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Languish: Chapters from a Novel

A Thesis Presented by

MELISSA L RYAN

MAY 2017

Approved as to style and content by:

Signature: _____

Prof. Bruce Machart

Date

Signature: _____

Dr. Kathleen Vejvoda

Date

Signature: _____

Dr. Ann Brunjes

Date

Languish: Chapters from a Novel

A Thesis Presented

by

MELISSA L RYAN

Submitted to the College of Graduate Studies

Bridgewater State University

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Part I: Introduction: Considerations for Point of View

Hidden between the lines of fiction are carefully chosen crafting points. These methods, also known as ‘narrative strategy’, are the “how and why” of the work (Castellani 16). Setting (both time and place), genre, intended audience, theme, and point of view are some examples of considerations for narrative strategy. The goal is to form a strategy that attracts readers to the story and holds their interest. At times, this has the potential to be the opposite of what is easiest for the writer.

Point-of-view became my biggest struggle while working on “Languish”. As *The Art of Perspective* explains:

Narrative strategy is not simply whether a narrator in a work of fiction uses “I,” “you,” “s/he,”... It is not just whether a story’s told in past or present, or whether there are quotation marks around what the characters say out loud, or even how many consciousnesses the narrator occupies. It’s all of these and more. It’s the unique philosophy behind the construction ... that applies to that work alone. It’s the type of narrator, limited by age and education and experience, speaking from a particular point in time. It’s the degree of retrospection, and her level of diction ...

The narrative strategy doesn’t determine every choice an author makes in a work, but every choice an author makes must answer to the narrative strategy. (17-18)

In brief, point of view has everything to do with *who* the storyteller is. For my thesis, there is an active fictional character narrating the story. My decision to utilize a first-person narrative was instinctual; however, validation of my preference presented itself through researching current trends, fiction-writing sources, and narrative theory.

As Elizabeth Schuhmann noted in her 1999 article, Young Adult fiction in particular is most often written with a first-person narrative (qtd. in Cadden 146). This is true for popular novel series such as *The Hunger Games*, yet, it is not a new concept. Authors ranging from Charles Dickens to F. Scott Fitzgerald penned stories from a first-person point of view during their careers.

While many classics are written from a third-person perspective, it seems contemporary authors often decide against the traditional standard in order to better appeal to their audiences. The reasoning for the trend circles back to narrative strategy. First, it provides intimacy between reader and character. Through continuously reading the *I* pronoun, “the reader actually becomes the character, walking around in his shoes, viewing the world from his eyes, hearing the tale straight from his mouth” (Steele 28). Whereas a third-person point of view causes the reader to feel like an outsider looking in, a significantly less intimate viewpoint.

Realism is another factor to consider. To some youthful readers, having an outsider explaining someone else’s thoughts or feelings may be abstract or unattractive to them. A fully omniscient third-person narrator is almost godlike in his/her abilities to “burrow into any available head or heart, articulate things no one in the story could know, access the past or future, make blanket statements about the nature of existence, interpret events, tell the reader how to process the story, judge actions or even condemn them” (Boswell 65). In the least, a third-person narrator comes across as authoritative, telling the readers what’s right rather than allowing them to discover it. It’s safe to expect that by a certain age, young readers likely prefer some independence from authority figures and seek out advice from friends rather than adults. A first-person point of view would be more appealing to young adult audiences because the adolescent narrator’s character and voice are similar to their own.

The obscure storyteller entity, used in the second-person and third-person point of view, has the potential to distract readers and reveal what Wayne Booth calls the ‘implied author’ (71). This implied author is the person behind the scenes, writing to them (Wood 29), thus drawing attention to actors and actions outside of the work and breaking the fictive illusion (6). Comparatively, the storyteller in a first-person narrative has been provided a concrete identity for the readers to imagine. The teller has a name and back story, he/she relays his/her own thoughts, and is an active participant in the story. This identity separates the *I* of the piece from the author (Booth 73).

Writers cannot rely solely on trends. They must look to craft, compare options, and reflect on how each possible narrative strategy might affect both the piece and the audience. A good starting point would be to determine what I call the narrator’s ‘depth of access’ into the characters’ being. There are two basic levels – objective and subjective – the latter of which being the most common.

An objective point of view limits the narrator’s storytelling to what can be seen externally: setting, action, details and spoken dialogue. The objective narrator cannot relay any characters’ internal thoughts, emotions, or senses to the reader because the narrator does not have access to any of these internalizations. By this stipulation, the author would be limited to using second-person or third-person point of view since people do not exist without emotions. Ernest Hemingway’s “Hills Like White Elephants” is an example of a successful objective narrative. The storyteller is outside of the scene looking on, describing it to us without expressing any opinion on the matter (Genette 198).

The woman brought two glasses of beer and two felt pads. She put the felt pads and the beer glasses on the table and looked at the man and the girl. The girl was

looking off at the line of hills. They were white in the sun and the country was brown and dry.

“They look like white elephants,” she said.

“I’ve never seen one,” the man drank his beer.

“No, you wouldn’t have.”

“I might have,” the man said. “Just because you say I wouldn’t have doesn’t prove anything.” (Hemingway, p. 2 of ch.)

This type of limited access narration forces readers to fill in the blanks caused by the story’s lack of internalization. The audience must refer to the content and compare it to their personal opinions or experiences in order to judge the characters or events. Since no two readers are alike, interpretations of objective narratives can fluctuate from one reader to another, and because many authors write toward a specific theme, an objective point of view is not a popular technique.

The standard ‘depth of access’ is the subjective point of view. It offers internal access to one or more characters. Utilizing its broader reach into the story’s fictional lives, it should “make us see and feel vividly what (the) characters see and feel” (Gardner 43). The subjective narrative is not limited to human characters, though they tend to include focal characters that parallel humans – expressing not only basic senses, but also their thoughts and feelings. Almost anything fits into this standard access model. An imaginative writer of science-fiction or fantasy, for instance, could tailor the internalization to an animal, alien, robot, troll, etc.

The narrator provides this access for the readers and becomes the writer’s key point of strategy in dictating the story. As English scholars, we often break down narrators into simple

categories – first-person, second-person, or third-person – as I’ve done thus far, but there are subcategories in each. In choosing the correct strategy, a writer asks a series of questions:

How should the narrative be written? Should the narrator’s access be limited to their own singular body (first-person traditional) or does the narrator see into the minds of a community or group (first-person plural)? Should it be extended to multiple focal characters (third-person limited or third-person omniscient)? Would shifting perspectives help or hinder the readers? Would it make sense to implicate the reader– *you* – (second-person traditional) into the story? Should the story tell *you* how to do something (second-person instructive)? Or should the first-person narrator talk to a fictional *you* (first-person apostrophe)? And of course, what would work best for the intended audience or genre?

Once an author has a sense of *how*, the issue becomes *who*. Who is the narrator? Is the narrator a single entity (first-person, second-person, or third-person) or a representation of a larger group (first-person or third-person)? Is he/she outside of the story (second-person or third-person) or an active participant in it (first-person)? The decision to utilize an outsider point of view indicates that the narrator will exist for the sole purpose of conveying the story to the readers. In these cases of second and third-person narratives, there is no real *who* behind the words. They are nothing more than storytelling entities. The first-person point of view is the only narrative that lends characterization to the storyteller, giving them a name, a sensate body, persona, and a part within the plot.

In order to answer the questions of narration perspective and access, an understanding of how narrative works is necessary. The writer must know from a theoretical viewpoint what the potential audience will take away from each particular strategy. We must remember that because characters resemble humans, readers “go so far as to identify with the character, to cry, to laugh,

and to search for or with it” (Bal 80). Any well-written perspective should allow the readers to feel something for the main character. The difference between the points of view is the psychic distance, which is defined as: “the distance the reader feels between himself and the events in the story” (Gardner 111).

The first-person perspective offers the closest reader/character relationship. We readers either become the *I* or we imagine the narrator “pulling us close, whispering color commentary in our ears, shaping the experience in ways beyond the characters’ abilities or intentions” (Castellani 15). The storyteller has a “distinctive voice, a character, a personality” (Stern 178). The *I* is not merely telling the story; they’re confiding it. And it is convincing because it is so direct. In this strategy, the character’s “understanding of his own situation is what compels us to keep reading, to find out what makes him tick” (Castellani 75).

The third-person perspective provides the most distance between reader and character, as noted previously, giving an outside view. It is an ancient method of storytelling going back to myths and oral legends. The narrator could be a friend or relative of a character in the story, (Stern 185) or they may be an invisible entity (186). These narrators typically do not participate in the action they describe, instead their voice is prominent. One author suggested a noteworthy feature of third-person omniscience, stating that it is especially useful in “stories that intend to raise the large questions about human existence that cannot be readily resolved ... (or) stories that intend to reveal not just the character, but the reader” (Boswell 89).

Regardless of the chosen strategy, there are two important “rules” for writers to keep in mind. The first is that “you must either tell all or keep quiet; above all, you must not omit or skip anything” (qtd. in Booth 52). If a writer chooses first-person, he/she must simulate a stream of consciousness with “unmediated flow” (Stern 222). The mind of that narrator should include

“images, memories, sensations, and thoughts ... before the rational mind sorts them out, represses what it can't deal with, discards what is irrelevant, and turns everything into what's called logical thinking” (Stern 222). In the case of omniscient storytellers, to leave anything of importance out would be coy (Boswell 76), and the resulting omissions would leave the reader feeling cheated or unnecessarily manipulated.

As a reader of James Dashner's traditional limited third-person narrative, *The Maze Runner*, I realized this sense of manipulation. The Young Adult novel focuses on Thomas, a teenager with no recollection of his past and begins with his “new life” in the Glade (1), a post-apocalyptic dystopian setting that cannot be breached. Dashner succeeds in allowing readers to enter Thomas's shoes and to question the strange new words spoken by those already living in the Glade. The narrative utilizes Thomas's amnesia in combination with the secrecy of his new environment and cohabitants to create a restricted version of the already limited point of view. I wanted more details than I was given and remained frustrated by the lack of insight provided by my narrator. It left me to wonder about the author's decision and strategy. Why not tell it from a first-person perspective?

This questioning of the author's narrative choice is precisely what writers want to avoid. As per the second rule, the writer's goal is to make readers believe that the story is told from the correct point of view (Castellani 86). For “Languish,” I chose the first-person subjective because of the potential effects it would have on readers. I knew I did not intend to comment on society as a whole. Rather, the main focus of the sample chapters is the character's internal and external struggles. Who better to provide a “moment by moment” and “emotion to emotion” telling (Gardner 24) than the protagonist, Logan Shaw, himself? My expectation behind this method was to create an intimacy with the audience while depicting a character and story that felt

realistic. As young adults themselves, I hoped that readers would relate to his situation. I wanted them to believe in the idea that the events written really happened or could happen (Gardner 22). By following Logan intimately through the events, I hoped they would feel for the characters, as though they were real people (Booth 129). I agreed with *The Art of Perspective*'s idea that the first-person point of view would better engage the readers (Castellani 84).

Of course, not all contemporary writers agree with the theory that a first-person narrator is the most realistic. Some prefer to return to the traditional third-person storytelling, their reasoning being that: "novels constructed by adults to simulate an authentic adolescent's voice are inherently ironic because the so-called adolescent voice is never – and can never be – truly authentic" (Cadden 146). Authenticity can only be generated if the author and narrator are equals, and in general, they are not. Another valid point against the Young Adult trend is the freedoms that the traditional third-person model grants the author. Without a *who* behind the narrator, the writer is able to remove limitations of diction and syntax, thus moving the narrative to a form of verbal artistry beyond the focal character's capacity (Steele 28). Any writer can appreciate these principles, and the experienced writer will weigh the benefits against the disadvantages for each point of view when creating a piece.

From a contextual standpoint, much like Dashner, I decided to minimize access to one focal character. I knew an omniscient narrator would not work for "Languish" because it would have given readers full access to the minds of the very characters who exacerbate Logan's personal problems. This would diminish suspense and possibly cause the readers to feel negatively about Logan's choices. I predicted the effect might be similar to someone viewing a horror movie, watching a character who runs upstairs rather than out the door when they are being chased. As the outsider watches, he/she sees the violent intent of the pursuer. That

audience-member remembers past scenes of murders committed by the pursuer and knows the character's decision to hide is fatally wrong. The viewer might be so frustrated by the victim's foolishness (for not seeing this truth) that he/she complains out loud. This was not my desired effect for "Languish". I wanted Logan to be liked rather than to cause eyes to roll.

I realized that in order to successfully write a first-person traditional narrative, I must imagine myself inside the mind and body of the fictional character (Gardner 118). Unfortunately, this proved to be much harder than I anticipated. There were many hours spent typing and deleting text as I tried to be the writer and the character at once. Part of the problem was the fact that the protagonist and I are so very much different. Logan is male, a teenager, and an undergraduate. I am none of these. The closest I come to his likeness is in our mutual enrollment in institutions of higher education. Furthermore, my diction and syntax would not be the same as Logan's. His experiences are also largely different from mine, which explains why the simplest of details either work or they fail.

My favorite note from Professor Machart highlighted my struggle with finding Logan's internal voice. In the original version, my attempt to describe the hairstyle of a female character read: "falling in wavy locks" (Ryan np). His response to this was: "this is *not* boy language". Here I was reminded that I do not think like a boy, though there were occasions in which I believe I succeeded in finding a boyish vocabulary. In lines prior, I decided to allude to capri pants without naming them: "a pair of white pants, the kind that cut off mid-calf. I had no idea what they were called" (Ryan 33). Since I will never be a teenage boy, I may never know if he would know what they are called, this is the dilemma of the writer.

I am not alone with the struggle of maintaining voice. Gender gaps are especially tricky, in that they may be less blatant. Where one reader might read through content in acceptance of

the voice, another reader might not. Author Gillian Flynn's *Gone Girl*, includes moments where the word-choice might be questionable to some. The adult male lead's description of his young mistress did not suite my expectations: "a nice, pretty bosomy Irish girl from my hometown, unassuming and jolly" (147). Here the use of *bosomy* and *jolly* for this otherwise manly character felt artificial.

