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Holding Her Hand

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HOLDING HER HAND

(TITLE)

BY

Chris Ellen Lamb

THESIS

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE OF

Master of Arts in English

IN THE GRADUATE SCHOOL, EASTERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY
CHARLESTON, ILLINOIS

2007

YEAR

I HEREBY RECOMMEND THAT THIS THESIS BE ACCEPTED AS FULFILLING
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ABSTRACT:

The history of GLBTQ YA (Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender, Questioning Young Adult) literature has seen the introduction of very small amounts of fiction over the years. Publication of the first YA gay novel in 1969 opened the doors for many writers interested in pursuing the genre. However, even since this year (the year of the semi-liberation of gays during Stonewall) we have only seen a small amount of titles provided to young readers. In the past decade, interest has begun to turn to a more accepting, emotional and physical based portrayal of GLBTQ teens in their literature.

Since the onset of the genre, we have seen the introduction of secondary homosexual characters, emotional expressions of homosexuality, embracing homosexuality through analyzing different types, protagonist reaction to homosexuality. It is not until the past decade that authors are willing to depict homosexuality fully, embracing out protagonists. It is through my reading of these numerous YA GLBTQ novels that I decided to present another perspective for teens.

Gay males have a breadth of literature available in comparison to that available to lesbians. Through the development of my thesis, I present a lesbian protagonist whose strongest relationship in life is that with her girlfriend. The homosexual relationship is the stronghold of her life, offering strength and motivation to face her fears, failures, and hardships head on. This thesis has nestled into the field, presenting diverse scenarios, yet holding true to the initial purpose: evoking change for homosexuals as well as heterosexuals.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS:

First and foremost, I would like to thank my committee. I would not have the quality of work that is presented in this novel if it wasn't for you. Each of you brought something special to the piece that would not have been included otherwise. Thanks for your many hours spent reading and rereading my work!

Dr. Olga Abella
Dr. Fern Kory
Dr. Letetia Moffitt

Next I would like to thank Amy for the time you allowed me to put into my work. I know it isn't always easy to sit back and wait, but you did it well. Thanks for believing in me and offering encouragement. All my love to you!

Holding Her Hand: A Creative Thesis

Chris Ellen Lamb
Spring 2007

“For me, words are a form of action, capable of influencing change.” –Ingrid Bengis

♀ ♀ ♀ **Inspiration** ♀ ♀ ♀

The inspiration for this creative thesis came to me when a friend suggested Julie Anne Peters’ *Keeping You a Secret* as a fun summer read. I was intrigued with the craftsmanship of the novel even though I was disappointed by the negative outcome. It is a realistic depiction of life as a homosexual, but seeing Holland kicked out of her house because of her relationship with CeCe is hard for a reader to accept. However, Peters’ handles the situation well, using her sense of humor about the trivialities of life interlaced with a serious, realistic viewpoint of homosexuality and the process of coming to terms with emotions. Her development touched me, depressing as it was.

The entire time I was reading Peters’ novel I was thinking, “I can do this.” I have since read all of her young adult novels. I understood that not all GLBTQ (Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender, and Questioning) “coming out” stories are positive, but I really wanted to see a portrayal of acceptance in YA (Young Adult) novels for GLBTQ characters by the people most important to them. I was determined to create a positive reinforcement for GLBTQ teens struggling to be themselves in a fairly non-accepting society.

I realized my home as a writer could be constructed in this field. I could address the issues that GLBTQ teens are facing today by creating a fictitious story line that parallels some of their own situations, offering a release from the pressures of life in the

teenage mind. Writing this thesis presented me with an opportunity to explore the fears and failures I encountered while discovering my own sexuality. I was able to use my experience in the creation of my novel, hoping to offer other GLBTQ teens a story to which they can relate. Teens like to be able to pick up a novel and relate with the characters in some way. Because I was a questioning teen and came out to myself in my late teen years, my voice comes from experience and this has given me an opportunity to address issues of sexuality.

In my thesis I situated myself among those having already addressed issues faced by GLBTQ teens. My novel involves a lesbian protagonist coming to terms with her own sexuality. However, unlike novels such as Nancy Garden's *Annie on My Mind* where Eliza lets her love for Annie suffer because of fear or guilt, or Julie Anne Peter's *Keeping You A Secret* in which Holland is punished and kicked out of her house because of her love for CeCe, the relationship my protagonist, Kelsey, shares with a female is the most beneficial aspect of her life. She does worry about losing her best friend, but when she is finally able to tell Olivia about her feelings, those desires are reciprocated to Kelsey.

More often than not in fiction as well as in real life, ridicule is the result of the "coming out" process for teens, but the cases in which parents and friends are supportive and encourage a healthy relationship have seldom been depicted. Rarely do writers offer these positive situations to their readers. In Lauren Myracle's *Kissing Kate*, Lissa and Kate kiss, but their friendship is damaged by Kate's disgust with the kiss. She claims to not have the same feelings for Lissa that Lissa has for her. Because Lissa is beginning to self-identify as a lesbian and Kate is clearly not ready for that, awkwardness between the two is undeniable. My concern is that in reality, the disappointment in expecting the

worst reactions from those closest to them restricts teen readers of books such as these from being honest with themselves as well as with their friends and family. There are families and friends that embrace their children as is, so I find it important to offer hope.

It was also important to me not to make this *about* a lesbian, but about a girl dealing with life who just happens to be a lesbian. There are many other themes in my novel and I don't want the theme of sexuality to be the only one readers take from the piece. I understand that not all readers will be GLBTQ, but expect that readers will be able to associate with characters, regardless of their sexuality. If the novel is read by heterosexuals, perhaps they will be able to see similarities to their own lives and loves. Perhaps readers will be able to develop a sense of sympathy and compassion, and in turn, apply that to people they may know. The ultimate goal for any audience is one of understanding and education about a diverse population.

In the history of GLBTQ YA literature, acceptance is displayed more often with male characters as the gay teen coming out. In Brent Hartinger's *Geography Club* and its sequel *The Order of the Poison Oak*, the apprehension Russell feels in his coming to terms with gayness, and the fear he lets overwhelm him, turn out to be unnecessary. Once he is open to his friends, he discovers that he is not the only gay person in his school. Even though he is ostracized by many students, those who mean the most to him accept him as gay and embrace their similarities. The same is true in the Rainbow series: *Rainbow Boys*, *Rainbow High*, and *Rainbow Road* by Alex Sanchez. His three main characters are both gay and friends. They are able to be "out" among themselves and in public as well. Representation of acceptance for gay men is more abundant than it is for lesbians. There are other novels such as Ellen Wittlinger's *Hard Love* where strong, self-

identifying lesbian characters are present, but only as secondary characters and rarely as protagonists.

The one exception to this is *Deliver Us From Evie* by M.E. Kerr. The representations in this novel focus more on butch and femme, than on sexuality itself. Evie's family does not embrace her lesbianism, but does not shun her either. Evie is a unique character, sporting a bomber jacket and slicked back hair. She is capable of pretty much any mechanical work and is a devoted worker on the farm.

Patsy Duff, on the other hand, represents the epitome of femininity. She is very much a girlie-girl and catches attention of guys on a regular basis. When the two develop romantic feelings for one another, they become the talk of the town. Physical appearance and demonstrations of love cannot keep the social order. Kerr develops a fairly realistic town reaction to the relationship and its repercussions.

This is perhaps one of the strongest representations of lesbianism in YA novels since its publication in 1994. Kerr took major steps in the development of the genre, opening many doors for future publications. I was able to feed off of her inspiration, using lesbian image as one of the subtle themes in my novel.

It is important for teenage lesbians to be able to realize who they are as well as to identify with characters who have a strong sense of self. In Tea Benduhn's *Gravel Queen*, there is a new girl in town. Aurin is encouraged by her friends to reach out and make friends with her. Benduhn addresses the topic of jealousy as the old friends begin to get frustrated with Aurin. Her friendship leads to deeper feelings for the new girl and eventually homosexuality is accepted, but because of the lack of character development, the novel creates a faux sense of their existence. After reading these two novels, I

decided it was important to me to present a character that feels the effects of society, but despite those strains, constructs the will to persevere while developing a larger sense of depth to the character.

Very early in my novel, an intense life for Kelsey is portrayed. In creating my protagonist, I situated her in a tough climate that should seem realistic to many teens today. She is the middle child of three and has been expected to grow up much sooner than she should have. Her father left when she was a child, leaving her mother to be the breadwinner for the family, thus placing Kelsey and her sister in charge of the house and care of her younger brother. Her mother drinks herself into a stupor almost nightly as a way of dealing with the loneliness, causing pain and emotional strain for Kelsey, and even resorts to physical violence.

Before beginning the writing process, I created a back story to my protagonist. I felt this would aid me in the execution of the novel from the point where I began. The following is what I knew about my character before writing: Kelsey is, over all, an excellent child. She does not require curfews because she comes home on time. She responsibly does chores around the house without having to be told by her mother. She even tries to make sure her brother is taken care of before she does anything for herself. However, during one night out with her friends, Kelsey decides to try smoking weed. Once her mother finds out, her harsh reaction to Kelsey's mistake leads to arguing and violence, eventually landing Kelsey in the office with a counselor against her will.

It is not until Kelsey meets her counselor that she begins to realize who she is and what she has to offer. Kelsey is the lead guitarist in a small band and uses practice as a release session, pouring all of her aggressions into the guitar. Through practice and an

eventual gig, the band becomes her stage, her door to the world of self-confidence and self-love.

Kelsey is forced into her counseling sessions, but after learning that Julie is a lesbian as well, she loses some of the defense and opens up to Julie's opinions. Julie offers her advice on dealing with her sexuality but not in a threatening way. She symbolizes, for Kelsey, a proud lesbian in a loving long-term relationship. When Kelsey asks the counselor "How do I deal with this?" Julie's response is, "One day at a time. That's all you can do. Remember, Kelsey, just because you have told me this, it is not confirmed to anyone else. Just because you have confided in me, the whole world looks different to you, but not necessarily to everyone else. Don't feel guilty. Don't feel scared. This is who you are. As I told you before, you are beautiful and you must embrace this before you can get anywhere." (63) Through her sessions with the counselor, Kelsey is able to embrace her lesbianism, leading her into the world as someone willing and capable of loving another woman. Her relationships lead her down varying paths to acceptance and through hardships, but as she quickly learns, none she cannot tolerate and even overcome.

♀ ♀ ♀ **Technique** ♀ ♀ ♀

The most challenging aspect of writing for any novelist is to develop characters that are realistic and dimensional, as well as to balance the aesthetic and didactic aspects of the novel. It was important to me as a writer, like most minority writers, to develop a clear representation of acceptance and deliver it effectively. I had to find a way to intertwine this intent with the demands of the craft of writing. I also had to maintain

equilibrium between the art and the message I was trying to convey. I feel I have done this nicely, sticking close to a realistic portrayal of teen life, yet suffusing the story with morals. I want readers, upon completion of the novel, to analyze their treatment of others, hopefully offering more compassion for diverse groups.

I believe I overcame the challenges and created a novel teenage lesbians will be able to identify with and utilize as inspiration to be who they truly are. There are a few choices I made in my novel that create a structure appropriate to the Young Adult world.

Working hard to create realistic language, I focused my attention intently on the dialogue included in the novel. I tried to create each character by their actions and language. I consciously chose different languages for males and females as well as to signal class distinctions. For example, Olivia is very well off financially and it is through description and language that I am able to offer this knowledge to the reader without telling him/her the situation in a straight forward manner.

Readers learn early on that Olivia, a sixteen year old, drives a Jeep Liberty. Her mother spends all day at home, sitting on the patio in the sun, sipping Margaritas. She doesn't work, and doesn't need to. Kelsey gives description at various points in the novel to the fact that Olivia never needs anything. She describes her huge house, the twisting wooden steps, the iron railing, and the immaculate house cleaned by a maid. I made these choices for a few reasons, the most important being that I wanted readers to know that all kinds of people deal with homosexuality and love who they love regardless of outside influences.

Another technique I chose to use was flashbacks. It is difficult to move out of the progression of the present in the story to a time in the past. To capture a memory and

offer as many visual descriptions as possible without distracting the reader is complicated. However, if the technique is appropriately applied, the reader is given a piece of their memory bank that adds to the development of a character. Flashbacks allow the reader to step into the door of the fictional world and become a character through relation to similar situations. They also allow the reader to see a different side of the character that may not be evident in the regular story line.

Perhaps one of my favorites in the novel is a memory Kelsey had from childhood. She recalls riding on her father's lap down a dirt road in the heat of the summer. It is not the actual memory that means something to her, but the caring her father displayed to her as a child. All of these years, she has been angry and blamed him for her wrecked home life, but it is in these recollections that she is able to remember his love for her. Her hope that things will change upon his return is restored in the good memories of him being a great father to her.

My third technical decision was the format of the novel. It is divided into six sections, Monday through Saturday. In each section, we see Kelsey in her counseling sessions, in school, in band practice, and at home. Her reactions to her relationship with Olivia all result from her environment. There are times that she uses her friendship/relationship with Olivia as an outlet, unloading her fears and anger to a sympathetic ear. Other times, Kelsey is able to utilize time with Olivia as a distraction.

♀ ♀ ♀ **Writing Experience** ♀ ♀ ♀

Throughout my undergraduate and graduate coursework, I have taken a wide variety of writing classes that have filtered into this process. I completed a poetry

independent study last semester with Dr. John Martone using feminist poets such as Adrienne Rich, Audre Lorde, Diana DiPrima, Lucille Clifton, and Nikki Giovanni as inspiration for writing poetry on love, power, loss, and life. This instilled in me the ability to say exactly what I want to say and no more in my writing. In my undergraduate work I enrolled in two fiction writing classes, and a humor writing class. Each of these classes offered a different angle on writing for me to practice as well. I was able to infiltrate the experiences from each into my dialogue, description, and flashbacks. The humor writing proved beneficial in aiding me with one-liners periodically that keep the reader jovial. The fiction writing enabled me to develop my descriptors to show the story instead of telling it.

My senior seminar was an independent study in which I worked all semester on the beginning of an autobiography—my coming out story. I completed over eighty pages and had individual instruction throughout the entire process. Writing this opened my eyes to what is important and what is personal in the discovery and revelation of homosexuality. It heightened my awareness of what readers do and do not want to hear from a lesbian writer. I learned to steer clear from telling emotions, and to develop those emotions with visual representations. I was told to never beg the reader for sympathy, but to give them a scene that *makes* them sympathize with the character. However, my ultimate discovery was that diversity is beautiful, and I believe I have successfully proven this to my readers through the revelations and the development of my novel.

♀ ♀ ♀ **Through the Years** ♀ ♀ ♀

GLBTQ YA literature has been in circulation since the publishing of John Donovan's *I'll Get There: It Better Be Worth the Trip* in 1969. It is no coincidence that this book was published around the same time as the events in the New York City Stonewall pub, where homosexuals finally stood up to authorities and demanded equal rights to access of public bars. This was the beginning of the gay/lesbian civil rights movement, and Donovan's text resulted in mixed reactions. As a milestone in gay and lesbian writing, the interaction was simply a kiss between the two boys, and they agreed that this interaction was to be the **end** of everything. This is ironic, since this book was the **beginning** of everything for gay and lesbian writers, characters, and readers.

Each year, one or two GLBTQ novels were published following Donovan. Titles such as Isabelle Holland's *The Man Without a Face* and Sandra Scoppettone's *Trying Hard to Hear You* followed in subsequent years. However, according to Christine Jenkins in her article "From Queer to Gay and Back Again: Young Adult Novels with Gay/Lesbian/Queer Content, 1969-1997," only 31 novels were published in the first 16 years from 1969-1984. Jenkins states that between the years 1985 and 1992, thirty novels were published; and 1993-1997 saw the publication of 38 novels. This means, as she calculates in her article, that between 1969 and 1997, only 99 titles were published, averaging 3.4 titles per year.

Looking at the field in these terms is shocking. Since 1997 reader interest has been growing. It is appalling then to think there has been such a minute canon for GLBTQ teens to read offering similar situations to their own. The earlier works offered only vague representations of GLBTQ sexuality, inadequate for the needs of most teen readers. The way situations were handled in these texts has changed as the nation has

become more aware of what it means to be gay. In the past two years at least seven novels have been published including new novels by Alex Sanchez, Julie Anne Peters, and David Levithan.

Changes are slowly but positively advancing due to the still-active gay rights movement. Therefore, I find it necessary to offer realistic texts for teens. With the fluid motion of the acceptance and familiarity of homosexuality, especially in schools, now is the time to introduce more texts into the world of eager readers. Schools are beginning to address diversity, including sexual orientation, and are offering more texts for students. I feel it is imperative to offer yet another source for teens to utilize in the process of self-identity and "coming out." Between the inclusion of my own experience, the extensive list of primary sources used for reference, and the secondary sources I have chosen to offer a more statistical, objective point of view, I strive to depict reality in my creative fiction.

Growing up gay is not easy. For any teenager, there are so many difficult situations to face and so many obstacles to overcome. Discovering and becoming familiar with one's own homosexuality is not an easy task either. Teenagers are becoming familiar with sexuality at an earlier age than ever, so it is essential that they are offered a rich selection of literature to confirm the validity of feelings that follow a direction besides the typical heterosexual path. Over the past forty years, writers have become slightly interested in the genre of homosexual young adult literature, but only in the past decade has a high demand for this literature surfaced and a more abundant number of titles been published. Therefore, I will contribute what I can to the education and

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2001-2005

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MONDAY

1: MARKED

“Kelsey?”

I hear my name called in a chipper tone and I'm quickly drawn back to my current reality. Looking up, I see who I suppose is my counselor. Not what I expected at all. I scan her from shoes to face as I raise my head. Black Sketcher boots, black cargo pants, a little baggy and obviously selected from the men's section. A white button-down shirt with black pin stripes, varsity tucked over a beater and adorned with a black studded belt. Her hair is short, spiked, and flecked with grey, and blonde tips. Hands tucked casually in her pockets and a manila folder tucked under her arm display to me her casual comfort. I have no doubt that my name is tagged to the flap in Sharpie, placing me on the list of “Those In Need Of Service.” After realizing my abnormally long hesitation, I nod my head her way, acknowledging my name she has just called, and manage a small half-grin on the right side of my mouth.

“Follow me, if you will.” she says with a smile.

Reluctantly, I pry myself from my slump, retrieve my backpack, and shuffle along behind her down an endless hallway of countless office doors. She finally stops at one, reaching for the knob.

After entering, I resume my slump in the client chair by the door; easy access in case I decide to bail. The chair faces her desk at an angle. Scanning the room, I realize how much I hate offices, but also realize how much character she has displayed here. Floor-to-ceiling bookshelves are stacked with not so many books and a bunch of random art, abstract for the most part. A black wrought iron candlestick extends from the shelf in a circular rise and holds a colorful selection of six candles, the rainbow. Hand-carved wooden figures embrace one another—clearly two women.

A small rainbow flag juts from the hole of a miniature bowling ball. The base holding the ball has a metal plaque with engravings. *Lookie here. We've got a bowling champ on our hands.* Damn my sarcasm. I fight the urge to walk over and examine everything up close realizing that would be too invasive.

A framed RENT poster leans against the window. Small picture frames line the edge of her desk facing her. I wonder who could be important enough to her to have made the desk. Who is it that she loves enough to look at every day?

She begins in a gentle tone. "My name is Julie Cromwell, just so you know. So, Kelsey, what brings you here today?"

Need she ask? I didn't make the appointment! "My mom made me." I offer the simple answer, hoping I don't have to go there. She immediately realizes my reluctance to be here and tries to offer some comfort.

"I know it is hard growing up with the pressures of home life and balancing school. Why don't you tell me a little about yourself Kelsey?"

Was she really serious? *Did* she know how hard my life was? What am I supposed to tell her? There are so many things going on that I don't even know where to start. Do I tell her how truly crazy and hellish my life is right now and how dysfunctional my family is? NO. I can't. I won't. That is not something I share with many people. Instead, I go the easy route and tell her the exact reason I was forced to come here. No ifs, ands, or buts about it.

"I was smoking pot and got busted. It was the first time I had ever even tried it and of course, my mom found out and spazzed on me. She called here and made this stupid appointment as part of my punishment. She knows I hate to talk about anything and that I won't talk to her, so why not send me to a counselor who gets paid to *make* people talk?"

Leaning back to give me a little space, Julie reacts to my reluctance. "I won't make you say anything you don't want to. However, anything you do say doesn't leave this room."

"What, is that supposed to make me feel better?" I immediately regret saying anything. "Sorry. Just a little bitter, that's all." I duck my head.

"That's okay. I've dealt with worse. So, how about this. How about you tell me what you like and dislike about your life right now."

"Umm..." I don't know how much to say. For some odd reason I feel this could be my chance. I could spill my guts about feeling different physically and sexually, and only one person would hear what I have to say. That one person isn't going to tell anyone, unless of course, I am planning on hurting myself.

"I hate my house, I hate my home life, I hate my parents, I hate drama at school, especially prissy better-than-you girls' attitudes...umm...I love my brother, I love my guitar, and I love a few of my friends. That's about it."

"Guitar huh? I play too. I'm not too good but it doesn't stop me from trying. It's my relaxation. Guitar is my therapy," Julie replies. She is really hanging in there and I have to say I admire her effort.

"Yeah, I guess you need therapy after giving it all day." This makes her giggle a little, and for some reason I feel good about that. I can be funny sometimes.

"You know," she says, "I love my job. I love the fact that through a series of confidential conversations I can make someone look at their life and say, 'You know, it's not that bad.' That, in turn, gives me a chance to let people realize what they *do* have. Then, I can say, 'Look at what you have. Let's do something to make that even better. Set some goals, and let's get a move on. Life's too short to sulk.' I feel like I should make that a bumper sticker...LIFE IS TOO SHORT TO SULK. What do you think? Think it would fly?"

Shyly but matter-of-factly I reply, "I don't know about the sticker, but I know I admire you for being able to be positive every hour of every day. I try, but it's hard. Usually if I'm not happy, I try not to say anything at all. The least I can do is keep to myself. No reason to drag others down with me." I can't believe I just said that. Here I am, sitting here chatting away with a stranger. Telling her things I never vocalize.

"I think I'm starting to see who you are, Kelsey." She says to me and my hands clam up. I'm wondering how, in just a matter of minutes, she is able to size me up. I've been told that I'm a mysterious person. "You are quiet and reserved. You rarely speak your mind because you are a pleaser. Correct me if I'm wrong or stop me any time, Kelsey."

Curious to see what else she has to say, I answer, "No, go ahead."

"By saying you are a pleaser, I mean you worry about others over yourself always. Rarely do you take the time to do what Kelsey wants to do, or what Kelsey needs to do."

Ugh! There she goes with my name again. I look away because I don't want her to know she's right and I don't want her to see the anger I'm feeling right now. I'm a leader! People do what I want to do most of the time!

Hmph. Who am I kidding? Of course they do. Not because I particularly want to do it, but because I am intuitive. I can pick up on personalities in a matter of minutes just by being in the same room

with someone. I want people to be happy, and don't want to draw negative attention to myself. Therefore, I always cater to the crowd when suggesting things to do.

"What's wrong? I lost you." Julie asks as I sit pondering her analysis of me.

"No, I was just thinking. About what you were saying."

"So, I was right? At least somewhat?"

Kind of ashamed to admit my defeat in this short amount of time, I bow my head. "Yeah, unfortunately."

"No," a quick response refuting my negativity. "Not unfortunate. There is nothing wrong with wanting to please others. It is in our nature."

Did she say "our" nature? Whose? Does she think I am like her or something?

"All I am saying is, it is okay to do things for yourself every once in a while."

Upset by her comparison of me to her, I decide to do something for myself...take her advice.

"Are we done here? Is time up?"

"We still have 10 minutes." She answers, confused by my attitude shift.

I grab my bag and jet out of my chair, telling her to consider payment of the remaining 10 minutes a tip. As I reach for the door knob I tell her I'll be back tomorrow, and the next day, and the day after that. Not because I want to be. A week's worth of sessions my mother has so graciously lined up for me.

"Kelsey, wait." She says as I start out the door. "Just think about what I said, Kelsey."

I turn around and lose it. "Damn it! Can you quit saying my name already? I know it's your job and it makes you look good to remember all your measly little patients' names, but please quit!" I storm out the door. I can't believe I just snapped like that. But then again, it felt kind of good. I try not to think about it and rush out the door to go get my brother.

* * * * *

2: MUDDLE

Kyle is waiting on the sidewalk when I pull up. His face and body are covered in mud. Two clean lines run down his face from eyes to chin, and I quickly realize they're tear streaks. He opens the passenger door as I quickly scramble to cover the seat with a towel.

"What's up buddy?" I ask as cheerful as possible. No answer. He turns away from me, clutching his soccer ball in his lap and looks out the window. I can tell he's holding back tears.

I'm not really in the mood to talk either. I want to be me today, Kyle's sister. I'm tired of being Kyle's mother. Normally I would be persistent, nagging at Kyle until I got an answer, but not today. I have too much on my mind. For as long as I can remember, I've been expected to be Kyle's mother. Well, at least since my dad left. I know that for a fact. And Kyle was only a baby then, barely even crawling.

Eleven seems to be a rough age for a boy. He's old enough to catch the drift of some subtle jokes, old enough to be held accountable. But he's in an awkward stage, not yet coming into his own. He's bow legged, knock kneed, and his feet are growing so fast his body can't keep up. Not that he isn't cute, because he is. But he's just that...cute.

"Kels, why are guys such idiots?" Kyle asks, startling me from my mental summary. "Why do they have to pull pranks on me?" I tiptoe carefully around the fact that Kyle is not exactly "Mr. Athlete," figuring this is the impetus behind his questioning. He is not the most coordinated kid on the block. I know this is what all the fuss is about. He probably tripped at practice and lost the scrimmage for the team, hence the mud he is covered in.

Giving him the benefit of the doubt, I ask, "What happened?"

"Where do you want me to start?" he asks, obviously frustrated by the continuous shit dealt to him by the guys at school.

"From the beginning sounds good to me," I sarcastically reply.

"Well, at school this morning, someone pushed me in the bathroom. I bumped into the soap dispenser, squirting foam soap all over the front of my pants. For the rest of the day, everyone was calling me 'premie.'"

I stifle a laugh. That's kind of funny. Kyle notices me covering my mouth, and the clean part of his face flushes red. Because of this, I sense his seriousness.

“What!?!” He screams at me. “It’s not FUNNY!” He crosses his arms over the ball in his lap and pouts. The famous Kyle Cramer pout. Oh, how many times have I witnessed that?

I peek at him out of the corner of my eye and realize he isn’t pouting because it hurts his feelings. He is pouting because he doesn’t understand. “You don’t get it do you?” I inquire in a calm yet somewhat surprised manner. “Kyle, it’s okay if you don’t understand. Just be honest.”

I have a feeling that this conversation is leading in a direction I don’t want to go. It is not my job to educate my brother on puberty and sex. I shouldn’t have to do that. And it’s not like I even have experience enough to do so, but if I don’t, who will? I don’t want to be the one, but I would rather do it than have him talk to Mom or our sister, Lori. They would just blow shit out of proportion and scare the poor guy. If only Dad were around, he could do it. I mean, isn’t it a father’s job to fill in his son on these subjects?

I honestly don’t even know why I think Lori would even attempt to have this conversation. Kyle has never been anything to her but a hassle. She used to bitch and moan for having to change his diapers. Then she would complain when he was a toddler, coming in and out of her room. One time, he wandered into her room while she was in the shower. He couldn’t have been more than three. I was in my room playing with my Legos and I hear her screaming at him. When she started screaming, he started crying.

Mom raced into her bedroom to see what was wrong. I followed close on her heels. As soon as I caught a glimpse of him through the crook of Mom’s arm, I started laughing hysterically. I fell to the floor dramatically, slapping my knee. I knew this would do nothing but piss her off, and that was part of the reason I did it. She started slapping me, screaming about how I did nothing but encourage the little brat. There he sat, on her dresser, having climbed on top of the overturned trash can. He had a tube of lipstick in his hand and a compact in the other. Powder was everywhere and his face was absolutely covered in red. He had smeared the lipstick with his hand across the mirror and the dresser. It was a complete disaster area.

It was after that day that Lori started locking her bedroom door every time she left her room. She took money she had saved up and bought a new doorknob with a lock and key, just to keep us out. She was too worried about her privacy and growing up and looking good, just so she could get out. That she did, and never looked back.

He sits there, pondering. Finally he blurts out, "No, I don't get it. Is that soooo funny, Kels?"

"No," I answer, startled by his anger. "Want me to tell you? Or are you just going to be a little ass to me?"

"Sorry," he replies. It's genuine. "Please, tell me what it means, but don't laugh at me for not knowing."

I inhale a deep breath through my nose, exhaling slowly through my mouth. This is my attempt at keeping a straight face and not making him look like an idiot. "Okay. In this reference, being that you had white foam all over the front of your pants...they are calling you a premie, short for premature..."

"Premature what?" he quizzically stares into my face.

"Ejaculator. Kyle! Premature ejaculator." I grip the steering wheel, palms sweaty, knuckles turning white. Beads of perspiration dot my forehead. I dread what questions will follow this. I almost hate to ask. "Do you understand?"

"No...not really." Sullen reply.

A frog jumps in my throat. Is this the time and the place that I am going to have to explain? Right here in my car, looking at his muddy face? How can I be serious? How can I read his reactions? I have always been good at gearing what I am saying based on his body language. Now, in one of the most important conversations we will have for a long time, I'm going in blind.

So, I tell him, asking questions and not wanting any answers. I explain so he understands what I am talking about. I explain sex and orgasms and everything in between. I can't believe I am doing this. When I finish my explanation I ask, "Do you understand now?" hoping he does so I don't have to offer more detail.

"Yeah, I got it." He quietly replies. Silence. Trying to recover from my nervous bout, I continue. "So, what else happened?" hoping no more sexual comments fly.

After a long pause, he finally responds. "Well, I guess that was the worst part and I didn't even know. At soccer practice this afternoon, I tripped in a mud puddle, lost possession of the ball, and lost the scrimmage for the team."

I knew it. I should've just let him keep talking and I never would've had to go there. As he finishes his story, we pull into the driveway. After such an exhausting conversation, I have never in my life been so glad to be home.

"Go wash up, bud. I'll get dinner ready."

Kyle looks at me with shiny eyes. "Thanks, Sis."

* * * * *

3: MANIA

Fumbling with my bags into the front door, I nearly trip over the massive heap of laundry on the floor, trying to reach the phone that is ringing off the hook. Mom is passed out on the couch yet again, oblivious to our entry and the ringing phone.

"Hello," I say, panting, trying to catch my breath.

"Hey Kels. What's up?" The familiar voice of Olivia, my best friend, on the other end.

"Just walked in the door. What's up with you?"

"I was just calling to make sure you were gonna make it to practice tonight at 6. I think Travis got us a gig this weekend at the Broken Rainbow. We need some major work if we're gonna pull this off."

"Shit!" I exclaim. "I totally forgot. I better bust ass on my homework so I don't get behind. But yeah, I'll be there."

"Cool. Sounds good." Olivia replies.

"Oh, Liv. Can you come get me? Mom left a note that she needs the car tonight." I say, knowing what the next sentence out of her mouth will be.

"Yeah, but are you gonna give her the keys? She can't get another DUI or you are screwed."

"Look Liv. I don't have time to talk about this and honestly, I don't even want to think about it so can we just drop it? And will you pick me up at 5:30?"

"Well...okay. I guess I'll see you then. I'll be in town in a little bit."

"Cool. Later." I quickly hang up the phone. Partly because I have to get dinner going, but mostly because I don't want to have the drunk-driving-Mom conversation again. Of course I don't want to give her the keys. I mean, shit, look at her passed out at 4:30 in the afternoon, but it's not my car and I don't feel like getting smacked today. Maybe one of these days she will realize how completely screwed up she really is, but I can't wait for it.

I rush into the kitchen and grab a pot from under the stove. Filling it halfway with water. I throw some salt in and put it on the burner on high. Kyle will just have to settle for a simple meal tonight. I grab a box of shells and cheese from the cabinet and lay it out on the counter. Turning around, I reach into the second drawer and pull out the loaf of bread. I quickly grab paper plates from the cabinet and flop out four pieces of bread.

Digging through the refrigerator, I realize how bad we need a trip to the grocery. I'll go on Saturday. That way Kyle can go with me and pick out what he wants. In the meantime, he's going to have to settle on bologna, cheese, and mustard. As I grab everything from the refrigerator, I turn and SMACK, bump right into my mom.

She has been roused from her slumber by my clanking around in the kitchen and is none too happy to see me home.

"What in the hell are you doing in here? Sounds like there is a herd of elephants in this kitchen." Great. She's pissed, and it's early.

I stare at her and study her frazzled look. Her eyes are puffy and the mascara has started to clump on her eyelids. There are black streaks in the corners of her eyes, running the valleys of her nose. Her hair is flat and matted in the back and stands straight up in the front. She, at this moment, closely resembles the Bride of Frankenstein. Her T-shirt is two sizes too big and hangs off her left shoulder. The right leg of her red sweatpants is pushed up to the knee and her socks are twisted, hanging about three inches off the end of her feet.

I watch as she walks to the refrigerator, opens the door, and pops the top on a Pabst Blue Ribbon. "Are you serious?" I mumble, under my breath. From my count of empty bottles scattered around, this is beer number 12 for the day.

"What did you say?" she asks, defensive.

"Nothing, Mom. Just, please, get out of the kitchen so I can finish dinner." Not liking my reaction, she rears back and slaps me, right across my face. "Oww! What was that for?" I ask.

"You should know better than to run your mouth to your mother like that. Now, straighten up or I will ship you out of here faster than you can think." The empty threat. I hear this threat ring through my ears every time Mom is drunk and angry. I realize that my count of the beer is pretty accurate and sigh because I have nothing else to say.

I was hoping it wouldn't come to this tonight. I know I don't have time to sit here and fight with her, but when do I ever have time? I repeatedly ask myself if I should even address this right now, and decide against it. *Just keep your mouth shut*, I tell myself, *it's better for everyone that way*.

As I squirt mustard on all four slices of bread and throw cheese on two, the water starts to boil out of the pot, sizzling and crackling on the hot burner underneath. I quickly yank the pot off the burner to let the bubbles settle down and dump the macaroni into the pot. Turning to grab a towel to wipe up the mess, I quickly glance at my mother. She is sitting at the table with her cheek propped on her fist, glaring at me.

"What?" I ask her, creeped out by the stare. "Why are you looking at me like that?"

"Kelsey, why in the hell do you wear those stupid clothes? Why do you always have to wear black? You're so Goth. You look like you want to die or something. No wonder you're turning into a pot head. It would depress me every time I looked in the mirror if I looked like you."

Knowing a way I could get under her skin I reply, "Well, it would scare the shit out of me every time I looked in the mirror if I looked like you." I couldn't help it and I knew this one was gonna cost me. Mom jumps out of her chair, pushing off the table. Her beer topples over and starts running all over the table, dripping on the floor. Before I know it, she has me pinned to the refrigerator and is clocking me left and right. All of the anger she has built up for however long and about whatever she gets mad about is now being eliminated through her punches. Tears stream from her eyes, as she screams like a maniac. She punches me hard in the nose, then once in the stomach.

I reach up and hold her by the wrists to restrain her from hurting me even more. Kyle comes running into the kitchen to see what is happening and I scream for him to go. I yell at him to run next door to Mrs. Oglesby's for help. As soon as I say this, Mom fights even harder, screaming at Kyle to come back.

"This is none of her damn business! You leave her out of this argument. This is between me and your sister, Kyle. Get back in here." Frightened by her yelling, Kyle slinks back into the kitchen. By this time he is getting angry. He balls his fists and I watch as he scratches the palms of his hands with his finger nails. I know this is going to send him over the edge and within seconds, he jumps on Mom's back and is wrapping his arms around her neck, trying to get her to release me.

Clawing and scraping at Kyle's arms for breath, Mom turns away from me, long enough for me to catch her off guard. "Kyle, jump down," I yell as I swing low and swipe her feet out from under her with my leg. She falls hard to the floor and her head smacks with a THUMP. *Ouch. Glad that wasn't me.* I feel bad, but what choice do I have?

I whisper to Kyle to get an overnight bag as I throw bologna on the bread and stuff the sandwiches into a bag. I reach up and turn off the burner that has ruined the shells and cheese. The water has boiled out of the pot and the shells are stuck to the bottom and sides of the pan. I run to the phone and call Liv.

In a whisper, I beg, "Please, come get us now! We'll be on the corner. I'll explain when you get here." I hang up and grab my bag. Kyle is ready with his book bag, his overnight bag, and a coat. He has gotten fairly used to fast evacuations. We race out the door just as Mom is waking from the fall, moaning groggily. Running around the corner of the house, we duck in the bushes by Mrs. Oglesby's house until Mom closes the curtain in the kitchen window. We sneak out of the bushes and head down the street to safety, waiting on the corner when Liv comes speeding up in her white Jeep Liberty.

I rush over, swing open the passenger door and get in as Kyle climbs in the back. "GO!" I yell, just as I see Mom rushing out of the house, arms flailing. "Just get us the hell out of here," I beg, as tears finally catch up to me. My adrenaline is rushing, my heart pumping blood spastically through my body, my nose is bleeding, and I can't hold back. I crumble into myself, gasping for breath, mentally thanking Olivia for picking us up again.

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4: MASQUERADE

"Oh my gosh! What happened?" Olivia asks, shaken by my panic. "Your nose is bleeding. There are napkins in the glove box."

I can't manage any words yet. The intensity of the situation is visible in the wrinkles of Liv's forehead. I look at the side of her face as she drives attentively. Her distinctive jaw line protrudes in a square. Her cinnamon hair falls limply on her shoulders and over her back. For a split second, I am calm, being with her.

I turn and look in the backseat and Kyle is lying down, hugging his knees. He snuffles one, two, three times and I pass a napkin back to him to blow his nose. He snatches the napkin out of my hand and peeks out the window before sitting up. Seeing that we are at a safe distance from home, he finally sits upright and fastens his seatbelt.

"She jumped me. Liv. I have never seen her this bad. She was making fun of me and how I dress and I sarcastically slammed her shabby appearance. Before I could even look up, she was all up in my face. She kept punching and swinging at me and if Kyle wasn't there, I would probably be unconscious right now."

"This is probably a stupid question," Liv starts, "but was she drinking?" She glances away from the road at me and the look on her face melts me. She truly cares about me as I do her, but my stubbornness won't let me accept it completely.

"Yes...a bunch. Thanks for picking us up. Do you have your cell so I can call Mrs. O?" I ask, suddenly realizing I have to take Kyle somewhere.

"Look in the front pocket of my back pack. It should be in there." Liv is gentle with her words and I can see the concentration on her face. "Kyle can just stay with us if that's what you are calling for. I'm sure Keenan will keep him company, and my mom won't mind if you crash at my place." She's right. Keenan, her twin, will do all he can to make sure Kyle is comfortable. "We can just go in the morning and get you some stuff for school." I look at Liv and my stomach shifts.

"You don't have to do this." I repeat, wanting nothing more than to sleep in the comfort of her home, but at the same time, not wanting to be staying there simply because her parents are sympathetic. "I

can call Mrs. O. She'll be okay with it. I made him pack a bag so we can just pick him up in the morning before school if that's okay?"

Olivia will hear nothing of what I am saying. "No, it'll be fine, Kelsey. You guys just need to stay with me. Things will be fine. Promise." She turns to me and makes a kiss face. A thin coat of clear lip gloss intensifies the pucker and flutters rise in my chest. This face is not unusual, but in this vulnerable state, my face blushes, heat-filled.

"Can we skip on practice for tonight?" I ask, kind of bummed at my own request.

"Yeah. Definitely. Let me just drive by the Band Barn and we'll go to my place and get you cleaned up." Olivia seems to be about as disappointed as I am, but more than willing to do what I want...what I need.

We drive by the Band Barn and Olivia jumps out of the car, leaving it running for me and Kyle. I turn to him and the look in his eyes makes me crumble. Trying to comfort him, I reach around and put my hand on his leg. He grabs my hand and holds tight, beginning to cry again. "Kels, I was so scared. I thought she was gonna hurt you so bad and I wasn't going to be able to do anything." The saddles of his lower eyelid fill with tears, mounting but not falling.

"It's okay buddy. Thank you for being brave and jumping on Mom. You saved me. You know that?" He doesn't respond. "We'll be okay. Are you fine staying with Liv, or do you want to go hang out with Mrs. O?"

"I want to stay with you if that's okay. I know she's your friend and all, but I don't really want to be alone tonight."

"That's cool. You can stay." As I finish this statement, Olivia comes running back to the Jeep. She is followed by Travis. *Oh great.* Travis walks out with his scrawny body in girl's jeans and shaggy hair swinging back and forth over his eyes. He swings my door open, wanting to see my busted face.

"Aw hell!" he says as he looks at my blue nose and my swelling eye. "She gotcha good this time, huh?" Olivia slaps his arm and he turns around, embraces her in a bear hug, pins her to the front fender, and starts trying to kiss all over her. He wants to be with her but she plays it off as if they are just teasing with one another. In their horseplay, they forget about me and the pain I'm in.

"Can we just go?" I ask Liv. I know this is probably totally rude, but honestly, I don't care. I just want to shower and clean up and curl up in bed with my homework. I can't let this get me behind, and I have a tough schedule this semester.

"Let's do it." She says as she climbs back into the driver's seat. Throwing the car into reverse, she creeps backward to get turned around. She stomps the gas. We swerve and fishtail out of the driveway, throwing gravel up at least 15 feet. A semi-grin appears in the corners of Kyle's mouth. Quietly, he reacts to her attempt to lighten the air. "Sweet."

