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Life in a Doorway

A THESIS

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Life in a Doorway

A THESIS

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ABSTRACT OF THESIS

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Life in a Doorway is a story about Brianna Fairchild who is a senior graduating from high school. The week before graduation her twin brother Hayden dies in a tragic accident at the school. Brianna, who was estranged from her brother, begins dealing with her grief in unconventional ways as she pushes people away from her. She feels disconnected from her parents who are also struggling with the loss of their son. Brianna's relationship with her best friend Stacey becomes strained as Brianna tries to work through her issues. However, she develops a friendship with Tiara, a girl from school who Brianna didn't like before. Brianna develops a romantic relationship with Caleb, Hayden's best friend. Brianna is also forced to interact with Hayden's girlfriend when she surprises everyone with her pregnancy. Brianna has a hard time dealing with this turn of events and pushes away even more, eventually having to face everything to begin healing from the death of her brother. Brianna tries new activities to get outside of her old self as the summer before college comes to a close and must break free from her self-centeredness to help a friend in need and bridge the gap between her parents and herself.

Life in a Doorway

Life in a Doorway

Chapter One

To the casual observer, my brother's funeral could have been just like every other party I'd been to during high school: me by myself while everyone else flitted around, spreading gossip. I was sitting alone on our tan, not-really-leather-but-you-couldn't-tell living room couch. Everyone in the room seemed to be giving me a wide berth like a social pariah. I was fine with this arrangement, doing my best to broadcast the "I don't want you to talk to me" vibe. I just sat on the couch and stared ahead, idly picking at lint on the black dress my mom had laid out for me that morning. My palms felt sweaty as I tried to rub them dry while I stared at the blank TV.

The mingled smells of many different casseroles and fruit cakes started to turn my stomach. I never understood the need to give food when somebody died. And usually the food wasn't that great. People never gave good comfort food, just whatever was easiest to make. "It's the thought that counts," my mom said every time a new neighbor came by to offer their condolences. Most of the dishes we received just went to waste or were laid out for the, lack of a better word, reception following the funeral.

I could see the reflection in the television of people milling around our living room. It felt like the whole town had shown up that day but I didn't recognize most of them and no one was introducing themselves to me. The adults were milling around the kitchen and dining room; no one was quite comfortable sitting in the living room with me. Regardless, they all spoke in hushed voices, afraid to be overheard. Well, except for my Great-Aunt Judy, whose voice boomed across the room.

“It’s poor Brittany, I’m worried about,” she said, her voice carrying to my secluded spot. The least she could do was to get my name right. Granted, I have two first cousins and one second cousin named Brittany (all different spellings) but I am the only Brianna. “Her mother says she still hasn’t cried about it yet. I just don’t understand that girl. It’s not healthy.”

“It is strange,” replied a voice I didn’t recognize. She was probably just a co-worker or random neighbor, eager to get a glimpse into our turmoil. “I heard from Anthony that the two of them were fighting a lot more lately, but you’d think she’d cry a little over his death. She seemed so indifferent at the burial.”

“Well, she never really was a sensitive girl. But I think you’re right. She should show a little more remorse over the loss of her brother.”

I had to try and tune them out. And not because they were gossiping (that part made me want to laugh, which would be incredibly inappropriate), but because they did get something right. I didn’t know why people found it so scandalous though. I didn’t know any siblings who didn’t fight; but I had been fighting with Hayden a lot more recently. They acted like they knew but none of them were there that day. They never saw what I saw.

It seemed the closer we got to graduation, the more we were fighting. We just didn’t seem to get along anymore; we were two completely different individuals who were no longer comfortable being lumped together as The Twins. The only similarity we shared anymore was the same birthday. Though we clearly weren’t identical, it was hard to tell us apart as infants. The only real indication had been the frilly, and typically pink, onesies I was made to wear. In our little baby portraits we would be staged next to each

other, me in a fluffy dress and Hayden in his miniature slacks and button-down shirt with the vest (or sweater, depending on the season) to match my dress.

Our faces looked identical in their chubby roundness, topped with faint wisps of light brown hair. Our toothless grins would curve up in the same shape, our noses crinkled in laughter. Even our eyes shared the same prismatic hazel color.

As the years progressed and the chubby cheeks faded, it was, thankfully, easier to tell us apart. I even hit my growth spurt first, sputtering out at 5'10" while Hayden soon caught up and then surpassed me to 6'1". And the more our appearances changed the easier it was for us to move in different directions. We found separate hobbies and different friends. We liked different foods and different movies. It seemed our only similarity had been our looks and when that changed we became like strangers. Slowly and quietly so we didn't even realize it or try to stop it. We just let it happen.

In fact, the day of the accident we had fought in the morning before school. We were fighting over who could have the car that night. We shared a beat up Chevy Blazer and Hayden wanted to take his girlfriend, Ally, out; but I wanted to take the car to the library to study. It was almost finals week and I wanted to ace all of my tests.

"Look," Hayden argued, his mouth full of Fruit Loops, "I already promised Ally I'd take her to see that new movie."

I narrowed my eyes at him over my own bowl of cereal. I wasn't going to just let him take the car. "But I need to study tonight," I said, pointing my spoon at him and flinging drops of milk across the table.

"You already made valedictorian. What else do you need? You can study at home just as well as at the library, loser."

“Oh, that’s witty.”

“Why don’t you get a life?”

“Yeah, ‘cause setting yourself on fire and cutting class is such a great life.”

“Better than going to the library every night.”

The longer the fight went on, the more our sentences started to overlap. We had this same fight all the time and already knew what the other was going to say next. I didn’t even know why we bothered because neither of us ever won.

“You’re such a slacker and one of these days you’re going to…”

“What are you two arguing about?” Dad brought his coffee mug to the table and sat down.

We both started talking at once. Hayden pleaded to take Ally out on a date and I begged to take the car to the library. I don’t know how he understood us through all of it. Just then Mom walked into the kitchen, poured her own cup of coffee, and stood at the breakfast bar. She looked between us all and her face dropped. “What’s going on here?”

I took a breath to try to get my argument out before Hayden but my dad held up his hand to silence us both. “They both want to take their car out.”

“Well I say neither of you can if you can’t agree on who gets it.”

“We’ll have a nice family dinner instead,” Dad added with a smile. He clearly hoped it would get us both excited. If he noticed the disgruntled looks on our faces, he didn’t show it.

“Whatever,” Hayden grumbled as I whined, “No fair!”

“Come on, guys. It’s not the end of the world to spend the evening with your family.”

“Especially since you’ll both be headed to college soon,” Mom added, her eyes welling up a bit. She did that a lot lately. She was determined to have family time and squeeze in as many fresh memories as possible before she shipped us off to our futures.

I snorted into my bowl of cereal. I had it on good authority (namely my best friend Stacey, who is a notorious gossip) that Hayden had no intention of going to college. He had sent off applications and received his acceptance letters along with me. But as soon as he could, he planned to head to California to find work doing stunts for movies. Our parents were oblivious. Hayden jumped out of his chair, slung his bag onto his shoulder, and gave me a pointed look. “We better get to school.”

Without a second glance at any of us, he trudged out the door. “Bye,” I said and hugged my parents. I followed Hayden to the car. As soon as I closed the door behind me he gunned the car out of the driveway and sped to school. “When are you going to tell them?” I asked as I buckled myself in.

“Soon.”

“Well, tonight would be a good time. You know they won’t be mad.” I had tried to keep the bitterness out of my voice but it always seemed like he could do no wrong while I strived for approval. Dad said all siblings feel like they’re the under-appreciated one.

“Maybe.”

We were already pulling into the parking lot. As usual, Hayden pulled into the spot at the farthest corner of the lot. He did this to prevent getting caught when he skipped class. It was really annoying on the days he didn’t come back to get me and I

had to bum a ride from someone else. Stacey was always good for it but it was still rude of him.

We walked in silence up to the school. The center quad was almost empty because we were so early, which almost never happened. Hayden wasn't keen on being at school any longer than necessary. I didn't care what time we arrived and just headed towards homeroom. We weren't allowed in the classrooms before the first bell rang so I normally just sat in the hallway and studied until then.

He stopped before we split off, though we had the same homeroom. "I'll see you after school," he said as he nudged my shoulder. It was a rare affectionate moment. I couldn't remember the last time we shared a hug. Probably the last time we saw Grandpa and he pulled us into a double hug, squishing us together in the process.

"Yeah, see ya," I replied, a little thrown. But I soon forgot the moment as I headed my own way. If I had known what would happen I might have done more, said more, or held onto that moment. Instead, I went to homeroom, not ever bothering to look behind me to see if his desk was occupied. The teacher had stopped asking me where he was when his desk sat vacant. The entire fall semester Mr. Hibbins would get all splotchy when he asked where Hayden was and I just shrugged in response. He assumed because we were related, because we were twins even, that I knew Hayden's every thought and movement. By spring he realized we didn't operate that way and gave up on badgering me.

Despite the fact that Hayden and I both knew we had grown apart, the school insisted on putting the two of us in almost all of the same classes. It had been a trend since kindergarten, when it didn't bother us. Back then we clung to each other like

walking, talking security blankets. We secluded ourselves and played our own games in our own twin language. As we got older and finally made new friends it was harder to be lumped together all the time. Now the only difference in our schedules was our electives, and the fact that Hayden skipped constantly.

I had been sitting in English that afternoon and was uncharacteristically staring out the window. Normally I paid close attention, filling the pages of my notebook with lecture notes, but today my gaze was drawn outside. I knew I should be paying attention as finals loomed in the very near future. It seemed senioritis was finally kicking in. The nearest window was open, allowing a cool breeze to play across my face. Summer was well on its way and the sky was a perfect blue without a cloud in sight. It was so hard for me to concentrate.

A sudden pull, deep in my gut, broke me from my reverie. It was one of those feelings like when you're on a roller coaster and you go over the peak, your stomach floats in mid-air. The normally pleasant sensation filled me with dread and panic. I frantically searched the room to see if I was missing something, but the class was silently reading to themselves from the textbook. When my gaze automatically searched the back of the room all I found was my brother's empty desk.

My body wasn't my own as I jumped out of my seat and thrust my arm into the air to gain the teacher's attention. I later realized that my jumping gained the attention of the whole room without the added movement of my arm.

"Yes, Brianna? Do you need something?" The teacher looked startled as she searched the room for a catalyst to my behavior. She instantly started smoothing her wrinkle-free skirt to hide her surprise. I'd never acted like this before.

“I need to go to the bathroom,” I practically yelled with fright.

“Okay, just take the pass.” I could tell she didn’t want to keep me from my errand but as I sprinted out of the room (without the pass) she was still trying to gain back the attention of the class by telling them to continue reading. They had all broken out into laughter; apparently believing I had digestive issues.

I ran down the deserted hallway, the multi-colored lockers blurring together. I can’t remember having any thoughts of where to go but my legs took me out the hall doors to the main quad. As I pounded on the paved sidewalk encircling the school I could see the massive oak tree, the only tree on campus, rooted right next to the farthest part of the school. Muffled yells and what sounded like screams echoed around, which only pushed me faster. As I drew closer I looked upward and could see a group of students leaning over the edge of the roof, obviously the source of the noise. They were all looking down at the concrete so I followed their gazes, searching the tree limbs and the trunk before reaching the bottom. At the base of the tree was a dark shape.

Everything was a blur after that. I fell to my knees when I reached the lump on the ground. It was Hayden sprawled out across the concrete. I could see blood spreading out behind his head, lapping at the concrete like waves on the shore. I frantically searched for a pulse but in the haze I could only feel my own pounding so hard against my ribs. It didn’t seem to take long for a crowd of students and teachers to press in around me. The teachers tried desperately to disperse the crowd of students who were screaming and weeping when they saw him lying there.

The paramedics showed up with their sirens blaring. They cleared a path and were able to push the kids back farther than the teachers could. It didn’t feel like it took

very long for them to work on him. They pounded his chest and checked his pulse. I wanted to tell them they needed to work just a little harder but nothing would come out. All I could do was feebly reach my hand towards him as they wheeled him away on the gurney.

“Come on,” Mrs. Krieger urged me and guided me towards the building. The ambulance was pulling away with the sirens still on, but I knew. He was already dead. “We need to call your parents.”

I finally turned to walk with her. She kept an arm around my shoulders in case I decided to collapse but I just felt numb. The police were still there, having shown up shortly after the paramedics. They had a group, probably the group from the roof, huddled together for questioning. I could see Ally’s bleach-blond head and tear-streaked face sobbing incoherently to an officer.

Another officer followed the principal and me inside to hear my part of the story. I told him I would answer any questions he had as Mrs. Krieger notified my parents. I wondered if she’d ever had to tell a parent this kind of story. As we waited, I could feel a tingling sensation in my knees. I gingerly touched them and they throbbed with pain. I rolled up my pant legs and saw my knees were covered with scrapes. I must have scraped them when I reached Hayden but I couldn’t really remember. I could only remember his broken body. He wasn’t all twisted at awkward angles. Instead, he was laid out mostly flat, like he had just fallen asleep.

It was a position he often slept in with his arms and legs thrown out to cover as much of his bed as possible. He had always slept like that, even as a kid. It always annoyed me when we were forced to share a bed on vacation. I would end up curled in a

ball at the edge of the bed, trying desperately to cling to the mattress to keep from falling off. It was a nice relief when we got to a certain age where a roll-away bed had to be ordered. It was so like him to still be trying to take up as much space as possible, even in death.

It seemed like my mom arrived in no time. She rushed frantically into the principal's office and put her hand on my shoulder to steady herself. It was a surprise she made it this far on her own. She was sobbing and hysterical so I reached my hand over to pat hers. She turned to collapse into the chair next to me and it took a good five minutes to pull herself together. Mrs. Krieger looked uncomfortable but the police officer just watched us. He had probably seen his fair share of similar reunions.

“Your dad went straight to the hospital to be with Hayden,” she said, taking a Kleenex from her pocket and wiped her dripping nose.

For some reason, in my numbed state, this comment confused me. “To be with Hayden?” I asked. “But he's dead. He won't know the difference.”

Mrs. Krieger turned her back and stared out the window as my mom broke into fresh sobs. She leaned away from me while still staying seated. There seemed to be no end to her tears while mine had no beginning.

When she finally started to gain control again, the police officer stepped forward and cleared his throat. “I'm sorry about this, but I need to question your daughter.” His voice was surprisingly deep and gentle. It was the kind of voice that made you want to spill your guts because no matter what you did, that voice would soothe and forgive you. I could just imagine criminals he had apprehended telling him whatever he asked for because his voice sounded safe.

“Okay,” was all Mom could choke out, but that’s all that was needed.

“Brianna, right?” he asked, checking his notes. I nodded. “Where were you when the accident happened?”

His voice washed over me like a drug keeping me numb, still unable to feel the intense grief controlling my mom. “Class, I guess.”

“Can you be more specific?”

I gave a short version of running out and finding Hayden already on the ground, as well as a description of the blur of activity when the paramedics arrived. I’m sure it was too much.

“Did your brother say anything this morning to indicate he was unhappy or anything?” His eyes shifted from me to Mom, clearly indicating the question was for both of us. But Mom just shook her head, pulling her lips into a tight, thin line.

“No. We were just talking about what we were going to do after graduation and then went our own ways. We’re not really that close.”

Mom shot me a questioning glance. I couldn’t believe she didn’t know how distant we were; but that only made me realize how distant she and I were.

“So he wasn’t unhappy at all?”

“No,” I said slowly, putting the pieces together. “He wouldn’t have killed himself.” I knew that’s what the officer was getting at and knew it was part of his job but it irked me.

“What about the people on the roof? Did any of those students have anything against Hayden?” His voice instantly calmed the anger flaring inside me.

“I don’t even know who was up there but Hayden didn’t make enemies. Everybody loved him.” I knew I sounded a little bitter, even though I shouldn’t have. I mean, I was alive after all. “Besides, he did stupid, dangerous things all the time. Of his own free-will.”

Mom turned away from me when I finished and I heard her try to control her crying again.

The rest of the questions seemed mundane and I didn’t really know any of the answers and the more they went on, the shorter my responses became. I don’t even know how long we sat there; long enough for Mrs. Krieger to check her watch about ten times and for Mom to stop sniffing from her runny nose.

Finally, he said, “One last question and I’ll let you go. How did you know where to go?”

It was a question I’d been asked throughout my life when Hayden and I seemed to know things about each other without explanation. I just shrugged and said, “It’s a twin thing.”

The images of two people standing behind the couch blurred in the blank television screen. I could just make out one of our neighbors from down the street; the other I didn’t recognize at all.

“I can’t believe that boy did that. It was so careless and irresponsible.”

“Speaking of irresponsible, what about his parents?” chimed in the other speaker. “Where were they when all of this was going on?”

Uh, at work. Did they expect my parents to follow him around everywhere? But I continued to listen in, a little curious as to what gossip was going around about Hayden.

“I know,” said a third voice; a woman who was also eavesdropping and decided to join in. “That boy was always doing dangerous things. He liked to jump off sheds and out of trees and drive recklessly down the back roads. He was always playing with fire too.”

“I remember one time he almost burned down their shed.” I couldn’t distinguish among their voices anymore.

“There was also that time he set himself on fire. And he did it on purpose!”

I remembered that incident too. He didn’t get hurt either except for singeing off his eyebrows. I could feel a twinge of a smirk pull at my mouth as I remembered him without his eyebrows but I resisted the urge because I figured it’d make people talk even more if I were grinning.

“I still think it’s the parents’ fault for not keeping him in check more often. I’d never let my kids run around and do the things he did. I think it’s absolutely disgraceful.”

I wished Stacey had been able to hang around a while longer. As friends go, it didn’t get much better than Stacey. She stood by me through the whole ceremony, though granted, I had to comfort her more than she needed to comfort me. But even her parents had shown up to the service. Unfortunately they had a family obligation that afternoon and had to take off shortly after we arrived home. She would know exactly what to say now to make me feel a little less alone.

Mostly, I was tired of hearing how my parents were to blame. He was practically an adult, our eighteenth birthday was just around the corner, and he could do as he pleased. My parents had tried to keep him in line when he was younger and just beginning to experiment with various stunts but soon realized it was a passion of his. They didn't exactly encourage his behavior so much as encourage his being safe about it. There was a strict rule about not involving other kids, but they knew the more they told him not to, the more reckless he would be.

I always thought he was too dangerous and knew he would hurt himself eventually. He had only broken a few bones in all of his recklessness but none of us ever thought he would die from his adventures.

It was his love of danger that really set us apart. He was always being reckless and spontaneous while I was practical and level-headed. I used to tell myself that I was the good twin and he was the evil one with a death wish.

I just never thought it would come true.

I think the police finally told my parents what really happened up on the roof at school but they wouldn't tell me what happened. I actually resorted to begging but all they said was a bunch of kids were up there and Hayden had an accident. I suppose they thought they would save me from the gruesome details but all it did was cause me to think of more and more outlandish ways he could've died.

They were kind enough to tell me that he died on impact. It was officially listed as an accident with cause of death being severe trauma to the head and a broken neck.

I suddenly felt like the world was crushing in on me.

The soft clip of heels and the murmuring of condolences signaled the arrival of my mom. She held out her hand for mine without saying a word. She looked the best she had all week. Her face looked serene, like maybe she'd taken a Xanax. I knew she already had a prescription for it. Her dress and makeup looked impeccable; her eyes were dry though still a little puffy from the burial service.

She took me to the front door where Dad was standing. Dad, too, was keeping his composure well. He shook hands with everyone and nodded along while they prattled about how beautiful the service was. I was the only cloud hovering over the whole day.

"People are starting to leave," she said as she placed me between her and Dad. "We need to say good-bye."

"What do you need me for?" I didn't want to talk to anybody. And nobody sure as hell wanted to talk to me.

"Just stand here with us and be good. You don't need to say a word."

I couldn't refuse; not today. So I stood by the open door which let in a breeze to disturb the extra funeral programs on the nearby buffet table. Normally that table was full of family photos and our senior pictures, but today it only had pictures of Hayden displayed. The sky outside was a perfect blue just like that day had been. I tried to shrink against the wall as people worked their way out of the house and on to the rest of their lives. They shook our hands and repeated how beautiful the service was, what a great picture we chose for the program, how sorry they were about all of this, and on and on.

I recognized a few people who came through the line. Mrs. Krieger was there looking uncomfortable as she shook hands with us all. A few more teachers passed

through but not many students. I assumed they were all at their own sort of memorial, probably raising a shot in Hayden's name before starting the real party. It was mostly nosy neighbors and co-workers with a sprinkle of family members.

"Oh, Caleb," Mom said, embracing some guy in a huge hug. "I'm so glad you could make it."

He said something but I didn't hear what it was. I was busy trying to figure out who he was. How did he know my mom? He seemed familiar but I couldn't place him. As mom released him from her grasp, he turned to me. He raised his hand to shake mine which seemed a little awkward. He was about my age with dark, almost black, hair and green eyes. Surely I knew him.

"I'm Brianna," I said. I hadn't spoken to anyone else but the words spilled out of my mouth. I realized I had held his hand a little too long as he tried to pull it back.

He gave the slightest grin and said, "I know," then shook hands with my dad, who patted him on the shoulder. And then he was out the door and gone.

"Who was that?" I asked as I stared out the door a little longer, ignoring the rest of the line.

Mom gave me an exasperated look. "That was Caleb, Bri. You know him."

"I do?" I wracked my brain but couldn't come up with anything.

"He's Hayden's best friend. He's been to the house a hundred times."

We went to a large school and I couldn't be expected to know everyone there. But my parents were surprised I didn't know who Hayden's best friend had been. What they didn't know was there had been a huge blind side in my life where Hayden was

concerned. I chose to ignore his life but now he was gone and I could suddenly see everything. I don't think they realized just how much I didn't know about Hayden.

Chapter Two

As doors go, this one wasn't particularly spectacular. No ornate frame or special wood grain. No fancy handle or sign proclaiming its contents. Just a non-descript, grey metal door like every other door in the school. There were black scuff marks along the bottom and scratches all over the face, exposing the steel and former coats of paint underneath. It looked like it had been painted red once and maybe even blue. There wasn't a sign on or around the door to indicate what was beyond it, but I knew it led to the roof.

I wasn't exactly sure why I was standing in the empty hallway staring at it. I reached slowly for the handle and gently pushed on it but it didn't budge. I knew it was locked. I had seen a maintenance worker fiddling with it after the accident but it still drew my eye every time I walked past. The PA system announced the morning after the funeral that access to the roof was strictly forbidden. Anyone caught up there would get a week's suspension. Of course, this announcement had caused another flurry of gossiping and pointing, whispering and some crying.

I finally dropped my hand, wondering if I could will it open, but nothing happened. I didn't have any Jedi mind-tricks to use on it.

I was there because I finally wanted to go to the roof. I didn't know why I wanted to go up there. I just wanted to see if I could feel him up there. Maybe something of Hayden lingered; though I didn't believe in ghosts so I don't know what that "something" might be. I wanted to see what he saw and maybe even feel what he felt. I wondered if it was windier up there or maybe more peaceful. I wondered if you could stretch your arms out, perched on the edge, and feel weightless or like the heavy world below didn't even

exist. I wondered what it felt like to float through the air. I wondered what it felt like to have your last breath forcefully pushed out of your chest.

I turned and almost bumped into somebody. “Excuse me,” he said. He was wearing a brown suede blazer over a ratty t-shirt and dark-washed jeans. His spiked hair and thick, black glasses screamed that he was one of the “cool” teachers. “Shouldn’t you be in class?” he asked.

I didn’t answer; I just held up my hall pass.

“Okay, but you really shouldn’t be here. This door is locked for a reason.”

I almost laughed out loud but I was still trying to catch my breath without him noticing. I just nodded in reply. It was actually refreshing that there was someone who didn’t know who I was, as vain as it sounds. But as he walked away he glanced back with recognition clearly written across his face. I spun on my heels and walked in the opposite direction.

My footsteps echoed along the hallway. It was the last day of class and finals were in session, which made the school extra quiet. Once that bell rang at 2:45 the halls would be swarming with students laughing and yelling, either on their way to summer break or making plans for graduation parties tomorrow night.

The week since the funeral had been...quiet. The house was mostly quiet. Mealtimes were held in silence while each of us carefully contemplated every single bite of food we took. I would nervously bounce my leg while dad drummed his fingers on the table. Mom ate slowest of all, setting her fork down between each bite like she needed as much concentration as possible just to chew and swallow. But nobody talked about their day.

When we weren't eating we were in different rooms. I was normally in the living room watching television with the volume turned low while my parents were off doing who knows what. The only real noise pollution came from the phone. It seemed to ring constantly and we all eventually gave up on answering it, letting the machine do our dirty work instead. The new answering message was much more morose than before, saying something about respecting our need to grieve or whatever, and that we'd call back soon.

I even turned my cell phone on silent because on vibrate it was distracting as I seemed to get a steady flow of text messages asking if I needed so-and-so to pick up my assignments from school or if I minded if they did something in Hayden's honor. I didn't talk to half of these people throughout the year and wondered how they'd gotten my number.

Of course, Mom thought I was being rude. She would occasionally pick up my flashing cell phone from the arm of the couch where I was lying and scroll through my messages. This might have bothered me but I didn't have anything to hide at the moment. "So sweet," she muttered and clutched her hand over her heart. "These kids are so supportive."

"Mm-hmm." I continued flipping channels too quickly to see what was actually on.

"You really should thank them for their kindness. Do you want me to send thank you notes with the others I'm writing up?"

Thanks for what? I wondered. They were sending texts, how hard was that? And I had decided to go back to school even though my parents didn't want me to, so the offer of picking up assignments was moot. But I had just said, "Sure." No point in arguing.

Heading back to class now, I realized I probably should've just stayed home instead of coming to school. At first Mom and Dad really insisted I stay home, as if being all together would be a comfort even if we were in separate rooms. They eventually decided to only take a couple days off work instead of the entire week anyway. No, I wanted a little distraction and thought taking my final exams would help. After all, I had been studying like crazy, anxious to pass them all.

Hayden had laughed at my diligence before. "You're already in," he'd said one afternoon when I had my books and notes spread over the entire dining room table. He was sitting on the kitchen counter peeling an orange. "They're not going to care if you make a B on a stupid final."

"Whatever," I said without looking up. I heard him jump from the counter and walk away, the front door soon closing behind him.

I had put in so much work and wasn't keen on wasting it by sitting around in my pajamas for the entire week. So I went to school.

Turns out, the school didn't want to give me any tests. Each class I walked in, pen in hand and ready to go, the teacher would just give me a sympathetic look before skipping me while passing out the exams. I didn't have enough in me to argue. Only my Physics teacher, a no-nonsense kind of teacher, didn't have a problem giving me a test, so I had one blissful hour of concentrating in an otherwise dead week.

I spent most of my classes in silence watching everyone else worry and sweat over their papers. The guy next to me at my Calculus final kept running his left hand through his hair so that by the end of the test it was flat on the right side and sticking in

all directions on the left. I laughed when he got up to leave but he just gave me a bewildered look which made me wonder if everyone thought I was crazy now.

I found myself starting to laugh at odd moments but everyone around me always looked scandalized. That morning I was in the library flipping through magazines when a witty line in an article made me giggle. A weird hush seemed to ripple out from my seat, less like a pebble thrown into a pond and more like a cannonball into a pool, until I snapped my mouth shut. I felt like everyone thought it their duty to keep me in check but laughter was the only emotion I could muster. If I couldn't cry, I might as well laugh.

I checked my watch as I wandered around with no particular destination in mind. I still had fifteen minutes left until the final bell rang, signally the end of my high school career. It felt oddly anticlimactic after everything that had happened. I should be happy and excited with my whole future before me. I was going away to college come August, moving into the dorms, and getting on with my adult life.

I pulled up suddenly when I reached the double doors leading to the quad. My aimless wandering had carried me in a slow circle around the school and down to the first floor. As I peered out the window in the door I could see the tree. The police tape had been removed already and now the oak tree was surrounded by posters, pictures, and candles, put together as a memorial for Hayden. I wasn't brave enough to approach that tree so I wasn't sure what all was there. People must've written notes saying "We'll miss you" and various Bible verses. I wondered who had started it first and assumed it was Ally, Hayden's girlfriend.

Ally had been at the center of attention almost as much as I had been. Even though it was a large school, most of the teachers had an idea of who was dating who,

and Hayden and Ally had been together for most of the year. They even served detentions together occasionally. She had never really been a friend of mine, though we had grown up together. Back in middle school, she nicknamed me Pancake (because I developed slower than most of the other girls) and it spread around the whole school.