Word-choice errors are not all equal – some are damaging to both realism and the reader's belief in the story. In reading a recently published young adult novel, I found an unmistakable voice discrepancy. The story is narrated by a sixteen-year-old girl and written by a professional author and Harvard graduate, Huntley Fitzpatrick. I believed in the *who* of the narrator and felt the voice matched the character, until I reached the word *octogenarian*. That single word shattered the novel's illusion for me. I wanted to make my own note in the margin for the author; *octogenarian* is not fitting for this teenager's voice. My criticism of Fitzpatrick's selection might appear harsh or exaggerated without explanation, but its foundation is based in theory – reader response theory to be precise. My personal experiences shaped my opinion.

The protagonist Gwen's back story is much like my own. They parallel each other on several points: she lives in a small town, is raised by working class parents and plans to be the first one in her family to graduate from college. Also like myself, Gwen's family consists of a foreign transplant, an immigrant to the United States whose first language is not English. Our teenaged selves are not AP English students or child prodigies, nor do we sit in solitary for hours reading voraciously. Based on what the author portrays, neither I nor the narrator live in an environment of fancy linguistics. Our vocabulary comes from our individual education, experiences, and family; all of which have been commonplace. In fact, the first time I heard *octogenarian* was in the dialogue of a popular television series called *Bones*. I was thirty-five at

the time, which proves how restrictive my environment or my fictional counterpart's can be. The word use during the episode of *Bones* did not surprise me in the way Fitzpatrick's usage had, because the vocabulary suited the character speaking it. *Bones*'s writers clearly set the expectations for the audience, showing characters of high intelligence with careers at a forensic science lab where commonplace does not exist. In the case of Fitzpatrick's Young Adult novel, however, there was no cause to go beyond the norm of saying *eighty-year-old*. As I read the jarring line of prose, my small-town girl perspective saw the implied author instead of the narrator, damaging the realism in her voice. As a writer, I know the unintentional voice shift is not always apparent to the author. It is often difficult to become your character and remove yourself from the narrative.

Throughout my work on "Languish," I often felt detached from Logan. I was not fully immersed in his world, nor was I inside of him. I was the scribe, as Booth puts it, constructing pieces of him from a distance (71). At times, the lines resembled dialogue and stage notes for a play rather than a stream of consciousness from the protagonist. The narrative sometimes echoed the objective third-person point of view's play-by-play of dialogue and action, rather than its intended viewpoint.

For me, finding the right words to describe a violent altercation required experience and research to help me create a sense of realism. I watched videos to get a sense of the action: self-defense how-to's and street fights caught on camera. On Professor Machart's recommendation, I read works of fiction that depict similar scenarios, and followed it up by reading boxing tips on the internet. In fact, I had been proud of my research. Not only did I know the names of the punches – uppercut, jab, cross, hook – but I actually had experience throwing them, having taken kickboxing classes years prior. My research was mostly external observations, which is why the

early drafts were all choreography. Describing the action seemed effortless, but the resulting scene was heavy in movement. What I failed to include was how it felt to be in the fight and what goes through one's mind in that moment. The original version did not meet the first-person point of view stream of consciousness criteria.

I ducked before his second swing could land and then slammed a right upper-cut into his chin. The impact forced him a couple steps back, solidifying his determination. Chase returned, rushing at me with a simple left-right-left combo. His movements were hasty, inexperienced, making them easy to block. Ahead of his movements, I cut to the right. With little time to reset himself, I threw a left hook to his stomach then readied myself again. His feet fumbled, his arm moved to protect his gut. I put more space between us and for a split second, thought he might give up. (Ryan np)

I returned to the drawing board for revisions and was finally able to find Logan when I participated in a cardio-kickboxing class. Then was I able to feel what he would feel, think what he might think, and hear what he might hear.

That night I listened to my own thoughts and tried to memorize the details of being in class, punching and kicking the bag. In that moment, I reminded myself to keep my hands up and to breathe. My internal coaching turned into an idea for "Languish." In the new draft, the narrator's father plays the role of Logan's internal voice, coaching him through the fight. The resulting scene was an improvement because it allows the readers inside his mind and provides a glimpse of his past and who he is emotionally.

I ducked before Chase's second swing could land. A whoosh of air passed above my head. I felt my body straighten and remembered the proper form. *'Keep one*

foot in front for balance and both hands up for blocking. And don't forget to breathe.'

I could tell the guy wasn't done yet. The aggression in Chase's face was how a boxer looked in the ring. He had the kind of determination that came from having something to prove and nothing left to lose. I saw his rage building, strengthening him, and his preparation to throw a knock-out punch. He didn't simply want to win. He needed it. Dad's voice coached me on. *'It's 90 percent mental, 10% physical, Logan. Don't let the other guy intimidate you. You have to be smarter than him. Fake him out, keep him guessing.'* I let Chase come at me and blocked a few punches. It became 100% surreal when the audience clapped and cheered.

(Ryan 15)

My attempts to rework this one scene and the need for my hands-on research, reminded me of the old phrase: "Write what you know". Writers do need experiences and interactions to spark their imaginations; however, they cannot limit themselves to depictions of personal experiences alone. We must imagine, re-imagine, improvise, and revise these challenging scenes. Similar to my rookie mistake of heavy action and minimal consciousness, Charles Dickens's Pip in *Great Expectations* relays a past altercation to his readers in a surprisingly fast-paced manner.

His spirit inspired me with great respect. He seemed to have no strength, and he never once hit me hard, and he was always knocked down; but, he would be up again in a moment, sponging himself or drinking out of the water-bottle, with the greatest satisfaction in seconding himself according to form, and then came at me with an air and a show that made me believe he really was going to do for me at last... the more I hit him, the harder I hit him; but, he came up again and again

and again, until at last he got a bad fall with the back of his head against the wall.

(Dickens 84)

Dickens's selection tells us of Pip throwing punches, yet offers little internalization as he does so. Professor Machart's advice to improve Logan's fight was to slow down the moment, to infuse the scene with elements of setting and sensation – beyond sight – in order to create a more realistic first-person perspective. For this reason, it is arguable that even experienced writers such as Dickens may at times stray from the stream of consciousness ideology behind this point of view for one reason or another.

Another struggle for me was my tendency to revert to the third-person model of description, for instance, noting Logan's face as flushed. I know it does not properly fit the intended perspective. Logan can only see himself if he is looking in a reflective surface or at a photograph, and in this moment he certainly was not. Writers actually prefer to avoid these methods, at any rate. The problem, as author James Gardner explains, is that first-person internalization “does not force the writer to recognize that written speech has to make up for the loss of facial expression, gesture, and the like, and the usual result is not good writing but only writing less noticeably bad” (Gardner 155). Expressing a narrator's physical attributes is complicated. It requires bringing in other characters “for the narrator to interact with and to create vivid physical actions” (Stern 182). The solution is to always keep in mind that the narration should relate to his interior, his body and mind must express how he feels. If I want Logan to smile, I cannot simply write that he did. I must instead show his happiness by thinking it and feeling it. As Professor Machart says, I must see my character from within rather than from without. By far the hardest part of my first-person narrative journey has been this interior focus, this constant attention to my narrator's senses, emotions, and unedited thought processes.

At times my inability to fully immerse myself in a character of my own making caused me to lose hope in my narrative strategy. Readers have higher demands for the first-person point of view, wanting “more humor, more style, (and) more insight” than they might from its counterparts (Castellani 85). I quickly learned that dissecting others’ works and critiquing their decisions is much less demanding than piecing together something from scratch. I persisted with my decision despite the challenges I faced, because I know it has the potential to not only work, but to work well. It is not impossible to write something I am not familiar with; it merely requires more practice to get there. I have no doubt that, from the start, my narrator/ protagonist Logan has been lurking somewhere just beneath the surface of my consciousness, in the bedrock of my imagination. I just need to use these proven narrative strategies to mine a little deeper, to find my way into him and therefore into the heart of the story.

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II. Languish: Chapters from a Novel

Prologue

As I sit beside her hospital bed, I can't help but stare at her fragile, hopelessly damaged appearance. Layers of thin bedding come up to her chin, the paleness of her skin camouflaged by the fabric. The few areas of exposed skin are hot spots for medical equipment: IV lines piercing her veins, oxygen monitor clip on one finger, breathing tubes forcing air through her nose and mouth. There are so many wires and tubes, they crisscross and tangle with each other like a web. And she's the captive.

I know these things keep her alive, but I can't stand them. I want to yank them out, to free her from being tied down. If she were awake she'd say the same, probably complain about the monotonous sounds of the beeping and puffing machines, or the smells – chemicals and other foul hospital odors that I don't want to consider.

She doesn't belong here, doesn't deserve this. We should never have gotten into that car. I should've kept her safe.

I reach out to hold her hand, my heart aching. Tears blur my vision. With my free hand, I brush her cheek, think of the way she's supposed to look: light hair, hazel eyes, happy...whole. The desire to kiss her sweeps through me, causes my breath to hitch. Instead I move away, lean against the chair and inhale deep. Because kissing her would make being here more agonizing than it already is.

A few weeks ago I thought we were getting closer, thought we might get together as a couple. Then everything spiraled out of control again. Of course, I accepted the outcome, thinking I'd traded my happiness for hers in the process. Acceptance would never change the way I felt, though.

I'd left so many things unsaid between us – like how much I love her, or how stupid I am for not saying it the instant I realized it. Nothing could break the hold she had on me. The aching in my chest hadn't died since I brought her here. That was a month ago. Since then it's been the unbearable feeling of powerlessness that comes with my inability to fix her or simply comfort her, and the madness that comes from waiting and watching.

These truths I've kept hidden from the one person who should've been told. And it's too late now. She couldn't hear me, not in her comatose state.

The squeak of the door cuts through the steady rhythm of the machines, startling me. I turn to see the visitor, her mother, entering the room. By her red, puffy eyes, I can tell it's going to be another long day.

I give up my seat, moving to stand against the wall in the hallway just outside the room. I hate to leave her side, but her mother seems uncomfortable whenever I'm there. It's probably best to give them some time alone, anyway. Me being there isn't helping her. It isn't helping me for that matter. Everything brings me back to the day we first met.

But I shouldn't be thinking of myself or my needs. None of that's important anymore. I have to find a way to make things right again, no matter what it takes. I have to do it for her.

Chapter 1

I repeated the plan in my head: have fun, avoid Bethany, and figure my shit out by the deadline. Those were my goals for the new semester. The last bit came directly from my parents, who continued to hound me about choosing a major. I usually blamed being an only-child for their helicopter parenting, but I guessed they had a point. It was the start of my sophomore year. Classes began in a few days and I had no clue. College had deadlines for everything. But I still had time. One more day wasn't going to change anything. It seemed like an impossible decision anyway. Everyone expected us to pick a career, pick our whole future from some list on some college application. They acted like it was no big deal, simple, like choosing a meal from a menu.

Was I the only one who saw how insane that was? What if I never figured it out? What if I changed my mind? I was nowhere closer to knowing myself at nineteen than I was at eight. That's why it was at the end of my list.

After the summer I had, working twelve hour shifts at my dad's gym – doing everything from cleaning sweaty equipment to teaching self-defense classes – I placed fun at the top of my to-do list, figured I'd try something new. Which is why on my first day back at school my roommate, Reid, managed to convince me to go to an off-campus party he and his girlfriend were throwing at her two older brothers' rental house. They promised it would be fun, although it had yet to match that description. For starters, it was the house where everything with Bethany went wrong last April. Before that party, my life revolved around her. This year would be different.

So far, the avoiding Bethany part was going well, at least in the sense that I hadn't seen her anywhere, not that I had been able to forget her entirely. Avoidance was necessary because

she would set me off track again, stir up drama, make me forget about the parents' deadline, etc. I wasn't exactly sure how long I could manage it, though. Being at Greer State College (or GSC as we called it) was a lot like being in high school in my tiny hometown here in Massachusetts. Everyone at home knew each other and went to the same places. Greer was the same: suburban, familiar, quaint.

Move-in day felt different this time around. There was the usual excitement from seeing old friends and the weight-lifted sense of freedom you get when the parents leave. But underneath all that was a darker lining of fear and tension that didn't quite fit with the town's reputation. During the course of a few hours, rumors had spread about a freshman girl being assaulted on the campus's trail during her morning jog.

The development left my normally busy dorm hallway vacant. People were either holed up in their rooms or bravely roaming about while suspiciously eying everyone they came across. When I stepped out to use the restroom earlier, a girl froze in the hall like a deer in headlights. We were all tense, the girls obviously since they felt like targets. But us guys had reason to be tense, too. We were automatically suspected as threats.

Everyone was secretive about it because nobody wanted a parental panic to start. It was just a rumor anyway, no official announcement. Reid's girlfriend, Samantha, decided a party was the solution. She pulled some favors with her brother, an amateur deejay, and set up a karaoke machine for the event. Despite it being a last minute event, the party was a full house. The music's thumping had likely attracted neighborhood party crashers because there were faces I didn't recognize mixed in. Our hostess welcomed them from her spot in the karaoke line and Reid made rounds through the crowd. I could barely see them with the strobe light.

After having my fill of tangy cool ranch chips, I leaned up against a wall at the far end of the furniture-less dining room, aka dance floor. I felt like the last single guy at the party. There were couples dancing, couples making out, new couples flirting. I watched them, half jealous, half longing. I even envied the couple arguing in the middle of it all. That could have been me. It *should* have been me with Bethany, if I hadn't chickened out of showing her how I truly felt.

I remembered how I had walked through Reid's smoke plumes to look for Bethany months ago. I'd found her in this room, pushed up against the side wall with some guy all over her. Dylan.

The one time that I should've kept my mouth shut and walked away, I decided to say something. In my defense, it was hard to tell if it really was her, considering the viewpoint. He wasn't exactly giving Bethany a chance to breathe. Or maybe my uncertainty came from me not wanting it to be true. Either way, I let one syllable slip out as I stood a few steps behind him. She had told me that I was the only person to call her by a nickname; at that moment, one syllable was all I could manage.

"Beth?"

She pulled free of his groping hands and almost ran into my arms for a hug. Her face glowed with happiness, eyes wide. "Logan, I'm glad you're here. I want you to meet my boyfriend." Over her shoulders, Dylan was red-faced.

"Your *boyfriend*?" I repeated, stupidly. "But...what about *us*?"

Dylan glared at me, then turned Beth around to confront her. "I thought you said you two weren't together."

“We aren’t.” Her eyes steadied on mine. That time I understood the emotions playing across her face: confused, concerned, and finally annoyed as she answered my question. “We’ll still be friends, if that’s what you’re asking. Why are you making such a big deal about it?”

“Because it’s a big deal to me. Because I want to be with you...and not just as friends. You’re all I think about, Beth.”

