the party going now?”

“Can I take a shower first? I'd like to wash the airplane smell off me.”

“I guess.” Chloe silently pouts as she gets up to find me a towel and washcloth. Then I escape into the bathroom, hiding underneath a stream of warm water.

Maybe coming out here was a bad idea.

The tension between us has been, well, palpable, since the moment I sat down in her car and we realized we had nothing to talk about on the twenty minute drive into the city. Or maybe it's that we have too much to talk about. I know when Chloe is hiding something from me, and this time I fear that what she is hiding from me is named Owen.

So now I'm standing in the shower wondering how I'm going to get through an entire vacation to Hawaii with her when what I really want to do is call him. I stay in the

shower until my skin has pruned and the water turns tepid, then I dry off and emerge from a room full of steam. Chloe is still pacing around her apartment, unable to sit or focus on anything. I get dressed and join her in the living room.

“Good shower?” she asks.

“Yeah, it was great.”

“So, are you ready to go?”

“Umm...” I stall. “Actually, I’d really like to call Owen first. I told him I’d call once I got into town.”

“Fine!” Chloe collapses on the couch in exasperation and immediately begins tapping her foot again.

“What?” I demand. “It won’t take me more than a couple of minutes.”

“It’s not that,” she says. “I’m sorry, but I don’t think you should be calling him. Let him call you. He has your cell number. Your problem is you’ve always made yourself too available for him.”

“Oh, that’s my problem, huh? This coming from a woman whose fiancé abandoned her? Sorry Chloe, but are you really in a position to be giving anyone relationship advice?”

Chloe gets this shocked look on her face. Neither of us can believe that I said something so mean. Without a word she gets up, grabs her purse, and heads out the door.

I don’t go after her. Instead I call Owen, and ask him to come pick me up.

He does.

**March 30<sup>th</sup>, 2007. 6:00 PM**

**Owen**

Bethany walks into my apartment behind me. I turn on the lights.

“Neat as ever,” she says as she surveys my living room. She walks past me then sits down on my couch, making herself comfortable. She smiles up at me, but runs her fingers through her hair simultaneously. Plus her shoulder is twitching.

“Are you okay?” I ask.

“Oh yeah, I’m great,” she says, and I don’t believe her.

“Are you sure? You seem on edge.”

“No, no, I’m fine. Everything is fine.”

I press on. “But why aren’t you with Chloe? I thought you were going out tonight. Did you two have a fight or something?”

She lets out a sigh. “She was acting entitled and I said something mean. I’m sure we’ll work it out, but in the meantime I’d prefer not to talk about Chloe.”

“Okay. Do you want a beer?”

“I’d love a beer,” she says, and I stroll into the kitchen to retrieve a Negro Modella for myself and a Corona Light with a slice of lime for her. As soon as I heard she was coming I stocked my refrigerator. I wander back into the living room, hand Bethany her beer, and sit down next to her on the couch.

“So what do you want to talk about?” I ask.

“Well, we could talk about your job, or my family, or the weather, or the latest episode of CSI...”

“All good topics,” I say.

“Yes they are. And they’re all worthy of discussion. We could talk about them, or we could get the big conversation out of the way, and discuss how I quit my job and decided to move back here, and what that means for us.” She finishes with a swig of her beer, then wipes the back of her hand across her mouth. I take a drink from my own bottle, stalling for time, hoping the right words will magically fly out of my mouth. But nothing comes, and she reads my silence aptly. There’s never been anything about me that Bethany has been unable to read.

“Or...” she says, “we could save that conversation for later and talk about how rainy it’s been. I thought March was supposed to leave like a lamb. What’s with this cold, wet stuff?”

I put my beer down and grab hers as well, placing it on the table. Then I collect her into my arms, grasping her in a tight, friendly hug. “I’m glad you’re home,” I say. “The world always seems incomplete when you’re not around.”

Bethany pulls away. “Owen, you need to not say nice things like that unless you really mean them. And right now, I don’t think you have any idea who or what you want.”

“But I do mean it. Bethany, if nothing else, you’re my very best friend.”

“I thought that title had been bestowed to Ward.”

I start to answer, but there’s a knock on the door. “I’ll bet it’s Chloe, looking for me,” says Bethany. “She hates being in a fight. She’s always the first one to break down.”

“We’ll see,” I say, and I get up to answer the door. My stomach is dancing, because when I open the door I’m expecting to find Chloe on the other side. But Bethany’s prediction is wrong, and my stomach goes from a dance to a one hundred foot dive. “Hey Man,” he says.

“Hello, Ward,” I respond.

### **March 31<sup>st</sup>, 2007. 11:30 AM** **Chloe**

My parents left my childhood bedroom pretty much untouched, and sleeping in it last night was like going back in time. I used to make mobiles out of glass beads, wire hangers, ribbon, and twigs. Sometimes I would cut out photos from magazines, tape them to cardboard, and add them in so as to create a part mobile, part collage. I wanted my room to be my own special reality, one that was strange, beautiful, and refracted lots of light. So I hung these mobiles everywhere, to the point that it became like a forest of upside down trees with glass leaves. They’re all still hanging from the ceiling, and I can see their reflection behind me as I gaze at myself in my full length mirror. I’m wearing my wedding dress.