By the time we get to Liv's house it is close to 8:00. I realize we have yet to eat dinner. Reaching into my bag, I pull out the gallon sized Ziploc I threw our sandwiches in almost three hours earlier. The sandwiches have been smushed by my books and clothes, and the mustard smeared on the bag. I reach in and hand Kyle a sandwich. Looking it over, he decides it isn't too bad and begins to chow down as if he is starved. I feel bad because I know he hasn't eaten in like nine hours and this is not going to satisfy him, but it's a start. I look at my sandwich and hand it back to him. He takes it from my hand and immediately takes a bite out of it. He sits there with a sandwich in each hand and as he is chewing, he looks down at the bag, noticing that it is empty.

"Take it back," he says, handing the sandwich to me. "What will you eat?"

"I'm not too hungry," I lie to him. "The blood is still running into my throat, making me a little queasy. I'll be fine." And I will, despite the hunger creeping up into my stomach, and the shaky hands. As bad as I want to take the sandwich back, I won't.

"Kels, how will we get to school tomorrow?"

"I've got us covered. Don't worry about it. You just get some rest." I stretch back and knuckle his head, ruffling his hair and he smiles. Slightly, but sincere.

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5: MAINTAIN

The thought of a shower feels amazing. I step in with the steam rising around me, embracing me. I tilt my head back and run my fingers through my long hair. Leaning forward a little, I wipe my face, forgetting, for a split second, that I had been in the fight. "Ouch," I say, under my breath. Carefully wiping around my nostrils. I try to cleanse the blood that has solidified. I gently tap the tenderness around the bottom of my right eye, knowing I will have a shiner when I wake up in the morning. Standing in the hot shower, I clutch my arms around my body and slouch against the wall. Leaning my head back on the cold tile I let the memories of the evening rush into the forefront of my thoughts, letting them replay, hoping they will soon fade.

My emotions have been tapped and I am completely drained of feeling. Reluctantly shutting off the shower, I reach for the towel draped over the shower rod. I dry myself and examine my war wounds in the full length mirror on the back of the door. I step closer and notice the purpling of my stomach at the base of my ribs and realize how painful a breath is to me.

Pushing away the pain and savoring the warmth remaining from the hot shower, I brush my teeth and my hair, gently rub lotion on my face, and pull my legs into black Jordan gym shorts. The only T-shirt I have in my bag is an old Rolling Stones shirt that I found in the attic and has been in my bag for three weeks. It's all wrinkled and smells like paper and books, but I figure it's better than wearing blood for the night.

Quietly pushing open the bathroom door, I scan left and then right, seeing no one. I walk toward Liv's bedroom and see Kyle sitting on the floor, flipping through a CD case in Keenan's room. "Hey, Kyle. You all set?" I ask and force a smile.

"Yep. Keenan says I can sleep in here so I thought I'd just chill." I look over at Keenan, busily typing away on IM. He looks nothing like Liv even though they are twins. His build is large, a little chubby. He is over six feet tall and a big sap. He is probably online chatting to his buddies about his roomie for the night. I walk over to Kyle, grab his hand, and pull him up from his crossed-leg position. As he rises, I notice how tall he is getting. In a few months, he will probably pass me up. I give him a hug. Normally he doesn't like to show affection for me when others are around, but tonight seems to be

different. Embracing me, he squeezes tighter and tighter. I have to ask him to release his grip so I can breathe. "Night, Bro. Love you." I say and head out the door.

When I get into Liv's room, she has already pulled back the bed and given me two pillows. I call for her and step into the hall. She pops her head out of the bathroom, toothbrush in mouth and toothpaste running halfway down her chin. With a wink she raises one finger to me, signaling me to hold on, and returns to the bathroom. I casually cross my arms and prop myself against the doorframe of her bedroom, doing as I'm told.

She emerges from the bathroom and approaches me, throwing her arm around my shoulders. With a grin, she pulls me in her room and shuts the door. I step over her shoes, purse, and book bag and step onto the furry, pink circular rug in front of her bed. Turning slightly, I sit on the edge of her bed and cross my legs, squeezing my clasped hands between my legs at the knee.

I glance around the room realizing how much I despise the decorations Liv has on her walls. She told me once before that she hasn't changed her decorations since she was eleven, and it is blatantly clear. I have been here quite a few times throughout the past two years, but I never really paid much attention to how juvenile her room is.

Her walls are painted with stripes in two shades of purple: light lavender and a deeper violet. The bed, vanity, nightstand, and mirror are all white wicker, and on the nightstand sits a brass lamp with a unicorn lampshade. A pink and purple plastic bead curtain dangles in front of the closet, and pink and green hippie flowers of various sizes hang on the walls. I look over and watch Liv as she applies her lip gloss in the mirror, smacking her lips together. She doesn't realize I'm watching her as she picks up her brush, swings her hair around her left shoulder and begins to brush. I can't help but realize how beautiful she is, even though I would never say anything to her. I wouldn't want to ruin our friendship, and besides, she doesn't look at me that way.

"You know, you should really do something with this room," my attempt at breaking the silence and halting the train roaring through my head.

"Yeah. No kidding. Mom said I can do whatever I want with it and she never comes up here, but I don't know how to decorate. Hey...you're artistic. Maybe you can help me." The answer I was waiting for.

"The only thing is, if I had free reign, the room would look like it was mine...not yours."

Thoughts were floating in and out of my head and I envisioned the changes I would make. The first thing to go would be the ugly lampshade! I would paint the walls, either red or black, and accessorize accordingly. I could make this room badass.

"So, if you could do anything with it, what would you do?" Liv asks. I explain the thoughts that had just run through my head two seconds earlier. I tell her how awesome it would be to get blackboard paint so you could write on the walls and erase. The more I talk, the more I am digging the idea of going crazy in the room. I laugh and lay back in the bed, propping my head on my arm. Liv soon joins me in the bed and turns on the lamp. I lie on my back, staring up toward the ceiling and continue with my thoughts.

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I start to doze and am startled awake by Olivia's meek call to me. I try unsuccessfully to will myself awake. My body tingles with a clenching panic, drawn from my slumber. Heart palpitations rattle my chest and my breathing is quick, shallow. I feel the tingles in my hands and feet, my neck and ears.

"Kelsey, do you think your Mom is okay?"

I had sort of pushed the earlier episode out of my mind. I think about my mother in all of her beastly, drunken glory and the stinging look on her face. The utter hatred as she pounded me with her fists. The desperate clawing as if I had betrayed her. Her misery struck out at me, I was the victim.

"Um, well...I'm not sure. It scares me to leave her like that, but there isn't much else I can do. I'm just hoping she was too drunk to find the keys. If she stayed there, I think she'll be fine." Honestly, I don't want to think about it. I feel safe here. I know her parents are sane and clean. Her parents would never dream of getting blitzed beyond sanity and then beating the crap out of their kids. "Can we just drop it?" I ask out of desperation.

"I'm sorry," she replies. "It's just, I want to make sure you're all right." She sniffs and I wonder if she is crying.

"Liv, I'll be fine. I promise. I'm used to this, sad as it sounds." I breathe in heavily and exhale slowly, trying to keep my composure. I'm tired of crying. Anyway, what good does it do? I mean, really, I waste time crying. As long as I can look out for me and my brother, we'll make it.

As I lay in the silence, I listen to her steady breath, in and out. I wonder if she's awake and why she's so worried. I'm kind of flattered by her concern, but it's hard to deal with. I'm not used to this attention.

I roll over facing the window and wonder where my mom is, what she's doing, if she's safe. I wonder if she even cares about the fight we had or if she is passed out somewhere. My eyelids press heavily on my eyes, forcing me to close them. As I lay cuddled with my pillow, I feel Liv's back press up against mine. The warmth connecting the two of us is comforting.

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TUESDAY

6: TABULATE

The warm sun wakes me early. My eyes fly open as I realize that I have begun to sweat under the layers of blankets Liv stacked last night. I roll over onto my back, turning my head toward her. She has thrown all of her blankets on top of me, the weight adding to the extremity of the obnoxious sun. I want to go back to sleep, but look at the clock and realize we overslept.

"Wake up Liv. We have to hurry. We're gonna be late for school." I spring out of bed and quickly strip off my shorts and T-shirt and slink into the pants from the night before and a Volcom hoodie that was crumpled in the bottom of my bag. As I stretch into the hoodie, the static crackles in my hair. I rush to the bathroom, wet my hands, and run them through my hair, pulling it into a dew drop.

I knock on the door to Keenan and Kyle, screaming at them to get up. Why did we all sleep in? Why didn't Olivia's mom wake us up like she usually does? Kyle stumbles from the bedroom and into the bathroom. I walk back to Liv's bedroom and she is sitting on the edge of the bed, staring into her open closet. I study her face, her crossed legs. As I stand in the doorway, she looks up at me.

"How did you sleep, Kels?" she asks in a raspy morning voice.

"Okay, I guess. Not long enough. And you?"

"I was out! I slept like a rock." As she talks to me, she stares into my face. Standing from the edge of the bed, she approaches me, hand extended toward my face. I jump away out of habit and she approaches once more. "Kels, your face looks terrible! How bad does it hurt?"

I had forgotten about the bruises. In my rushing around, I didn't even look into the mirror. Leaning toward the vanity mirror across from her bed, I check out my face. My right eye is swollen with shades of blue and purple surrounding the bottom. My nose is discolored and the slit in my lip is puffy. I look like hell. Immediately, thoughts of the day at school and the reaction of my classmates rock my brain. How will I explain this? What do I say to distract people from my busted up face? I vow to myself to not tell the truth. I'm not normally a shady person, but I know the severity of telling others that my mom beat me up. I know that with confirmed abuse, Kyle and I would probably be taken from our home and put into some crappy foster home or something. I also know it is likely we will not be placed together. Without me, Kyle would go crazy.

"Liv, do me a favor? Please, whatever you do today, don't tell *anyone* about the fight with my mother. I'm begging you."

Her stare burns through me. I know this is not the right thing to do, but is what has to be done. I can't hold her gaze. I look down at the floor, rustling the edge of the pink fuzzy rug with my shoe. "I don't understand you, Kelsey." Liv says as she walks to her closet and pulls out a pink fitted shirt. With her back to me, she continues. "I know you love your mother and that you don't want to break up your home, but I mean, really, you have to do something about this. I have known you for two years and this has happened so many times. I can't believe no one has done anything about it so far. How many times are you going to let this happen? I will keep my mouth shut, but not because I want to. I'm doing it for you, understand?"

As she finishes her statement, she again approaches me. Her hand brushes against my jaw and she tugs my chin up with a crooked finger so I look into her face. Her eyes fill with tears. She has lied for me so many times, even though she doesn't really understand.

"Liv," I say softly as I grab her hand and hold it in mine. "one day, I will do something about this. And when I do, you will be the first to know. It's just, today isn't that day." I tilt my head to catch her eye that is escaping mine.

"Kelsey, I just...." She starts, hesitating.

"What? You just what?" I prod, hoping she will answer. She doesn't. Every time we get in this position, she stares at me, starts to talk, and changes her mind. I want to know what it is that is so hard to say. Why can't she just blurt out, tell me what is bothering her so much. But she won't...can't.

"I don't think you fully understand. It's not that I don't *want* to do something about this because, believe me, I do. I just can't justify running my mouth. Do you know what would happen if I told?" I have her attention now. She looks up at me, shaking her head.

"If I rat my mom out for this, she'll be turned in to Social Services. With this comes mine and Kyle's removal from her custody. After that, we more than likely go into foster homes, depending on some stranger to care for us. Chances are, we won't be placed together. Then what? I'm in one place, worrying about Kyle. He's in another, crying for me. Not a good situation." She listens, but doesn't and can't fully

understand. She doesn't know how it feels. She has loving, doting parents. "Besides, it isn't completely her fault. If she isn't drinking, she's not half bad. She's my mom, you know?"

Turning away from me, Olivia walks back to her closet. That didn't sit well. With her back turned to me once more, she strips off her night shirt and I watch as the muscles in her back and shoulders tighten. Clasp her bra behind her back, her shoulders flex. She bends down, grabs a white tank, and pulls it over her head.

I stare at her and realize how gorgeous she really is. Fighting back urges to walk to her and turn her toward me, embrace her in my arms. I sit on the vanity stool. I continue to watch as she slinks out of her pajama pants, staring at her smooth, dark legs. Pulling a pair of navy pants on one foot, she hops to the right a little, losing her balance. She slides her other leg in and I watch as she pulls them straight over her hips. She stands on tiptoe to button the pants, something I have always noticed her do. One of her little quirks. Turning back toward me, she notices my stare as I turn my head away, too late.

"What?" she asks, kind of startled, but kind of flirty I think. "Were you staring at me? I think you were."

"Huh? Oh, no. I was in a daze, just thinking about everything." Whew! That was close. How would I explain staring at my best friend as she changes clothes? A sight I have witnessed countless times over the past two years? "Hey, what would you do?" I ask her, changing the subject.

"What would I do about what? You staring at me when I change?" She casually punches my arm. "Or about your situation?"

"Theoretically, if your mom or dad were beating you and drunk all the time, what would you do? How would you handle things?" I'm not quite sure I want to know her answer. And even if she does give me an honest answer, I more than likely will not agree with it for my situation. But I ask. One, because I'm curious to hear how she would handle this. Two, because she is my best friend and I care about what she thinks. And three, because I desperately want to change the subject.

"I'll have to think about it. I'll get back to you later on that, K?" She walks out of the room and I watch her as she moves gracefully down the hallway. As Kyle emerges from the bathroom, Liv walks in. Kyle looks at me and offers a half-ass smile.

"Hey bud, how did you sleep?" I ask as I realize he is staring at my bruises.

"Um, pretty good. What about you?" He stands, shoulder against the wall, hands in pockets.

"Better than I expected. I was really tired." I try to sound a little chipper, despite things.

"So, how's your face?" The blunt question because he knows I won't bullshit him.

"Doesn't hurt too bad, but I look like hell, huh?" I try to joke and he smiles a little more.

"Worst yet. Usually there's no bruises. What're we gonna do?" I knew he would worry. I didn't expect anything different. Kyle is a worry wart. He never is content without knowing exactly what is going on. When he was four, he always wanted me to carry him around piggy back or on my shoulders so he could see everything. "I'm the king of the world," he'd say, able to see everything in the house. For some reason, because he could see, he thought he knew everything too. Now, with emotions peaked, I know he wants answers, but I don't have any.

"Hey bud, don't worry okay? I'll take care of us. Have I ever failed you? Have I ever let you get hurt? I'll figure it out and you'll be the first to know." I see him relax a little and his arms bend from their stiffened state as he casually tucks them in his pockets. He trusts me. "Let's just go to school and wait on the curb for me after practice. I'll be there to get you. I have something I have to take care of this afternoon, and then we'll work things out with Mom."

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7: TURNABOUT

Because I left with Olivia last night, I have to walk to the counselor's office after school. I head to my locker after class and load my bag with all of the work I need to catch up on. It's only the first few weeks of school and I have already fallen behind in my classes. I told myself at the end of last year I wasn't going to do this, and look at me.

I pop in the ear buds to my ipod as I slam out of the front doors and head toward town. The walk to the counselor's office isn't that bad. I should be there in about twenty minutes. I breathe in the fresh air of this gorgeous August day as I strut across the crosswalk per instruction from the crossing guards. Because of the heavy traffic at the end of a school day, crossing guards take their duty seriously. Standing on the corner in their fluorescent yellow vests, black pants and boots, holding Stop/Yield signs attached to white PVC pipe, the guards consistently showcase stern faces. Whistles rest between their lips and their motions are stiff, rehearsed. One beacons for me to hustle across the street and I pick up my stride until I reach the opposite sidewalk. Cars from the school parking lot turn right and head down Tamarack Avenue following closely behind one another, falling into line. As I walk along the sidewalk, I start to sing along with a Dave Matthews song, escaping into my head for a while. My classmates are heading toward town with windows down, leaning out and screaming, as if today begins a holiday.

I walk with my head bowed letting my hair fall into my face as I have all day. I want to obscure the bruises as much as possible to avoid confrontation. People look at you weird when you have bruises and cuts and frankly, I don't want to deal with the plaguing questions and concerns. I want to carry on...live my life as I know it and get the hell out of here as soon as possible. As I think of what my life will be like when I'm independent, I'm immediately overcome with a burden I have not yet considered...Kyle. What do I do with him? I can't leave him with my mother. It isn't safe for him to be alone with her. Do I take him with me? Is that even legal? I know that I have to fabricate an escape plan for the two of us, just in case. It would be a lot easier to just stay and duke it out with Mom until I turn 18, but the question is, can I?

I approach the elementary school as well as intensified traffic. All of the students from my school are piling into this traffic jam as parents attempt to pick up their children. This time of day is impossible for making a left turn out of the elementary school parking lot. It never fails that some dumb asses feel

they have the ability to do so and wait for the smallest clearing in the flow of cars, maybe two car lengths, and pull out in front of the next person. This is exactly what I am witnessing.

Some idiotic soccer mom has nosed out into the street, restricting the west-bound traffic. The driver she blocks is cussing and ranting, waving his arms. She is waving her arms back at him as she tries to turn. A break in traffic appears, way too short for her to swing her white mini van into the opening, but she goes for it. Slamming the gas, she guns her van into the east-bound lane just as the cars in front of her stop. She plows into the Ford Escort in front of her, causing a Dodge Hemi to crash into her rear. I jump at the screech and crush of metal on metal on impact. Her kids are crying and she's frantic. Antifreeze is shooting out of the front end of her van and her hood is angled in a V shape, blocking her view from inside. She jumps out of the van, running to the car in front of her. As the driver gets out of the car, she quickly hugs him against his will. I hear her screams over my music as she apologizes endlessly to the driver. I choose to walk on. I don't have time to stick around as a witness. There were plenty of people who saw the wreck, and besides, if I stay and talk to the cops, they will more than likely ask how I got so beat up and I can't risk it. My best decision is to carry on...and I do.

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I walk into the counselor's office, give my name at the desk to verify my appointment, and plop into one of the stiff iron chairs in the waiting room. Almost as soon as I sit down Julie is waiting for me in the doorway. "Hey, Kelsey. Good to see you. Come on back." I follow her down the hallway, careful to obscure my bruises from clear view. As soon as I sit down in the patient's seat with my head down, I can feel the sizzle of Julie's eyes burning through the top of my scalp, waiting for me to raise my head. I know she has already noticed the bruises. I'm screwed. Out of the corner of my eye, I see a small stress ball on the table next to my chair. I reach over and grab it, looking at the logo on the side. Century 21.

"Looks like you didn't have a very good night. Want to talk about it?"

I reply with my head still down, forehead leaning against my upturned hand resting on my knee.

"Um...I'd rather not, but if you want me to, I will."

"Like I said before, I won't make you tell me anything you don't want to say. But I have to say.

I'm curious about how you were hurt. It worries me. Want to start there?"

Am I going crazy or did I not just say that I didn't want to talk about it? I understand that she is doing her job. I really do get that. What she doesn't understand is that I don't *want* to be here. I was forced to be here. I rub my hands over my eyes and then down my cheeks, slightly raising my head to stare into her face, hoping she will back down. Realizing that I am already preparing myself to get an attitude with her, I decide against the anger. I lift my face completely, thinking to myself that she can't do anything about it even if I do tell her. In my opinion, this falls under patient confidentiality.

"Look, I will give you the rundown, but only if you don't tell anyone else. I'm hurt, but I don't want you to do anything about it. I can take care of myself, and I have. Is that cool?"

Her hesitation scares me a little. Her eyes study the bruises and cuts on my face and some sort of sadness or compassion or whatever you want to call it changes her expression. The look in her eyes causes my stomach to flip as if I've let her down in some way. Softly she answers my questions. "I am supposed to report dangerous behavior, so if I think it is out of hand, I can't promise that I won't tell someone, not because I don't trust that you have things under control, but because it is my job to make sure my clients are safe. We can work through that."

I know she's right. It isn't the first time I've heard such things, but it doesn't make it any easier for me to tell. I lift my legs and drop them back down on the tops of my hands, stiffening my arms, swinging my legs. "Well...here goes." I pause for a moment, gathering the nerve to explain. I don't do this. I don't tell my business. I take it all and let it settle somewhere within me. But I will try. "My mom did it. I came in last night from here and was trying to fix my brother some dinner before band practice and she was passed out. She drinks a lot sometimes. She came into the kitchen and started picking on me. One smart comment out of my mouth and she goes ballistic, swinging at me, throwing punches directly at my face and stomach. She blocked me in the kitchen and my brother distracted her to get her off me. After that, we left." I left out the part about knocking her out, but don't really want to talk about it.

"How often does this sort of thing happen between you and your mother? Is it a regular thing or is it just random?"

"Umm...this is only the second time she has hit me hard enough to make me bleed and bruise. Usually she just slaps me with an open hand, and sometimes kicks me in the shins. I have never seen her so irate before. It was kind of weird."

"Okay. What about your brother? Does she ever hit him?"

"No. Never. She doesn't even acknowledge him most of the time. She never wanted him to begin with. I've practically raised him since my sister quit helping. She's the favorite. She gets anything she wants because she's feminine and pretty. She dresses like 'respectable' women should. I get all of the blame for everything. It doesn't matter how hard I try, I can't please my mother. She's constantly nagging me about how I dress and how I wear my hair. About playing the guitar and about being in a band. She says I need to take better care of myself so I can find a rich man to marry and move out of this damn town."

"So, you feel a lot of pressure that you think is unnecessary, and your feelings are justifiable. Is there anything you can do to make her stop worrying so much?"

"Nothing I can do will ever be good enough. Don't you understand? There's *nothing* I can do to please her. Every time I talk to her, she finds something new to bitch about. If I knew of something, I'd do it. I promise. Not only is this wrecking my home life, but it's tearing me away from my best friend. She doesn't understand."

"So this happens often. How often do you have verbal disagreements with her?"

"We argue all the time, but I have to say it's worse when she's drinking. She becomes another person. Sometimes she doesn't even realize that we're there, in the house, cleaning and doing laundry, grocery shopping and mowing the lawn. She doesn't realize that without me and Kyle, nothing would get done around the house. She's ungrateful and worthless."

As I say this, I look down at the brown squiggles patterning the charcoal carpet. No matter how true these statements are, I can barely utter them. I am ashamed to have a dead-beat mother who boozes her day away. I am ashamed that I don't have anything more to offer Kyle. I am depressed that regardless what I do, my mother will never recognize my accomplishments. I hate that about my life. I glance up in the silence and watch as Julie taps the end of her mechanical pencil against the yellow steno pad in front of her. She is stumped: she can't even figure out what to write next in her notes to file in my cute little "needs help" folder.

As I look back up into her face, she tilts her head and leans closer to me from across the cherry desk. "Listen here, kiddo. I know how hard this has to be, and I am tempted to report this. However, because you are disclosing this information to me, and because you are only a few months from turning 17

when you are able to make some decisions as an adult, I will leave this open for now. Because this seems to be a somewhat rare occurrence, I am not obligated to immediately report this incident. However, I expect that you will be honest with me in the next couple of days. If the violence continues, I have no choice but to report your mother. Understood?"

As I am listening, my heart sinks. My emotions have mounted a teeter-totter, rising to the height of a mutual understanding and the realization that this woman is respecting me like I have never been respected before, yet sinking to the depths of my darkest wishes to be removed from my mother. Something deceitful and evil within me wants to be taken from her, never to return to her unappreciative, disrespecting self. This same something feels it would be best for Kyle to be somewhere else. Realistically, I know Kyle would transform into a different person if removed from me and his dependency on me. But, honestly, would it be all that bad?

"Got it. Hey, thanks for listening. Thanks for agreeing to not say anything." I stand up, shaking my now-numb hands, waiting to regain some feeling. I reach down and grab my bag, sling it over my shoulder, and reach out to shake Julie's hand. I don't really know why I'm doing this, but I feel the need.

"You are a fine young woman with more maturity than I have seen in most women your age. You keep taking care of yourself, and don't let her bring you down. No matter how you look, how you dress, how you wear your hair, you are still a beautiful person. Don't let anyone tell you differently. Okay? Tomorrow, we are going to talk about you. About what you need to get from these sessions. About what will help you deal with your struggles. About what makes you happy. Sound okay?"

I manage a smile as she softly speaks these things. "Okay. I'll try. But I have to admit, I'm not very good at talking about myself."

My smile is mirrored on her face. Her compassion has, in only two days, changed my mind. I feel warmth and security in this place. I don't dread being here. I would never say this to Julie, but I'm looking forward to seeing her tomorrow. She seems like the only person, besides Liv, that truly cares right now. She's being paid to make me talk, to listen, and to get my mind redirected, but I confide in her anyway. I wave as I walk out the door. Looking down at my watch, I realize I have to hurry and get the car. Kyle will be waiting for me to pick him up. He'll want to know my strategy for correcting the wrongs of the world, so I have to concoct one, and quick.

As soon as I get my ear buds back in place. I begin to jog toward the bus stop. I can feel the warmth of the afternoon sun beating down on my back, radiating through my black shirt. My bag is banging against my hip with every other step so I reach my arm around under it to steady the thump of the books against my body. My feet slip out of my shoes with every step, making it hard to carry on, but I don't care. For these two minutes, I'm free. I'm a bluebird soaring through the open skies. I'm a fawn running across a clear field chasing a butterfly. I'm a woman, respected and cared for.

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8: TOPSY-TURVY

I get off the bus three blocks from home and race down the sidewalk toward home. Thinking of how the rest of the day will play out, I immediately dread going home. I know I have no choice, but am not ready to look into Mom's face. I'm uncertain of how she will react to me, and don't have time to talk to her now. I walk around the back of the house and slide the key into the door. Mom is in the kitchen and I startle her when I bound into the dining room. I drop my bag onto the table and look at her, wondering what her first words will be.

"Why are you late?" she asks. Her tone is surprisingly gentle, curious. It is clearly evident that she is currently sober.

"Um...I had counseling, remember? I need the keys so I can go get Kyle from practice. Know where they are?"

"I think they're on the table by the phone. Are you coming straight home, or do you have practice tonight?"

Is this real? Is she really acting like nothing ever happened? Does she remember that she beat the shit out of me last night? I run into the living room and see that the keys are exactly where she said they were. I pick them up, toss them in the air, snap my hand back around them and stuff them into my pocket. I realize how thirsty I am and walk to the kitchen for some water.

"Oh my gosh!" my mother screams. "What happened to your face! Did you get in another fight?" She is sincere. She doesn't have a clue that she did this to me.

"No, not really. I'll tell you about it later. I have to go get Kyle now. He's probably impatiently waiting for me." I walk out the door with a weight lifted off me. I know it's absolutely absurd that I should be grateful that she doesn't remember the encounter, but it's that much less to deal with now. I slide into the car and start it up. Backing out of the driveway, I crank the radio, drifting into my thoughts. Do I confront her on her abuse? Do I let her know that she did this to me or do I fabricate some fake story to get her off my back? I really need to talk to Liv. I don't know that her advice will actually be what I want to follow, but I'm sure she'll know what is right to do. I hate when she's right, and it seems like it's most of the time.

Pulling up to the curb. I see Kyle. He gathers his bag and his soccer ball and runs toward me. He plops down in the seat and turns toward me. "Hey. You look like crap."

"Thanks, bro. Good to see you, too. Does it really look that bad?"

"Yeah, it kinda does. So, what about Mom? Did she go nuts on you when you went back?"

I decide to stay parked for a minute. I need to talk to Kyle and this is the best place to do it. I need to warn him about me blabbing my mouth to the counselor. I need to prepare him for the confrontation with Mom. Most of all, we need to come up with a plan in case it doesn't go well. "I don't think she remembers. I really don't. She asked me how I got the bruises. Can you believe that? I wanted to tell you something though. I went to the counselor again today. You know, the one Mom made me go to? And...um...well, I told her. I told her what happened."

I look over at him and he slumps. His head looks down at his lap and his hands twitch. Fiddling with the edge of his shorts, he looks back at me, a little teary. I know exactly what he is thinking and decide to intercept his thoughts.

"She's not reporting it. She's going to wait it out. We don't have to be sent away or anything like that, but, Kyle, I couldn't lie. Something told me she would be cool about it, and she was. She was totally understanding, okay? She really is a good person and she's going to help me work through this, to try to find a way to fix these problems with Mom. Okay?"

"Yeah." Insecurity evident in his tone.

"Kyle, we'll be okay. Look at me." He doesn't. "Hey, look at me." I catch his gaze and stare intently into his big, blue eyes. "I won't let you down. Promise. I told you I would take care of you, right?"

"Right."

"Do you trust me?"

"I guess."

"No. That's not acceptable. I *will* take care of you. Period. End of story." I am trying so hard to convince him. My attempts seem to be failing. "Okay. So, here's the plan. We're going to go home to see how Mom is. I'm going to calmly explain what happened to me, but not before I call Liv. I'll tell her to head over so she'll be getting there when we're talking through everything with Mom, just in case. You

don't even have to be in the room with me. I want you to get in the shower and pack a bag in case we have to leave."

He is staring at me as I talk, watching every word seep out of my mouth. "Okay, but Kels, I have homework that I have to finish tonight. And you told me you would help me study for my science test that I have tomorrow. Remember? ...I'm scared. I don't want her to do that again, and if she does, then we'll have to move and live in foster houses with families we don't know and we won't be together, and..."

"Hey bud, calm down. I have this under control." With that said, I put the car into Drive and take off toward the house. This control I preach sounds real pretty. I sound like I know what I'm saying. My gut is wrenching and I'm scared shitless, but I can't let on to that. I can't be weak. I'm the one who has to take charge. I look into the rear-view mirror as I'm driving and see a ghostly reflection staring back at me. I tell Kyle to reach into my bag and hand me my cell phone. He hands it to me and resumes his stare, straight ahead.

I dial Liv and she answers after the first ring. "Whoa! Were you sitting on your phone or what?" I smile. Only the second one I have managed today.

"No, but it was sitting in my lap. What's up?"

"Not a lot. I was wondering if you could do me a favor...yet again."

"Sure. What's that?"

"Well, I'm gonna talk to Mom when we get home and I was wondering if you could head over a little early...in like thirty, forty-five minutes...just in case, you know. Crazy shit. Mom didn't even remember last night when I went home for the keys. I have to talk to her about it and I want you to be there in case we need to bolt, K?"

"I can do that. Are you going to practice?"

"Yeah, I'm going to practice. As far as I know anyway. If all goes well." She starts rambling about a new song or something. As she is going on, Kyle taps me on my leg. I look over and furrow my brow to him in an inquisitive way. He whispers to me, "Don't forget about my homework."

"Oh, Liv. I do have something I have to do before practice. Think you can call the guys and push it back to seven tonight? That would help me a bunch."

"I'll just tell Keenan when I'm leaving. He can call the guys. They'll probably go early anyway, but that way they'll know we'll be late."

"Thanks so much. Well, pulling into the drive now. Wish me luck and I'll see you in a few."

"Good luck. I'll be thinking about you and driving nervously in your neighborhood, just in case you need me quicker."

"You're the best." I'm truly grateful and lucky to have such an awesome friend, even though she doesn't understand.

"I know. See ya soon. Later."

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9: THRESHOLD

My hands are shaking and my stomach's in a knot as I reach for the door knob. I'm trying to play cool so Kyle doesn't get too worried, but I can't hide the fear. I glance back at him before opening the door and he gives me a willed crooked smile, the best he can do now. I'm certain that as nervous as I am, he's ten times as bad. He doesn't deal well with conflict and never has. I'm sure he is anxiously awaiting the end of this drama, but I'm convinced that he won't see it any time soon. The only way he would see an end is in the case of our removal, and that wouldn't be good. I rustle his hair to calm him a little and walk into the house like normal.

Mom is in the living room. I can hear the blare of the TV and peek around the corner to see that she is watching Dr. Phil. The topic of discussion on today's episode is "My Dependant Child." The funny thing, there are no children. All of the 'children' are grown adults 25, 28, 31 years old who still live at home with their parents. She is engrossed in the show and barely even acknowledges our arrival.

"Hey." I say casually as I lay down my bag by the hallway. "What do you want for dinner?"

She doesn't answer for a minute. I wait as I flip through the caller ID to see what calls were missed. No one for me. A bunch of unavailable calls pop up as missed calls, but other than that, no one for anyone. Probably a bunch of telemarketers. When the commercial comes on, she finally decides to respond to me. "Come here, Kelsey." She demands.

I walk into the living room and flop down in the recliner, facing the TV. This is intentional because I want to put off the conversation about my face as long as possible. "Yeah?"

"I wanted to talk to you, remember?" Uh oh. Here we go. I quickly scan the room and see no empty beer cans. That's a plus. I peek around the corner to the kitchen bar and see that it is clean, no cans there either. I think I'm in the clear.

"Okay, so talk." I say. Authoritative but not hateful. I want her to know that I'm not scared of her. Then again, I don't want her to think I'm being a smart ass. We know how well she handles that!

"What happened to you? Did some girls beat up on you in the locker room or something? It better not be a boy, I tell you. Kids these days."

"Actually, Mom....I...it...I..." Ugh! Just say it already. How do I do this!? I just have to be strong, but calm. "It was you. Last night. That's why we left." I look over at her and can see the figurative slap across her face.

"Me? Are you serious? There's no way. I wouldn't hit you. Tell me the truth." She actually has no recollection of this. How amazingly pathetic. She was that drunk that she doesn't even remember something this major?

"Mom, you did it. I was making dinner and we were arguing. Next thing I knew, you were punching me. I couldn't get you to stop. I...I'm....I'm sorry. Do you not remember?" I ask, not because I don't know, but because I want her to see how absurd this whole situation really is. I want her to see how ridiculous she is when she drinks. I want her to learn a lesson. I know it is a far stretch, but it's worth the effort. "You scared us, Mom."

Tears roll down her face. She sits on the corner of the couch with her left ankle tucked under her right leg, propped on the arm of the couch. She flops her head back staring at the ceiling. "I didn't...I couldn't...I don't hit my children." This is spoken, not to me, not to anyone, but to herself, in disbelief. Her head raises and looks me square in the face. "It was the pills, Kelsey. I swear. The doctor gave me pills and I didn't know I couldn't drink a beer with them."

I decide I can't be the nice-guy. Not now. I can't just suck it up and take it anymore. I'm hoping Liv is nearby because I need her here. I'm choking back tears because I don't want to look weak. "Mom. You didn't have *A* beer. You had a half case of beer! I counted the empty bottles around the house. You were passed out when I got home from school. That means you were drunk way before that. Sitting here, all alone, drinking one after another, after another. You did this to yourself. You did this to *me*. You need to look at your pathetic self and realize you are harming your children. The kids who do everything you are supposed to do as a mother are being hurt by *you!*" Now I am crying. I can't hold it in anymore. There is only so much drunkenness one can take and I have reached my limit. I can't deal with her drunk anymore. "You are hurting us! Do you hear that? You.....not me. Not Kyle. Not Lori. YOU!"

Head hunkered over into her lap, the sobs grow stronger. She is listening to me. She is finally listening to me and not getting angry. She isn't beating me. She isn't screaming at me. She is listening to me. I can't wait to tell Liv about this. "Mom, please look at me." I approach her and grab her hand. Her

wet fingers slide in between mine as she slowly surfaces from her stupor. "Please, if for no other reason than our safety, quit drinking."

She grabs my arm and pulls me down beside her. No words come out. She looks into my face as her mascara runs down her cheeks. Her blue eyes radiate with the redness surrounding them. Her face, filled with desperation, stares into mine. I suck in my breath, trying to compose myself. "Please. Mom. For me. For Kyle. For you!"

Looking away from my face, she begins to cry more. "I am so sorry. I hit you. I hit you. I hit you? I didn't hit you did I? Please tell me no. Tell me you didn't say that. Tell me you are kidding. Tell me now that I didn't hurt you."

"Mom, I can't. I can't say any of those things. You did this to me. Please look at me. Look at what you did to me. I can forgive you, but only if you don't do this again." Where is this coming from? When did I become the adult?

Kyle peeks around the corner and I quickly shoo him away with my hand. This is not the time for him to come in. I feel, for some odd reason, that I am doing some good. I do what I have not done for months, maybe years. I lean over to my mom and grab her shoulders, pulling her into an upright position. Looking into her face once more, I hug her. Not strong, not overbearing. Just a gentle 'I care' hug. With that, I stand and walk out of the room, leaving her with her tears. I can hear her sobbing and sniffing as I grab my bag and walk down the hall toward Kyle's room. As soon as I start to walk, I hear a quiet knock on the back door.

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10: TENTATIVE

"Come on." I whisper to Olivia, tugging her arm to make her hurry through the living room. "Let's go to my room." She looks at me in shock because I am red-faced, my mother is red-faced and everyone is silent.

"Not the right time, huh?" She whispers.

"Actually, perfect timing. I'll tell you more later. When we leave." I follow Olivia to my room and close the door behind me. I sink down on the bed in relief. Clasp my hands together. I stretch my arms forward, then cross them behind my head, looking at the glow-in-the-dark skulls and stars on my ceiling. They are hard to see in the daylight, but at night, my ceiling is illuminated by the word "BELIEVE" spelled out with the glowing plastic. My bed is unmade and the comforter is wadded up under my back, causing me to lean a little away from Liv. She sits down in my black, plush retro chair against the wall, cradling the Harley Davidson bear my dad mailed me last Christmas.

"Tell me. How did it go?" I don't really want to talk about it now, so I decide to give her a whispered short version. I don't want my mom to be standing outside the door listening to my conversation, and I don't really have the energy to give a full-blown play-by-play.

"She didn't even remember. Can you believe it? I told her what happened, sort of, and she cried. She begged me to tell her I was lying, and I wished I could, but I just kept on. I asked her to stop drinking. We'll see if that works. I'll tell you more later, K?" I look over at her and wink. Her face flushes pink as she agrees.

"So, what's the plan?" She asks me, standing up and approaching the bed. She sits down next to me, looking at my face and the bruises. Leaning over, she touches my bruises, my cuts. I grab her hand and scoot away a little. The pain is more intense than I want to admit.

"Um...I have to help Kyle study for a test before I can go to practice. Were they okay with moving it? Or do you need to go on?"

"No, they were cool. We can go at 7:00. Why don't you have Kyle come in here to study. I'll help you quiz him or whatever." She seems excited by the idea of helping him study. I will let her do all of it if she wants. I have stuff to catch up on too.

"KYLE!" I scream to avoid getting out of bed. "Come in here!"

He pushes the door open, popping his head around the corner. "Yeah?"

"Get your science stuff and bring it in here. We'll quiz you." He walks away from the room leaving the door cracked about six inches. Then, a knock. "Yeah? Why are you knocking? Come in." My mom peeks in.

"Sorry, I just, uh...wanted to talk to you for a second, but...sorry...I didn't realize you had company. Hey, Olivia."

"Hey Mrs. Cramer." Olivia politely answers, making a gallant effort to smile.

"It's okay Mom. What did you need?" I sit up, curling my legs underneath me.

"It can wait. No big deal..." She closes the door and I can hear her quick footsteps down the hall. Weird. Olivia looks at me and it is obvious she is as confused as I am.

"What was that all about?" She asks.

"No clue." And I don't even care right now.

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Just as we're heading out the door to the Band Barn, the phone rings. I hesitate, causing Liv to bump into me, then second guess my concern with whoever is on the other line. I head out the door, rush to the car and flop down in the driver's seat. Just as I start the engine, Mom's head pokes out of the door. She is holding the cordless in her hand and points at the phone, then at me. I pull myself up, crooking my arm over the driver's door and yell to her.

"Who is it? I have to go."

"It's your Dad." Her face immediately becomes molded with desperation, begging me with her eyes to not leave her alone on this call. I think twice about leaving and look at her again.

"I've got to go. Tell him to call back tomorrow. I'm already late." I can't believe this! He never calls. I haven't talked to my dad since Christmas.

When I was four, he went away on a business trip. I cried when he told me he was leaving. I even tried to climb into his suitcase and zip myself in. I didn't do well being away from him. So, in order to appease me, he decided to take me for ice cream. We drove to the parlor in his rusted out '71 Monte Carlo. It had no air conditioner and the radio only worked when there were no clouds or wind. He let me climb into the bench seat next to him, making me pinky swear not to tell Mom I got to ride up front. He rolled

the windows down with the hand crank and we backed out of the drive, floating down the street in this boat-like car.

My legs were so short that my ankles barely reached the edge of the seat. Because of the humidity in the July afternoon, the backs of my legs stuck miserably to the fake leather seats. My hair clung to my face and big chunks kept blowing into my mouth with the cross breeze through the car windows. He looked over at me many times, and each time I returned his glance with a huge smile. My heart was hurting because my daddy was leaving, but in that car, sitting in the front seat next to my idol, I couldn't let myself get angry.

We pulled into the parking lot and he helped me out of the car, taking my hand in his. I remember looking up to see his hand and how crazy it felt for my hand to disappear in his rough, calloused palm. I skipped along, partially because I was happy and partially because it's all I could do to keep up.

As we ate our ice cream, Dad leaned over the table, making sure I was paying attention. "Now Kelsey, I'm gonna call you every night. I will read you a story before bed and I will be there with you when you fall asleep." I didn't understand the concept of being there even though he was away. But he did it, just like he promised. He called me every night. He had taken four stories with him in his overstuffed, hard, click-latch suitcase, just so I would have a new story each night. He did what he said he would do, and I counted on him for that. He was honest with me. One year later, to the day, he walked out of the house without saying goodbye. Sometimes I still wait for those phone calls when I miss him, just to hear his voice. He never calls. And now, when I am too busy to talk, he's on the phone.

My stomach clenches. Maybe I should've taken the call. I glance over at Liv as she stares out the passenger window, obviously not wanting to butt in. "Should I have taken the call?"

"Huh? Oh. It was your dad, right?"

"Yeah." I wonder where her mind is now.

"You haven't talked to him in like two years, right, besides Christmas? Why would you go out of your way to talk to him right now? No, I wouldn't have." She cuts a look at me. She says this hoping I'll agree with her.

"I don't understand why everything is coming down on me at once. It seems like my life has been completely rearranged in the past two days. What is up with me?" I wait for her response and get nothing.

She continues staring out the window. Her shoulders quiver a little. I lean forward and look over at her, trying to see her face. She is crying. "Liv, what's going on? Look at me." She shakes her head and begins biting her thumbnail, already chewed to the quick, to offset the tears. "Please, look at me."