She sighed heavily, shook her head. “Since when? You never said anything before.” Bethany reached out to put a soothing hand on me. I let her, foolishly hoping that her next words would fix everything. “I can’t be with you, not like that. I told you, I’m with Dylan.”

I backed off from her touch. My heart had initially cracked at the sight of them together. With her announcement that this wasn’t some little party fling, it was crushed to bits. Pieces of it were getting lost inside me, a lump in my throat, a knot in my stomach. I left immediately, pushing through people, ignoring Beth as she begged me to stop. I knew what she wanted – to talk, to make sure I was okay. But I wasn’t okay, and I was incapable of talking. I could barely breathe. I could barely contain my emotions in front of the gawkers. It felt like the entire school witnessed it, even though there were probably no more than a dozen people in the room.

The memory of it didn’t feel much better than living it had. I shifted uncomfortably against the wall, my mind returned to the present. The room burst into applause and cheers for the girl on stage. I clapped half-heartedly and counted out everything that went wrong last year: I hadn’t made a move when I should have, I played the friends bit too long, and I never got up the nerve to turn it into something more. After four months of pining over Beth, the truth came out and I ended up with nothing. No girlfriend and one less friend because she dropped me from her life entirely. I had nobody to blame but myself, which probably meant I’d always regret it.

If I could stop thinking about her, that would help. I needed to find someone to talk to. Reid was missing in action. I knew my whole soccer team was here somewhere. I thought about checking the kitchen or out back when the arguing couple left the dance floor. Their absence provided me with a clear view of Bethany huddled with a group of friends. The sight of her didn't hurt so much. Some dull emotion of love – or loss, or both – lingered in my heart, and my pulse quickened.

I hadn't realized she was there. Everyone around her was so much taller than her that she'd been hidden. Honestly, I didn't expect her this time, not with her avoiding me. She had no ties to any of my friends, either. She wore her favorite pair of cut-off denim shorts, ones with pockets peeking out from under the frayed ends. And the short-sleeved vintage concert tee she wore was one of many in her collection. But I'd almost forgotten how her long hair looked against her tan skin, or the almond shape of her brown eyes.

“I swear we didn't invite her,” said Reid, joining me.

My roommate always managed to look as though he had yesterday's clothes on. Parties were not even occasion for changing. His wardrobe knew nothing of occasions or seasons. I was willing to bet Reid outlasted all other New Englanders' tolerance for wearing shorts in the dead of winter. I asked him about it once, and he said, “I'm from Maine, I'm not cold.”

When we first met on move-in day a year ago, I wasn't thrilled with the idea of having to live with him. The guy was loud and bordering on immature. But I came around as soon as I saw him for who he really was. We'd been good friends since and we'd opted to request a room together again this year. Reid was more of a package deal, his girlfriend made up the better looking half of the set. Sometimes people wondered how he managed to get such a great girlfriend like Samantha. Reid's mess of reddish-brown hair and unshaven face was in stark

contrast to her straight-out-of-a-magazine looks. I knew him well enough to understand. Reid was the one person I could count on.

“I know,” I said, my eyes searching the room. If I found some teammates, I could go over and blend in. Or I could search for someone as alone as I felt. The odds of finding anyone matching that description were significantly out of my favor.

Except there she was, watching one of the party-crashers on stage, a mystery girl with straight, sandy-blond hair pulled back into a pony tail. She was too lost in the performance to notice anything else around her. I sidestepped for a somewhat better view. The girl fidgeted with the long chain of a silver necklace. She wore a pair of light blue jeans and an aqua tank top, a nearly transparent white shirt layered over it. I definitely didn't know this girl, but I felt drawn to her. Without a word to Reid, I crossed the dance floor, passing Bethany to meet her.

“Hi,” I said. She jumped at my interruption. “Sorry, I didn't mean to sneak up on you like that.”

“It's okay, I'm a bit on edge today.”

My physical attraction to her was instantaneous, made me hold my breath, unable to speak. Light shined into her hazel eyes, and splashes of green and brown peered back at me, captivating me. When I was younger, I found this old kaleidoscope in my grandparents' attic. That's what looking into her eyes reminded me of: prisms of color, vibrant, and beautiful. She smiled and brushed long bangs behind her left ear. Now *I* was on edge – my whole body tensed and warmed with anxiety. My heart pounded so hard I thought it might bust through my chest.

Had she notice me unravelling? If she had that couldn't be good. What was I even doing anyway?

She was too beautiful to be here alone. Her boyfriend would come rescue her at any moment. I stayed anyway, wanting to be near her, even if it were temporary. I don't know why I expected it to go well. It's not like I'd really thought it through. I scratched at my head, as though doing so would help my brain somehow.

A blush painted her cheeks as she tugged at the infinity symbol charm. I was obviously making her uncomfortable. "Is this your party?" she asked.

I hesitated, worried my breath stunk like cool ranch, and took a step back, just in case it did. "No, it's my friends' party. Do you go to GSC?" I knew I needed to say something else, you know, get past small talk. I needed to be funny, girls liked funny. I groaned to myself because I had nothing. And I couldn't remember ever being *this* bad at talking to girls.

"Yes, but I don't really know a lot of people. Just people from the bookstore and my roommate, she invited me. I hope it's okay."

The fact that she had no date didn't pass my notice. If anything it catapulted my nerves. "It's no problem. Did you get introduced to anyone?" She shook her head, so I continued on. "Let's see...the girl next in line to sing, the one with wavy light brown hair? She's our hostess, Samantha. The guy with her is Reid. He's my roommate and Samantha's boyfriend." I checked for more friends, unable to distinguish anyone else in the flashing room.

She laughed. "Okay, you going to tell me your name at some point?"

"Oh, sorry, my name is Logan. Logan Shaw. I guess I should've started with that."

"I'm Kayla Brooks."

We weren't alone for long. People gravitated to Kayla the same way I had. I introduced her to Reid and Samantha before they took the stage for a duet. Everything was cool until Samantha tried to get her to sing.

Kayla stepped away from the stage, shaking her head nervously. “No, no. That’s okay. I prefer to watch. Anyway, I should probably find my ride.”

“It’s too early to leave,” said Reid.

“I know. The thing is, my dad is supposed to call soon. If he hears a party in the background, on my first day here, he’ll freak out. I barely convinced him to let me be a resident this year. I don’t want him to change his mind. I’m sorry. I’m sure I’ll see you guys around.”

Samantha immediately started in on me. “You like her, don’t you?”

“She seems nice.” It was the most I wanted to admit. Honestly, meeting Kayla excited me, she made me smile. I hadn’t been doing much of that lately. I did want to see her again, but at the same time she made me feel like a bumbling idiot.

“That’s not what I meant. You’re impossible, Logan. You should’ve asked her to dance instead of hanging around us. The problem is that you don’t even try. You’ve got the whole tall, dark and handsome thing going for you. I doubt she would’ve turned you down.”

Samantha was being generous. My looks were nothing special – 5’ 10”, dark brown hair in a simple crew cut and a summer tan I couldn’t remember getting. I was bored with my own reflection. But the reason why I could count the number of relationships I’d had on one hand wasn’t about looks. And it wasn’t for a complete lack of trying like Samantha said. I was never the type to jump right in. I needed to wade a little, get comfortable in the water.

My overly cautious pre-dating routine confused girls, made them think I wasn’t interested, which was why it had only worked twice for me. Ironically, the first girl to spark action from me had been my high school chemistry lab partner. The second girlfriend was literally the girl-next-door, my childhood best friend. She had done the asking out, and we lasted a year. College ended it for us when she went to Florida and I stayed in Mass. Fast forward to

day one of freshman year, when Bethany sat directly in front of me in seminar class. She gave me a simple hello as she passed the syllabi down. There was no instant sense of I-must-date-this-girl with any of them. Our relationships built themselves over time. Well, except mine and Beth's, that one stopped at the foundation.

Reid tried to convince me to be more like him, spontaneous. He met Samantha on a Tuesday night in November, strutted into our room with a huge grin plastered on his face, and told me he'd met a girl at the park. Wednesday morning he called Samantha to ask her out. He'd said there was no way he could wait another minute, he had to go for it.

My attraction to Kayla was that kind of intense. It made me act weird, out of character. One minute I was walking over to her all calm and curious, zero expectations. The next I was tongue-tied and worrying what she thought about me. I had no clue what she thought, which meant I couldn't place any expectations – high or low.

Still, I wanted to know, badly. I chewed on my bottom lip, impatience festering. Regret hit me, told me I was an idiot. I didn't want to let her go the way I had with Bethany. Suddenly I was in a hurry to catch Kayla and handed my red plastic cup to Reid. "I'll be back in a few."

"What?" Reid asked. "You're going for it?"

"Don't get too excited."

I left before he could figure out some snide remark and traced Kayla's route out the front by zigzagging through the human obstacle course. Outside, a warm breeze tickled the hairs on my neck and arms. A combination of scents came with it, the campfire and fresh-cut grass. Behind me the music pumped inside the house. My ears rang as though they hadn't left. Beyond that was a chaos of laughter, chatter, and splashing coming from the backyard.

There were fewer party-goers on this side of the house, though. Students in the front were cloaked in darkness and scattered in groups. Some on the porch, some hunched around a car in front of the house. The car's driver revved the engine to a roaring putter that left his circling friends choking on exhaust fumes. I made my way past some of my soccer teammates, excused myself through a large group, and then paused to scan the yard. Kayla stood under a street light at the edge of the yard, she was on her cell. I hoped it was her dad so she wouldn't have to leave.

Bethany was in my path and our eyes met. I saw pity in her expression. To her I was probably a pathetic little lost puppy. She seemed determined to make an effort and followed along with me despite the fact that I wasn't stopping to talk. "Hey, Logan, I thought I saw you before," she said. "How have you been?"

"Good." I was glad I didn't have to lie about it, that I wasn't tormented by the sight of her. And glad that my desire to soak up as much of her time as possible was gone, too.

"Are you leaving already?"

"Yeah, I'm in kind of a rush." I slipped away from Bethany.

There was someone crossing the street with the same destination as me, his stride fast, edging on aggressive. When the shadowed figure reached Kayla, the light washed over him. He looked creepy and intense, his black hair spiked out of control. Everything he wore was black: faded black jeans, fitted black tee shirt, black sneakers. If he had socks on, I could almost guarantee they were black. Drawing closer to them, I read his body language and heard a bit of their conversation.

"You owe me more than that. That's two nights in a row," the guy told her. "You know what I think? I think you're cheating on me."

“*Cheating* on you? We went on *one* date. We’re not in a relationship. I don’t owe you anything. You know what, Chase? I’m sorry, but I don’t want to see you or talk to you anymore. Please just go away.”

My gut knotted, as though their tension had somehow been diffused into the air and worked its way inside me. I didn’t want to intrude exactly, but I couldn’t leave Kayla. I had to make sure she stayed safe. The rumors swirled in my head, and his behavior raised red flags.

“Everything okay over here?” I asked, interrupting them.

“It will be as soon as he leaves.”

“She’s fine. Mind your own damn business.” He clenched and unclenched his fists, and I glimpsed unexpected brilliant color covering his right forearm. It was a blazing phoenix tattoo that moved with the tendons beneath it.

The few people standing nearby heeded his warning and stepped away from the scene. A car passed us and drove into a garage next door. Everyone was either oblivious or indifferent to Kayla’s situation. No, I wasn’t going to mind my own damn business.

I’d been in Kayla’s position once. It was a long time ago, but I’d been pushed around and terrorized by a kid during fourth grade, when *tall* wasn’t part of my description. Liam had been the oldest boy in my class, he’d been held back while the rest of his friends moved on to middle school. For whatever reason, he hated me. Most of the time Liam was all talk, no action, until the day he snapped and I went home black and blue. Chase reminded me of that bully – hot tempered and highly combustible.

Kayla did not remind me of myself, though. As a kid, I had taken the verbal beatings from my bully. Kayla was way better at standing her ground. “I’m done talking, Chase.” Her lack of fear and feistiness surprised me. It merely amused him.

“You’re right, talking is overrated. We should *kiss* and make up.” Chase locked his arms behind her and pulled her into him. In the next instant he mashed his lips against hers.

And that was it for me. I’d had enough of the guy. Instinct kicked in, I locked my right arm under his chin, putting slight pressure on his trachea. It worked perfectly, forced his survival mode to kick in. He attempted to pry my arm off as he gurgled for air. I released the hold and pushed him into a parked car. “You need to leave.”

“I’m not going anywhere. Get out of my face and let me talk to my girl.”

“For the last time,” she said, “I’m not *your* anything.”

I instantly wished she’d held her tongue. Her words only infuriated him, made Chase storm closer. After everything else that he hadn’t heard, he heard that. He raised a hand to hit Kayla for denying him. I caught his arm mid-air, squeezed against his resistance, my knuckles white from his resistance.

The one good thing was that her voice carried, it invited people’s curiosity. I doubted there was anybody left in the apartment. I hoped it meant I’d get some help. There were blank faces surrounding me and a few cell phones aimed to catch us on video. In the background, the music continued without a singer. Apparently the best entertainment was me and Chase.

I dropped his arm, knowing it probably looked like I was the bad guy. “If you’re ready to go, Kayla,” I said. “I can give you a ride.”

“I’m ready. Let’s go.”

“You’re not taking her anywhere.”

Despite Kayla accepting my offer, she didn’t dare pass Chase and kept a perimeter of distance between them. I filled that spatial void, creating a buffer so we could start down the road. That’s when his fist connected with my mouth, lip cutting against teeth. My tongue

searched for it, tasted the salty blood. It didn't hurt that much, a dull throbbing grew from the contact point, increasing as the nerves caught my brain up to speed. My friends persuaded Kayla out of harms way, which was good because I wasn't going to stand there and take it.

He'd hit the wrong guy. That day in fourth grade, after Pops picked me up from school, he gave me my first lesson. Though I never had to use it before, the memory was ripe. Still in his correctional officer uniform, he bent down to my level. *'If you don't stand up to guys like that, they'll keep coming back. You don't want to become an easy target,'* he'd said. Dad took me to the garage, stood me in front of his punching bag and swung it toward me. *'Imagine the bag as the bully.'* Every time I hit it, he pushed it back, sometimes changing the direction of the swing. *'Get ahead of him. Try to anticipate his next move.'*

I ducked before Chase's second swing could land. A whoosh of air passed above my head. I felt my body straighten and remembered the proper form. *'Keep one foot in front for balance and both hands up for blocking. And don't forget to breathe.'*

I could tell the guy wasn't done yet. The aggression in Chase's face was how a boxer's looked in the ring. He had the kind of determination that came from having something to prove and nothing left to lose. I saw his rage building, strengthening him, and his preparation to throw a knock-out punch. He didn't simply want to win. He needed it. Dad's voice coached me on. *'It's 90 percent mental, 10% physical, Logan. Don't let the other guy intimidate you. You have to be smarter than him. Fake him out, keep him guessing.'* I let Chase come at me and blocked a few punches. It became 100% surreal when the onlookers clapped and cheered.