My mom knocks, then enters without permission. She stops when she sees me.

“Oh, honey. Are you okay?”

“I’m fine. It’s just such a pretty dress. I don’t know... I felt like I ought to be wearing it, even if it’s just for a few minutes.”

My mom stands behind me and rests her chin on my shoulder. “You look stunning.”

I sniff back some tears. “Thanks, Mom. But I think it’s time to change. Can you unzip me?”

“In a minute. I want to look at you just a little longer.”

“Mom, come on. This is painful enough.”

She turns me around so I am no longer facing myself, but her instead. “Sweetie, I know you’re in pain. But you’re doing the right thing by confronting your emotions.”

“I’m not confronting anything! I’m running away to Hawaii, and I have no idea what the plan is once I get back. Dad’s still mad at me about wanting to sell the store and go back to school...”

“He’ll get over it...”

“And now I don’t even know if Bethany is coming with me and I need her right now.”

“Are you sure she’s the one you need?”

I start to answer, but I’m stopped by his voice. “Oh my God!” I hear him say.

For a moment I can’t decide if I want the floor to swallow me whole, or if I should charge forward and attack. My indecision renders me speechless, but my mother has no trouble finding words.

“Ward! You’re here! Are you okay? You weren’t in any danger, were you?”

“I’m fine.”

“Well, I’m glad you’re okay, but I hope you realize that means Rex and I have to kill you.”

Ward laughs, but he stops once he notices my mother’s serious.

She stares at him for an uncomfortable moment, then asks, “How did you even get in here?”

“Rex let me in.”

“You’re lucky. If I had seen you first I would have told you to...”

“Mom!” I say. “Can you give us a minute?”

My mother gathers herself together. “If that’s what you want.”

“It is,” I say. She gives my shoulder a squeeze, then walks past Ward and out of my room. He steps in. Finally after weeks of waiting he is standing before me, and I can ask him all the questions for which I’ve waited weeks for answers. His face is right in front of me; I could kiss it, slap it, or both. Yet I do and say nothing. He takes me in, and I wonder if he can sense all my anger and hurt feelings.

“Chloe, ... wow! You’re even more beautiful than I imagined you’d be.”

I cringe. “Thanks, but I’m not wearing it under the delusion that we’re getting married today.”

He ignores the venom in my voice and steps closer to me, taking my hand. “But that’s what I’m here to talk to you about. I still love you. We can still get married if you want. I understand if you’re mad, but ...”

I yank my hand away. “Owen told me about your daughter.”

Ward’s face falls. He goes and sits on my green velvet armchair, which is the right size for a teenage girl, but only makes him look really out-of-place. “I know Owen told you. I talked to him last night. Bethany was there too. They filled me in on everything.”

“Oh, really? And I suppose you filled them in too? Am I the last one to get answers from you? Why didn’t you find me before you found Owen?”

“Fear?” He says, with a sick little laugh.

“Fear is not an excuse. Tell me where the hell you’ve been, and your answer had better be good.”

Ward is as awkward as I’ve ever seen him, but at least he’s not the one unable to sit comfortably. He isn’t wearing a dress that is constricting his breathing. Most likely he doesn’t feel close to fainting either.

“I had to go. Janey said if I didn’t, that she’d keep Marthe away from me.”

“Is Marthe...”

“Our daughter? Yeah. Janey was against me getting married from the start. She had it in her mind that I was unsure, but I never was.”

“And who is Janey to tell you who you should marry?”

Ward sighs. “Only the mother of my child. And my ex-girlfriend.”

I step back and lean against the wall in an effort to free up my breathing. “And your co-worker. How could you not tell me about her?”

“Janey and I met after college, when you and I were broken up. We were together for a few months, then she took off for the Peace Corps. When you and I got back together I didn’t know where Janey was. I sure didn’t know I had a daughter. Well, one day she shows up, saying she’s broke and has nobody else to turn to. She hadn’t told me yet that Marthe was mine, but I figured the least I could do was find her a job, so I talked to the people at the Y. After a few months of working together and talking, we decided I should take a paternity test. And sure enough...”

“And you never once thought to mention this to me?”

“I didn’t know how. After not telling you for so long, it seemed impossible to say anything. I felt like I was being buried alive.”

“Were you having an affair with her?”

“No! I swear, Chloe, we were just friends.”

“Not according to Janey. I talked to her, and she says she’s still in love with you.”

Ward shrugs his shoulders to display indifference, but his face turns bright red.

“So Ward, you still haven’t answered my question. Where were you?”