She turns to face me with wide streams of tears pouring down her face. Puddles dance on her lower lids as her green and brown swirled irises shine. I reach over and dry the tears on her left cheek with the back of my hand. I pull her hand out of her mouth and intertwine my fingers with hers. As I hold her hand, her body heaves more and more. No sound comes out.

"What's going on with you?" I retreat into my own thoughts. Have I done something to her? Is she scared to talk to me, to tell me I have hurt her? I'm completely lost by this reaction. I have noticed her being a little strange the past couple of days, but I thought it was just a reaction to my pain. "Will you please just talk to me? I can't read your mind and you're scaring me."

"It's just...I don't know. I feel so bad for you. I want to steal you from the pain of your world. Scoop you up and carry you to a land of happy. I can't do that. There is nothing I can do to help you and I hate that. I hate not having any control over circumstances around me. I just...ugh." She reaches up and roughly wipes away her tears as if she is pissed at herself for crying. "Nevermind!"

"Wait, that's not gonna cut it. Nevermind? You know I hate when you say that. In my mind there's no such thing as 'nevermind' because something *is* there. You are thinking something that needs to be said and that's just a cop-out." Why am I getting angry? This is ridiculous. She is sitting here bawling her eyes out for me. Out of compassion for the hurt I'm going through and I'm getting mad. Something inside tells me this isn't all she's thinking about. But I know Liv, and I know she won't tell me the deepest thoughts. The most painful ones.

I look over at her again as she is starting to calm the crying. "Listen, Kels. I do have more on my mind, but now is not the time to talk about it, okay? I'll tell you eventually, I promise. I just think now we need to focus on the other shit and get you through. Okay?" She is sincere and I can't fight that. I squeeze her hand then release. As I wipe the sweat from my clammy palm onto my leg, she speaks again.

"I don't know what's going on to make everything crash in your face. I mean, you get in trouble for something you do only once, and BAM, everything skyrockets from there. I know you can handle things. I have no doubt. I just want...I just want you to know that I'm here for you to talk to. You aren't

very good at talking, but I want you to be. I want to listen to you when you're down, to offer my support, and to have you accept it."

"I do. I honestly don't know what I would do without you as a friend. I probably would be locked up in juvie right now if it wasn't for you. I mean...you're the best thing that has *ever* happened to me. Do you believe that?"

I wait, then a nod. "I do. But sometimes I think you'd be better off without such a high-maintenance friend. No matter what you're going through, I still expect attention. I need to work on that, to quit whining and devote time to you. I'm sorry, Kelsey."

Where is this coming from? I'm completely confused with her emotions right now. Honestly, I just want to forget about those other things for a while and enjoy time with Liv. I want to go to the Barn and rock out. "Music is my therapy." That's what Julie said. I understand how she could say that. I hadn't ever really thought of that before, but I always know when I'm at the bottom, all I need is to pick up my guitar.

I pull the car over just as we turn onto the shaded gravel road. The Barn is only a minute away, but I want to give her time to recollect herself. As I pull over, Liv looks at me, confused. "What are we doing?"

"Just giving you a minute to clear your head. We've got some major practice to get to tonight, and you have to be at the top of your game. You can't go in there and sing with a tear-filled lump in your throat, now, can you?" I smile at her and squeeze her knee. She jumps, lunging forward to remove my hand. I hold on and squeeze some more until she laughs. She begs me to stop, and I do. "Now, breathe. Look at me." She does. There's still a mystery in her eyes, and for a second, I'm mesmerized by the look on her face: one of compassion, sympathy, pain, and mystery, all blended together. "You good?"

"Yep. Let's do it."

I throw the car into gear and head down the washed out gravel road. I reach over and crank the volume on my radio as Fergie blares out of the speakers. Ugh, I hate her. I flip through the stations and land on a country station, giving Carrie Underwood the chance to wow me with her empowering revenge song. I would hate to be on the receiving end of her anger, that's for sure. I breathe in, exhale, and stretch

my arms over the steering wheel. thinking...wondering...what is still revolving around unsolved in her mind.

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11: THERAPEUTIC

I haul out of the car, pop the trunk, and grab my gig bag. Slinging it over my shoulder, I rummage through the trunk, looking for a bandana or a hat to hold my hair back. There is nothing worse than getting into the groove of my music and having my hair flop over the body of my guitar, tangling in the strings. I find a black Volcom hat and cock it sideways on my head. I glance over and see Olivia still sitting in the car. I walk around and stand near her feet that she has swung out of the car and planted on the ground. She leans forward, elbows on knees, and face in hands. I reach out with my left hand and brush the hair away from her hands. As she looks up at me, I notice she has begun crying again. I take the guitar strap off my shoulder and prop it against the car. Squatting down, I try to get Liv to look up at me.

"What's the matter, chica?" I run my hands over her smooth hair again and again.

"I just can't quit crying."

"I don't know what's going on, but can we talk about it later? We need to get in here. We're already fifteen minutes late."

I stand and take her hand in mine, pulling her to a standing position. Just as I reach to grab my guitar, she leans around me, losing her guts at my heels. "What is wrong with you? Are you sick? Do you want me to take you home?"

"No, I'm fine. Let's just go." She walks on without me, leaving the passenger door wide open. I slam the door and sling my bag back over my shoulder. As I walk into the barn, I'm greeted by the macho I-am-a-man-waiting-for-women look, given by Travis. His shaggy bleach-blonde hair hangs over his left eye and he leans his head to the left out of habit, just so he can see. His scrawny arms hang at his sides, longer than they should be. A sarcastic 'mad at you' look resonates on his baby smooth face.

I really like Travis. He's a riot. He's so mellow most of the time, but has a great sense of humor. He lives in his own head 98 percent of the time. He dresses a lot like me, and actually, when I first moved to town, he was drooling all over me because I like to ride a skateboard. He thought I was the coolest person ever. I scored another point with him when he found out I played guitar. I filled the open position as lead guitarist in their band, and now he respects me. That doesn't mean he doesn't tease me, because, believe me, I get my fair share of shit from him.

"What took you girls so long? Were you making out or something?" I slug Travis in the arm...hard. "Damn! Sorry. I was just joking!"

"Where do you come up with this shit? Dude, let's just get started, okay?"

"Aw...my bad. I seriously just made it up, I swear." He holds his hands up where I can see the palms as if he's surrendering. The fifty black and translucent plastic bracelets he wears slide down the length of his forearm. A shit-eating grin splashes across his face as he leans into his own bone-thin body, curling over laughing. I kick at the dirt floor, stirring a cloud of dust in his face and turn around as he coughs.

"Whatever, dude." I murmur as I walk away. I reach over and unzip the front pocket on my bag and pull out a handful of picks. Deciding on the marbleized white Jerry Garcia pick Olivia gave me for my birthday, I resume removing my gear. I sit down on a straw bale, swing the black and white checkered guitar strap over my head, and lay the body of the guitar on my leg. Picking string by string, I twist the tuners until the guitar sounds as good as it's going to get tonight. I mentally remove myself from the nuisance of Jack banging on the drums and Travis playing on the electric guitar and begin playing a lick I make up, just to make sure my guitar sounds okay.

I reach down and grab the 3-ring binder I use to hold my music and flip open to the first page: Melissa Ferrick's *The Stranger*. I reach down, placing my fingers on the appropriate frets and play through the riff, humming the song quietly to myself. Liv appears from behind me, plops down on the bale beside me, and begins singing the lyrics along with my guitar. *You the stranger who took a chance. Held me at a distance so I could see myself. So thank you for everything you gave without knowing, and thank you for letting me fall in love, without withholding, without withholding....*

As I play through the song, I realize how much I've never paid attention to the lyrics, and how much I really should have. Ever since I heard this song, it has always been one of my favorites. How did I never listen to the lyrics? That is so unlike me. I guess I got caught up in the guitar music instead, since it focuses mainly on acoustics. As she sings, I look over at her. I don't need the music for this one. I memorized it a while back. I watch her as she feels the music she is singing. She is good at that. When she's singing, she must feel the same as I do when I'm playing.

Travis jumps down off the make-shift stage we have built with scrap 2X4s and plywood and jogs over to us. Standing in front of me, he watches us, almost mesmerized by the chemistry between the two of us as musicians. He has learned never to interrupt when we're in the middle of a song. He sways with the music, tapping his fingertips on the elbow of the crossed arm. I can tell he is anxious, but I block him out to hear the completion of the song carried out by the gentle, raspy voice in my right ear. She voices the aggression in sharp, accentuated words, feeling the frustration of the episode in the song.

*So let me in now I am ready to move/and here comes fear
and resistance from you/and for once I am willing and now
what/I've got to wait?*

A pause in the song, lyrics and guitar. Silence...verifying the mood. Chills pop on my arms and dance down my spine. A lump rises in my throat and sticks. I feel a prickle of something behind my ears, as if someone has blown a white dandelion all over the back of my head and the seeds remain, blowing in the breeze, tickling my skin. The initial strum after the silence is magnified in the still Barn.

*These lessons are everywhere in my life/You know I never
waited for anyone and I was always right/But yeah now I
give up, I surrender/I would wait for you...forever.*

As she sings, her voice strengthens until *forever*, which is a vocalized surrender from the singer. All of the unexplained emotions she freed in the car are disappearing with the words escaping her lips. She closes her eyes as she sways with the music, gently brushing against my elbow with each left sway. Her clasped hands rest on her lap. As I play, I try to stay a step ahead, recollecting the words she will sing next. For the life of me, I cannot do it, I can't get ahead. I have to wait. As I play out the transition to the next verse, she sniffs, never opening her eyes. The strength of her voice magnifies the tenderness that follows. I continue, as does she.

*So come on and test me go on and try it because I know
that I fit perfectly inside you/and to deny this love would be
to deny your heart/and you're gonna be the one who breaks
it/baby/if you choose to walk...*

Her voice crackles, then resumes into the repeat of the chorus. I strum quietly through the remaining chorus, listening, feeling, living her words in the pit of my stomach. The emptiness I have felt for two days has lifted and I can feel a tingle work down my arms and legs. My fingers are almost completely numb as I work to finish the song. By the time we get to this point, everyone in the Barn is still, watching, listening to this developing dynamic.

The final strum. Claps start out. Slow, pauses between each one, coming from Jack at the drums. His black, three-inch Mohawk shivers with each clap. Soon Keenan and Travis join in and start to cheer. Just as I am regaining my breath, Mr. Bradshaw, the P. E. teacher who owns the Barn, walks into the door.

"Ladies, that is the best music I have heard coming from here for a month! If you continue with that, you might get somewhere." He turns and walks out, but not before giving us a wink.

Travis raises his hands to get everyone's attention. "That song, right there, will be the first of our set at the Broken Rainbow."

"I disagree." Jack chimes in, which is rare for him. He's usually pretty go-with-the-flow. "I think that should be the last song we play. Leave those damn bar hoppers with something to look forward to. Maybe they'll ask us back if we end with that."

Personally, I don't understand how the song was that awesome. I felt it, but I think that's just because I was in it. Living it. But I'll let it slide. I look at Liv and her face glows. Her cheeks are still red from the crying, her eyes a little swollen, but something about her has changed. Even though I don't know what it is, I can feel it just sitting here beside her.

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As we are wrapping up rehearsals, Travis grabs the mic, for emphasis. "Listen up losers. We have a gig in less than a week. We *have* to practice every day. No questions asked. So, get here tomorrow, on time. Got it?" He then realizes how serious and controlling this little fit is and tries to break up the serious stares from the band. Holding up his hand he starts ticking off numbers backward from five. Four, three...we all know what this means. Keenan jumps to turn off the mic on the board just as Travis places the microphone practically in his mouth, belting out one of his hugacious burps.

"You are so gross!" Liv reacts as I duck my head laughing. Travis sees me laugh and points at me with a straight arm.

"You feel me don't ya Kelsey? Yeah...that's what I'm talking about." What a clown. His bony self moves awkwardly in his dramatic moments. As I pack up my bag, I start thinking about how lucky I am to have found this group of egg heads to hang out with. If I was in this town, not knowing anyone, having to deal with my mother every single night, I'd shoot myself.

"So, can ya take me home?" Travis interrupts my self-pity.

"You know, for someone who minutes earlier was bitching about people showing up on time, I find it kind of ironic that you are the *only* person in the band without a car. But, yes. I will take you home."

"I have a car, ass wipe. I just never get to drive it because my dad tends to think it is a 4-wheeler instead of a Jeep used for driving on paved roads. Not my fault, okay?"

"Touché. Yeah. You can have a ride."

I grab my binder and head for the car, placing my guitar into the trunk. Before Travis can even get into the backseat, I have to throw some of the junk in the back. As I start pulling out sweatshirts, shoes, jackets, blankets, McDonald's bags, cups and god knows what else, he walks up beside me.

"Holy shit, Kelsey. Do you live in here or what?"

I cut my eyes at him letting him know I'm not in the mood for his shit. I slam the trunk to make sure it closes all the way and slide into the driver's seat. I reach down to get the CDs from the floor just as Keenan slides into the passenger seat. "What are you doing crazy? You don't need a ride too, do you?"

"Nope. Just wanted to tell you that you guys kicked ass tonight."

"Oh, thanks. I guess." I don't really know how to handle compliments. "Where's Liv? We need to get a move on."

"I'll get her." He replies as he gives me a pound. "Later sweetie." He is too nice for his own good. Sometimes I wonder if the boy ever has a bad day. It takes Liv a minute to get to the car. By the time she gets there I have already listened to an entire song on my Sarah Bolen CD and Travis is sitting in the back seat with his head tilted back, looking at the sky out of the back window. His ears are plugged with his ear buds and I can hear his music over mine. He'll be asleep by the time we get back to town. I think to myself.

Liv plops down into the passenger seat and the entire car shifts, rousing Travis from his dream world. "Bout damn time..." he murmurs, and then leaves us to our own silence. I peel out of the lot and click on my brights as I merge onto the gravel road. The moon is full and bright tonight, causing the shadows from the overhanging trees to converge on the jagged road. A bunny darts out in front of the car and I swerve to miss it just as Liv grabs hold of my leg. "Oh shit...that scared me!"

My heart jumps into my throat. Not because of the near accident, but because of the reaction she gives. A flutter rises inside me as she covers her heart with her right hand in horror, removing her hand from my leg. I imagine how distraught she would have been had I hit the bunny. She would have screamed and insisted that I stop the car. She would have bailed from the car and run to check on the wounded, or even dead, rabbit and burst into tears when she discovered the bloody, distorted body of the small animal. Then she would have returned to the car and fallen into my arms, mourning the death of the 'small innocent creature.' For some odd reason, I'm wishing I had hit the rabbit. My morbid curiosity for what would have happened pounds in my brain, my temples throb.

"I'm so glad you didn't hit that bunny," her exasperation evident in her breathy statement.

"Yeah, me too."

"Do you have homework tonight, or can I hang out and chat with you?"

"I do have homework, but you can stay and chat for a while if you want." I know this is the wrong answer, but quite honestly don't really care right now. I want her there for two reasons. First, I'm afraid of how the conversation with my dad went when Mom told him I couldn't talk. Second, I'm curious as to what in the world is going on in Liv's mind. I glance over at her as she quietly sings along with the music. She doesn't notice me looking at her.

The glow of the moon shines on her face, whitening the shadows a bit. Her hair curls under her chin along her face and I'm tempted to twirl it behind her ear. I can't stand for my hair to hang in my face like that. Instead, I watch as her emotions change with the music. She sings with feeling, imagining some place other than here. I look over at her a couple more times, and she doesn't notice.

"Where'd you go?" I whisper to her. She looks at me, confused.

"Oh, nowhere. Just singing along. Sorry, did you want to chat?" I do, but I don't. I don't really know what to say. Besides, the things I want to say don't need to be heard by the person in the backseat.

who only two hours earlier, accused me of making out with the girl. The things I want to say are intense and confusing all the same. I want to tell her how beautiful she is. I want her to look in my face as I say it so I can see her reaction. I want to tell her of the feelings I have been having for her, more than friends. I want to tell her how confused I am but how ready I am. I want to confide my deepest, darkest secrets in her. I have never done that...with anyone. I want to lock my fingers with her as I speak, letting my emotions flow into her body through the palm of her hand. I'm scared to say anything. Scared I may lose my best friend. *Wanting* and *doing* are two totally different things.

"No, that's cool. You just seem distant, that's all."

"I'm sorry. Nothing against you. I just am in a weird mood today. Not really too talkative. I hope that's okay with you."

"Oh, yeah, that's fine. I mean, that's my norm, right? Not talking?" I smile, and mean it. She returns the smile, holding my eyes a little longer than normal.

* * * * *

12: TRIAL

I sling my back pack over my right shoulder and lean back into the car to grab my water. As I shut the car door, I look up at the front of the house. Mom is pacing in front of the window with the phone clenched in her hand, drink in the other. Uh-oh. What does this mean? Am I gonna have to go through this again? I turn to make sure Olivia is following me up the sidewalk and hesitate.

"It looks like Mom is drinking again. You don't have to come in if you don't want."

"That's nonsense. Kelsey." She answers. "That is, unless you don't *want* me to come in." She emphasizes the 'want' in a way that makes me feel guilty, reserved. Usually I don't like anyone to be around when my mom is drinking. She embarrasses me and she would be embarrassed herself if she realized what an idiot she is when she is drunk.

"I do want you to be here. It may not be pretty, though. You've been warned." Olivia grabs onto my bag as I walk up the steps in the dark. I open the back door and the screech announces our arrival. Mom pops her head around the corner, holding up her finger to signal 'one minute.' I walk quietly into the kitchen and drop my backpack in the laundry room on the left. Liv follows suit. We turn back into the kitchen and I open the refrigerator, pulling out a Coke. "Want one?" I hand the Coke to her and grab another for myself. I probably should not be drinking caffeine this late, but I still have a lot of work to do. I can hear Mom on the phone in the living room. "Uh huh...yeah...oh yeah, I understand...Okay...Okay...alright. bye."

She joins us in the kitchen and my first reaction is to check her hand. Relief washes over me when I see a Coke can in her right hand. No fights tonight. "Hey babe. How was practice?" She pulls out the end chair to the dining room table and sits. Brushing her hair out of her eyes, she waits for a normal conversation.

"Actually, it was awesome. Liv and I were doing a song we have never done before and it turned out to be the best duet we've done. I think we have to keep it in the set lineup. It was kind of cool. And the song, it's one you would never expect to be so dynamic...." I realize the detail is not what she is going for. That was merely an icebreaker. She is priming the pump so it doesn't spring a leak when the weight is dropped.

"I don't like that look. What's going on?"

"Well, as you know, I got a call from your father today." Here goes. "...he is coming to town on Friday and wants to see you. I told him you are pretty busy and may not be able to hang out for long, but he wouldn't take 'no' for an answer."

I stand still for a moment and raise my head to look at Liv. We had planned on spending Friday and Saturday together. We had made the plans at least two weeks ago. She shrugs.

"Why? What's the matter? You can't make time for dear-old dad?" Mom thinks she is funny.

"I don't know. Why *should* I? He hasn't made time for me in *ten years*. Am I just supposed to drop everything and follow along with whatever *he* wants to do? That pisses me off!" I throw down the stack of mail I'm rummaging through. None of it is for me anyway. Just a bunch of credit card offers for Mom, like she needs those. "What would you do, Mom? Would you back out of your plans to see that worthless piece of..." I stop myself because I don't even want to go there. "Screw this."

"Now, Kelsey. He's trying. He wants to know you. He wants to be something to you." I can't believe she is taking his side. Well, actually, I'm not one bit surprised. She always takes sides with anyone but me.

"You really are...you think...you want me to, don't you? You want me to hang out with him, get chummy with the old pops? That's crap, Mom, and you *know* it! If he wanted to be my father, he would have done it ten years ago. If he wanted to be a part of my life, he wouldn't have left and *never* called! He could have spent time with me all these years, but NO...he had more important things to do. He had other plans. He couldn't handle a family then...what makes you think he can now!?!?" By the time I get all this out, I'm screaming. I feel sorry for Liv who is stuck in the middle. But then again, I want her to see what she is missing when I don't invite her over much, just so she knows how truly jacked up my life is.

Mom looks over at me and sighs. Why does she want him to visit me? "Is he going to hang out with Kyle and Lori, too?"

"He said he is going to go to Kyle's game on Saturday morning. Then he might take him to a movie or something like that."

"Oh, that's great. 'Check it out guys...we have a super dad who thinks he's special because he can do things with his kids.' Mom, he doesn't even know what we look like now. Kyle doesn't even

remember him. The only thing he remembers is the picture by his bed. Ten years, Mom! You expect me to forgive ten years just to make him feel better? I'm not doing it!"

No one says anything for a short while. I'm staring out the window. Liv is propped up against the kitchen cabinets in the corner, looking under the free-standing cabinets at my mother, then back at me. Mom continues to sit in the chair, only she has perked up and is sitting erect, back not even touching the chair. The wind is blowing the trees and the black leaves dance in the moonlight, cascading onto the concrete patio. A car starts a few houses down. A dog barks. All of these things I hear through the silence in my house. Then it hits me in her look of desperation. No way!

"You want him back, don't you?" I accuse my mother. "You want *me* to have a 'play date' with Daddy so I can win him back for *you*? I know I am right. Don't even deny it." Her shoulders slump. I knew it. That was all I needed. "If you want him back so bad, you're gonna have to do it yourself. I'm not helping you with this one. It's gotta be you and him. Don't let him think we will bend over backwards to worship the ground he walks on. I have learned how to live without any help and I don't need any intrusions. I have been doing just fine on my own, thank you very much!"

She has nothing to say. Of course she doesn't. I wouldn't either if I was in her shoes. She is desperate. She is willing to go the distance, to set up her kids as a sacrifice for getting back her high school sweetheart. And he'll probably fall for it. But I'm not going to. I chug the last swig of my Coke, step on the lever to the trash can, and chuck the can in the bag. I look over at Olivia who has skipped out on me, once again, and stands in a daze, trapped by her internal thoughts.

"Kelsey, I am trying to do something right. Can you really blame me? I am trying to help myself and I feel like it would be a hell of a lot easier if I had some companionship. Everything is easier with support. Plus, I miss him. Even after all these years, I am still willing to forgive him and forget everything that happened. I talked to him for two hours tonight. Two hours! We had fun talking. We talked about things that have happened and he reassured me that he could make things better. He told me that if I would take him back, he would help me get sober. He promised."

My head spins. All of these empty words fill my brain. I just want to explode. "You know what? You can do whatever you want, but don't expect me to play matchmaker. Don't expect me to turn on the charm and win him back for you. If you want him back, do it yourself. And don't use Kyle either. He

isn't old enough to really understand the inner workings of your demented wishes. Don't hurt my brother! He has been hurt enough by you and your alcohol....Come on Liv. Let's go to my room." I grab my bag and hers, handing hers over. She looks at me. Her loss of words flushes her face. She doesn't like to see people upset, and yet again, I cannot hide the emotion. "Have fun with your rendezvous, Mom. If you need help making honeymoon plans, just let me know." I stomp out of the room and down the hall.

Kyle opens his door just as I'm storming by. His eyes are squinted and his hair, matted on one side, sticks straight up in the back. "Go back to bed, champ. Sorry to wake you." He shuts the door as we walk into my room and I slam mine behind. I close and lock the door behind me and lean against it, letting myself slump to the floor. I embrace my knees and stare across the room at Olivia who is pulling back the bed, making herself at home.

"Are you staying here?" I ask.

"Are you okay with that?"

"Yeah, of course. Just call your Mom and make sure that's fine with her."

As she picks up her cell to dial home, I lean my head back and close my eyes. Why me? I don't have the energy to consider the why's. I climb off the floor, empty my pockets, take off my shoes, and flop onto the bed. As Liv reasons with her mother, I reach out and tug her belt loop, pulling her into me. I don't know where this came from, but I don't fight it. I cuddle her in my arms, laying my head on her shoulder and drift off for a moment in the scent of laundry still clinging to her shirt. The look on her face is one of shock. We have never really cuddled too much before. After a minute's hesitation, she rests in the crook of my legs, looks over at me just in time for me to wink. Her face glows. Nothing of the outside world can penetrate the orbit of emotion filling this room.

* * * * *

WEDNESDAY

13: WITHOLD

I awake to my mom pounding on my door. I look over and realize I have slept through the night spooning with Olivia. Thank goodness the door is locked! We look at each other in confusion and awkwardly pull apart. Olivia stands up and walks to the window, pulling the curtain back. The sun shines directly in my face and I shield my eyes with my arm from the blinding rays penetrating my sleepy head. My room stays dark most of the time, a cave created by the black blinds. So the unwanted sun livens up the room in ways my grumpy morning attitude can't handle. "Close the curtains already!" I yell in a more severe tone than I intended.

"Aren't we little Miss Chipper?" Her sarcasm is not lightly taken at 7 am. I roll over and bury my head under the pillow, anchoring it with my arms. "Get up grumpy pants. We've got to get ready for school." She walks over and grabs her bag, slinging it onto the foot of the bed. Rummaging through, she pulls out a wadded up sweatshirt. "This is all I have."

I roll back over and face her, laughing. "You really think you need to wear a sweatshirt when it's like 90 degrees outside?"

"Well, no, but I don't have much of a choice, now. Do I?" She sarcastically replies with a wide, helpless grin. Her demeanor in the morning is much more sunny than mine.

"I can let you borrow some clothes. Just dig through my closet and find something you want to wear. I'm gonna shower." I finally stand and bend over to pick up a white tee from the pile on the floor. I stumble over to the dresser and pull out socks and underwear. I look at myself in the mirror and realize my hair doesn't look much better than Kyle's did last night when we woke him up. My two blonde streaks that are usually in place running down the front of my face are separated and spread all over. I run my fingers through it, trying to comb out some of the tangles. I realize it is a hopeless attempt and pick up the brush. I flop back down on the edge of the bed and start brushing my hair. I always start at the bottom and work my way up. Otherwise, I would have a knot the size of a golf ball.

Olivia grabs a pair of khaki thin-lined corduroy pants with flowers and vines embroidered on the back pockets, holds them up and then folds them over her arm. "Why don't you ever wear these?"

"Are you serious!?" The look on her face tells me she is.

"I don't wear girlie clothes. Seems like you'd know that after all this time. You can wear them if you want. Matter of fact...you can have them for all I care. I'm getting in the shower. Back in a few."

I take the clothes I balled up on the couch and head for the bathroom. I turn on the shower and wait for the warm water to kick in. As I wait, I begin brushing my teeth. I step in the shower with my toothbrush still hanging out of my mouth and toothpaste dripping down my chin. Some people think it's gross to brush your teeth in the shower, but I don't really understand what all of the hype is about. I let the warm water run over my neck and shoulders as I spit out the toothpaste. Reaching my hand out of the shower curtain, I toss the toothbrush onto the sink.

* * * * *

After less than ten minutes I emerge from the steamy bathroom, fully dressed, with a towel wrapped around my head. As I open the door to the bedroom, Liv jumps behind the closet door. "Shit, you scared me!" She yells. I look over at her as she struggles into the pants she pulled out.

"You not gonna shower?" I never understand how people can wake up without a shower.

"I didn't really know if we had time. I'll be okay."

"You can if you want. I'll get you a towel."

I grab one of the nicer towels from the linen closet. There aren't many of those in there. It's funny that you never notice how dingy something is until you have to share it with others. Most of our towels are ripped on the edges with little strings lining the edge. The one I pull out is actually a beach towel, but it's in decent shape. I walk back into the bedroom and flop the towel down on the bed, turn and see that she is fully dressed.

"I'm sorry, I just don't want to impose. I took a shower right before I came to get you last night. I'll be fine. Unless you think I smell..." With that comment Liv pokes me in the stomach. One of my pet peeves, but I say nothing. Instead, I smile and grab her hand, gently throwing it away from me. Flirting at 7 in the morning? Not my style, but yet, here I am doing it to the max. I realize the thought I just had. Is this real? I am really falling for my best friend. I turn from her in the awkward silence and begin to comb my hair. Deciding I don't have time to fix it, I opt for a pony tail.

I reach over and grab the bottle of Curve sitting on my dresser and spray myself down. I notice Olivia nonchalantly trying to inhale the smell of me. I turn to face her. "It's that good, huh?" Her cheeks blush.

"No...it's just...I can't help it, okay? I love the smell of that stuff. That is one of the first things I remember about you. The first day I met you, I remember smelling the Curve, not knowing what it was. That's all." She turns shyly from me and busies herself with repacking her bag.

I think about letting it slide and decide against it. Instead, I walk over to her and grab her arm, swinging her around to face me. As she turns, she ends up closer to me than I expected. We stand there, face to face, toe to toe, and I freeze. I want to kiss her but know I can't...not now. I don't know what to do to remove myself from this. She obviously doesn't either. We stare into each other's faces for a second and turn away at the same moment. I clear my throat just to have something to do. I really almost kissed her. Shit, what has gotten into me? I wanted to...didn't I? I wonder what she would have done? Would she have returned the kiss, or would she have pushed me away in disgust? I kick myself for not doing it, but then reassure myself that now is definitely not the time for that.

I slide my feet into my Doc Marten's and bend over to tie them. As I do, Liv tries to squeeze by me and brushes her hand against the small of my back for balance. The flutter arises in me again. I give my head a little shake to try to forget the feeling and stand up, refilling the contents of my pockets I dumped last night.

"Ready?"

"Yep. Let's do it...I mean....let's go."

* * * * *

14: WASTED

I slowly walk into the locker room to change for gym class. I'm usually the one who slides in the door and walks to the corner locker, not talking to anyone. Because of this, I usually go unnoticed. Not today. As I walk in slinging my bag to the floor, I reach up to open the lock and three girls walk up behind me. I have never really even talked to them before so I wonder what is so important that they have to approach me today.

Bethany is super skinny and I'm convinced she is anorexic. Her blonde hair lies perfectly over her shoulders, tucked tightly behind her ears, accentuating her protruding cheekbones. Her short shorts are rolled over so the white waist band glows against the red of the shorts with her long fake-baked brown lotioned legs shining in the fluorescent overhead lights. Her Apollo tee is tucked into the front of her shorts and she fiddles with the looped string hanging out of the waist band. She stares at me with an intensity I have never seen on her face.

Lacey falls in beside her, much shorter, but almost as thin. She prisses over and cocks her hip, bending the leg, pointing outward at the knee. To accentuate the emotion of the cocked leg, she huffs as she places her hands on her hips. Her eyes are caked with mascara and look as if she used mascara that had been in her mother's make-up drawer for years. The clumps make her eyelashes stick together. I smirk as I look at her eyes and wonder how long it's going to take for her to get that crap out tonight.

The third girl is not quite as noticeable as the other two. There are no eye catching quirks to her. Her make-up is smooth, natural looking. She is thin, but not in an unhealthy way. She seems to be more of a follower. I think she is just stuck with these girls because they pay attention to her. I think her name is Mel, but I'm not one hundred percent sure. She walks up behind Lacey and crosses her arms, half hidden behind Lacey's shoulder. The look on her face is almost sympathetic, and I wonder what the deal is. What could these girls possibly want with me?

"What's up?" I ask as I dig into my gym bag and remove the smelly clothes I have been wearing for a week and then wadding up in my bag, sweat and all, after class. "What can I do for you?"

"That's a good question, tramp." The hateful reverberation of Bethany. "WE want to know what happened to your face. You know, we have been watching you all semester and looking at the weird

clothes you wear. Ya know, we just wondered how good of a fighter you are. Like, who did you get in a fight with?"

I stare straight into her wrongfully inquisitive eyes with a strong, hate-filled stare. I hate people like this. They think they can come in here and just because they are popular, they have some kind of magical powers that no other girls in the school have. Just because they starve themselves and spend hours each day fixing their hair and doing their make-up, they think they have somehow earned a higher standing than those of us who choose not to participate in athletics. "It's none of your damn business."

At that, Mel flinches. I can tell by the look on her face that she wasn't over here because she wants to be. She is standing in my face simply because Bethany told her to join. Bethany didn't have enough guts to approach me on her own accord. She had to resort to rounding up her posse in order to even say anything to me, the outcast skater chick that hangs out in the corner and never talks during class.

"That, my friend, is not the answer I was looking for. I want to know *who* you got in a fight with! Is that so hard to answer?"

"I told you once, and I'm telling you again...it is none of your business! What part of that don't you understand?" My cool is starting to wear off. I have looked at her in a way that usually sends the signal I want—get out of my face. That didn't work. I have raised my voice and cussed at her. That didn't work either. They stand, unmoved by my anger. "What is the big friggin' deal anyway? Why do you all of a sudden care about what happened to me?"

"Well, let me just tell you. There's a girl that is tramping around with *our* boyfriends and it has to stop. She has been trying to hook up with them out of spite. Would you happen to know who that is?" It dawns on me...they think it is me. I burst out with a laugh that fills the locker room. Every girl's head in the room turns to look at us in the corner. Silence. Bethany's face flushes. She is used to getting attention, but not in such a vulnerable state.

"I don't do that. I got these bruises and cuts for reasons far more involved than being a slut. So, I think you should just turn your little skinny ass around and get out of my face." None of them move.

"We don't think you understand," says Lacey. Since when did the three of them share a brain?
"We don't think it's you. We want you to find out who it is."

Even better! They don't think it's me, but they want me to find out so I can go beat the crap out of some girl I don't even know. They think I'm tough just because I wear black all the time and because I have bruises on my face. I got those bruises not because I wanted to express my aggression to some girl for whatever reason, but because I *didn't* stand up for myself until I had no choice. Now they are asking me to stand up for them when they have never spoken one word to me before.

"Sorry ladies, but I'm the wrong person to be talking to here. I don't fight. Much less with people I don't even know and don't have any qualms with. Find someone else to do your fighting...or, better yet. Quit being titty-babies and do it yourselves."

This is not what the girls want to hear. Lacey and Mel look at Bethany, waiting for her to respond for the group. "That's it," Bethany snaps. "We didn't want to have to do this, but it looks like we have no choice."

Interest in our conversation has worn off, and the room is buzzing with activity. Laughter from little clicks of girls here and there, scattered. Some sit on the benches in the center of the room, others prop against the lockers. Some are huddled around the sink, laughing. Smoke rises from one of the stalls, but I see no feet. I guess she is standing on the toilet seat. Nothing new. Bethany snaps her fingers in my face. I swat at her hand.

Leaning in closer to me she begins talking. "Listen here, you little dyke." I straighten up at that statement, caught a little off guard. Anger surges down my spine, through my arms and legs, and to my fingertips. She continues as I clench my fists at my side. "If you don't find out who this girl is and put a stop to the little whore, we..." pointing to the other girls, "will tell the entire school that you are freakin' lesbian."

My body becomes noodle-like, but I keep a strong face. "You can't do that. I don't even know you. Who are you to go running your mouth to the school? Who in the hell told you it was so? YOU don't KNOW me!"

My efforts are in vain. An evil smile cracks into the corners of her mouth as she leans into me, closer. "You're right, I don't know if it is true or not. I have my reasons to believe. That doesn't matter. You don't even know how many people I know. I could ruin you for the rest of your high school days just by telling three or four people. Think about it, Kelsey. Tomorrow, I expect an answer from you. We'll be

waiting.” She snaps her body around stiffly and her hair flips in my face. I close my eyes and reach up to wipe the tickle from my nose.

Quickly changing into my smelly clothes, I storm out of the locker room, slamming the door behind me. I walk into the gym and see a bag of dodge balls piled into the center of the gym floor. Walking over to them, I loosen the strings at the top of the bag and pull out the one on top, letting the bag fall open, spilling balls across the floor. I walk over to the edge of the gym, flipping the ball out of my hand and catching it. I rub my left hand over the top of the rough surface of the cherry red ball, grip it in the curve of my right wrist, and fling it with all of my strength against the blue concrete wall, imagining that Bethany is standing there. The high pitched *ping* of the ball hitting the slick surface of the wall echoes loudly throughout the gym. I am the only one in here and it feels good to drain my aggression right here against this wall.

I catch the ball on the up bounce and fling it once again. As I do so, my mind drifts back to middle school. It was because of those same idiotic bimbos in my old school that I begged my mom to change my schools, following my complete humiliation. In my gym class in eighth grade, Tori Rakeshaw did the same thing. She was a competitor in all of the local and state pageants and won a few times on various levels. Because of that, she gained popularity. I was teamed up with a few of the guys in my class on a basketball team in our battle-of-the-grades competition. The entire school was involved in this field day at the end of the semester. Faculty and Staff had worked out a variety of games and competitions for the students. We all had to be involved in at least one activity.

When it came time to play basketball, I was all riled up. I got out my uniform and dressed alone in the locker room, similar to what I had done this morning. Tori approached me, asking me to let her score a few points for the seventh grade team against me so her boyfriend would be impressed with her. He expected her to be athletic and was highly competitive. I didn't answer but she assumed I would. All the while, I knew I wasn't going to let her cheat. I didn't know her, but because my mom worked with hers, she thought I would do her the favor. As we stepped onto the floor, stretching and getting into position, I looked at Tori and she gave me the thumbs-up. Turning away from her, I resumed my concentration.

Long story short, I refused her. Instead, I played against her harder than I had ever played any sport. Any time she went in for a shot, I stopped her, even blocked one of the shots mid-air. Toward the

end of the game, she went up for a shot as I moved in and she came down on the top of my foot, rolling her ankle, and falling to the floor screaming. I looked down at her lying in a heap and smiled, walking away and high-fived my teammates. Anger rushed onto her face in splotches of red, and the next day, she hobbled into school on crutches, flipping me off.

Heading to my locker that day, I noticed everyone in the hallway parting as I came through. My classmates stood behind shielded hands, whispering and chuckling with one another. I opened my locker and a pile of notes fell to the floor. I bent down, gathering all of them, grabbed my books, and headed to my first class. As I sat at my science table, I began unfolding the notes. "Lezzie." Read one. "Dyke." another. "Freak, Gay Wad, Girl Lover, Carpet Muncher..." read others. The list went on. Anything that could have been said about a lesbian was written on these shreds of paper. I collectively crumpled up the notes and threw them in the bathroom trash as I passed by to walk into the stall and vomit. My life, as I knew it, was ruined. I had a label I could never rid myself of. I had escaped that torture with changing schools, but was now feeling the exact same burn in my gut.

Mr. Bradshaw pokes his head out from his office in the opposite corner as I throw the ball harder and harder against the wall. "Hey, Kelsey. What's going on?" He seems genuinely concerned. "You seem a little upset by something."

"Oh, don't worry about it. I'm fine."

"Hey. Change of subject. You guys sounded great last night in the Barn. You are really getting it together. Like I said, that is the best I have heard from the band in a while out there."

"Thanks," I reply, nodding my head in his direction, fidgeting with the ball I have tucked under my arm.

"You sure you're okay?"

"Yeah. I'm cool." With that, I turn away, dribbling the dodge ball left, right, left, right, through my legs, back through them again. I walk over onto the court and begin shooting. You would have thought I was a basketball pro, sinking free throws one after another and even a few three pointers. He walks back out of the office and joins me on the floor.

"You sure you don't wanna join the team? We're short on players right now. I think you've got what it takes to play. Hey, with a little practice, you could even be a starter."

"Naw. Not interested. I'll just stick to the guitar."

"If you change your mind..." He walks away, grasping the black whistle hanging around his neck. "...you know where to find me."

The screech of the whistle brings me back. My class begins filing out of the locker room and into the gym. It's dodge ball time, suckas! Luckily I'm chosen as a team leader, opposite a scrawny little guy that I don't even know. I vow not to choose any of the three girls that are threatening my social life. They become my targets in the game. I will not let my life be ruined... again.

* * * * *

A pop quiz! In US History, the last class of the day, of course. I had been magically successful at drifting through the day up to this point, not drawing any attention from others, not being called on to answer questions in my class, but able to let my mind begin to process all of the thoughts floating around, demanding to be sorted into my mental filing cabinet. Each issue gets its own hanging folder, equipped with a color coded tab. The easiest way to deal with issues—forget them. And here we are, last class of the day, and this train wreck of a teacher just happens to be organized enough today to give us a quiz. Lucky me.

I pull out a piece of notebook paper and write my name and the date in the upper right hand corner, just as I am instructed. I lay my head down on my left arm thinking of the threat, and wait for the first question I won't know the answer to. She drills through the questions, ten of them, all one word answers. Fortunately, I know all but two of the answers. I manage to hang on to a B for the quiz. Only thirty more minutes and I can get the hell out of this school for the day.

I feel a pencil poke into my ribs and turn around. Keenan is looking at me with a concerned face and passes the paper to me under my arm. Laying it in my lap, I unfold the note that I realize has been circulating the classroom. The top of the page reads, in all caps I AM SERIOUS...FIND HER...OR ELSE. I tear off the corner of a piece of scratch paper and write a note to Keenan, *who gave this to you?*

He writes back: *the guy behind me*. I stretch to one side then another, turning my body slightly in my seat in an effort to not distract the teacher. Reaching up to pop my neck so I can look behind him, I see her, Lacey, sitting in the back of my row. I didn't even know she was in my class! I turn quickly and face

forward, my face burning. I had kind of put this behind me for the time being. They aren't going to let me slide. Shit! Keenan passes me another note saying *what is that all about?* I freeze.

I can't tell Keenan. He is only the twin brother to my best friend who also happens to be the girl I am having feelings for. I can't tell him the suspicions about me. That would only lead to more shit getting started in our group. I see him every day, almost as much as I see Liv. He is my^s friend, but I'm not really sure how he would react. That is, if he really knew the truth. I can't risk it. Not right now. I pass back a response, buying time. *I'll tell you later.* Maybe, this way, he'll forget. Then I can figure out how to keep their mouths closed before my business leaks out. I have to talk to Liv, give her the heads up.

I look up and realize we only have two minutes before the bell. I carefully start packing my bag so I can jet as soon as it rings. I don't really have time to talk right now, and don't know if I can even talk without breaking down. I know I have to hurry to get Kyle to Catholic Middle for his soccer game before I can even go to my appointment with Julie. Now is not the time.