When I thought about it though, she was a lot like Hayden. She was smart, or had been in middle school, but once high school started she bleached her mouse-brown hair and had the ditz act down to a science. She eventually got a reputation and I couldn't believe it when she hooked up with Hayden. But it had never been my place to question his decisions.

Ally had been at the church and then the cemetery for Hayden's burial. She wore the most conservative black dress I had ever seen, and Ally wasn't one for covering up normally. She bawled the whole time, making a scene in my opinion. But who was I to tell someone how to grieve. Maybe she really was torn up over his death. Maybe they were in love. I didn't know and I knew I probably would never ask. How awkward would that be? It really irked me when she didn't even bother to show up to the reception at our house, though. If she was so attached then why couldn't she come share her sorrows with us?

God, what had Hayden seen in her?

As I stared at the impromptu memorial by the oak tree, still not daring to go any closer, I wondered what she was really like and how she really felt. When the wind knocked over a brightly decorated poster, I decided to head back to the classroom. I had been gone for forty-five minutes already and I didn't want to get caught in the rushing

tide of students who couldn't wait for that Georgia sun on their faces and no homework to stop them from soaking it in. Besides, I needed to collect my lonely pen.

I eased the classroom door open, careful not to disturb the test takers who were frantically trying to scratch out an "A" response, but the crescendo of voices told me they were all done. Every eye watched me as I slid into my seat before they started their murmuring and gossiping again.

It felt like the minute hand would never make it to 2:45, but finally it clicked and the bell rang out. Almost instantaneously, doors all down the hallway burst open, releasing the rumbling flood of students into the world. I was the last to leave the room, hoping to miss most of the onslaught of anxious teens with wide open summers ahead of them. I wasn't in much of a hurry.

When I finally left the room with my sad, unused pen, I nearly walked into somebody standing outside the door about a head shorter than me. She whipped around causing her black hair to fly in every direction. "Watch it," I said.

"There you are," Stacey greeted me. "You ready? Got everything?"

I held up my pen. "Yep."

"Let's get out of this dump then." She linked her arm with mine and led me out of the school. We took the long way around, bypassing the quad, to the parking lot. The lot was practically empty, nobody had wanted to linger, so it was a pretty straight shot to her car, a shiny blue Chevy Cruze. She turned around, making me turn with her.

"This is it," she said, a small smile forming. "As of tomorrow night we are no longer high-schoolers." I could tell she was reigning in some of her enthusiasm. If things had been different she would've been jumping around in circles and yelling at the

top of her lungs. I might have joined her too, but instead she was more morose. “This is the last we’ll see of this place.”

“What about graduation tomorrow?” I asked, always the practical one. “It’s in the gym.”

Stacey narrowed her eyes at me for a moment. “That’s different. This is our last day of class.”

“Whatever. Good riddance.” I hated feeling this way as I pulled my arms out from the link we’d formed. I wanted to be excited about the future and sad about leaving this place because it hadn’t been too bad up until now. Now it all just seemed pointless. But I stared over the grounds with her, taking in all of the buildings. My eyes instinctively searched for the oak tree but it was hard to see from this angle. “Let’s just go.” I climbed into the car without waiting for her.

When we got to Stacey’s house, I was still reluctant to go home. So rather than walking across the street to my house, I followed Stacey through her front door like a lost little puppy. We had grown up together so it was common for us to just walk into each other’s house without knocking, and Stacey didn’t question my following her.

“Hey, Mom,” Stacey called on her way through the living room to her bedroom.

“Hey, Mrs. Greenfield,” I said too. I was always uncomfortable with calling grown-ups by their first names, and though she had asked me countless times, I just couldn’t call her Mai. She waved in reply as she yelled in rapid Vietnamese on the phone.

I didn't know what Mrs. Greenfield's job was. I had asked Stacey once but she shrugged and said, "Marketing?" I knew she worked from home and was almost always on the phone or typing furiously at her laptop. Stacey's dad, Terrence, owned a men's suit store. He had even been kind enough to give us a suit for Hayden's funeral. He went to the funeral home to take measurements and tailored a suit perfect for Hayden so my mom didn't have to worry about it. It had been navy blue with a crisp, white shirt underneath and a blue and green tie. He did such a good job of it and it made me love Stacey's family even more.

Her parents were quite a pair. Mrs. Greenfield had perfect olive skin, was small and petite but could really make herself be heard, especially when she shouted in Vietnamese. Mr. Greenfield was a big guy with the blackest skin I'd ever seen. He was always smiling and spoke with a deep voice. He could always calm Mrs. Greenfield down after she'd worked herself into a frenzy.

Stacey had hit the genetics jackpot between her parents. She was the most exotic looking girl at our school, which equaled popularity. She had thick, black hair with the slightest wave and flawless light brown skin. Her eyes were almond-shaped and such a dark brown they almost looked blended with her pupils. Her cheekbones jutted out gracefully. Her only complaint was the way her ears stuck out so it was rare to see her hair pulled back to expose them. She was gorgeous and I was jealous.

Really, it was a surprise we had stayed friends throughout high school. Her popularity soared during sophomore year while mine plateaued (and thankfully, the majority of students stopped calling me Pancake). I was okay with that; it seemed like hard work to keep up with who was cool and who wasn't. I was already preoccupied

with my classes, perfectly content with my “smart girl” label. Being best friends with Stacey kept me out of the lower stratus of the school hierarchy.

Stacey tossed her tote bag into her closet, where it landed amid a pile of clothes and shoes. I threw myself onto her four-poster bed and stared up at the lace canopy. Her room was an odd mix of girly frills, dancing paraphernalia, and R&B posters. Like the lace canopy, her bedding was a soft pink to match her walls, which were covered in posters. One wall housed her dancing medals and trophies while another was covered with personal photos, many of which were just close-ups of the two of us squishing our faces together during our happier, carefree days.

“Did you see the memorial by the tree?” Stacey asked, sitting on the other side of the bed. She crossed her legs under her and grabbed a heart-shaped pillow, hugging it close to her body. “There were so many pictures and notes. I couldn’t believe it. I never thought he was that popular.”

“He wasn’t,” I said, sounding cynical. “Everyone just loves the drama. You know people only really pay attention when something awful happens.” I sat up and leaned against one of the posts. “I mean, do you know how many people have talked to me this week? Offered me their help? It’s ridiculous.”

“I know. Today Tiara was going on and on about how horrible you must be doing and that we should go console you. And I was like, ‘Hello! I’m her best friend. I already talk to her.’” Stacey had a self-satisfied grin on her face, clearly pleased she had bettered Tiara. “Needless to say, she shouldn’t be bothering you any time soon.”

“Thank god,” I sighed in relief. Tiara was a lot like Ally in that she loved drama and attention, only Tiara was more self-righteous. She felt like it was her duty to help

everyone, whether they needed it or not. Overall, it wouldn't be such a bad characteristic in her; people are always complaining about how self-centered kids are these days. But Tiara just has this look that says "My life's perfect and yours isn't so of course I can fix your problems" and it really gets under everyone's skin, mine included.

I suddenly switched gears, thinking about the funeral. "Do you know that guy Ally was hanging all over at the funeral?" Stacey raised an eyebrow at my abrupt change in conversation.

"Of course, that was Caleb."

I picked at imaginary lint on my capris and said as casually as possible, "So you know who he is then?"

"Seriously?" she asked. Her eyes popped open and she gave me an incredulous look. "How do you not know who he is? He's Hayden's best friend." She looked awkward for a moment and then mumbled, "Or was."

I ignored the qualifying statement. "I don't know."

She threw her pillow at my head and walked over to the low bookcase next to her desk. She had a whole row of yearbooks from every year she was in school. I had a similar collection at home though they sat in the corner of the living room untouched. She pulled out a volume from the middle and by the date of it I knew it was from sixth grade. She flipped to the section of sixth grade pictures and then turned the pages until the last page with the W's.

"Caleb Wright." She pointed to the middle picture in the last line of photos of a small boy with big glasses and a bowl-cut. He had freckles across his face and a tight,

close-lipped smile which usually signaled braces. “His family moved away in the middle of sixth grade.”

And then it clicked.

Caleb’s family had lived around the corner from us. His dad was in the Air Force and they had moved to town in the third grade and then they were gone in the sixth grade. Caleb moved to town just as Hayden and I were drifting apart, even if we didn’t realize it then. They would race around the neighborhood on their bikes or roller-blades and built ramps to jump off. They built a fort in the woods just outside our development and terrorized the girls with squirt guns during the summer. They were “hellions,” as my dad called them. And that behavior was just a tamer version of what Hayden eventually got into. He just upped the danger factor each summer.

It was easy to forget Caleb in the long line of friends Hayden made through the years; he had only been around for a couple years and at that time I was already preoccupied with my friendship with Stacey. We kept to ourselves and played our girl games like teacher and Barbie’s. When we did go out on our bikes we wouldn’t take the same paths. We had avoided the rampaging boys as much as possible.

“Oh yeah,” I said aloud. The Caleb now was a far cry from the sixth grade version. The glasses, braces and awful hair cut had been replaced but the freckles had only multiplied. And of course he had gotten taller. I didn’t have any classes with him now but maybe I had passed him countless times in the hallway and just didn’t pay enough attention.

“Apparently his dad retired at the beginning of the school year and they decided to move back here to be close to family.” I had been right; Stacey did know a lot about

this. “I guess his mom’s family is from around here.” She snapped the book shut and tossed it on the floor rather walk over to put it back where it belonged.

Just then Mrs. Greenfield peeked around the door-jamb.

“Hey girls,” she said. “How are you, Brianna? You holding up?”

Stacey and her parents were the only ones who I felt were sincere when they asked how I was doing. They didn’t ask to pry but because they truly cared about me and my family. “I’m all right,” I said, telling the truth.

“Good for you.” She turned her eyes to Stacey and immediately switched gears.

“I want this room cleaned up tonight, missy.”

Stacey rolled her eyes. “I will.”

“That’s what you said last night. You’re grandparents are all going to be over tomorrow and I want this place spotless.”

“Okay.”

Mrs. Greenfield turned back to me, her features instantly softening. “You tell your mom that if she needs anything to give me a call, okay?” I nodded in reply. “And you’re welcome to come over tomorrow after graduation if you’re feeling up to it.”

“Thanks.”

When she left the doorway, Stacey blew out a puff of breath. “The way she acts you’d think I was still in elementary school. Hell, I’m practically an adult. I can’t wait to go to college!” She said this last part a little louder, intending it to carry into the other room. “And you don’t have to come tomorrow if you don’t want to. I’m sure it’ll be super boring.”

“I don’t know. It’s kind of amusing to hear them try to explain things to each other sometimes.” Mrs. Greenfield’s parents had emigrated here from Vietnam and were still working on understanding sarcasm and slang.

“Oh my god. Last time they were all here together they seriously spent hours talking about Survivor and which would be harder: Survivor Atlanta or Survivor Vietnam.” We both burst out laughing. It was nice to be able to laugh with Stacey without being judged. She was just as lost as I was on how to act sometimes.

“I wish I had been there for that,” I managed to choke out. I glanced at the clock by the bed. “I better go. It’s almost five.”

“Okay,” Stacey said, not bothering to show me out. I knew my way pretty well by now. “I’ll see you tomorrow when we graduate!”

“Woo-hoo,” I replied sarcastically. “See you.” I left the house, not seeing Mrs. Greenfield as I left and crossed the empty street to my own house, a low ranch-style house with grey siding and maroon shutters. The whole front is covered in grey flagstone with a long white front porch and a small garden flanking the sidewalk. There weren’t any cars in the driveway other than my own so I unlocked the front door and went in.

I went straight to the kitchen and hit the play button on the answering machine out of habit. It was something I had done since Hayden and I were first allowed to be home alone after school. Not that I ever expected any phone calls for myself but sometimes my parents would leave a message if they were running late.

These days, of course, they were just a string of condolences. There was a sprinkling of automated marketing calls about lowering your insurance or getting paid to take a survey. These I immediately deleted. I was a little surprised to hear a few

messages from law firms. They were offering to represent my parents if they wanted to sue the school. I couldn't believe they would want to. I figured we were all in agreement that this was Hayden's fault alone. It seemed about as dumb as suing McDonald's for spilling hot coffee on yourself.

I took my usual place in front of the TV, turning the volume up loud so I didn't feel quite so lonely. It was still hard getting used to the silence of the house. With Hayden there had always been some kind of noise. The boy just didn't know how to keep quiet. If it wasn't the heavy metal music blaring, it was the thumps and crashes of God-knows-what or the drumming of a pencil as he pretended to do homework; but usually it was a combination of things.

When I heard the garage door finally clang open, I turned the volume down and changed the channel from cartoons to the History Channel, trying to at least appear more morose. But I didn't get up from my lounging position on the couch.

"Hey, Bri," my dad's voice greeted me, followed closely by the warm smell of melted cheese and pepperoni pizza. We'd had a lot of take-out and fast food this week, allowing the questionable casseroles to go bad in the refrigerator.

"Hey."

"Your mom's running late if you want to go ahead and eat." I could hear him rummaging in the cabinets for plates and the clear *pop!* and fizzle as he opened a can of soda. I rolled off the couch to join him in the kitchen. I grabbed my own can from the fridge and seated myself at the breakfast bar. My dad loaded a plate for me and slid it onto my placemat. He didn't bother to get a plate for himself and just started eating a slice over the box.

“There’s a bunch of messages,” I said, trying to fill the silence again.

“Oh, yeah?” he said after swallowing a huge bite. “Anything good?”

“Nope.”

“I’ll just let your mom take care of it then.” He winked at me. He was a bit like me and didn’t believe all the messages were genuine either. I watched as he took another swill of his drink and realized it wasn’t a soda at all. The red can was clearly emblazoned with the word Budweiser. I tried to remember the last time I’d seen him drinking a beer. It must’ve been around New Year’s. The only times my parents really drank were on holidays. And even then it was in moderation.

As I continued to eat slowly and take small sips of my own soda, I realized he had finished a can as he finished his first slice. He went to the fridge and pulled another out of the case and popped the lid to take a fresh drink. I felt my appetite quickly receding.

I started picking at my pizza, just pulling the pepperonis off. I watched as Dad scarfed down another slice and finished his second can. It was something I couldn’t recall ever seeing before. I almost said something when he went to get a third can.

Had this been going on all week? When did it start? I hadn’t noticed anything and I couldn’t recall him drinking when we all sat down for dinner on previous nights. But then I did tend to keep my eyes lowered during those awkwardly quiet mealtimes. I started to wonder what else I was missing. Had my mom started drinking more frequently too? Or had she found something else to occupy her time?

I looked at the clock. She didn’t normally stay late at work, though she did enjoy her job working for the city. Maybe this is what she was doing to compensate. She would throw herself into her work to keep her mind off of what was really going on.

It all just seemed too much. I excused myself, leaving my pizza only half-eaten. My dad asked if I was feeling alright but I just waved him off. I went to my room and shut the door quietly behind me. I had been so worried about school and graduation that I hadn't noticed my parents' real reactions. I thought their plastered on smiles were just a show to everybody else, but maybe they were just there for my benefit. And now they were cracking.

Chapter Three

The morning of graduation I lay in bed for hours, staring and trying not to think too much. I had heard my mom come home around 10:30 the night before. She and my Dad talked in hushed voices for a while before retreating to their bedroom. But with my valedictorian speech looming ahead this afternoon, I couldn't let myself work over what was happening to my family. I was too afraid I would fall apart and I couldn't have that. It would have to wait until tomorrow, or never.

It wasn't until about eleven that I finally got out of bed to take a shower. When I came out, wrapped in a robe and running a comb through my wet hair, I almost bumped into Stacey. She was leaning against the wall next to the door to Hayden's room. His door was closed and covered in posters and pages ripped out of magazines. They were layered on top of each other like he was too lazy to take the old ones down. I'm sure if we started peeling away the pages we could see a progression of his changing tastes in music and clothes.

But we weren't going to do that. We hadn't even opened his door yet. Mr. Greenfield had provided the suit for the funeral so we didn't even need to rummage through his clothes. It was as if everyone was too afraid to disturb his stuff. That if we even touched the doorknob to his room, where his fingerprints still lingered, he would slowly disappear. I hadn't tried to go in and realized I was now a door-lurker. I was someone who stood outside of doors but didn't go through them because I was too scared. I would sometimes find myself just standing outside of his door, staring at the chaos of his posters. I tried to dissect the purpose of each and every picture he had taped

up. I wouldn't touch any of it but I thought if I memorized it, maybe I would know a little more about him.

I was surprised to see Stacey, especially right here; I hadn't checked my phone all morning so I didn't know she was coming over. I vaguely wondered if she'd touched the door or just stared at it like I sometimes did. But I didn't ask.

"Your mom let me in," she said, her face crinkling in a frown. I must have looked surprised or upset. "I hope that's okay."

"Yeah, that's fine." I hitched a smile into place though I was still a little groggy from sleep. "I just got up."

She followed me into my room and plopped down on my blue paisley bedspread, kicking her wedge-sandals off in the process; she was always wearing heels to appear taller. I've always kept my room neat and tidy. I like knowing where everything is. My jewelry is kept tucked neatly into the jewelry box on top of my dresser; my shoes are all arranged in order starting with sandals and ending with boots; and even most of the posters were evenly spaced along the walls. Stacey always thought I was weird because I even kept my room neat as a child.

I walked into my closet and pulled on some clothes so I could fix my hair. Stacey was already dressed and ready to go. She was wearing a black strapless dress with a red patent leather belt. She had her hair pulled back with sparkly barrettes but still kept the tops of her ears covered, allowing the silver chandelier earrings to hang down.

"So how's it going?" she asked as she flipped through the *Science* magazine sitting on my nightstand.

I just shrugged as I started rubbing product into my hair to give it some kind of life.

“Is it weird?” She was intentionally keeping her gaze on the magazine though I could see her shoot a furtive glance out of the corner of her eyes when I was facing the mirror.

I didn’t have to ask what she was talking about. “Of course it’s weird.” I pulled my blow dryer out. “He was supposed to be here too.” I turned the dryer on to keep the conversation at a minimum.

After about ten minutes, my hair was definitely dry and I had to turn the dryer off but Stacey didn’t jump in with any more questions or comments. She could clearly read my bad attitude and decided not to push me any further.

I returned to my closet and pulled out two dresses. I was hoping that by asking her opinion on what to wear I would show her that we were cool. “Which one should I wear? The green or the pink?”

She sat up and a smile spread across her face. She loved picking out clothes for anyone. She took a moment to assess each dress as well as me. “Are you going to leave your hair down?”

I nodded.

“What about shoes?”

I held up my white flip-flops. She crinkled her nose in disgust over my choice. She only wore flip-flops to the pool or to check the mail.

“Then go with the pink. I love the asymmetrical hem.”

I held the dress up to me and gazed in the mirror. I had been leaning towards the green because it covered a little more but I was trying to mend fences and went with the pink as suggested. I jumped back in the closet to change again.

“Do you have your speech ready?” Stacey called.

“Yeah, I’ve had it ready for months.” I came out and rechecked myself in the mirror. Today I wanted everything to be perfect. I wanted to have at least one bright spot in all of this mess to remember. And I certainly didn’t want to be remembered as a train wreck at graduation.

Then my mom poked her head through the doorway. “Are you going to eat something before you leave, Bri? I could heat up some leftover pizza or make you a sandwich.” She looked me up and down, appraising my outfit. “Stacey, do you want anything?”

Stacey looked at me, waiting for me to answer. “Sure, Mom. Pizza sounds great.”

“Yeah, thanks Jane,” Stacey replied; she had no problem calling my parents by their first names.

“I’ll start heating it up so you girls aren’t late.” She turned to leave but stopped with her hand still on the edge of the door. She looked back at me and gave me a weak smile. “You look very nice, sweetie.”

“Thanks,” I said. I noticed her eyes get all shiny as she turned and closed the door behind her. She had been giving me that look all week. She would just smile sadly with her eyes filling with tears and then turn away. I felt like she was either too ashamed

to cry in front of me or just too ashamed of me, in general. Our relationship had turned very awkward like we were both too embarrassed to be ourselves anymore.

Stacey immediately began the questioning again, but she had a knack for detecting tension. “How are your parents doing? Your mom just seems so sad.” She put the magazine back where she found it and stared intently at me as I continued to work on my hair.

“I don’t know.” I tried stalling for time. “I guess they’re managing as well as they can.” It suddenly felt very difficult to explain what was going on. It wasn’t that I didn’t want to tell Stacey because of all people she would be the most understanding, but I just couldn’t put it into words. The thoughts seemed to back up like a log jam and the words stuck in my throat. And I honestly had no idea how they were managing. They were doing such a good job at putting up their facades that I could barely see through it. We were all just mirrors of our former selves.

“That’s good,” Stacey finally said though it was obvious she didn’t know what to say.

No one really knew what to say. The well-wishers all secretly wanted to hear about our suffering but didn’t have the words of comfort we would need to actually get the words out. It was just easier for all parties involved to sound as optimistic as possible even when it felt like the hope had drained away.

By the time I was done with my hair, lunch was ready and Stacey joined my quiet family around the table for the first time since Hayden’s death. To their credit, my parents tried to keep the conversation going rather than falling into our new pensive habit of staring at our respective plates.

Stacey was a good sport too, asking all the right questions about their jobs and answering theirs about her plans for college. I was the only one who stuck to the new routine. I didn't need to pretend for Stacey, but my parents did.

It felt like hours before we all finished up.

My mom checked the clock above the fireplace and her eyebrows shot up in surprise. "You girls better get going. You don't want to miss check-in."

We went to clear away our dishes but my mom just shooed us away. "You girls just get going and we'll see you there later." She did her best to smile and I almost believed it. I went back to my room to grab my robe and cap and double-checked that I had all of my notecards for my speech. As I followed Stacey out of the door, my dad stopped and gave me a one-armed hug.

"Knock 'em dead," he said, causing my mom to visibly flinch. The plate in her hand clattered to the table and bumped a half-empty glass of Coke causing it spill over the table. She had to brace herself on the edge of the table but she was turned away so I couldn't see her real expression. My dad's face fell as he realized his mistake. He kissed the top of my head and ushered me out of the door without another word.

I made my way dazedly out to Stacey's car, thankful she had missed that little scene. But I tried desperately to shake it from my head as we sped towards the school.

Stacey and I arrived at the gym around the same time as most of the other graduates. We waded into the sea of blue robes to check in with the school secretary. I was nervous to find out that I would be first in line along with Andy Newman, the salutatorian. We each had a gold stole to wear, with mine reading "Valedictorian" in embroidered blue thread

down the front. Everyone else was lined up alphabetically which meant Stacey wouldn't be near me, unfortunately.

Soon the gym started filling up with family and friends. Before I knew it, it was time for the ceremony to begin. The junior class student council went in first carrying candles. They were stationed at intervals down the aisle. Then the familiar tune of "Pomp and Circumstance," played by the band, started which was my cue to go. I kept my eyes on the carpet runner as I walked next to Andy down the aisle between hundreds of folding chairs. We had to walk all the way down the end of the first row to take our seats at the end. This also meant we would be the first two to walk up and receive our diploma holders, because, of course, the diplomas were mailed after the test scores were all accounted for.

The beginning of the ceremony was a complete blur. I thought it would take forever to get through all the other speeches but before I knew it, Andy was sitting back down to a round of applause. He started to say something but was soon drowned out.

"And now let's welcome your valedictorian, Brianna Fairchild," Mrs. Krieger announced.

Applause broke out and suddenly my nerves jumped into my throat and I didn't know if I'd be able to speak. But I had my notecards clutched tightly in my hands as I made my way carefully up to the podium. The last thing I wanted was to trip in front of the whole crowd.

When I finally made it the microphone and rechecked my cards, I looked out over the huge audience. It seemed like the entire town was in the gym right now and they were all clapping. Then, the clapping got louder and one-by-one they began to stand. I

hadn't even said a word and was already getting a standing ovation? I looked back at Mrs. Krieger and the school superintendent for some instruction on how to handle the situation.

And that's when I saw; up on the screen where our senior slideshow had just played, was a picture of me and Hayden. I was surprised by how recent it was and how friendly we looked. It was maybe only a couple of years old and it looked like it had been taken on our last family trip to Florida. We were both wearing tank tops and shorts, standing on the beach. Hayden had his arm draped over my shoulder and mine circled his waist. We were giving the cheesiest smiles we could manage. This was a family photo, not a school photo, and I wondered where they got it.

It dawned on me that they were not really clapping for me, but for Hayden. I felt my cheeks flame up and wondered why nobody had thought to tell me that they would be doing this. The embarrassment increased as I realized I hadn't changed my speech since the accident. I had worked on this speech for a couple months. I tried to find the least cliché inspirational quotes mixed in with just the right amount of humor to keep it from being boring. I hadn't thought to change it, to reflect on Hayden now that he was gone. I didn't want to think about it, let alone share my thoughts with the crowd.

As I looked at the people, finally calming down and taking their seats again, I knew they were expecting me to say something sobering and loving about Hayden. After all, it looked like I had planned this photo with my speech. They were waiting for a poignant reflection on the life of my deceased twin brother and how I would just have to find the will to make it through the rest of my life living for the both of us, or something.

But all I had were funny stories from elementary school and some stupid line about shooting for the moon and landing in the stars.

My hands started to shake as I shuffled through my notecards, trying desperately to find something this crowd was expecting. I felt as though I had swallowed a handful of cotton balls as I croaked out, “Welcome parents, friends, faculty, and fellow graduates. We stand here today,” except they were all sitting, “at the edge of the rest of our life. The past twelve years,” or was it thirteen counting kindergarten, “have prepared us for what adults fondly call, the real world.” That was funny right? Now what could I say about Hayden?

“It feels like an even greater feat to have made it to this point after the past week’s events and the passing of my brother, Hayden.” Did that sound too formal? God, I wondered what my parents thought about this.

“Hayden was,” I faltered but tried to continue. “Hayden was...” But what was he? What could I really say to all of these people? Sweat accumulated just under my graduation cap and the heat from the spotlight was starting to filter through my blue robe. I felt the panic rising and my flight instinct kicked in. My notecards fluttered to the ground around the podium as I tore off the stage and ran towards the exit.

I didn’t think – I just ran. I didn’t bother to see how the crowd reacted and was too ashamed to look for my mom and dad. I just bolted for the nearest door. When I reached the sunshine I stopped and leaned forward to rest my hands on my knees as I tried to catch my breath.

I had it all planned and organized and then it just fell to pieces. Like my notecards scattering around on the ground, so did the order I had desperately clung to.

“Where’s the fire?”

The voice made me jump about a foot in the air. I clutched my hand to my chest as it raced away in fright. I turned around to see who was lurking outside of the gym during the graduation ceremony.

“Sorry, I thought you saw me here,” he said.

It was Caleb.

I hadn’t been this close to him since after the funeral and felt silly for not recognizing him before. I wasn’t likely to forget him again. “What are you doing out here?” I blurted out. I took slow, calming breaths.

Caleb considered me for a second as he leaned against the brick wall. His graduation robe was unzipped to reveal an un-tucked, black button-down shirt and a loosened, red tie. His hat was hanging from the bike rack nearby and shifted back and forth in the slight breeze causing the strings of the tassel to dance around.

“I slipped out when Hayden’s picture came up for your speech.”

“I didn’t see you leave.”

“I’m pretty good at slipping out unnoticed. Besides, I figured you’d be telling stories about him and I didn’t know if I could sit through it all.”

He said it so straightforward, like he didn’t care if I thought he was strange for not wanting to hear stories about his dead best friend. I was a little thrown by his response, unsure what I should have expected. He reached into his pants pocket and pulled out a crushed pack of cigarettes and offered them to me.

I took a step back and said, “No thanks. Smoking’s gross.”

He shrugged as he drew one out for himself and slid the pack back into his pocket. He stuck it between his lips but didn't bother to light it. I wondered if he did this for show or if he actually smoked. He didn't make an attempt to search for a lighter or match and the cigarette just hung out of his mouth in a pathetic sort of way. I wondered if his mouth tasted like cigarettes.

I noticed his hair was curling slightly around his forehead, probably from the humidity. Mine had stayed stick-straight though any body I had willed into it had fallen. The silence dragged on and I started to swing my arms as I searched for something to say but Caleb beat me to it. "So what are you doing out here then?" He pulled the cigarette back out of his mouth and stuck it behind his ear. "How was your speech?"