Chase was definitely no boxer. His stance resembled an archer's – left arm outstretched, grabbing at my shirt; the other drawn back, elbow out. His next move was obvious; his right was ready to fire. He wouldn't anticipate my move. I put my weight into it, my back muscles twisting

with a left-cross. The crowd reacted to the smacking sound of fist to cheek with sympathetic interjections. I felt the impact vibrate back into my bicep, tried to keep the pain from showing on my face. My hand didn't seem broken, but it felt like someone smashed it with a sledgehammer.

Somewhere, someone was telling one of us to quit. I stepped back and gave him opportunity to end it there, all the while warning myself: don't let your guard down. Don't take your eyes off him. I was ready.

He rushed to tackle me, and I could've easily tripped him, but knew that would only delay him. It'd wound his pride further, amplify his desire to win. I decided to strike his face again. Figured it'd hurt a hell of a lot, might even change his mind. As soon as I had an opening, I went for it. With a crack, blood gushed from his nose. Chase finally stopped long enough for Nigel (my soccer team's captain) and Trey (one of the guys across the hall from me) to step out of the crowd. They surrounded Chase, restrained him. Dylan copied them, yanked my arms behind my back and pulled me away. I didn't bother to resist, because it was at that moment that I realized how bad things looked: Chase's pinched nose, blood dripping in a staggering line down his mouth and chin, nearly everyone I knew had their jaws hanging open. They were frozen from shock. Beth included. I searched for Kayla among them, found her safe at the edge of the yard with Reid and Samantha.

The three of them moved in unison as Reid called out. "Dylan, let him go. Logan isn't a threat to anyone."

"Not a threat? He beat the crap out of someone. We all know your friend has a history of hitting on other people's girls. I don't blame that guy for trying to teach him a lesson." He released me with a grunt anyway.

“Are you alright?” Kayla asked. A cautious hand wiped the blood from my lip, and I couldn’t reply. My breath hitched at the feel of her touch. For a moment everything else – the people, the music from the house, the sound of oncoming sirens – faded and disappeared. All I saw was Kayla looking up at me.

I wanted to kiss her. It took all of my willpower not to. Reid snapped me out of it. The crowd scattered, they ran down the street or piled into cars. For me, leaving wasn’t an option. The cops would find me either way and running made you look guilty. I wanted the cops to come so I could tell them the truth.

The cops pulled up to the house, blue lights flashing. The high-pitched scream of the siren abruptly cut out and the cruiser’s spotlight went on. I winced as the yard flooded with light. Two officers exited the car. Each had a hand by his holster and stepped into the remaining swarm of students. The partner’s badge read J. O’Neill. The older policeman was more than familiar, he was like extended family. The man had been friends with my father for a good twenty years, long before I was born anyway. Strict with his kids, I grew up intimidated by the sergeant’s mob-boss appearance and drill sergeant personality. The two didn’t mesh and neither had good connotations to me. His slicked-back thinning hair was the softest feature on him. The rest was pursed lips, thick grimacing eyebrows, broad shoulders and a stiff posture. I blamed my bad luck that it was him responding to the call.

The sound of Sergeant Riccardi’s deep voice shut up the crowd as he stormed forward. “Break it up. Party’s over.” The other students opened a path for Riccardi. And then he saw me, the spitting image of my dad. Not exactly thrilled to see me, his scowl remained intact. He didn’t stop until we were toe-to-toe.

His head blocked the spotlight from their car and shaded my eyes. I blinked at the halo spot in my vision, fought the urge to retreat or to lower my head because guilty people do that sort of thing. And I had no regrets over what happened. “It’s not what you think...” I said.

Chase cut me off, “Officer, he broke my nose. I want him arrested for assault.”

“It was self-defense,” I argued. Riccardi turned a mini flashlight on and directed its beam at my eyes. O’Neill did the same to Chase.

When the officer was satisfied, he asked me, “Is that right? How did you end up with nothing more than a busted lip? Beating the crap out of a guy to save your pride isn’t self-defense.”

I tried to contain my frustration, to keep cool despite the accusation when I really wanted to raise my voice and plead my case. My pause caused Kayla to speak for me. “That’s not what happened. I saw the whole thing.”

Riccardi’s partner gestured for her to stop. “You can explain it at the station,” he said, taking his cuffs out and moving to arrest Chase.

Chase backed up on his approach. “What the hell? You can’t arrest *me*. Arrest *him*. *He’s* the problem. He’s been sneaking around with my girlfriend.” It took both officers to detain Chase and force him into the cruiser. His exclamations continued inside the car, muffled behind the door.

I heard Kayla sigh, felt her warm body lean against me, her breath warm on my neck. I put an arm around her, half expecting her to shy away, but she didn’t. Her head tilted into me. I took in the lavender scent of her hair and the contact of her soft skin. My pulse slowed. I didn’t care about the consequences I was about to face. I did what I had to do to help Kayla. And I knew I’d do it again if I had to. Nobody had ever needed me this way before. I barely knew

Kayla, yet I didn't want to let her go. I wanted her to be safe and wanted to be the one to make sure she was. And I think I needed her touch as much as she needed mine.

Riccardi interrupted us, cuffs in hand. "I hate to have to do this to you, Logan, but I can't play favorites in front of all these people. We've got a second car on its way to take you in."

Chapter 2

The hand cuffs rubbed tight against my skin. Sergeant Riccardi escorted me into the Greer police station, and Kayla followed close at my heels. She'd offered to go in and make a statement. I was grateful for it. I had a feeling Chase would spin his telling of what happened leading up to the fight in his favor. He'd likely play the victim, and his injuries would support that. My only hope to prove otherwise was Kayla's story matching mine.

The station was small, a product of the low crime level and population. There were a few plastic chairs by the entryway and a wall facing the doors, a bulletproof glass window separating the officers from whatever might walk in. Riccardi guided us to the left, into a key-card locked door and down a hall. Chase's voice erupted from one of the side rooms. The officer with him placated him, promised to let him see a doctor about his nose. My eyes trained to the two framed pictures of uniformed officers at the end of the hall. Their faces stared at us as I made my walk of shame.

Soon I'd be getting my one phone call. But did I really want to call my parents? This was worse than any trouble I'd ever been in. My dad was one of those by-the-book cops. Chances were that he'd let me sit in jail, play the tough-love routine for a bit, and make sure I'd learned my lesson. At least I knew the cops wouldn't risk sticking me in the same cell as the creep.

A tug at my arm told me to stop, and Riccardi sent Kayla inside an empty room to wait. He directed me further, past the room Chase was in. When he saw me, Chase jumped up. It knocked the chair out from behind him with a loud thud. They'd given him a short leash. One hand locked in one cuff, the other cuff locked onto a bar on the tabletop. He tried to stretch his reach, metal clanged against metal as the leash held him at bay. "You're gonna pay for what you did to me. You hear me?"

“If you don’t calm down we’ll lock you up in holding overnight.” O’Neill shut the door and blinds.

I was brought to Riccardi’s dimly lit office at the end of the building. It was right next to the fallen officer memorial. I’d been in there at the age of ten, visiting with my dad on one of those bring-your-kid-to-work days. His job as a correctional officer wasn’t exactly kid-friendly, so he took me to Greer PD on his day off. I played with the cruiser’s siren, got locked up in the holding cell for fun, and then had my fingerprints taken before having lunch at Riccardi’s desk. Besides the rolling black chair and computer being updated, nothing else had changed in the room.

He removed the handcuffs and I rubbed at the red indented line in my wrists, tried to get blood flowing again. The sergeant’s tough-cop face dissipated in front of me. “You’re lucky it was me on duty, you know. The way the other guy looks makes it hard to believe you’re the good guy in this.”

“Kayla knows what happened, she saw the whole thing. There were other witnesses, too. And videos, I think.”

“I believe you, kid. How about I take your statement and you promise not to give us reason to cuff you again?”

I agreed and went on to give him a play-by-play. When I was done, he stood and told me to follow. I expected him to take me to do the usual booking stuff: prints, mug shot, confiscate my belongings. Instead he took me in the opposite direction. “I’ll have one of the officers take you and the girl back to campus. I think it’s safe to say that boy will think twice next time. At least where you’re involved, you clearly have the advantage. Speaking of, are you teaching those self-defense classes with your dad while you’re at school?”

I shook my head.

“Well, it might be a good idea to teach your girlfriend a few things.”

“We’re not a couple,” I said. “We just met about two hours ago.”

Right as I spoke, he opened the door to the room Kayla was in. He paused for a moment to scratch his brow, raised his voice to speak to us both. “Alright, anyway, the both of you should take precautions to stay safe. We’ll be keeping the other guy in holding a little while to let him cool off. He needs medical attention, of course. But you two are free to go. I’ll give you a lift to campus.”

“Wait, that’s it?” It was too simple, too good to be true that I’d walk out of there like I’d gone in voluntarily. I mean, I’d broken somebody’s nose.

“Your witness made things easy, and with it being your first offense...it was all paperwork. The other guy can’t press charges without getting himself into trouble. You should know that if this happens again, it won’t be so easy. Understand?”

The sergeant’s radio beeped to life, let out a quick pulse of static. A dispatcher requested backup for GSC Police and an ambulance for an A & B. That was police lingo for assault and battery.

O’Neill popped his head in from the lobby, hand to microphone in impatient anticipation. “These two have a ride waiting for them. You want me to take the call, Sergeant?”

I looked to Kayla, caught her anxious expression. The call confirmed the rumors. At the same time they amplified the danger. Another assault? Had everyone in this town gone crazy over the summer?

As though answering my question, the phones began ringing and the station bustled. The Sergeant nodded consent and O’Neill responded in police code as they rushed to the emergency.

The dispatcher relayed the details over the radio as they left. Female victim, college student, slightly different M.O. from the last ones, she said. The girl was found unconscious in the middle of the Green, no witnesses, her attacker gone. I couldn't hear the rest as they turned the corner.

How many assaults had there been? The dispatcher said other *ones*, plural. It shocked me beyond words. It was surreal. I didn't want to believe it, or think about it. And I was happy everyone I knew about was at the party or here, away from danger.

Our waiting ride wasn't Samantha like I'd thought. It was Bethany, one leg crossed over the other in a chair by the exit. She nervously chewed on a fingernail and went right into explanation when she saw us. "Reid was going to leave you here to fend for yourself. I figured I'd check and see if you needed help with bail money or something."

"You can't take Reid seriously."

"I know, but I wanted to help."

I wondered what her boyfriend had to say about that. He wasn't interested in helping me. Besides that, Bethany usually took his side over mine. It was an unspoken reality, Dylan was the reason she avoided me. Whether he didn't trust her, or didn't trust me I couldn't say.

"I'm surprised Dylan let you," I said.

Her shoulders slumped, gaze fell to the floor. It was a jerk thing to say. I didn't know why I let it slip out, pent up anger maybe. And she didn't argue it. That was new. Where were all the excuses and praise for Dylan?

By the time we arrived at the party house, the front yard was vacant, the street no longer lined by cars. My fight with Chase had ruined the party. If there were any stragglers left, they must've been inside or behind the stockade fence.

Bethany stepped out of her car, the keys rattling as she shut the door. “Do you mind if I speak to Logan?” she asked Kayla.

A part of me wanted to deny Bethany any of my time. She hadn’t acknowledged my existence for four months. Denial would’ve been fair. Then there was the other part, the one that saw better days. She was the one who had once cooked soup when I had the flu and helped me cram until four in the morning when I forgot about an exam. Bethany wasn’t even in that class, which meant the hours spent studying with me did nothing for her. Then in February, she skipped school for the Patriots Super Bowl victory parade in Boston. She cheered so loud she lost her voice. And though we weren’t on speaking terms during the spring, I saw her – alone – at a tournament game played on GSC’s diamond. Beth hated baseball, said there wasn’t enough action in it. My mood softened with the memories and changed to curiosity.

“Are you dating her?”

“No. Is that really all you wanted?” What did she care, anyway?

“Of course not, I wanted to apologize. I swear I didn’t mean to hurt you. Cutting ties just seemed like the best thing for all of us. It kept the peace for me and Dylan. And I figured it would be easier for you because you wouldn’t have to see me all the time. I realize things are different now, but I still care about you. I was hoping maybe we could be friends again. Dylan doesn’t get me the way that you always did. I miss you.”

“I can’t. Friends wasn’t enough for me.”

She took a step closer. I hadn’t seen it in the dark, but there were tears pooling in her eyes, ready to spill over. “Everything I did was wrong. I should’ve chosen you, not Dylan. We would’ve been good together, as a couple. I can see that now.”

Beth's words echoed inside my brain. Her confession mirrored how I'd felt all along. But I didn't know what to do with it. Her admission of past mistakes and feelings didn't change our situation. It was in Bethany's hands to change things, and she'd made her choice.

I wanted to look away from her, to hide the loss I felt. Her dark eyes held my gaze. Hope fluttered inside me, sped my heart rate up. She stood on her tip-toes, reached up for a kiss. I closed the gap between our lips. I knew what we were doing was wrong, considering she was taken – especially considering her boyfriend was probably here somewhere. I needed to know if there was something between us. Our history was littered with unanswered questions. The most important: Was I the one she wanted or was Dylan?

Beth pulled away first. She opened her eyes slowly and looked contemplative, as though she heard what I'd asked myself. "Maybe we could give it a try?" she asked.

"Is that what you want? To break up with Dylan so we can be together?" Was that what I wanted? I didn't know. Too much had happened. I couldn't sort through it yet.

Her gaze left me and darted around the yard. A couple girls waved from a car in the driveway and giggled. For once, I didn't care.

"I should talk to him before he finds out from someone else. We'll talk soon, right?"

"Yeah, sure," I said, stung by her leaving so soon.