The bell blares over my head and I throw my bag over my shoulder and rush past the other students in front of me, jetting to my locker. I hear Keenan calling my name behind me, but ignore him. I rush to my locker, fling it open on the first try, and start throwing books in my gym bag. Slinging the bag crossways over my chest, I slam the door and rush toward the parking lot just as Keenan falls into step beside me, panting.

"What's going on, Kels? Why did you run from me? This doesn't make any sense."

"Sorry Keenan. I just...I have to hurry to get my brother and I have an appointment today. I don't really have time to talk, but I promise, I'll tell you what's going on. Just not now, okay bud?" I reach over, tuck my shoulder under his arm, and give him a squeeze with my left arm. He is a good hugger. He is so rugged, yet so teddy bear-ish. He would be a good football player, even though he has no interest in playing.

He hugs me back. "It's just weird to see you being so secretive. You usually talk to me more. That's all."

"Are you serious? You are looking at the queen of secrets, brutha."

He smiles a little and waves me on. "Go. Get your brother and get to your meeting. Talk to you later." I wave and rush out to the parking lot.

The heat is stifling. I can hardly catch my breath with all of the humidity. By the time I get to my car, I have already broken a sweat. I swing the door open, start the engine, and pull into line. I fold down my visor and look at myself in the mirror. Clear liquid beads dance across my forehead, right below the hairline. I wipe them away with the back of my hand and reach to grab my CDs. I need some therapy. Flipping through, I grab Lil' Wayne and slide it into the feeder. I lean back in my seat and sigh as I let my body numb, just for one minute.

* * * * *

15: WELCOME

I rush into the lobby and the secretary immediately recognizes me. "Hello Kelsey. How are you?"

I wave, trying to catch my breath. "All right. And you?"

She counters with a 'fine' and I have a seat in one of the wonderful chairs, fanning myself with the front of my shirt. As soon as I get settled Julie rounds the corner. Man, that was fast.

"Hey. Come on back."

I follow her to her office and remain standing, wandering around the office a little. She takes her seat at her desk chair and crosses her ankle over her knee. Leaning a little to the right, she props her jaw in the L of her hand, looking at me. I wander over to her bookshelf, looking at the picture in the black wooden frame.

"What's going on, Kelsey? You seem a little out of sorts today."

I whirl around to face her, holding back tears. I don't really know where to start. Instead, I change the subject, trying to buy time. "Who is this...here in the picture?" I need to know. Earlier in the week she had lumped us in a group together. I wonder and I have to know if by that, she was letting me know, without saying flat out, that she is a lesbian. All the signs are there. The rainbow flag in the corner, the tiered rainbow candles, the tomboy style of dress, the short spiked hair. I know I am jumping to conclusions just like the girls in the locker room did with me by assuming, based on appearance, but I need answers, and quick. Is this her partner or girlfriend or whatever?

"Look, I just...I wanted...I have something I need to ask you. I hope you don't get mad at me for getting personal, but this is going to help me to deal with a situation I am in. Can I just ask you a personal question?"

"I guess so. Sure."

"I just want to know, are...." Ugh. Get it out. This is important stuff and my tongue is tied.
"...are you...you know..."

"Gay?"

She did it for me. I can't believe this. Did she know that quickly that I might be a lesbian? How? I mean, I know I dress funky and stuff, but damn, is it that obvious? "Yeah...are you?"

"Well, as a matter of fact, I am. But I have to ask you, why is this important to you?" She stares at me with a sharp, inquisitive glare. She doesn't seem too angry by my question, but I can tell by the look on her face, I'm not going to get out of here without an explanation. I plop down in the chair and begin fiddling with my fingers, head ducked in partial embarrassment. I've never talked to anyone about this. *EVER*. The feelings have been there for quite a while, but I haven't addressed them to myself, much less to anyone else.

"I think I am." I whisper, choking over the lump in my throat. I cough, wipe the lone tear from my cheek, and raise my eyes to hers. "No...I know I am."

"Okay. Well, how does that make you feel?"

"Scared. Weird. Normal. I don't know." Julie leans forward, resting her elbows on her knees. A stern look remains on her face, hard, yet concerned.

"Sounds like you are experiencing what every young lesbian goes through. There are times of doubt, times of awkwardness, times of pleasure, and times of pain. What is it that makes this come to your mind right now?"

"It's a long story, but I need some advice. I'm scared shitless. Oops, sorry. Didn't mean to cuss." I begin to explain the locker room scene to her, watching her nod, acknowledging my pain. She listens intently to every word that comes out of my mouth. When I pause, she clears her throat and begins to speak.

"This, right now, is one of the most painful experiences you'll have. Right there with watching your family hurt. Right there with taking a beating from your mother. This scars you internally. This pain is not easy to tolerate, but it is the most important pain you will ever experience if you want to be true to yourself. I am not saying the road will be easy, but if you want to act on the feelings you are having and be what you say you are, a lesbian, you must learn to deal with these brutal blows."

What she is saying makes sense, but for some reason, I need more. She is remaining distant because that is her job. Right now, I don't need a counselor. I don't need an adult figure telling me what to do. I need someone I can confide in...as a friend. I lean forward, sobbing into my hands. The pressure in my head rests in my nose. My temples throb as I try to hold back the tears. I can't even raise my head. I feel ashamed of myself. I feel a shift in the room. Julie rolls her chair toward me and lays her hand on the

arm of my chair. I look up for a second and I see my pain mirrored on her face. She has been here, done this, and moved on.

"How do I deal with this?"

"One day at a time. That's all you can do. Remember, Kelsey, just because you have told me this, it is not confirmed to anyone else. Just because you have confided in me, the whole world looks different to you, but not necessarily to everyone else. Don't feel guilty. Don't feel scared. This is who you are. As I told you before, you are beautiful and you must embrace this before you can get anywhere."

"One day at a time is not good enough right now. I have to have an answer tomorrow. They will put my name out there and within the day, it'll all be over. I don't have time to wait around, but I also don't want to pick a fight with someone just to seal their lips."

"I don't really have any advice for you. I would, however, refrain from fighting. That is never going to solve your problems. There has to be a way to do this so that neither of you gets hurt. Think on it. I'm sure you will come up with some way to embrace yourself without outing yourself to the entire school."

That's it? That's all she has to give me? A regret? How shitty. I can't believe this. I am still stuck in the same position as when I walked through the door. My anger is burning in the pit of my empty stomach. Hunger cries out in a growl and I press my arm across my belly to damper the noise. "So, I guess you are telling me I'm on my own? Is that right?"

"Not necessarily. However, as your counselor, I am not inclined to tell you what to do. I shouldn't persuade you to do anything you don't want to do."

"Listen. I don't need a baby sitter. I don't need anyone to hold my hand. I need help. I need your advice." I look at her with a desperation clinging to the tears in the corners of my eyes. "This is no time to drag my ass, but I'm at a loss here."

"Look, Kelsey. Like I said. You need to do what is best for you. If you have a girlfriend, talk to her. See if she would be crushed by them outing you. You are not only looking out for yourself, but you have to keep her..."

"I don't *have* a girlfriend!" My breathing is becoming more rapid, nostrils flaring. My face heats up with anger. I can't believe I am doing this again. "I'm sorry. I really didn't mean to snap at you again."

"It's fine, but you really need to get your anger under control. I can only imagine how you will react in more threatening situations. I just said that to get you to think about all angles. Maybe you should write in a journal. This will give you a chance to clarify your anger before you actually talk to anyone. What do you think of that?" I shrug my shoulders.

"If I were you, I would find the girl and talk to her. Just simply chat with her about the situation. Keep it quiet and perhaps that will keep you from getting hurt. Let her know you are expected to beat her up and you don't agree with that. Maybe, in exchange for your mercy, she will be able to help you not get embarrassed...not be traumatized."

"That sounds okay...I guess. For some reason, I feel like there *isn't* a girl. That's the thing. I think it's a prank, and a really evil one at that. I'll let you know tomorrow...if I make it out alive."

I stand and gather my bag and water bottle, slinging the cord of my ipod over my shoulder. Sliding my left hand in my pocket, I reach my right hand out to Julie. "Thanks. I um...really appreciate you listening to me."

"Hey, that's what I'm here for." She smiles at me. "Oh, and by the way, that is my partner...in the picture. Her name is Rachel. We've been together for eight years." I walk back over and stare at the picture again. Rachel looks happy, sitting next to Julie on a set of front porch steps. Her arm is around Julie's shoulder, hand resting close to her neck. Her head is tilted toward Julie and a smile shines on her face. Her white beater fits snug to her body, offset by baggy jeans and navy Converse Chucks.

I turn back to Julie as she looks for my reaction. "Nice. She's, um, cute. Looks like you guys are happy. Hey, I've gotta go. Thanks again." As I walk toward the door and reach for the knob she calls out to me.

"Kelsey. Keep your head up. It will be okay. You will be happy too." I walk out and don't look back. I rush to my car and slump in the driver's seat. Leaning my head on the head rest, I close my eyes for a moment. Tears run out of the corners of my eyes and drip onto my neck. How can I do this?

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16: WAIVER

Walking into the kitchen, I sling the cabinet doors open to see what options we have for dinner. *Shit, nothing.* I yell up the stairs to Kyle that I have to go to the grocery. No reply. I walk up the stairs, rap on his cracked door, and push my way in. He is laying on the floor on top of a massive pile of dirty clothes with his headphones blaring so loud I can make out every word being said.

“Hey!!! Turn that down for a sec!!!”

Startled, he opens his eyes, apologizing as he pulls the earphones down around his neck. “Sorry, what’s up?”

“I have to go to the store. You going or staying?”

“Can I shower first?”

“Not if you want dinner anytime tonight. Just throw on some different clothes and let’s go if you’re coming with.”

I walk out of the room, returning the door to its slightly open position. I rush into the bathroom and check myself out in the mirror. I look like crap. My eyes are still puffy and red from my visit to the counselor. I reach down and turn the knob for the cold water. Running my hands and part of my arms under the stream, I cup my hands under the flow until a puddle forms. Bending over, I splash the puddle of cold water onto my face, rubbing and hoping the swelling will fade a little. I do this three times and finally reach for the hand towel on the wall next to me. I clasp the towel over my face and gently wipe the water away. Hanging the towel back on the rack, I look at myself again and decide I don’t really care what I look like right now.

As I walk out of the bathroom door, Kyle comes rushing down the hallway and bumps into me. “Watch out!” I scream at him, not meaning to use this tone.

“Gosh, sis. What’s wrong with you?” He slugs me in the arm, his way of lightening the mood in an uncomfortable situation.

“Nothing. Let’s just go. Ready?”

The ride to the store is silent. I cruise along in my own little world, thinking of what to say to Liv and how to say it. Kyle stares out the side window, a trait he has fully developed in the past few weeks.

Finally he turns and looks at me. His green eyes are inquisitive and piercing through my emotional barriers.

“What’s going on? Is there something I missed out on?”

“No...I um...I’m just having some personal problems. Nothing for you to worry about.” He’d never understand. As much as I would like to just spill my guts to him, I know it would do nothing but upset him. He would then start to question me and may not even be okay with me, and then he’d be all alone in the world. I couldn’t do that. I can’t tell him what is going on, no matter how hard it is for me.

“I know when you are lying, Kels. And this is one of those times. Is it something about Mom? Or is it Dad?”

I can honestly say it has nothing to do with either of them. I had completely forgotten about the phone call and didn’t want to think about it right now. “It’s not anything for you to worry about, okay?” I glance over at him and his eyes as a worried look spreads across his face. “Really, it’s just something with me, but not anything bad. I’m not like, sick or anything crazy like that. I just need some time, okay?”

He nods, not wanting to give up the conversation, but knowing he’ll get no further than he has gotten. I pull into the parking lot and scan the rows in the blinding sun. The heat of the afternoon sun can be seen in the swirls of gas dancing on the pavement and on the hot metal hoods and trunks on the parked cars. I pull into a spot by the cart return and shut off the car. I swing the door open and as soon as I step out of the car I see her.

Julie. She’s one row over, walking toward the grocery store, holding hands with her partner. I stop for a second by my car as if I’m waiting for Kyle, but really so I can catch my breath. I don’t know if she saw me or not, but I begin wondering if she would even talk to me in public. She can’t tell anyone that I’m her patient because of confidentiality rules, but I wonder if she’ll speak to me. I start to freak out. How do I explain to Kyle who she is and why she’s holding hands with another woman? Will he freak out when he sees them? He walks up beside me, waiting for me to walk on first.

As I walk toward the door, they cut over a row, into our lane. Julie is shielding the sun from her eyes with her hand and turns around to look behind her, making sure no cars are coming before crossing to the door. When she turns, she pauses, looking at me. I act like I don’t see her and continue walking. She waves to me with the hand that is shading her eyes. I don’t respond.

"Hey, who is that?" Kyle asks. "She just waved at you."

I am frozen. Not physically, because I am still walking forward. But my insides grow heavier as I walk closer and closer to her. She and her partner pause on the sidewalk, waiting for us to get closer. *Shit! Pull it together Kelsey.* I find within me an ounce of bravery and approach the two of them.

"Hi. Long time, no see." I'm so stupid.

Julie smiles at me as we step onto the sidewalk. I look over at Kyle and am instantly embarrassed by his appearance. I should have let him take a shower. His hair is matted to his head from the sweat of practice, still wet in some sections, and sticks to his forehead in clumps. He is still wearing his practice jersey and his soccer socks pulled to the knees, but threw on a pair of denim cargo shorts and some Adidas sandals. He smells like a boy, that salty outside smell boys get when they have been out for a while on a summer day.

"This must be Kyle?" she inquires knowingly with a smile. "Nice to meet you Kyle." She extends her hand and takes his in a firm handshake.

"You too." He returns, having no clue who this strange woman is. "What's your name?"

"I'm Julie. And this is Rachel." He reaches over and takes Rachel's hand as well. Her shake is more feminine and not so firm. She leaves the firmness to Kyle.

I stare at the two of them with a fake smile glued to my face. Rachel is even more beautiful than in the picture. Her layered, blondish brown hair falls perfectly around her face and flips out around the bottom. She has a nice, pure dark tan, not too dark. Her legs shine smooth in the sunlight and the light sparkles in the few blonde hairs on her arms. Her teeth are beyond white and perfectly aligned. A few freckles dot her nose and cheeks. Her eyes are hidden behind large black framed sunglasses. Her nose wrinkles slightly, a reaction to the sun. Her appearance is quite the opposite of Julie and I wonder if I would ever have even known she was a lesbian if I didn't see her holding hands with Julie.

"So, what are you up to this afternoon?" Julie asks.

"Oh, um...we didn't have any food in the house because we haven't been to the store in a while. I figured if we wanted dinner, we better get to the store." I look over at Kyle and he is analyzing their every move. They have rejoined their hands, and stand shoulder to shoulder. "So, here we are."

"Well, it is good to see you, and Kyle, it was nice to meet you. We better get in here too. We are having some friends over for dinner tonight and we have to get the grill fired up. Have a good day."

"Okay. You too. Enjoy your friends." As I'm finishing, Julie drops Rachel's hand and places her arm around the small of Rachel's back, leading her into the store. I can tell that Kyle is curiously staring at them, but not in an "I can't believe they are doing this" kind of way, but more of a "hmm...I wonder if..." kind of way.

Rachel turns back to me. "Nice to meet you guys." She waves, turns, and they head in. I breathe a heavy sigh and start walking in. I can't believe this. I mean, I know there are all kinds of lesbians and gays out there, but never have I seen someone I know that is brave enough to hold hands with their partner in public! This is just crazy. Part of me wanted to just tell them they better not do that. Then another part of me wanted to clap, to show them that I support their courage in a small town atmosphere. Being gay must be a hard thing to be. You always have to wonder what other people are going to think and how they will react. My stomach begins to flip, partly because I am so hungry, but partly because I am nervous. Will I ever be that okay with my own life? Can I do this, this gay thing?

* * * * *

Kyle says nothing about them in the grocery store. We fill up the cart with the usual groceries and he picks out some different snacks to get him through the week. I push the cart over to the U-Scan and Kyle helps me bag them and put them in the cart once I have them scanned. The groceries total over 100 dollars and I pull out my mom's credit card to pay for them. I have perfected the art of electronically signing my mother's name in the little blue box since I am the only one who buys groceries for the house. I fold the foot-long receipt and slide it into my wallet for safe keeping.

As we walk toward the car, a look spreads across his face. It's as if being back into the parking lot has triggered some sort of memory of the earlier run-in with Julie and Rachel. We load the bags into the back seat, careful not to place anything at an angle that will let the bags tip over on corners. Kyle returns the cart as I start the car. I roll down the windows to let some of the heat escape as the air is cooling. I reach up and pull down the visor and slide my sunglasses on. Kyle goofily skips over to the car, slings the door open, plops down in the seat, and slams the door closed.

"Now... we aren't in public anymore so you can tell me... who were those women?" He is so upfront about his inquiry. My face heats up and I know I have to do the best I can to be nonchalant about the whole thing. If I give too many details, he might catch on. I can't, no matter what I do, let him know that I am "one of those people."

"That was Julie, my counselor." I will leave it at that. See what else he wants to ask.

"She seemed pretty cool. Pretty laid back. I wouldn't mind it too much if I had to talk to her." He smiles at me. I wonder if he already knows, then immediately push that thought to the negative category. *Never assume, Kelsey.* I tell myself. *That never turns out good for anyone.*

"Yeah, she really is. You know, I didn't really want to go to counseling. Thought it was so stupid. But it's not all that bad. Don't tell Mom, though. She might make me do something else as a punishment."

He giggles a little. "I thought it was stupid anyway. I mean, so what? You did something bad. Ooohh. Like the bad fairy is gonna cast some dumb spell on you or something!" He is totally okay with this. Am I seeing this right?

"So is that girl, like, her girlfriend or something? I mean, she was holding her hand and stuff." Oh boy... here we go.

"Yes, as a matter of fact, she is. They've been together for a long time. Are you okay with that?"

"Umm... I mean... I guess so. It just seems kind of weird, that's all. They're all like holding hands in broad daylight. And at the grocery store! I was kind of like, whoa. You know?"

"Did that bother you?"

"No. Not really. Just weird I guess. Not bad, just different."

Whew! I expected him to go nuts on this one. I expected some crazy story about how they're not supposed to do that and that it is gross and all of that nonsense most people preach. If he had say that, it wouldn't have been because he learned it at home. We never even talk about gay people at home. It would've had to come from some of his friends or someone at school.

"I guess it doesn't really matter that much, huh?"

"No. I um....I don't think it does. Some people think differently, but that is a good attitude to have. I mean, you don't freak out when you see a guy and girl holding hands do ya? What's the difference?"

"I don't guess I really see a difference." A pause. "So, um, what are we having for dinner?"

That was it! That was the end of that conversation. It didn't phase him at all. What a relief. "Whatever you want, champ." I can't help but smile. No matter what had gone on in my mind today, there was a little bit of comfort in knowing that Kyle wouldn't be *too* upset when I finally had to tell him the truth about myself.

"I say....I want spaghetti and meatballs....and cheesy toast!"

"You've got it!"

* * * * *

We come waddling into the house with bags hanging from each arm all the way to the elbow. I swing my arm around in order to get the bags up on the counter then turn to take the bags from my brother. As I turn around, Mom is standing in the entry, leaning against the wall by the phone.

"What is all this mess?" She moans quietly. Her eyes are squinty and her hair is matted on the left side. She must have just gotten up. She yawns big, tapping her mouth with a flat hand. "How much did you spend this time?"

I say nothing and reach into my back pocket, retrieving my wallet. I reach in, unfold the receipt and hand it to her. I quickly resume unpacking the bags to avoid eye contact with her when she sees the total. This is a weekly battle in our house. The messed up part of it is that *she* should be the one buying the groceries. Instead I have to do that and she gets mad at me every freakin' time because of the price of everything. I wait for her yells. Instead, she begins mumbling under her breath.

"Damn groceries cost more and more every week. A hundred and fourteen dollars and eighty five cents. Lord, Jesus. What kind of crap did they buy anyway?"

She continues rattling as she scans down the entire list, calling off items and shaking her head.

"Kelsey, I told you not to go spendin' a ton of money, now, didn't I? I told you I got an hour cut this week at work and wouldn't have a full pay check. Why do you not listen to me at all? I *said* go easy on the groceries this week. And no more gas in the car, hear me?"

"Mom, I didn't buy a bunch of crap. I bought enough food to fix lunches for us, to cook dinner for us, and to have snacks for Kyle at practice. *That is it!* I'm sorry that you didn't get the money, but that isn't our fault. We still have to eat."

She shakes her head as she starts to tear up. Wiping the tears off her cheeks with the same flat hand, she raises her face to me. "I am sorry honey, but I can't do this. Did you use my debit card? Cause if you did, this is gonna give me an overdraft. What am I gonna do?" Her crying grows stronger. I feel a little sorry for her. She is so pathetic she can't even make enough money to support her family. I finish putting the groceries away and wad up the bags, stuffing them in the bag caddy on the top of the refrigerator.

"Don't worry, Mom. I used the credit card. I know you don't have a lot of money, but we don't have a choice of whether or not we can eat." My voice is surprisingly calm. She turns and walks into the living room. I hear the TV turn on and can hear the Dr. Keith Ablow show in the background. She watches that crap every day. I hate to hear all of those staged fights on the set of those shows. I know that half of them are fake and can't help but think of the real ones I'm used to at home. I really think that my mom takes them seriously and thinks that everyone fights like that with their family. That's why she thinks it's okay to yell at me for things that aren't my fault. That's also why she thinks I shouldn't answer her questions with attitude, and if I do, I deserve to be slapped.

On the commercial, she shuffles back into the kitchen. I've put pasta in the pan to cook and am rolling out meatballs for Kyle. She looks over my shoulder and turns to the fridge. She opens the door and stands staring at the stocked shelves. "You didn't get me any damn beer?" Here we go again.

"Did you forget that I can't buy beer?"

"Well you can sure as hell use my credit card. Why can't you buy beer with my damn credit card?"

"Mom, let's not have this argument. If you want beer, go get some. I don't want to hear it."

She stomps over to the kitchen table where I laid my backpack. She unzips the front pocket and starts rummaging through my stuff. "What are you doing?" I ask, sort of short. "That is my stuff. What do you want?"

"I am looking for the damn car keys. Where did you put them?"

"They are right here." I say, pointing at the counter. "Are you gonna at least change clothes before you go?" I look at her in her Tigger night gown with her boobs hanging down and fluffy pink house shoes. I hope she will change clothes and at least brush her hair.

"Sure, Kelsey. Whatever makes you happy. Don't want to embarrass you in your little black get-up. Never mind that I never want you to leave the house looking like that and you don't listen to me." She stomps to the back of the house. She's already been drinking and I wonder how much. I walk over to the trash can and step on the pedal. The lid pops up and I see at least four cans, but there are probably more. *Great, another one of these nights.*

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17: WHITTLE

As I am wondering if I should call Liv, the phone rings. I rush over and pick up the cordless, propping it on my shoulder so I can finish dinner.

"Hello?"

"Hey, Kelsey. Did your mother tell you I called?" It's my father. Great.

"No. I mean yeah. She told me you called. I just haven't had time to call back."

"Well, that's fine. Hey, I just wanted to touch base with you. It's been a while." No shit. As much as I think it'd be cool to see what he looks like now, I don't want to waste my time chatting it up. I really just want to get this over with.

"So, I guess your mom told you I'm gonna be in town this weekend. I know this is short notice, but I really would like to see you again. And Kyle. I have missed you guys so much and it is hard to believe it has been so long since I've seen you." I listen as he pours on the nice. He is playing innocent and I can't figure out why. Since I have nothing to lose, why not just ask.

"So what's the real reason? Why, after ten years of being nonexistent to us, do you feel the need to come back now?"

"I just...it's...it's kind of a long story." The stumbling over words thing just isn't working for me.

"I'd like to hear it. I'd like to know what it is that drove you to the decision to pack up and leave." I can hear him breathing into the phone. The continuous chatter in the background tells me he is watching TV.

"I'm not sure I have the answers you want to hear. Besides, wouldn't it be better if we saw each other first, so we can...you know, at least meet each other again?" This isn't gonna work for me. I need answers and I need them now.

"No. The deal is, you tell me what happened. Let me be an adult for once. I think you owe me that for leaving me fatherless for so long, don't you?" I feel anger rising up in me, but the sincerity of my question is true. This is a mystery I have held with me for so long. I have gone through different stages, hating him at times, and longing for him to return at others, never knowing his motivations. Now, I'm not quite sure what I want, but I know I want answers. Is that so wrong?

"Listen, if you really think you want to know this, I'll tell you. Not because I think it will change things, but because I am willing to do this to be able to see you this weekend. It's a hard story to tell. Kelsey, if I tell you, will you agree to see me?" I pause for a second to analyze before deciding. I could hear what he has to say and be completely pissed, not wanting to give him another second of my life, or things could be better than I expected, and I could live with seeing him.

"I want to hear," I finally speak up. "I want to know what happened to you, what took so long, and what's going on in your life that brings you to call." I imagine him smiling at me, his deep dimples creasing his cheeks. I remember those, but that's about it.

"Okay. It's a deal. Things weren't good between your mother and me, I'm sure you figured out. I lost my job because of a company staffing cut. Your mom was staying home with you and Lori, and had to get a job to help pay the bills. She hated me for that. We were both working crappy part-time jobs just to survive. The stress led her to alcohol, and before long, she couldn't function without it." I figured as much.

"Then, she got pregnant. You were only a toddler, and we knew it wasn't a good pregnancy since we were barely getting by. She continued drinking, cursing the world and all those in it. I finally got a good job again when she was ten weeks along. The night I came home to tell her, she was curled up in a ball on the bathroom floor, clinging to her knees, crying. I rushed to her, asking what was wrong and she swung her beer bottle in my face, breaking it across my jaw." Oh my god. That's when the violence started.

"She lost the baby in a miscarriage. There was nothing I could do. I tried everything to make her perk up. I bought flowers and pampered her. I cooked dinner and cleaned the house. For months, she did nothing but work, drink, and sleep."

My mouth starts to water. I want to cry, but am too busy. My ears are attuned to the conversation and every noise in the house causes me to jump. I never knew. She never told me. Maybe that's why she never had anything to do with Kyle. Why we had to raise him.

He continues solemnly, "things got better after a while. She cut back and tried so hard to get things together. She started to be more involved with you girls and it seemed healthy. Then, about two years later, she turned again. I felt helpless, scared to say anything to her. She was out at clubs and

partying all the time since she wasn't expected to work anymore. I didn't know what to do. She was cheating on me in her numb state of awareness. Then...she got pregnant. This time with Kyle."

I finish his thought. "you didn't know if he was yours so you left..."

He hesitates before answering. "Yeah. That's right. I feel so damn guilty for that now and have ever since it happened, but I couldn't keep doing it. I asked Mrs. Oglesby next door to look after you, promising to send her a check once a month and packed my bag that night. I waited up for your mom, and as soon as she stumbled in and went to sleep, I snuck out the door."

This explains so much. Why he never called unless it was a holiday, knowing Mom would let us talk to him simply to avoid confrontation. Why she never, ever mentioned his name unless she was cursing him. Why we never heard anything about him and where he was. Why food would miraculously appear in the kitchen. Why, most of all, we were left to deal with our own lives...to grow up on our own. I wipe my eyes continuously, but cannot stop the steady flow of tears. Why did I never know?

I gather myself a little before speaking. "Thanks for the explanation. I think I needed to know. Don't worry, I won't tell anyone that you told me. It doesn't matter, right?"

"Thanks. Kelsey, I have lived with this long enough. I want my life and my family back. So...will you meet with me on Saturday?"

"How can I not?" I get a little chuckle out of him for this. "I'll meet you for breakfast. But I've gotta get going now. Hope that's okay."

"You bet. See you then."

I lay the phone down on the counter and step outside for a fresh breath of air. I need to cool it so no one asks me what's wrong. It's my little secret, for now. Of course, I know I can't keep it from Liv because she hears everything. But just for a few minutes, I hold onto the knowledge that my dad isn't the creep I always thought he was at all.

* * * * *

I pick up the phone and dial the first three numbers. I hang up. Something inside me is not right. I feel a little jittery. I punch the button on the phone and listen to the dial tone humming in my ear. I dial six numbers and my finger stalls on the 8. *Just do it... push the button.*

I hear the ring on the line and wait, wringing my hands and popping my knuckles. My breathing is heavy. After four rings Keenan picks up on the other end. I chat with him for a minute then ask for Liv. As I wait for her to come on the line, I wonder if we will get into personal conversations, beyond the normal rundown of what's going on.

"Hey," Liv says cheerfully. "I was just getting ready to call you. What's up?"

"Um...I just wanted to tell you something. You will never believe who just called my house."

"My father! Can you believe that? He wants to see us on Saturday."

"Really!?! Are you serious? He just called out of the blue? I'd be kinda skeptical about that if I were you. I mean, you haven't really talked to him much since he left, right? And now he just magically shows up. Weird." My first instinct is to get angry since my conversation is still fresh in my mind. I turn myself away from this because she hasn't gotten the entire story. Once she hears, I'm sure she'll react differently.

"Well, it was just...I don't know. He seemed kind of...lonely, hard up. I kind of felt sorry for him. It was weird. There was that curiosity in me. I asked him why he left, 'cause, why not? You know? You're not gonna believe this."

"Tell me! I want to hear."

"Not now. It's a long story. I'll tell you later."

"You can't do that to me. That is so cruel." She doesn't understand.

"I don't want to go into it now. And I really can't, so I'll let you know as soon as I can."

She huffs, not satisfied with my response. "Ugh...you are such a tease. Just kidding. Okay, well I guess that'll have to do, huh?"

"Yep. Well, I guess I'll see you later? Hey, did you want to stay over tonight? I don't know how much homework you have or whatever, but you can if you want." She tells me she will ask her mom as she says her goodbyes. I have to get her in a place where I can talk to her face to face...alone. I have to tell her about my dad, but the more important thing to me right now is my feelings for her. My relationship could take a drastic turn.

I know things could go all wrong. I know this could be the end of our friendship, but I can't hide these feelings much longer. I have to talk to her. I have to tell her the threats in the locker room. I have to

ask her advice. I have to tell her...everything. I pivot from my leaning stance against the counter and return the phone to the charger. Hugging my arms around my middle, I lean against the wall for a second.

* * * * *

I have cleaned up the dinner mess and as I'm packing my binder into my gig bag, my mom comes tearing through the back door. She tosses the keys on the counter and hefts the bulk of a brown paper bag onto the counter. I pull out my tuner and lay it down on the kitchen table to tune my guitar in drop D. Throwing the strap over my head, I sit down on the corner of the table and strum a G chord. A little flat. I begin, one string at a time, picking and twisting, picking and twisting until the line on the tuner falls flush with the balance line at the top of the digital screen.

"Do you have to do that right now?" My mom says, a little perturbed. "Isn't that something you can do at practice? You are going to give me another headache."

"Sorry!" I quickly grab the tuner, stuff it in the box, and throw it into the front pocket of my gig bag. I look over at my mom as she pulls a 6-pack of Budweiser out of the bag. She reaches back in. Next, she retrieves a fifth of Hot Damn. She reaches in, yet again, pulling out a small two-shot bottle of some flavor of Schnapps.

"Are you serious? You really need all that?"

"Why don't you shut your pretty little face before I make you shut it."

"Ugh." She always does this when she drinks. I can't help but think what Dad must've felt dealing with this all the time, too. There is no telling what she had to drink while she was gone. I'm sure if I walked up closer to her I would smell the familiar cheap beer, and probably mint or vanilla liquor as well. "I thought you said you were quitting for me...for us? Did you forget that little conversation?"

She raises her hand, squinting her eyes. Her body sways a little to the left, and then she returns to her upright stance. "You know..." she slurs, "I was. But t-h-at's all changed now."

"What is it that could be so important that would change your mind to do something for your kids?" Do I really want to know this? I wait for her answer.

"Weee...ll... your dad. I th...nk. Leave me a...lone."

I shake my head and approach the bar. When she turns away, I reach up and slide the keys into my pocket, hoping she didn't hear the clank of the metal keychain against the keys. She didn't. I shoulder

my gig bag and walk out the door, loading the guitar into the backseat. I walk back in and jog up the stairs. I tap on Kyle's door.

"Yeah?"

I push the door open and see him glued to the TV, rapidly punching buttons on the Game Cube controller in the empty space between his crossed legs. He pauses the game and turns to see what I want. I squat down beside him, rustling his damp clean hair. "Glad you finally took a shower." I smile as he protrudes his lip in a mock-anger face, scrunching his eyes.

"I do like to do that sometimes."

"Well, I'm off to practice. I'll probably be gone for a while. Just so you know, you'd probably be better off just hanging out up here tonight."

"Why do you say that? What's wrong with Mom?"

"She's been drinking again." I reach into the cargo pocket on my army pants and pull out my cell phone. "Here, keep this and call Liv's phone if you need me, okay? You should be okay, but just in case. Oh, and don't let Mom see that you have my phone. She'll take it away from you." I stand up and turn toward the door.

"Okay. See you later."

"Do your homework."

"I will. I will." He returns to his game before I even get out the door, not looking back at me.

I run back down the stairs and grab my back pack off the table. "Gone to practice. Mom. There's spaghetti on the stove if you want some...and meatballs!" I poke my head around the corner and she's sitting in the recliner with her legs tucked into the chair with her. The living room is dark except for the light bouncing off the television. She holds a bottled beer in her right hand and a lit cigarette in her left. Her numb gaze doesn't even shift over to me. She has no idea I even said anything to her. The ashes on her cigarette are every bit of an inch long and I just hope she doesn't burn the house down before I get home. Of all nights to invite company over. I round the corner and jump in the car, revving the engine. There's something about leaving, on my own, that gives me a free, light feeling. I smile as I glance into the rear view mirror. *Be who you are*, I tell myself in the mirror, then laugh at my own ignorance...talking to myself in a mirror.

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As I'm driving through town, I flip through my CD case. James Blunt...nah. Justin Timberlake...no. Jimmy Buffett...nah. Melissa Etheridge...no. Dixie Chicks...no. How about Bob Segar? It's been a while since I listened to this one. I slide the silver CD into the player and wait. I listen as the familiar voice rings out. A blurry memory rushes into my mind. I'm sitting in my dad's lap in the driver's seat of the car. We are cruising back roads and I'm pretty small, probably around five. I lean my head against his exposed chest and the hairs tickle my bare shoulders. The window is rolled down and his left arm is propped on the door at the elbow. A half smoked cigarette clenched between his middle finger and thumb, he inhales and I can feel the rise of his chest followed by the sinking. It's a pretty hot day. My hair is sticking to my face and neck. The backs of my legs stick to his below the line of his shorts. I'm dozing off as we drive in the heat with the sun pelting me through the windshield.

We pull over and he lifts me under my arms, slinging me onto his shoulders. "Here we go, Cupcake." He shouts up to me. He always called me that. He bounces as he walks down the dirt path, bumpy with the knots of tree roots protruding out of the ground. He turns and looks back at my mom and sister. Mom is huge and pregnant and pulls Lori along by her arm, waddling down the path a little slower than us. I lean over and lay my chin on the top of his sweaty head as we walk toward the water, comforted by the steady stride.

And I'm back. That's it. That's all I can remember. I'm driving down this gravel road, watching the sun disappear in the distance. I want to go back. I want to see more. To feel the way I felt then. To know that all is well. I want to experience my father. It has been so long since I saw him that I rarely even have memories of him. He simply disappeared from my life for all of these years, and now he's back. Calling me. Wanting to see me. I don't even know if I will recognize him, or if he will recognize me.

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18: WEB

I pull into the driveway for the Band Barn. Travis and Jack are sitting outside on a bale of straw. Travis takes a pull from a fifth of Jack Daniels and waves over to me in an overly dramatic way. I smile and holler over to him. "What's up crazy?" He gets up from his stoop and wanders my direction. "Why are you drinking? Don't you know we have to practice for like three hours or something? You can't be off your game."

"You're right. I can't. But you know how smooth everything feels after a couple of shots. Look. I've only had a few." He raises the bottle. It's more than half empty. At least he's a funny drunk...unlike my mother.

"Right. A few, huh?" He holds his hand out, palm up.

"Give me some skin, girlie." I slap his hand and he pulls away, clenching a fist, in reaction to the sting. I turn my hand up to return the favor. "You ready to do this thing? We gonna rock 'da house. Tha's right." He turns and heads back to the Barn before I can even answer. I look around and notice that Liv isn't here yet.

"Hey, anyone know where Liv is?" I call out as I walk into the Barn. No one answers. "Keenan, where's your sister?"

He looks up from the sound board shrugging his shoulders. "I don't know. I'm not her keeper. She needs to hurry up though. Why don't you call her?"

I reach down to the pocket on my leg and realize I left my phone with Kyle. I borrow Keenan's phone to call. She picks up on the second ring. "I'm coming, I'm coming! Be patient."

"Hey, Liv." I speak softly into the phone.

"Kelsey? I'm sorry...why do you have my brother's phone?"

"I left mine with Kyle. Where are you?"

"Turn around and you'll see." I do a 180 and see her white Jeep Liberty flying up the gravel road. She's leaving a cloud of dust behind her. "Damn girl. I'm glad I'm not following you!"

"Shut up, smart ass. I have to hurry. I had a little hold up in town. I almost ran out of gas and had to turn around and go get some. Anyway, I'm here so I'm getting off. Love ya. Ciao." Click. Did

she just say that? I haven't heard her say that in a while. I stand out by my car and wait for her to pull in. She swings open the door and hops out. I look at her and my heart jumps.

She has on white, grey and black camouflage pants bunched on the side into Capri pants, a white studded belt with the buckle on her left hip, black military boots laced halfway up her shins, and a black beater with a big silver star on the front. Her hair is pulled back and she's wearing a black and white bandana with silver hoop earrings. On her left arm is a two-buckle leather bracelet, about three inches wide, and on her right are at least twenty or thirty black plastic ring bracelets. She looks hot! I swallow hard as she leans over and hugs me.

"Hey. Mom said I could stay with you, if that's still okay. I brought a bag with me." She points to the back seat. By the looks of the bag, she has packed for a week.

"Did you bring enough stuff?" She winces at me, tilts her head to the left and sticks out her tongue. She lifts up the front of her shirt, showing me a new belly piercing.

"NO WAY! You didn't. When did you do that?" Her face floods red. "You just did that didn't you?"

She puts her finger to her lips to shush me, continuing in a whisper. "Don't say it too loud. I don't want to tell anyone. That's why I was late. Promise me you won't say anything, k?"

"I promise, but I want the details later."

"And I think you owe *me* some details too."

* * * * *

Practice is awesome. We start warming up and hit a few of our regular songs. Then we take a break and huddle up on the straw circle to organize our sets for the weekend. We go back and forth about song order and all that crap. Some say we should mix up the slow and fast songs. Others think we should group them together. Honestly, I don't care how we do it. I just want to get this thing moving. After about thirty minutes of debate, we settle on a lineup. We start the set with Maroon 5 *Sunday Mornings*. Most of our songs are covers for different bands like that. We'll do Dave Matthews, Modest Mouse, Nickelback (which seems so different), and one by Staind in the first set, with Travis and Jack alternating lead.

We'll take a small break and switch into a different set. This one is more geared toward Olivia. In this set we will do songs by Ani DiFranco (but not many because I can't master her guitar skills yet), Kris

Delmhorst, Sarah Bolen, and some Melissa Etheridge. We will end with the Melissa Ferrick song that everyone agreed would bring down the house at our last practice. Oliva has a pretty versatile voice, so we have a lot of options in the less-popular realm of music. Hopefully people will be impressed and ask who the different artists are. If not, at least it's a night of fun for us. The first, and possibly the last, if we don't get a move on.

There's no way we're going to get through all of these songs tonight. I suggest we start with the second set because the guys hang out here without me and Liv a lot more. I think they can practice without us. After groans fill the room, they finally agree. Liv jumps up onto the front of the stage and signals Keenan to pump up the volume on her microphone.

I settle into my music, starting to feel the groove. I look up from my guitar when I can. I watch her. She's there on the front of that stage in this abandoned barn, but in her mind, she is performing for thousands of people. She gives this practice every ounce of effort she has, as if she is actually performing on Saturday night. She feels the music, sways with it, jumps with it, uses her hands to make her point. I smile occasionally as I recognize her passion for what she's doing. She is feeding off this band behind her.

At the end of the song, she turns around, wiping her nose on her wrist. She looks up at me and I smile at her. She smiles back and once again, we are connected. Only me and her in this room right now. I wink out of my right eye and she blushes. She approaches me a little closer and bends to tie her shoe. I look down at her and she winks back.

My heart is heavy and beating out of my chest. My palms sweat and I wipe them on the towel beside me. Trying to distract myself, to find a way to get my focus redirected to the music, I turn away and reach for my water bottle. I screw off the cap and tilt it toward the ceiling, chugging. She walks over to me and places her hand on my side.

"Can I have a drink of that? I am parched!"

I hand her the bottle and watch the curve of her lips around the mouth of the bottle. I think of how it would feel to kiss those lips. I wonder if they are soft and if she is a good kisser. I want to take her into my arms and kiss her for an hour. I run my hand through my hair and smile as she returns the bottle to me. There is only a little left in the bottom. I tilt it back and down the rest.

Sitting the bottle down next to me, I stand and shake my head, pop my neck, and shake my body all the way down to my feet and wrists. Gaining a little composure, I grip my guitar and strum the intro to the next song quietly. I have to do something to draw my attention back to practice. When I begin playing, everyone resumes position and we move on, song by song.

It's time to practice the Ferrick song. The end of practice, and the most emotional song. Oh boy! Here goes nothing! Or something, who knows? As I wait for the boys to get back to where they need to be, my mind wanders. She seemed excited about staying with me. Is she feeling the same things I am? I drift down one road of possibility.

If she's feeling the same as I'm feeling, does that mean we could be happy like Julie and Rachel? I can't really imagine walking into the grocery store holding hands with Olivia. What if people stare? What if they laugh at us? Or even worse, what if we get beat up for showing the world our attraction to one another? This could potentially be a very dangerous life. I've seen on TV shows where men get beat up a lot just for being gay. What makes people think it's so wrong?