I dropped my face into my hands. "It was awful." My voice was slightly muffled from my hands. "You could've stayed inside. I didn't know they'd put up that picture of us and I didn't even think about changing my original speech. I wasn't prepared to talk about him." The words came out in a rush and I was surprised at how honest I was being with a relative stranger.

"I'm sure it wasn't that bad," he said, a half-smile pulled at his mouth.

I dropped my hands to my side with a slap. "Well, I'm out here instead of in there. What does that tell you?"

He just nodded but that half-smile became full blown. "I just ran out of there." It was easy to blurt out what I was thinking and feeling to him even though he wasn't *my* friend.

I wondered if Hayden had had the same ease with Caleb that I was feeling. Did he make everybody feel that way or just me? But I continued talking anyway, "My mind

just went completely blank as I tried to think of something to say about Hayden, but I came up empty. So I ran.”

“Just look on the bright side,” he said as he pushed away from the wall and zipped up his robe.

“Which is?”

“Chances are you won’t see half these people after today.” He picked up his cap and walked back to the door while I just stood there. He was right after all. We didn’t live in a small town so it would be easy to avoid people. I had already done a fairly good job of that this week. And at the end of the summer everyone would be going to colleges all over the country.

Caleb pulled the door open slightly to poke his head back in the gym. “They’re about to hand out the diplomas.”

“They’re just the holders,” I said without thinking. I was getting pretty good at this blurting-things-out business. It was like after blanking during my speech my brain hadn’t been able to restart itself.

“Well, are you coming or not?” He waited patiently, still holding the door for me. Without saying anything I followed him. He let me go through first and as he did he put his hand on the small of my back. Even through the cheap, synthetic material of my graduation robe I felt a little shock run up my spine.

But it could’ve been static electricity.

I felt embarrassed as I stood outside of the gym, waiting for my parents. Every eye seemed locked on me and Caleb when we tried to sneak back into the gym, but the

closing door seemed to echo around the whole room like a fire alarm going off. I was surprised I hadn't passed out with all the times the blood had rushed to my face that day. But I took my seat in the front and didn't turn around to look at anyone. Caleb, on the other hand, didn't seem to mind making a scene as he worked his way to the middle of his row to reclaim his vacated seat.

I was the first to accept my diploma holder and when my name was called a smattering of applause broke out, like everyone was still too stunned by my behavior to congratulate me on my accomplishment. Mrs. Krieger wore the same look of pity she had worn the day of the accident as she shook my hand and the superintendent almost dropped the holder before I could grab it. As they continued down the list of students the applause became more enthusiastic again. I was thankful that I didn't have to face the crowd anymore. I just kept my gaze fixed on the cursed podium and clapped along with everyone else.

Standing outside by the parking lot, I had already taken off my robe as the afternoon got hotter. I had it draped over my arm, revealing my pale pink sundress with the blue flowers all over it. I had just worn flip-flops to reduce my chances of tripping across the stage, but now tripping seemed like a better alternative to my mad dash from the stage mid-speech.

My mom and dad were by the doors talking to Mrs. Krieger. It looked like she was handing them a pile of posters and a plastic sack full of more paper. My, now former, classmates all lifted their hands to wave good-bye as they paraded past with their family members. They all looked so happy, and I wished I could be like them.

Stacey stopped to give me a hug as she trailed behind her parents and grandparents who were in an intense argument. All of their hands flew as they tried to mime out their points. From the looks of it, they were debating about basketball, but I couldn't be sure. "I'll call you later, okay?" Concern filled Stacey's eyes as she patted my shoulder. She lowered her voice, "And then you can tell me why you sneaked back in with Caleb." She bumped my shoulder before turning away to catch up with her family.

Normally I would've been just as giddy and eager to dissect every minutiae of our conversation. Each look Caleb gave me and the very inflection of his voice as he asked questions. But that encounter seemed too far away as the dread of facing my parents loomed ahead.

"You ready to go?" my dad asked as my parents joined me. Almost everybody had left so the parking lot would be easily managed. They were both smiling slightly which confused me. I fell behind as we headed to the car, wondering if they were upset, disappointed, or possibly understanding.

"Are you coming or have you changed your mind about graduating?" Dad laughed at his own joke which I would have normally found funny. He had his arm around Mom's shoulders and held the plastic bag in his other hand. She was clutching at the stack of posters like they might blow away.

"I'm waiting for the lecture."

"Brianna, what happened up there?" Mom asked. I couldn't read the look on her face. She looked so sad all of the time that it was hard to pick any other emotions from her features anymore.

“Yeah, Bri. We were really looking forward to your speech.” Dad glanced at Mom but she just turned for the car.

“I didn’t know they’d be displaying that picture of Hayden and me.” I hesitated, not sure how much to share. “It just surprised me is all.”

“Oh, honey, I’m sure I told you about it,” Mom said as she put the posters in the backseat of the car.

I opened the door on my side and just stared across the roof at her. “You knew?”

“Of course I knew.” She moved to her door without bothering to look at me.

“Where do you think they got the picture?”

I had wondered about that. I didn’t think it could have been turned in for the slideshow because I never submitted any and I doubted Hayden had either.

“The school called and thought it would be nice to do a sort of tribute. If you had bothered to check the phone messages too, you could’ve told them no. But I know I told you.”

“Yeah, you definitely didn’t.” I couldn’t believe this. And of course, it was my fault.

Mom gave an exasperated sigh. “Well what’s done is done. Let’s just be glad we didn’t videotape it.”

I slammed the door as hard as possible as I got in the car but neither of them said anything. I crossed my arms and hoped one of them would see the anger and humiliation burning in my eyes but they didn’t. I diverted my gaze, not wanting even to look at them for the moment, to the pile of posters and papers lying on the seat next to me. The ones my mom had laid so tenderly down.

I started to poke through the pile of papers and realized they must've been the signs from the oak tree memorial. A part of me wanted to see what everyone had to say but another part wasn't sure I was ready, especially after the tumult of the afternoon. The poster on top was just a hodgepodge of pictures of Hayden. I recognized the big bubble-letters from when it was arranged by the tree though I hadn't gone near enough to see the pictures. One showed him up on the roof of the school with his arm around Ally and a couple other people. It was obviously from earlier in the year because there was a slight dusting of frost across the tar, the extent of a Southern winter. Another must've been at a party because Hayden was set with an intense look of concentration as he carefully aimed a dart, poised to throw it.

I hadn't known he could play darts.

"So where do you want to go eat?" my dad asked as he pulled out of the parking lot. I gave one final look at the school, sure this was the last time I'd see this place ever again. The sun seemed too bright for this moment, and the way it glinted off the metal roof made spots before my eyes so I quickly turned back to the front.

"How about Ryan's," I said. Ryan's was a family favorite because it was buffet style. We always went there because it was guaranteed that we would all find something that we liked. It was our default restaurant because often when we debated on places to eat me and Hayden would purposely pick places the other didn't like, just to see who could win. But we never turned down a chance for Ryan's. I was hoping this might make my parents feel a little proud of me for thinking about Hayden too.

"I don't know," Mom said, "it might be a little crowded there." She had her face turned towards the passenger side window so I couldn't see her expression but my dad

shot a glance at her as he kept driving. I wondered if he was just trying to keep her as happy as possible by not saying anything.

“Everything will be packed, Mom.” I didn’t know why she was acting like this. Did she not want to face the memories of countless meals there or did she really not want to be in a large crowd where people might possibly stare? Because we had just left a place full of Hayden’s memory, as well as an extremely crowded room. But all I could think about was how selfish she was being. She didn’t seem at all interested in enjoying this day for me. It was like she thought if she were happy today then that would tarnish her love for Hayden.

I couldn’t help but feel crushed and a tad resentful.

“What about Steak and Shake?” my dad chimed in. He kept driving but since we didn’t have a place picked I had no idea where he was headed.

“No, that’ll be packed, too. What about Rising Sun?” she asked.

“I don’t like Chinese,” I answered though I wasn’t sure my opinion counted anymore. They knew I didn’t like Chinese food and this was supposed to be my dinner choice.

“Chico’s?” my dad asked as he made another right turn. It felt like we were going in circles. And Hayden didn’t like Mexican food or at the last I could remember he didn’t. But I didn’t voice this aloud.

My mom threw up her hands. “Let’s just go home. We’ll go out another night.” Her voice cracked a little but she turned to look at me again and her voice got softer, “Is that okay, honey?”

“Sure,” I said equally soft, though for different reasons, “that’s fine.”

I clenched my jaw as she turned away and my dad made a left turn to head for home. The day was slowly progressing to evening but the sun still wouldn't set for another couple of hours. This day had gone nothing like it was supposed to. It was supposed to be fun and exciting; a celebration of all these years of toiling away in school and extra-curriculars. I made valedictorian and had gotten into a good school with good scholarships.

The summer break felt like it would be too long and my escape was too far away.

Chapter Four

“That’ll be fourteen dollars,” I said into the microphone mounted on the glass dividing my little ticket box from the mall food court. The couple on the other side was clearly on a date. She had a death grip on his right arm while he tried to retrieve his wallet from his back pocket with just his left. It took a minute but he managed to palm it to the counter and extract his money.

He slid me a twenty under the glass and as I counted the change the girl started whispering frantically in his ear. Her eyes kept darting towards me and I thought I recognized her too. Maybe she had been in the grade below mine. I felt paranoid as I tried to get the correct change. For all I knew she might just be making sure I couldn’t hear her as she whispered her urgent need to use the restroom before the movie. Girls always had to go before the movie started.

But somewhere in the back of my head I knew, just knew, she was whispering about me.

“Here’s your change,” I said sliding six dollars and the ticket stubs across to their side. “You’re in theater two. Enjoy your movie.”

“You too,” the guy said before I could flick the microphone off to drown out the food court noise. I hated when people said that, even though I knew they were just being polite. But I clearly was not headed to a movie myself.

The girl shot me another glance over her shoulder as they turned the corner towards the concession area.

Maybe I just had something on my face, I wondered. I had been paranoid a lot since I started my job at the movie theater. Then again, maybe if I didn’t want to be

stared at, I should've gotten a more unobtrusive job. But when I applied at the theater weeks ago, I was a nobody and didn't have a reason to hide. I also imagined being a projectionist and being able to flit around in the dark upstairs, catching glimpses of movies during the lulls. Instead, I was offered a job with tickets sales. All-you-can-eat popcorn and free movies all summer wasn't too bad.

As summer break set in, so did the emptiness. I had desperately needed to be out of the house, so I quickly accepted.

It's not like Hayden and I had ever spent more than fifteen minutes together in the same room when our parents weren't around during summer break. It had never bothered me before to be home alone. In fact, I relished those times because of the quiet. But now I noticed it, and it bothered me.

A couple of days alone and it didn't matter how loud I turned up the TV, the silence was deafening. There were no arguments over who got the big TV or who ate all the pizza rolls (which was normally Hayden). There was just me, like it always felt before. But now it was different.

And it didn't help matters any that I had to stare at the miniature altar set up in Hayden's memory. The day after graduation I had woken up and gone to the living room to watch my normal morning television. Right there in my line of vision was a display of posters, pictures, letters, and cards. I don't know if my mom or dad set it up, maybe both of them did, but they'd taken all of the paraphernalia that Mrs. Krieger had given them from the school and set up a memorial for him. They had even lit the candle someone had left, and when that burned down, they replaced it with a flameless candle so it could be lit all day.

Each day, the display had gotten harder and harder to look at. I found myself analyzing it like I analyzed his door, though never touching any of it. I read the notes people left and stared at the pictures, trying to see if I had been around that day. Sometimes I would pull out a yearbook so I could match names with faces, though that didn't always help. I wondered how many people actually knew and cared about Hayden and who was just trying to look like a saint. I even noticed a tiny little notecard with a brief message from Stacey which surprised me. I wanted to ask her about it, but I was too scared to disturb anything.

A tap on the glass interrupted my thoughts and when I looked up I noticed a short line had formed. I flicked the microphone back on and tried to use my most pleasant voice possible. "Welcome to the Galleria 10," I said, hoping I sounded genuinely excited to see this stranger at my window. "How can I help you?"

The line never seemed to get any shorter. Geez, didn't these people have anything better to do than sit in the dark for two hours? I could see the bright sunshine streaming through the skylights over the food court. I was sure it was a beautiful day. The humidity of middle Georgia was probably forcing everyone inside.

Well, at least this whole job-business was distracting. That was until the last group in my line reached the window. I didn't even look up as the lady requested three tickets to the latest chick-flick. Some heart-wrenching number about a woman learning to find true love again, blah, blah, blah. I kept my eyes trained on my computer screen until a familiar voice, dripping with saccharine sweetness, said, "Oh my goodness! How are you, Brianna? I didn't know you worked here!"

I looked up startled, losing count, and not quite ready to deal with this. Tiara Halifax, the school savior, stood on the other side of the glass and leaned on the ticket counter to be closer to the microphone speaker, which was definitely unnecessary. Her voice seemed to echo around my little box before filling my ears and my brain, blasting away like tiny little missiles.

She stood with two women who must have been her mother and grandmother. They all looked alike with their hair pulled back in various braided styles, pastel-colored polo's, and denim skirts. The only inclination of their respective generations was the varying degrees of gray in their otherwise light brown colored hair. I couldn't quite see but I was also sure that Tiara's skirt didn't quite reach her ankles like her mother's and grandmother's did. I instantly thought of a stereotypical Pentecostal family though I had no idea what her denomination was. Besides, I'd see Tiara wear jeans before, as well as shorts that were definitely not church-regulation length.

Mrs. Halifax's smile was just as pitying as Tiara unsuccessfully whispered to her, "This is the girl from school I told you about."

I turned back to counting their change, hoping I hadn't started to turn red out of embarrassment. I knew she meant well. I really did! And I almost wanted to like her and appreciate her concern.

Almost.

"Are you doing okay?" Tiara reached her hand under the little arch where I pass the money and tickets. I just stared at her hand lying there. Did she really think I would reach out mine too, and complete the consoling gesture? Yeah, right. Instead, I clutched

the money and ticket stubs to my chest as if they'd protect me from whatever evil I imagined had passed through that opening along with Tiara's hand.

I knew I was just fanning the flames of the notion that I was losing it, but Tiara was too busy being a saint to notice my strange reaction. In fact, it probably added to my pathetic image, only furthering her mission to save my soul. She still hadn't retracted her hand and I didn't know what to do with the money.

"I'm alright," I managed to say, though I still hadn't moved forward. I noticed her grandmother looking a little impatient as she not-so-discreetly checked her watch. She clearly found the movie a more pressing issue than establishing a reading on my mental well-being. And I agreed.

"Of course, you're not," Tiara finally retracted her hand, but I doubted if it was because of my not cooperating. "You just lost your brother and then graduation." She let this trail off as she shot another sympathetic look to her mother. It was clear from their expressions that this wouldn't be the last I'd see of these two.

Tiara looked back at me with her perfect smile, because all saints have perfectly white, straight teeth. "If you need someone to talk to, I'm a great listener. I don't know if you have my number but here it is." She slid a small business card-sized piece of paper through the opening to my side. It had her name printed on it, as well as two phone numbers and an email address. I didn't tell her that I already had her number, but she probably just assumed I didn't because I never responded to her bazillion text messages. "You can call me day or night. The church address is on the back too if you ever think you might want to come down. We have a counseling group that meets once a month to talk about crises like death."

Sure enough when I turned the card over, the address to the First Baptist Church was listed, along with yet another telephone number and email address. At least one question was answered, they were Baptists. I didn't come from a religious family so I didn't know what the difference was, only what I learned from stereotypes and zealous extremes. We celebrated the holidays and I assumed we all believed in God but that's about where our devotion ended. I could have admired Tiara's personal commitment to her beliefs if she weren't always shoving them down someone's throat.

“And even if you just want to hang out or see a movie sometime, you can give me a call.”

“Thanks, I'll keep that in mind.” I finally released the money and ticket stubs and slid them over. My palms were sweaty. “Enjoy your movie.”

Grandma Hallifax blew out a sigh and led the way into the theater. I was about to turn off the microphone when Tiara said, “And we'll pray for you and your family. I don't know where Hayden's soul has gone but it's more important to focus on the future of yours.”

I clenched my jaw so tight I thought my teeth might crack from the pressure. This was not something I needed right now.

“Bye, Bri. And God bless you.” She didn't wait for a reply this time and instead turned on her heels to follow her mother. Mrs. Hallifax bore the look of a proud mother who could clearly see the glow of a halo above her child's head. All I could see was the spiked tail of a demon whip around the corner.

How dare she! I couldn't believe it. I couldn't believe she could say these things and sound like an angel the whole time. She had insinuated that Hayden didn't make it to

heaven. But nobody had ever even hinted at a fate other than holy. We had more “He’s in a better place now” than I could count with a few “Only the good die young” thrown in for good measure. One of my great-aunts had even said, “God calls his favorites back first.” But nobody had mentioned eternal damnation as an option. Hayden and I did get saved when we were eleven at a lock-in, where we stayed up all night playing games at a church but also were preached to, so I’d mostly felt secure in the assumption he’d made it to the Big Guy Upstairs. I hadn’t thought of any other possibilities.

And then it hit me. I was definitely on Tiara’s summer to-do list. Clearly the salvation of my soul had become a priority. I could expect more religious crusades in the future and I wasn’t sure if I was up to the challenge.

“Oh my god, was that Tiara just now?”

I looked up and saw Stacey standing on the other side of the counter, filling the space Tiara had just vacated. I could only see her from about chest up because she was so short but she leaned her crossed arms on the counter and continued in a low, outraged voice, “What happened?”

I knew I must’ve looked angry or worse. I couldn’t say what was really wrong, so instead, I tried to rearrange my face into a more controlled look and told a half-truth.

“Tiara’s concerned for my soul and well-being.”

“Well she seems to make someone a mission every summer. I think it’s like a requirement to bring in new recruits or something.” Stacey instantly brushed off my weird mood. She could usually tell when I didn’t want to (or couldn’t) talk about something. She was alone but her arms were weighed down by a few bags.

“Getting a workout in, I see.” I looked over the counter to try and see what stores she made it to, but it was impossible. She seemed to be hiding the bags out of sight

“You know me. Just some power-walking and strength training.” She lifted the bags like she was doing a bicep curl. “And I found you the coolest, most awesomest birthday present ever. You’re going to love me forever.”

My birthday, something else I didn’t want to talk about. “But it’s not for a few more weeks.” I tried to make my tone convey how un-excited I was but Stacey ignored me.

“It’s never too early to start planning.”

“Whatever.” I just wouldn’t think about it now. More information to put on the back burner until I was ready (or had to) deal with it.

“So?” Stacey gave me a pointed look.

“So what?”

“So what about Caleb? You still haven’t told me what happened during graduation and it’s been days. I’ve been trying to give you some space since your epic fail but I’m dying over here.”

“Thanks for your concern.”

“Oh come on. People are barely talking about your speech anymore so I need something new.”

“Look nothing happened. He ducked out before I started rambling and we just talked a little.”

“What did you guys say?” Stacey was practically bouncing in place.

“I don’t know. Stuff. It barely lasted five minutes.”

“You looked awfully friendly when you came back inside.”

“He just held the door open for me.”

“Fine, don’t tell me.” Stacey crossed her arms and looked away. I was reminded of when we were little and she would do act like this to her parents to get her way. And she always did.

“There’s nothing to tell,” I reassured her.

She eagerly jumped at the chance of continuing the conversation. “Are you going to see him again?”

I couldn’t help but laugh at that. “Doubt it. He wasn’t my friend, he was Hayden’s. Why would I see him?”

Stacey just shrugged in response and I kept my mouth shut. I didn’t want to let her know that I was a little sad at this revelation. A part of me hoped I would see him again even though our encounter was very brief.

“Well, I better get home before I wear out my credit card.”

“See ya.” Stacey left with the sound of her bags crinkling together and I was alone to stew in my own thoughts until the next set of movies came up.

Luckily by the time Tiara and her family got out of their movie, I had a massive line for the last matinee showing. Tiara tried to hover for a few minutes, clearly hoping for a break in the line so she could continue her attack on my brother’s eternal resting place but the line wouldn’t let up. I just gave her a shrug and a smile that said, “Sorry, really wish I could talk but I’m super busy.” She finally caught the hint and left. Six o’clock and the end of my shift couldn’t come soon enough.

When I got home I collapsed on to the couch with a great sigh like I'd seen my parents do hundreds of times after long days at the office. It felt good to be so worn out though I wasn't sure how long the feeling would last. I was sure it wouldn't make it past the first pay day when I realized how little minimum wage turned out to be. But for the moment I was content.

There was no sign of my parents and before the silence could set in I hit play on the answering machine which was blinking red with one new message. The mechanical voice came on announcing the new message made at 3:30 that afternoon followed by my mom's ringing tone. "Hey, Bri. It's Mom."

Well, of course, it was. She always announced herself like after all these years I couldn't recognize her voice. Even after we had caller id on every phone, including our cell phones, she still had to let us know it was her.

"I just wanted to let you know," the message continued, "that your father and I will both be late tonight so why don't you order pizza or see if Stacey wants to come over for a while. You can even order a movie off pay-per-view if you'd like."

Gee, she was being awfully nice and accommodating. I immediately wondered who else had died.

"I wanted to make it home sooner but I got a lot of work."

That seemed to be implied by the lateness but judging from her tone of voice it sounded more like an excuse. I could usually tell when my mom was just saying things to make someone feel better because I sounded the same when I did it. Like earlier when I told Stacey the half-truth about my encounter with Tiara. Something was definitely up.

But her message wasn't finished.

“Anyway, your father,” she emphasized this like it was my fault he was my father, “asked me to ask Caleb to come by to go through some of Hayden’s stuff. I’m sure Hayden would have wanted Caleb to have something of his so if you could show him where to go that would be great. Love you, sweetie. Bye.”

“End of new messages.” The machine beeped and the light stopped blinking but I was frozen in place. Caleb was coming here? Tonight?

My emotions were thrown into a tumult of confusion, torn in different directions. A part of me, a much larger part than I’d previously imagined, tightened in excited anxiety. That part remembered the slight shock I’d felt when he’d put his hand on the small of my back to usher me back into the school gym at graduation. That part wanted him to come over and imagined his visit was purely for my enjoyment.

But soon that overly eager portion was bound and gagged by the angry and slightly selfish part of myself that wasn’t too keen on this practical stranger going through MY brother’s stuff. I had pictured in my head a homely scene of my parents and me going through Hayden’s stuff together, reminiscing over fond memories while going through box after box of tissues. And eventually we’d all decide to leave his room exactly as is, a sort of homage to his brief but full life. I don’t know where this scene came from. We hardly ever reminisced about the past even when we were all looking at the same photo album together but this angry part had sure got its hopes up over it.

And then there was just a tiny portion that was utterly confused. It couldn’t decide what exactly this meant. Would Caleb take Hayden’s stuff? How much was he allowed to have? What would happen to the stuff that was left? Was I supposed to

supervise? And it didn't exactly jibe with the fact that my parents had already created a memorial in the living room. It felt too soon.

I hadn't realized that I had started to pace around the living room as my mind ran through all of this information. I immediately picked up the phone and speed dialed my mom's office. I couldn't do this.

But the phone just rang and rang and rang.

So I tried her cell phone and got nothing but her voicemail. This only added to my anxiety and the notion that something was going on. I ran to the kitchen to look out the window, thinking I had heard a car pull in the driveway but nobody was there. I walked back to the living room and tried to calm down. I guess I was just going to have to deal with this myself.

I panicked then when I realized I was still wearing my uniform from work. I rushed to my room and tried to find a good outfit that didn't look like I was trying too hard. But just as I found a comfortable pair of jeans the doorbell rang.

Chapter Five

I raced to the door, still buttoning my jeans. When I finally fumbled the lock open at the front door and let Caleb enter, the awkwardness began. “Hey, come on in.” I felt relieved I managed to actually be polite. Then I realized I still had my bow-tie on from work. I felt the color flame along my neck as I quickly took it off.

We stood for a moment refusing to make eye contact until I finally blurted out, “Would you like a soda or something? Water? Coffee?” I felt like a waitress taking his order.

He just smiled (causing more somersaults) and said, “No thanks.” He shoved his hands in his pockets and rocked back on his heels.

“I guess I should show you where to go?” I headed for the hallway leading to the bedrooms. I could hear his footsteps behind me though I didn’t look at him.

“I know where Hayden’s room is, you know. I’ve only been over here like a million times.”

“I knew that.” God, I was nervous. I stopped in front of the doorway. There was no way I would be the one to disturb those lasting fingerprints or disrupt the dust bunnies that had surely accumulated after these last couple of weeks.

Could it really have been a couple of weeks already?

Caleb had seemed to be thinking along the same lines because he hesitated for a second with his hand poised above the door knob. But he took a deliberate breath and set his hand down. He slowly turned the knob and let the door swing open, making the stop vibrate with a metallic twang upon impact.

I hovered in the doorway and kicked my socked toe against the edge of the carpet where it met the wood flooring of the hallway. My left hand gripped the wood molding that framed the doorway. Caleb stood as awkwardly as I felt, in the middle of Hayden's room. We both looked around the place and each time our eyes met up we looked away. Surely if there were a hell, this was it; and Tiara was wrong because Hayden wasn't here.

"You can come in if you want," Caleb offered as I continued to hover in the doorway. It felt almost like a violation when my toe happened to cross over the carpet line, I wasn't sure I could make the full commitment of actually stepping in.

"I'm good." But that was a big fat lie. All I could do was stare around at this completely foreign land. It smelled different in here and I wondered if it smelled like him. Just like his door, the walls were plastered with posters covering older posters. His clothes were everywhere like a tornado had ripped through. That definitely seemed like him. He tore around life like a tornado so it made sense that his room reflected that. No, this was hard enough without actually entering.

"I don't really know what I'm supposed to do," he said in a rush of words. "Your mom called my mom and asked if I'd come over and go through his room." He waved his arms out to encompass the mess Hayden had left. "She figured I would know what Hayden would want to give away and who he'd want to have it."

I just stared at him because I had these same thoughts myself. How was he supposed to know? How were any of us supposed to know what Hayden would have wanted?

"But I don't even know where to begin. It feels wrong." His mouth turned down in a frustrated frown. I could imagine him pulling out his pack of cigarettes and sticking

one, unlit, into his mouth. Instead, he ran his hand through his hair and then let his arm fall helpless at his side. I didn't know how to help him, but I understood the confusion. It felt too soon and it did feel wrong to put this kind of pressure on Caleb. Shouldn't my parents be undertaking this task?

"I don't think I can do this," he said, his voice was tinged with a sadness I'd never heard before. "I thought I could. The whole drive over here I was making an inventory of his stuff and who would want what. But now that I'm looking at all of it, I can't. I don't think I can make those decisions."

"You don't have to," I said quietly, not sure if he heard me. "At least not tonight."

"What about your mom?" As he said this he made his way to the doorway where I stood, like my suggestion was easy for him to agree to.

"We'll just tell her it was too much right now. Which it is. But you'll try again another time."

"Okay, I can try to do that, but no promises."

He walked past me and I followed him back to the living room. I could feel the awkwardness about to take hold again so I blurted out, "I'm going to order a pizza if you want to stay a little bit."

As soon as he hesitated I knew the answer. I could see his face work as he tried to find the best way to let me down easy, but I didn't say anything to help him out.

"I would but I have to get home."

"That's cool," I said, trying to mask the disappointment. "I asked Stacey to come over too so it's not a big deal."

“Okay.” He headed towards the door and I followed behind so I could lock it. When he opened the door, he paused in the doorway and looked at me for a minute. I couldn’t quite read his expression. I was so used to seeing pity from everyone who looked at me that other expressions seemed foreign. “Maybe we can hang out some other time,” he said finally.

“Yeah, that’d be cool.” My head was buzzing with a light, happy feeling and it made it hard to concentrate.

“It’d be nice to be able to talk about Hayden.”

“Yeah, of course.” I felt like a balloon with all the air let out. “Bye,” I called after he started down the sidewalk. I stood there for a minute and watched him climb into his car and drive away. When he was completely out of sight I closed and locked the door behind me.

I didn’t hear my parents come home later that night. I never did invite Stacey over; I knew she’d give me the third degree about Caleb but I kind of wanted to keep the afternoon to myself before I dissected it with her. So I went to my room pretty early and I must have fallen asleep at some point.