It felt like she'd chosen him again. I'd never been so confused in my life. She was difficult to decipher, always dancing around her true feelings and acting as though she could care less about most things. Bethany put on a show and put up a wall in front of everyone else, but I believed the kiss. It was the most honest moment we'd had in a while.

What if Dylan convinced her to work things out with him? What if she didn't break it off with him? Could I go back to friends despite everything? Did I want that?

As I drove Kayla through the neighborhoods toward campus, we passed The Java Junction, Bethany's favorite place. The coffee shop was part of the downtown business strip where the buildings are townhouse style, no space between them. They weren't the cookie-cutter kind; they were more like books on a library shelf. None of the buildings matched. If it weren't for the signage or the fabric awning striped in shades of brown, The Java Junction's one story cottage could be mistaken for someone's house. With the store closed for the night and all the lights off, the sign was lost to the darkness.

I imagined how it'd look come morning with tables and chairs set on the sidewalk. People would be eating outside in their last-ditch attempts to soak up sunlight before fall. The first time me and Beth went there was the morning of that big exam. The strong aroma of fresh-ground beans welcomed me, and the caffeine revived us before class. Later in the semester, when the air outside was cold enough to see our breath, Bethany used the steaming cup to warm her hands through purple gloves. Nostalgia had forced me back there on a few lonely occasions since.

I learned the hard way that I couldn't spend all of my time with Reid and Samantha. They needed space, and sometimes I needed a break from being the third wheel. Sometimes being alone was less torturous than being with my friends and their happiness. Honestly, it went deeper than that. My purpose in going to The Java Junction on those lonely occasions was in desperate hopes of seeing Bethany there. She did show up on the last day of finals. I sat sipping the bitter dark roast, willing her to come over. She didn't.

I thought my friendship with Bethany was over. And I thought *I* was over it. Now she had changed all that in the matter of minutes. I felt lost again. I didn't know what I wanted or how to go about figuring it out.

Beside me, Kayla sat quiet. She had her head turned, peering out the side window. I had ignored her the whole time, hadn't even noticed the radio volume was low. I turned it up a little and asked the first thing I could come up with. "What building do you live in?"

"Linwood Hall." Her wide-eyed gaze moved anxiously about the streets, hands fidgeted in her lap.

"You still on edge?"

"I'm nervous about being alone tonight. Chase knows what room I'm in. And Amber, my roommate, she's still at the party. When I talked to her before, she told me she wasn't leaving until morning."

I wondered if I should invite her to my room or if that would be too much? It almost sounded like Kayla wanted me to, as if she hinted at it. But we barely knew each other. There had to be some other options.

"Amber should be back in a few hours, right? We could drive around, maybe get a coffee or hang out somewhere. Whatever you want."

"Do you mind if we hang out at your dorm for a while?"

My heart quickened at the question. "No, I don't mind. But we don't have the whole suite set-up. It's pretty cramped."

"That's okay."

I acted cool as I agreed, shrugged my shoulders and tried to keep my eye on the road, all the while, wondering how this would go. I couldn't shake the thought of Kayla in my arms, the way she leaned in like it was an everyday thing for us.

"Can I change the radio station?" she asked over the commercial.

On my okay, Kayla scanned through the stations, stopping on a country channel as it played the tail-end of a song. When the tune died out, the next track began. Slow tempo instrumentals filled the Jeep: guitar and drums, a whining violin. Her face lit up with the kind of enthusiasm you see mostly from little kids. It helped me finally loosen up. Kayla's mood seemed contagious.

Country music was never my thing, but Kayla's interest piqued mine. So I listened to the lyrics about lost love. The song hit on all my emotions about Bethany...regret, pain, loss, more regret. The whole notes with lamenting vibratos echoed those feelings. For someone like me, after going through that in real life, hearing those lyrics awakened the pain I'd spent months trying to forget. But at the same time, the song told me not to walk the same path again. It said I had to be smarter this time.

After parking the Jeep, I thought of another option. "There's a game room in the Commons that's open pretty late. We can hang out there if you prefer."

"I get the feeling that I'm making you uncomfortable. I'm sorry. I guess I kind of forced my company on you. You'd probably rather be at the party with your friends."

"That's not true, I'm happy here with you. I just thought you wouldn't want to be alone with me after everything that happened today. I figured Chase would've made you leery of all guys now."

"Leery of other guys, maybe. But you? Not so much. You went out of your way to help me. You made me feel safe." She looked at the ground, shoved her hands into her pockets. "I hope I didn't cause a rift for you and your girlfriend."

“You mean Bethany? You don’t need to apologize. If there’s a rift between us, it’s her doing, not yours. And Beth and I had never been more than friends. I don’t know what we are anymore. It’s complicated. Anyway, I’m glad I was there to help.”

Her question led me to some of my own about Kayla and Chase, namely the cause of their argument. Their relationship appeared to be as messed up as mine and Beth’s. I had to know more.

“What’s up with this Chase guy?”

“I wish I knew. He seemed totally normal when we met, otherwise I would have never agreed to go out with him. Chase works on campus, he does freshman orientation tours and their last stop was always the bookstore. That’s where I work. Up until our date, he was really charming. Then during our date I got to see his real personality and I was not impressed. I told him I wasn’t interested, but he’s been trying to convince me to change my mind ever since. All he did was prove that I made the right decision. I’d rather stay single and concentrate on school.”

My mind hung on the last part. She wasn’t looking for anything beyond friendship. The moment we had earlier didn’t mean the same thing to her as it did me. I had no idea what I needed or wanted at that point.

It felt like my life kept pushing me toward Bethany. My relationship with her always felt relaxed, even after I realized I wanted to be more than friends. I could be myself around her. Besides that, I trusted how I felt about Bethany. But I couldn’t trust the effect Kayla had on me. She made me no better than the guys that drooled over Samantha’s looks. Kayla deserved better than that. She deserved a guy that cared for her. When I think of my past with Beth, that’s what I am to her – the guy that cared enough to put her first.

By the time we entered Brice Hall, my unease reached a plateau. There were plenty of explanations for my unease: hanging out with a girl that I barely knew, talking to her about things I'd been trying to avoid. Not to forget the fact that Bethany was out dumping her boyfriend for me. Basically, I had the getting-to-know-someone jitters mixed with a guilty conscience.

I sucked it up and opened the door to my room. Kayla stepped inside and took in the eleven-by-eleven square room. Reid hadn't started unpacking yet. His side was a scattered mess. The plastic trash bags of clothes and two boxes he brought from home sat on the floor beside his bed. Our building was old and stale. Our room was basic: white walls, no moldings, no blinds. The amenities were limited to a mini-fridge and the small desks at the foot of each bed. All the dorm room beds were either elevated to accommodate storage dressers underneath or they were bunk beds. Anything to save space. We got lucky with detached beds and the so-called bigger room. My twin-size bed was against the wall on the window side of the room. Reid's was on the opposite wall and bare. We'd eventually get around to hanging stuff up.

I kicked Reid's skateboard under his bed. The guy brought it with him every semester but hardly used it. He made me feel like a nagging parent whenever he left it out. Except for that we were both cool with the whole sharing thing, him more so than me since he'd had practice with siblings.

With Kayla there, I didn't know where to go. Bed or chair? At the chair I could fake interest in the computer if it got too quiet. Beds would be either too cozy or too weird if we sat across the room from each other. Probably confirm how awkward I felt. I was over thinking everything. Because I didn't know how to be a girl's friend, or how to look at a girl without

seeing her beauty. I never knew how to care without falling. And worse, there was nobody to save me from the possibility of looking dumb, nobody to entertain Kayla if I failed to.

My cell phone rang, and I was thankful for the interruption. I fumbled for it, thought it might be Bethany. It wasn't. "Samantha's probably wondering how everything went at the police station," I told Kayla. "Do you mind if I take it?"

"No, of course not. Go ahead."

As soon as I picked up, she started on me. She didn't even bother to say hi. "Why is everyone saying that you kissed Bethany tonight? Please tell me you didn't."

I stalled, stepping out into the hall. "Technically, she initiated it."

Samantha wasn't the type to let lame excuses slide. I knew I had to let her say what was on her mind. She was the advice-giver, the motherly figure that tried to help everyone. And similar to moms, if she didn't agree with you, she'd tell you.

"But you kissed her back. And Dylan was still there. What were you thinking?"

Her attitude frustrated me. It was her idea to have the party in the first place. And both of them insisted that I go. Maybe my brain got a little shaken up from being punched. Or maybe I wanted to kiss Bethany, whether they liked it or not.

"It's not like I planned it or anything. I tried to avoid Beth but she picked Kayla and me up from the station. When we got back she insisted on talking. The kiss just happened." There was no defense, no other reasoning to offer. And I didn't want to get into it then. "Can you yell at me later? Because Kayla's here and..."

"She is?" The phone jostled as she told Reid what I'd said. "Okay. I won't keep you then."

Samantha was going to kill me when I finally told her how Bethany planned to break up with Dylan for me. There was no doubt Reid would be her accomplice. My two closest friends on campus were the biggest opposition of me dating her. Then after Dylan, I should say.

I returned to the room and found Kayla at home on my bed. Her shoes off, no socks, and legs crisscrossed into the shape of a pretzel, blue jeans on gray sheets. She curled her toes and I couldn't help but notice the way her toenails matched her tank top. I stood frozen, eyes on her, my mind blank. "There's plenty of room here," she said. I shoved my hands into the pockets of my hoodie and took a seat at the headboard facing her. "You want to talk for a while?"

"Just talk?" I said, trying to ignore the lavender scent on Kayla. Tomorrow, my bed, maybe even the whole room, would smell like her. It was definitely an upgrade from the damp wood and dusty air vent odor.

"Why not? I was hoping to find out more about you."

We spent hours getting to know each other. She had some serious goals and listed them at an excited pace. As her words spilled out, hand gestures accompanied them for emphasis. I had nothing to add. I just listened, taken by her smile.

She was a sophomore, like me, but it was her first semester living on campus. Kayla said she would've been studying abroad for a year, would've been in France that very day if it weren't for her father calling it off. He was overprotective. She was afraid to tell her parents about everything going on around school between Chase and the assaults. Kayla thought her dad would overreact.

If it weren't for her dad keeping her home and my friends convincing me to go out, I might never have met her. I was glad I did, though. I liked getting to know Kayla. I didn't even care that it took a busted lip to get us there.

Chapter 3

“Dude, wake up,” Reid said, his voice breaking into my sleep.

The stench of cigarette smoke made me turn my head, things got darker, like someone had turned off the light. Someone shook my arm, and they weren’t being gentle about it, either.

“Go away,” I said. I wasn’t exactly what you would call a morning person. I squeezed my eyes tighter, not caring what he wanted. I wasn’t ready to move, let alone give up on sleep.

“Fine, have it your way. Samantha, *Kayla*, and I will go get lunch without you,” said Reid.

Kayla? I jolted up and scanned the room, squinting while my eyes adjusted. It took a moment to place myself; the room was new and the bed wasn’t mine. The girl from the party last night, I’d brought her to our dorm after. When we’d gotten tired, I let her sleep in my bed and took Reid’s for myself. My bed was wrinkled from use, but empty, which meant my roommate was lying. “Real funny, jerk.”

“No joke.”

“Then where’s Kayla?”

“She’s with Samantha. They went to Linwood Hall. Kayla didn’t want to wear yesterday’s clothes. I’m not gonna lie, we were shocked she was still here. Hell, we were shocked you invited her over in the first place.”

I ignored this and searched for my cell until I found it kicked under the bed. “You said we’re going for lunch?” I hit a button to illuminate the screen – no missed calls or messages. And it was almost noon. Reid answered with a short yep, and I got up to grab what I needed to get ready. Neither of us spoke as I did, but I knew he was waiting for me to spill about me and Kayla. He probably wouldn’t believe me if I told him the truth, that we talked for a few hours

and nothing more. I dug through a drawer, passing over tees and shorts, jogging pants. I couldn't remember where I'd put my button-down shirt or my new jeans.

“What are you looking for?”

I moved onto the next drawer and found the clothes, then stepped back to think. What else? The stubble on my face told me I needed a shave, but the swollen ache said to skip it. So I grabbed my soap, shampoo, and deodorant.

I didn't know what to say to Reid about Kayla, I wanted to ask if she'd talked about me to either of them. But the simple idea of seeing her again made me nervous, enough that I almost forgot my toothbrush and toothpaste. Reid's eyes following me around didn't help. I prepared for him to complain about something, anything. There was plenty from last night: me kissing Bethany, me fighting with Chase and ruining their party, me being taken to the police station in handcuffs, and everything to do with Kayla. I was beyond surprised when he opened his mouth and said, “Make it quick. I'm starving.”

By the time I got back to the room, everyone was so focused on the TV that they hadn't heard me come in. Kayla was the first person I noticed. She wore a long plum v-neck tee shirt and a pair of white pants, the kind that cut off mid-calf. I had no idea what they were called, I only knew that seeing her in them made me happy. The word sounded wrong somehow. Happy wasn't the right expression. It was stronger than that, like I was high on the sight of her, heart thumping and hands sweaty.

Her hair fell mostly to one side in waves of blond, matching how Samantha wore her hair. On Kayla the change highlighted the soft angles of her face, made her lips the focal point. Hers were a raspberry tone, not too red and not too pale.

I shut the door behind me and everyone turned. Kayla flashed a smile.

“Finally. Waiting for you to get ready is as bad as waiting for a chick,” Reid said.

I felt a hot wave of embarrassment. It had taken longer than normal for me to decide what to wear. I knew it wasn't a date, but that hadn't stopped me from considering how I'd look to Kayla. It had to be better than the impression she got from Reid's Superman tee.

“At least I smell better than you,” I said. He was notorious for splashing on cheap cologne in failed attempts to cover up the tobacco stink. The cologne had a woody fragrance. Paired with the cigarettes, his unique odor was what I called 'wet campfire' – smoked leaves and branches put out with a bucket of rainwater.

“He's got a point there,” said Samantha, nudging his arm.

Reid acted offended by his girl's comment and took to mock-wrestling her on his bed. “Take it back.”

It forced Kayla from her seat. She stood up and joined me, a light blush on her cheeks. I couldn't tell if it was makeup or the product of her mood. I had to admit, being around my friends made me feel awkward, too.

“Hi,” said Kayla.

“Good morning.” I wanted to tell her that I was glad she stayed, that I was happy she decided to go out with us. But the giggling noises in the background got louder and became smooching noises. “Guys, knock it off.”