If I love a woman, what does that matter? I can't help who I love. We could have so much fun together. There would be no more tension between us because we could be upfront and honest about all our feelings. I could tell her I love her if I feel it. She could tell me the same. We could share connections that most girls don't have. We could...

"Earth to Kelsey." Travis is standing in front of me. My eyes cross then straighten, focusing on the strings of his electric guitar. "Where'd *you* go?"

"Oh...sorry. I was just thinking."

"I think brain damage came with the black eye," he cackles, proud of himself for finding a way to make fun of the bruises I had forgotten I even have. "Let's do it, you little badass." He returns to his spot and I rejoin the band, playing the acoustic intro to *The Stranger*. Liv cuts her eyes my way and turns around breathing in deeply before her spotlight is turned on. I watch her move and wish I was in front of her, watching her face as she sings this song. I would look into her eyes and read her emotions. I would stare into her face and pretend she was singing the song for me and only me.

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19: WANE

Liv follows me home after practice. I roll down the windows and let the warm air blow into the car. Cranking the radio up, I sing along with Ludacris' *Money Maker*. I know every word. The music flows through me, energizes me. I bob my head and dance to the music. When we reach town, she flashes her lights at me. I pull over in the mall parking lot to see what's wrong. She pulls up next to me and shakes her phone at me.

"Your brother just called."

"Is he okay?"

"I think so. I talked to him for a minute and he said your mom is drunk and just wondered when we would be back. Wanna call him?"

"Yeah. I better if you don't mind." She hands the phone to me and I call my own number, which feels awkward. He picks up after the first ring. "Hey, bud. You okay?" After talking to him for a minute to calm his unnecessary panic, I decide this would be the perfect time to tell Liv about my dad.

"Kyle, will you be okay if I'm home in like thirty minutes?"

"Yeah. I'll just hang out in my room. Hurry though."

I hang up, a little relieved that I can actually talk to her about it without having to whisper the entire story and without any interruptions. I swing my door open and walk over to her Jeep, climbing in with her. I hand her the phone. "Here ya go. He's fine. Just a little panic attack."

"Oh, good. He was out of breath and everything when he called me. I think your mom started yelling at him or something."

"That's what he said, but I got him calmed down. I came over here so I could tell you about my dad in private." She nods her head, clapping a little, excited to hear the news.

"It's not like that at all. It isn't an exciting story. Pretty much depressing, if you ask me. But it does explain a lot about how Mom acts and stuff." I start off slow, working my way in to how it got to the point of the confession in our conversation. She is listening intently to every word I speak, nodding occasionally to show me she is paying attention. Before I even get finished with the story, she has started to cry a little.

"Oh, Kelsey. I'm so sorry." She's sincere, but what good does it do me?

"It's no big thing. But I do think it's something I needed to hear. It gives me a reason not to hate my dad like I have for so long. I just wish I'd known sooner, you know?"

"Maybe, but you probably wouldn't have dealt with it too well. You weren't ready to hear this yet. Maybe you would've thought he was lying or gotten angry with him. You never know how you would've acted." She has a point. I don't know that I was ready to hear it earlier. I hated him for leaving. Hated him for upsetting my world. Hated Mom for letting him go and not fighting for the relationship. This perspective is completely different than I would've ever imagined.

"You're right."

"I love it when you say that!" She's so cute sometimes.

"Ready to get back? I'm sure Kyle is going nuts." She hands me the phone to call him again. I tell him we are in front of the mall and will be there soon. As I get back in my car, I sigh. *One story down.* I tell myself. I'm ready to get back so I can talk to her and hang out for a while.

* * * * *

I peel out of the parking lot, heading out of town on the back roads. I really want to speed the rest of the way, but think better of it because I know I can't afford a speeding ticket. I set my cruise on the curvy road knowing Olivia is not too familiar with this road, especially in the dark. She follows fairly close to me. I pull into the driveway and signal with my arm out the window for her to park on the street. She follows my lead. I get out of the car and wait for her as I sling my gig bag onto my back. She hauls out this gigantic bag and I shake my head in disbelief. How could one person need so much stuff for one night?

She follows me in and I see my mom sprawled out on the couch. As I'm wondering if she is passed out, her head pops up.

"Hi girls. You sure are late. What time is it, anyway?"

"Um. It's 10:45. We had a long practice. We have a gig this weekend."

"You do? You didn't tell me that. I didn't know you were getting that good." She reaches over and grabs a cigarette, clumsily placing it between her lips. She has to scoot the top part of her body off the couch to reach the lighter on the center of the coffee table. She groans as she rights herself on the couch and flicks the lighter. It takes three tries before she gets a suitable flame. I quickly scan around the room

and see all six of the Bud bottles spread out. Three on the coffee table, one on each end table, and one on the floor next to the couch; within reach. I wonder how much of the other liquor she has gone through, but don't ask. I reach around and grab Liv by the wrist, trying to signal for her to leave the room. She flinches, not expecting the touch.

"Well, Mom, we're gonna head upstairs. Night."

"Leaving me already? I was just getting started." Oh no. Tonight is one of the chatty drunk nights. That makes me think she has slowed on the hard liquor and stuck to the beer.

"Well, I'm really tired and I need to shower. It was hot in the Barn tonight, so I was pretty sweaty by the time practice was over."

"Well...that's okay, I guess. I'm kinda bored though. Where's your brother? I haven't seen him all night." Are you kidding me? How did he know she was so drunk if she doesn't even know he is here?

"He should be upstairs. That's where he was when I left."

"I'll be. I didn't even know."

I turn around knowing if I don't just walk out, we'll be stuck here for hours. I walk up the stairs, drop my bag in my room, and walk across the hall to knock on Kyle's door.

"Hey bud. Why did you get scared? Mom seems to be in a good mood tonight."

"She wasn't earlier. I went down to get a snack and she started screaming at me. She said I needed to get out of her house. She didn't even know who I was. What was I supposed to do?"

I can see the pain in his eyes. It must suck to be a stranger in your own home. I hurt for him because this is how it's been his entire life, for the most part. I reach out and hug him. Knowing he wants to be cool with Liv in the house, but also knowing that he needs the hug, and I more than him.

"Hey. Can I come hang out with you guys for a little bit?" I hesitate but then agree. After all, he's been alone all night. I wave him into the room and close the door. I start picking up my room a little as we rehash the night. We explain our practice to Kyle and he listens intently. I feel a little guilty for leaving him here. I really should've invited him to come with me, but sometimes I need a break.

As I start brushing my hair, Kyle and Liv are chatting about an episode of Survivor last week. Since I don't really watch TV all that much, I'm lost in the conversation. It doesn't bother me. It feels good to have my brother and my best friend finding something to talk about.

"While you guys chat it up about some crazy show, I'm gonna go shower." I reach down and grab my towel off the floor. Because it's crumpled, it's still damp from my morning shower. I toss it into the floor of my closet, deciding to grab a clean one from the hall closet. I turn back around and catch Liv's eye. She smiles at me, obviously not completely in tune with the conversation. I wink at her and grab my pajamas off the chair in the corner, waving as I walk out of the room, closing the door behind me.

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I pull the comforter back and scrunch down between the sheets, pulling the blankets up to my chin. My wet hair dampens the pillow, which I normally hate, but it feels good to be clean and warm in bed. I look over at Oliva as she rummages through her bag.

"Hey, mind if I shower now?" She pulls a pair of silky purple sleep pants out of the bag, wrapping them around a T-shirt.

"Nope. Have at it. The towels are in the closet."

"K. Thanks. Back in a few." She walks out the door, closing it gently behind her. I invite Kyle to sit at the foot of the bed.

"So, did you get your work done tonight?"

He looks at me, a little frustrated by my nagging. "Yes. I did it. A while ago. I almost beat the game, too. I was getting bored without you here, so I played the game forever."

We stare at each other, silent for a minute. "So...when's your next game?"

"Um...Saturday. I think it's at 1:00. Can you take me?"

I think about Saturday. It's gonna be a busy day. Soccer...Dad...and gig. "Yep. I'll even stay if you want me to. You know Dad is coming to town, right?" Shock rolls over his face and his shoulders slump. He didn't know. Mom didn't even bother to tell him.

"What for?" I can read the same mixed emotions on his face that I felt. He's just as skeptical as I was. I want to reassure him that it'll be a positive experience for both of us. I'm not sure how things will go, but I have to pretend things will be fine between he and dad, and I don't foresee anything but fun for him, but I'm trying to get him a little psyched up about the visit.

"I'm not real sure. He told me he missed us and wanted to be a part of our lives. I agreed to meet up with him. Maybe we can talk him into going to your game. Would you like that?" I hate lying, but I know he wouldn't understand what I heard from Dad. He didn't need to hear it.

He stalls for a minute, twisting the frayed edge of my blanket in his fingers. Looking down at the floor, he props his forehead in his hand. Is he crying? I sit up and reach over to rub his back but he jerks from me. When Kyle resists, something is wrong.

"Hey, bud. Look at me." I wait. "Hey." He finally upturns his face and I see the solitary tear trickling from his right eye. I reach forward and wipe it away, taking him into an embrace. "We're gonna have fun. I promise."

"How do you know? What if I don't *want* to see him? What if I don't have anything to say? What if I don't even know what he looks like, and then I feel dumb?"

"Listen. You don't have to do anything you don't want to do, okay? No matter what Mom tells you, you don't have to go anywhere with him or say anything you don't want to. Just trust me. He wants to see you."

I watch, waiting for a reaction. He seems to have calmed a bit, but I'm not entirely sure. "It's just....I don't even remember him." This triggers more tears. His face reddens with his unsuccessful effort to hold back. "I've just kinda gotten used to not having a dad. Won't it be weird?"

"Yeah. I'm not gonna lie. I think it will be really weird, but Kyle, we don't even know him. That is the beauty of the whole thing. Maybe he has turned into a really cool guy. We should give him a chance, don't you agree? Just think about it."

"I just...I don't know."

"It's okay. Just think about it tonight and tomorrow. Let me know. I'm supposed to call him back on Friday afternoon. Maybe then we can have a better plan for the day. It's up to you, bud."

"Okay....I think I'm gonna go to bed now." He stands from his cross-legged position at the foot of the bed. I climb out of my comfort and wrap my arms around his shoulders, kissing him on the top of the head.

"I've got your back. I won't let anyone hurt you. Do you trust me?" I take my hands and place them on his cheeks, lifting his face to me. "Well, do you?"

A smile twitches in the corner of his mouth. "Yeah...I do." He turns from me and walks out the door. I exhale as I wait for him to close the door then climb back into my spot in bed. Pulling the covers back up, I cross my arms, tucking them behind my head. *Why me? Why do I have to do all of the 'mom' things?* I complain to myself constantly about these things, but I realize I don't really mind all that much. I'm the one person who can calm my brother, make him feel important. That's not such a bad thing.

I stare at the ceiling, at the word *Believe* looking down on me. Sometimes I do. Believe, that is. I believe I can take charge and make things okay for everyone else. I believe there are things I can change. Things I can do to make a difference.

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20: WANTON

I start talking as soon as Liv comes back into the bedroom. "So, tell me about your piercing. Why did you do it? How bad did it hurt?"

She flips around, greeting me with a mischievous smile. "Well, I did it just because. I don't really know. It was pretty friggin painful, if I have to say." She goes into details, showing me and telling me every move they made from beginning to end. She tells me how she's supposed to care for it.

"That's cute. And you can't change it for two months? How crazy." I stand up and turn on the lamp. The overhead light is too bright for now. I walk over by the door and flip the switch. I'm acting way too nervous. "I think I need some water. Need anything?" She grabs my hand as I turn toward the door.

"Oh, Kels, can you..."

"What? Can I what?"

"Never mind." She drops my hand and shoos me toward the door. "I'll tell you in a minute."

As I walk quietly down the stairs, I pray that my mother is asleep, or passed out, or whatever so I don't have to talk to her again. I tiptoe through the hall, into the kitchen. She is snoring on the couch. Whew. I quietly open the cabinet and pull out a plastic cup. This is the tricky part. I open the freezer and dip my hand into the ice tray, pulling out piece by piece, trying not to let the cubes shift any more than necessary. I close the door and fill the glass with water from the sink. I rush quietly back out of the kitchen and up the stairs. I slide into my bedroom and close the door behind me. Liv is sitting cross legged on the dresser when I come back in staring at her belly in the mirror. She looks over to me and climbs down.

"So, what did you think of practice tonight?" I say, hoping this conversation will lead into more important conversations that need to happen.

"Uh, I thought it was awesome. We're really getting into our groove, don't you think?" Crossing her legs at the ankles, she leans against the dresser, taking the water from me to get a drink. She grabs one of the cubes with her teeth, retracting it into her mouth. I imagine how cold her lips and mouth are right now. How sensual it would be to feel her cold mouth on my warm lips.

"Yeah. Totally. I'm stoked about the concert this weekend. I've never been to the Broken Rainbow, have you?" I honestly don't even know where it is, or what kind of place it is. All I know is that it's a club that you can get into even if you aren't 21.

"No. I've never been, but Travis says it's a pretty hip spot. All kinds of people there." She watches me from her post with her left arm crossed and tucked under her right. Her firm leg muscles are accentuated under the purple form-fitting pants. Her shirt hangs loose just below her waist and the sleeves are short, allowing her biceps to peek out below the seams. "What?" she says as we stare at each other silently.

"Nothing. I just....I don't know." I sit up, crossing my arms over my knees.

She smiles at me as she stands up straight. She shuffles to the other side of the bed, sitting with her back against the wall. I turn slightly, spreading out across the foot of the bed with my hand propping my head. My feet dangle off the edge of the bed and I notice that I'm bouncing them, shaking the entire bed.

"I don't really know how to say this...I want..." Oh god. I'm gonna stall. My stomach growls loudly as I squirm to find a comfortable position.

"What's up, Kels? Are you okay?"

"Yeah. I've just....been thinking. That's all." Maybe this *is* it. There isn't gonna be a better time. I've got her here in my room alone. I need to just spit it out. To spill my guts would be the most relieving thing for me right now. But what if she doesn't agree? What if she gets weirded out and wants to leave? Then I'll feel like shit.

"Okay. You've been thinking. So...what else's going on?" I look away from her, staring hard at the Kill Bill poster above her head. "Are you worried about your dad coming here? Is that what it is? Or is it something else?"

The flood gates are open. "Yeah...sort of....but...that's not all. It's just...I feel....I don't know...a little weird." Breathe. "I want to...I just need to talk to you about something." I wait for her reaction. She seems a little tense and looks away. She fiddles with the cup, swirling it around in circles, so close to spilling the water on the bed. She studies her hand movements and finally speaks.

"Did I do something wrong? Something to make you mad?" Her concern radiates from her furrowed brow.

"No...don't even think that. It's nothing you did wrong. I just don't know how to say this." I sit back up and cross my legs. My fingers and toes tingle with nerves. My stomach clenches. I breathe in deep and blow my breath out of puffy cheeks. "It's crazy. I don't want you to think I'm stupid."

"I can promise you that nothing you say will be stupid. Kelsey, you are my best friend. You know that right? So just tell me what it is. I'm listening." For some reason, I think she suspects part of what I'm going to say. She steadies the cup, crossing her fingers around the back of it, holding it upright in her lap.

"I've just been...I don't know how to explain it...I've been having these strange feelings. Like I'm sort of, unmm...attracted to you. Like more than friends." There! I did it! I said it. I wait for her reaction. She says nothing for a minute and slowly, her face lights up. She stares into my eyes and the connection is there, once again.

"That is so weird, Kelsey. I have kind of been feeling that too. I thought I was just being foolish. I thought I was way reading into things. I don't know...it's just like...these vibes. Like there's something there between us."

I'm completely shocked by her response. I never, in a million years, expected it to be mutual. At least not like this. I never expected her to admit to having the same feelings. "I can't get this out of my head, Liv. You, I mean. I think about things and have to back myself out of my own thoughts, tell myself I'm being dumb. It's just, the last couple of days, I have wanted to hug you. To cuddle up to you and hold you. To kiss you. And nothing else."

"Yeah. I feel ya." A shy smile. I smile back. This has been way too easy for me. What's the catch?

"It's not just that, Liv. I think...no, I *know* almost 100 percent...I'm gay." I wait for the extreme. If she is going to change her reaction, now will be the time. She doesn't.

"I'm a little scared of that too. I have tossed that around in my head for a while now. I mean, I don't really look gay...most of the time. Do you think? I don't really dress like a boy or wear my hair

short, or anything like that. What makes someone gay? I don't know that I have the answers to my own questions."

"I'm not really sure. But I have to say, this has been eating at me forever. I was so scared to tell you. I was afraid you would turn away from me." She reaches out and grabs my hand. Her fingers are soft, and a little cold from the cup.

"So, what do we do about it?" A huge grin takes over her face. A lump slides into my throat. I hadn't really thought we'd get here. Now what?

"Well, there is something else." She waits.

"Three girls, Bethany, Lacey, and Mel, approached me in the locker room today. They pretty much said if I didn't find the girl who was fucking around with their boyfriends and beat her up, they were gonna tell the entire school that I'm a lesbian."

"Are you serious? That is so stupid. They did this to a freshman last year and nothing came of it. I think they just like to make people get nervous." How does she know this? Why didn't I catch on?

"So, you're saying it's a joke? This is never going anywhere?" She nods to my relief.

"I think so. I can't say for sure. But even if it isn't a joke, so what? What does it really matter? No one that you are friends with will listen to them over you anyway." I can't believe she is so nonchalant about this. I expected her to be upset and distance herself from me for a while so she's not caught up in the gossip. She is, yet again, proving her friendship to me.

"What should I do then?"

"I think you should talk to Bradshaw since that is the class you have with them. He'll take care of it for you."

"I hate to rat...but I guess I will." I wiggle my hand in hers, extending my fingers then clamping them again around her hand.

"Now that that's taken care of, back to us." She studies my lips. I lick the bottom lip slowly, anxious for the first kiss. I pull my hand away from hers and wipe my sweaty palms on my shirt, giggling nervously. I turn my body, settling in next to her. She reaches over and lays her hand on my leg. My adrenaline is pumping, rushing wild through my body. *This is it.* I tell myself. My chance is right here.

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I move her hand off my leg and walk to the door, quietly turning the latch...just in case. I walk back to the bed and slowly sit, sliding back into place. I turn my face to look into hers and our eyes lock. Giddy smiles on both of our faces clearly demonstrate a mutual nervousness. My hands shake as I reach over and take her hand. Lifting her hand, I take my fingers and delicately trace down hers. She flips her arm over and I lightly scratch my fingernails from the bend of her arm down to her palm. Goose bumps rise on her flesh. The hairs stand on end. A nervous energy penetrates my stomach and hips. I shiver under the veil of desire, unsure of what to do next.

I run my hand back up her arm, to the shoulder, bringing it to rest on her face. I pull away again and trace her sharp jaw line with the tips of my fingers. My hand quivers as I trace with my thumb, under her eyes and across her lips, wanting to lean forward and press my lips to hers. My ears are attuned to every creak in the house. I jump as a limb scrapes the outside of my window in the breeze.

I finally lean in, turning my head slightly right, and gently touch lips with her. She hesitates for a second, and then returns my kiss. We kiss softly for a few minutes before we pull from each other. I look deep into her eyes. "You okay?" I whisper. She nods.

"You?" I nod in return. I reach forward and run my fingers through her hair, pulling it away from the scalp. Though it is still damp from the shower, I'm surprised at how smooth it feels between my fingers. My right arm, tucked under my side, starts to go numb. As I shuffle around, she turns onto her back pulling me over onto her. She grabs the sides of my head and pulls my face to hers once again. The kissing becomes more intense as she slides her tongue into my mouth. Breathing becomes heavier and I am immediately aware of my own breath, blowing hot against her face. *Thank god I brushed my teeth!* She stops quickly.

"Can we turn off the lights?" She whispers to me. I kiss her once more then turn and twist off the lamp on the table next to me. There's something about the dark that makes everything more real. Nothing I can think of could replace this moment for me. This is the time I've been waiting for as long as I can remember having feelings for other girls. My fears are, slowly but surely, being pushed aside.

I turn over to her, sliding my leg between hers, and climb on to her a little more than before, careful not to squish her stomach. Her hands roam up and down my sides as we kiss, under my shirt and up my back. She digs her nails in and pulls them aggressively down my back. I moan quietly under the

intensity of the scratch. I sink my tongue into her mouth. Not in a sloppy, wet kiss, but in a loving, precise, passionate kiss, demonstrating my desire for her.

We pause for a moment, letting our eyes adjust to the darkness. The light from the streetlamp shines through the cracks in the blinds, giving us enough light to see simple features. I see the outline of her face. Slowly my eyes focus on her lips; her thin upper lip complimented by her curvy lower lip. They glisten in the light under a thin layer of wetness. I lean my head down, mouth parallel to her ear, and whisper slowly, "I can't believe this is happening."

She takes me in an embrace and rolls me over, landing on top of me. "Believe it." She says in a firm, controlling tone. She seems to have been waiting for this moment as long as I have. We continue on, playfully tickling one another, trying in vain to keep quiet. We kiss periodically. Her hands roam up my shirt, and mine up hers. With the sensation of touch radiating between the two of us, we learn each other's body, inch by inch.

At one point I roll over and look at the clock. 3:34. "Shit, Liv. We *have* to get some sleep."

"Nah. The first only happens once, right?" She pulls me back into her and we make out more. *What the hell? Things could change by morning, right?* We tumble back and forth, one on top, then the other. Later, we settle down side by side, facing one another. I pull her arm around my middle and trace her curves. Starting at the shoulder, I rub down her side, into the dip of her waist and back up to the hip. I slide my arm around her back, pulling her closer to me. She slings her leg over my hip and I caress the curve of her ass, not able to get close enough to her, savoring each second in this new beginning.

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THURSDAY

21: TRIED-AND-TRUE

I wake up on my back with the alarm clock buzzing loudly in my ear. I open my eyes and reach over, slapping the snooze button. Just nine more minutes. I turn my face back toward Liv who is curled up under my arm with her head lying on my chest. She raises her face and the creases of my shirt leave lines in her face. I smile at her, unsure of her 'morning after' reaction. She smiles at me, wiping her eye with a loose fist.

"Wow, that was...interesting." She says to me in a yawn, as she rolls over onto her pillow, tucking her hand under her cheek.

"To say the least." I'm still unsure if I can touch her, or what I can and can't do. I lie still, waiting for a cue. She reaches over, draping her arm around my waist.

"You okay?" She asks sincerely.

"Yeah. I'm good. Just a little tired." I reach up and brush her hair from her face, lean over, and give her a peck on the lips. I'm careful, knowing my breath is rank. "What now?"

"I don't really know. Are you worried about things? I mean, just because this happened, no one else knows, right?" I hadn't thought of it that way. But wouldn't people be able to tell? Not all people, but our group. Travis, of all people, will pick up on it. Keenan is pretty quick to catch on.

"Do you really think no one will notice that we're a little, you know, different?"

"I don't think it really matters, Kels. It is what it is, right?" She's so nonchalant about this. And I have to say, I'm a little surprised. This 'feeling' seemed like it was something I was dealing with...on my own. It felt like a big secret I had to feel out before I could be completely sure. Now, it's like WHAM in my face. I'm not saying I'm not ready for it, because I am. I'm ready for what will come with Olivia. Whatever happens, happens. All I can do is buckle up and hang on for the ride.

"I just don't wanna get out of bed. That's my problem right now. I have to say, you wore me out last night!" She shyly shrinks into her own body, pulling the sheet up to her chin. I roll over cuddling up to her. As soon as I find a comfortable position, the alarm screams out a warning. *Get your lezzie butts out of bed!* Okay, so I made that up, but the hesitance is real. The paradise is over.

I roll over and grab my pillow as I stand up. I raise it above my head and bring it down on top of Liv. "Get yo' lazy ass up!" She stands up, ready to fight. She grabs her pillow and crawls across the bed

swinging at me. Our pillow fight continues for a few minutes. She jumps on top of me and starts kissing me. I resist her attempt to get me going again and pull out from under her grasp. "We have to go!"

No part of me wants to leave this house. Actually, no part of me wants to step out from behind this locked door. I do, against my wishes. I rush through the getting ready process, pulling my hair up in a ponytail. I throw on some random clothes I pick up off the floor, not quite sure if they're clean or dirty. I watch Liv as she meticulously brushes out her hair. It falls into perfect formation, as if she just washed, dried and fixed it. So unlike my own, but I don't really care.

From the time I sit down in my car, I miss her already. I walk the hall to my locker, twist my combination, and swing the door open, a little more aggressively than I had intended. The door bangs against the next locker and I jump. I quickly stuff my bag for the next few classes, throw it over my shoulder and slam the door shut. I turn to head to class and I see her, a few doors down.

She's standing at Keenan's locker, and it seems like they are in an intense conversation. Did she tell him? I can't help but wonder. I decide not to butt in on them and continue walking by.

"Kelsey. Come here for a second." I turn around casually, walking over to them. I search Keenan's face, looking for any little clue to indicate whether or not she told him. I can't tell.

"What's up guys?" I try to sound relaxed.

"I was just telling Keenan about the girls. He's headed to Mr. Bradshaw's now so he said he'd talk to him and see what he could work out." I don't know that I want this to happen. I mean, yeah, it'd be nice to have it all taken care of, but if I don't handle this on my own, they will have more reason to accuse me of being gay because I will seem guilty.

"That's okay. You don't have to do anything. I'll take care of it." I reach out, placing my arm in the crook of his elbow. "Thanks though."

"Are you sure? I'd be happy to talk to him. I don't like that they are doing this to you and I think it needs to stop before it goes any further."

"I agree, but I can handle it." I smile at him, pulling myself away.

"How about if I just tell him you need to talk to him about the threat and you'll fill in the details?" Ugh. I'm not a child. I'm fully capable of handling my own shit and I want him to back off. I don't want to be rude, but do want him to know I'll do it.

"I'm cool. I'll take care of it. But if I need you, I'll let you know." That seems to satisfy him enough. I wave and look into Liv's eyes. She smiles a cute little smile to me as I turn and walk away.

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I sit at the desk and pull out my notebook, flipping to a blank page. I start doodling. Nothing in particular, just something to pass the time. A flower, a star, a crescent moon with the star at the bottom tip. I see the black flats of my history teacher cross in front of my desk as I'm shadowing a tribal twist.

She stops in front of my desk with her back turned to me as she lays down a stack of papers...Monday's tests. Great. Just what I need. A bad grade to alter my mood. My guts are twisting and turning; a direct response to the increased sexual tension thriving in my body.

I can predict her next moves. She'll walk over to the windows, pulling every shade up three fourths of the way, walk to the sink in the back of the room and run just enough water to fill the coffee cup half way. Then, she'll walk back to the front of the room, dumping part of the water into the potted tulips and the rest into the fern hanging from a ceiling-mounted chain. After she finishes her watering duty, she'll walk back to the desk, push her glasses up on her pointed nose, run her fingers through her black, frizzy hair, clear her throat and wait for the tardy bell to ring as she checks off present students in her attendance book. The same routine, day after day.

I watch her routine and peg everything until the very end: she clears her throat as she pushes her glasses up. I chuckle to myself as I realize the irony in this situation. Mrs. Tucker is so predictable. I'm sure all of her days are composed of the same actions in the same sequence. Me, on the other hand, I'm so not predictable it is actually quite hysterical.

I think about the blazing heat that tortured my body last night as I surrendered to my deepest, darkest desire. I fidget in my seat as I recollect the gentle touch of Liv's fingers on my face, my lips. The excitement that rose in me as she sucked my finger, teasing me with a twitching tongue on the tip.

I brush the stray strands from my face and pop the collar on my black polo, pulling the corners around my face to the edges of my mouth. I watch Mrs. Tucker's stiff motions as she gathers the papers in her hand and speaks to the class.

"These are the graded tests from Monday. Not bad. I have to say I am, overall, very pleased with the results of this test."

I mentally sigh with relief. Maybe this won't be something to burst my balloon. She lays the paper face down on my desk. I slide it to the edge before flipping it over, close to me, forgetting that she never writes the grade on the first page. "Just in case," she says. In case what? In case we have a heart attack when we look at it, I guess.

I scan through the test. I missed half of a question on the first page, none on the second, and an entire question on the third. Grand total of 96.5%. No way! How stoked am I? I tuck the test into my notebook, and then realize I didn't look at her comments. I pull it back out, flipping to the last page. She writes:

Kelsey,

Although I am very impressed with your test, I can't help but wonder if something serious is going on with you. You have seemed very distant in class for the past few weeks. If you need further help on any of your assignments, or additional time to finish your first paper, don't hesitate to come talk to me. My planning period is 4th on Mon, Wed, and Fri, and 3rd on Tues, and Thurs. Come by anytime. Keep up the good work!

-Mrs. Tucker

My initial reaction is *what the hell is that about?* I then realize, duh, I have bruises on my face. I keep forgetting that. I guess that would give her reason to worry. I appreciate her concern and I do have a lot going on, but nothing I need her help with. I can handle my own problems. I'm getting tired of everyone feeling sorry for me. I decide to stay after class, just as a courtesy, to let her know everything is fine. Hell, right now, all of the important things are great!

I tuck the test back into my notebook and turn to another clean page. I figure I should try to pay close attention, take some notes, maybe even offer some answers to her open-ended questions in lecture just so she knows I'm fine. I smile at her when she looks at me. The smile has nothing to do with her, but she doesn't have to know that.

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The rest of the day is pretty boring and way longer than I want it to be. In my last class, I start making a list of things I need to get done in the next few days:

-laundry

- clean room
- Julie's office (today and tomorrow)
- Kyle-practice
- band practice (today, tomorrow, and Sat)
- clean house
- go to Library (books about Stonewall Jackson for Hist. paper)
- dye hair (trim if needed)
- gas in car
- dream all day ♥♥

That should be enough; probably more than enough. I figure tomorrow in study hall I can go to the library. Maybe I can get online in the morning and figure out what books they have in so I can jot down call numbers. That will make my trip a little easier.

A minute before the final bell, I start organizing my things. As soon as the bell rings, I jump up and dart to the door. Travis is right outside the door when I leave.

"Hey Kelsey. What's up? You look a little tired." Is it that obvious?

"Gee, thanks." I say sarcastically to him. "Follow me to my locker. I have to hurry to make my appointment."

"Oh, how's that going? You seemed totally pissed about havin' to go and now you don't say shit about it."

"Actually, my counselor is really cool. It's not bad." He studies me, actually involving himself in the conversation for once.

"Oh yeah, what's she like?"

How to explain this...hmp. "Well, she's really laid back. Kinda cool, you know? Dresses all hip and stuff with her cargo pants. She even had on flops yesterday. Can you imagine, wearing flip-flops to the office? How chill is that?"

"Flops huh? What, were they pink and furry?"

"Funny, Trav. No, they were black Reefs. I have the same pair."

“Sweet! You two could like twink out!” He laughs and draws away from me, expecting a punch. I don’t follow through. “What, is she like gay or something?” Now comes the punch.

“What’s that s’posed to mean?”

“Nothing bad. I was just sayin’, you know, with the cargos and flops, seems kind of butch to me.”

“Actually, she is.” I don’t know where that came from. “She’s had a partner for eight years.” I wait for him to freak on me. He doesn’t. Instead, he raises his eyebrows with an understanding smirk on his face.

“Hey, that’s cool. Whatever floats your boat, right?”

Whoa. Was he just totally cool with her being gay? I doubt that will be his reaction when the news hit closer to home, right in the middle of the band. He shifts gears and I’m glad.

“So, what did you think of practice last night? You guys were kicking ass, if I might say so myself. I think Keenan actually gave Liv more mic volume last night. Mr. Bradshaw asked Keenan if he could come in tonight...listen for a while and shit like that. That cool with you?”

“Yeah. I’m fine with that.” I smile at him as he switches feet, swaying. His attention span is shot and that’s probably a good thing.

“Gotta run, bro. See you later.”

“K. Have fun. You gonna be on time tonight?”

“Hey...I’m not the one you should be telling that to. You need to talk to your buddy Olivia about that one.” I wave and turn, just in time to reach out for the silver bar handle on the exterior glass panel door. I step into the bright afternoon, the heat of September, shielding my eyes. I’m still smiling.

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22: TOUCHED

Once more, I rush into the counselor's office, wave to the receptionist and park it in the lobby chairs, trying to catch my breath. Surprisingly, I'm a little early today. I sit, staring at the Monet hanging directly across from me. I extend my feet, crossing them at the ankle, cross my hands over my belly and stare into the Impressionistic lilies. I try to imagine myself as Monet, the artist, sitting on a stool on the bridge with my canvas propped on the easel in front of me. My paint palette is color coordinated with pastels, greens and white. The serenity of the scene lets me escape into this world.

A guy shuffles into the waiting room and slumps into the chair opposite me. I look down from the painting into his acne-covered face. He stares at the floor, picking at one of the few untouched pimples on his chin. I recognize him from school, but don't have any idea what his name is. It is obvious to me that he doesn't want to be here. I wonder if he was he forced to come just like I was? I look at him and he never looks up.

Julie finally appears in the doorway and I'm relieved to be rescued from the waiting room. I stand quickly, slinging my bag over my shoulder and follow her to her office. "How are you today?" she asks as we walk down the hall.

"I'm cool. Pretty good."

"Have a seat." She waves her arm toward the chair. I sit stiffly in my client's chair, trying to stay cool. My legs bounce quickly and my breaths are shorter than normal. I stare into the drawn up windows, at the light peeking symmetrically beneath each slat of wood in the cherry Venetian blinds. I wonder why, on such a beautiful, sunny afternoon, Julie sits holed up in a dark office.

"So, tell me about your day. You seem happy."

I look over to her sitting at her desk, chair swiveled sideways, staring at me. Her legs are casually crossed and her fingers are intertwined. She, too, fidgets in her seat with a bouncing foot. I smile. Not one of those 'I don't know what to do so this is what you get' smiles, but a genuine, 'I'm happy for the first time in years' smile.

She smiles back curiously. "Something's going on with you. Am I right?"

"I don't know what you're talking about." I respond, knowing full well she isn't going to buy my false stupidity.

"You don't know what I'm talking about? Hmm. Well, I guess we'll move on. How was your evening at home? Any less tense?"

I can't stand it. Trying to hold back isn't gonna work for me, so I blurt out, "I have a girlfriend! Well, sort of."

With the raise of her eyebrow, I can see the gears turning in her mind before she dares to speak a word. Her careful analysis of my body language leads to a professional response. "Do you want to talk about this?" She doesn't want to pry, and I appreciate this, but for once in my life, I *want* someone to pry. This is HUGE information I am dying to share.

"Of course I want to talk about it. I've wanted to talk about it all day. The problem is, I didn't know who to tell. I mean, I'm scared, you know? What if people think of me differently? What if people start harassing me because of this?"

"Whoa...Slow down. Let's just talk about the now. Let's not worry about the 'what ifs' just yet. First off, congratulations. What's her name...if you want to tell me, that is."

As she's talking I'm realizing how much I haven't considered what could happen to me because of this. I mean, I've always kind of known, but never really done anything about it. Now that I'm *doing* what I am *feeling*, things are different. My palms are damp and little beads of sweat spring up on my forehead.

"Olivia." That's all I can say. The excitement I had when I walked into this office is now gone. Fear rises in me and I'm glad I'm here, in the privacy of the office of someone that understands what I'm feeling.

"Where'd you go, Kelsey?"

"I'm here. I just...it's just...I've not thought of those things 'till right this very second. What do I do? How do I deal with this?"

"It will be fine. I promise. First, and foremost, you need to enjoy yourself. You need to enjoy the realization you have finally made. Don't worry about everyone else. No one has to know until you are ready for them to know." Her voice is calm yet persistent. I look at her, nodding my head, trying to believe that I can do what she's telling me.

"What about if I do want to tell people? I mean, not really people at school, but other people." I bite my lower lip as I wait for a reply.

"Everyone moves at a different pace. Some people don't confirm their relationships for years. Others like to get it out in the open, not wanting to hide. It all depends on what you and Olivia want to do. This is something you need to talk about and agree on. You should respect her, and in turn, she will respect you. Does that make sense?"

"Yeah. It does. Can I change the subject a little?"

"Of course you can. I am here to listen to you, remember?"

"Right. Well, I was completely worried that Liv would freak out about this. It's something I've been questioning for a while, but we are such good friends that I was scared she would flip and not want to be friends anymore. She completely shocked me. It was almost like she was waiting for me to say something. Like she had been thinking the same things about me. And now that I said something and we kinda did some stuff, it's like she is proud of herself. It's kinda weird. I guess I expected her to be more...reserved, or something."

"Does that hurt you, or worry you?"

"No not really. I'm just shocked, that's all. Like, in the hall today at school. I walked by her, not even looking at her because I didn't want to make her uncomfortable. She called for me to come back like nothing was up. I figured she would have a hard time with it for a while, but she's not."

"Well," she wrings her hands as she thinks about what I've said. "That's not a bad thing right?"

"No. I just don't want her to regret telling people."

"Maybe the best thing is for you to talk to her about it. You'd be surprised how easy it is to talk about these things. Who are you wanting to tell?"

"I'm not real sure yet, but my dad is coming in this weekend and I told him I would see him. He told me his story and I want to be honest with him as well. I want him to know me. ALL of me." Confusion spreads on her face.

"So, things are good with your dad now?"

"Long story short, he called and wants to spend time with me and Kyle. He regrets missing out and all that. His story is different than I expected. My mom is trying to get him back and I think it just might work. He's coming in to hang out with us. I'm not real sure what's going on."

"Well, I guess you don't really have much to lose talking to him about it. I mean, yeah, it would be bad if he didn't accept it, but if he loves you like he says he does, and if he wants you to be his daughter again, it's only fair that he accept you as you are. You've gotta start somewhere, right?"

I'm so glad to hear her say this. I need this affirmation of my thoughts right now. I want to tell him. I want to ask Liv about it, but I'm almost certain this will be a conversation I have with him this weekend. For some reason, I always feel better when I'm here. I talk to Julie and she treats me like an adult. She respects me for who I am, never questioning my ability to make decisions, unlike my mother.

"Look, I just wanna say 'thank you'. I was totally dreading having to come here, but you've made it a good thing for me. You've shown me it's okay to be me."

"That's what I'm here for. I'm not here to *make* your life miserable, as some may think. I'm here to help you open your eyes and analyze your life and the decisions you make. It's unfortunate that you were caught in a moment of poor judgment, but I have to say, it has been beneficial to you. I can see the beautiful person under all of the trouble. I can see a responsible individual willing to stand up for what you believe. Most of all, I can see a loving, caring, sensitive person who deserves to feel love. To feel that others care."

I'm a little teary. I've never been told these things. It makes me happy to hear these words coming from someone I just met four days ago. She is truly good at what she does. She cares about people who may not deserve it. She looks inside you. I could never have let myself be who I want to be had it not been for her.

As I get ready to leave, she stands up and walks toward me. At first I don't know what she's doing. I panic a little. She normally keeps her distance; maintains a professional session as she is expected. Today, however, she is breaking out of the counselor/client role. "Do you mind if I give you a hug? I know it seems a little strange, but I feel like you could use one."

I hesitate for a second, but then agree. She hugs me, squeezing me hard to her boney body. I don't know how to react. I'm stiff at first, hands to my sides. I then return her hug. It's been so long since I've been hugged by anyone besides Liv that I don't know how to react.

I step back, a little tense. She smiles at me as she grips my shoulder. "I'm proud of you, Kelsey. Have a good day."

"Thanks. I guess I needed that. I'll see you tomorrow."

She waves at me as I walk out the door. "See you tomorrow. Your last session."

For some reason, I'm sad at the thought of this. Not because I want to go to counseling for the rest of my life, but because I've been able to talk to someone who cares. Calm has come back over me and I'm happy. I wave to the receptionist as I burst out of the doors into the heat of the afternoon. I hug my arms around myself and look up into the sky. I open the door and sit in my car with my left leg dangling. I want to sit here, for just a second, in silence.

* * * * *

23: THUNDERSTRUCK

I settle down on my bean bag chair with the phone next to me as I crack open my Algebra book. Liv said she'd call me this afternoon, but I'm tempted to call her anyway. Instead, I will myself to focus on my homework. I dig my planner out of my bag and flip to today. Chapter 3, problems 1-23 odd and problems 22 & 24. *My gosh! I'll never get through all of these. At least the odd answers are in the back of the book.* I finish question five when the phone starts ringing.

"Hello." I answer quickly.

"Hey Kelsey. It's Mom. Just wanted to tell you I'm gonna be a little late getting back."

Seriously?

"Where are you? It's so loud."

"Oh, I'm at the mall."

"The mall?! What are you getting?"

"Clothes for the weekend. I thought I could use some new ones." Ho-ly Shit! I can't believe this. *She can afford clothes and booze, but not groceries.* I choose not to say anything. She seems like she's in a good mood.

"So, when do you think you'll be home?"

"I don't know. Maybe by 6:30 or 7."

"Mom, what about Kyle? I have practice tonight."

"I totally forgot about that. I'm so sorry. Can you just take him with you?"

Take him with me? You've got to be shittin me. What about Liv? I can't really be myself with her if Kyle is with me. "And what about his homework...and bedtime? I know I'll be there late."

"Umm..." I hear her laughing at someone in the background. "Please, just do this for me, okay? I'll owe you." She returns her attention to whoever is with her.

"Who are you talking to?"

"Oh, no one. Look, I've gotta go."

"Hey, Mom."

"Yeah?"

"Can you just come get him at the Barn when you're done?" Hesitation.

"I guess...See you then." She hangs up. I want to scream but I don't for one simple reason: Kyle. I don't want him to think he's a burden to me. For the most part, he's not, but this is really important and she is really starting to piss me off. She dumps him on me as if he's my child. If it wasn't for me reminding her *Hey, you have a son*, she would never even realize he existed.