It was well after midnight when I woke up again. I’d been having a dream about Caleb and Hayden. They were hanging out on the roof of the school and talking about their future plans. Hayden was planning on going off to California and already has his stunt reel ready to show around to agencies. Caleb was undecided. He didn’t think he could go to California with Hayden like they’d planned.

Then Hayden had flipped out. He started yelling at Caleb about what a bad friend he was. And then he accused him of loving his sister (me). Dream-Caleb, of course, denied this accusation and instead stated how he couldn't afford to go and didn't know what he would do in California.

But Dream-Hayden wouldn't listen. Instead, his face got a wild, desperate look as he continued to accuse Caleb of loving me more. The whole time he was yelling, he kept backing up until his foot hit the ledge. He paused and looked down to the ground for a moment before a satisfied smile lit up his face. Then before I knew what was happening, he launched himself backwards off the ledge.

Dream-me had just stood in the doorway to the stairwell, helpless to stop it.

I woke with a jerk, almost like I had been the one falling. It took me a few minutes to remember where I was because even though the dream quickly began to fade, the very real image of Hayden sprawled out on the pavement would never leave me. It was all too quickly pulled from the recesses of my mind and displayed in front of my eyes. It always felt just as real as the first time.

When I caught my breath, I made a quick trip to the bathroom and noticed the glow from the living room TV. I tried to be quiet as I slinked down the hallway to see who was still up. Sometimes my dad would pass out on the couch and I didn't want to wake him if he had. I would just turn it off and go back to bed.

But this time it was my mom who was awake. She was curled up on the end of the couch wearing sweatpants and a t-shirt. From the looks of it she was crying because she kept dabbing at her face. I almost walked up to her to see what the matter was and to tell her about Caleb's visit. It took me a minute to realize what she was watching though.

There wasn't any sound besides a soft thump-thumping and the screen looked like it was covered in static. But I realized it was an ultrasound. It must've been the ultrasound of me and Hayden.

I wondered how often she did this. Was this a nightly occurrence now? I had never seen our ultrasound video before so it wasn't something she used to pull out all the time. In fact, looking at the video, I could only see one baby on the screen but I could hear the two different heartbeats.

I didn't want to let her know I was here. I wouldn't know what to say but I too couldn't look away. Instead I slid down the wall and sat on the floor. I sat where I could see the video and watched it until my mom's tears quieted down and I eventually fell asleep.

"Brianna, wake up."

I shook the sleep away and stared up at my mom. I had fallen asleep in the hallway. Crap.

"What are you doing here?"

I looked around. Just the hall light was on and it looked like it was still night outside. I wondered how long I'd been passed out. "What time is it?" A huge yawn escaped as I struggled up from my sitting position. My back and knees popped a few times.

"It's 2:30 in the morning. Now what are you doing sleeping in the hall?" Her eyes were still a little red-rimmed and her hair was mussed like she had possibly fallen asleep too but the TV was off. She looked a little embarrassed, like I'd caught her asleep

in the hallway. But I knew she was wondering if I'd seen her watching that ultrasound video though I couldn't for the life of me understand why she'd be embarrassed.

"I guess I sleepwalked," I lied. It's not like I could tell her I was spying on her. Watching her as she watched her precious little Hayden and probably imagined I wasn't even there. I had to mentally kick myself, I knew that wasn't true. We were too much alike for me to actually think she didn't love me.

It's not like she was a horrible mother, or that my dad was a horrible father either. They never discouraged me from trying new things and they never said anything when Hayden and I started to drift apart. They let me take ballet lessons and then quit so I could take piano lessons. It was just the little things.

I could remember back in elementary school, back when Hayden and I were in the same class, and our report cards would be sent home. I had always been so proud and excited to show them mine. I always had excellent marks and received plenty of praise from my teachers that I was always sure my parents would be just as enthusiastic. But every time they would just say, "We knew you could do it."

Then when Hayden had brought home one A out of a combination of Bs, Cs and Ds, they would fawn over him. They'd say, "We're so proud of you." His one A was worth more than all of mine and it sucked.

Even months ago when I announced I was valedictorian they couldn't muster the excitement. My mom just said, "You know Hayden, if you had applied yourself you could've been valedictorian." I couldn't believe it. They didn't even say congratulations which made it difficult to feel appreciated.

“Since when do you sleepwalk?” she asked; her fists rested rigidly on her hips. It was hard for her to look intimidating when she was wearing paint-splattered sweatpants and a Snoopy t-shirt but she sure did try.

“I don’t know. I’m normally asleep.”

“Don’t get smart with me.” Her fists dropped when I was too tired to say anything back. “Just go to bed.”

“Okay. Night, Mom.” I thought about giving her a hug like I used to do. I don’t think we’d hugged since the funeral now that I thought about it. But I wondered if it was because she was normally gone in the morning before I got up or because I was in my room when she got home. Before I could really process the thought she crossed her arms over her chest, a clear signal to stay out of her space. So I just went to bed.

Chapter Six

I had to wait a whole entire week before I saw Caleb again. I hadn't fully realized that day how much I really was looking forward to hanging out with him until I found myself waiting desperately for a call. I wondered crazily if he even knew my number, but of course he did. It was the same as Hayden's. Then at work I always expected to see him as the next person in line, on a date with some other girl. I felt like I was losing my mind. I'd never been this into a guy before.

I had even told my mom the next day about how he wasn't ready to go through Hayden's stuff yet.

"I totally agree," she said, which surprised me. "It was your father's idea anyway. *He* thinks we should go through his stuff as soon as possible because *he* thinks it'll just get harder the longer we wait."

I didn't know how to respond to that. It felt like I hadn't seen my dad in a while with our conflicting schedules but my mom sounded very combative about it.

"You tell Caleb that he doesn't have to worry about it. I'll do it when I'm ready to." With that she immediately headed towards the side door to head to work without as much as a good-bye. I was left wondering what exactly she meant by "I." Apparently, it was a task only she would perform.

"Where is dad anyway?"

Her mouth grew tight in anger but her eyes betrayed the sadness that was always just below the surface. "He had an appointment this morning."

I tapped my nails against the counter, waiting for her to say more. She took a sip of her coffee and stared over at the wall before continuing. "He would like to explore our

options about what kind of action we can take against the school.” And before I could get any clarification, she walked back to her bedroom and closed the door loud enough that it echoed across the house.

Did he really want to sue the school? Judging by her attitude my mom didn't agree with it. That definitely surprised me because she seemed to be taking the loss the hardest out of the three of us. My only explanation was that maybe my dad just needed to feel like he could do something. Maybe my mom just wanted to put it behind her and focus on Hayden. I didn't know whose side I was on either.

It was definitely something I wanted to keep to myself. But just as predicted, Stacey had wanted to dissect every little nuance of my encounter with Caleb that afternoon and she took it very personally when I didn't call her immediately after he left. She even refused to talk to me for a whole day but since I had to work, I barely noticed. Besides, she was dying to know the details so I knew the freeze-out wouldn't last long.

“So tell me everything,” she had said when I answered the door. She'd come over with a peace offering of brownies. We immediately headed to my room where we could comfortably discuss the future of mine and Caleb's relationship. She took his suggestion of hanging out another time as a promise. She was the eternal optimist and didn't think someone so cute and nice could lie about something like that. I wasn't quite so sure but I knew it was too late to not get my hopes up.

After the whole story was out, I asked, “You don't think it's a little creepy that we bonded over my dead brother?”

She took a moment to answer, clearly taking this seriously, which I was glad for. This was a definite problem to me. It felt very morbid that our one thing in common was Hayden's death. Maybe all Caleb was interested in was talking about Hayden.

"You never know," she finally answered, "you may find you have a lot in common. So what if Hayden's the link in the beginning. Now if he accidentally calls you Hayden, then you have a problem."

"That's definitely creepy."

"You know you two did look an awful lot alike."

"Thanks, I guess." No one had said that in a while but maybe because it's not so much of a compliment the older we get because it means either I look like a dude or he looks like a chick. Either way, it didn't flatter us.

"That's why I never tried to get with him before." Stacey had started sifting through my CDs and didn't make eye contact when she said this.

"What?" Stacey had never mentioned ever liking my brother and I wondered why she would mention it now.

"Oh, come on," she said, finally facing me. "Your brother was pretty hot. But you have the same eyes so it's a little weird. The only time we ever kissed was in the dark but still."

"Wait, you kissed him?" More information I didn't know. But her cheeks turned a light pink when she realized she'd never told me this. I was truly shocked; I thought I knew everything about her. I wasn't surprised Hayden never mentioned it but surely Stacey would have.

“It was a long time ago at some party. I think it was Holly’s party back in sixth grade and we were playing Seven Minutes in Heaven. I was paired with Hayden and we went in the closet and spent the majority of the time just talking about how weird it would be. But just before the time was up, we kissed.”

I was speechless.

“It was no big deal really.”

But it was definitely a big deal as I realized Caleb might feel the same way. “Do you think Caleb will find it creepy how much we look alike?”

Stacey looked relieved at my change in thought process and that I wasn’t mad at her. I mean, how could I really be mad about something that happened seven years ago?

“I don’t think guys notice those kinds of things about other guys, usually.”

“God, I hope not.” I collapsed back on the bed. “We’re doomed.”

“Don’t say that. You don’t know. Besides you might find out he’s a complete douchebag and end up not liking him at all.”

“Thanks.”

“That’s what I’m here for,” she said, still going through my CDs. She held one up, “Can I borrow this?”

I spent the next few days eagerly anticipating a call to either confirm my doomful suspicions that it was too weird to see his dead best friend’s sister or to confirm Stacey’s theory that guys are oblivious. Each day that passed made me more depressed. Luckily, I hadn’t had another encounter with Tiara, otherwise I’d have to just lock myself up in my room and never come out again.

I was at work where it had been crazy busy for about two hours straight. It seemed like every daycare in town was bringing their kids to the movies that day. I was getting a headache from all of the screaming and crying. When the line finally trickled away, I sighed deeply and took a seat on the stool against the wall. I had just closed my eyes, promising myself I wouldn't fall asleep, when Caleb's voice rang around my booth. "Hey."

It was just one word but it immediately jerked me out of my seat; all thoughts of sleep instantly dropped away. "Hey." I could hear my voice echoing around the food court and instantly felt self-conscious. "Why don't you come over to the door so I don't have to feel like the whole mall is listening in?"

He walked around and I opened the little door that led to my box. I tried to be cool and leaned against it but it banged into the wall so I just stood there awkwardly. This felt like my new state of being.

"Um, sorry it's taken me so long. I've been really busy this week." He shoved his hands into his pocket and I noticed a cigarette poking out from behind his ear. It seemed like such a strange habit of his. From the sound of his voice, I just knew what I was dreading was going to come to fruition. I waited patiently for him to tell me how weird it was to hang out with me and that it might be better to keep our distance.

"So are you doing anything tomorrow night?" Now he looked awkward as he waited for my answer. I was surprised so it took me a minute. "I understand if you have to work or already have plans," he immediately qualified.

"No, I have tomorrow night off."

“Cool.” The relief was easy to read on his face as his body started to relax, though mine felt wound up tighter than a guitar string. “So do you maybe want to hang out then?”

This time I didn’t even hesitate as I answered, “Yeah, that sounds fun.” I already couldn’t wait to tell Stacey. I wouldn’t waste a second as I’d need her help to figure out what to wear.

“Cool,” he said again. “I’ll pick you up at seven if that’s okay.”

“Yeah, that’s good.”

“Okay, see you tomorrow then.” He was about to walk away when he stopped and turned back. “And wear something you don’t mind getting dirty.”

The confusion must have read on my face because he laughed and said, “Trust me.”

“Okay,” I said faintly. “Bye.”

I watched as he walked away across the food court. I closed the door and sat down on the stool when I didn’t think I could support my own weight anymore.

“Oh my God, was that Caleb just now?”

Stacey appeared in front of my window. “Where did you come from?” I asked bewildered. How did she always manage to be around at times like this? “Don’t you ever go home?”

“Girl, please. You know I live at the mall.” She rolled her eyes at me then got back down to business. “So was that Caleb talking to you just now?”

“Yes, it was.” I couldn’t hide the excitement in my voice and Stacey seemed just as excited as me.

“I knew it. It may have taken him too long, but I knew he wouldn’t leave you hanging like that.”

“Well I didn’t know it. But he asked me out for tomorrow.” I almost started jumping up and down but was just able to stop myself. I’d wait till I was alone in my room to do the real celebration.

“So where’s he taking you? Tell me everything.”

“I don’t know, he didn’t say. He just said to wear something I didn’t mind getting dirty.”

Stacey didn’t seem to know what this could mean either. “So I guess wearing a cute sundress and some wedges wouldn’t work then huh?”

“You already had an outfit in mind?” Trust Stacey to be on top of my fashion emergencies.

“I had this planned from the second you told me he came to your house. But I guess now I’ll have to revisit the issue and your closet.” I felt relieved; maybe she’d have a better idea. “I’ve got to run now but how about if I come over later. What time do you get off?”

“Eight. Where do you have to go?”

“I have an interview at American Eagle.” She was very pleased with herself.

“Did your dad cut you off?” Stacey had never indicated she might get a job.

“Not exactly, but extra money couldn’t hurt right? I’ll see you at eight then!”

She took off around the corner towards the rest of the mall.

I couldn’t believe this incredible turn of events. I was trying to stay on this excited high before the nervousness and anxiety set in. I had no idea what to expect

tomorrow and that frightened me a little. I was used to knowing exactly what to expect out of life but since Hayden's death nothing seemed predictable anymore and I wasn't sure if I liked this new way of living. The Caleb aspect was thrilling but everything else seemed overwhelming.

Stacey was waiting in my room when I got home from work. "How'd you get in?" I asked, though I wasn't really worried, just curious.

"Oh, your mom was home for a little bit so I asked if I could get started on going through your closet."

"Oh my god. Did you tell her I have a date with Caleb?" I wasn't sure why this was a big deal but I really didn't want my parents to know. In fact, I didn't want anyone to really know. They already thought I was weird; I didn't want them to think I was completely heartless.

"Of course not. I just said we were going to go through your clothes to give some stuff away to charity." She held up an old dress that looked like it came straight out of *Little House on the Prairie*. "Like this."

"In my defense, that was for a school event or something." I snatched the dress out of her hand, balled it up, and hid it under my pillow. I was strangely attached to some things and this dress was something I had made with my grandmother years ago.

"Yeah, in middle school. But I doubt if you'll be rocking that at college. Am I right?"

"Whatever." I wanted to change the subject before she started talking about the future. "As long as my parents don't know what's going on."

Stacey disappeared back into the closet. I could hear the sound of hangers sliding across the bar as well as her mutterings about how boring my wardrobe was. She called out from the closet, “Won’t they notice when he comes to pick you up?”

“Yeah, right. Do you see them around now?” I waved my arms around to indicate the silence. My door was open which I always closed if they were home but there were no other indications of life around. “They’re hardly ever around anymore,” I muttered. It was hard to keep the disdain from my voice which Stacey, only too quickly, picked up on.

She poked her head out the door and opened her mouth but I cut her off. I knew she’d spout something out about how they really loved me and that everyone handled grief differently. But I didn’t want to hear it. I was tired of hearing it. “So have you found anything workable?”

She hesitated a moment, not willing to let this go. Stacey was much better equipped to deal with these kinds of emotional situations. She understood the need to discuss this because she came from a family that didn’t have a problem talking about their problems. I’d spent countless days at her house listening to her parents argue with each other or their parents and even with Stacey. And even though these fights were loud, they were short. Once everyone laid all their feelings and frustrations out on the board, they could easily work to an understanding. My family subscribed to the “sweep it under the rug” methodology. This caused things to build up until they went away or became too much to handle. I was surprised nobody had exploded from all the pent up emotions.

And being more intuitive than I usually gave her credit for, Stacey decided to let it go. She understood all of this about our very different families too. Instead, she held up a dress I didn't even know I had. It was a dark blue with beaded embellishment around the waist. It was simple so it looked more casual. I think my mom bought it for me to wear to my cousin's summer wedding a few years ago, but he ended up eloping so the dress was pushed to the back of the closet and forgotten.

"Well, I would've chosen this," she held the dress up to me and cocked her head to the side. She looked like she might be in heaven. "I don't know why I've never seen this before, it's gorgeous. Who knew you had it in you?"

"Gee, thanks."

Stacey tossed it on the bed along with all of the other rejects (which was most of my closet). "I just don't understand why you have to get dirty." She eyed the dress again. "Maybe if you wear it, he'll change his plans and you'll do some normal dinner-and-a-movie combo."

"I'm going to go with no, but thanks."

"Well, I guess just pick the cutest, old jeans you have and a t-shirt because I've got nothing." She collapsed on the pile of clothes on the floor with a tortured sigh.

"You're giving up? This is an emergency. Do you know the last time I went on a date?"

"I don't know, freshman year?"

I threw a balled up shirt at her face. "Sophomore year, actually."

Stacey poked her head over the edge of the bed to glare at me. “And whose fault is that? I believe what’s-his-name asked you to the prom this year and you said no!” She threw the shirt back at me though it went wide and missed completely.

“His name was Brendan and he was weird.”

“Well so are you. And then you didn’t even go to prom!”

“I didn’t want to go without a date.” I wasn’t sure how we got into this line of discussion but I knew my argument was paper-thin.

“You could’ve gone with what’s-his-name!” Stacey had jumped off the floor and was throwing her hands around wildly. The image reminded me of her mother on the phone and I waited for the Vietnamese expletives to start flying.

“Whatever. I had scholarship applications to fill out.” I went to my dresser and started digging around in one of the drawers.

“Whatever yourself. You’re always skipping things like that.”

She had a point but I wasn’t about to tell her that. Besides, judging by the smug look on her face, she already knew it. “Look, I just have things to do.”

A silence fell as Stacey returned to rummaging in my closet again, this time going through my meager shoe collection. Caleb just wanted to talk about Hayden so this shouldn’t be a big deal. I was just blowing it up into something I hoped might happen. Besides what would it look like if I did go out with him so soon after Hayden’s death?

Stacey walked out holding a pair of tennis shoes that were still mostly white. She stopped and stared at me for a minute.

“What?”

“No.”

“No, what?”

“I can see it written all over your face. You’re not cancelling.”

“What? I wasn’t thinking –.”

“Yes, you were! You can’t do this.” She dropped the shoes and sat on the bed and gave me a serious look.

“But don’t you think it’s a little soon? Won’t it look bad that only a couple of weeks after the funeral I’m going out with his best friend?” I turned from the dresser and gave her a frank look. It felt nice to say it aloud.

“No, I don’t. Besides, who’s going to know about it? It’s nobody’s business but yours.”

“I don’t know. All he wants is to talk about Hayden.”

Stacey beat her hands against the mattress in frustration. “You always do this. You always have an excuse.”

“I know,” I said quietly. And I did know, because this was the safest way to live my life. I had made my decision long ago to do all that I could to get the best future for myself. I knew that if I did all the right things in school that I could get a good paying job and eventually have a family. Sure, I may not have exciting stories from high school but dammit I’d have a good retirement plan.

“Fine, you’re right.”

“Good. Then let’s get you all kinds of pretty.” She went back to the shoes she’d dropped and held them out for me. “I think you’ve got some cute capris from last summer that’ll look good.”

Chapter Seven

The car came to a stop in a sparsely wooded area. A dilapidated farmhouse stood a few yards ahead. The headlights shined on the collapsing front porch, highlighting the faults and casting deeper shadows in the recesses. A few shutters hung off their hinges and the porch railing was missing a few posts. The windows were mostly smashed in and the paint was peeling everywhere, though in the dark it was hard to tell what the original color should've been. The main structure of the house seemed to still be in okay condition. The roof didn't have any gaping holes that I could see and the walls were still standing straight.

"Well, here we are," Caleb said as he turned off the engine and plunged us into darkness.

I got a strange feeling like I got when I watched horror movies. It was that tight feeling in your stomach when you know you are about to be scared but your body was trying to prepare itself. I was sure, somewhere, there was somebody screaming, "Don't get out of the car! It's a trap!"

But this was definitely not a movie.

"Where's here exactly?" I asked, trying to sound nonchalant as my eyes tried to penetrate the darkness.

Caleb just chuckled. "C'mon." He left the keys in the ignition and pressed the trunk release button below the steering wheel. He slid off the leather seat and slammed the door before making his way to the back. I didn't move for a minute as I listened to him rustling around. He slammed the trunk shut and walked past my window, shining a flashlight on my face.

I squinted from the glare and saw Caleb was carrying a large wrapped bundle and an extra flashlight. “C’mon,” he repeated and walked towards the house.

I decided to suck it up. After all, to even come out with him tonight, or any night, displayed a small amount of trust in him. Ever since Hayden’s death he seemed to always be in my periphery, something I wished I had noticed sooner. Now I was afraid there would always be this morbid curiosity between us that we would never shake. Brought together by death.

I slid from my seat out into the darkness and slammed the door behind me. The noise rang in my ears for a second before being silenced by the pressing of the trees around us.

“This isn’t going to be like a horror movie, is it?” I asked, trying to make light of my hesitations. I walked around the front of the car where Caleb had laid down a plaid blanket in the grass.

“Don’t worry, I think you’ll be safe if it is,” he replied as he lay on his back. He crooked his arm behind his head and stretched his legs out, crossing them at the ankles.

“And why is that?” I asked as I sat carefully on the blanket. “Is it because you’ll save me if a serial killer pops out with a chainsaw?”

Caleb gave his low chuckle. “No, because the virgins always survive.”

“Ha-ha. Very funny.” I looked away as the embarrassment rose up my neck and I was thankful it was too dark to see. Did everyone at school know my prudish reputation?

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to offend you or anything.” Caleb kept his eyes focused elsewhere as I shot glances at him from the side. “Sometimes I just say things and don’t

realize it until it's too late. My older brothers told me I had Tourette's when I was younger but really I just don't have that little voice that stops me from saying stupid things."

I decided to just let the comment slide and pressed him again. "You still haven't told me where we are."

Caleb propped himself up on his elbows and surveyed the house. "This is where my grandparents used to live. No one has lived here for years. Not since they moved into town and my parents never wanted to live here. But no one is quite ready to give up the land."

"Yeah, Stacey told me your family lives around here. Your mom's side right?"

"Both sides are actually from middle Georgia so my parents thought it would be nice to live near them again. Though, I can't say I missed the pine trees at all."

"Oh come on, at least they're green all year round."

"Yeah, but then you have to rake pine needles all year. Now when we lived up north, we only had to rake in the fall. It was pretty nice."

"To be honest, I'm not a big fan of it either," I admitted. I continued to look around, peering into the darkness. As the silence continued, I got a little more freaked out from the various noises and my eyes seeing things that weren't there.

Caleb continued, "We used to come out here and party. Your brother, too. We had a lot of fun out here before everything happened." I looked over and he was watching me. "This is the first time I've been back."

“Oh.” I knew it was coming. He made it very clear that he wanted to talk about Hayden so I don’t know why I was so surprised. And maybe Stacey was wrong, maybe I did remind him of Hayden which was way too creepy for me.

“It’s a lot quieter now.” He went back to staring at the house and sat up, crossing his legs. “You see that window on the right?” He pointed to one that was missing all of the glass. Both shutters seemed to have been ripped from the siding and the lower sill looked as though someone had tried to kick it in. “Your brother took a baseball bat to it.”

“Why would he do that?” I knew my brother did a lot of strange things, things I could never begin to imagine. But that just seemed so odd. Hayden was not the aggressive type.

I thought.

“I don’t know.” Caleb shrugged with his mouth turned up in a half grin. Apparently the memory was a lot funnier to him than to me, though it wasn’t my memory at all. “I guess because he wanted to. He said he’d never broken a window before so I handed him the baseball bat. He just went at it swinging. Eventually, everybody else joined in. There were probably ten of us just picking up rocks and sticks, trying to smash in all of the windows. Hayden just went even harder. He started beating on the shutters and ripped them off the wall. When he started to take apart the actual wall, he ran out of steam and gave up.”

Caleb had the look of someone remembering his fondest memory. “It was a complete blast.”

“That sounds really stupid. Completely pointless.”

Caleb turned and gave me a very serious expression. “Haven’t you ever wanted to just completely destroy something? Just rip it to shreds or beat the hell out of it?”

I hesitated. Nothing came to mind. Yeah, I had been angry before and sad and happy. But I didn’t like to let my feelings control me, especially to commit vandalism. What was the point? It didn’t help anybody; it only created more work to fix this house when his family finally realized what had happened to it. “I don’t think so.”

Caleb didn’t seem fazed by this revelation of mine, though he clearly felt like I was missing out. “Well, I wish I had brought a baseball bat with me. It really is quite liberating.”

“I think I’m good.” Caleb was starting to seem a bit crazier than I thought he was. I mean, he must’ve been weird to be such good friends with Hayden but it wasn’t anything I had expected. My fear from earlier started to turn into annoyance. “So why are we here anyways?” It was hard to keep the agitation out of my voice.

“Well,” he began slowly, “It’s a clear, beautiful night and I thought we could do a bit of stargazing. This place could use some more fun again and so could you.”

I picked up a stick next to the blanket and chucked it at him. “I have fun.”

“When was the last time you had fun,” Caleb scoffed.

“Just last night Stacey came over and we had fun going through my closet.”

There, take that.

“That doesn’t sound like much fun to me.” Caleb still had that smirk on his face that I now found more annoying than charming.

“Well it’s no smashing windows, but it was fun. Not everything has to be loud and in your face to be fun.” I started pulling up blades of grass bordering the blanket and started shredding them to pieces. I was sure that I looked like a child.

“When was the last time you even went out somewhere? Probably well before Hayden’s death, I’m sure.”

“Sorry there hasn’t been much to celebrate since he died.” Now the annoyance was turning into anger and I was already tired of Hayden talk. Caleb actually seemed to enjoy telling me about all about the fun times they had together but I didn’t know if I could take much more of the reminiscing.

I couldn’t think of any recent memories of Stacey, let alone Hayden, that would meet Caleb’s exciting standards. But Caleb had so many vivid memories of Hayden. I realized why I was getting so annoyed and angry at him. I was jealous.

Caleb changed the subject again. “Hey, look. Let’s just forget it for a while okay?”

I didn’t say anything.

“Just turn off your flashlight and lay back.”

I shot him a distrustful look. This didn’t sound like a better idea at all.

“Just trust me,” Caleb chuckled. “Remember, you have to stay a virgin to survive when the killer comes.” But I didn’t laugh. “Sorry, there’s that blurting things out business again. I’ll try to rein it in.”

“You do that.”

Caleb lay back and turned off his own flashlight. Reluctantly, I followed suit without saying a word. It was amazing how deep the darkness became. I was hardly

ever very far from the bright lights of the city and had never experienced such darkness outside before.

I was oddly comforted though, by all of the pinpricks of light, sparkling high above us. I immediately started counting, trying to see how many stars were in my field of vision but quickly lost track. They just seemed to keep multiplying. Occasionally, a blinking light would crawl across the sky, an airplane holding hundreds of people.

“Don’t you feel tiny?” Caleb asked quietly. “I love being out here.”

“Yeah, it’s amazing,” I said in awe, still wrapped up in the expanse of the night sky. I reflexively reached my hand up, opening and closing my fingers like I was trying to grasp as many stars as possible. “I don’t get to see the sky like this very often.”

Caleb turned slightly so he could look at me and I let my arm drop to the ground. “When I was a kid, my parents used to take me and my brother camping. And not like, campground camping, but real, out-in-the-woods-with-no-bathroom kind of camping. My mom was really into stargazing so she’d point out the different stars and constellations. Every time we saw a shooting star we’d make a wish. She said that if I was lucky, the star would be falling for me and my wish would come true.”

I asked, “Did any of them come true?”

“No, but I haven’t lost hope yet.”

I suddenly exclaimed, “There’s one!” And pointed to the tiny arc that was quickly fading to black.

“Quick, make a wish,” he said. I squeezed my eyes tight, caught up in the moment. I didn’t worry about looking stupid or childish, I just wished with all my might.

Then we lay there in silence for I don't know how long. It seemed like the cicadas were out in full force, creating a symphony reminding me of the music that would blare and thump out of Hayden's room.

And with that little thought I came crashing back down to Earth. I looked over at Caleb and wondered if he was thinking about Hayden too. After all, that's why we were here, wasn't it? All Caleb wanted was someone to share his memories with. But I didn't have many to give back. Besides, this wasn't quite the relationship I was hoping for.