Samantha convinced him to stop and went to the mirror. “What do you think about Kayla's hair? I did it for her.” She asked, looking at my reflection as she reapplied pink lipstick and mashed her lips together.

I raised an eyebrow, unsure how to respond. Why did Samantha insist on putting me on the spot like that? The truth was that Kayla was beautiful no matter how her hair was done. And

based on her fidgeting, I could tell she was just as uneasy about being the conversation piece as I was about the question.

“It looks nice,” I said, not wanting to discuss it. My mind kept going back to the chills she gave me when she touched my busted lip, the warmth of her body in my arms and her girly floral shampoo. The new hairdo was about all I could handle. If Reid’s girlfriend had convinced Kayla to wear some skin-tight diva outfit, it would’ve been impossible to focus on anything else.

We walked to the bus stop in the rain and stood under the glass shelter with a group of other students. Drops pitter-pattered above our sardine-can enclosure and my friends chatted with Kayla. Down the street at a crosswalk, a campus police officer in a neon yellow jacket stopped traffic for some soaked pedestrians. After crossing, he waved the cars through.

Samantha was busy updating me on what I’d missed while I slept. Chase called Kayla multiple times overnight. He’d left one voicemail and the girls wanted me to hear it. There was a creepy sigh before Chase spoke. “Kayla, Kayla, Kayla. Are you ignoring my calls? I know you’re upset, but we can work things out. I’ll see you soon.”

Kayla wasn’t kidding, the guy sounded obsessed. Even after she’d told him to leave her alone and me beating him up, he still pursued her. Anger swelled inside me. I expected Chase to show up at any moment, to pick up where he left off.

The bus pulled up, releasing a flood of students, and I strained to see each among those hidden in hoods or obscured by umbrellas popping open. I felt my pulse quicken in my wrists as my body prepared for the worst. It wasn’t fear that drove me, it was concern for Kayla. She didn’t deserve the crap he was putting her through. And though I was certain she’d never ask for my help, I planned to offer it. There were some things you couldn’t fix by yourself and this seemed like one of them.

Everyone else at the bus stop had boarded, and now Kayla shifted closer to me. I assumed her thoughts were in sync with mine. “Hey, don’t worry,” I said. “I’m right here.”

The air-conditioned interior was packed with few seats left to choose from. I dried my face with my shirtsleeve, anxious eyes swept the seats as we passed them, shoes squeaked on the slippery floor. Once I saw it was all clear, I relaxed a little.

I hated taking the bus. If anything, the rain amplified my reasons for hating it. The bus’s wet dog smell warred with the perfumes and body sprays of its occupants. I hoped I didn’t stink. Hoped my deodorant managed to keep up with my tension level because I couldn’t risk a sniff-test to find out. A few more steps and I caught onto another note – someone’s lunch.

Kayla took a seat in the middle of the bus, next to a girl with straight brown hair and black rimmed glasses that looked like movie-theater 3D ones. The girl hugged her school bag in a way that reminded me of a child holding onto her favorite stuffed animal. Samantha sat across from them, next to a tall guy wearing a Red Sox hat. Reid went to the back, beside a guy with a thick beard and mustache who bopped to the beat of the music from his headphones. I could hear the bass line from where I stood in the aisle next to Kayla’s seat. We had three stops to go until we reached the Commons on the other side of GSC, and it looked like I would be standing for the ride.

The bus jolted to a start and threw me off balance. I grabbed onto the back of Kayla’s seat for support. The humming engine and whirring tires signaled the increase in speed. It took the first right in our route, its blinker clicking faintly behind the assorted voices. After a wide turn, I had to let go. My knuckles screamed. Unfortunately the bus driver seemed to be new, apprehensive in his speed, overly cautious. His wipers worked faster than necessary and swiped before water blurred the window.

Without anything to support me, the bus felt like a small boat. It pitched on bumps in the road and swayed at each hard turn. I couldn't seem to find my sea legs no matter how I stood. The wind swept around us, its sound equal to waves on the ocean. I never cared much for boats either. It made me that much more impatient for our final destination. We should've walked. The campus streets were bumper-to-bumper with cars and between the stops and waiting at traffic lights, walking would've been faster. There were people on sidewalks faster than us. I was in a rush to get off campus, to put miles between us and Chase. That voicemail was all wrong, and it made me feel protective of Kayla.

The feeling was new to me. I'd never jumped into someone else's drama before or fought someone else's fight. With Kayla I hadn't thought twice about it. If anything, I felt obligated to, as though she counted on me to help. It wasn't the kind of obligation that I accepted grudgingly, either. For whatever reason, I wanted the job.

A wave of cell phone notifications crested around me, and among them I heard my signature tone, a basketball swish. It was my email notification. Like everyone else, I checked the message. School officials sent out a mass email to all students and faculty – the subject: 'Crime Alert.' I skimmed as fast as I could.

Three assaults on campus, including last night...all female victims, all unable to identify their assailant. Campus and town police believed the crimes to be committed by the same person. The perpetrator's description was generic - white male, about 5' 9", wearing dark clothes and a dark hoodie.

It could be anyone, I thought. He might even be a student. My gaze to move from student to student, checking for anyone with a hint of guilt on their face. Instead I found eyes on me. It

took a second to comprehend how easily I fit into the perp's description. With newfound frustration, I continued reading.

Campus police had increased patrols. 'In addition, a safety curfew has been implemented for the GSC community effective immediately. Students are to remain indoors between the hours of midnight and 5:00AM until further notice.'

My finger scrolled down to bulleted safety tips: 'Don't go out alone, report suspicious activity, be aware of your surroundings, use the bus if possible, and stay on lighted pathways after dark.' The message ended with contact numbers for victim support and an anonymous tip line.

I couldn't believe this was real. This was Greer we were talking about, a place where the police logs were supposed to be nothing more than traffic violations and petty crimes. Worse yet, this guy they were looking for didn't seem to be deterred by anything. Everyone knew the first assault happened during daylight on a public campus during the busiest time of the year. What good would a curfew do? The best advice for girls like Kayla and Samantha – and Bethany – was to stay in groups. But nobody had it worse than Kayla; she was already a direct target for Chase.

Minutes later, the bus whined to a stop at the Commons. We joined other students on the sidewalk as they rushed in and out of the contemporary-style building. It was built of brick the same as every other building, but went against the traditional white-trimmed, red-brick rectangles of its older counterparts. The east-side of campus was all new, an expansion of the college. Here the halls blended a variety of exterior textures and colors. The Commons architect's expression of greatness came in the form of floor to ceiling windows and odd shapes to break from the out-dated style of GSC's original halls. From the outside I could see students in

the Commons' cafeteria, eating with friends and looking down at us. I blinked at the falling rain, returned my gaze to my friends.

Samantha hitched a ride on Reid's back and they went on ahead. I knew she was trying to give Kayla and me some space. She probably figured we were hitting it off since I hadn't told my friends the whole story of my possible second chance with Bethany. I'd have to do something about that soon.

"I should've warned you about my friends before," I told her. "Being around them can get awkward. Especially Reid, he can be a little immature. I'm going to have to apologize now for anything that he says or does later."

"You're exaggerating right?" A grin crossed her face when I shook my head. "Well, they've been really nice to me so far."

It was unusual to find a girl not offended by Reid. He had a tendency to say the wrong thing, to let out unfiltered thoughts rather than keeping them to himself. And he needed a target, someone to joke about. That target was usually me. I worried he'd switch to Kayla.

"Yeah, key words - 'so far'. The day is just beginning. But I promise, even if Reid does give you a hard time, he really is a good guy."

Reid rushed back and called out. "Someone slashed your tires."

"You're kidding, right?"

"Go see for yourself."

I picked up my pace, jogging until I was close enough to see my hand-me-down Jeep Wrangler sitting at a tilt in its parking spot. All but one tire was flat. I bent down to get a closer look, the slash marks were clear. I knew it was Chase's doing.

"Dammit." I wanted to punch something, no, punch someone, again.

Samantha, ever the optimist, tried to calm me. “Look, at least he got his revenge out on the truck instead of you.”

“Please, it’s a proven fact that Chase can’t touch Logan. That’s why he had to take it out on the truck.”

“What if it wasn’t him?” she asked. “Chase wasn’t the only person Logan pissed off last night.”

I immediately understood what Samantha meant. I made two possible enemies, the second being Dylan. He could’ve done it. Still, my gut said that it wasn’t him. Chase warned that he’d get back somehow.

“This was definitely Chase,” I told them.

I let my arms fall to my sides and inhaled deeply to relax myself, the way I did before a big game. I wasn’t going to let Chase get to me. If he thought messing with my car would convince me to distance myself from Kayla, he was way off. If anything, he proved without a doubt that he couldn’t be trusted.

Kayla put a hand on my forearm, seizing every bit of my attention. “Logan, I’m so sorry. This is all my fault. I can pay to fix it; I have an emergency credit card.”

“Kayla, you didn’t do anything wrong. You don’t have to apologize for things you had no control over. And don’t worry about the tires. We’ll go eat and I’ll take care of the truck later.”

“My car’s better anyway, Kayla. You’re gonna love it.”

Samantha called shotgun and ran off toward Reid’s Mustang with him chasing after. I rolled my eyes for Kayla to see. It had no effect over the guilt written on her face. With a backdrop of drips and leaves rustling she walked in silence beside me. Kayla didn’t seem to mind rain the way Samantha did and kept a normal pace. It was a welcomed cool-off from the

humid summer temps. It must've been the perfect weather for revenge. People would've been too concerned with avoiding the rain to notice anything.

Between all the cars and sheets of rain, I lost sight of my friends. I wasn't even sure where he'd parked. I was about to ask Kayla when car tires screeched. "What the..." I said. The vroom of the car roared behind us and I pulled Kayla out of the road. But it was only Reid in his dirty white 80s Mustang. He skidded to a stop. "I should've known."

He stuck his head out the window. "You shoulda seen your face. That was awesome."

For a second I pictured him as a shaggy dog enjoying the summer breeze from its owner's car and I couldn't help but let out a quick laugh at the image. "Are you done showing off now?"

"Aw, don't cry about it. Get in the car. I'm hungry."

Kayla's mood perked up thanks to my friends. She smiled and laughed out loud while Reid and Samantha sang along with the radio, some power ballad from a classic rock band. And as expected, Reid's driving left Kayla holding on for dear life. She gripped the door handle to keep from falling over. It didn't help that the Mustang had slippery leather seats. Whenever he turned left, her body shifted toward me, sometimes bumping into me. When Reid caught on to her amusement, he amped up his comedic act. I had to admit I was thankful for his jokes and bad driving because Kayla seemed happy again. Her mood was contagious to me, to all of us, really. We were having a good time.

Reid drove us to his favorite local restaurant, hidden on the outskirts of town – with a bumpy old parking lot, home-style cooking, and noisy dining room. Samantha had introduced us to it almost a year ago since she grew up in Greer. Today it was ideal. Most GSC students didn't travel far enough from campus to go there.

All-Star Grill was a stereotypical sports bar with Boston memorabilia and photos of local teams as decoration. Red vinyl booths went along the perimeter of the restaurant's interior. At the center of the dining area was a maze of wooden pub tables. The wait-staff maneuvered around the place, large circle trays balanced on their shoulder and hand. The aroma from one table enticed my grumbling stomach. I felt like Reid, like I needed to whine about being hungry. I'd slept through breakfast. I munched on free peanuts to calm its impatient churning and watched a waitress with short silver hair deliver their steaming plates of fish and chips, a bacon cheeseburger, and a Philly cheesesteak sandwich.

We sat in a corner booth with a window, Kayla to my left. Sunlight broke through the clouds and lit up her hair golden. Samantha sat on the inside of the bench she shared with Reid. The bench felt smaller than I remembered. I was used to having the whole side to myself. Even when Bethany and I were close, we didn't hang out with my friends. Reid and Beth didn't exactly get along. But Kayla was different. Somehow she managed to fit in with us. My friends included her as though she'd always been a part of the group, rather than the new addition that she was.

I could get used to this – the four of us together – finally not having to be the third wheel. A nut hit the side of my cheek, bounced off, and dropped into my water. “Sweet, flavored water,” said Reid.

I gave him a dirty look and scooped the two peanut halves out of my glass, felt my eyebrow raise at him, a silent complaint to knock it off. Reid's girlfriend pushed closer to him and seized his peanut-throwing hand. She cuddled closer to him, I turned back to Kayla interested in the girls' conversation about them hanging out together. Without us guys. Reid doodled on the back of his paper placemat with crayons from the restaurant. The caricature's

giant head resembled his girlfriend. Kayla watched him draw, smiling at the embellishments.

“You know, you’re a lot easier to put up with than Logan’s last girl,” he told her.

His words put me on the defensive, made me wish I could shut him up. Not only was he criticizing Beth but the way he said it gave the wrong impression. It made me seem like a liar. I corrected him, “What he means is friend, not girlfriend.”

Reid laughed under his breath. “Did he tell you *that* whole story, about Bethany?”

Three sets of eyes went to me. Mine locked on Reid across the table, my frustration high. It wasn’t that I couldn’t handle the subject or that it was a secret from anyone, the issue was Reid. Every time he talked about me and Beth, he made me feel like an idiot. It was typical of Reid to mock me. But to do it front of Kayla was embarrassing as hell. I wanted to kick him under the table. More than that, I wanted her to hear it from my point of view, not his lopsided take on things.

“He told me enough,” said Kayla. She took a bite of food but kept her focus on him.

I tapped at the table, patience fading, hoped he would drop it after her response. I tried my best to act uninterested and watched a family of five at the hostess stand. Their infant cried in the portable car seat thing. The other two kids, a boy and girl, were sandwiched between the parents. They were probably three and five, their heads tilted way back to look up at their dad. The hostess seated them near us. The five-year-old girl climbed into the bench beside the carrier and tried to calm the youngest down.

“He doesn’t exactly see her the way everybody else does. For instance, last night she ditched her boyfriend to chase after Logan. Then she planted one on Logan in front of everyone, including her so-called boyfriend.”

“There’s way more to it than that, Reid.” The words came out forceful and bitter. “You don’t know her like I do. Neither of us set out to do anything wrong, it just happened. Besides, Dylan is a crappy boyfriend. You saw how he was at the party. He’s a caveman. And she’s breaking up with him.”

The baby cried louder. I figured it was my fault and felt bad for the family. Not so much for snapping at Reid. Finished with my food and anxious to leave, I dropped my fork onto the plate.