I toss the phone back on the floor and work a few more Algebra problems. I snap my book closed around my notebook and crawl out of the bean bag. Tucking the phone in my back pocket, I trudge down the stairs for a drink. I throw open the refrigerator door and see that Mom has restocked her beer supply. Great. I reach in and pull out the cardboard carton of orange juice, unscrewing the lid of the plastic opening in the side. How dumb...to put a spout on a cardboard carton? I tilt the jug back, chugging the juice. Large pieces of pulp hit my teeth then slide into my mouth and down my throat. When I'm finished drinking, I chew the rest of the pulp left in my mouth as I screw the lid back on. I sit the jug back on the shelf, grab a bottle of water, and head back upstairs.

When I reach the landing, the phone rings in my pocket, making me jump. I pull it out, quickly hitting the 'TALK' button.

"Hello."

"Hey, sexy."

My body grows warm. "Hey to you! What's up?" Ooh...what I wouldn't give to have her here now.

"Not too much. I was just calling to see if I could come over before practice so we could, you know, hang out a little...alone."

"Well, yeah! Come over whenever you're ready! I'll be here. Mom's gone, but Kyle's here. He's in his room playing video games again. I'll be waiting."

"Okay. Well. I'll be there in about thirty. Can't wait to see you. I've got a story for you."

"Tell me."

"Nope. You just have to wait."

"Aww. Come on...Tell me. Or at least tell me what it's about."

"No hints. No story. It'll give you something to look forward to."

Like I don't have enough already? "You're cruel. You know that?"

"I know. It's what I do best. See you soon."

"Now who's the tease?"

She laughs then hangs up. I hang up the phone wondering what in the world this could possibly be. My guess is that she told someone. But who? The panic I felt earlier quickly returns to my gut. Suddenly the orange juice is sitting heavy and my mouth begins to water. I open the bottle of water and take a few swigs, trying to get rid of this horrible taste. No luck. I turn and head back to the bathroom to brush my teeth, wondering what this fabulous story will be.

* * * * *

The doorbell rings and I race down the stairs and fling the door against the wall by accident, thinking it is going to be Olivia. It's not. A little boy, like first or second grade stands at my doorstep, his mother parked in a van at the curb. His feet are together and his legs are locked at the knee. Blonde hair sticks out below his cap and he has a bag slung across his front from his left shoulder to his right hip. He is holding a paper-covered coffee can with a tent, a fire, and a stick person drawn on it in magic marker.

"Hi. Can I help you?"

"I was wondering if you would be interested in purchasing a candy bar for only a dollar to support my Boy Scouts troop on our camping expedition." How adorable. I wonder how many times he stood in front of his parents, or his mirror, repeating that line. He must have practiced over and over in order to remember it. I smile at him, but think this is yet another task I shouldn't have to do...this is a parent's job.

"So, tell me, what will you get to do on your camping expedition?" I may be throwing him off, but I'm curious to know. He stares at me for a minute. He starts to sway front to back, working up an answer to my question.

"We will tie knots, put up a tent, build a fire, hike, and cook our own food. I don't know what else." He is absolutely adorable. Even though I don't have a lot of money, I can't resist this one. I reach into my back pocket and pull out a wad of paper and money. I retrieve a dollar from the stack and hand it to him. He quickly stuffs it in the can. He bends over stiffly, setting the can on the ground, so he can dig in his bag for the candy bar. He pulls out three different ones.

"Would you like milk chocolate, milk chocolate with almonds, or caramel filled chocolate?" He holds the candy bars like a hand of playing cards, spread for me to pick the Old Maid. The bars are twice as long as his petite hands.

"I'll take the...um...caramel filled please."

He hands me the brown-papered bar, slides the other two in his bag, picks up the can, and looks back at me. "Thank you so much for your support." He turns and waves his hand, running down the stairs and through the yard to the neighbor's house.

Just as I am about to close the door, I see Liv turn the corner onto my street. My heart beats fast as I wait for her to pull in the driveway. I walk out, leaving the door cracked open, to greet her in the drive. She swings open her door with a shit-eating grin on her face.

"Hey there, hottie." I look down at myself, not quite sure where she gets that from. "Looks like you had a visitor." She says, pointing at the little boy that just left my doorstep.

"Yeah. He was the cutest little guy. Come on, you can split the candy bar with me." As we walk toward the house, she carefully slides her hand in mine. My first reaction is to shake it out, not knowing who could see. I resist the urge, locking my fingers with hers. I lead her in the door and drop her hand to turn and lock the door behind us. She turns to me and grabs my face with both hands, kissing me in the middle of the living room. I love it, but it makes me nervous too.

"Wait a second." I say lightly. "Let's go to my room."

* * * * *

Before I can even flip the lock on the bedroom door, Liv is kissing me. Roaming hands wander rapidly over my stomach, back and ass. I lean into her kisses, letting go of my reservation. I playfully throw her onto the bed, climbing on top of her, pinning her arms to the bed. She blushes as I bend down kissing her helpless body. I release her, pulling her into a sitting position. I swing my leg over her and sit in her lap facing her. She wraps her arms around me, sliding the tips of her fingers into my waistband.

I pull her face up in my hands, looking into her eyes. "Olivia Thomas, you are beautiful." I don't really understand where this came from, but it's something I have wanted to say for so long. She shyly turns her face away from me. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing. Absolutely nothing." Her smile convinces me of her words. "I just can't believe this is happening. I have wanted to be with you in this way for so long. I was so scared to say anything. I just...feel kind of bad. That's all."

"BAD? For what?"

"For not telling you sooner. We could have been together for at least a year by now if I wasn't a chicken."

"You can't say that. Everything happens when it's supposed to. What's the most important thing? We're together now, right? To me, that's all that matters." I lift my leg and climb off her lap. Propping my pillow against the wall, I lean against it. I pull her shoulders around and lean her back on me, crossing my arms around her chest. "*This* is what matters." I kiss the top of her head.

"You're right. I can't imagine things any different than they are now." We lay there for a few minutes, me holding her and her rubbing my hands.

"So, what's the story you were gonna tell me?" She perks up at my question, sitting and swirling around to face me.

"Oh yeah. I almost forgot...I got a little sidetracked...if you know what I mean." She scrunches her nose up and pinches my cheek. "Anyway, I told Keenan today. About us. I mean."

"You told him? Are you serious? What did he say?" My heart is beating double time. I'm not sure I want to hear this. The first person she tells is her brother?

"He was cool with it. I told him a long time ago that I thought you were hot. Don't be mad. He kept telling me to talk to you, that he thought you might be into that kind of thing, and he..."

"Wait, wait, wait. That kind of thing?"

"Well, you know what I mean."

"No. It doesn't work like that. If this is just gonna be a *thing* for you, we need to talk about it."

"Okay, so that's not what I mean. This is me. Kels. This is my life. I am attracted to women. Okay?"

I shake my head yes to escape the knot in my throat. I wave my hand for her to carry on with the story.

"So, anyway. He asked me if you were a good kisser and all that stuff."

"Ooh gross. Your brother asked you about someone you kissed? I wonder why he didn't say anything to me about it. I talked to him earlier today and he...wait a minute...he was acting a little weird. Maybe that's it."

"He's totally cool. Don't worry. He won't tell anyone about it unless we tell him he can. He's my best friend, besides you." She winks at me. Something I haven't seen in a few days.

"Doesn't it seem weird that people are okay with this? I mean, I told my counselor today. I don't really know her and she's older than me, but I felt comfortable for some reason. Granted, she is a lesbian too, but she was completely cool with it."

"People just do what they do. I'm sure there are plenty of people that won't understand and will treat us like shit."

"Yeah. I just don't know how to act. It kind of scares me. Like, I was trying to not talk to you because I didn't want anyone to pick up on it."

She pauses for a minute, thinking hard about what I said. "But don't you think it's worse to not talk to me? I mean, we're together all the time. Wouldn't it be worse to avoid me? Are you ashamed of this...of us?"

"No. Not at all. I didn't want to tell because I was afraid you would be mad."

"I'm not mad. I want this. If my friends don't like me because I'm with a woman, they can find new friends. I don't want to lose my friends, but if that's how they are gonna be, I don't have time to deal with it."

I am so glad to hear that. This is exactly what I wanted to hear from her. It's so different than I expected it to be. I expected to feel sort of like a freak. Like everyone would be staring at me and pointing at me. "So, you're okay with telling anyone?"

"Not exactly. It's not like I want it to be spread around the school. But if it is, I won't get too upset."

"I do want to ask you something."

"Shoot."

"I was thinking of telling my dad. Would that be okay with you?"

"Yeah. Of course. This is not all my decision. This is your relationship too. I do appreciate you asking me, but tell who you feel like telling, okay?"

I reach over, taking her hand into mine. I pull her hand up to my mouth and kiss each of her fingers. I look up as I'm kissing her. She studies my lips on her fingers. After I have kissed each of her fingers, I lean in close to her, pressing my mouth to hers. This is heaven.

I pull away, brushing my hair from my face. Quietly I ask, "Do you want to meet him? My dad?" She looks at me. First at my lips, then into my eyes.

"I would love to."

* * * * *

24: TOP OF THE WORLD

I dig around in my closet for something to wear to practice. I pull out a wrinkled beater, frayed around the bottom edge. From the bottom of the pile, I pull out my favorite frayed jeans with bleach stains. I pull the jeans on over my green and cream plaid boxers, leaving them unbuttoned as I sit on the edge of the bed. I reach down and pick up my black Doc Marten boots, pulling on the right shoe. As I grab the left shoe, Liv climbs up behind me on the bed, brushes my hair to the side and starts kissing my neck. I blink hard, lick my lips, and slide my foot into the boot. She pulls my shoulders back and lays me down on the bed. Here we go again.

She bends and whispers in my ear trying to get me riled up again. "You look so hot! I want you...now."

I force myself from under her, making myself breathe. There is nothing more I want right now than to just collapse into bed with her and stay there the rest of the night. I know we can't do that. I stand up, kissing her again.

"We've gotta get moving. We can't be late again. Keenan will know what's up and that won't be good." She laughs and pouts as she stands up, brushing the wrinkles from her clothes. She walks over to the mirror, running her fingers through her hair. I watch her as I pull my studded belt through the loops of my jeans. *I can't believe I've got her. She's mine.* I shake my head just as she turns to look at me.

"What?"

"Nothing. Just thinking."

"What are you thinking about?"

"You."

"What about me?"

"Just you."

I button my pants and belt, tucking my boxers tight into the jeans. I reach over, grab the Curve, and douse my body with the cologne, rubbing my wrists together. I pull my hair back and through the hole of a green and white O'neil trucker's cap, tilting it slightly on my forehead.

"You are *trying* to torment me, aren't you?" Liv stands at the door with her hands on her hips.

"Maybe. Gotta keep you wanting me, right?"

"I don't think that's a problem. I'm not gonna be able to focus on practice tonight. I'll be thinking of getting you alone again."

I reach out, grab her hand, and plant another kiss on her lips as I reach for the doorknob. "Let's go, sexy girl."

* * * * *

I swing open the back door of my car and pull out my gig bag. I lay it in the back floorboard of Liv's Jeep, propped upright against the seat. I climb into the passenger's seat, buckle my seatbelt, and tilt the seat back.

"Man. Who's been sittin' here? Your grandma?"

"What do you mean?"

"I feel like I'm sitting on the dash. I haven't sat up this straight since I was in a back brace." I wink at her as I pop a stick of gum in my mouth.

"Shit! I forgot we were supposed to take Kyle with us! We have to go back and get him."

Liv swings into the next driveway, backs out, and throws the car into gear, peeling out in the street. I look back in time to see the smoke from her tires dissipating into the heat of the afternoon.

"Damn, woman. It's not that urgent."

"Sorry. I didn't mean to do it quite like that. Pretty badass huh?"

"You're not kidding."

I get out of the Jeep and run to the back door. I unlock it, running through the house. "KYLE! Come on. We've gotta go now."

He opens his bedroom door, confused and tired looking. "Where?"

"You're going to practice with me tonight. Mom isn't gonna be home for a while. Hurry."

"For real? I get to go with you? Will Travis be there?" I nod yes. He pumps his arm up and down.

"Yes. He will be there. Get your backpack and your homework. You *have* to get it done while we're there. No questions. Got it? Oh, and comb your hair."

He doesn't comb his hair, but throws a hat on. He hustles to gather his stuff and slings his backpack over his shoulder. I rush down the stairs, swing the fridge open and pull out three Gatorade's. "Let's go, bub."

"I'm comin'. I'm comin'. Gosh."

We jog to the car and slide in. I look at the digital clock on the dash as I buckle my seatbelt. 5:34. Three minutes. Record time.

"Hey Kyle," Liv calls out as he gets in. I look back at him and see the smile on his face. He feels important right now. I like that he can feel that. I have to say, I don't like that I can't hold her hand or lay my hand on her leg.

"Hey, Olivia. How's it going?" He settles down, leaning his arm against the door.

"Pretty good. What about you?"

"Good. Is Travis going to be at practice tonight?"

I blurt in. "I just told you he'd be there. Buckle your seatbelt, bud." He slumps back in the seat, defeated by my annoyed tone. "Sorry. I wasn't trying to be short with you. I just told you he'd be there two minutes ago."

"I know. I was just talking to Liv, that's all." He looks down, fiddling with his hands.

"Go ahead and talk to her. Fine by me." I settle back in the seat, reaching up to grab the 'oh shit' handle above my door. I need to watch my temper.

"Sorry, Kyle. Let's have fun okay?" I look back at him and smile.

"Okay." A reserved answer. I reach down and crank up the radio, knowing it's Kyle's favorite song.

* * * * *

We pull into the lot at the Barn. Travis and Jack are sitting outside and make sure to make a big thing out of looking at their watches when we get out. I look at Liv, mentally telling her we should have left earlier. The guys are distracted when they see the third door swing open and Kyle jump out.

"Hey, bro." Travis says as he approaches Kyle, smacking his back and taking Kyle's neck into his embrace. "Whatcha' been up to?"

Kyle looks up at Travis, all smiles. "Not much man. I've just been hangin around home, you know?"

"Cool, cool. I tell you what, little man. I could sure use some help in here if you don't mind." They walk toward the Barn together. When they get far enough away, Liv looks at me saying, "Aww. How cute is that? Travis finally found someone his own mental age."

I can't help but smile. He's always been good with my brother. He always makes a point to make Kyle feel welcome and useful. I grab my bag out of the backseat as Liv leans in from the other side. We're ducked down behind the seat and she makes a quick gesture with her hand for me to come over there. I slide in a little further, sneaking a kiss. Something about the possibility of being busted by the guys makes the sensation of the kiss even better. I smile as I back out of the door and bump into Keenan.

"I saw that you naughty girls." He approaches me to give me one of the infamous bear hugs I have grown accustomed to. Leaning down to hug me, he speaks in a low tone. "You okay?"

"Yeah. Absolutely. Why would you even ask such a thing right now? I'm on an adrenaline high." I smile, wink, and turn from him, practically bouncing into the Barn. I lay my bag down and sneak back outside for just a minute. I need some Kelsey time. Even if it's just a minute or two.

I walk around to the back of the Barn and swing my leg over the wooden fence. I sit with my back propped on one of the fence posts staring out over the field. A small valley runs the length of the land about fifty yards down the hill. In between the gusts of wind, I can hear the trickle of the creek running through the trees. I look up to see the sun ducking behind the distant maple trees, casting gigantic shadows onto the swaying weeds. I breathe in deep, close my eyes and feel my body relax.

"Hey you." I quickly open my eyes and turn just as Olivia walks up to me. She stands with her belly against my thigh and lays her hand down on the fence in front of my knee. "Pretty peaceful out here, huh?"

"Yeah. I do miss the quiet sometimes. We moved in town when I finished Middle School." I look around to make sure no one is within eyeshot and lean down to kiss her. "We need to come out here sometime at night when no one is around. We can spread a blanket out and look up at the stars. Wouldn't that be fun?"

"Yeah. Romantic." She pinches my side and I squirm from her grip. I turn to her, looking into her face. The light from the afternoon sun glazes her face in a golden orange. Her crystal blue eyes sparkle with the reflection of the sun. A breeze catches a strand of her hair, blowing it over her shoulder. I stare in utter amazement at the beauty of the girl beside me. *She is mine.*

"Welp...ready?"

"Whenever you are. I'm kind of enjoying the peacefulness, but we probably should get in there and get ready." As we walk beside each other back around to the front of the barn, Olivia hums, warming up her voice. I want, so bad, to reach down and grab her hand. To hold it, swinging our arms as we walk in the door, but I can't. And I don't.

"All right, guys." Jack says, standing behind the drums, twirling his drumsticks. "Let's rock out with our cocks out."

"What about us girls?" Liv chimes in.

"Improvise." He comes down hard on the drum. The guys are laughing and Kyle's face turns a little red. He sits in an old school desk without a back right next to Travis' corner of the stage, watching his every move. I smile at him and he waves to me.

I look over at Liv mouthing to her "You ready?" She nods and I begin picking the delicate start to Dixie Chicks *Top of the World*. I wanted to include this song in our set so I've practiced continuously for weeks. It's a little slow and a little distant from what we usually play, but I have heard Liv sing the song over and over in the car and decided to do it for her. Yet another chemistry builder.

Her delicate voice starts in almost a whisper as I softly pick the notes. She sings in the silent microphone. Once the guys realize what's going on, the room grows still. Perfectly hitting every note, she sinks into herself, closing her eyes and swaying with the song. Keenan tiptoes over and turns the volume up slowly until her singing is penetrating the still barn. Travis chimes in with the constant bass on the chorus and follows my lead, having been tortured enough in my car listening to the song.

*Cause everyone is singing/ we just wanna be heard/ disappearing
every day with out so much as a word/ somehow... Wanna grab a
hold of that little song bird/ take her for a ride to the top of the world
right now...*

Prickles of sensation cover my flesh. I sway with the beat of the music, the twang of the acoustic ringing in my ears. Olivia hits all of the notes, high and low. I watch her grasping the microphone delicately. As she sings into the end of the song, Mr. Bradshaw rounds the corner, stopping in the doorway. He stands in his gym pants and white Apollo Eagles polo with his arms folded across his chest.

As the song draws near the end, he walks toward the stage, watching each of us individually. I pick the last few tabs of the song. As I strum the final chord, all eyes are on me.

"Let's do it!" I yell out. Energy levels are high as we jump into our set. Mr. Bradshaw looks over to me and nods, hopefully seeing why it is I don't want to play basketball. This guitar is my life, my release. The more I play, the more I love it. I'm hoping he can see the passion in my face as we play song after song. We break after three songs. My fourth string snapped and I have to change it. Luckily I have a new set in my bag and a string winder to tighten it. This is an unfortunate break because our energy was outrageous. We were on a roll.

"Man, guys. Are ya'll feelin this like me?" Travis says as he wipes his sweat on the back of his arm.

"This is off the hook!" Jack calls, high-fiving Travis. "Let's keep the beat going. Kelsey, we'll play out of sequence while you string your guitar, okay? We'll do something that doesn't really need the guitar. That cool?" I don't know which song they are talking about because I play every song, but whatever they want to do.

"Sure. Go for it." I walk over to a chair by the door and sit. As I'm pulling the old string off, Mr. Bradshaw walks over to me.

"You're pretty good, if I must say."

"Thanks."

"So, when do you have your first gig again?"

"Oh, Saturday night. At the Broken Rainbow. You gonna come?" I ask, assuming that his answer will be no. I mean, what high school gym teacher wants to hang out at a club with his students?

"I was thinking about it. I mean, I've listened to you guys out here pounding away for so long, I might as well see the real thing. Right?" Holy shit! I never expected that. Suddenly my nerves grasp my heart, tugging it into my belly.

"Well, yeah. I just never expected you to want to come. That's all."

"What, am I not cool enough?" He laughs a deep, throaty laugh, laying his arm over his stomach. He bends slightly, slapping his leg. "You think I'm a dork don't you?"

"I didn't say that. It's just...you don't seem like that type of person."

"And what type of person is that, Ms. Cramer?"

I'm stumped. What do I say? I mean, yeah, I did kind of think he was a dork. How many men do you see walking around with a polo tucked into their elastic waistband pants? Really? Just gym teachers...that's it. "You're a teacher. I didn't think teachers really wanted to hang out with their students on the weekends in a dance club." Whew. By the seat of my pants!

"Oh. I see. Well, I just might prove you wrong, huh?"

"Actually, I would like for you to. And while you're at it, why don't you invite some of your faculty friends? We'll just have a real good time." I'm totally joking by this point. He doesn't get it. Or at least he doesn't let it show. I pull out my tuner as soon as I get the string wound. I start picking string by string, twisting to get the right pitch on each of the strings. Getting everything where I want it, I stand up, slinging the strap over my back. I bend down and pick up the broken string and my tools, tossing the string in the metal barrel outside the door.

"Well. I'm set. Hang out and listen for a while. We need an audience."

He looks at me and slaps my shoulder. "I'll do that. Make me proud."

I walk back into the barn and they are standing around bullshitting. "Hey, Travis. Ready for your turn?"

He turns to me, inquisitive. "Yeah, sure. Whatcha' got for me? You seem to be planning it all out. Hit me, sister." He walks over, grabbing the mic from Liv. She jumps down, joining Kyle.

"All right...here you go." I start strumming the intro to Dave Matthews' *Gravedigger* and his head starts to bob. Not many people can pull off Dave Matthews. His voice is so raspy, so different. But I have to say, Travis does a pretty damn good job. His falsetto is believable. He sways with the song, bending at the knees when he gets to the harder vocal notes. I play on, letting him shine in the spotlight. He likes it there.

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25: TIPSY

I look down at my watch at 10:05 as my mom swaggers into the barn. *What is she doing?* I forgot Kyle was even here. He's been practically silent the entire night. He loves coming here with me. Because of that, he tries to keep quiet, ensuring a chance to come back again. She comes in waving her arms. She reaches into her pocket, pulls out a lighter, flicks the side and waves it back and forth as if she is in the front row of a Nickelback concert. *Oh my god. She's not doing this to me!*

I jump off the edge of the stage, still playing my guitar. I walk over toward her, careful not to miss a beat. She looks at me as I nod my head for her to follow me. She giggles as she trails behind me. At the end of the song, I look over at her.

"What are you doing here? I didn't expect you to show up."

"I came to get Kyle. You told me to, right?" Kyle has noticed her and is trying to hide from her sight.

"Yeah." She leans over to me.

"You're good, sis." Her breath smells like a brewery.

"Who brought you?" I'm hoping she will say somebody, anybody. I'm hoping she didn't drive here alone.

"Your dad's in the car. He didn't want to come in." I'm instantly nervous. He showed up early. I thought he was coming tomorrow and hanging out with me and Kyle on Saturday. That explains why she didn't want to have to look out for Kyle. That actually explains a lot to me.

I don't want my first meeting after 10 years to be in the Band Barn, but reply reluctantly, "He can come in...if he wants."

"He didn't want to make you nervous, being he hasn't seen you for so long." I secretly appreciate his concern. I'm glad he didn't come in because it's just that much more to explain to the band. *Oh, by the way, this is my dad.* I don't see that going too smoothly. For him to strut in here would definitely throw a kink in our flow.

"Hey. Why don't you go have fun with Dad. Leave Kyle here. I'll just bring him home with me." I say this, not because I particularly think it is best for Kyle to still be up, but because I feel sorry for

him. I don't want him stuck in an awkward situation just because I had a long practice. I know he's nervous about meeting Dad and I told him I'd look out for him.

"Well. I drove out here to get him." She studies her hands, not sure what to do now. I look over at Kyle and he is shaking his head 'no'. He doesn't want to go. He must have heard Mom say that Dad was here. His eyes are floating in tears. I see his body jerk with a sniff, the pointless effort to restrain the tears.

"Just don't worry about it, okay Mom? I'll take care of Kyle." I grab her shoulders, turning her toward the door. I start to walk, pushing her forward. "Just go." I let go as she turns back to me.

"If you insist. We do have a lot of making up to do...if you know what I mean."

"Yuck, Mom. I don't want to hear about it. And I'll call when we're on our way home...if you know what I mean!" She giggles again, waves to everyone and blows Kyle a kiss. He ignores her.

* * * * *

"What was that all about?" Keenan asks as the band gathers around me.

"Oh, she's just...nothing. Let's get back to it." I raise my hand and gesture to Kyle with my finger for him to come over to me. He stands and shuffles toward me.

"She gone?" He asks, wiping the snot from his nose on his sleeve.

"Yeah. Don't do that. It's nasty! I got you out of it this time. But you have to promise me you won't be a grouch in the morning."

He holds his hands up in the air by his head. "I swear. I won't."

"Can I get that in writing?" I rustle his hair with an open hand. "I know it's hard to concentrate, but did you get your homework done yet?" He looks down at the dirt floor and I know the answer. "Get to it. No arguing."

"Thanks Kelsey." He hugs me tight around my waist. He whispers, "I didn't want to go with them."

"I know. Now get over there and get your nose in the books."

Liv walks over and sits beside me. "You okay?"

"Yeah. I'm just tired of this mess."

"I understand." I nod. But she doesn't understand...not really. Her parents are still together. Even though she doesn't see much of them, at least they care about her. They pay attention to her and make sure she's taken care of. They play the role of parents, unlike mine.

"I guess." She puts her arm around me and I stiffen up. "Let's just get back to it." She crooks her finger under my chin and lifts my face to hers.

"We'll be okay. I promise. I'm here. Remember that." I force myself to loosen up.

"Good. That's what I need to hear."

I stand up and regain my composure. I flip the page in my music binder and start the next song. Everyone joins in. I want to get pumped again. I want to feel the high I was on a few hours ago. Mr. Bradshaw stands and waves at us.

"Sound's good guys, but the old man needs to hit the sack." He walks out of the Barn whistling.

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Kyle falls asleep in the car, propped against the window. With every bump his head bounces. Once we hear his head thump against the window and cringe at the pain he would've felt had that happened when he was awake. It's a dark night but clear. Liv turns down the brightness of the dashboard lights until only a tiny bit of light glows in the Jeep. She reaches over, taking my hand in hers. She moves my hand to her thigh and sits with her fingers intertwined in mine. I slump down in the seat, leaning my head against the head rest. I look over at her with the orange interior light flickering on her skin. She glances my way and smiles.

"What?" I ask, in a guarded tone.

"Nothing. Can't I just look at you?" She pulls my hand up, kissing my fingers.

"Be careful...Kyle."

"It's fine. He's sleeping."

"You never know...Sorry. I'm just a little skittish right now."

"You're fine." She lays my hand back down in her lap, releasing my grasp. She grabs the steering wheel with her right hand and props her left arm on the door. I rub her leg, wanting to lie next to her and feel her close to me.

We pull into the driveway and I realize I didn't call my mom. I decide to make it a point to make a lot of noise when I go in. I knock a clip of papers off the refrigerator, accidentally, and stomp and carry on as I pick it up. I laugh at Liv as she makes faces at me. Kyle is still asleep in the car so I go back to wake him after I sit my bag down by the kitchen table. He groggily raises his head to look at me as I'm tapping his leg.

"Huh? Where are we?" He asks.

"We're home. Come on. It's time for you to go to bed."

Sleep and walking are not two things that Kyle does well together. He takes forever to get in the house. I watch him go up the stairs and into his room. Mom and Dad are nowhere to be found. I walk back into the kitchen and throw open the fridge, starving. I tear into a package of lunchmeat. I pull out a jar of pickles and dip my hand down into it, wrestling with a slimy spear. I finally pull it out, sucking the juice off it.

"Want one?" I offer Liv.

"Um...sure."

"We may as well both have pickle breath, huh?" I smile as I dramatically bite off a chunk. I chew it and stick my tongue out, pickle chunks and all. Liv follows my lead, sticking her tongue out. We laugh, falling into each other's arms. Our laughing summons my mom from her dungeon of love. Yuck.

"What are you doing?" She's not happy.

"Sorry, Mom. We'll be quiet."

"You were supposed to call when you were on your way home."

"I'm sorry. I forgot."

"You're just full of apologies tonight. You need to go to bed. It's midnight and you have school tomorrow." Since when did she care about me going to bed?

"Okay. We're on our way now." She turns and stomps back into her bedroom, huffing and slamming the door.

"Somebody got interrupted." Liv whispers to me. We start to giggle again, but more quiet this time. I extend my arm for her to go upstairs first. As she is walking up the steps, I grab the back of her legs and she collapses on the stairs, turning to me with a playful grimace. "I am so ticklish there."

“Something for me to remember.” I retort with a tormenting laugh. I follow her into the bedroom, collapsing onto the bed. She falls down on top of me.

“I probably should go.” She says as she pulls my hat off and tosses it across the room.

“What? Are you kidding me?”

“It’s a school night, remember? And *somebody* can’t keep up...”

“Awww...that was low. Tell you what. You stay here and I *promise* you, you will be the one begging for sleep.” I start to tickle her. She pushes me away, pulling her finger to her lips to shush me.

“With a promise like that, I can’t really turn you down, now can I?”

“Good. Let’s go to bed.” I shut the door, flip the lock and slam my hand against the light switch. Darkness. I strip my tank top and jeans, climbing into bed in my boxers and sports bra. I cuddle up to her, basking in this bliss.

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FRIDAY

26: FLINCH

I wake up to pounding on my door. "KELSEY! Get up!" I roll over and look at the clock. Shit. We overslept...again. I guess I forgot to set my alarm when we finally curled up to sleep at 4:30. I'm so glad it's Friday because I don't know how much longer I can handle this up all night stuff. I roll back into the warm spot I just came from, snuggling my face into the nape of Liv's neck.

"We've gotta get up, babe." My body goes warm. Did I just say that?

"I don't wanna." She groans into the pillow. "Can't we just skip school today?"

"You can if you want, but I have to go. I have a quiz in Algebra today."

The knocking is back and I'm getting pissed. I throw my hair gel at the door, yelling at my mom. "I AM UP!" I flip the lock and throw open the door. "See!"

"Man, someone's grumpy today." She mocks me.

"Well, look who's Little Miss Chipper. You must have...never mind."

"What? I must've what? Don't you sass me, young lady. I'll show you who's boss."

I walk back into my room and pull a plain black T-shirt from the closet. I pull out my olive green army pants from the middle of the stack of clothes on the chair and amble into the bathroom, making an effort to slam the door behind me. I look at myself in the mirror. My bruises are looking better. Just a little green and yellow left: the last stages. I quickly jump in the shower and love the feeling of the warm water hitting the tops of my shoulders. The tension has gotten so bad. I lean back, letting the water run down the length of my hair. Small streams run down my forehead and into my face. As I'm wiping my eyes, a cool breeze washes over me. Someone just opened the door.

"Who's that?"

"It's just me. I have to pee real bad. I'll only be a second." Liv. At first I start to think how weird it is that she is in here when I'm in the shower. All girls do that, right? They go in and out of the bathroom when others are in there? I try not to get so uptight about it.

"Flushing." Her voice shouts out. I quickly move to the back of the shower awaiting the rush of cold water. It takes forever for the warm water to flow back to me.

"Thanks for the warning."

"No prob. Are you gonna be quick enough so I can get a shower? I can't really go to school smelling like...this." She's got a point. I wouldn't be too fond of going in public with the smell that was lingering in my bedroom right now either.

"Yeah. I'm almost done. It'll be just a sec, k?" She pulls back the shower curtain. I shy away from her, leaning my front against the curtain.

"What's the big deal? It's not like I haven't seen it before." It's different for me. There is something vulnerable about being in the shower and someone peeking in. Something a little uncomfortable. I lean over and kiss her, choosing not to go there.

"I'll be out in a minute." I rush through the rest of my shower and quickly dry off. I wrap the towel around myself and yell across the hall to Liv. "You can come in now." She walks into the bathroom with a pile of neatly folded clothes, lays them on the hamper, and tosses her towel over the curtain rod. As she takes her clothes off, she carefully folds each garment, not one bit guarded about standing in front of me naked. I like that about her, but sadly admit to myself that it will take a while for me to reach that comfort level.

I wait for her to get in the shower, piddling around with stuff on the sink, trying to look busy. As soon as she steps in and slides the curtain, I hurriedly step into my underwear and pants with the towel resting on my back. I drop it to the floor as I slide my bra over my head. I have learned to dress privately in the locker room. I don't really know where my body issues come from, but I do know that I'm not comfortable strolling around the house naked.

* * * * *

I gel my hair and dry it for a few minutes, just enough to get the weight of the water out of it. I throw on some shoes, stuff my books and notebooks into my messenger bag, and head downstairs to round up some breakfast for us. Mom is in the kitchen when I get there. "Sorry for being so crabby, Mom. I'm just tired."

"I'll say. You've not been yourself lately. You need to get some rest so you don't get sick."

"I know, I know. It's just, we're so pumped about this gig tomorrow that we have been practicing so hard and I have to stay up later to do my homework, and all." I just lied through my teeth. For some

reason, I think we both know I'm not staying up to do homework. She doesn't say anything about it. "So, how were things with Dad? Did he tell you that we talked the other day?"

"Yes. As a matter of fact, he did. I want to thank you for that, by the way. He's really excited to be able to get to know you again. We had fun last night. It was like back in the day. We were cutting up and dancing. And we had a lot of catching up to do."

"I bet you did." Sarcasm...but who can resist? She left that one wide open for me. I look over at her and see a look on her face I haven't seen in quite some time: contentment and maybe even a little happiness.

There's something in her look that draws me back to age six. I was sitting on my new bike on the back patio. It was my birthday, July 10th, and I had just gotten the bike. It was big and the coolest thing I had ever seen. Mom, even at that time, was trying so hard to get me to like girly things. As I walked through the store by each of the bikes, I would point to a red one or a blue one, telling her over and over again how much I wanted a bike. She would, in turn, try to avert my attention to pink, purple and even mint green girls' bikes.

I told her so many times how much I wanted this Superman bike. It was the best bike ever. The seat was a giant Superman cape and there were red, blue and black tassels hanging out of each of the hand grips. For some reason, she gave in and bought the bike for me. This was the one time that I got something the other boys on the block could only drool over. Most of their bikes came from garage sales or older siblings.

I sat on that bike seat, barely able to reach the ground. The summer sun scorched my sun-screened skin. I could feel the sizzle. A trail of sweat ran down my spine and my thin curls clung to my cheeks in the heat of the summer morning sun. I reached up with my arm to shield the sun, looking over first at my dad, lounging in the tri-fold lawn chair. His back was to the sun and his gigantic sunglasses shielded half of his face. He bounced baby Kyle on his legs and watched me gawk over the best birthday present I ever had.

I looked over at my mom, sitting with her legs crossed in the swing, newspaper spread to the funny pages. A random breeze stirred in the backyard, blowing clippings of grass onto the patio. They formed a cyclone under my dad's chair and danced on into the yard. My mom radiated happiness. She was

proud to be able to give me the gift I really wanted. "You just gonna sit there all day on that brand new bike or are you gonna ride it?" She asked, smiling sincerely into my face. The twinkle I saw in her eyes then disappeared for a long time and has reappeared this very morning.

I pull myself away from that day, questioning Mom. "So, you guys getting back together?"

Her head whips around to face me. "Don't say that. I only just saw him for the first time in years last night. I couldn't possibly be able to tell you that."

"I didn't mean it in a bad way. I mean, I've watched you mope around here long enough. Mom. You deserve to be happy. If that's what it takes, so be it."

"Where did that come from, Kelsey? Is this my daughter standing here? For a second I thought you might be supportive of me trying to get him back."

"So you are, huh?"

"Well, maybe. Are you okay, Kelsey?" She approaches me in an almost loving way, placing her hand on the small of my back. She tilts her head to look into my face. I stop spreading the peanut butter on my bagel and look at her.

"I'm great. I'm really good." I resume.

"What's ruffled your feathers?"

"What? Where did that come from? That is so corny!" I look over and notice a smile on Mom's face. This is the first time in forever that we've been in the same room and both been capable of smiling at the same time. I lick the peanut butter off my fingers and slide the knife into the dishwasher just as Liv comes bouncing into the kitchen.

"You ready?" I ask her as she gives a little wave to Mom.

"Morning, Mrs. Cramer. Yeah. I'm ready."

"Good morning, Olivia." She gives Olivia a sincere smile and I wonder if she would be smiling the same way if she knew what was going on between us. I grab my bag and hand a bagel to Liv. I toss a bottle of orange juice to her, grab one for myself and sweep up my bagel, heading for the door.

"Are you gonna take your brother to school?"

I sigh and look at my watch. "I don't think I have time. Can you take him?"

She puts her hand on her hip, a little annoyed. "Yeah. I'll take him."

"Thanks, Mom." I close the door before she can say anything else. I hop into Liv's Jeep before I think about the rest of the day. "Shit. I can't ride with you. I have counseling today." I reach for the handle to open the door.

"Don't get out. I'll take you."

"Are you sure? I don't want to interfere with your plans or anything."

"Are you kidding? YOU are my plans." She leans over, laying her hand on my leg. "Are you sure you're cut out for this whole relationship thing?"

I'm not real sure if she is serious or not. I look over trying to read the look on her face. I can't see through the pleasant grin. "I'm game. You?"

"Absolutely!" I want to lean over and kiss her but decide not to. We both stare out the windshield in silence, slightly dancing to the radio. She reaches into the console and pulls out a CD case. "Don't look." She flips through the pages and pulls out a CD, careful to cover the top so I can't see. She reaches up to the slit in the dash and it pulls the disc from her hand, registering the songs. I listen, waiting. It's Ani Difrancio. I knew it. It's disc one of the Living in Clip set. My favorite, and hers too. We link hands on the console. With the windows cracked, the humid morning air blows warmly into the car. We join in singing with the music blaring.

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27: FRAUDULENT

Nothing can shoot me down from the adrenaline high I'm riding on. I seem to float through the day, a little sleepy at times, but giddy nonetheless. I drift off into my dream world in between classes, but remain attentive during class lectures. I float through my Algebra quiz, jotting down the formulas for sine, cosine and tangent. I plug and chug numbers, turning out answers I think are correct. I even have time to go back and check them with the formulas by substituting different parts of the equations. I flip the quiz to the back and fly through problems using the Pythagorean Theorem. That's the easiest for me: $A^2 + B^2 = C^2$. How hard can that be?

As I rush out of my Algebra class hoping to see Liv before gym, I realize what class I have next...gym. Shit. I got out of answering to Bethany and her posse yesterday because of an assembly for the football team, but there is no getting away from it today. I have to go to Mr. Bradshaw. I see Liv down the hall and wave to her, signaling her to come to me. I open my locker, grab my gym bag, and turn to her. "I've gotta talk to you."

"Okay. What's wrong?"

"Let's go over here," I say, pulling her toward the stairwell. "Listen. I just wanted to tell you I have gym now. Wish me luck with the girls. I just wanted to remind you."

I'm glad she isn't worried about the rumor, but I'm still a little scared. "I need to go. I'll see you after school."

"Yeah. Meet me at my car."

"You got it." I turn from her, weaving in and out of the crowd. I'm trying to get to the locker room early so I can get changed and out of there before they even get in. My plan fails. As soon as I open the door to the gym, I see the three of them, guarding the door to the locker room.

"Hey, Kelsey. What's your answer?" Bethany says in her sassy, 'I'm better than you' voice.

"I don't have one. I have to get in here to Mr. Bradshaw's office. I'll be there in a minute." I duck into his office, not wanting to be a tattler, but knowing it's the best option. I need suggestions and I need them fast. I round the corner, a little out of breath. Mr. Bradshaw is sitting at his desk with his feet propped on the oversized calendar. He has on earphones and is tossing a basketball up as if he is shooting free throws. As soon as he sees me, he jerks the earphones off his head.

"Well, Ms. Cramer. What's got you so out of breath?"

"Look. I need help. I'm not much of a rat, but I don't see any option in this situation." I quickly run through the most important details, watching the confusion clear up from his face.

"I see. Well, looks like we've got ourselves a problem, huh?"

"Yes sir. I don't really want to get them in trouble. I just want them to leave me alone. I'm not a fighter. That isn't an option for me. I just don't really want my name dragged out all over the school."

"Understandable. Tell you what. You just tell them this." He rattles out a plan. "I'll take care of the rest." I shake his hand and thank him as I back out of the door. I sling open the door to the locker room and go about my business like nothing ever happened. I lay my bag down in the open locker in the corner, strip my shirt, leaving it as a cover over my chest. I swiftly slide the shirt over my head, punch my arms through, and pull the other shirt out of the neck of my gym tee. I slide my pants down and pull them off, folding them in a sloppy manner and stuff them in my bag. My boxers tickle my legs as I slide my basketball shorts over them.

"Well, look at the dyke. She's got her boxers on today." Bethany says, loud enough for everyone in the locker room to hear.

"Shut the hell up." I yell, not even turning to face her. I busy myself with my rubber band, trying to pull my hair up.

"Did she just say that to me? I know she didn't." She turns to Lacey and Mel getting a little crazy. "Did she just tell me to shut the hell up?" Lacey nods in an evil way, instigating trouble.

"So, Butchy, did you get her or what?" Butchy. How unique. My emotions want to get angry but I keep telling myself it's under control. I inhale and exhale deeply before turning around to face them.

"I got her. Now, can you leave me the hell alone?" The three of them giggle to one another like second graders.

"You got her, huh? Who was it? If you're so good, then who was it that was trying to sleep with *our* boyfriends?" *Were* they making this up? I'm still not sure. Mr. Bradshaw is taking care of the rest of it. This could possibly be the best joke I ever pulled on anyone. EVER! I play badass, and I love it.

"If you're so concerned about it, why don't you see for yourselves. She's in Mr. Bradshaw's office now." I hope they had time to get it going. I walk into the stall and slide the lock in place. Through

the crack I can see Lacey standing over the sink with tweezers. *You've got to be kidding me. She is tweezing her eyebrows for gym class?* I flush the toilet, wash my hands, and sling the cold drops of water all over Lacey's legs.

"Eww, gross." She whines as I smile, tossing the paper towels in the trash. I walk out into the gym and straight to the office. I lean my head in to make sure she's in there, see her in his chair, and give them a thumbs up. I walk back into the gym and slouch against the wall, sliding to the floor, just as I was told to do. I clear out my mind, holding in the laughter that I want to belt out. Sitting with a stern look on my face, staring at the floor, I see three sets of shoes walk slowly toward his office. It's them: Bethany, Lacey and Mel. They're whispering in a little of a panic as they walk past me. They approach Mr. Bradshaw's office and are called in. I hear the door slam shut and know they're getting one of the best acting scenes they've ever seen.