"So how are you holding up?" Caleb asked.

Should I be honest or say what everyone wants to hear, I wondered. "I honestly don't know. How do you mourn for someone it turns out you barely knew?"

"I'm still trying to figure out how to mourn for someone I knew really well."

I moved my arm over an inch and our elbows touched. We just laid in the dark like that, comfortable with the silence. I even thought I could fall asleep. And it felt good to know I wasn't alone in my confusion.

After a while, he eased up onto one elbow and shook his other arm to make his watch swing around to face him. It glowed in the dark but I couldn't tell what time it was. It didn't feel like we'd been out here for too long but just then Caleb sat up. "Oh, crap!"

I sat up too, though more slowly. My back popped but in a good way as I stretched my arms above my head. I felt like I'd just woken from a deep sleep.

"How did it get so late?" He started to scramble around and frantically tried to gather everything he'd brought. We hadn't even touched the basket which I assumed was full of food.

I started to feel embarrassed. Was he really so eager to get out of our epically boring non-date? I couldn't blame him really. We had spent most of the time in silence. Maybe if I'd had more practice at dating I would be better. But as I tried to explain to Stacey the night before, I had too much to do.

I'd told myself it was all so I could enjoy life even better when I became comfortable financially and whatnot. But now I just didn't know how. I didn't know how to date or make small-talk. I knew how to apply to college and take standardized tests. I knew that I needed to have a solid financial plan for retirement so I wouldn't have to rely on Social Security in my old age. And I knew how to stay safe at home on a Friday night.

Caleb had already cleared everything and stowed it in the trunk of the car. Now he was tugging at the blanket, a subtle hint to get up. "Sorry I'm rushing like this," he said as I eased to my feet. He already had the blanket folded up before I could offer my help after I brushed the imaginary dirt from my back and legs. "I have an early day tomorrow."

"Oh, yeah?" I tried to be conversational. Friendly, since that was all I could hope for. "Big plans?"

"I work in construction and all of our days are early. But I got a call this afternoon to see if I wanted an extra shift tomorrow and I couldn't turn it down."

We both got into the car and Caleb started the engine. I decided to try to keep the conversation going. Good practice for when I get to go on a real date. "That's cool. What kind of construction is it?"

“Housing, mostly.” He kept his eyes on the road. “Right now we’re working on the addition behind North Lake.”

“Oh, I know where that is. It’s just a few streets down from my house right?”

“Mmhmm.”

He kept his eyes completely focused on the road. As the darkness seemed to dissipate I knew we were approaching home. Soon the blazing streetlights were flashing by too quickly, and then he was pulling quietly into my driveway. It was just before midnight, which had been my curfew though I wasn’t sure if I still had a curfew now that I wasn’t in high school anymore.

I sat in the passenger seat just a little longer than I should have. Finally, I said, “I had a good night. Thanks for taking me out.” I hoped that sounded good enough. It didn’t imply that I assumed this was a date but still expressed my enjoyment for the most part.

“Yeah, me too.” He looked me in the eyes and it seemed like he meant it.

“Have fun at work tomorrow.”

“You too,” he gave a nervous chuckle, “if you work too, that is.”

“I don’t but I’ll keep it in mind for the next day.” I was getting good at this, throwing in some light banter. Maybe I wasn’t a hopeless case after all. “I’ll see you around.” There, that sounded like a good, open-ended farewell.

“I’ll talk to you later.”

I got out of the car and closed the door. He waited until I had the front door open before he reversed out of the driveway and slowly drove away.

After I closed the door behind me and locked it, I noticed the glare from the TV. I made my way into the living room and realized my parents were both home and awake. I couldn't remember the last time I'd seen either of them, let alone seen them together. Dad was sitting on the couch, watching a show with the sound turned down so low I couldn't hear it in the kitchen where I set down my purse. Mom was standing up and straightening her pajamas like she had just been on the floor. I assumed she had been crying over the memorial or something.

"Hey, honey," my dad called over his shoulder though he didn't turn around. "Where have you been?"

"Out," was all I said; for some reason I was determined to keep this a secret.

"Who were you with?" Mom asked as she took her seat next to Dad.

"Stacey," I blurted out and prayed she hadn't called this evening. But she knew I was out so she'd probably wait till tomorrow or she had been watching for my return home and would be calling any minute.

"You can come watch some TV with us if you want." Now my parents were sitting close together with their shoulders touching. A part of me wanted to go cuddle along with them but I couldn't make myself join them.

I felt like an outsider to their little bubble of sorrow. I assumed if I joined them they wouldn't ask me about my day, my job, or anything else non-Hayden related. They would want to talk about him and my feelings about him. Just like Caleb. That's all anyone wanted to do anymore. They asked me how I was only in relation to him.

But I tried to let them down easy as I started to back down the hallway to the refuge that was my bedroom. “Thanks, but I’m kind of tired. I’ll see you guys in the morning.”

“Goodnight, sweetie,” my dad called. My mom didn’t say anything.

Chapter Eight

“Oh my God.”

“What?” I asked Stacey over the phone. It was noon and I was surprised this was the first time she was calling. I had fully expected a call as soon as I’d gotten home last night but was also slightly relieved. I had taken the night to figure out just how I felt.

“I’m coming over right now. You have to see this.” She sounded really alarmed which was odd. Stacey hardly ever got flustered and now she sounded like an ambulance was needed.

“See what?” I asked. “Don’t you want to hear about my night?”

“Of course,” she gushed and her voice took on that familiar, excited tone for just a second. “But first you have to see something. You’re going to freak.”

“Okay, well, come over then.” Right after I said this there was a knock at the door.

“Already here.”

“Well come in then.” I clicked the phone off and got up from the couch as Stacey walked through the door, clutching her own phone in her hand.

“Where’s your computer?”

“In my room, where it always is. What’s going on? You’re really freaking me out.”

Stacey didn’t even crack a smile. “You will definitely be freaking out in a second.”

I was surprised as I followed her to my room. I hadn’t seen her nearly this upset since some underclassmen was talking trash about Stacey’s family. Stacey almost got

into her first fist-fight, but it took a lot of calming down. And the other girl was so scared she stayed out of school for almost a week. Stacey wasn't big but she could get scary.

But even that didn't really compare to now. She seemed sad-upset rather than mad-upset. She quickly booted my computer and logged on to YouTube. I was even more confused. She consulted her phone before typing in a set of keywords into the search engine. A really long list of videos popped up but she seemed to know exactly which one she needed.

She clicked on the video icon and then paused before playing the video. She stood up and faced me, worry written all over her face. "I don't want to show you this, but I think you need to see it."

"What could be so horrible on YouTube?" I tried to make light of the situation, certain she was pulling my leg and it was just going to be some stupid video meant to scare me or make me feel stupid. I didn't want to get my emotions flying all over the place just to be duped.

Stacey bit her lip and almost thought she might cry but she just moved out of the way so I could sit in the desk chair. When I saw the title of the video, though, I started to feel some dread.

"Crazy Roof Jump."

As soon as I clicked the play button I realized it was a mistake. I did not want to see this. I had imagined all sorts of horrors but as the shaky camera panned around the group of students, I knew I was about to know the truth, to see it.

There were about ten of them up on the roof that day. I hadn't known and nobody had bothered to tell me who was up there. But now I could see it was the normal group

of kids Hayden always hung around with in the hallways and at lunch break. Hayden was lounging on a beat up sofa and I vaguely wondered how they'd gotten it up there. Tucked under his arm, as always, sat Ally. Her hair was half blond, half green that day. The other kids were scattered around in a loose circle, sitting on various objects, like desk chairs, footstools, or just the tar and gravel roof. It almost looked like peasants surrounding their king and queen. And behind Hayden and Ally, standing like a sentinel, was Caleb. He had that signature cigarette stuck behind his ear and his hands shoved in his front pockets, only adding to the image of a royal court.

I had no idea who the cameraman was. He didn't speak and nobody actually addressed him. The camera became steadier as it focused in on Hayden who was in the middle of a laugh. Apparently somebody had just told a joke. I instinctively turned up the volume. I didn't think I could look away from the screen even if it burst into flames suddenly. I had lost all sense of Stacey standing behind me, looking over my shoulder.

After the laughter died down, Ally said in her trilling voice, "I'm bored." It sounded so like her.

"So what's the plan for today?" The camera panned to a guy sitting on the roof. I couldn't quite recall his name. It was either Brandon or Bryan, I thought.

"Let's go paintballing," somebody else said. The cameraman didn't bother to show who this was and I didn't recognize the voice. Instead, it refocused on Hayden, as if expecting his word to be the final word. I wasn't surprised in the slightest. Hayden had a sort of charisma that I definitely lacked. He'd always had an entourage since the end of elementary school. They were fellow outsiders and were always willing to go along with his crazy schemes.

Hayden seemed to ignore this suggestion too and said instead, “I’ve been thinking about this stunt to do for a while.” He let that little tidbit hang in the air; sure somebody would snatch it up.

And lo and behold, paintballing guy immediately grabbed onto it. “What stunt?”

Hayden gave his slow, mischievous smile. One of the few looks I knew only too well. In seventeen years it had never changed and only bad things came from it. I can still remember how he’d get that look whenever we were at the pool and he was on the diving board. Without fail he would hone in on my position, crack that grin, and then cannonball almost directly on my head. Of course, some sort of fight would ensue with lots of yelling, splashing, and dunking. We would both emerge with bellies full of pool water and out of breath.

But this time, I knew much worse consequences would occur.

“You guys remember how I jumped from Brandon’s tree house to the next tree?”

So the guy’s name was Brandon, I knew it.

Everyone nodded or said, “Yeah,” some more enthusiastically than others.

“Well, I was thinking I could jump from here to that tree.” He used his hand to indicate his runway straight to the tree.

“That’s crazy,” the guy now confirmed as Brandon said. “My tree house and the other tree were practically on top of each other. And it wasn’t that far from the ground. We’re a good two stories up.”

Hayden just continued to smile as everyone started putting forth their own opinions. There were definitely more pros than cons. Ally was literally bouncing in her seat. I thought she’d start clapping her hands like an excited little kid who was about to

get a lollypop. Hayden didn't put forth any more argument for himself. It was apparent that he would do this no matter what anybody said. His mind had been made up a long time ago.

The chatter died down and Caleb, still present in the background, spoke up. "I think you should go for it, dude."

Hayden turned in his seat and gave Caleb one of those macho guy high-five handshake combos. "I knew you'd be on board."

"This is going to be awesome," Ally added. My dislike of her only grew. "When are you going to do this? After school?"

"Nope," Hayden stood up, causing Ally to slump back and pout. "I'm going right now."

A few more Awesome's chorused from the groundlings along with Brandon's "Don't do it, man." But Hayden was set. He walked to the edge of the roof and surveyed the distance to the tree. I imagined he was picking out the branch he wanted to land on or catch. I wasn't quite sure how this was supposed to go. When he had his bearings he paced back along the roof, almost back to the stairwell door.

Ally ran up to him and flung her arms around his waist. She only came up to his shoulder so she leaned back for a kiss and said, "Good luck, baby." Their lips smacked disgustingly loudly.

Caleb walked over and said in a low voice, "You got this." They gave another handshake with a chest bump and pat on the back this time. Caleb stepped back out of Hayden's way. Everyone else just watched in awe.

The rest seemed to go by in a blur, but still painfully, in slow motion. Hayden took a moment to take a deep breath before he sprinted across the roof and the cameraman tried to keep up. The video was shaky and made me a little dizzy to watch; though it could also be because I knew what was coming. At the edge he took a flying leap and reached his hands out for the branch while the camera pulled up short. A brief shout of triumph burst Hayden's mouth when his hands made contact with the oak branch. But it quickly faded from his lips as the momentum swung his legs under him. His hands scraped over the bark and then lost their grip.

There was true horror on his face as his head swung back briefly making eye contact with the camera lens and his arms flung out wildly behind him, trying to make purchase with any part of the tree. I knew if it had been a pine tree with more branches, he might have caught himself. But this sad oak tree didn't offer him anything at all. Hayden fell from view but the thud of him hitting concrete rang in my ears as if I had just been next to an exploding grenade.

Then there were screams in the background as the cameraman leaned over the edge and showed a brief image of his inert body sprawled out at the base of the tree. A small pool of blood was already visible, slowly reaching out from the back of his head. Ally's voice sounded close but incoherent as she cried and yelled.

The camera was suddenly shoved forcefully away so all that showed was a group of feet and the gravel of the roof. The image shook violently as it swung all around again. "Man, what's wrong with you? Put that away." I knew immediately it was Caleb talking and I assumed he had shoved the cameraman. "Oh, man. Oh, man." Everyone

sounded frantic. “Somebody get a teacher. Call 911.” He was trying to hold it together. “Oh, man,” he repeated again.

“Who’s got their phone? Call an ambulance quick!” Then a voice could be heard talking frantically to a dispatcher about an accident before the video cut off.

I knew in real life, at that moment, that I had arrived at the scene having felt the cord that connected me to Hayden snap. I knew he had been doing something stupid and reckless, but it never felt more real until now.

The video time only showed less than ten minutes. It had only taken a few brief minutes for Hayden to decide to do something and then it was all over. Just this one little decision and poof, he was gone forever. And how many other stupid things had he done over his life? Too many to count, that was for sure. Why this time? Why this stupid stunt that really seemed harmless compared to some of his other antics?

There were too many questions and not enough answers.

I jumped out of my chair when Stacey put her hand on my shoulder. I’d forgotten she was there, that she had shown me this. Her face was the palest I’d ever seen before; she almost looked like she might be sick. I’m sure I didn’t look much better because the worry on her face melted into a look of heartbreaking sadness. A part of me wanted to comfort her but all I could do was sit there dumbfounded.

Stacey bit her lip again. “Maybe I shouldn’t have shown you.”

I shook my head, not trusting my words.

She sat on my bed and her hands twisted around in nervous knots. “It’s just that I was texting with Lindsay and she asked me if I’d seen this video of Hayden and when I

told her no she sent me the link. As soon as it was over I came over here. Apparently most of the school has seen it by now.”

I looked back at the computer screen, expecting to see maybe fifty to a hundred hits on the video. I didn’t believe most of the school had watched it. But my jaw dropped, as well as my heart, when I saw the hits numbering in the thousands, almost ten thousand. I knew about viral videos and this one was probably making the circuit on social networks and emails. More stuff I just couldn’t deal with.

“Are you going to be okay?”

I turned off the monitor so I wouldn’t have to look at it anymore, but I didn’t turn off the computer and lose the link. I sat next to Stacey on the bed, my mind a haze. She put her arm around me and I leaned my head on her shoulder, sure the tears would finally come.

But they didn’t.

“Do you want to be alone?”

I shook my head into her shoulder, still not trusting my voice. I didn’t know what I would do alone. My parents were gone, as usual, and I wasn’t sure I wanted them to see this. After all, they had tried to shield me from the detailed report of Hayden’s accident. This visual was undoubtedly a million times worse than the police report. I wondered vaguely if this tape had been submitted as evidence for the case. Something told me it hadn’t.

And who filmed this and then posted it on the internet? For the first time, I wished I knew who Hayden’s friends were. If I had paid closer attention I could really get to the bottom of this. Stacey probably knew and Caleb certainly knew.

We sat there for a long time. Stacey's phone chirped almost non-stop until she finally put it on vibrate, though she never answered it. I felt sorry for her for being the bearer of bad news. I don't know when but she got up and left for a few minutes, coming back with a couple of sandwiches and cans of soda.

I only ate because she had been thoughtful enough to make us lunch but the food just stuck in my mouth. It took a long time just to chew a few bites because my mouth felt so dry. I thought I might choke every time I tried to swallow. She took it as a positive sign though and relaxed a little more even though I couldn't.

She suggested we go in the living room and watch some TV. She knew I processed emotional and difficult information a little slower than academic information. In school, I could understand concepts and ideas fairly quickly. But she understood that I liked to push bad emotions to the backburner because they weren't practical. It had never done me much good to dissect them before.

We were very good at distractions around my house. We all had our go-to's: I watched TV like it was going to be cancelled any day or threw myself into homework, if I had any; Mom cleaned every nook and cranny of the house and liked to reorganize everything so we had to search for days just to find the silverware; Dad always played golf; and Hayden had formulated new stunts. Stacey was well aware of these distractions though she didn't have to bother with them in her own house.

She tried to talk about other things as we moved to the living room. "So I got the job at American Eagle." Her voice was low and I almost didn't hear her over the blare of the reality show we were watching. I looked at her as a sign to continue. "I start

tomorrow actually. I think it'll be fun though I'm not sure how far my paychecks will go. I get a pretty good discount."

I envied Stacey then more than I have ever before because she could just remove herself from this mess if she wanted to. She didn't have to stick around to deal with me, the train wreck. But I knew she didn't have a perfect life either. It had taken her some time growing up to become as popular as she was now. When we were younger she was left out a lot because she was mixed race. She wasn't black enough for the black girls or Asian enough for the Asian girls. She always said that's why she was friends with me, because I didn't understand what the big deal was. I accepted her for her.

Don't get me wrong though, I was thankful for Stacey. So thankful.

"Maybe we can get lunch at the food court when we work the same days." She was trying so hard.

I nodded my head; sorry I couldn't be happier for her.

"I think it'll be fun to work in the mall together. Maybe I can let you use my discount too." She gave a weak smile and looked nervous; like she was afraid she wasn't helping. I didn't know what I could do to assure her she was helping so I just nodded, hoping she got the message.

She quieted after that and we settled into a more comfortable silence as I tried desperately to not think at all. I didn't want to give my brain the chance to replay the video.

I couldn't really function the rest of the day. I was very glad I didn't have to work because I knew I would've been useless. I was also thankful my parents were gone

all day because even they would have noticed I was in a funk. Stacey eventually went home when I assured her I would be alright by myself.

“You call me the moment you’re ready to talk, okay?” she asked before she went out the front door. The look she had reminded me of her mother so I didn’t dare say no. Not that I wanted to, I just didn’t know when that would be, so I nodded.

I stared blankly at the TV and ignored the phone when it rang, allowing the machine to get a good workout. I didn’t bother to make dinner, positive I wouldn’t be able to swallow any of it. When it was late enough, I retreated to my room where I could give into the urge that had been nagging me all day.

I re-watched this video all night until I had every line, every movement, and every look memorized. It started to feel like my own memory, like I had been there the whole time. I started to think this was what my mom had been doing when she watched that sonogram video. I was sure she was also watching our home movies in the middle of the night too. She was probably memorizing every one of Hayden’s looks or funny quips.

I felt sorry for her for the first time since the accident.

But when it was almost five in the morning, something finally dawned on me when I started the video again for the umpteenth time.

Caleb had told Hayden to jump.

Caleb might as well have pushed Hayden off that ledge.

Caleb killed my brother.

Chapter Nine

This was crazy. I was crazy. I was really just grasping at straws. By the time the sun came up I'd had time to calm down. I was still troubled but I was now able to function at least. I had moved past shock to anger but that was quickly dissipating too. I knew I couldn't really blame Caleb though I think he had a hand in it. It all came down to Hayden's own decision. I firmly believed that no matter what anyone had said, he still would've jumped. I just wished he would have listened when Brandon said no.

Before I knew it, I had to drag my jumbled thoughts off to work. Maybe it would be a quiet day and no one would bother me. Unfortunately, I have horrible luck and we were slammed all morning. Around two o'clock I insisted on taking a break and leaving the theater for it. My boss didn't like to let us take breaks, let alone leave the premises. He assumed the lulls between movie showings were break enough. But after not sleeping all night, there was no way I was going to sit in that stupid box all day without one.

I didn't have anywhere to go really. I just wanted out so I grabbed a pretzel and just sat at a table by myself. I thought about going to see Stacey; she was supposed to start her job that afternoon. Maybe she was already there. But before I could, Caleb walked up, casting a shadow across my sun-splashed table.

"Hey, how's it going?" He looked like he was in a good mood, without a care in the world and somewhere deep inside me (probably the same somewhere that did flips when I thought of him before) growled. It seemed my anger hadn't completely evaporated.

"Hey." That was it, no need to say much more. I didn't return his smile either.

“Uh.” He shoved his hands in his pockets and rocked back on his heels, a trait that must’ve been born out of nervousness. “Did you have a good day off of work yesterday?”

I narrowed my eyes and pressed my mouth into a thin line.

His eyes darted around the food court as he scratched at the side of his neck. We had parted on a good note after our non-date outing so he was probably wondering what went wrong. In fact, I would’ve told anyone who asked that there was some definite flirting going on. But not now. “Is everything alright?” His voice was low and his look intense, like he thought I might come unhinged at any second.

I just shook my head. I mean, what could I say? How could I even begin to put it into words?

“Will you tell me what’s wrong? Did I do something the other night to upset you?”

I wished we hadn’t been in the food court for this, where each whisper sounded amplified as it bounced around the cavernous space. I should’ve worn a sign that said, “Caution! Contents under pressure. Do not shake.” Because I just exploded.

“You killed him.”

I didn’t mean to say it so loud or so accusatorily either. I thought I had come to the conclusion that it wasn’t his fault, but it honestly felt good to blame someone. A part of me shriveled up as Caleb’s face shifted from concern to horror at my outburst. In a split second, it fell to shame as he put a hand up over his face.

My face stayed stony and removed. He should be ashamed.

He dropped his hand and studied me for a second. “What are you talking about?”
He tried to keep control but his voice cracked at the end.

Now that I had broken the seal on my feelings, they tumbled out. “I know what happened up there. I saw everything. You told him to go for it and he did. He jumped because you told him to.”

His face had turned ashy. “How do you know what happened up there?”

“I saw the video. Everyone’s seen the video.”

I didn’t think it was possible for a body to experience the full spectrum of emotions in such a short period of time but Caleb was proving me wrong. It was easy to see the anger start to contort his features. He looked like I felt though I didn’t know what he had to be angry about.

“The video?” he asked through clenched teeth. I nodded. “Was it online?”

I nodded again rather than roll my eyes at the obvious. Why was he playing dumb? Surely he knew about all of this.

“Son of a bitch!” He slammed his fists down on the rickety table, causing it to rock violently. It scared me, which effectively cooled my anger. “I told him to erase it!”

“Told who?”

He looked at me like he forgot I had been sitting there this whole time. “Seth.”
He spat the name out like it tasted disgusting.

“Who’s Seth?”

“He was a junior who tagged along after our group. He started filming everything and posting it on YouTube. He said we could all get famous someday if one of these

videos went viral. But I told him explicitly to not post that video and that he'd better erase it."

"Wait." I held up my hand to stop him as he opened his mouth to say more.

"You mean there are other videos?"

"Yeah. You can look up all of the videos he's posted this year. There's quite a few of them actually." He hitched his grin back into place. "Some of them are really great."

I knew I had another sleepless night ahead of me because there was no way I could not watch all of those videos. I could probably call Stacey over. I wasn't sure I could watch them alone. I almost asked Caleb but I still didn't know him well enough. And even though I had found a new scapegoat in Seth, I wasn't quite ready to forgive Caleb. "You still told him to go for it."

The wistful smile disappeared. "I did. And I hate myself for it. But you and I both know he jumped because he wanted to. Nothing anybody could've said would've talked him out of it if he was determined to go." He reached his hand across the table but I recoiled instantly, reminded of Tiara's attempts to console me last week. He drew his hand back but the intensity didn't leave his eyes. "When he gets that look in his eye, I know there's no way he'll back down. So rather than argue, I just tell him to do it."

I knew that look. I had recognized it so easily on film that of course Caleb would be able to recognize it too. But I felt frustrated at the deflated feeling I had now. It had felt so good to get all of it out that I felt like I was back at square one.

Defeated, I said, "I better get back to work." I could see my manager sitting in the ticket box glaring at me. When he saw me look he tapped his wrist, urging me to hurry up.

"I'm going to go find Seth and have a little talk with him." Caleb's jaw was set but he had a look in his eye similar to Hayden's, only more sinister.

"Can I come?" I wanted so badly to find out who this kid was. This kid who thought the death of my brother was good video fodder.

"Don't you have to get back to work?"

I crossed my arms over my chest, not willing to back down. "You can wait till I get off later."

He seemed to debate it in his head. "Okay, what time?" I could tell he was a little reluctant but I was happy he gave in without a struggle. I knew I could probably guilt him into letting me tag along but I didn't really want to go that far.

"Five. But come pick me up at my house. I need to change first."

"Okay, see you later then."

"See you."

I went back to my ticket booth and ignored the nasty look my manager gave me as he left. I wouldn't classify my mood as happy, per se, but it was definitely better than how I'd felt a few hours ago. I now had a new focus for my anger and I knew some more questions were going to be answered.

Caleb showed up around 5:30 which was plenty of time for me to get home and change. There was a note and twenty dollars on the fridge from my mom to tell me that she and dad were going to a friend's house for dinner. They didn't know what time I would get off work so they decided to go on without me. The twenty was for dinner.

It seemed like before Hayden's death, I couldn't get any alone time. My parents were always home or we were always doing something together "as a family." It was sweet and I knew in the future it would be nice stories to tell my kids but it had also gotten on my nerves because we all didn't like to do the same things. We would always argue over what to do, where to go, or what movie to watch. Someone would throw a fit (I'm not going to lie, it was usually me) because they didn't get their way and throw everyone into a bad mood. It was a strict formula we adhered to but my parents insisted on these family events.

I had never considered Hayden as the lynch-pin for holding the family together, but without him we all fell apart. Or rather, it seemed, my parents had deserted me. We were three different people who just happened to live in the same house together, all haunted by the same ghost.

I threw away the note and pocketed the twenty. I wasn't particularly hungry at the moment. I was mostly just anxious, not sure how the night would go. In fact, I was probably more anxious about this than I had been about going out with Caleb. I didn't know who or what to expect and I wasn't even sure what I was looking for.

What good would it do to meet the kid who filmed and then posted Hayden's accident? Maybe it was better for me to know exactly what happened rather than wonder for the rest of my life. And would I really feel better if I lashed out at this Seth guy for

posting the footage online for the whole world to see? What could I even say to him to make him understand what it's done to me?

"You ready to go?" Caleb was standing at the counter while I stared at the trashcan.

"Yeah, I'm ready." I followed him out to his car, acting braver than I felt.

It was definitely strange how easy it was though. I didn't have a lot of close friends. Stacey was the closest one to me; the person I told just about everything to. After her, there were only a handful of other people, like Andrew and Megan, who I could talk to about some things. There were many more people I was just friendly to and never had serious conversations with.

It didn't take long to get to Seth's house. I was surprised when we pulled in the drive of a big, brick house. It was colonial style with towering white columns flanking the front door and a wide front porch with a swing set to one side. It was hard to tell if it was new or some old plantation that had been remodeled. I had prepared myself for some dark, dingy apartment on the bad side of town, assuming Seth's home had to match the picture I'd created of him.

"Seth lives here?"

"Yeah, his parents are loaded. You should see all of the film equipment he has. Sometimes when we planned big stunts or whatever, he would pull out all the stops to film it. That's why I was saying some of his videos are really great."

"Wow." It seemed to sum up the entire picture. I'd never been in a house this big. Everyone I knew was middle-class or lower. I suddenly lost the purpose of this visit

because I was in such awe of the place. As we walked up the front steps I felt like I was at Tara from *Gone with the Wind*.

We walked up to the double-doors which were as snowy white as the four columns supporting the porch's roof. Each door was set with a square wrought-iron cage which I presumed worked as a peep-hole. The handles were of the same metal worked into complicated scrolls. The effect was very historic and expensive. I was sure the doors alone were worth more than my car. Caleb rang the doorbell and I could hear it echo inside the house.

It felt like a half hour passed before the door was finally opened. I thought it might creak because that's what they always did in the movies but this one just glided open without a sound.

"Hey, man!" The boy standing there reached out his hand for Caleb's and they did the same handshake I'd seen Caleb and Hayden do in the video. Although, this guy clearly didn't have the same finesse. Nor was he anything I'd expected. I imagined him looking weasel-like, somebody who sucked up to others but wasn't afraid to stab you in the back. But this kid literally looked like a child, trying to dress like an adult.

His face had all the roundness of a ten-year-old. He was pudgy and quite a few inches shorter than me, adding to his child-like qualities. His clothes looked about two sizes too big and his shorts sagged so low the hem reached his ankles. His shirt was emblazoned with a grotesque assortment of skulls and coffins with some band's name written across the top. To complete his look, his hair was styled into rigid spikes and his ears were pierced by the biggest diamond (and I was sure they were real judging from the

house) earrings I'd ever seen. To me, he looked ridiculous and I tried very hard not to laugh.