He rolled his eyes. “Breaking up with him? For you?”

“For me, for her, both? I don’t know.”

He groaned. One hand went to his forehead, rubbing at it with enough pressure to leave red marks on his skin. The waitress came by to place the check in the center of the table. Reid grabbed it right away and got up, pulling his wallet out. He dropped a stack of cash, and then dug into his other back pocket for a crushed pack of cigarettes. He and Samantha went outside while I collected the money and counted the bills.

I was glad to have him and his opinion out of the way for a bit. I sipped at my barely touched water and let the cold liquid wash away the taste of ketchup and fries.

“How much do I owe?” Kayla asked me.

When I looked up, she was pulling her hair into a ponytail. I tried not to notice the newly bared skin, the little hollows just above her collarbone. I turned back to my task, but forgot what I’d counted or how to do simple math. Kayla leaned toward me, read over my shoulder, her arm touching mine. It was there that I realized how Bethany could date one guy while kissing another. Sometimes your brain didn’t agree with your heart. Sometimes your whole body had

something to say. That's where I was. It was as though Kayla drew me in and there was nothing I could do to stop it.

It was hard to explain. I'd heard people call it 'chemistry' before, but that was too common. There was more to it than physical attraction. Being close to Kayla made everything else disappear. In that restaurant, as busy as it was with lunchtime orders being carried around by the waitstaff and customers clinking their forks against plates – I tuned it all out.

I felt mesmerized by her. I hoped to see something in the eyes staring back at me, perhaps a mirror of my own thoughts. Kayla nibbled on her bottom lip, and I wondered what it would be like to kiss her. Could my heart race any more than it already was? Or would it be one of those things that you've built up so much in your head that once it finally happened, it was nowhere near as good as you'd expected?

She backed away suddenly, broke me out of the trance. I leaned against the seat, unsure what had come over me. Beth and I weren't official yet, but it didn't stop me from feeling like I was cheating on her.

We met my friends outside as Reid finished his cigarette, one eye squinting with the inhalation. He dropped the butt to the ground and mashed it with his shoe. Samantha held out a toy to Kayla. I automatically knew where it came from. The restaurant had one of those claw vending machines in the entry way. She won almost every time. Today's prize was a toy pig wearing jeans, a black muscle shirt, and a black leather hat – a motorcycle hog. But Kayla's concentration was elsewhere.

“Kayla? What's the matter?” I asked

“That red car parked next to Reid's, it looks like the one Chase drives.”

Reid made a dinging noise to mimic the sound of the bell before a boxing match. “Round two.”

“How about we leave before that can happen?” I said.

“After what he did to your truck? You’re going to let him get away with it?”

Even though I was pissed about the truck, Kayla’s apprehension made me want to forget the whole thing ever happened. At that moment, concern for her beat out my own needs. I was set on getting her out of there. And as much as I hated to admit it, the Sergeant’s warning about a second offense had stuck with me. My uncertain future would become much more complicated if I had a record.

The girls rushed to the Mustang’s passenger door, their feet splashing through puddles, and I trailed behind with Reid, walking at a normal pace to show I wasn’t running away or something. My eyes fixed on the car parked at the driver side. Sun reflected off the windshield, and I couldn’t see the driver. I’d left distance between me and Kayla. Adrenaline pumped and alerted my senses to the sound of his engine cutting. With the girls taking the back seat this time, the front was waiting for me. It was quick thinking on their part. The driver’s seat was broken so that it wouldn’t move in any direction. Everyone besides Reid had to pile in and out of the passenger side.

My decision to trail behind didn’t leave enough time for a fast getaway, so before I could get in, Chase was out of his car. “Leaving so soon?”

“Are you seriously following me?” I asked.

“The last thing I’d do is waste my time on following any one of you three losers.”

I figured Kayla was the sole ‘non-loser’ among us, but asked anyway. “Why are you here then?”

Chase stepped toward the Mustang with a strut that made me want to hit him again. He draped his arm on the car roof and leaned in.

“Get off my car,” Reid yelled.

“Relax, I’m not hurting it. I came to see Kayla.” He stepped closer, blocking me from shutting the door. “This is ridiculous. Stop pretending to be mad at me and get out of the car.”

“I’m not pretending anything, Chase. I honestly can’t stand you.”

I contained my appreciation for her response. I wanted to applaud her. There was that feisty spark inside her. At the same time, though, I worried it would only provoke the guy. I told Reid to start the car and put it in gear. He did and then released the clutch. The car rolled forward. Chase stepped back and growled with frustration. I slammed the passenger door and we sped off in the Mustang. From the rearview mirror, I saw Chase watching in the dusty lot, dumped by Kayla, yet again.

Chapter 4

Samantha made plans with Kayla for the afternoon. They went out shopping for clothes and would set up a new phone number for Kayla. Reid and I hung out at our dorm. He played Call of Duty while talking to Trey through a headset. So far his games were the few things to make it out of his boxes and I considered taking bets on whether or not he'd ever finish unpacking or if he'd be one of those living out-of-a-suitcase hobos. Or in his case, out-of-trash-bags.

Later we were going to the drive-in movie. It was Samantha's idea. She was thrilled about spending time with Kayla and Reid. "If you don't have other plans (meaning with Bethany), you can come too, Logan," she'd said.

Beth hadn't contacted me yet. It made me doubt the whole thing. If she changed her mind, then what? Kayla? She wasn't interested. Back to the original plan, I figured, so I agreed to the movie and offered to drive.

My dad was on his way with snow tires that we'd stored in the garage. I couldn't exactly afford to buy brand new ones and since winter would be here soon enough it was the logical solution. I kept a watch out our window and let the gun-battle sounds of the video game fade into the background. For whatever reason, my mind was busy comparing Bethany and Kayla. Their looks were opposites but to me their personalities were similar once you got beyond Beth's defenses. The main difference was the fact that Kayla actually got along with my friends. That was a plus.

The problem was that during my contemplation, it became clear how much I wanted to give things another try with Beth. It didn't make any sense not to. I'd spent half of last year wishing for a chance with her. When she got with Dylan, I hoped he'd mess up somehow and

cause her to end it. Feelings of regret and questions of what-if were impossible for me to get over. I couldn't stand it anymore. I wasn't ready to walk away from her.

I checked back into real life in time to notice a blue truck pulling up outside. "My dad's here with the tires," I told Reid.

"I'll be out in a few, let me finish this game," Reid said. Gunfire rounds blasted CGI characters on the TV as he tapped the controller buttons. Both Reid and Trey yelled triumphantly. I could hear Trey inside his room when I rushed outside.

My dad was 48 and kept himself in good shape. He hadn't changed much in the past ten years, except for the missing hair on top of his head. Last year, his bald spot had taken over, and he finally gave in to shaving it all off. He rocked the shiny cue-ball look, but I had a hard time looking at it. I already resembled his younger self and thought I might suffer the same hair fate. I'd inherited my mom's dark eyes, but everything else right down to the angled jaw line, came from my dad.

"Hey, Pops," I said, hopping in.

"Where's your friend?"

"Reid should be out soon. He wouldn't leave in the middle of a game."

"I meant – the girl."

"What girl?" I was honestly unsure if he thought this had to do with Bethany or if he had heard about Kayla somehow. Unlike Reid, my parents actually liked Beth. They used to invite her over for supper. They even knew about Dylan, thanks to Reid's big mouth.

"Sgt. Riccardi called. I know about the fight and the girl causing all these problems."

I was tired of arguing yet found myself at it again. "It's not her fault, Dad, really."

"Two boys fighting over one girl? It's not a new story."

“I wasn’t fighting over her. I was trying to help her. You were the one that taught me stand up to guys like that. I thought you’d at least listen to my side before deciding I’m guilty.”

“Don’t get cocky with me. I’m trying to look out for you. Having a scholarship to come here doesn’t mean the school won’t kick you out if you cause too much trouble.”

“So someone slashes my tires, and you think *I’m* the one causing trouble?”

“I’m talking about the fact that you punched someone last night.”

“In self-defense.”

“You’re not a minor anymore. You have to think of the bigger picture.”

“Okay, I got it, Dad.”

He put the truck in gear and headed to the parking lot at the east side of campus. Besides giving him directions, I didn’t say anything else. I knew it was rude, considering he’d taken time out of work to help me out. I just didn’t want a lecture. He’d end up telling me something I didn’t want to hear. I knew him pretty well. He’d say Kayla was trouble; that I was better off without her in my life.

He didn’t understand what was going on. Kayla needed me and my friends. Besides that, Samantha liked her. So did I. And he didn’t know anything about her. Who was he to say anything?

We got the Wrangler onto jack stands and replaced one butchered tire. I was used to being his trusty assistant, and despite giving him the silent treatment we worked well together. The tires’ pungent smell reminded me of my childhood, of afternoons spent playing on tire swings and running through recycled-tire obstacle courses. But the tires weren’t sources of fun anymore. They were just hollow black shells, a means to get around or to get revenge. And they

were a pain in the ass to change. My neck felt baked, more like overdone. It got me to thinking that changing them in the rain would've been better.

Once Reid showed up, he took over for my dad and finished the front passenger wheel. When he was done, he sat on the sun-dried pavement and stretched out his legs, back against the wheel. I squinted at the glare from the rim, gravel digging into my knees as I tightened lug nuts. It didn't matter what hand I tried, the knuckles hated the repeated motion. I should've iced them after the fight.

I took a break, gulped warm Gatorade, then passed the bottle to Reid.

"Are you really gonna go out with Bethany?" he asked. "Wait, don't answer that. Just listen. I get that you don't want to believe me, but it's obvious you're not the guy she wants. The way I see it, you're more like her consolation prize. If Bethany had wanted you, she wouldn't have left you hanging in the first place. Because leaving you would've left her as much of a wreck as you were. No offense, but you're blind when it comes to her. She's totally playing you."

"Beth wouldn't do that." As usual, Reid's perception of her pissed me off, I couldn't look at him. To keep from having to I went to work removing the jack stands, rolled the heavy duty jack under the chase and pumped the control arm until the truck's weight lifted off the stationary stand.

"She kissed you, right?"

I hesitated, thinking about how it felt. She might have initiated it, but I willingly returned it. "Yes, but..."

“But nothing. I know I’m right. You can’t trust a girl that goes around kissing other people when she already has a boyfriend. Don’t do this to yourself. Forget her. Move on with your life. Come on, Kayla’s right in front of you, and you don’t even see her.”

“Trust me, I see Kayla. It’s just that I don’t know what to do anymore.” Frustration caused me to bang the metal jacks around more than necessary. Bethany was the one topic we’d never agree on. “I can’t pretend Bethany never existed. If I could, I would. Moving on isn’t that easy. You’re biased anyway. You never liked Beth.”

“Because she has a horrible personality: no sense of humor, thinks she knows it all and is better than everyone else. And now she’s a cheater. Kayla, on the other hand, I can tolerate. You know, Samantha thinks Kayla’s into you and I’d have to agree. She was clinging to you like glue.”

“Yeah, but that same night, *after* being all clingy, she told me straight out she wasn’t interested in dating anyone.” I said it like a challenge, like ‘a go ahead and try to explain that’.

“Whatever you say. You do what you gotta do, then. I obviously can’t stop you. Anyway, I’m glad Kayla’s around. Samantha doesn’t usually find girls that aren’t intimidated by her. If she sticks around, they can be girly together. It’ll save me from having to go shopping all the time. Try not to screw it up for me.” He pulled out his pack of cigarettes and lit one up.

I probably could’ve used the calming effects of its chemicals right then, because things were getting more complicated by the minute. While I tightened the last lug nut, I thought about what Reid had said. He didn’t want me to mess things up.

If you asked me, things already were. Nobody made the right connections. Chase wanted Kayla, but she didn’t want him or me (even though my friends thought otherwise). And Beth seemed to want me while she was supposedly with Dylan. Admittedly, I was no better with my

own confusion. One love triangle was bad enough. What we had here was three times that, and I was the connecting link.

Reid and I were in our same places in Brice Hall hours later. I was fresh out of the shower and ready to go. Not my roommate, he put off getting ready for Samantha to come over. He kept making fun of me for showering twice in one day and I gave it back to him for how gross he was for never showering. Our whole room reeked of Reid's feet so bad that we opened our door and window to air it out. The open door meant people kept stopping by, to the point where I didn't even look up when someone knocked.

"Speak of the devil," Reid said. Though we hadn't been talking about Bethany at the time, I knew the special tone reserved specifically for her. I looked up from the computer to see he wasn't joking. She sported a GSC Cubs tee and black lounge pants that molded to her curves. "Hey, Bethany, where's your better half?"

She scowled. "I could ask you the same. If you must know, Dylan's not exactly talking to me right now."

"I guess the guy is smarter than he looks. Weren't you supposed to be breaking it off with him?" I knew Reid could care less. He was all about pushing her buttons to get a reaction. I held my breath for her response.

Beth folded her arms against her chest and came up to my bed. "That's kind of why I was looking for you."

"You should really take my advice," Reid said.

"What advice?" she asked.

“Nothing,” I said. “Don’t mind him.” I watched Reid rummage through his laundry to pull out clean clothes. Then he grabbed my shampoo and Irish Spring body wash.

“Sorry, Logan, but I’m not sticking around for this train wreck. This is my cue to hit the showers.” Reid started walking off, then had a few last words. “Don’t do anything I wouldn’t do. And don’t be late tonight.” I closed the door behind him. I didn’t want to air my dirty laundry any more than I already had.

“What’s so special about tonight? Another party?” She took a seat, and I closed the laptop to put it aside.

Reid had forgotten to shut his game off, and the menu music continued its monotonous repetition. I got up and hit the power. “We’re going to the drive-in.”

“You, Samantha, and Reid?”

“And Kayla.” My response clearly affected her. I’d never seen her that defeated, eyes downcast, hand at her forehead as her mind spun. “Samantha invited her, they really hit it off. Do you want to come with us, or with me actually? We can take two cars and make it our first real date.”

Bethany wanted to go, and we tried to figure out a way to make it work, but in the end her schedule got in the way. She had a job as an RA in our dorm, and they had a meeting at 7:00. We’d need to be at the drive-in by then.

“If you didn’t share a room with Reid, it’d be perfect,” she said.

I couldn’t deny the bigger obstacle. “You’re forgetting Dylan.”

“No, I’ve already decided to end it. I’m not trying to delay it or anything. I just don’t want to be the kind of person who does it through text or over the phone. That’s all.”