The door opens and the three girls emerge from the office, tears in all of their eyes running down their faces, dragging mascara and eyeliner with them. They look a mess. Mr. Bradshaw looks over at me and nods. It worked! They fell for it. Victory is mine. He approaches me, asking me to step into his office. He closes the door behind me. I walk over and slouch down on the couch on the back wall of his office under the framed jerseys.

"So, give me the rundown." I plead, not wanting to wait another second. The chair swivels in my direction and I gawk as I look into her face. The girl is Lexi Snodam and she's one of Liv's friends. She's a senior theatre major and just happened to be in the gym that afternoon. Mr. Bradshaw asked her to help, knowing the three girls would never see her in school. None of them were in theatre and none of them were in senior classes. Brilliant, if you ask me.

She had rushed to the dressing room in the theatre and brought over a tackle box full of makeup. You wouldn't believe how well she pulled off a black eye and a split lip. She even ratted her hair to make it look like I had pulled it in a fight. She finally spoke up. "I hope this helps you Kelsey. I know it must be pretty shitty to have that threat hanging over your head."

"What did you say to them?"

"I told them that you beat me up just because rumor had it that I was sleeping around. I told them these cuts and bruises were based on nothing but people running their mouths, that I didn't even know their boy friends, and that I am, in fact, a lesbian."

"No way. You didn't." I can hardly contain myself. I want nothing more than to get in their faces and point my finger, yelling at them about lessons learned. I know I can do nothing of the sort or the battle will continue all year long. They can never know this was a joke.

"The girls are being sent to the principal's office. I phoned him and told him what was going on, but they will be sent to detention. I didn't do this to make you look good, but did it to prevent the demolition of your reputation. Understood, Ms. Cramer?" Mr. Bradshaw is standing over me, looking down with a glorified grin.

"Yes, sir. Absolutely." I stand and walk over to Lexi. "Thank you so much. You will never know how much I appreciate this. Let's hang out some time. If you want."

"Sure. I would be happy to." She lowers her voice so Mr. Bradshaw can't hear. "So, is it true? What they were going to say about you? You don't have to answer if you don't want." I consider lying, but think better of it. I nod yes. "I thought so, but didn't want to assume." She stands, straightening her shirt around her hips.

"Well, Mr. Bradshaw, I better go. I have rehearsals I'm missing out on. I'll come back for the make-up kit when school is over. Is that okay with you?"

"Yes ma'am. And thanks again Lexi."

"No problem." She shakes my hand and walks out of the office.

"Now," Mr. Bradshaw says, "let's go play some volleyball." He waves his hand toward the door and I walk out in front of him. "This is our little secret...remember that."

"My lips are sealed." I walk out onto the floor proudly. This couldn't have gone any better.

* * * * *

28: *FISH*

Liv revs the engine just as Bethany, Lacey, and Mel walk in front of her car. They look up and quickly rush by when they see me sitting in the passenger seat. We both start laughing, curling down below the dash so they don't see us laugh. Liv pulls forward in line, waiting for the faculty members on parking lot duty to give us permission to leave. She peels out of the parking lot, earning evil stares from the teachers and crossing guards.

She drops me off at the curb to the counseling center, telling me she'll be back in a little over an hour to get me. I squeeze her hand and wave as I shut the passenger door. I stand on the curb, waiting for her to pull away. She gives me two little honks and before I can blink, she is gone, lost in the traffic.

I whip the door open, strolling into the center like I own the place. Well, not really, but maybe it's fun to think that way. I mean, these people know me now. I have mixed emotions about my session today. It's my last session and I have an eventful weekend ahead of me. That pumps me up. On the other hand, I'll miss the chance to sit down and spill my guts for an hour, receiving hella feedback throughout my conversation with Julie. It's only been a week, but feels like so much longer.

I take my seat; the same one I've sat in the entire time I've been coming here. I tap my toes to the hum of the fish tank that must've been installed today. I watch as the orange and white flecked goldfish flips his tail side to side, gliding through the crystal clear water. He weaves in and out of the faux plants, stationary simply because of the blue and purple fish tank rocks covering the plastic base. An algae sucker clings to the glass wall in the corner, hanging out and probably starving to death because of the sanitary tank. His nutrition hasn't had time to form.

Two neons dart back and forth, keeping the same distance between them with each jerk. The leader, extended half a body length in front of the other, is painted with a fluorescent green stripe on its belly. The follower, day-glo orange. I watch as bubbles climb the clear tube from the gravel to the filter. There are a few other fish lollygagging around, but I don't know the names for them. The lone goldfish sits at the glass, almost as if he is watching me. His mouth opens and closes over and over as he breathes. I name him Gus.

Gus was a fish I won at the county fair when I was five. I say 'I won,' but really mean my dad won him. I played game after game, after reluctantly backing away from the stand where you throw a dart

at a balloon. I knew I could win that one, but didn't really want a stiff, crinkly, spooky white teddy bear with red paws and ears. So, being the stubborn child I was, I chose the impossible games: throw a three inch ring around a two and a three quarters inch bottle, or toss the whiffle ball into the moving tub with a holed-out slanted piece of plywood stuck in it, or best of all, knock down the five stacked two-pound jugs with only three baseballs. Needless to say, at five years old, weighing a measly 34 pounds and having the upper body strength of a toddler, I wasn't getting too far.

Dad came to the rescue. He stumbled over in his tank top and too short cut-off jeans carrying a can of Pabst Blue Ribbon in one hand and a cigarette in the other, smoked down to the filter. He took the cigarette between his thumb and middle finger, pulled it from his mouth, dropped it on the sparse grass under the tent and placed the toe of his Chuck sneaker on the tip, twisting from side to side. I waited patiently because I had seen him do this so many times before.

He walked over to me as I stood there with my arms full of baseballs. Taking one from me, he launched it toward the bottles, knocking over three and booing at the game leader. He moaned about how jacked up the game was and how no one ever won. He carried on with his babbling, took another ball from me, lined up and launched the ball right at the middle jug, knocking over two. There was one jug left and I held one more ball. I knew the odds were against me because how often is the ball going to connect with that one little jug from 15 feet away?

He reared back and launched the ball forward with every ounce of energy he had left. The bottle spun on the rim before diving off the edge of the board. He did it. I jumped up and down, celebrating my victory (or my dad's). I was finally gonna get a fish. The game guy lifted me over the barrier and let me look through the bags and bags of fish in the plastic kiddie pool. I found the perfect one and lifted the bag, looking the fish in the face.

For the rest of the night, I didn't care what we did. I had what I came for right in my hand. Every few minutes I would lift the bag and look at my fish. It took all of three hours for the name to come to me. As I stood by the grandstands watching the horses prance around the track before the races, I lifted the bag once more. It was right then that the name popped in my head. Gus. Perfect. I had a fish named Gus and in my mind, I was the coolest kid in the entire world.

As I sit looking into the fish tank Julie calls my name. I smile at her as I stand. "Nice tank." I say as I follow her to her office.

"You like that? It was a gift from a patient's father. All offices need a fish tank, right?"

"Yeah. Isn't it kinda a requirement or something?"

"That's how it seems, huh?" She twists the knob on the door, swinging it open. She motions me into the office before her. I lay my bag down on the floor by the chair and sit down, slouching comfortably. I lift my arms, crossing my fingers behind my head. "You seem relaxed today. It's a nice change, Kelsey."

"Thanks. It feels good to relax sometimes, ya know?"

"So, tell me, what's going on today in your life?" She sits, swiveling her chair toward me.

"Well, I have a lot going on. I wanted to tell you...I talked to Liv about who to tell and all that stuff. She was totally cool. Actually she already told her brother. She is not ashamed and thinks we're doing what's best for us. It's nice to have her be so upbeat. We both know I tend to lean toward the negative." I watch as she nods in agreement. It bothers me that I am this way, and even more, that she is confirming it. It's true, but I'm working on it.

"So, things are going well with you and Liv, then?"

"Yeah. I can't seem to get enough time with her. We haven't slept apart in a few days."

"I will tell you, it's fun to spend time together, but be careful. You need to make sure you give yourself some time to be alone. Everyone needs alone time. Otherwise, you will become someone you're not. Does that make sense?"

"Sort of, I guess." I can't even think about being apart from Liv. It seems unnatural. Why part when we're having fun and getting along so well?

"When relationships are new, it's hard to grasp the concept of aloneness, but you need to focus on Kelsey every once in a while. Find a time to maybe go to the river and play guitar, or to sit down and write, or something else you enjoy. This will keep you from getting so bogged down like you were earlier this week. So, what else is going on?"

"Umm...well...we have a gig tomorrow night at the Broken Rainbow. I'm psyched about that! I can't wait. And...to top it all off, my dad's in town, but I haven't seen him yet. My mom was hanging out with him last night."

"So, your mom was with him but you didn't see him?"

"Yeah. They came to the Barn during practice, but Dad stayed in the car. I was kind of freaked out, and I'm not real sure why. It's just...I haven't seen him in so long that I don't want to be put on the spot in front of all my friends. I don't want the first time I see him to be in front of a lot of people. I don't know how I'll react, so I guess I'm just a little guarded."

"That's perfectly normal, Kelsey. You have learned to live without him and now he just randomly contacts you, wanting to hang out. It's okay to have reservations about the meeting."

"I'm excited to see him. I think it'll be a good thing later on. I'm just a little scared."

"I hope that goes well for you. I really do."

"I'll see him in the morning, so we'll see how it goes. Can I ask you a question?"

She sits, looking into my face intently. Her cheek propped on her index finger with her other fingers falling in front of her face. "Yeah, absolutely."

"I decided to tell my dad...you know...that I'm...gay. I mean, it seems like a good place to start. I want to tell people, so why not start here? What do I have to lose? I know that sounds kinda mean, but true."

She pauses, assessing the possibilities. A sincere response confirms my opinion. "If that's what you want to do, I don't see a thing wrong with it. However, you have to think of how you'll feel if he doesn't accept your life. Will that crush you to the point that you won't be able to see him anymore? Or, will that give you the feeling of accomplishment you so need to have? It just depends on you. I think it's a very bold step on your part. Whatever's best for you."

"Yeah."

"Anything else you'd like to talk about before you go? This is your last session."

I don't really know what to say. This has been a good thing for me. "Not that I know of. Thanks for listening and stuff."

"It's been my pleasure. Just give me a call if you need anything else. You know where to find me."

* * * * *

When we get back to my house, Liv and I walk in the back door. Mom is standing over the sink, staring out the window into the afternoon. "Hey Mom." I call out, dropping my bag by the door.

"Hey." A quiet, somewhat sorrowful reply.

"What's wrong?" Do I really want to know?

"Nothing you should worry over," she says, continuing to stare out the window, unmoved. I wonder if I should pursue it further or if I should follow my selfish instinct and walk out, leaving her to sulk. I feel generous so I enter the conversation.

"Are you okay? Is there something I can do?" She shakes her head. "Are you crying?" Probably a stupid question since she has yet to look at me. She turns around. Boy has she been crying! Her mascara runs in two streaks clear to her chin and is smudged around each eye, making her eyes look not so much different than mine did earlier in the week. I approach her, wanting to console her, but find myself tripping over my own tongue.

This is the first time I ever remember seeing my mom cry out of some emotion other than anger or drunken rage. I realize I'm not sure how to react. As I stand here and watch her cry, I understand how Julie must feel every day when patients sit in her office crying and she doesn't know what to do. How can I comfort her when she won't talk?

She stands, propped against the sink, feet crossed at the ankles. One arm is wrapped around her middle, the other is propped at the elbow on the wrapped arm. She covers her mouth with her free hand.

Gently, I speak again. "Can you please tell me what's wrong?" I look back at Liv and wave my hand for her to go to my room, thinking Mom may talk if we're alone. She quietly tiptoes through the kitchen, disappearing in the hall. I hear the thump of her shoes up the steps and wish I were following instead of stuck in this dead-end conversation.

I turn back to my mother. "Tell me... what happened to you?"

A whisper. Finally. So faint I can barely hear. "He got upset. He left."

"Who?" I know who. What a stupid question. Maybe I don't want to believe it. Maybe I just need to hear it.

"Your father. He said he was ashamed of how I have raised our children..." Could he say that? Does he have a right to say that when *he* left? She continues. "...he said I should care more and if I don't, he can't have me back." I stare, not knowing what to say.

"I'm sorry...I guess."

She tilts her head, looking questioningly into my face. "Am I that terrible of a mother? Do I treat you that bad?"

"No...um...well..." I don't know exactly how to put this. The brutally honest truth is, yes...she's been a terrible mother for the past few years. The bad thing is, that answer could send her over the edge. I choose a not-so-brutal approach. "...the thing is, Mom, you need some help." Okay, so maybe that didn't come out quite right.

"You are not a bad mother...when you are sober. But I can't sit here and lie, saying you are the greatest mom that ever walked the face of the earth, because you and I both know what a crock that is. You hurt me and I'm not able to forget that. You beat the shit out of me. Remember? If you could just quit drinking, like I told you earlier, things would be different. You would feel better. I would feel better...like I could talk to you easier. Kyle would feel like he had a parent...besides me."

"Wait, he doesn't?" She is shocked by this.

"Mom, seriously. When is the last time you sat and talked to Kyle? When is the last time you gave him a hug? When is the last time you even acknowledged him? I had to tell him about sex, Mom. I am the one he comes to with personal questions because *I'm* the one he trusts."

Her eyes fill again. "I can't believe this," she repeats, covering her face and rocking herself. She isn't talking to me. She has retreated into her own world and is coming to realizations no one ever wants to have to face. "I *am* worthless," she whispers to herself as if repeating something Dad said to her in their conversation.

I do something I never expected to do. I hug her. "Listen," I say, taking her shoulders into my hands, playing 'Mom,' "you are *not* worthless. You just need a little help. That's all. If you can promise me you will quit drinking...I will work through this with Dad. I will try to smooth it over."

I wait for her reply. She takes me into her arms, leaning back to brush the hair out of my face. She is at a weak point now, and I realize it, but it's hard to willingly stand here in her embrace, pretending to be loved by her. Letting her hold me angers me. I want to lash out on her, to be mean like she has been to me so many times. Instead, I let her play with my hair and rub my face like she did when I was small.

"I'll try." Her only response. I back away a little, stiffening.

"Not good enough. If you try, I say nothing to Dad. If you sign up for AA or rehab or something...I talk to him. You decide."

I'm now finished with the mushy-gushy-feel-sorry-for-me crap. I pull her hands away from my hips and let them go at her sides. "Mom, this is it. This is your chance. If you will just do this one thing to help yourself, you can get your husband back. You can get your family back. Most of all, you can get *you* back. Honestly, I don't blame him one bit for getting upset. Look at yourself. You are a mess." I pause, stepping backward toward the hall. "It's your decision."

I spin in place and walk out of the kitchen, not looking back. I don't feel sorry for her. The only thing I feel bad about is having to be the one to tell her these things. Someone has to do it, but for once, just once, I want it to be someone besides me.

* * * * *

29: FRIVOLITY

I walk solemnly into my bedroom and Liv is lying on the bed, head propped on pillows, fingering through the latest People magazine. "Sorry." I say quietly as I slide on the bed beside her.

"What are you apologizing for? It's cool."

I lean over to her, placing a gentle kiss on her cheek. A smile starts in the corner of her mouth, spreading across her face. "Listen," she whispers, laying her hand on the crook of my leg. "You've had a lot to deal with lately. Why don't you pack a bag and crash with me tonight? We'll leave here in a little while, go to practice, and head to my place. You can forget about everything for the night. How's that sound?"

I contemplate the offer. Honestly, I would love nothing more than to stay with her. My mind catches up with me. "What about Kyle?"

"Kelsey, you can't keep worrying about him. I know he's your brother and you worry, but the truth is, he's not your child. He's not your responsibility."

I hear her words. I understand her words, but it doesn't change my feeling of responsibility. "I have to take care of him only because Mom doesn't."

"I know this, but you can't put your life on hold just to make sure he's taken care of. *Make* her do her job as a mother. If you're not here, she has to take care of him."

My guts are wrenching. I just worry about him. All of the things I've had to deal with this week seem intense, but I can't push away the thought of Kyle having to witness it. Even though it wasn't Kyle getting beat up, he watched it. He watched her drink herself into oblivion. He isn't dumb.

"I'll go and I'll have fun, but I need to at least talk to him first. Okay?"

She pauses before answering. "Deal...now pack some bags, girl."

I start stuffing clothes into my bag in silence. "Oh, wait. I was gonna go buy an outfit for the gig."

Liv looks over to me. "Tell you what, we'll go now. You can invite Kyle if you want, then we'll bring him back and head to my house." Descent compromise, I guess. I walk over to her, taking her in my arms.

"Thanks. I'm sorry I'm so bummed right now. I'll snap out of it before we get to the mall."

"Promise?"

"You bet." I take her hand, leading her out of the bedroom.

* * * * *

We pull up in the mall parking lot and Kyle sits straight up in the back seat. "Can we go to Spencer's?" His excitement is without reserve.

"Maybe, but I told you before we left that this shopping trip is for me and Liv." His excitement is quickly replaced by defeat. He gets out of the car not saying a word and follows on our heels as we walk in the front entrance.

"So, where do you wanna go?" Liv asks, poking my ribs because she knows the answer.

"Pacsun, of course." I walk with my shoulders slumped and straighten them when I realize it. "Let's do it."

We walk in the door, greeted by a guy named Jacob who's in my Algebra class. "Hey ladies. Just to let you know, we've got T-shirts 2 for \$25, jeans 2 for \$55, and this entire rack is \$9.99 and under. There are a couple more sale racks in the back." He nods as he continues folding the stack of T-shirts in front of him, placing them carefully on the display table.

I walk to the back of the store first. I like to start in the back and work my way forward. There's a guy in the back with spiked hair, red on the tips. He moves quickly through a box of shirts, sticking pins in the neckline, clicking the sensors onto the pins. He piles the shirts on the shoe bench.

"Anything I can help you ladies find?"

"Nah. We're just looking."

"Okay. Well, let me know if I can help."

I dig through the rack, scooting one shirt after another to the left. I really want to get a thermal, but realistically, that is not the best decision. I know I'll be so hot on the stage under the lights. I settle on a black beater. Tan bleach spots randomly splatter the beater and a tan bleached Volcom Stone symbol rests on the bottom, left hip in front. I grab a SMALL and sling it over my shoulder.

I walk to the denim wall and realize I don't really like any of the jeans. Liv comes up behind me, placing her hand on my hip. "Why don't we go to Hot Topic and get some pants?" She has a white beater.

similar to mine, draped over her arm. I grab it and hold it up. The design is the mirror image of mine with black splatters and the logo on the right front hip.

“Won’t we be hot? With coordinating clothes and all?” She winks at my enthusiasm. That was her plan. I walk to the dressing room and turn the handle. Locked. *Uhh. I hate when they lock these!* Shirt boy walks over to us.

“Need a fitting room?” No shit. He opens the door and grabs a ‘1’ tag from the wall next to the room. I interrupt before he can hang it on the door.

“Can we go in together?” I ask matter-of-factly.

“Uh...we’re not really supposed to do that, but I guess so.” He exchanges the ‘1’ for a ‘2’ and hangs it on the outer hook over the preppy display outfit. “If you need anything, just let me know.” Yeah. I need you to go away.

“Okay. Thanks.” I mumble, slamming the door in his face. I think he’ll get the picture. We strip our shirts off and pull the beaters on. I look in the mirror, visualizing the entire ensemble. “We’re hot. Liv.” She stops smoothing her shirt and looks over at me. I lean into her and kiss her. Her face flushes red.

“Kelsey!” I wrap my arms around her, tucking my flat hands in her back pockets. I sway side to side, pulling her to me. She kisses me back.

“Let’s do it right here.” I whisper in her ear seductively.

“No. Absolutely not! Kelsey, your brother’s out there waiting.”

I bite my tongue and turn around. “Okay, okay. But it would be fun.”

“I didn’t say it wouldn’t, but let’s just get out of here.”

I do as she says, but not without tormenting her a little. As she grabs the knob to open the door, I reach out and grab her ass, squeezing it. She squirms out of my reach, slapping my hand. We buy the shirts and head out of the store with Kyle following.

Kyle complains as we walk toward Hot Topic. “Why do we have to go *here*? This store is freaky.”

“You’ve never even been in here! Just come on and look around.” I scrounge through the tightly packed sale walk-around and pull out two pairs of pants. The first is a pair of black Dickies with zippers all

over the place. There is a zipper up the back of each leg that goes to mid-calf. Every pocket on the front and back has a zipper. The second ones are a pair of red and black plaid strappy pants. There are random straps on the backs of the legs that intertwine and connect the legs together.

I grab both and throw them over my arm. I walk over to Liv and see that she has found a pair of white Dickies exactly like the black ones I pulled out. How crazy is this? "We could totally match." I say quickly as I walk up behind her. She jumps, covering her heart.

"You scared me to death."

I scoot over to her between the overpacked racks and grab her around the waist. "I'm sorry. Hey, we should do that. You dress in white, I'll dress in black. Opposites attract, you know. Nothing like coordinating for the big show, huh?" She's falling for it.

"Let's go try on the entire outfit!"

I pull the curtain back and wave her into the dressing room ahead of me. I look over at Kyle before stepping in. He is closely examining the band shirts displayed in plexi glass, lining the entire west wall.

We try on the outfits, talking through accessories. "You could wear a white bandana and I could wear a black one." Liv says, finally getting excited. "And then, you could wear my white studded belt and I'll wear a black one with the white outfit." If I had only known it would only take shopping to pump her up about the show, I would have brought her last week.

"Hold up. You want *me* to wear the belt with the cutie little star cut-outs? I don't think so. I'll just buy a white one. The one with the three rows of studs. That sounds better to me."

"What's wrong with my belt?" she answers, a little defensive.

"Nothing. Absolutely nothing. It's just...not me, that's all." She sticks her tongue out in a mocking way, knowing all too well it's the truth. I don't do cute.

Before we get to the checkout, we end up with wrist bands and jewelry, and I grab a sticker to add to the collection on my gig bag. This one says: TACT IS FOR PEOPLE WHO ARE NOT WITTY ENOUGH TO BE SARCASTIC. Fitting. At least I think so.

Kyle comes romping over with a few things in his arms. "Hey, Kelsey. Do I have any money?"

"Look at you, Mister this-store-is-creepy. Crazy what you find out that you like when you give things a chance, huh? Let's see here..." I dig in my bag, pull out my wallet and see how much cash he has. My wallet has a divider in the money part so I always keep up with his cash in front and mine in back. Good thing too since he would drain me of my money if I didn't carry his. "You've got...it looks like...24 dollars."

"Yes." He pumps his hand up and down.

"Let me see what you've got first." He unloads his junk on the counter so I can scrounge through. The first thing I lift out is a red Happy Bunny lanyard with a quote that says: I JUST THREW UP IN MY MOUTH A LITTLE. Real funny. He thinks it's hilarious and covers his mouth, trying not to laugh. The next thing is a two-pack of Nintendo wrist bands. One is green with the 1up mushroom on the front. The other has a picture of the remote and underneath it says "Old School." Not bad. Then, wadded up, he has a shirt with a skull and cross bones. The skull has shiny sunglasses and a smoking joint in its teeth.

"Nope. You're not getting this." I hold it up.

"Why not?" he whines.

"Mom wouldn't let you wear it and you can't wear it to school. So unless you are gonna waste your money on a shirt you can only wear in your room...no."

"Aww man. You're no fun." He knows I'm right. Otherwise he wouldn't say anything. I look over into the case and see a sticker exactly like the print on the front of the shirt. I point to it.

"Compromise...you can get that instead." He shakes his head no.

"Okay. Be that way. Either put the shirt away and come on or pick out something else quickly." He decides to just go with his other two things and I'm not the least bit upset. I don't love shopping and my patience is about gone. "Let's get a move on." *I have better things to do.*

* * * * *

30: FABRICATION

We drop Kyle off in the driveway, not even going into the house. He waves, ducking his head, clearly not wanting to be left. We watch until he gets in the house and pull out of the drive. I lean back in the seat, exhaling. Liv reaches over, rubbing my leg.

"You ready to party?" she says, squeezing my thigh.

"Party? Are you serious?"

"Well, not *that* kind of party...you know. Party in my crib." She slaps her leg laughing. She thinks she's funny. I cut my eyes to her, snarling in a joking way.

"Cute. Why are you in such a good mood?"

"What? I can't be in a good mood? I just am, you know...I've got the night to spend with my hot girlfriend and..."

"Oh, so you're my girlfriend now, huh? When did that happen?" I'm serious.

"Is that not what this is?" She gets a little insecure. Her mood is deflated by a sincere question on my part.

"That's not what I meant. I just...didn't know it was official, I guess." I lean over, pecking her cheek as she drives. "I like it."

"Is that...okay? I mean, that I called you that?"

"Absolutely. I said I like it, and I mean it. 100 percent. It just caught me off guard, that's all." *I have a girlfriend!* How many times have I said this to myself, wishing it were true? "Doesn't it seem weird to be all like 'I have a girlfriend'?" Does that feel weird to you?"

She analyzes my question. I see her lips moving as she repeats the phrase a few times silently. "Yeah. It does seem kind of weird." She glances over at me. "But I have to say, I love it!" I grasp her hand, holding it over her lap.

"So...party at your house, huh? Let's do it. No worries. Not for now, anyway."

* * * * *

I stare at her hugacious house as we pull up. I always forget how big this house is until I'm here again. Liv flings open the door, announcing our presence as she drops her bag at the foot of the wooden staircase twisting upward. "Mom...we're here." She yells as she walks through the entry, into the dining

room and eventually into the kitchen. Her mom is sitting on the back patio in a fancy lawn chair with a glass in her right hand, dangling over the sandstone floor. I see the top of her woven hat from the other side of the room, the lime green reflecting in the sunlight.

As we emerge through the French doors into the breezy afternoon, I walk behind her mom's chair, noticing the orange slice floating in her strawberry margarita. She sits, one leg straight, the other bent at the knee in an elegant pose as if there is a hidden photographer clicking off rolls of film from the bushes. Her white framed sunglasses cover the majority of her face, but I'm distracted from them by the flamingo pink lipstick shining under a thick layer of gloss. Her reddish brown locks flow freely from under the hat, resting heavily on her shoulders. Lines in the corners of her mouth display her age, her many years in this same position in the sun, day after day.

"Hi Mrs. Thomas." I wave casually, plopping down in the lawn chair next to her, propping my elbows on my knees.

"Hello Ms. Cramer. How are you?"

I raise my shoulders as if to say I'm not real sure. "Pretty good, I guess."

"Well, your face sure has cleared up. I can hardly see the bruises now." I raise my hand to my face, rubbing my eye out of instinct. I drift off, thinking how odd we as humans truly are. When we talk about a body part, we have a tendency to touch or scratch that part subconsciously. Liv interrupts.

"Mom. We're gonna go up to my room and pop in a movie. We figured we'd just veg out for the night. Will you order us a pizza in a little bit?" I'm amazed at her demanding tone but realize this is normal for her. Her mother lives to please the kids. She doesn't do anything all day but sit in the sun and drink margaritas or daiquiris, she can afford to do something, right?

"Yes, hon. Just tell me when you're ready. I'll have it delivered and let you know when it will be here."

Liv leans over, kissing her mom on the cheek. "Thanks, Mom. You're the best." She waves at me to follow her inside. I stand and stretch a little.

"Good to see you Mrs. Thomas."

"You too, Kelsey. Don't be a stranger. You're always welcome here. You know that, right?"

"Yes, ma'am." I reply quickly. I turn to Liv, whispering to her. "Would I still be welcome as your girlfriend?"

She chuckles softly. "I think so, but let's not go there now."

As I trail behind her through the immaculate house, I wonder what it must be like to have so much money you don't even know what to do with it. They must hire a maid because I've never seen her mother lift a finger besides serving some fancy order-in dinner that was delivered from the other side of town on a fancy engraved platter. The only way there is a clean room in my house is if I clean it when no one is home and it only stays like that for one point five seconds after Mom or Kyle enters.

We trudge up the shiny wooden steps, holding on to the iron railing. I follow Liv into her room and am welcomed once again by the immaturity of the purpleness. "Hey." I call to her, tugging at her shirt. "We should redo your room tonight. Want to?" I get a little excited by such a huge possibility of distraction. There are other things I want to do. I don't want our relationship to revolve around just sex. I want to be able to have fun and not feel like I am obligated at every free second to fulfill some desire.

She pulls me to her, collapsing with me onto her bed, kissing me. "Are you saying you don't want to party?" Here we go.

"Where in that sentence did I say I didn't want to party? I do. I just think it would be fun, that's all." I wait for her rejection of my idea. She looks around the room, studying each wall and taking it all in. She stands up and walks around and I'm not quite sure what she's doing. She turns to face me.

"Black, white, and red? Is that what we decided?" She reaches up, pulling one of the hippy flowers down and tosses it on the floor by the miniature trash can at the edge of her vanity.

"Yeah!" I jump up, excited by this possibility. How fun, to just go crazy decorating? I mean, it's not like she doesn't have the money or anything. "Let's go get paint." I grab her hand, pulling her to me, kissing her. "Wouldn't that be fun?"

I'm excited. It's been so long since I did anything artistic besides play music. I haven't done any ceramics or charcoal like I used to since my art class was over last year. She reaches over to the dresser, lifting a music box from the top. She lifts the lid and a ballerina starts twirling to some jacked up scary lullaby. Liv takes the ballerina, folding it down with her hand to shut it up as she pulls out a wad of cash. Holy shit! There is no telling how much money is there. She quickly shuts the top to the box, preventing

the noise, and tucks the wad in her pocket. Noticing me staring at her unbelievably, she decides she needs to explain the money.

"I've been saving up for three years. I didn't know what I would need the money for, but this seems like a good investment. Don't you think?"

I nod, unable to speak. If I had that money, my life would be so much easier. I, of course, would never tell her this. Knowing her, she'd probably tuck it in my pocket, insisting that I take it. She would tell me I need it more than her, which would be true but beside the point.

She reaches behind me wrapping her arm around my waist. "Let's do it, chica."

I smile as I walk out the door. "How fun is this? I am super excited."

* * * * *

At Lowe's, we flip through swatch after swatch of possible paint colors. Liv reads off the crazy names of the colors to me, voicing her opinion on each. "Fire Engine Red...too common. Candy Apple Red...too hooker. Tootsie Pop Red...too dark. Cranberry Sauce Red...too, I don't know. Coca-Cola Red...that's it! This has to be the one." She takes the sample and hands it over to me as she walks to the black end of the color palate. *How hard can this one be?* Sure enough, there are at least fifteen to twenty different colors of black. I wonder how in the world this is possible, but I see with my own two eyes the samples. She pulls one after the other out of the holders.

"Oh, for crazy's sake, just pick one." I poke her in the butt with a stir stick. She slinks away from me, knowing how nuts she is making me, but continues to study each. She finally decides on Midnight's Cat Black. Whew! That was a close one. We walk to the paint counter, handing the samples to the dorky guy behind the counter. He stares at us hard for a second before taking the paper from my hand.

"This gonna be all fur' ya's, ladies?"

"We need a gallon of white and a quart of blackboard paint as well." I manage to squeak out before busting out in laughter. He points to a tower of white gallon jugs.

"White's over there."

His southern drawl is completely overdone. His hair is parted and slicked down, and it looks like it is oil and not gel holding it in place. He is missing three of his front teeth and squints when he talks. I'm thankful for the interruption because I'm not quite sure I could stand there and watch him mix paint for too

long without being utterly rude to his face. We load up on brushes, paint trays, free stir sticks, rollers, handles, and just about any other painting utensil you could possibly think of before we finally reach the register. We make it out of the hardware store with a cart full of \$154.74 worth of painting supplies. "That oughta do it," Liv states as we walk to her Jeep.

"Ya's think?" I answer and we both roll, bending over from the pain of laughter. I look up at her and see tears from her laughter. We laugh the entire time we are loading the junk and are still laughing when we pull out of the parking lot.

"We are so mean," I finally say. And we are.

"Oh, but we're funny," she replies. And we are that, too.

* * * * *

It's almost dinner time by the time we drag all of the paint upstairs. We carefully lay out one of the plastic drop cloths in the hallway where we'll keep the unused paint. The difficult part of the whole thing will be getting everything off the walls and out of the room. We decide the best thing to do is to pull the heavy stuff to the middle of the floor and drape it with cloth. We'll just have to dance around it while we paint.

I grab the giant roll of blue painter's tape, blocking off squares and triangles on the walls. If you're gonna go for it, why not go all out, right? We decide to fill in the shapes with red, the background with black and the ceiling will stay white, with a fresh coat at some point.

Mrs. Thomas hears us banging around and climbs the stairs to see what's going on. Her mouth drops to the floor as she reaches the landing and a gasp of air loudly bounces off the walls of the open hallway. I stand at the railing, looking over the edge to the giant Venetian rug in the entry to avoid her eyes. I have a feeling this isn't going to go over well.

"What are you girls doing?" Claspng her hand over her heart in a soap opera dramatic way, she continues. "Are you crazy? It's almost dinner time and your room is a wreck."

"It's cool, Mom," Liv interjects. "We've got it under control...right Kels?" Damn it. I knew it wasn't gonna be that easy.

"Huh...oh yeah. Absolutely Mrs. Thomas. We'll have it done this weekend, if not tonight." I look at Liv, raising my shoulders as if to ask "is that okay?"

"You girls. Always gotta be doing something productive. What colors are you painting this craziness?"

"Just wait and see." Liv replies. Smart one. She'd really flip a lid if she saw the black. "It'll be a masterpiece. I've got my very own artist standing right there." She points with a straight arm to me. No pressure. I can't help but think how serious I have to be. I can't be sloppy or I will get my hide skinned.

"So, Mom. Won't you turn your skinny little tush around and head right back down the stairs. We've got a job to do here." She smiles knowingly, draping her arm around her mother's shoulders, leading her to the stairs. "Go fix yourself another Margarita and we'll come down for dinner."

"I don't know if I like this." She steps down one step, two steps, then turns, looking me in the eyes. "Kelsey, don't let her go wild on this okay?"

I bite my lip. She's gonna hate it. "Yes ma'am." I hope she doesn't blame me when she can't stand to look at it. Then again, it *was* my idea. She turns and heads down the stairs. At the bottom she calls back up, "I'll order pizza in thirty minutes."

"Thanks, Mom. Love ya." Liv calls over the railing. She rushes back into her room holding back laughter. "Aw man, Kelsey. She's gonna go nuts when she sees this." A pause. "Well, let's get to it."

We move systematically through the room, painting the red first. As we reach the last wall, the first is pretty much dry. I pull the tape away and restick it over the red so we have a clean edge for the black. It's getting dark out and Liv goes into Keenan's room, grabbing the halogen floor lamp for more light. By the time we make it through the black, it's almost midnight. My back and legs are cramping. I sit on the floor, staring around the room at the utter chaos, loving it. Not many people have parents that let them do whatever they want to their walls. This is nuts.

"Liv...what do you think?" She swings around with the biggest smile I've seen since the 'morning after'.

"I LOVE it! This is so kick ass. Think we should invite Mom up to look?"

I think about it for a minute. Probably not a good idea. "If you really think so, Liv, we are gonna give her a heart attack. Maybe you should wait 'til morning." She nods in agreement. "Besides, we still have to paint the ceiling. And you're gonna have to have new bedding and stuff. You can't have *that* ugly ass comforter in this bomb ass room, right?"

"You better believe it. We'll go Sunday to pick out the decorations for the room."

"Why can't we go tomo...oh. That's right. My dad." Suddenly I'm caught in a whirlwind of emotions. My first thought is, *yes...my Dad's coming to hang out*, then I get a little frightened, a little anxious, a little skeptical...all at once. What if he doesn't like me? I quickly push this question aside, deciding it isn't acceptable. He has no choice but to like me. I'm his daughter.

"You about ready to close up shop for the night?" Liv asks, draping her arms over my shoulders.

"Yeah. Probably a pretty good idea. I have to get up early, remember." I tilt my head up and kiss her. She grabs my hands and pulls me to my feet. "So, you still gonna go meet my dad in the morning?"

"Um...sure. If you want me to. I don't want you to feel like you *have* to introduce me or anything. I haven't said anything else about it because I don't want you to feel pressured."

"I want you to meet him. Are you okay being introduced as my girlfriend?"

A spark ignites in her eye. She is proud to be my girlfriend. I fold her in my arms, proud to have her. "I'd love it."

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SATURDAY

31: SYNCHRONIZE

Eight o'clock comes earlier than it should. I stretch and sit up, nauseated by the paint smell trapped in the room. I stand up and slide the window open beside the bed, letting some fresh air in. I didn't think about the fact that we would be breathing fumes all night. Liv rolls over, looking at me.

"How do you feel?" I ask, sitting on the edge of the bed, smoothing her hair out of her face.

"I have a little bit of a headache. You?"

"Me too. I think we're high. You ready to get up and get this show on the road?" She rolls over and tucks her face into the pile of pillows on her side of the bed. I have never seen anyone require so many pillows to sleep. She sleeps on one, cuddles one in her arms, props one between her legs, and when I'm not here, she leans against a body pillow. She may as well be sleeping in a ball pit like they have at the McDonald's Playland.

She rolls over onto her back and stares around the room. "I love the paint. You did a good job, babe." She slides her arm around my hips. "Are you some sort of professional or something?"

"Yeah, right. I just like to paint. I have an eye for it and can't really explain why."

"I don't know where you learned, but I have to be honest, I didn't expect it to be this cool."

I lay down on her outstretched arm yawning. "Thanks. Glad you like it."

We get up and slowly pull on some clothes for the outing. I don't feel like showering and decide to skip it this morning. I mean, we're going for coffee and to Kyle's soccer game. Not like we need to look cute. I pull on a pair of thin sweats with a wide waist band and drawstrings on the front and slide into a plain white tee. My hair crackles with static. A drawback of foregoing the shower. She dresses quietly and we head downstairs.

We climb in the Jeep and head into town to meet my dad at Starbucks. Here goes nothing. As we pull into the parking lot, my hungry stomach rumbles and it feels like there's something inside me rolling over. I'm not quite sure if it's nerves, hunger, or a little of both. I swing the door open and wave her ahead of me. I slide my sunglasses onto the top of my head as I study the menu.

"Kelsey?" A quizzical voice calls to me from the table in the corner. I turn on my heels and glance over to the corner. It's him. I recognize him right away because he looks a lot like me. I wave and step out of line, shuffling over to his table. He looks comfortable sitting there. He has a newspaper spread

out on the table and a tall coffee next to his left hand. The wrapper of a muffin lays spread on the edge of the table, no crumbs in sight. *He must be a pretty tidy person.*

His dark hair is dappled with gray, but not too much, just a little over his ears and a few across the front hairline. Deep grooves around his mouth are shadowed along the edge of his smile, the dimples I never forgot. His forehead creases with his arched eyebrows. He sits with his right leg crossed at the ankle over his left knee. A button up Hawaiian shirt with a tuft of chest hair extending in the V of the top button, a pair of khaki cargo shorts, and Reef flops. *This guy is cool!* He stands as I approach his table, taking me into a giant man hug. It feels nice, familiar yet a little strange at the same time.

"Long time, no see, kiddo." He acts so nonchalant that I forget all of the nerves I had built up all week. It's almost as if this is a moment he has waited for all these years just like me.

"Yeah. You're not kidding. Good to see you." I don't know what else to say. He returns to his seat and I grab the back of the chair across the table for something to hold on to. My head is spinning. I can't believe this day has come.

"You look good, Kelsey. Slim. Well kept."

"Are you kidding? We just rolled out of bed." I let out a nervous laugh. He reaches into his back pocket and pulls out his wallet. He flips it open and pulls out a twenty.

"Here, go get yourself some breakfast. And your friend." He tucks the twenty in my hand, wrapping my fingers around it as if I were a small child.

"Thanks. You don't have to..."

"Just take it and come sit with me. We've got some catching up to do." He flashes a smile and returns to his paper reading.

* * * * *

I get two glazed donuts and a tall caramel latte with whipped cream. Liv settles on a blueberry muffin and a bottle of orange juice. She's not much of a coffee fan. I look over at her at the register and whisper, "Here goes nothing." She nods, feeling my eagerness.

We get back to the table and Liv scoots into the chair by the window. I sit down directly across from my dad. He looks up at us as we get settled.

"And who's this pretty young lady?" He waves his hand toward Liv.

"This is Olivia...or Liv. She's..." should I? I told her I would but didn't anticipate these nerves. "she's...my girlfriend." He doesn't say anything for a minute and I feel like I have blown it. I have completely ruined any chance I had at getting to know my father. I wait, expecting him to stand up, demand his money back, and walk out the door. He doesn't.

"Well...that's...interesting. Nice to meet you, Olivia." Whew. My relief is unexplainable. He didn't flip.

"Nice to meet you too, Mr. Cramer." She politely extends her hand to shake his. She is good with people. She knows how to say all the right things, unlike me.

"No, it's Dan. You can call me Dan. Mr. Cramer is what they call my father. I don't particularly like that title." He jokes with her. It takes me a bit to get it, but she is right in the loop.

"Well, Dan. It is nice to meet you. How's your visit been so far?" I can tell by the look in his eye that he is pleased with her politeness.

"Great. Feels good to be back in good 'ole Kentucky." He laughs the obnoxious laugh I tried to remember so many nights, but lost somewhere in my memories. We carry on with nonsense, surface level conversation for a good ten or fifteen minutes. He finally turns to me with a more serious look on his face.

"Kelsey, I'm worried about your mother." The onset of this statement feels like I'm watching a Looney Tunes cartoon when Wile E. Coyote is falling off a cliff. I hear the whistle in my ears, loud and real. This dive bomb of a statement instantly removes me from the bliss of chatting it up with my father.

"You and me both." I choke on my words. "That's something I wanted to talk to you about."