“Hey.” Caleb’s voice sounded low and gruff but Seth’s smile never faltered.

“Dude, do you need me to film something? I can have my equipment ready in like ten minutes.” Seth looked like he was going to bounce up and down like an excited puppy.

“No, we just came by to talk.”

Seth noticed me for the first time. He leaned around the door and looked me up and down. “Who’s she?”

Caleb glanced at me before he answered, “This is Brianna.”

“Hayden’s sister?” Seth’s eyes narrowed and his face pinched together, finally making him look like the weasel I’d imagined before. “I thought you looked familiar.”

Caleb didn’t say anything. His face stayed stony as Seth stepped back to let us in.

If I was impressed by the outside, it couldn’t possibly compare to the grandeur of the inside. I felt like I should take off my shoes or at least wear protective covers before I even walked in. The place was so lavish I didn’t think I’d be comfortable touching any of the surfaces. There was leather, velvet, silk, marble, and many other things I didn’t recognize covered every surface from the living room to the kitchen.

Seth didn’t stop to explain anything as he led us to the back of the house and downstairs to the basement. We passed by a room that looked like a home theater as well as a rec room with a pool table, air hockey, and Ping-Pong. I wondered if Seth had any siblings or if all of this was for him.

He finally turned into his bedroom which was larger than my parents' master suite. It was even tidier than my room but I was sure they had a maid or something. I doubted if Seth cleaned it all by himself. His large bed was made up and faced a huge flat-screen TV mounted on the wall. It looked like he had paused a video game before he answered the door.

Seth walked over to the far corner of the room and sat in his computer chair, though it was hard to even make out the computer in everything else. There were all kinds of electronics stacked on and around the desk, most of which I had no idea what they were. I assumed it was all film related stuff but I wasn't very good with electronics. I could barely set the clock on the cable box.

"So what did you want?" Seth didn't sound nearly as eager as before; he sounded suspicious.

Caleb took a deep breath and I waited for him to explode but he didn't. "I thought we talked about erasing that video." If I was on the receiving end of Caleb's look, I would've been quaking but Seth just sat in his chair, swinging it from side to side. Frustration tinged his voice as Caleb continued, "I thought we *agreed* to erase that video."

"Dude, have you seen how many hits it's gotten?" Seth stopped swinging around and quickly typed on his keyboard. YouTube popped up along with the video. Seth scrolled down and pointed at the computer screen. "We're in the tens of thousands now."

I had to do a double-take. Tens of thousands? Surely that was wrong. Surely he was exaggerating. I walked over to the desk without saying anything and stared at the screen, unable to comprehend. But there in bold font, right below the video: 60,882.

That was way more people than went to our school. That was more people than all three high schools in town, combined. It wasn't quite national but more people had seen it than I ever would have imagined.

Seth looked a little freaked out as I leaned over him, my face just inches from the computer screen. "Do you mind?" he asked and nudged my arm out of the way.

I moved back to stand next to Caleb and Seth quickly exited the website. He kept shifting his gaze between me and Caleb like he was worried one of us would jump him. Caleb didn't move an inch the whole time. I was surprised at his control. He looked like he wanted to take Seth's head off and a part of me hoped he would.

"Do you realize how many more hits the other videos have gotten because of this one?" Seth's voice took a condescending tone like he was speaking to a couple of kids. It didn't endear him to me any more and I could tell Caleb was resisting his violent urges because he kept clenching and unclenching his fists each time Seth opened his mouth. "All their numbers have gone up since I posted this one. I think this one is going to be huge."

"You're an idiot, you know that?" I didn't feel the words bubbling to the surface so I was surprised when I heard them out loud. But could he really be serious about this?

"Say what?"

"You're. An. Idiot."

Seth shot Caleb an incredulous look. "Is she serious?"

But Caleb was most definitely not on Seth's side. "Completely," he said. "How could you post this video? Did you even think what would happen?"

“Yeah, I knew it’d be huge. I was doing us all a favor, man. We could get famous for this.”

I really wanted to strangle him at this point. The anger that had felt so good earlier was beginning to burn again. I tried to do the fist-clenching thing Caleb had been doing but it wasn’t helping me at all.

Caleb held up his hand to stop Seth’s talking. “Okay, let’s just put aside the fact that we never showed this video to the police when they were investigating the accident,” he said pointedly, “and focus on the fact that you posted a video of our friend dying. Do you not see a problem there?”

Seth just shrugged and I felt my body convulse forward, but I stopped myself before I actually took a step. Maybe this is what Caleb had been talking about when we went out the other night; how it sometimes felt good to just destroy something. I thought it was stupid before but right now, I didn’t feel the same. Right now, all I wanted to do was start smashing all of Seth’s shiny, expensive electronics to wipe that smug look off his face. In fact, I really wanted to hurt Seth. I’d never really wanted to hit somebody so much before. I’d only ever fought with Hayden. At the worst, I would call somebody a bad name but name calling just didn’t feel like it would be enough in this instance.

“The problem is,” Caleb continued, though he sounded less in control with each word, “that the whole world can watch Hayden die. Over and over again. Can you imagine if Bri’s parents see this?”

Seth shrugged again. He looked like a kid who was in trouble but didn’t think he should be. His jaw was set and tilted up slightly so, even though he was sitting and we were standing, he was still able to look down his nose at us. I knew then that this trip was

pointless. I don't know what I was expecting from it; maybe an apology of some sorts. But I knew that wouldn't help either. I don't think I could ever understand what would possess somebody to post that kind of video anyway and standing here, getting angry, wasn't going to make me understand any better.

Caleb wasn't quite done though. "You have no idea what you've done. And you obviously don't care either. All you ever did was follow along behind us like a lost puppy and now you think you're going to be some hot shit because of this video. You're not even in it moron!" Caleb was shouting by the end and his face had turned a deep red. But he finally got a reaction out of Seth because he was starting to look scared.

Seth opened his mouth like he was about to say something but I didn't want to hear anymore. "I could call the cops and have them throw your ass in jail." I took a step forward. "They're under the impression that there is no evidence from the accident, aren't they?" Another step. "My parents will want to sue too." As the threats tumbled out, I moved closer until I was towering over him. "Just take the damn videos down!"

"Are we done here?" Seth stood up and tried to play it cool but I could tell he wanted us gone.

I still stood about a foot taller than him. He just looked so insolent, like Hayden meant nothing but a free ride to him. My anger exploded. "You had better take that video down or there will be hell to pay."

"And what are you going to do about it?" Seth tried to puff up his chest.

So I slapped him, harder than I ever hit Hayden. My hand tingled, but it felt good to wipe that arrogant look off Seth's face. His cheek blazed a bright crimson.

“Let’s go.” Caleb had gentle but solid grip on my upper arm, guiding me back towards the door.

Seth walked to the other side of the room where his big screen was mounted and picked up a gaming controller. “I think you need to leave and I have a game to finish.” He popped down into a bean bag chair and immediately restarted the game, but my handprint remained and that made me smile.

“C’mon.”

“Don’t let the door hit you in the ass,” Seth said without looking back at us.

It felt like we had been downstairs for hours but it had really only been about a half hour. I felt exhausted. I collapsed into the passenger seat as Caleb slammed his door shut and violently pulled on his seat belt. He started the engine and then slammed his fists against the steering wheel, causing the horn to sound. “What a douchebag! I can’t believe I was friends with that little shit.”

“At least you didn’t hit him.” I started laughing uncontrollably then. After a few blocks, even Caleb began to grin.

Chapter Ten

Caleb and I didn't exchange many words on the drive back to my house other than "Talk to you later." My parents still weren't home, though it wasn't too late. I was actually surprised they were going to a friend's house tonight. They hadn't done much socializing since the funeral and I thought they might think it was a little soon to start now. They usually liked to keep up appearances and follow certain unspoken rules, but maybe they wanted to appear like they were trying to move on. Maybe they were moving on; I wouldn't really know.

My stomach made a gurgling noise as I stood in the empty kitchen. I realized I hadn't really eaten since the half-pretzel at lunch and I was finally starting to feel those hunger pangs. I hadn't talked to Stacey all day either so I decided to call her up.

"Hey, Bri," she answered on the first ring. "How's it going?"

"Better. You want to get something to eat? I got some stuff to tell you."

"Is everything okay?" Her voice instantly got a pitch higher.

"Yeah. I mean, I guess so. I don't know." I really didn't know if everything was okay. I wouldn't really know until I saw those other videos. Would they make me feel better or worse? They might not even make me feel anything at all.

"That doesn't sound reassuring."

"I know. I'm sorry. I just can't explain it over the phone is all."

"Okay. Come on over and we'll go get something. I'll see you in five." She hung up and probably started rushing to make herself presentable. I just paced around the kitchen island for a few minutes. There was no point in turning on the television or even sitting down. Besides, I didn't think I would really be able to sit still.

Stacey already had her car waiting by the curb for me. As I got in she said, “So I’m thinking tacos at the park?”

“Sounds good to me.” I relaxed into the seat as I realized there would be no more surprises today. I could collect my thoughts and then analyze them with Stacey. She would be able to stay calm and I wouldn’t have to worry about my wildly fluctuating emotions. They were up and down a lot lately, which was starting to get on my nerves. I liked being in control of my feelings. I liked knowing what to expect from them and I was ready for everything to go back to normal.

But I knew that probably wasn’t going to happen. I didn’t really think anything would get back to normal because normal included Hayden.

It didn’t take long to get some fast food tacos and nachos and head to the park. We went to our usual spot by the lake. There was one bench that was always shaded and away from where the geese liked to congregate. As soon as they saw food, they would all flock around you. And then when you ran out of food, they would get angry though the signs all around the lake clearly say not to feed the geese. But, of course, the geese don’t understand this rule.

We ate in relative silence for a few minutes, both of us content with the crunching of taco shells acting as the only conversation. Eventually, the tacos were all gone and I couldn’t keep silent anymore. “There are more videos,” I started with.

Stacey didn’t seem shocked by this revelation. “I figured,” she said, “though I haven’t seen any of the others. Have you watched them already?”

“No. Caleb told me about them earlier. I haven’t had a chance to yet.”

“Do you even want to?” Stacey could read me like a book.

“I don’t know. I mean, it wouldn’t really change anything.”

“But the other video did. You know exactly what happened now. For better or worse.”

“Well, see, that’s the question, now isn’t it? Would it be better to watch them all, or not?” I leaned forward and picked a rock up from the ground. I turned it over and over in my hand. It was smooth and flat on one side and I thought I might try to skip it across the water. Hayden was always good at that. I threw it but it just made a plunk as it sank straight to the bottom.

Stacey held her hands out plaintively. “I’m sorry. I don’t have the answer. But I don’t think it could make things any worse.”

“That’s true. I mean, how much worse could things get? My brother’s dead and there’s a video on the internet.”

“So why haven’t you had time today to watch them? Did you ask Caleb about the video?”

I decided not to tell her about my accusing Caleb of killing Hayden. I really didn’t want to share that with anyone because I was actually starting to feel ashamed of it. And if she hadn’t already thought about it, I didn’t want to put that little seed in her mind to grow. It was still eating away at me. But I did tell her about our trip to Seth’s house.

“So let me see if I have this straight. This little twerp Seth posted the video online and won’t take it down?” Stacey looked as incredulous as I felt. “Who is he?”

“He’s a junior. Well, I guess he’s a senior now,” I said, a little satisfied that she had never heard of him either. “His family is pretty loaded.”

Stacey looked out over the lake, her face pinched in concentration. The sun was starting to set and caused the water to turn vibrant shades of pink, purple, and orange.

Finally, she said, “Short guy, dresses like he just stepped out of a rock video?”

“That’s him.” I felt a little disappointed that she did know who he was, but Stacey made it her business to know everyone.

“He is such a creep! He used to follow girls around with his video camera and ask what size bra they wore.”

“That’s gross.”

“I didn’t know Hayden was friends with him.” She frowned and looked contemplative again as she probably scrolled through her mental files of clique hierarchies. She knew who everyone hung out with or even talked to on a regular basis. She could tell someone a rumor and know exactly who else would hear it and in what order. I was definitely surprised she didn’t know where Seth fit in. “He does seem like the type to not care whose feelings he hurt though.”

“Yeah, that was definitely apparent. He all but said it to me and Caleb earlier.”

“I think he used to hang out with the baseball guys a couple years ago.”

“Okay?” I wasn’t sure what this had to do with Hayden.

Stacey shook her head causing her hair to fan out behind her. “I was just trying to figure out when he started hanging with your brother’s group. I remember he didn’t make the cut for JV baseball his sophomore year but I don’t remember when he actually switched groups.”

“You know, if you applied this kind of skills to school, you’d do a lot better than me without even trying.”

Stacey smiled wide. “That’s what my mom says all the time.”

The sky had already darkened and the lamps around the walking trail had come on. “Let’s head back.”

“Okay, do you want to watch the videos at my house or your house?” Stacey asked as we walked back to the car.

“I don’t know.” I hesitated by a trashcan while I threw all of the taco wrappers and my drink cup away. “I think I want to wait to watch them.”

“Okay, that’s cool.”

“I think I just want to go home and process for a little bit more. But I’ll definitely need you when I do decide to watch them. I don’t think I could watch them alone.”

Stacey wrapped her arm around my waist. “That’s what I’m here for.”

When we got back, Stacey just pulled into her own driveway. We said our “See ya later” as Stacey went into her brightly lit house and I crossed the street to my own home. My dad’s car was in the driveway again and I could see the lights from the living room and kitchen from the street. As I walked up the front sidewalk I debated whether I should tell them about the video. I kind of hoped they were exhausted and had just gone to bed but left the light on for me.

Before I reached the porch I felt my cell phone vibrating in my back pocket. Thinking it was Stacey calling because she just remembered something, I didn’t bother to check who it actually was. I just pressed the green “Accept” button and said, “Hey.”

“Hey girl! I’m so glad I caught you!” Instead of Stacey’s voice I was met with the chirpy tones of Tiara. I had been doing such a good job at ignoring her calls that I couldn’t believe I’d just slipped up.

“Oh, hey,” my voice and enthusiasm instantly dropped and I hoped she could sense the change.

“You’re really hard to get ahold of.” She laughed loudly and it reminded me of cheerleaders.

I lied, “Yeah, my phone has been acting up and I’ve been super busy.” I stopped on the porch, not wanting to go inside and possibly disturb my sleeping parents. I leaned against the flagstone siding and resisted the urge to bang my head against it. How long was this going to take?

“Oh, I bet.” Her voice was full of sympathy. “Well I was calling because I saw that video of Hayden’s and wanted to check on you. I’m sure you’ve seen it too.”

Crap. This thing really was everywhere. And what did she mean by “that video of Hayden’s” like he was the one who posted it or something. I sighed. “Yeah, I’ve seen it.”

She tried to hide her disappointment. I’m sure she was hoping she would be the one to show me the video so she could get to what she does best and try to console me. “Oh, you poor thing! Do you want to talk about it? I really couldn’t believe it. And when my mom watched it she almost burst into tears. It was absolutely awful!”

Even her mother had seen it? It was like people couldn’t help but be curious about it. I wondered if I would be just as curious if this had happened to someone else. Would I be so morbidly obsessed that I would watch a video of somebody I vaguely

knew dying? Would I have to send it to everyone I knew and tell them just how awful it was but that they had to watch it anyway?

“Are you still there? You didn’t faint did you?”

“No,” I said but the fight had left me entirely. I just felt overwhelmed and tired as the gravity of the situation pulled me down.

“Do you need me to come over?” She sounded so eager and hopeful but I knew she would smother me with what she thought was kindness.

“No, I’m fine.” I really just wanted off the phone. I walked over to the front door and grabbed the doorknob so I could jump inside as soon as possible. I wouldn’t put it past her to be driving around my neighborhood just waiting for me to let her in to this mess she was so interested in. “Look it’s getting late and I need to go.”

“Okay, well just let me know if you need someone to talk to. I’ll keep praying for you. And you know, if you want you can always come to Sunday services with me. The whole congregation would love to meet you.”

I couldn’t really tell her what I wanted to say so instead I said, “Thanks. See you.”

“Good-bye.”

I ended the call with much more force than necessary and forgot to be quiet as I slammed the door behind me. It didn’t really matter because my parents were both still awake. My mom was sitting on the couch and by the shaking of her shoulders she looked like she was crying though she didn’t make a noise. My dad was standing at the counter with his head hanging. His laptop was open in front of him next to a half-empty glass of a dark brown liquid I guessed was not a Coke .

“Did you know about this?” he said quietly though he hadn’t looked up to acknowledge me.

Uh-oh, it had traveled far. “What, no hello?” I took a few tentative steps towards him, afraid my attempt at humor might just make him madder, though he stayed rigid. My parents hadn’t acted this strange since the day of the funeral. After everyone had left our house, Mom sat on the couch and cried and Dad stood very similar to how he was standing now. He let his head hang while he braced himself on the counter. I didn’t know what to do then so I just went to my room. We had all been so exhausted from entertaining that day. I thought surely the tears would have come that night for me as the realization of Hayden now buried in the ground for eternity set in, but they remained dry. I just lay in bed in the dark until I finally fell asleep. I didn’t know when my parents went to bed that night but they had never showed signs of that fatigue since.

Dad pushed his laptop around so I could see the screen and it felt like my stomach dropped. I clenched my mouth shut and took a step back. I just couldn’t get away from it.

“Did you know about this?” he asked again, finally looking up at me. He seemed older than I had ever seen him and I never considered my parents old before. But the anger in his eyes made him look like a totally different person. His mouth was set in a line and the pull of his eyebrows made the wrinkles around his eyes more defined.

All I could do was nod. I had not expected this. Nor had I expected them to be so angry at me. I felt like a rabbit that had just been spotted by a fox and I didn’t know which way to run.

“We had to hear it from Rob Weaver tonight. His son showed it to him yesterday and he asked us if we were going to do anything about it.” A choked sob sounded from the living room but my Mom didn’t say anything as my dad continued, “Do you know what it was like for us to hear about this from friends? And you knew about it the whole time?”

“I just saw it yesterday.” My voice came out much smaller than I intended. I wanted to sound angry too or make a stronger defense but the hurt on his face just caused it all to fall away.

“You should’ve come straight to us with this. Do you know what it’s like to have your friends show you a video of your son dying?” He finally pulled away from the counter and walked towards the couch which was facing away from us. He stopped short, ran his hands through his hair, and then turned to face me again. My mom remained silent.

I wanted to say yes, that I knew exactly how that felt. Hadn’t Stacey just done the same thing to me yesterday? But I knew that’s not what they wanted to hear. I had no idea what they wanted from me, so I presented the best defense I had, though my voice remained small and insignificant. “I already told you I just saw it yesterday. I haven’t seen you since then.”

“Dammit, Bri!”

I flinched and took two more steps back. At the rate I was going I would be back out the front door in no time.

Dad worked hard to keep his voice more controlled, “How much do you want to bet the police haven’t seen this?”

I shrugged, not trusting my voice anymore.

He rubbed the back of his neck. “Do you at least know who made this video?”

I nodded.

He waited a moment and then said, “Well?”

“His name is Seth.”

“Seth what?”

I quickly went to check my yearbook. “Pollitt.”

He must have sensed my unease because he let out a breath and walked over to me. He put his hands on my shoulders. “I’m sorry to take this out on you. It’s just frustrating to be the last to find out, you know?”

I nodded.

He hugged me and I almost started crying. It seemed like decades since I’d been hugged by either of them. It almost caused me to start spilling about every thought and frustration I’d been having. I wanted to tell him about Caleb and about Tiara. I wanted to tell him how weird it felt to sit in the ticket booth at work knowing everyone could see me. Mostly, I wanted to tell him how much I missed our family.

But I didn’t. Instead, I pulled away first.

“Why don’t you tell your mom goodnight,” he said.

I walked to the front of the couch and I could fully see my mom now. Her face was so puffy it was hardly recognizable. Her hair was straggly and looked like it hadn’t been washed for days though they had just come from their friends’ house so she must have been fixed up before then. Her brown eyes looked sad and muddy. “Good night, Mom.”

She didn't say anything. She hid her face in a clean tissue and I knew nothing had changed for us. I looked up at my dad and he looked sad that neither of us was willing to bust through this barrier. We were frozen in this new way of life and we couldn't figure out another way to be.

Chapter Eleven

I became obsessed with the watching the video and eventually looked up the others. I called up Stacey the first time I looked through the videos so I could have her support but they weren't near as hard to get through. They were mostly full of Hayden doing stupid things. There was a video of him standing on the hood of a car while it raced down a deserted back road. There was another one of him diving from a high tree branch into the middle of a lake. One video was truly spectacular to watch as they all engaged in what the video labeled as "Parkour" where they ran around jumping off of structures, did flips off of walls, and rolled under obstacles. It looked like a crazy ballet and I wondered where and when Hayden had learned to do all of this.

However, I made the mistake of going back to read the comments. I became even more obsessed with these as I holed up in my room. I didn't turn on the lights and I definitely didn't call Stacey as I engaged in this self-torture. The comments were truly awful, but I couldn't help myself. They started out consoling and gradually got worse:

rockrgrl17 says: I miss you, baby!

(That must've been Ally. Of course she was the first to comment.)

*****The-Man***** says: Hayden you were a rock star and you'll never be forgotten!

grlwchr says: This is awesome! Did that dude really die? That would suck if he did.

2cute2be says: What a bunch of idiots...and what kind of school let's their students go up on the roof?

Anonymous5803 says: How cold do you have to be to post a video like this?

(I have to admit, I agreed with this one whole-heartedly.)

MarvinMartian says: this kid clearly had it coming for jumping off a roof

whosthatchick says: i blame the parents they probably encouraged this behavior for years and this kid's friends were dumb enough to tell him to do it

donthateonme says: I bet its fake.

inconspicuous_frost says: What a bunch of attention whores! Find something better to do with your time than trying to get famous over being stupid!

Kong-the-Konqueror says: stupidity + jumping off of roof = death, duh

(This one was eventually deleted due to so many dislikes.)

A few days of this and Stacey came over to intervene. I could imagine what I looked like: a crazy person, huddled in a dark room, staring at the computer with dark circles under my eyes. I was obsessed. She instantly pushed the power button, causing the screen to go blank, but I didn't protest. She was only doing what I couldn't.

I felt like a zombie awakened from the dead. The only times I had been away from the computer was during work and sleep. When I was asleep, the comments plagued my dreams and I was in such a bad mood at work that I couldn't muster a smile for anyone. Eventually, my boss pulled me from the ticket booth and put me on theater cleaning duty, which was actually a blessing in disguise.

It was much easier to get through the day when I wasn't wondering if this or that person had seen the video and if they knew who I was. Instead, I could wait outside of the theaters for everyone to leave before spending some quality time with the rolling credits and a broom. It was a disgusting job, to say the least. When people are left to

their own devices in a darkened space, they make messes they wouldn't normally make if they were seen doing it.

But I didn't really mind. I would grumble every time I came across a whole bucket of popcorn spilled under the seats or a pile of beer cans that were snuck in. The one time I found a used condom I had to call one of the other guys to clean because it grossed me out too much. In between theater cleanings I hid out upstairs in the poster room. It was fun to sort through all of the old posters. I had started making a stack of ones to ask my boss if I could take home.

One day in the middle of my shift he came to the poster room. "What are you doing in here, Brianna? You should be helping concession get ready for the next set."

"I was just reorganizing," I said, hoping I wasn't in too much trouble.

He walked around the room and saw all of the bins were labeled by genre and the posters were secured in rolls with rubber bands though there were still plenty shoved into corners that I hadn't made it to yet. His balled up fists were perched on his hips as he tried to stay upset with me, but I could tell he was clearly pleased. He walked towards the door and I thought he was just going to leave but he turned and said, "When you're done in here, clean the marquee room too." And he left without another word.

I hadn't made it quite that far yet but it was nice to know I would have tasks to keep me busy through most of the summer. And these tasks would keep me away from prying eyes and unwanted questions.

At home, it was a different story. After the pain and shock of the video died down a little, my dad continued his interrogation on my knowledge of the video and its origins. I tried to answer them as best I could but I was just as clueless and not quite

ready to go looking for answers myself. My dad had checked the phonebook and the internet for the Pollitt's number but they weren't listed. Finally, he had called Caleb's parents and gotten the information from him.

"What did Seth's parents say?" I had suggested one Saturday afternoon while making a peanut butter and jelly sandwich in the kitchen. There was already a stack of beer cans by the trash. My dad was in his recliner in the living room watching a baseball game between the Atlanta Braves (his team, of course) and the St. Louis Cardinals. I didn't know where my mom was. My dad had hedged around my questions saying she had errands to run.

He began grumbling to himself and I thought maybe he didn't want to talk about it. I licked the leftover strawberry jelly off the knife before throwing it in the sink. I took my sandwich to the living room and sat on the floor with my back against the couch. It was nice with my dad when we kept the conversation casual and didn't delve too deep beneath the surface. So I sat there in silence and pretended to be interested in the game as I ate my sandwich.

After a few minutes, my dad said, "Mr. Pollitt's as full of it as his son is, that's for sure."

I didn't know what to say so I waited in silence to see if he'd continue. He shouted a few expletives at the referee who made a call against the Braves before he started again. "I was trying to be polite and everything but that man just got under my skin."

"I understand. Seth's the exact same."

He looked at me and touched his finger to his nose, a gesture he used when we were both on the same page. “The apple doesn’t fall far from the tree. So I’m sitting in their house trying to explain what it’s put me and your mother through to have that video up. I said I didn’t want to involve the cops because I was sure we could sort this out like adults.” He gave a gruff chuckle. “And you know what that asshole said to me?”

I could imagine. “What?”

“He said his son made those videos with the full consent of Hayden and he had every right to post them on the internet. Freedom of speech and all.” My dad crushed his empty beer can and threw it against the wall.

He began mumbling to himself again. His neck had turned red and I could see a vein pulsing. Only the odd word or two was coherent enough for me, like “Freedom” and “sue his ass.” By the end of the game he was out cold.

The police showed up in a few days, making good on my dad’s threats. They were the same officers who worked the original accident and it felt like *déjà vu*. It wasn’t quite as intense as before because they really didn’t need to talk to me much. They just wanted to know what action my parents wanted to take. I could tell that my dad was all on board but my mom was hesitant, just like she was about suing the school.

I still watched the videos while they were still online. Stacey didn’t think it was healthy for me but I couldn’t stop. One afternoon after work, I changed into comfortable clothes and immediately started going through the playlist of videos. I sat at the computer staring at the frozen image on the screen for too long. The house was completely silent and I still reeked of popcorn and pickle juice but all my attention was focused on this picture of Hayden. He was frozen in mid-jump from this red clay cliff I

recognized. It was hidden from view at the back of our neighborhood by a line of trees. I say cliff, but it was probably not even thirty feet high and it was a gradual slope. There were vertical ridges where the rain channeled down and the foot of the cliff was a soft mixture of sand and clay. All of the neighborhood kids had made forts or ridden their bikes down it at some point. But in this video, Hayden had taken a running start and launched himself off the edge, flipped through the air and tumbled on the ground. This was one of the early videos, dated about a year and a half ago. Caleb and Ally hadn't joined the group yet.

I had the clip paused at the moment when Hayden's arms were stretched out to the side like he was going to do a swan dive into a pool. He looked so graceful, so fearless, and so much like the last jump he ever made.

And I couldn't help thinking of the last time I saw him.

The actual funeral had been closed casket but we had a viewing before that wasn't. My parents and I were the first to arrive at the funeral home, of course. It was weird to be in that cavernous space with just my parents. As soon as she saw the casket my mom turned around and laid her head on Dad's shoulder. He immediately wrapped his arms around her black-clad shoulders. His hands were clenched in fists and he looked away as well. They didn't invite me in to include me in this moment of intense grief for our new family of three. Neither of them even looked at me.

But I didn't spare them much of a glance either. Instead, I got tunnel-vision and walked straight for Hayden. It was like a tether snapping me to him. It was the same pull I'd felt when I found him on the pavement outside of school. I didn't try to understand it then; I just followed.

It felt like the longest walk of my life, like I was walking towards my own casket and for a wild, brief second I felt sure I would see myself laying there, frozen in time at seventeen. But it was only Hayden.