Bethany invited me to the game room at the Commons. The place had been updated during the summer. New carpeting, window cleaners, and fresh paint tinged the air. The once white walls were shamrock green – our school color – and the worn couches had been replaced with plush tan ones. The layout was distinct now, a lounge area on one side, game area on the other. A slim television hung in the lounge, away from the action. For games the old equipment remained: ping-pong, foosball, and pool tables. The light above the first table that used to buzz and blink from being hit too many times was steady and bright.

Bethany and I claimed the pool table. Despite the fact that I was losing, I was at ease. And I wasn't half tongue-tied, the other half drooling over her the way I got with Kayla. Beth had taken my mind off everything, helped me relax. It was almost like travelling back in time to when things were almost perfect, when I was the only thing that stood in our way.

She took my hand and led me around the pool table. “You should definitely go for the seven-ball. If you hit it right, you can get two in the corner.”

Beth had always been the type of girl to hug her friends and have little consideration for personal space. She was comfortable with that sort of thing, so she didn't think twice about it. I'd never been able to tell if she was being flirty or simply friendly with me. At that moment, the contact felt wrong. Maybe it was Reid messing with my head earlier.

I knew it made no sense. I'd had no doubts yesterday when I kissed her. And a touch was harmless in comparison to that. It wasn't cheating. Just the same, I stepped away from her touch and focused on my shot. With my left hand resting lightly on the felt, I readied the smooth cue-stick between two fingers. Once I'd lined up, I followed Bethany's suggestion and went for it. The white ball cracked into the seven and ricocheted with another crack into the three. Both dropped into the pocket.

Beth smiled at me. “Was I right, or was I right?”

I laughed. She was the reigning champ of the game room. Guys foolishly bet against her ability to call her shot. “You’ll still win. Guaranteed.” As I reapplied chalk to the cue stick, the volume of people talking lowered to whispers. I caught sight of the source walking in the door. Dylan.

One of his buddies must have told him we were there. Together. He looked pissed, about as pissed as Chase had been. He puffed out his chest and stared. I wondered what in the world Beth saw in him. I came up with nothing.

“I’ll be right back to finish the game,” she said, taking him out into the hallway.

I took out my cell to kill time, and Nigel drifted over. He wasn’t a close friend like Reid was. Outside of soccer and parties, I barely saw him. He acted decent with us guys and was a great captain, but he didn’t make time for friends because he was all about the girls.

They swooned over his blond hair and blue eyes, liked how he called them ‘hun’. Nigel was a real-life Ken doll when it came to looks, but he was far from charming. The guy bragged about how many girls he’d dated. In the locker room, he told stories about his latest flings. It was hard to tell where truth ended and exaggerations began. To me it seemed like everything was a game to him, one where he needed to beat everyone, every time. It got irritating if you hung out with Nigel for too long. Since dating wasn’t a game to me, there was no competition between us. I let him talk, took it all in strides. It explained why nobody besides me agreed to jog with him.

“You gonna play or what?”

“I’m in the middle of a game with Bethany.”

“Alright, my bad. You can wait on her then. Let me know if you get tired of waiting.” He pointed thumb at the foosball table where he’d be and wandered away.

I tried to let his comment roll off me. Then Reid's voice played in my head. *If Bethany had wanted you, she wouldn't have left you hanging in the first place.*

Was I being stupid for expecting different results this time? Was she playing me?

I pushed the thoughts aside, gave her time to prove me right or wrong. Almost twenty minutes passed without her return, and I became convinced of how wrong I'd been. Frustrated by my stupidity, I dropped the pool stick on the table. It tapped the orange striped ball into a slow-motion roll into the side pocket. It figured it was one of hers. The thought made me clench my jaw tighter, made my head hurt, right smack between my eyebrows.

When I found her, Bethany was a crying wallflower just outside the game room doors. The sound of her sniffles shifted the anger I felt toward her onto myself. I shouldn't have been so wrapped up in myself. Why hadn't I thought to check on her, to make sure she was okay? What had Dylan done to her?

"He broke up with me," she said. I didn't know what to do or say because I was partly to blame. If I hadn't actually caused the breakup, I surely wanted it. I thought Dylan was no good for her, maybe I was no better. She wiped tear streaks from her face, feigned a smile. "Honestly, he was such a crappy boyfriend I don't even know why I'm crying."

I knew why. Because behind the walls and the act she put on for everyone else, I knew the real girl. I understood how badly she wanted it to work out. She had a history of picking the wrong guys. Her eyes revealed crushed hopes and I took her into my arms. Bethany hugged me tight and I felt her choppy breaths calm under my hands. I let her vent about Dylan, how he spent more time with his friends than her. And how she felt he'd become bored with her. Beth told me that she wasn't sure Dylan ever loved her. She said nobody had ever loved her the way I had.

Everything she said only made me feel worse. She made me doubt myself, my own actions and feelings.

“I’m done with jerks like him. I want to be with you.” She proved it with a kiss, hard and breathless, then rested her head on my chest. “Promise you’ll miss me tonight.”

Her innocent request made me feel like an ass, like she somehow knew that my mind had been elsewhere since the party. Since I met Kayla. I wanted to be with Bethany, to make her happy. But the promise didn’t seem like a simple one to make. Bethany had this idea of me being perfect, and I was far from it.

Kayla, Reid, Samantha and I arrived at the drive-in theater after sunset. There would be two movies and a long drive home, which meant we weren’t going to make it back to campus by curfew. I could’ve stayed behind, but then I would’ve been waiting around for Bethany to get out of work. Of course, as soon as we got on the road, Beth texted me and brought on a guilt trip. It was like no matter what I did, it meant choosing sides and upsetting someone.

I had taken the top off the truck before we left and we had a full view of the cloudless night. The place had two screens nestled in a semicircle of woods. The orange glow on the horizon had transitioned into a blue-black sky scattered with tiny stars and a white crescent moon. For a September night in New England, it was relatively warm. Little kids ran around in short-sleeves beneath the nearby screen, a small fur ball of a dog their entertainment before the two shows.

It was the final week for the season and there had been a line of cars backed up onto the main road waiting to get in. An equally long human line formed at the concession stand. Hungry as usual, Reid insisted on getting food, enough to require Samantha’s help. With them gone I

tuned the radio to the station Kayla liked. She sat in the front beside me and checked out the stars. I wasn't usually into that sort of thing, but she said it reminded her of home. She grew up in a small town northwest of mine.

"Country music and my hometown just go together," said Kayla. "We have everything they sing about – farms, horses, mud, no trespassing signs, and back roads. Actually, I lied. They sing about beaches sometimes, we don't have that...we have swamps instead."

I told her about my town, Little Falls. Water was kind of our thing. The conversation gave me the sense that she missed home. So when she closed her eyes, as though she were praying or wishing or something, I didn't ask about it. Not that it stopped my curiosity. I couldn't imagine there being anything beyond her reach, something she wanted or needed so badly she'd ask the heavens for it. I rested my head back, the sunburn rubbing against my collar, and hoped she would get it, whatever it was.

"Hope we didn't interrupt anything," Reid said, coming up to the truck. He added a kissing noise at the end and Samantha complained. It was good because it meant I didn't have to. It wasn't like me dating Bethany was a secret. Reid handed me a bucket of popcorn plus two drinks then climbed into the back seat with Samantha.

I took a sip of my soda, the bubbles tickling my mouth as they fizzled, and placed the popcorn bucket in the center console for Kayla and me. I would have to dig in to the food when I knew it was safe to. I didn't want to get all weird on her if our hands touched.

It was confusing, but it was like whenever I was with Bethany, she was all I wanted. And whenever I was with Kayla, I couldn't help but think about Kayla. I had to stop that. It would be a long torturous night if I couldn't keep my mind where it belonged.

As the screen flicked and the Jeep's speakers boomed with the action movie, I fidgeted in my seat. I kept picturing the hero character as me. Except when it came to imagining my love interest, I imagined both Bethany and Kayla in the role. Even my imagination couldn't choose.

I'd never felt torn like this before. I finally got my second chance and I was totally ruining it. I'd only managed to add to my problems. I was the crappy boyfriend who hung out with his friends instead of his girlfriend, all the while thinking about someone else. Somehow, I'd become worse than Dylan. I hated it.

I dug my hand into the popcorn bucket. Instead of hitting sticky kernels, my fingers brushed Kayla's soft hand and I unconsciously let them linger there. She was everything I liked in a girl – smart, funny, sweet, attractive. If I really wanted to be with her, I'd have to wait until she was ready. We'd have to be friends first the way it was with Bethany. And I didn't think I could bear to do that again. I didn't want a repeat of my past, I wanted to move forward. I had that chance with Beth. She was ready and so was I.

"I'll be right back," I said, anxious to leave the car. I needed a breather. More than that, I needed some distance from Kayla. I couldn't forget how close to kissing her at the restaurant or at the party. I didn't trust myself around her. I called Beth's cell thinking it was the right thing to do. I thought it might realign my mind with my heart. But I got her voicemail. It was probably for the best, though. If Bethany were to ask about me missing her, the response would be no good.

To make my disappearance appear casual, I picked up candy from the concession stand and headed back to the truck. There was a young couple in a convertible with the top down a few rows ahead of us. They kept ogling each other. After a few pickup trucks, I passed an older couple sitting in matching lawn chairs in the grass. They were holding hands like teenagers. The

car directly in front of mine at first glance had no passengers. On the second glance, I noticed its steamy windows.

There was too much love and romance surrounding me. Next time we decided to hang out with Kayla, I was going to suggest an activity that was a little less date-like. I had way too much time to think while sitting around like this.

I shook my head, mad at myself as I realized my mistake. Next time it'll be me and Beth.

Before we got halfway into the second movie, Reid was asleep and snoring loudly. He was the type of guy that preferred stories with blood and gore. Because the second was a romance, it didn't exactly hold his attention. Samantha woke him up a few times, but it was a matter of minutes before his fog horn impersonation started up again. After enduring the noise on and off for over an hour, Kayla had an idea.

"Samantha, Reid likes pranks, right?"

Reid loved pranking people, that was for sure. The guy called April Fool's Day a holiday, but nobody had dared to play one on him. Reid was going to hate it. If he did I'd remind him that he was the one that preferred girls with a sense of humor. It looked like we found one.

"What'd you have in mind?" Samantha asked.

Kayla held up her empty cup, shaking it to make the ice cubes jostle.

A devilish grin appeared on Samantha's face. "Better let me do it," she said, taking the cup from Kayla. We watched her go through with it, whispering and holding in laughter. She removed the lid and dumped the ice under Reid's shirt.

He let out one final snore before his eyes flashed open and he reacted to the cold. Reid looked down at his chest and pulled the Superman shirt away from his body. A few ice cubes fell to the floor. He stumbled out of the truck, shaking off. No longer having to keep our voices

down, the rest of us were hysterical. Kayla laughed with her whole body, bobbing back and forth, completely unable to catch her breath. She kept trying to hide her smile behind her hand.

When Reid's overly dramatic display was done, he returned to the truck. The guy was actually pouting. It only caused us to laugh harder. So hard that the girls complained about having tears in their eyes. My stomach cramped and I had to focus on breathing again to relax the muscles.

"What the hell, guys?"

"Aw, don't cry about it," I said, using his own words against him. "Get in the truck."

He got in and plopped down with the loudest thump he could manage, crossed his arms against his chest. Samantha composed herself enough to pull a blanket out from behind the seat. She draped it over them, asking, "Are you mad?" She gave him her best puppy-dog face and flirted with Reid to lighten his mood, which led to them kissing in the back seat. I was back to that awkward feeling.

The movie ended with cool breezes and the crunch of tires on dirt and gravel. I gave Kayla my hoodie to wear for the ride to Greer, the one my mom got for me as a sentimental gift freshman year. It was a thick sweatshirt material in navy. Across the front it said 'Little Falls', the name of my hometown. Samantha was asleep, too, so Kayla and I fell into chatting. Just like Beth, she went right to the hard topics.

"You seem to be somewhere else tonight," said Kayla. "Are you thinking about Bethany?"

"A little."

"I'm sorry, I feel like it's my fault you didn't get to see her."

“No, don’t worry. She couldn’t go out tonight. Besides, she never hangs out with all of us. Reid and Bethany can’t stand each other.”

As the miles passed, we kept up the conversation, talking over the wind. The way the wind hit your ear sounded the same as having a conch shell up to it, except that the effect of being on the road amplified it. The breeze swirled Kayla’s ponytail and tossed loose strands into her eyes. The night air chilled the burn on my neck. We talked more about home and our families. She joked that her thirteen-year-old step-brother reminded her of Reid and swore that it wasn’t a bad thing.

When we got into GSC territory, I concentrated more on the road. I was used to pedestrians crossing everywhere. I’d forgotten about curfew until the empty streets reminded me. It was 12:30 when I steered into the resident parking lot. How had we gotten back this fast? The whole drive was a blur, like I was on autopilot the entire time. Our night was almost over.

“We should probably wake up Samantha and Reid.”

I’d forgotten them, too. I twisted around in my seat and tapped them each a few times to awaken them. I should have been obnoxious for Reid the way he always was to me. He opened his eyes and stretched out, his elbows cracked. He was like a bear waking up from winter hibernation – except that he was scrawny rather than plump.

Samantha wrapped the blanket tighter around herself and yawned. “I’m too tired to drive home.”

“My bed’s available,” said Reid.

There was no way I would be able to handle an entire year hanging around them. I was about to kick them out of my Jeep when headlights flashed in my rear-view mirror. “Hold on, there’s a car coming, don’t get out.” My friends saw it too and fell silent.

I felt exposed, no roof over our heads. My heart sped up. It was after curfew. Who would be driving around campus?

Everyone shifted in their seats. I held my breath, tracked the lights moving through the lot. The car turned down the aisle of parked cars before stopping behind us. The driver's door opened. The interior light revealed enough of the car for me to see the kind of trouble we were in. Within the white rear door, bold blue letters stretched across it and I read 'ICE'. Not needing to see the rest, I faced front and hoped for a miracle.

I waited for the inevitable, my stomach churning so bad I wanted to puke. The door closed, and I imagined the blue tag becoming wholly visible. POLICE. Was it worse for me that it was campus police this time instead of Greer police? Or better? Were the college police more like security guards, or did they have actual authority? I didn't really know. Two nights, back-to-back police run-ins. I thought for sure I was screwed.

The officer came right to my door.