"I agree. It needs to be addressed if this is going any further. Let me just be real with you." He folds his paper and lays it on the floor at his feet. With the table cleared, he is able to prop his elbows on it. He leans in to me, closing the gap. "What is she like, I mean normally."

"Umm...well, that's kind of hard because she is a little different every day. Some days she is kinda happy-go-lucky and other days she stresses me out. For the most part she is pretty much worthless to anyone but herself." Maybe I shouldn't be saying this. Maybe I should try to brush it off and make it a little more attractive to woo him back to her. Nah. Not fair. He's been cool so far and I think he deserves to hear the truth.

Liv slides her hand over onto my leg as I start back in. "She's an alcoholic. When she is drinking, I can't even say anything to her without her crying or flying off the handle. She beat the shit out of me earlier this week. Pardon my language. I don't know what to do with her."

He purses his lips, nodding in agreement. "I'm sorry you have to deal with this. She should not be your responsibility."

"I'm well aware of that, but if I don't take care of her, who will? Lori is gone and Kyle is too young. He's terrified of her most days."

"I want to help. Let me just be honest." He pauses, wrapping himself around his words. "I *want* to come back. I *need* to come back. I've made some stupid decisions in my day and I'm trying so hard to fix that. But...I can't come back and get into this situation again. I've been clean for almost three years and I don't want to get mixed up in alcohol again. It seems like your mother is nothing but an alcoholic. I love her, but I don't know if I can deal with that."

Now is my chance. I have to tell him about my conversation with her the other night. I inhale and stretch my arms under the table. Reaching up, I brush my hair back and pull out the pony tail holder, redoing my hair before I speak.

"I told her to get help. I told her if she didn't get help, I was going to get it for her and it wouldn't be pretty. She bawled like a baby, but she knows. She knows she's screwed up. She knows she has nothing. She knows she needs you back. Where she goes from here, I don't know. I tried. That's all I can do."

"I agree. And I have to say, I'm proud of the way you have handled this so far." He pats the top of my hand. "I'll do the best I can to take care of it from here. Don't you worry yourself too much."

That is exactly what I needed to hear. I have a life I'm trying to hold together. I have a new relationship that is wonderful. I have a brother I want to chill with as his sister, not a mother. I have a band that is moving up in the world. I have a life. Thanks to the way Julie opened my eyes, I can recognize this now.

"Hey, Sis. I can't begin to tell you how glad I am to see you." He says, choking back tears. Is this real? Is my life really getting this much better?

"You too." I reach over and squeeze his arm. My cold fingers cause the hair on his arm to stand up.

"Man, you're cold." He looks down at his watch. "Let's get out of here so we can see your brother play soccer. Whadya say?"

I stand up, collecting my garbage. I lift the cup of now cold coffee to my lips, downing the last swig. "Let's do it. We'll go get him and meet you there in thirty minutes. Sound good?"

"That'll do. Oh, again, it's nice to meet you, Liv."

She has to uncoil her tongue to speak since she hasn't said a word in about an hour and a half.

"You too, Mr. Cra...Dan!"

I walk into the warm morning and am smacked in the face by the humidity. I climb into the car and look over at Liv who is beaming. "Well, that went well, don't you think?"

"Yes," she says. "Kelsey...I'm proud of you. And it didn't phase him but just a minute."

"I have a feeling the conversation is yet to be had, but I'm cool with that. He's my dad, ya know? Whatever comes of this is gonna be good. I can feel it in my gut."

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32: SALUTATION

"Kyle..." I call out, running up the stairs. "You ready for your game?" I push his door open and walk in. To my amazement, he's standing in front of the mirror, fixing his hair. I haven't seen him fix his hair in almost two years. "What's the occasion?"

"Do you even have to ask? Duh...I'm meeting Dad today, remember?"

"Oh. He doesn't care what your hair looks like. You are going to play soccer, remember?"

He snarls his lip, clearly not liking my reply. "But I have to look good so he'll like me." He picks up my can of hair spray that he had to have snagged from my room, spraying way more than he needs.

"Enough already. You are choking me out." I sarcastically wave my hand in front of my face. "You look beautiful you little stud muffin. Now let's go."

"Hey...not beautiful. Handsome I could go for, but definitely not beautiful. That's a word for girls only." He tosses his duffle bag over his shoulder, stumbling slightly under the weight.

"Good grief, child. What do you have in there? A body or something?"

"No smarty. I'm staying at the hotel with my team tonight. The coaches are having a swim party at the Fairfield Inn for us." I totally forgot.

"Do you need money?" I start to dig out my wallet.

"Nope. Mom already gave me some. She said Dad left it for me. That's pretty cool, huh?" This leads in beautifully for me to give him a rundown of my first impression of Dad after all these years.

"Kyle, you're gonna *love* Dad. He's so fun and kinda hip too. Let's go. Liv's waiting in the car. I'll tell you more on the drive." He perks up, rushing out the door. He jogs down the stairs with the bag thumping into the back of his legs with every step. I watch carefully, hoping he doesn't go tumbling. I mean, this bag is big enough for him to get in and he had to have packed enough clothes for a week for the bag to be this full.

"So..." he leads in as we close the front door, "tell me more. What's he look like? What does his voice sound like? Do we look like him?"

"Whoa...slow down, cowboy." I open his door, taking his bag from him. He slides in and I chuck the bag in the back of Liv's Jeep. She says hi to Kyle and he acknowledges her with a smile before staring at me intently, waiting for me to continue my description.

"I'd have to say, yes, we look like him. You definitely have his eyes. He seems pretty laid back. Just so you know, he looks like a total beach bum today." I continue on, describing every visual detail painted in my memory. He listens, waiting for more. It's almost as if I'm feeding candy to a starving child. He just can't get enough. I look over at Liv at one point and her face is solemn. I turn from Kyle to acknowledge her.

"What's going on? Why the ho-hum face?"

"Nothing. I'm cool. Just listening to you." She stares forward, never looking over to me.

"I don't believe you. Tell me, what's up?" She cuts her eyes to me as if giving me a warning to back down, mouthing the words 'I'll tell you later.' I nod, and quickly resume my happy chat with Kyle. He is pumped. He's ready to see Dad, but more than that, to get out on the soccer field and prove to Dad that he is a good athlete. I don't dare burst his bubble and tell him that he kind of sucks. Who knows, maybe today will be the day with all of this adrenaline pumping, he could have a lucky day.

We pull into the parking lot and I dig the water jug out of Kyle's bag, not even attempting to carry that hunk o' junk around with me all day. There are thirteen fields in this complex and we won't know until we get to the concession stand where Kyle will be playing. I will not lug that bag.

He rushes on ahead of us and I settle in close to Liv as we walk through the grass. The blades tickle my bare toes, exposed through the sandals. I try not to focus on the tickle and get serious for this conversation.

"So, what was bothering you in the car?"

She hesitates as if she doesn't know how I will react. She looks at me, then down at her feet as she walks. Looks at me again, then straight forward.

"Just tell me. It can't be that bad."

"It's not bad at all, just sad. That's all."

I'm completely lost. What about today has been sad? "Can you clarify because I must've bailed off the train a few cars back or something. I'm not following."

"It's just...I don't know. I feel like I take my life for granted."

"Meaning?"

“Well, you struggle to make relationships work. You have a mother that’s so twisted up in her own addiction that she can’t even give you the love you deserve. You strive to make Kyle’s life a little bit better than yours was. You sacrifice yourself, sometimes more than necessary, to make sure he is happy and content and active in anything he wants to participate in. You have zero support, besides me, of course, but you don’t even realize it.” She pauses, reaching up to wipe a tear from behind her sunglasses that I didn’t even know was there until she wiped it away.

“And then I look at myself. I have a mother that does exactly what she’s supposed to do...she acts like a mother. She makes sure everything is taken care of for us so we don’t have to worry. Kelsey, I *never* wanted for anything in my life.”

I wonder if I’m supposed to feel bad or glad or what. I don’t say anything, waiting for her to finish. She sniffs and wipes the other eye. I can’t believe she’s crying. Yet another example to prove to me how much she cares.

“And then today...I see how your face lights up when you first see your dad. How your entire temperament changes when you’re with him. How adult you truly are about everything in your life. Your face lights up with that same glow when you talk to Kyle. I just adore you...is that okay?” She finally looks at me and I smile shyly. I appreciate her spilling her guts to me. By this point, we’ve stopped walking and stand propped against a huge Dodge Ram in the grassy lot. I reach out and grab her hand. She starts to speak again.

“So I guess why I’m sad is because it hurts me that you haven’t had a father all along. It kills me to know that you are such a beautiful person, inside and out, and the people who should matter the most never see that.”

“But you do...and that’s what matters most to me now. I’m not gonna lie, I am super excited to see my dad, but he hasn’t been around and I’ve gotten used to that. You, on the other hand, have been a constant in my life for two years now and I couldn’t go on without you. A lot of my strength, whether you know it or not, comes from you.”

I rub her arm and she connects eyes with me. “Kelsey...I love you.” Flutters. Like the first time we kissed. “I’m not saying this in a total relationship kind of way, but as friends too. I love being around

you, hanging out, making music with you, and of course, making love to you. I know it may sound corny this early in the relationship, but it's true."

In hearing these words, another layer of strength is added to my shoulders. This confirmation lets me believe things will be okay. It allows me to move forward into the ugly world knowing things won't always go my way, and probably most times they won't. But with her love, I know it's worth it. I reach over, taking her hand in mine, locking our fingers.

"Let's go watch some soccer." We walk on, swinging our interlaced fingers and tightly clenched hands into the crowd of parents and children, holding firm to one another. Both of us are wearing smiles as we walk up behind my dad, talking to my brother. Kyle glances over at me with the biggest grin I have seen since he was a small child and when he sees me holding hands with Liv, it doesn't fade. He's in heaven.

"What field you on, bub?"

"Three, I think. Come on. Let's go." He waves us on and we follow. Looking back occasionally, his smile doesn't fade. I look over to Dad and he joins hands with me on the other side.

"Kelsey ...I can't believe how much you two have grown. I have missed you more than you will ever know."

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33: SURPRISE

I high five Kyle and hug him, congratulating him on his block. The hair he took so long to fix is now plastered to his forehead in wet chunks. He has completely forgotten how hard he tried to make himself look good. Dad lifts him over his head, sitting him on his right shoulder. We walk through the field, back to the cars.

"Kelsey...can I ride with Dad? Would that be okay?" I love it. He feels so at home now. Dad puts him back on the ground and he jogs over to me, waiting for my reply.

"Of course you can. Let's get your bag out of the car first. Dad, where you parked?" He points over rows and rows of cars. Like that's gonna help. "Okay...this is next to impossible. Let's just pull out and meet at the Shell station on the corner. Does that work?"

"Sure thing, kiddo." Dad looks over to Kyle and reaches his hand out. He takes it. "Ready, soccer champ?"

"Yep." We separate and load in.

"He is so adorable." Liv says. "I wish I had a little brother."

"Are you sure about that?" My sarcasm never dies.

"Yeah, why not?"

"I'm not gonna lie, they can be a pain sometimes. But I wouldn't trade him for the world. He's my light most days. Or as I used to say when he was a baby...he's my pride and joy."

"Aww...that's so cute. How old were you?"

"I don't know, like 5 or something. I was a dork."

We pull into the gas station and Kyle has a hard time getting out of Dad's truck because it is so high off the ground. He hops out and runs over, slinging the back door open to grab his bag.

"Not so fast there, macho man. Don't I get a hug or anything?"

He rounds the side of the car and squeezes me long enough to count, but quick enough to get away. I follow him to Dad's truck. He rolls the window down.

"Hey." I say. "Are you okay with this? I mean, do you have anything to do?"

"Don't worry, sis. I can take care of this."

"Okay. Well, thanks. Hey...I don't know what your plans are tonight, but if you have nothing better to do, our band has a gig tonight at the Broken Rainbow. You're welcome to come check us out if you want. This is our first time playing in front of an audience. We are stoked." He grins and so do I.

"We'll see. I try to steer clear of bars, but you never know."

"Don't feel like you have to. I just thought I'd put the offer on the table."

"Have fun and don't worry about Kyle. We're gonna have a good time today."

I lean over so Kyle can see me. "Hey buddy, you be good, okay? And have fun at the party. Call me if you need anything. I have my phone and Liv has hers too. You have the numbers with you, right?"

"Okay! Just go. I'll be good and yes, I have the numbers. Love you."

"Love you too. Later guys." I wave and turn back to the Jeep. Liv is beaming in the driver's seat, watching the interaction between the three of us. I don't even have to ask what she is thinking because I know already.

* * * * *

The afternoon is ours so we decide to head back, change clothes, and drive out to the Barn to practice for a little bit. We have two big songs together in the line up tonight so we want to play around with them a little with no one else around. As we pull up at her house, Keenan runs out of the front door.

"Hey...where have you guys been? I've been waiting for you all morning."

"Her Dad is in town and her brother had a soccer game, so we were running around there. What's it to ya?" Little miss sassy is out today!

"I was just gonna see if you were going to the Barn early tonight to practice. I haven't heard anything from Travis or Jack so I didn't know."

She rolls her eyes at him. Little Mr. In-the-Know doesn't know what's going on. He ducks down, leaning his arms against the window seal and his head in the window. "Hey, Kelsey."

"Hey, Keenan."

Liv butts in. "We're gonna go practice our two duets in a little while, but the band is planning on practicing for like thirty minutes or so before we head out. I think you should show up at like 5:30."

"Sure you're practicing. Don't mess with me like that. I know what you two are up to. You're gonna go make out or something in the Barn." Liv's face flushes red. Not because she's embarrassed, but because she thinks his comment is horribly inappropriate.

"No, smartass...we really are going to practice. If you don't believe me then get your happy little ass ready and come with us." I'm silently hoping he refuses because I could use some time with just Liv. I mean, I should take advantage of the free babysitter I inherited this morning, right? Thankfully, he shakes his head no.

"We're gonna go drink some Jack, I think. Travis scored a blunt and he wants to light it up, but I'm not gonna smoke."

"Have fun with that. We're not smoking either, right Kelsey?" She nudges my leg, making fun of me for getting busted. "Some of us can't handle the buzz and get busted by our mothers."

"Ha, ha. Real funny. Hey, if I hadn't gotten busted, I wouldn't have gone to counseling. If I hadn't gone there, I wouldn't have met Julie. If I hadn't met Julie, I may have never gotten the balls to tell you how I felt. So...dog me out all you want, but this relationship you have right now...would've been nil." Hah. Now who's boss?

"True, true. Guess the stuff's not all that bad. Keen, don't get too trashed. We have to be good tonight if we want another shot at this shit, okay?"

"You've got it. Later girls. You lezzies."

Liv slaps his arm. "Not funny. Take it back." I'm laughing behind her back. Such sibling love...

"Sooooortrrry." Keenan sarcastically draws out, leaning in and planting a big fat kiss on her cheek, squished between his hands. "Later."

* * * * *

While Liv is getting dressed, I try to pick up some of the mess we made last night. I look around the freshly painted room thinking of what decorations she could get. I love the room. I agree...we did a good job.

When she's ready, she takes me back to my place and tells me she'll meet me at the barn at 4:00. She kisses me quickly and inconspicuously before I get out. I wink at her and head in the house. Mom is in the bathroom when I walk by, primping. For a second I'm drawn back to my childhood, when I used to

sit on the floor in the bathroom doorway and watch her get ready in the mornings. I would watch her smooth on foundation, powder over top. She delicately outlined her eyelids with vibrant eye shadow. I never wanted to learn how to put on makeup. I just liked to watch her process. I would sit and stare, wondering why she was putting all that junk on her face when she was beautiful to me without it.

"What's up?" I ask, startling her.

"Oh, just getting ready for dinner. Your father called and asked if he could take me out tonight since you have plans and Kyle is at the hotel party." She can barely contain her excitement. I look around the room and see no beer bottles or mixed drinks. What a relief. Maybe she can go out and see that she can have fun without alcohol. It does seem sort of weird to me that he called to hang out so quickly after telling her he couldn't handle her. Maybe it helped him to talk to me today. Maybe I helped him change his mind a little. Even if that's the case, Mom will *never* thank me.

"What did you do today?" I ask this hoping she'll say she contacted a counselor or something to help her. She looks at me with her big, round eyes through the reflection of the mirror as she continues curling her hair.

"Well, I cleaned the house." That's almost enough to make me happy right there. "And I called my friend Lucy. Do you remember her? You probably haven't seen her in years, but I needed someone to talk to and she is usually the one I dump my problems on. Doesn't that just sound horrible?"

"Not at all. I kind of remember her, but I couldn't pick her out of a crowd. What did she have to say, if you don't mind me asking." I've learned in the past few years that when Mom isn't drinking, you have to prod her for any information. Another clue for me that she hasn't tipped the bottle today.

"Um, well, I pretty much spilled everything out to her and she kind of agrees that I need to do something different. Figured you'd be happy about that. She offered to help me." I am glad, but choose not to rub it in her face.

"I hope that goes well. I need to get ready for practice and stuff. The big day is here."

"How exciting, Kels. I'm sure you'll be brilliant. You are at everything you do, it seems." I'm not sure if that is a comment or if she is dogging me out. I choose to accept it as a compliment.

"Thanks." I walk toward my room. *That wasn't too bad.*

* * * * *

I stand over the trash can in my room, ripping tags from all the new stuff I bought to wear to the gig. I carefully fold the pants, and shirt, tucking them into my backpack. I roll up the belt and lay it on top of the shirt, tucking the wrist bands and bracelets in the front pocket. I dig through my jewelry box for some cool rings. I say 'dig' in a light sense because I don't have a whole hell of a lot of jewelry. I mentally check off everything I need from the list, sling the bag over my shoulder, and head out the door.

I walk into the kitchen to get the car keys. She wasn't lying. The counter tops sparkle and I can still smell the faint but pungent smell of lemon Pine Sol. The floors are clean, the junk mail is in a neat pile on the corner of the bar, and no food is left out to waste on the counter top. Even the window above the sink has a refreshing shine to it. Nice. I call out to Mom as I reach for the back door knob.

"I'm out, Mom. Have fun tonight. Don't wait up for me."

She doesn't answer and I don't wait for her to. I rush out the door to the car and pop the trunk to make sure my gig bag is in there. I open the bag, checking for my tuner and a pretty good number of picks for the night. All there. I slam the trunk and as I'm walking to the driver's door, Mom comes out the front door.

"Here." She extends her hand, offering me a white rose. "It's for luck tonight."

My eyes fill with tears at the surprise. Never did I expect her to give me anything for an accomplishment of mine she doesn't understand. And never did I expect any acknowledgement to be any more than a hug. I take the rose from her and give her a hug.

"Thanks, Mom." I say into her shoulder as I squeeze harder. "I really appreciate this."

"You're welcome." She runs her hand over the back of my head and the length of my hair. I pull away and get into the car, starting it before I close the door. Carefully, I place the rose on the dash so I'll be sure to show Liv.

"See ya." I slam the car door, smiling, and reach over to crank the radio.

She blows me a kiss as I back out of the driveway. She doesn't see me, but I catch it and tuck it in my pocket like I used to do when I was small.

* * * * *

34: *STIFF*

I'm at the Barn and no one is here yet. I climb out of the car and slide onto the hood, and lie against the windshield. I cross my arms behind my head, close my eyes, and listen. Birds chirp and I can hear the beating of wings as a few fly overhead. In the distance, I can hear the low moos from a field of cows. I hear a thump and jump slightly, opening my eyes. Sitting on the hood of my car is a long haired gray cat. It sits at the edge, not wanting to get too close.

I extend my hand slowly, letting the cat know I won't hurt it. It leans into my hand, appreciating the affection. The cat scoots closer and closer, eventually parking on my belly. What a loving little fellow. As I pet, the cat begins to purr, massaging claws into my belt. I feel kind of stupid, but I talk to the cat anyway.

"Must be nice, living out here in the country, getting the romp of the land. You sure are a friendly little fella. You have to be someone's pet." I reach up, running my hand down the head and the full length of the body, wrapping my fingers around the tail. A quick whip pulls the tail from me as the cat turns and nudges my hand with its head.

I hear a car and sit up to see who it is. It's my girl. The cat, a little startled, hunches down. As Liv pulls up beside me to the right, the cat jumps down to the left and darts out of sight. I slide down off the hood and walk to her car.

"Hey, babe." I swing her door all the way open.

"Hi. What're you doing on your car?" She finds it odd.

"I was just early and I thought I would chill for a minute. You scared off my visitor."

"Oh yeah? Who was that?"

"Just a cat that wandered up. It was pretty loving. Just wanted some attention...like me, right now." I reach in from behind, wrapping my arm around her waist. I slide her hair over her shoulder and kiss lightly on the back of her neck. She holds her arm up for me to see the goosebumps.

"You drive me crazy. You know that, don't you?"

I slide my hands under the edge of her shirt, pulling my fingernails across her bare belly. "You haven't seen crazy yet." I pull her into me, turning her toward me and kiss her. She wraps her arms around

my neck, kissing me back. Knowing how much I can torment her, I pull away, leading her into the barn.

"We better practice, don't you think?"

I can barely make out her hushed voice as she walks behind me, "You've got to be kidding me."

I shake my head, knowing I have control. I'll use that, but not until later. I need her to save up her energy.

"Let's do it on the stage. Want to?"

"Nope. We've got songs to practice."

She sticks her tongue in her lower lip, perturbed yet entertained by my little game. "Now, let's get to these songs." I jog back to my car, grab my guitar and swing the strap over my head. Strumming as I walk back in, I take a seat on the edge of the stage and lead in. I watch her close her eyes, breathe in deep and exhale, getting into the spirit of the song.

* * * * *

Everyone starts piling into the Barn at around 5:30. All of the guys are riled up and half drunk. There are a few other guys that I don't know wandering around the Barn drive. I do what I probably shouldn't do and remove myself from the bustle. I need a few minutes to breathe and run through these songs in my head.

I grab my guitar and slide out the door unnoticed. I walk to the back of the Barn and crouch down against the wall, crossing my legs. I quietly strum through a few of the songs, quicker than they should be played. I have to make sure my fingers are loosened up. My nerves wreck me for a minute. I've never been on stage in front of an audience. I don't even like much attention.

I hear the crunch of gravel and straw as someone's steps round the corner. It's Liv. "I figured you would be out here. Is everything okay?"

"Yeah. I just needed time alone to warm up." She slides down the wall next to me, sitting on her heels.

"I just wanted to tell you that in the midst of all the nerves and all of the glory of the spotlights, the one thing that will be on my mind throughout the performance is you. For many reasons. Without you, I don't know that we would be here. I don't know that we could have found someone with such talent to fill our slot."

"Thanks, but I'm not *that* great."

"Yes, you are. Don't be so humble. You have so many talents you aren't even aware of. You're amazing." Silence. I pick random notes that don't belong to any of our performance songs. "You know, it's weird how things work out. How we were brought together two years ago and developed an unforgettable friendship. Then, in this one week with all of the pressure, all of the excitement, we just happen to take things further."

I really hadn't thought of it this way. This has been one hell of a week! With all of the pressures of my parents and Kyle, Liv has been the one to pull me through. "I couldn't have done it without you." I mumble to the ground. She leans over to me.

"I'm glad I could be that person." She kisses me. Not in the joking, tormenting way I had kissed her earlier, but out of passion. Out of desire. I lean into her and just happen to open my eyes as Travis rounds the barn.

"Dude! What's going on here?" Shit. Not now. Please don't let him freak. I hold my finger to my lips to shush him. I wave him over to me.

"Please, Trav, just keep your mouth closed. Don't say anything about this. Not right now. I don't want the band going crazy over this. I mean, we were planning to tell you guys, just not tonight."

His mouth is still hanging open. He didn't see this coming...at all. "I...um...naw...I...guess...I won't." I'm not quite sure I believe him.

"Travis, I'm begging you." I plead with my eyes, locked on his.

"All right. Man," he says, rubbing the back of his neck with his right hand. "I just didn't. I don't know, I didn't think *this* would be what I found." He holds his hands up in front of him. "It's cool. I love you guys. Whatever, you know." I can tell he's a little upset because he is still crushing on Liv.

I stand up, wanting to clarify things. "I just want you to know...I'm not ashamed of this. We aren't ashamed. We just wanted to wait, K?"

He approaches me, wraps his arm around me and gives me a man hug, slapping my back. "Let's do this thang!" He has to change the subject and I'm not sure if that's good or bad. I guess it doesn't really matter since it really is time to load up.

* * * * *

I decide to drive my car in town and ride to the club with Liv and Keenan. I drop my car off at the mall since it is on the way and not too far from home. I grab my bag I had so carefully packed earlier in the evening and toss it into the back seat next to Keenan, who has so graciously offered me shotgun. As I go to climb into the passenger seat, Liv says, "Hey goofball. Were you planning on taking your guitar? It might help."

I grab my stomach, a little sick at my own stupidity. Man, my nerves are getting to me. I rush back to my car and grab my gig bag. Liv opens her door quickly. "Hey, just stick it in the backseat. I have a lot of shit in the very back." I think nothing of it and do as I'm told. I climb back in, clapping my hands together.

"Let's rock and roll!" We roll down the windows, feeding off the adrenal euphoria pumping through our bodies. Liv reaches out and turns up the volume on the 80s radio station. We're all singing along with Tommy Tutone's song "867-5309" and acting so incredibly stupid I'd be embarrassed if I weren't in the car with these two. For a second, I forget where we're going.

Our caravan trails a tow truck down the side road. Travis is behind us, honking furiously for us to pass. Liv taps the brakes a few times as a way to tell him to back off. She finally turns on her blinker, heading toward the main road. We drive downtown and park along the river, right in front of the club. If we weren't getting here two hours before the gig, there is no way we'd ever be able to park here on a Saturday night. Usually, if you want to go to the park by the river or any of the buildings near the club, you end up walking two or three blocks. We're in between rushes. The rush on Cavatini's, the local Italian restaurant, has slowed by now. The bar crowd is somewhere else. We are in the clear.

As we all start hauling out of our vehicles at the same time, we look like some sort of punk skater gang about to rob a place. We all wear our clothes two sizes too big (with the exception of Liv) and have chains hanging out of our pockets. All five of us have studded belts and wear a lot of black. I'm sure some people would laugh in our faces if we even attempted a robbery, but most would be so uncomfortable that if they happened to be walking by us on the sidewalk, they would instantly duck their heads and pick up the pace.

I chuckle to myself as I think of that scene. A wardrobe choice tends to place us in categories we don't fit at all. My philosophy is if people want to make assumptions about the types of people we are

based on how we dress, their shallowness doesn't deserve our company. It's surprising how many people react that way, though.

We haul ass to the back door and Keenan raises his hand, beating on the door with the side of his arm for effectiveness. "You're such a badass, Keenan," I mock.

He sticks his tongue out at me, squinting his eyes for effectiveness. "Thanks, dork."

"Ooohh. That, I think, may have earned you yet another point." I give him the familiar Kelsey slug in the shoulder.

"You can quit touching me now you little stank ass punk."

The manager comes to the door. I don't know him or even recognize him, but it's kind of hard to miss the white lettering across the front of the black T-shirt saying 'Manager' in all caps. He nods to Keenan who is first into the door. Liv follows him, I follow her. Travis is behind me. He speaks up as he walks in.

"So, you're the manager?" He thinks he's funny, but I honestly have to say, I thought of saying the same thing. "Just wondered."

"Yeah. As a matter of fact I am," he says with a jeering smile. "The name's Bill. You can call me Bill." Wow. Isn't he Mr. Personality? He is trying to be cool and we have to give him props for that, but otherwise, he's a total waste of a man. His shirt is tucked tight into his Levi 501 jeans and his pot belly hangs over in the front, causing the waist band to fold down a little. He's wearing a pair of Adidas Sambas. I think those went out like, um, ten years ago or something. To top it all off, he's wearing a day-glo green wrist band. I guess they must pass those out at the door.

"So," Jack says, "where do you want us to set up?"

Bill points to a door behind him. "We're gonna set you up in the loft. We've got tables and chairs up there and a small dance floor. Usually where we put the bands. There are dressing rooms behind the stage. Help yourself." He locks the door behind us and flips a switch in the stairwell, brightening the room. I haven't really been to clubs before, but I would like to think that these are what they refer to as 'house lights.' The ones they turn on when they're trying to run everyone out at the end of the night.

I quickly scan the lower level. Pretty cool. There's a dance floor to my right with a huge arch of a rainbow painted on the wall in six inch strips of color. There are mirrors on either side of the painting, to

make the dance floor seem bigger, I'm sure. In the opposite corner, the other half of the rainbow mirrors this corner, hence 'The Broken Rainbow'. I wonder if that means they'll break anyone who walks in the door that has even an ounce of pride, or if it means just the opposite...it's a welcoming place for people with broken pride, those who have been trampled on for their differences. I secretly hope it's the latter because if not, I'm definitely not welcome here.

* * * * *

I follow everyone up the steps, bringing up the rear. I quickly take in my surroundings, getting a feel for the place. The walls on the stairwells are fluorescent orange. The carpet is black with little specks of color in triangles that I'm certain look pretty damn cool in the black light. The stuffy confinement of the stairs draws the reek of puke to my nostrils, causing my nerves to overload. I suddenly feel drawn to the toilet myself. If I thought about it long enough, I could seriously make myself puke right now. I won't. Instead, I focus on happy things.

This is it...the big night. Upstairs, we are all chatting nervously about what if this and what if that. None of us truly knows what to expect and maybe it's better that way. We separate into the guys/girls dressing rooms. Alone with Liv, I watch her bounce her shoulders up and down, a trait I've noticed off and on with her when she is super excited about something.

"You ready?" I ask.

"Hell yeah. I am more than ready. What about you?"

"Honestly, I'm a nervous wreck. I don't deal well with crowds."

She tries to console me. "Baby...you are going to be brilliant. I have no doubt. Besides, when you're up there in the lights, you won't even be able to see the people in the crowd. Believe me, I do theatre, remember?"

"True, but theatre is different. You don't have people cheering and yelling, trying to talk over the noise. The audiences are totally different. I do think the lights will help though."

She doesn't say anything for a minute. I start to worry that I have pissed her off or something. She's a little sensitive about theatre. She thinks people make fun of her for it, but I'd never do that. "Who knows? I've never done this either, but I'm just not gonna worry."

* * * * *

35: SPOTLIGHT

Liv starts her vocal warm-ups as she is dressing. I stand in front of the mirror in my bra and underwear for a minute, watching her routine. She does seem totally cool. Something inside me won't let me settle. Maybe the nerves are good. I mean, I play guitar every day, and have for the past three or four years. I shouldn't be so worried. I unzip my bag and pull out my clothes. That's one thing that we have going for us, if we don't sound good, at least we'll look good.

I lean over and step into my pants, pulling them up, but not buttoning them yet. I never do and I'm not really sure why. I pull on my tank and switch everything from my pockets in the pants I had on to these pockets. I clip my wallet chain to the belt after I wind it through the loops. I pull the stool out from under the vanity and plop down in front of the mirror. It's lined with the huge yellow bulbs like the mirrors you would imagine in Hollywood or backstage on Broadway. I rub lotion on my face to freshen up my skin and brush my hair before tying on the bandana.

After I'm dressed, I sit in the lounge chair in the corner and pull out my guitar, tuner and a pick. I mess around with the strings until I'm totally satisfied with the sound and start playing warm-up exercises to get my fingers back in it, even though I just put it away a little over an hour ago. Liv walks over, watching me, and I know she doesn't want to interrupt.

I look up at her. She looks amazing! She looks like a rock star. "What's up, hottie?"

"I was just wondering if you wanted to give me a little good luck lovin'?"

I stand, propping my guitar carefully on the edge of the chair and wrap my arms around her. She moans as she sinks into me. I kiss her gently a few times. I pull away and look her in the eyes. "I love you."

She smiles sincerely. "I love you, too. Always and forever, 'til my dying day."

"Let's not think of that, k?"

"I guess not. How about we go see what the guys are up to. Maybe do some focus exercises." I don't really want to because focus exercises are as close as you can get to icebreakers and I don't deal well with those. I agree anyway since she seems a little sensitive.

We walk across the hall and she sticks her hand behind the curtain. "You guys decent?"

Keenan answers. "Yep. Come on in." We walk through their curtain and they are all lounging around like we are going to the movies or something. No nerves here.

"Focus exercises, anyone?" Liv asks. I can tell she's hoping we'll all jump for joy. Instead, she's answered with moans. Travis and Jack are both in theatre with her and they know what's coming. I motion behind her back to the guys to stand up. They do. We humor her and do some of the focus exercises, simply to make her happy. We can't have an upset lead singer, can we?

* * * * *

As we're wrapping things up, the manager, Bill, sticks his head in the curtain. He has a microphone clipped to a head band draped over his head and a wire running to a battery pack on the side of his pants. High tech right here. "On the stage in three minutes. We'll make an announcement for you. Is there anything you need me to take out?" We all look at each other and decide that we're good.

"I think we're cool. Thanks though." I answer for the group.

"Alright, well, break a leg." And he's gone.

Liv has one final game for us called Zing. Basically you stand in a circle and one person starts. You do a clapping pass, straightening your arm to pass the Zing to someone else in the circle, who will then pass it to someone else. It seems like a pretty cool game, but a little hard to play with only five people. You really have to watch good to make sure you're sticking with it. It's pretty hard to stick with. I'm losing focus easily. The object is to use your peripheral vision to watch the people next to you and to pass the Zing as quickly as possible. We suck pretty bad, but we play until we lose it three times.

Jack starts the classic hands-in-the-middle-and-break thing that you see sports teams use way too often. We all pile in, erupting with the words 'Kick Ass.' We're ready, or as ready as we're gonna be. I scoot to the curtain, peeking out. The place is packed. I step away and retreat to the dressing room, grab my guitar, and wait behind everyone. We all agree Liv should be the last on stage since she'll be the one communicating with the audience.

* * * * *

I lean my guitar against the wall. My fingers are numb and I flex my hands rapidly, trying to get feeling back in them. That doesn't work so I start shaking them. I let the shake spread to my arms and

down my legs, ending with a tilt back and forth with my head. That did it. I'm officially ready as I hear the announcer in the DJ booth.

"Ladies and gentlemen, guys and girls, and anyone in between..." a ring of laughter from the front row. "I'm pleased to welcome to our stage tonight our feature band, an up-and-coming band from right here in our hometown. Put your hands together for **RUSTIC ROOTS**." Claps start up and get louder as we burst out of the curtain onto the stage. We all go about our business, getting settled in our places. Liv grabs the microphone from Bill who stands tucked away in the corner. She raises the mic to her mouth and she is immediately in her zone. This is her thing. She's here to make the crowd happy.

"How ya'll doin' tonight?" She waits for the cheers to die down a little. "We're so glad to be here and we hope you'll have fun with us. We've got a good lineup for you tonight. Hope you enjoy." She turns to Jack. With the first pound of the drum, the cheers have already begun. Liv is singing her heart out, dancing around and rousing the crowd. I can make out the shadows of people in the front row, sitting at the cocktail tables, clapping along.

I'm concentrating deeply on the chords I'm strumming. The lights, as Liv said, create an illusion of us alone on this stage. If it weren't for the noise, I would think we *were* alone. This is awesome! That's all I can say to describe it. This pure feeling of the art of music played out in perfect unison.

* * * * *

Too quickly, the time comes for the final song of the night. I move forward from my back corner spot, closing in on Liv since we are the only two performing this song. As I step forward, I just happen to look down at the front row. Sitting there, center stage, is none other than my dad. My nerves return. I smile and nod at him trying to make out other people. He is at the table with my mom and she is beaming. Why she got so proud so quick is beyond me.

I try to let my eyes adjust and focus on them. She leans over to him, whispering in his ear as I blindly start picking the opening of the song. A new motivation creeps up on me. I have to do this and do it well...for my dad. Even though Melissa Ferrick's *Stranger* is a love song, for some odd reason, I feel like it is meant for my dad to hear. For so long I've waited for him to return. And he's here on perhaps one of the biggest nights of my life so far. I look at them one more time before returning my focus to my guitar and Liv. They look happy...a little stiff, but...hopeful.

I look up at Liv as she starts in on the chorus, admiring her execution of the song in her own unique style. As I play, growing louder on some parts, fading on others, I can't help but hope that some way, somehow, this vision of my parents is not just a façade. I want them back together for the sake of everyone involved. But I also want them to accept Liv as my lover, my girlfriend, my companion.

I strum the last chord gently. We all pause. Claps ring out. People are whistling from all over the room. One guy yells out over the entire crowd "You chicks are hot!" We all laugh at that. The guys join us on stage, bowing, and we all duck out, behind the curtain.

Bill comes back on stage. "How'd you like the show?" Cheers and yells again. "Let's give another round of applause to Rustic Roots. Thanks for coming out tonight. Have fun and be safe." With a wave, he turns and walks off stage. He comes back stage to us.

"You guys were awesome. We'd like to have you back sometime, if that would be okay with you." We all simultaneously start nodding and agreeing. Individually we shake hands with him, thanking him for the opportunity. I'm sincere, but ready to get out of here. I need to get back out on the floor and make sure what I saw was what I thought it was.

I step down the three stairs onto the floor, maneuvering my way through the pile of people. I walk over to the table behind Dad and lay my hand on his shoulder. He turns and sees that it's me and stands quickly, taking me into a giant hug. "You were amazing, Kelsey. I had no idea you could play like that. Your mom and I were just talking about how you've always had the knack for music, but I guess we never really took you seriously." I shift over, looking down at my mom who is still sitting.

She hesitates, then stands as well. "Good job, Kels." She leans in to hug me, whispering loudly in my ear. "Thanks for talking to him."

"You're welcome. Please, don't blow it." She nods and I finally believe that all the motivation she needed to better herself a little is standing next to her. I chat for a minute and say my goodbyes.

"Thanks so much for coming. I really appreciate it. I never expected you two to show up."

Dad chimes in. "Wouldn't have missed it for the world." With that, I need nothing more. I weave back through the audience and go to gather my stuff thinking, *I couldn't have asked for more.*

* * * * *

36: SILHOUETTE

I lean over, scooting my guitar into the Jeep. My hair is still clinging to my face and neck. I sit down, looking over at Liv. "What now?"

"You just sit back and ride. I've got it all planned out."

"You do? When did you have time for that?" I'm completely shocked by this. I didn't expect anything but a shower and some wind down time. Maybe a movie at her house.

"When I dropped you off today, I was like a crazy woman trying to get all of the evening planned out. I wanted to tell you, but I thought you'd just bug the shit out of me until I told you the plan." She knows me well. I don't deal well with surprises. "Instead, I chose to keep it a surprise."

I sit back in the seat with my arm out the window. Thinking over the night, I drift into the possibility of my parents getting back together. I don't want to get too excited until I know for certain what's going on. It's hard, though. I've not had a complete family for so long.

I look out the window, trying to figure out where she's taking me. We cross the river on the blue bridge and she turns onto a desolate side road. It's so unused that no one has even thought to pave it. The gravel is pretty much washed away or compacted deeply into the soil from the travel of combines and tractors up and down the road. The ride is bumpy and Liv swerves to miss a few massive potholes in the tire tracks.

"Where are you taking me? Are you some sort of psycho killer and this is my final fate?"

"Yeah. That's exactly it. You guessed it. I'm an evil vampire in disguise. I'm gonna take you back here and sink my teeth into your neck, sucking the life from your body as I drink your blood." We both find humor in this and joke about it.

"Oh yeah, well what you don't know is that I trained under Eliza Dushku. I'm a vampire slayer." As I am saying this, she pulls off the road into a clearing in the trees.

"Okay. We're here. Get out." She cuts the engine and climbs out of her seat. Pulling the handle to the back open, she reaches in. I join her at the back as she pulls out an oversized quilt and hands it to me. "Here, carry this if you don't mind."

"I will, but I don't know what's going on here." She reaches into the back, pulling out an old golf cooler she had to have jacked from her dad. We walk toward the shore of the river on a flashlight lit path.

It's obvious that others were here before us. There's a stone circle about six or eight feet in diameter with a huge pile of ashes in the center. I scoot closer and grab the flashlight from her, shining it into the remnants of the fire.

Crushed beer cans are tarnished black from the flames. There are dozens of brown bottles, all different kinds of beer. To the side of the fire pit is a disposable grill and a bun bag. "Man, someone had a party down here."

She grabs my hand, leading me to the edge of the water. Taking the quilt from me she spreads it out on the ground. I sit cross legged on the corner as she unzips the cooler. Inside, she has packed us a picnic. She pulls out sandwiches, chips, pops, and a small container of strawberries. Aphrodisiacs. This is gonna be a wild night and I'm not complaining one bit.

She pulls the sandwiches out of the gallon size Ziploc, handing me one. Prying open the bag of chips, she lays it down, propping it on my leg. She even goes as far as to open my drink for me. "Now this is what I call treatment." I say.

"Enjoy." That's all she says as she sinks her teeth into the sandwich. I follow suit. I'm appreciative of the food since I haven't eaten anything besides breakfast. That was sixteen hours ago. My nerves wouldn't let me eat before the show, but my stomach is appreciating me now.

We finish the sandwiches and she pries open the fruit container, taking a strawberry by the leaves, feeding it to me. I tease her, licking all over it before I finally take a bite. "Somebody's frisky," she says, biting off the same strawberry. We plow through them, having successfully polished off all the food she brought down here. We tuck all of the trash back into the cooler and lay it in the grass behind the blanket.

"Thank you, so much. That was really sweet. A moonlight picnic." I spread out on the blanket, calmed by the food. She joins me. As I lie here on my back on this peaceful end of summer night, I can think of nothing better. My left leg is bent up, my right ankle propped on my knee. Liv lies perpendicular to me with her head half on my ribs, half on my stomach. Her head rises with my inhale, then sinks. I reach down and intertwine my fingers in hers, placing our closed hands gently on her belly. A warm breeze rustles the blades of grass above my head as well as the baby fine hairs lining my forehead.

I stare into the black sky, dotted with vibrant blue and white stars, thinking *this is too good to be true*. The stars are so much more real than the stars I lie under night after night, taped to my ceiling. BELIEVE, they say. How can I not?