“Um, well, I needed some time, you know, to figure things out. I felt like I had to choose between you and Marthe; there seemed to be no way that I could have you both. So I went to this yoga retreat to clear my head...”

I gasp. “You were at a yoga retreat?”

“Janey said if I went, followed all the rules, and came back still convinced that getting married without telling you about her and Marthe was the right thing, then she would go along. And the rules are no contact with the outside world. You can’t do anything for a month but yoga, meditation, eating, and sleeping.”

I start to hyperventilate. “You have to unzip me,” I manage to say.

Ward can see I’m having trouble, and he jumps up to help me out of my dress. For a moment I am completely exposed to him, and the intimacy of that is at once strange and familiar. I throw on my sweatshirt and wiggle into my jeans. My dress lays crumpled in a heap on the floor.

“Why, Ward. Why not just tell me the truth?”

He stalls for a moment before answering. “My whole life has been a lie. It got to the point where I didn’t even know how to tell the truth. I guess I thought doing something extreme like this yoga thing might help me. Then, maybe, we could start our marriage off right.”

“Oh, Ward. You have to know. There isn’t going to be a marriage.”

He backs up, and his knees give way as he sits on the bed. I lean against the wall, and the only sound in the room is our breathing. When he looks up at me I see that he’s crying.

“Why? Is it because I lied, because I disappeared, or because you don’t love me anymore?”

“How can I love you when I don’t even know who you are?”

“Ouch,” says Ward.

I go sit next to him on the bed, and take his hand in a friendly grip. “Ward, when I think about what you went through as a child, how you re-invented yourself, and became someone who would do anything for a friend, I admire you and I admire that you’re still trying to get things right. But you and I... we’re no longer right for each other. I think you belong with Janey and Marthe. Anyway, marrying me just because I had prior claim would be stupid.”

“It was always more than that,” he says.

“Maybe,” I respond. “But it was never enough.”

**April 1<sup>st</sup>, 2007**

**Chloe**

I’m standing at the edge of the check-in line for my flight to Hawaii, hoping a miracle will happen and I’ll see Bethany’s face emerge from the crowd. After two days of being unable to contact her, I finally left a message on her cell phone with the information of where and when to meet me. I doubt she’ll show, but I’m going on my trip nonetheless. Yet as I’m searching through the sea of faces, a familiar set of eyes meet my own, and against my will a smile breaks out on my face.

Owen smiles back, and he walks up to meet me.

“What are you doing here?” I ask.

“Bethany asked me to come. She wanted me to tell you that she isn’t coming to Hawaii. She’s decided to go back and give New York another try. She said she’ll call you in a couple of weeks, after you get back from your trip.”

“Oh.” I look down in an effort to hide my disappointment. “Is she still mad at me?”

“Not really. She’s mad at me. She thinks I led her on.”

“Why? What happened between you two?”

“Nothing, really. I was trying to give her what she wanted. She just knows me so well... said it shouldn’t be so much effort.”

“Oh. So is she okay?”

Owen shakes his head, and his hair flops a little. “Not really. But there’s nothing we can do. She just needs some time.”

“So... you drove all the way out here to tell me that when you could have just called? I thought you didn’t want to see me anymore.”

He shifts his weight. “I don’t. And I didn’t drive out here just to talk to you. I’m going away myself. One way ticket back to Portland. I found you to say goodbye.”

“You’re... you’re leaving? Why? I don’t get it. Why is everyone leaving?” I look up and watch people walking by with their suitcases, as I swallow back tears. Owen starts laughing. “What’s so funny?” I demand.

“April Fools!” he says. “Just kidding. I’m not going anywhere.”

I punch him. Hard.

“Ow.” He says. “Geez, Chloe. Have a sense of humor.”

“My sense of humor disappeared when Ward did.”

Owen rubs his arm where I hit him, but his eyes smile at me. “Ward called me last night. He said that you two are over. Hopefully that doesn’t mean you’ll never get your sense of humor back.”

“Well, since you’re so funny all of a sudden, maybe you can help me get it back. That is, if you’re willing to see me now.”

Owen steps in closer to me. “I’m sorry about that. I was just trying to do the right thing for everyone involved. But Ward told me what you said, about how he shouldn’t stay with you just because you had a prior claim.”

“So?” I ask.

“So shouldn’t the same rule apply for us?”

“Just because it should, doesn’t mean it will.”

“Then what do we do? I can’t help how I feel about you, Chloe. I’ve been trying for so long not to love you...”

I cut him off with a kiss. He envelopes me in his arm, and kisses me back, warm, strong, and tender. I break away. “Come to Hawaii with me,” I say. “The tickets are in my name. We can get you on, I’m sure.”

“Okay.”

“Really, just like that? You’re saying yes?”

“In all honesty, I was hoping you would ask.”

He pulls me back into his arms, and now I’m sure of one thing: Looking forward may be better than looking back, but my real goal from now on will be to live in the moment. Yes, it may be dangerous to follow my heart, but from now on, it’s the only route I’ll ever take.