I ran my hands across the cold, metal edge of the casket as I filled my mind with this last image. I played with the satin lining as I memorized his face but I realized I already had his features memorized. His hair was stick straight like mine and a little longer than he normally kept it. It was gelled perfectly in place which wasn't normal but that was okay. I could see the little half-moon scar just below his mouth from when he tried to pierce his lip with a safety pin. Mom flipped out when she saw it and ordered him to take it out immediately. Of course he didn't listen and his lip swelled so much that he talked with a lisp for a week before he caved and took it out.

There was another scar that ran from his right eyebrow to his hairline. This scar I knew very well because I was the person who actually caused it. In middle school we had a family reunion at a cousin's house from my dad's side. They owned a large, sprawling farm with an Olympic-sized pool in the backyard. One afternoon a bunch of us cousins decided to play chicken in the pool, where you try to wrestle one another off of somebody's shoulders, while the adults were all scattered under awnings with their coolers of beer, not really paying attention to us.

I was on my eighteen-year-old cousin Larissa's shoulders at the time and Hayden was on Joey's shoulders. Hayden and I were both twelve and I was actually bigger than him at the time so when we started trying to wrestle each other into the water I had an advantage. Well, none of us realized how close we had gotten to the edge when I finally

over-powered him and shoved him down to the water face-first. Unfortunately, he cracked his head on the edge and immediately started gushing blood.

We started yelling, “Hayden’s hurt!” but none of them gave us a second look because even at twelve, Hayden had already made a habit of hurting himself at every possible moment. It wasn’t until we got him up to the porch where he almost passed out that they all started running around for towels to stop the bleeding and a sober adult to drive him to the hospital. Twenty stitches later, he was already bragging about his battle wound and how he’d win the next round.

I had barely noticed during my reminiscing that my hands made their way from the satin lining to the edge of Hayden’s sleeve. The blue suit Mr. Greenfield made for Hayden really was beautiful. It was so soft. I ran my fingers up to his wrist where I started to fiddle with the buttons at the cuff. Then they touched the back of his hand. His hands had scars too. The back of his right hand was where he burned himself that time he’d set himself on fire. Surprisingly, it was the only burn he had from that incident. The scar felt like it was molded from plastic, so hard with deep ridges that twisted like vines.

When I heard murmuring at the other end of the room I slowly pulled my hand back. I took a few steps back and sat in the first chair I came to, not daring to take my eyes off him. It was so strange to feel so close to him. I’d never felt the need before but it was like a thirst I couldn’t quench. Even when the room filled, I ignored the words people said to me and craned my neck when somebody stepped between me and him. I blocked out the words of the minister as he droned on about someone he’d never met in real life. I was reluctant to leave when the room had cleared. Dad came and tugged on

my arm, whispering that Mom was out in the car waiting. I walked slowly behind Dad though he was pulling me along with him. And then we turned the corner and I never saw Hayden again.

It wasn't until we were leaving the gravesite the next day that I felt the tether snap. I could feel the recoil, deep in my gut and it nearly knocked me down. I didn't realize at the time that that's what it was. I thought it was grief, finally setting in, but I spared his grave one last look as I tried to right my world again.

The hollow feeling I had within me had started then. It slowly grew as I sat alone at the reception at our house. I thought it was because there were so many questions and I needed someone to blame. But as I continued to stare at this image of Hayden in mid-flight I knew what it was. Hayden and I had started life as best friends in our own little twin world but as we grew older our desire for individuality grew too. We didn't realize we were trying to be so different. And while we were both alive it was easy to miss what had now become painfully obvious.

I thought I was my own person but that hollowness wasn't just because I had lost my twin brother; it was because I lost my other half. Without Hayden, I was only half a person, living half a life. I had spent years suppressing anything that might make me like him and he had done the same. I never felt deprived or like I was missing anything because he was always there. We were like a binary star system, orbiting around each other, but now that he was gone I was just floating along by myself.

I was a runaway star.

And run I did. I was tired of sitting out and I needed to do something. I got out of the computer chair without bothering to turn the computer off. I just left my room and

then the house without locking the door behind me. I needed something to fill this emptiness I had. I didn't have anyone else to blame at the moment so I could only think of one thing. I knew exactly where I was headed, although I didn't realize just how far it was to go on foot. The sky was a steely grey and I wished I had checked the weather but I couldn't stop. I knew if I did I would lose my momentum for change.

It was half an hour before I was finally walking up the street I was looking for and praying he hadn't gone home early because I didn't know where he lived. It was strange to see a neighborhood in development. The old part just ended abruptly at an almost empty field. The blacktop of the road was so clean, without a crack or oil slick in sight. Dotted along either side of the street were concrete slabs, all in the same basic shape, with plumbing and wiring sticking out. A few had frames erected already and towards the end of the right side of the road a construction crew was busy pushing up the frame of one of the exterior walls.

I almost ran up into the group but decided to just look for Caleb before I got too crazy. This was his job after all. I stood at the curb and searched the workers for any sign of him but they all seemed to be dressed alike and wearing different colored hardhats that it was difficult to tell the difference between any of them. I was separated from the concrete foundation by a sea of red clay with a few tufts of grass like little oases in the desert. A guy wearing a red flannel shirt and dirty jeans holding a clipboard (I assumed he was the contractor or whoever was in charge of a build-site) walked across that Georgia desert and said, "Can I help you miss? Are you lost?"

“No.” I got super nervous all of a sudden. I was being stupid. I almost turned away but the guy looked so concerned for me that I decided to just ask. “I’m looking for Caleb. Um, Caleb Wright.”

“Just a sec.” He gave a shrill whistle using his thumb and forefinger and the noise died down. “Cal, you got a visitor.” Then he walked off.

Everyone stared at me for a minute and I suddenly realized I had walked all this way barefoot. I was wearing some cut-off shorts and a spaghetti-strap tank top. Seriously, what was wrong with me?

Caleb walked up, took off his hard hat and ran his hands through his sweaty, dirty hair causing it to stick up straight. He looked at my feet then up to what must have been a panicked look on my face. “Is everything okay? Did something happen to you?”

He looked so concerned that I felt stupid for coming here. The construction crew was still looking at me and I pulled nervously at the bottom of my top, making sure it covered my stomach. “No, I just, I was just walking.” I forced a smile and started to walk away. Why did I come here?

“Walking barefoot?” He touched my arm and I turned to face him. “You don’t look like everything’s okay. At least let me give you a ride. We were about to finish up here anyway because of the storm rolling in.” His eyes were searching mine for some kind of sign as to why I came here.

I felt so bad that I blurted out the first thing I thought of. “I want to jump off a cliff!”

Now he was the one looking panicked. He stepped further away from the curb and turned me so I was facing away from the job site. He put his hands on my shoulders

and tilted his head so he could look me straight in the eyes. “What are you talking about? You don’t mean...”

He let the question hang but I knew what he was getting at. “No, I don’t want to kill myself. I want to jump off a cliff like Hayden did. Or car surf or something,” I finished lamely. Saying my wish out loud made me sound even more stupid. I wasn’t this person. I was the responsible one, the one who thought everything through. But I hadn’t even thought it through enough to wear shoes. I braced myself for Caleb to start laughing at my ridiculousness. He didn’t need to deal with Hayden’s crazy sister.

Caleb visibly relaxed though. He let his arms drop back to his side. “Let me take you home. I just have to put up my tools.”

I nodded as he walked away then I sat on the curb opposite the construction site and put my head on my knees. Nobody was looking at me anymore, which made me feel a little better. I felt a drop of rain hit the back of my neck and I was glad Caleb would be driving me back.

“All right guys, let’s pack everything up before it starts pouring,” the guy with the clipboard yelled. I could hear the clanging and banging of tools and equipment as it was stowed away. They were almost done by the time Caleb pulled up beside me in his car. As soon as I got inside and closed the door, it seemed like the heavens opened up and let out the deluge.

“Did you know there was a tropical storm moving in?” Caleb asked. He turned on the windshield wipers which quickly went to work flinging the water off the car.

“No.” I tried not to look at him while I wondered what he was thinking. Probably something along the lines of *I need to get this crazy chick home as quickly as possible.*

He glanced at me and then said, “So tell me what’s really going on. Why this sudden need to jump off cliffs or car surf?” He laughed at the latter suggestion and I had to laugh a little too because the image of me on the hood of a speeding car did seem pretty out there.

“I was watching Hayden’s videos.”

“You really shouldn’t do that.” He looked serious.

“I know. I just want to know more about him I guess. And I thought I knew myself pretty well but it turns out I don’t. And I realized how much I missed out on and I don’t want to miss anything else.” He nodded but didn’t say anything so I just kept talking and it helped. “I spent all my life just trying to not be like Hayden and now that he’s gone, there’s this void. It was like we were halves of a complete person. Does that make any sense?”

I looked at him pleadingly, desperate for someone to tell me I was okay.

“I think so.” He sounded uncertain and I felt frustrated. I couldn’t explain it any better.

“But you know,” he continued, “you could’ve talked to me about Hayden. I did know him pretty well. That’s why I took you out to that old house. It was my way of letting you know we could talk about him, but you didn’t seem that into it.”

I looked at him but he wouldn’t meet my eyes. “I know and I’m sorry. It’s just hard.”

But I hadn't quite given up on my jumping off a cliff idea. "So what about taking me bungee jumping or hang gliding, or something?"

He took a minute to consider and I tried to stay quiet, silently pleading for him to say yes to anything. We pulled up in my driveway before he answered.

"Are you off tomorrow?"

"Yeah. Isn't it still going to be raining tomorrow?"

"How about I pick you up in the afternoon?"

"Um, okay. What are we going to do?"

"You'll see. Wear something comfortable that you can move around in."

"Why can't you just ever tell me what's planned?" Caleb shrugged. "Fine. I'll see you tomorrow."

"Bye," he called as I slammed the door behind me and sprinted to my porch. The door was still unlocked as I had left it and my parents still weren't home. It looked like I had the whole night to wonder (or worry) about what Caleb had planned for me.

Chapter Twelve

I didn't get up in the morning until the sunlight glaring in through the window became too much to ignore. I checked my phone to see how late I'd slept. It was already almost noon but I was more surprised by the date. It seemed as though my birthday had crept up on me. I was very tempted to just throw the covers back over my head because I knew the day would probably be depressing. But I could hear some noises coming from the living room and kitchen and knew my parents must be home. They surely wouldn't have forgotten what day it is.

So I tumbled out of bed and got dressed. Normally, I would pick out something slightly special to wear on my birthday. Even though I wasn't too into dressing up to look cute, there was just something about my birthday that made me want to feel special. Maybe it was because I'd always had to share the day with Hayden so I just needed something extra.

I stepped lightly to the bathroom and closed the door as gently as possible so I could brush my teeth and pull my hair back into a pony-tail without letting my parents know I was awake yet. I wondered what this day would be like now they only had me to celebrate with. How hard would it be on them to only have me around? And as I stared at my reflection in the mirror I was suddenly scared that the reason they were never around because of how much Hayden and I looked alike. Was it just too painful for them to look at me? After all, I didn't have to look at myself all day so was I a too-real reminder?

The bed's calling became stronger but I resolutely wiped my face clear of any toothpaste and went to the kitchen to see what was for lunch.

I must have surprised them because when I opened the fridge for some orange juice my mom jumped and dropped the pair of tongs in her hand. I looked over at the stove to see she was pan-frying chicken and I could smell the baked potatoes in the oven. It was weird to have these home-cooked smells in the house again. It seemed like for the past month or so the house had smelled like greasy fast-food wrappers and molding pizza.

“Happy birthday, Bri!” My dad embraced me in a hug. I could tell from the pink tinge to his eyes that he’d been up for a while. The bottle of whiskey sat opened on the counter. It seemed like liquor had replaced beer. Or today was just a special occasion.

“Happy birthday,” my mom said though it came out barely above a whisper. She didn’t come over to hug me too. She turned back to the food and began pushing the pieces of chicken around in the sizzling grease.

“Thanks,” I said as I got a glass from the cabinet for my orange juice. “Lunch smells good.” I was trying to be friendly because they seemed like they were trying to though apparently it was taking a lot out of them.

I went and sat in the living room while my mom finished cooking and noticed some new additions to the Hayden memorial. There were a couple of birthday balloons tied around the posters and some new birthday cards were propped up on the carpet. “Where did those come from?”

Dad walked over and sat in his chair, the ice cubes in his glass tinkled as the liquor dangerously sloshed at the rim. “Your mom got the balloons, a couple of the cards are from relatives who either forgot or didn’t know that Hayden died and one is from Ally.”

“Ally? Why would she send a card?”

My dad laughed and I wondered what about my question was so funny. “She didn’t send it. She came by this morning.”

“Why?” I didn’t understand why she would come over here.

“She came by to talk to your mom and me about Hayden. She remembered his birthday and didn’t want to leave anything at the cemetery in case it blew away or something.”

I took a sip of my juice. “You don’t think that’s weird?”

There was a clatter of dishes from the kitchen as my mom said, “No, it was sweet of her to think of us and to think of Hayden.”

I decided not to say anymore and instead focused on the baseball game my dad had turned to. He too decided to let the conversation drop as he turned up the volume so I could barely hear the buzz of the oven timer.

It seemed like hours before my mom called us to the table for lunch. My dad turned the volume down finally though he sat where he could still see the game. It was quiet as we all passed plates around and loaded up with food. Luckily, the chicken and potatoes was just as good as my mom always made them so it was an easy excuse to just stuff my face rather than talk. I could almost forget the past few weeks.

When we were all slowing down I finally said, “This was very good. Thanks, mom.”

She nodded as she pushed green beans around on her plate like I used to do when I was five to make them look like I had tried them.

My dad clapped his hands together. “Present time?”

Again Mom just nodded but pushed her plate away from her as my dad went down the hall. He came back holding a big gift sack and a couple smaller wrapped gifts. He set the sack on the ground with a soft thud and handed me the others. “Go on.”

I tore into the gifts feeling eager to know what they had thought to get me. The first was a t-shirt and a pair of shorts. The top was one I had pointed out to mom before and I was sure they were bought a few months ago. The other was a toiletry caddy. I must have looked confused because my dad said, “It’s for when you go to college in the fall. So is this one.” He nudged the sack with his foot.

I opened it and found a comforter set. It was a bright pink and green floral set, something I probably wouldn’t have picked on my own but I didn’t want to seem ungrateful after they had tried so hard. “Wow, thanks a lot. I really like it.”

My dad was beaming as he put his arm around my mom’s shoulders as she gave a weak smile. I could tell she wasn’t really into this. And my dad seemed like he just had to keep the momentum going before everything fell apart. “Alright, cake time!”

He went to the fridge and pulled out a white frosted cake emblazoned with “Happy Birthday” in sugared letters. He carefully placed the candles and slowly lit them one at a time. He started to sing the Happy Birthday song to me, waving his hands in the air like he was directing a choir. I could see my mom mouthing the words but no noise was coming out until my dad said, “Happy birthday, Hayden and Brianna” just like he had for seventeen years. My mom pushed back from the table and stormed off to her room. The door slammed so hard I could hear the frames in the hallway shake.

“Jane,” my dad called as he followed her down the hallway. “I’m sorry. It was just habit.” I heard the door slam again, though softer this time, and then I was left in the quiet while the candles burned down.

“Happy birthday to me.” I blew out the candles before they got too low and just sat at the table. I didn’t bother to make a wish because the one thing I would wish for wouldn’t come true. And it’s something I never thought I would ever want to wish for. I wished Hayden were there.

It was such a relief when Caleb finally showed up. My parents had been in their room for over an hour. I had finally cleared the table and even did the dishes. I left the cake and the presents where they were though. The spiteful side of me wanted to leave those for my parents to deal with, so they would have to look at them and remember they still had a child who was living and breathing in this very house. But the hurt side of me just didn’t know what to do with them anyway.

I heard Caleb pull up and raced to meet him at the door. I didn’t bother to tell my parents I was leaving or leave them a note to tell them where I would be. They probably wouldn’t even notice. Caleb looked surprised as I met him on the porch. “Are you ready to go then?”

“Yep.” I made my way to his car.

“Is something wrong?” he asked as he followed behind me.

“I’m just ready to get out of that house again.”

Caleb paused before getting in the car and looked at me over the roof. “Is it because it’s your birthday?”

“Mostly.” I climbed in and buckled up.

“I’m sorry. Happy birthday though.” He was smiling and I couldn’t help but smile back. Caleb instantly relaxed me.

“Thanks.” I leaned back in the seat and didn’t even worry about where we were headed this time. I was already starting to trust Caleb and I felt like the day couldn’t get much worse than my mom’s slight meltdown at lunch. I knew today would be hard but it didn’t feel like they tried all that much to make it a good day. At least Caleb was trying.

We soon pulled into a parking lot at a place called Rock On! I tried to hold out on my disbelief and the fear that was creeping up on me. Caleb looked absolutely ecstatic however. He looked like he just wanted to pull me as fast as possible inside.

Before I knew it we were suiting up to go rock climbing. “This is *not* cliff jumping,” I said unable to keep the disappointment out of my voice. I felt uncomfortable as a total stranger adjusted the leg straps of my harness.

“Have you ever jumped off a cliff?” Caleb asked. He was standing a few feet away, his harness already fitted and tightened.

“Obviously not. That’s why I asked you to take me.”

“Have you ever been rock climbing?” he returned, clearly ignoring my sarcasm.

“No.”

“Then for all you know they’re the exact same.” He had a big grin on his face as if he’d gotten the best of me. I didn’t say anymore as I stared up the face of the climbing wall. I hadn’t planned on this.

“But look at my arms.” I pointed at my skinny bicep. “They’ll snap from the weight of me.” I tried to sound pathetic hoping I could get out of this.

Caleb burst into laughter. “I think you’ll be fine.”

“You’re all set.” The attendant slapped me hard on my back and I stumbled a bit. What was I thinking? I wasn’t stable on solid ground, what made me think I’d be stable in the air? I was starting to feel thankful we weren’t jumping off of anything as the panic started to set in.

Caleb walked over the nearest grey wall with the pink, yellow, blue and green handholds protruding from it. From the looks of it we were starting off on an easy section because the hand and footholds seemed pretty concentrated. Other sections looked like you’d have to be a spider monkey to make it from one hold to another.

Caleb looked back at me. I hadn’t budged. “Come on.” He waved me over and I took slow shuffling steps until I was staring up the almost vertical face of plastic rocks. “Remember, this was your idea.”

“I think I might be getting sick.” I wasn’t really but I’m sure I’d gone pale enough from anxiety that he might believe me.

“Not a chance.” He shuffled over to me and pointed out the best holds for me. “Just put your left foot there on the green one and reach with your right hand for this yellow one. It’s just like a puzzle or math equation, right?”

Wrong. Puzzles and math only required a pencil and no physical exertion. They also didn’t include real falls from high places. But I did as he said and pulled myself up about a foot off the ground and clutched my handholds with dear life.

“Perfect,” he said and started his own journey up the wall.

He had already moved about ten feet up before he looked back down and saw I hadn't moved again. I was starting to feel embarrassed. This had been my idea (sort of) and now I was chickening out. So I reached slowly with my left hand, then looked down and lifted my right foot to a red spot and pulled with all my strength, rising another foot above the ground. I felt more pathetic as I realized I was already out of breath.

"How can someone so skinny be so out of shape?" Caleb called down. He seemed like one of those aforementioned spider monkeys who could scale these walls like nothing. He was already another ten feet higher.

"Shut up," I said, trying to sound angry but it came out small and breathless. I reached again, found a foothold and pulled. I did it one more time before my arm muscles began screaming in protest. They were not used to this kind of work. Another pull and my legs started shaking and I refused to look down though I doubted I was much more than five feet in the air.

"Come on you're doing great," Caleb called but he sounded so far away. I chanced a look up and saw him soaring in the air. He was already being lowered to the ground, spinning and bumping slightly as he hung from (what seemed) an extraordinarily thin rope.

"I can't do this."

"Sure you can." He was already level with me in his descent.

"No, in fact, I think I'll stay here. I think I have a fear of heights I never knew about before."

"Come on. Just try a little bit more."

I tried to suck it up and reached my right hand again but my right foot slipped at the same time and gripped even harder. “Nope, not doing it. I want to come down.”

I could hear Caleb let out an audible, slightly disgruntled, sigh from the ground. “Alright, just lean back then and let go.”

“What! I’m not doing that.”

“It’s the only way to get down. Besides you’re not that high up.” I knew he could barely contain his laughter so I closed my eyes and leaned back as far as I could without taking my feet from their holds. The rope seemed like it might hold me so I took a deep breath and pulled completely away from the wall.

But Caleb was right. I hadn’t made it very high and felt like an idiot when I was already touching the floor. I could feel my face begin to burn as I wondered why he even put up with me. Did he really miss Hayden so bad that he was willing to up with my antics?

The harnesses came off quickly and we headed to the snack bar. I wasn’t too hungry and felt so embarrassed that I wanted to ask to go home. When we sat down Caleb asked, “So you’re really not going to try again?” He sounded exasperated with me and I felt like a child, stuck at the dinner table because I wouldn’t try my vegetables. At the same time, I wasn’t sure I could force myself back into the harness, let alone back onto the wall. I shook my head and dropped my eyes back down to my onion rings.

“I’m really sorry,” I said. “I wasted your day off.”

“It’s not wasted. Besides, we’ve barely been here an hour.”

“Well, it felt like an eternity in hell being plastered to that rock wall.”

Caleb brushed the salt from his fingertips. “I’m sorry my surprise didn’t turn out so well. I had no idea you were afraid of heights.”

“It’s okay. I appreciate the effort. It’s better effort than my parents.” I took a sip from my drink. “I’m just not ready to go home yet.”

“Do you mind if I climb a couple more times?” Caleb crumpled up the paper wrapper the onion rings were served on and tossed it towards an open trash can.

“Be my guest.”

We spent the rest of the afternoon with me sitting on a bench while Caleb scaled the walls like a gecko. If I didn’t know any better I’d think his hands and feet were sticky or something. I tried to not let my failure get me down. I had been so excited to come out with him again and hoped this birthday wouldn’t completely blow.

Each time Caleb finished a section of wall he would come over and ask if I was ready to go yet but I could tell he was eager to keep climbing. It wasn’t until he was drenched in sweat and I had finished my third strawberry smoothie before he decided to call it quits. I tried to keep a smile on my face as he drove me home. It helped that he was in such a great mood. And I was surprised he had barely mentioned Hayden the whole day. It was kind of refreshing.

Chapter Thirteen

But the day's bliss didn't last long. When Caleb pulled up to the curb in front of my house, I could see some lights on inside. The blue flicker of a television showed through the blinds of my parents' bedroom window. I looked across the street and could make out Stacey's mom in the kitchen of their house. Mrs. Greenfield was standing over the sink probably scrubbing pots and plates from the dinner she'd made that night. She had a phone wedged between her ear and her shoulder and was waving around her scrub brush in her usual animated way. Their family has something so easy and natural; something I had taken for granted for so long.

"Thanks for today," I said though my mood was already starting to crash. I felt like a manic-depressant.

Caleb sat there for a minute and it felt like he was trying to bore a hole through my head to figure out what I was thinking. I could imagine if we were standing outside the car he would've already shoved his hands in his pockets and rocked back and forth on the balls of his feet. Instead he just let them rest on the bottom of the steering wheel.

"I'm glad you enjoyed it."

"I'll see you later." I got out of the car as Caleb said goodbye and wished me a Happy birthday again.

I didn't know what awaited me inside. Would my mom melt down again? Had my dad been drinking all day? Would they even acknowledge me again? I didn't want to find out.

So instead I turned around and started walking. It wasn't a frantic journey like the other day when I had to find Caleb but it still seemed instinctually where my strides were

taking me. I wasn't in a rush and I tried not to think about anything except how reflectively white my legs looked in the dark.

I kept walking, passing houses and then businesses. My long strides took me past cars going about their own business and people who didn't give me a second look. I'm sure I just looked like a teenager up to no good. Maybe passersby thought I was homeless and felt sorry for me. Maybe someone contemplated pulling over and offering me help, but nobody did. I wouldn't have taken it anyway.

Soon I saw my destination though I hadn't quite planned it out. I nodded to the security guard in his little hut at the open gate though he barely looked away from his smartphone to acknowledge me with a wave.

The cemetery was surrounded by a high, stone wall and as soon as I entered, the noise from the busy street died away and I barely noticed the neon lights from the McDonald's next door. The only sound was the soft thuds of sneakers hitting pavement from the woman taking a nighttime jog. People often came to the cemetery at night to walk or jog because it was safe with a security guard at the gate and nowhere for anyone to hide. The whole place was well lit and there were only two trees which were both located in the oldest part of the cemetery. I guess as years passed they decided the space was worth ripping out the trees so the cemetery was completely open. Just row after row of head stones with a few mausoleums scattered around the perimeter, pressed against the high wall to be as out of the way as possible.

Hayden's grave was on the opposite end from the gate in the newest part of the cemetery. The graves on this side still had fresh flowers, the tombstones stood upright and none of them had any cracks yet. The closer you got to the trees the more dilapidated

the graves became. The absolute oldest were almost impossible to read because they were so eroded and vandalized.

I quickly found the white tombstone engraved with HAYDEN MICHAEL FAIRCHILD. It wasn't fancy or anything special to look at. There was still a wreath of flowers in the brightest pink, something I knew Hayden would've hated, sitting in a little metal stand next to the grave marker. The grass was so green here too. As I looked around there were only two other graves with grass as green as Hayden's which told me they were laid with fresh sod too, but I tried not to think too hard about what that meant.

I knelt down and rubbed my finger over the engraving quickly. I expected it to feel cold but it was actually a little damp and warm from the all the humidity in the air. I avoided stepping on the grass directly in front of the tombstone. I wasn't superstitious or anything but it just didn't feel right to walk over it. I did notice a slight depression right in front of the grave marker that looked like a stray dog often made its bed right there. It almost made me laugh.

I lay down on my back next to his plot with my feet by the headstone. We used to lay like this, head to foot, when we were younger and joked about how we were in the same position in the womb, curled together like a little yin-yang symbol. "Well, I'm an adult now and you'll be a kid forever. I bet that was your plan all along. You were just going to let me get old while you stayed young, one way or another." I was just rambling. I felt a little stupid but there was no one around to judge me but myself.

"This is all your fault, you know." I kicked the stone with my toe for emphasis and instantly regretted it; the thin canvas was no match for the hard granite. "If you were still here none of this would've happened."

I had moved from blaming Caleb, to blaming Seth, to blaming Hayden. And really, if it was anyone's fault, it was definitely his. I should've felt worse for coming to this conclusion but I didn't. I was still mad. More than a month later and I couldn't get over the shock of his selfishness. He never thought about anybody but himself. He just did whatever he thought would be the most fun for him.

"I even thought it would be easier to talk to you now, but it's not really. But it's harder to lay here and be quiet." I thought back to all the times before when I wished he would just go away. There were many times I had wanted to be an only child, or not a twin at the very least, but one always bubbled to the surface. The one time I had actually wished Hayden dead was after he pushed me off the roof. He denied it to our parents, of course.

Our house isn't too far away from the county fairgrounds where the Fourth of July fireworks are set off. Every year since we were eight we were allowed up on the roof to watch the show over the tops of the pine trees. The summer we turned ten Hayden and I had made our way up to the roof early in the day to pick our favorite spots. Dad was down on the patio barbecuing and had put the ladder in place for us. I had toted up my favorite quilt to sit on while Hayden tried fruitlessly to bring up a lawn chair.

"It'll never work," I taunted as I smugly spread out my blanket, taking the best spot near the peak.

"Shut up. It will," Hayden said as he tried to balance the chair over the center but it kept sliding one way or the other.

"Hayden, get that chair back down here," Dad yelled from the ground. I peeked over and he was waving a cooking fork with a hot dog skewered on the end.

“All right,” Hayden grumbled to himself. I expected a full blown fit from him but he just folded the chair and tossed it over the edge of the gutter.

Dad’s angry voice carried over the house again. “Hayden! Do not throw the furniture off the roof again.”

“Geez, okay.”

“Now you two get down here so we can eat.”

I stuck out my tongue at Hayden as he made his way carefully to the edge. He sat down by the ladder and dangled his legs over. I finished smoothing out my blanket and making sure it was perfect before I followed him. “Are you going to go or what?” I asked when he didn’t move.

“I bet I can jump down,” he said more to himself than to me. His feet were still swinging and clanged occasionally against the metal rungs.

“Don’t be stupid. It’s too far.”

“Nuh-uh. I could land in the bush and be just fine.” He pointed down to the low line of bushes that ran against the side of the house. The bushes were prickly and untamed; they didn’t look like a soft landing at all, and I told Hayden so.

“Whatever. You’re just scared.”

“I am not. I’m just not stupid like you.” I moved closer to the edge to try and nudge him out of the way so I could get down but he still wouldn’t move. “Now get down.”

It happened pretty quickly. I should’ve sat down too while I waited for Hayden to move but I stood there. Hayden grabbed my ankle and shook my leg saying, “Don’t fall.” He was trying to scare me but I wasn’t expecting it and my foot slipped into the

gutter. I tipped over the edge, fell right on the bush, and continued to tumble to the ground with my left wrist and shoulder take the brunt of the landing. My dad yelled and Hayden scrambled down the ladder to look at my injuries. Having only worn a tank-top and shorts, I was covered in scrapes. My dad quickly scooped me up and carried me to the car. The pain was agonizing and Hayden kept commenting on how cool it looked as I flailed and rolled down. At the hospital I learned I had a broken wrist and a dislocated shoulder.

I never went back on the roof to watch the fireworks after that though, of course, Hayden had no problem with it. “You never would admit that you pushed me,” I told the tombstone. It didn’t answer. Hayden didn’t answer. I couldn’t even be sure that Hayden was listening when he hadn’t listened before.

If the cold dampness of my clothes didn’t wake me up, the nudging in my ribs sure did the trick. I was curled into a tight ball on my side and felt every joint pop as I stretched out onto my back. Blocking the early morning rays of the sun was the cemetery security guard.

“Miss, did you sleep here all night?” he asked. The corners of his mouth were turned down in a frown and he held a walkie-talkie in his hand. “Do you have somewhere to go? Can I call someone for you?”

I popped up from the ground (causing more aching protest in my limbs); I couldn’t believe I had fallen asleep here! “No, I’m fine. I didn’t realize I’d fallen asleep. I’m just going to go home.”

I started walking towards the front gate and the guard jogged to catch up. “Are you sure I can’t call someone to come get you?” He waved his phone at me.

“I’ve got my own phone and I don’t live too far away.” I took off down the street, retracing the previous night’s trail. I wondered if my parents were worried and checked my back pocket for my phone, but it was empty. So was the other one. And the two front pockets. Crap. On top of sleeping in a cemetery all night and waking up with clothes soaked through with dew, I’d lost my phone at some point. But I was already a few blocks away from the cemetery so I decided I’d just come back later, and hope by then that the guards had changed shifts.

Without my phone I had no idea what time it was and I hoped I would make it home before my parents left for work. The garage door was closed when I got there, so I tried the door but it was locked. I got the spare key from under a fake rock in the flower bed. “Mom!” I called as loudly as I could though I was nearly breathless, after a few panting breaths I called, “Dad!” But nobody answered. I went down the hall and knocked at their bedroom door and it swung open. Empty. I walked to the living room and was surprised by a blue banner that said Happy Birthday and a couple clusters of balloons, already starting to drift to the ground. I looked at the counter and there were two cupcakes on a plate, one with a pink B and one with a blue H. There was a flat square present lying next to them with a card that read:

Happy Birthday to my best friend! I know life has been hard and today must be even more so but I want you to know that I’m always here for you and I plan on making this day amazing! Your bestie, Stacey

I couldn't believe it. Stacey had done all of this for me and I missed it. I had to go find her. I checked the digital clock on the microwave and I only had half an hour to get to work. I raced to change into my uniform (after swiping my finger through the frosting on the cupcake) and then bolted out the door. I knocked and knocked at Stacey's house but nobody answered. Her parents must have been at work and maybe she was too. I decided to just try and catch her on my lunch break. I ran back to my car and sped off to work.

After the rush of getting to work, it was kind of a letdown at how slow the time went once I was there. We had one daycare group come in to watch the summer's blockbuster cartoon movie that left a swamp of spilt popcorn and juice for me to clean up but not much else to make the time go by quicker. Finally my manager let me go on my lunch break and I made my way down to Stacey's store to see if she was there.

When I walked in the doors, it was like walking into a wall of sound and smell. The music was thumping so loud I didn't know how they could check purchases without having to yell. And the perfume was so strong I thought I was in Bath and Body Works. I spotted her over by the sundresses helping a customer match a scarf with one. I couldn't hear a word she was saying from across the room but I hovered among the racks until she was done.

"Hey!" I walked over to Stacey as she was putting some clothes back on the racks.

"Hey," she said, though she said it loudly she didn't sound exactly happy to see me.

I faltered. "Do you go on lunch soon?"

She checked her watch, muttered into the headset she was wearing and said, "I can take five real quick."

I followed her out of the store into the blessed quiet of the mall. She walked to the nearest unoccupied bench and sat down, staring expectantly at me.

"How's it going?"

Stacey shrugged. "All right, I guess. You?"

"I'm doing good. I went by your house this morning but you were already gone by then."

"Did you need something?"

"Well I got home this morning and saw your present and the decorations you put up." I shifted on the hard bench but couldn't get comfortable. The look Stacey was giving me didn't help either. "I just wanted to say thanks."

"You're welcome."

Stacey wouldn't look at me, and she wasn't just checking out guys so I knew she was upset. "Look," I said, "I'm sorry I missed you last night. I didn't know you were going to come over."

"Whatever, it doesn't matter." She crossed her legs and started jiggling her foot. "It's not like we haven't spent the past seventeen birthdays together or anything."

"Do you want to hang out later when you get off?" I was starting to feel really bad. I hadn't seen much of Stacey lately. Not since she pulled me away from the computer.

Stacey shrugged. She wasn't giving me anything to go on and I didn't know how to fix this.

"Will you just say whatever is wrong with you!"

Stacey shot me a look I hadn't seen since middle school when she thought I'd started a rumor about her stuffing her bra (which she actually did until she realized we had to change clothes for gym). We didn't speak for almost a month. It wasn't until Ally's nickname for me really picked up steam that she cleared me of all charges and we became friends again. Stacey wasn't quick to temper but when she got going you had better get out of her way.

"Fine." She turned to face me and slammed her jiggling foot on the ground like a tantrum was starting. "I've been trying to be a good friend for you. I know you're not like everyone else and deal with stuff in your own way but I'm tired of it. I've been here for you. I've tried to help you cope, make you laugh and move on but you just don't want my help."

"Am I supposed to just forget about Hayden? Pretend I never had a brother?"

"That's not what I said. I'm just trying to help."

"Well I'm sorry I'm not sticking to your mourning schedule. But you'll have to excuse me because my twin brother just died."

"You guys didn't even get along. But I forgot. You've got Caleb now. What do you need me for?"

I couldn't help but laugh. She was jealous of Caleb? It sounded so ridiculous. But laughing at her was definitely the wrong thing to do.

"You know, screw this." She stood up and folded her arms against her chest; the barrier between us already going up. "You don't seem to need me and that's fine. Have a

great summer." She turned around and left before I could even wrap my mind around what had just happened.

I sat on that bench for a while still seething in my own anger. Shoppers continually walked past me pushing their strollers or swinging their bags. I got up and walked slowly back to work. How did this go wrong? How did I screw this up again? My intention was to apologize and explain. I laughed because it seemed ridiculous. I did need her but I was just bad at needing people. Maybe she was right though. Maybe I was relying too much on Caleb.

Like I had summoned him with my thoughts, Caleb was sitting at a food court table in front of the movie theater. He was by himself and flipping a phone between his hands. I tapped on the table and he looked up at me. "Hey," he said.

"Hey." I sat down and waited for him to talk. I wasn't feeling very inquisitive though.

He slid the phone across the table and I caught it before it could fall. "I found this in my car this morning. It must have fallen out of your pocket. There are a lot of missed calls on it."

"Thanks. I was wondering what happened to it." I clicked through the list. They were mostly from Stacey, a few from Tiara, and one from home. There were some other birthday messages from my aunts and uncles.

Caleb drummed his fingers on the table and stared around at the mostly empty food court. I just watched him, wondering if he thought I was a bad person too. He finally looked back at me. "Are you okay?"

"Me and Stacey had a fight."

"I'm sorry. Was it serious?"

I told him about going to see Hayden and sleeping at the cemetery. Then about how Stacey had decorated the house and left me a present as well as the argument we just had. "She thinks I don't appreciate her and that I spend too much time with you." I fidgeted a little and rubbed at an imaginary itch on my right arm. "I'm not very good at being someone's friend apparently." I dropped my head to the table.

"Maybe I should go."

"It must be me. I just don't know how to need people." I heard Caleb sit back down though I didn't lift my head. "I mean she's basically my only friend and I can't even keep her."

Caleb touched my arm. "We're friends, aren't we?"

I lifted my head slowly. "Yeah, I guess. I mean I still think of you as Hayden's friend." He pulled back his hand slowly and dropped it below the table. I knew I had done it again and stuck my foot in my mouth. But it was true.

"Well if it'll help with you and Stacey I'll just hang back a while. I don't want to ruin things between you."

"She'll get over it sometime. I think." Or I hoped anyway. I wasn't quite ready to forgive or apologize though.

"I'll figure something out and we can still hang out...if you want."

"Yeah." He got up again. "Look I better get back to work. I'll talk to you later."

I waved as I got up and went back to work and spent the next few hours mulling over what had happened with Stacey. All I could think about was that I'd managed to trade one friend for another.

"Oh, great. Just what I need now." I pulled my car into the driveway and could see a blonde head peeking through the windows on my front porch. When I slammed the door shut, Tiara looked over and a big smile spread across her face. "Bri, how's it going?" She ran over to me and threw her arms around me. I gingerly patted her back.

"Hey, what are you doing here?" I was trying to be nice. I didn't want to anger anyone else today.

"I wanted to say Happy Birthday! We all missed you last night, silly." She held me at arm's length and wouldn't let me walk around her.

"We? You were here last night too." Stacey didn't even like Tiara, why would she invite her?

"Of course. I wouldn't miss yours and Hayden's birthday. And I wanted to give you your present."

She let go of one of my arms so she could pull me behind her towards the front door. She had set a package on the porch railing. It was wrapped in bright shiny paper covered in pink cupcakes with a big pink and white bow. "Here, open it."

She looked elated as I began to pull at the wrappings. I pulled out a bright blue plaque with a hand painted saying: "Shoot for the moon. Even if you miss you'll land among the stars."

It was really quite pretty with tiny stars decorated around the edge. "Thanks, Tiara."

"Well you're going to school for astronomy right?" I nodded my head, surprised she knew that. "I thought it was fitting and you can hang it up in your dorm room or something for inspiration."

"That's really thoughtful." I felt painfully aware that I didn't deserve this kindness. It was definitely a strange day for me to go from fighting with Stacey to opening up to Caleb to feeling like Tiara might not be such a bad person after all.

"You're very welcome. I'll let you get inside, I'm sure you're tired from work. I'll see you later."

"Thanks," I called faintly after her. I felt like I'd just been hit with vertigo and my world was turning upside down again.

Chapter Fourteen

I thought this fight with Stacey would be like every other fight we'd had. It would burn hot but fizzle out quick because we missed each other. She tried calling a couple of times but I wasn't ready to answer. I wondered if she might come over and apologize but that didn't happen.

I didn't even open the present she had left for me. I just stared at it every now and then, contemplating what it could be. It seemed too big to be a book but too flat to be just about anything else. It wasn't a record because I wasn't that into music. I pushed it around on the counter and fingered the edge of the tape sure that this time I would just open it but I always left it alone. The cupcake sat on the counter for about a week. It still bore the depression where I'd hurriedly scooped some icing but I hadn't touched it yet. Mom or Dad must've thrown it out before it could start to mold.

The decorations also disappeared on their own though one balloon found its way into my room, tied to the handle of the comforter bag. The bright neon balloon bobbed in the corner until it too became deflated and depressed, drooping around the ground as lonesome as me.

Well I wasn't completely lonesome. I was still spending time with Caleb. In fact one day he took me back to his grandparents' farmhouse, but during the daylight. We poked around the house a little bit. It looked the worse-for-wear by daylight where I could clearly see the dents from the baseball bats and the shattered glass hiding in every crevice, just waiting to strike. The cobwebs lent the place to a haunted house inhabited by a gruesome phantom or a werewolf but it bore the distinct marks of neglect and vandalism by teenagers.

This trip we trekked across the wide acreage to one of three barns. The other two looked like the next good wind might blow them over. I expected them to be classic red, a little faded in some places but they were all just brown. One of the large doors was hanging on one hinge but the other door, as well as all the shutters, were still intact and secured shut.

The door creaked with rust as Caleb swung it open. "I'm probably going to tear the other two barns down soon to reuse the wood."

I poked my head in as he worked on the door. I could already smell the must of decay and animals. "What for? It looks useless to me."

"People love the reclaimed wood look for headboards, tables, wall hooks, shelving. You name it and they want it."

"Really? It just looks dirty and what if there are bugs crawling around inside the wood." I shivered to get the imaginary bugs off my skin.

Caleb grunted with his last effort to get the second door open and said, "Well you have to treat the wood of course otherwise it would just decay on its own anyway. Trust me, there's good money to be made off those barns."

"You're the expert." I followed him inside and the smell got stronger. I thought I might gag but Caleb made quick work of opening all the shutters lining each side which gradually let in light and fresh air. The right side was lined with animal stalls though I couldn't tell what kind of animals it housed. I hoped maybe horses; they seemed the cleanest of possible occupants. The other side had pegs and hooks for various farm materials to be stored. There were some feed bags in the corner, chewed through by mice, and a few workbenches lined the wall.

But straight ahead was a vertical ladder that led to the loft and Caleb went straight for it. “Okay, I know you thought the house was pretty lame when I showed it to you before but I think you might like to see what’s upstairs.”

“Are you going to tell me what it is?” I eyed the ladder hesitantly. I could see where there was splintering on the rungs and judging by the state of everything else, I wasn’t entirely sure I wanted to be in the loft when a wrong step could send me back down to the ground.

“You know that’s not how I roll. I like surprises.”

“Well I hate them.” I touched the ladder and it was actually smooth from wear. “I’ll let you go first.” I gave him a big smile and waved him forward.

“No problem.” He grinned just as big and quickly scaled the ladder. He pulled himself through the square opening and called, “Your turn.”

It took me longer to get up there and I could hear Caleb moving around and opening more shutters but he was right there when I got to the top. He grabbed my wrist and hoisted me onto the floor. I looked around at the large open space and I felt like I had been transported somewhere else. This was not an old decrepit barn loft, it was an art exhibit.

The walls, the floor, and the ceiling were covered with graffiti but it was the most amazing sight I had ever seen. Some areas were spray painted with big bubble letters, other places were carved reliefs of people I recognized, and other places were swirls of acrylic paints creating landscapes and telling stories. I didn’t know where to look but I couldn’t take it all in at once. Finally I just let out a breath, “Wow.”

“I thought you might like it up here better.” Caleb started to walk around the room and looking at everything. He seemed to be trying to take it all in like me.

“Who did all of this? Was it you?” I still didn’t move but turned my head in every direction. I was nervous to walk on the drawings sprawled across the floor.

“I did some but definitely not all of this. We all did some.” I shot him a questioning look and he clarified, “You know, all of us that hung out with Hayden.”

I nodded. Hayden did some of this? It seemed like a strange concept to me. I didn’t even know he could draw.

“You can walk around,” Caleb said, reading my thoughts. “You won’t damage anything. It’s all been sealed.”

I took a tentative step followed by another. Soon I was in one corner trying to take in every painting and drawing one at a time. But the very first picture that caught my attention was a carving right at eye level. It was uncanny how much it looked like Hayden. I reached out and touched the wood, following the curves whittled in the plank of wood. “Who did this one?”

I could hear the thump of Caleb’s boots as he made his way over to my corner. He looked sheepish as he said, “I actually did all the carvings.”

“This is amazing! Where did you learn to do this?”

He shrugged and shoved his hands in his pockets like I’d seen him do so many times in the short time we’ve been spending together. “My grandpa liked carving and whittling little figurines. He taught me when I would spend summers with them after we moved.”

I looked at him quickly. “I didn’t know you came back for the summers.”

He shrugged his shoulders again and walked away.

My ignorance of Hayden's life, as well as Caleb's, was starting to astound even me. Every time I think I have them both pegged, something new comes up and I have to rethink everything. I had no idea either of them was so artistic. I instantly wanted to dart around the room and locate all of Caleb's carvings to see who he deemed worthy of immortalization in carved relief but I stopped myself. I wanted to take my time. And I wanted to see what artwork was Hayden's.

Near the floor there was a black silhouette like an old Victorian cameo but instead of the profile of a woman it was a guy and girl holding hands against a neon pink background. It was impossible to tell which direction these silhouettes were supposed to facing but I imagined they were facing away from me, walking into the oblivion of the wall. Next to that was a column of spray-painted words. I realized it was a free verse poem. It was signed with the initials AL and I knew it was written by Ally.

Taking up most of the wall was a floor to ceiling mural. It was a cityscape with futuristic spired-towers reaching passed the clouds. It was painted with hard greys and blacks with glints of green, blue, and gold. It was beautiful and unlike anything I'd ever seen outside of a science fiction movie. I had to take a few steps back to really see it all. After a few minutes of just staring at it Caleb walked back over to me and surveyed the mural as well.

"This is one of Hayden's pictures," he said.

I couldn't help my mouth falling open. "Are you serious?" It didn't seem possible. I thought Hayden's world consisted of doing dangerous things and listening to

loud music. But all along he had this whole hidden world swimming around in his head before he drew it out for everyone to see. It blew my mind.

“Yeah, he made a lot of paintings like this one. He did that picture of a robot in the corner, another of a space ship, and a few more cityscapes,” he said, pointing around the room to each drawing in turn.

“I guess we had more in common than I thought,” I said as I recognized the common theme.

“Oh yeah, what’s that?”

“Well I’m going to school for astronomy and he clearly had a fascination with space and the future.” I walked over to the first picture Caleb pointed to; the robot. It was done in the same color scheme as the mural but rather than looking futuristic it looked like a robot from a fifties sci-fi film. It was retro but still cool. And it was life-size, standing within an inch of my own height.

As I walked around the room I could tell which were Hayden’s by the style of each picture. They all had the same vibe as the robot which heralded back to the fifties, even the space ship.

“So whose idea was this anyway?” I came back to the center of the room and took a seat on the floor.

Caleb came and sat beside me. “I don’t know that it was anyone’s in particular. We used to come up here for parties all the time because we could be as loud as we wanted out here. I guess one night I started carving faces and after that we all just gradually added more pieces.” He leaned back on his elbows with his legs stretched out in front of him.

“I never would have guessed your group was so talented.” It was hard to hide the genuine surprise of this statement.

Caleb looked over at me. “What? Did you think we were all rejects with no future?”

I could hear the slight hurt in his voice. “That’s not what I meant. I mean sure I thought some of you were rejects with no future but I thought it was by choice.”

Caleb’s eyes hardened. I’d made it worse instead of better.

I tried to backtrack. “No, I mean, not you.” I stuttered trying to figure out what I really did mean. I knew what I’d said was true. I had thought they were all losers with Hayden as their king. I didn’t think Hayden had a future as a stunt double or whatever his plan was and I assumed his friends had equally dead-end goals. I took a breath and tried again as Caleb got up and dusted off his jeans. “Okay, the truth is that I really thought you guys were rejects but I’ve changed my mind,” I pleaded. “You changed my mind by showing me pieces of who Hayden really was. And about you and everybody.” I started rambling not sure where I was going with all this but wanting to be honest. “Well not everybody. I haven’t changed my mind about Ally. Or Seth. But definitely about you and Hayden.”

Caleb actually laughed and I jumped up from the ground.

“Forgive me?” I held my arms out.

“I guess so.” He stepped between my outstretched arms and enveloped me in a hug. That hadn’t been what I was going for and I awkwardly closed my arms around his back. But it actually felt kind of nice and comforting. And then I realized I hadn’t been hugged in such a long time and I missed it. I think I held on a little too long as Caleb

began to pull away. I let my arms drop back to my sides and I felt like something was suddenly missing I hadn't known I'd lost.

We went back a few more times over the next week and the more I studied the paintings the easier it became to tell who had done what. I could see the patterns in technique and subject. Ally did mostly poetry and quotes, scattered haphazardly around the room and usually pertaining to a painting near it. Caleb, of course, did all the carvings but he admitted to doing the entire ceiling. Like his own Sistine chapel, he painted a blue sky with clouds but instead of filling it with angels and cherubs he did caricatures of Lord of the Rings characters. It was funny but beautiful.

I could even recognize Seth's little additions. They were much more elementary compared to everything else and usually consisted of stick figures. Caleb said this was because he was much more of a live action artist.

"You should, like, open this to the public or something," I commented one day. It was another bright July day like the first time he brought me here but this time I brought a twenty ounce soda and a bag of chips.

"No one would pay to see this," Caleb said as he stole one of my chips.

"You don't have to make them pay if you don't want to but I think people would like to see it. You all did amazing work."

Caleb just shrugged and ate another chip.

"Have you shown your parents or anyone else?"

"Nope. You're the only one outside of our reject group that's seen it."

Caleb liked to throw in these digs ever since that almost ill-fated conversation. And every time he did I was reminded of the innocent but comforting hug he'd given me.

But I wasn't used to hugging people so I didn't even know how to go about it again. It seemed like a silly thing to hope for but I couldn't stop thinking about it. Especially since I wasn't talking to Stacey. I hadn't even seen Tiara in a while. Caleb had become my only real source of human contact and I felt a slight addiction to his presence.

It was hard to rely on someone for something so mundane but I couldn't help it.

Chapter Fifteen

After work I walked around the mall, hoping I might see Stacey at her store. I wasn't quite sure if I wanted to talk to her yet but I felt weird not seeing her for so long. She wasn't there. I stood outside for a minute feeling a bit dejected. I was really starting to miss her and I knew it wouldn't be long till we were going our separate ways anyway. I wasn't ready to let go now. I looked around the mostly empty mall, feeling like a lost child, unsure where to go.

I had just decided to go home when I spotted the signature ponytail of Ally: half-blonde, half-whatever-color-she-could-find. Last I saw her, the bottom half of her hair had been a dark red but now it just looked washed out, which was not like her at all. It seemed every month there had been a new color, black, green, and purple, but always blonde on top. I didn't think she saw me and after spending time up in Caleb's barn I thought I might go see how she was. Maybe I had misunderstood her like I misunderstood Hayden.

I followed her into a department store as she wound her way through the racks of clothes. For a girl who barely came up to my shoulders she sure did walk fast as she passed over the junior's department as well as the women's clothes. I jogged to catch up to her in case she was just leaving and tapped on her shoulder. When she turned around she opened her mouth to say something but no sound came out. She instinctually put her hands to her stomach and backed away. And that's when I saw, she wasn't as rail-thin as the last time I'd seen her at graduation. My own shock only deepened when I realized we were standing in the maternity section, and not by accident.

Neither of us spoke for a moment as the surprise sunk in. Ally looked like she wanted to back away and run. I guess because I could feel my face working itself from surprise into anger. Ally was very pregnant.

My hands started to go numb and I blurted out the first thing that came to mind, “That didn’t take long.”

Ally’s face flushed crimson but she took a step forward. “For your information, it’s Hayden’s.”

I should have been more surprised but my brain just couldn’t accept it as the truth. Hayden was gone and all he’d left behind was a mess, not a baby. “Whatever. We all know you’re such a slut.” I didn’t know what possessed me to say these things. I had come over to reconcile with her but instead these awful things just poured from my mouth. “I don’t know what Hayden ever saw in you.”

Ally’s pale eyebrows seemed to reach towards her hairline. She probably wasn’t used to being talked to like this, especially by me. We were both used to me just taking things with my mouth shut, not even trying to defend myself. But this time I was the one on the attack and Ally was on the defensive. “What would you know about Hayden? He said you two barely said one word to each other.”

“You can believe whatever you want,” I said as I felt my fists clench as my arms regained their use, “but I know that’s not Hayden’s.” I jabbed a finger in the direction of Ally’s protruding stomach, unable to comprehend a new life growing in there.

“Well your parents don’t seem to have a problem believing me. In fact, your mom was practically gushing over the baby.”

I felt like she had slapped me. I stupidly raised my hand to my cheek just to make sure she hadn't because my head seemed to pulse with the pain of her words. My parents? They knew about this and decided not to include me? I knew the family was fractured but this was unfathomable to leave me out of. It couldn't be true...it just couldn't be.

Ally's smug grin only incensed and hurt me more. We both knew she had got the best of me. And that dig about my dating life didn't go entirely unnoticed either. She always knew just how to cut somebody down and she'd been working on me since elementary school. I didn't even say another word to her. What could I say? All I could do was race home and beg my parents to deny this news.

But of course, when I got home, the house was completely empty. I thought about calling them but I was too angry. I needed to see their faces when they admitted to leaving me out. I began pacing the house. First I took a few turns around the living room couch, all the while biting nervously at the skin around my fingernails. Then my circle grew to include the kitchen where I would peek through the window over the sink on every turn. Finally, I started walking through the hallway towards our bedrooms and each time I would pause at Hayden's closed door before finally stopping in front of it entirely.

I hadn't paid much attention to his door in the recent weeks and expected to see some sign of decay to the posters and pictures plastered across the surface. There was no yellowing of the paper, the corners weren't curling up. It seemed to be perfectly preserved in time like I could just open the door and find Hayden lounging on his bed with his headphones on flipping through magazines.

So I turned the doorknob and let the door swing open.

I didn't really expect him to be in there. I stepped inside for the first time, in I don't know how long. But I could barely comprehend that because I was still mad – at Hayden, at Ally, at my parents, even at Stacey.

Just looking at all his stupid Indie band posters and Star Wars figurines started my blood boiling. His bed, still as haphazard as he left it that last morning; some leftover food growing mold; stacks of magazines and books; and the piles of clothes all made me even more mad like it was one big joke on me. His clothes were everywhere and filled the room with the reek of his sweat still.

It felt like the last few months were starting to bubble up to the surface finally and I had no control over my emotions I had worked so hard to keep pushed down. I started to wonder if this was what Caleb had meant the night he took me to the old farmhouse when he talked about wanting to release tension. It felt like I was losing control.

And then I snapped.

I grabbed the corner of the nearest poster and tore it from the wall, leaving behind the other three corners still taped up. It felt good so I reached for another, feeling the twist of a smile at the satisfying sound of ripping paper.

Once I started I couldn't stop. I went through the posters one at a time until they were sufficiently mangled; then I started knocking things off the shelves. I started with the Star Wars figurines and pelted them around the room, not caring where they landed. I hadn't thrown such a tantrum since I was seven. I grabbed books and threw them across the room, followed by his organized CD collection. I even began tearing the sheets and coverings from the bed.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing?”

My mom stood in the open doorway, her face a pale, ashy grey. She looked like I had just desecrated a holy place, and her mind I probably had. I tried not to look at the destruction I had made in my blind fury as I tossed a random CD case back onto the bed. But I wasn’t ready to regret this.

She stepped into the room like she was walking through the final destruction of the world. “How could you?” It came out small, barely a whisper, but I could see the anger burning in her eyes like it was burning in mine.

“No, how could he, Mom?” I yelled. I didn’t want to do this but I felt too full that it all just spilled out. Everything I’d held back came pouring from my mouth. “He did this, Mom. Not me.”

She opened her mouth to say something. I didn’t want to hear it. “No, Mom. He did this to himself and he did this to us. I didn’t do anything wrong yet you treat me like it’s all my fault. You won’t look at me, you don’t talk to me. And even worse, you and Dad didn’t tell me that Ally was pregnant.” I clenched my fists so tight I was afraid my nails might break the skin of my palms.

“Ally. That’s no excuse. How could you destroy his stuff like this? It’s all I have left of him.” Her voice had increased in pitch until it broke on the last word.

“But you have me still. I’m right here, Mom!” I spread my arms out wide, as if my taking up more space would really make her see me. Why couldn’t she see that I did need her? I didn’t know until now, but she should’ve. She was the parent here.

“Hayden’s gone and he’s never coming back and it’s nobody’s fault but his!” I grabbed the nearest object and threw it at the wall in frustration.

But with that one action my mom snapped too. I didn't even see it coming as her hand whipped out like a flash and cracked across my cheek. My fists unclenched and I stood stock still as the sting intensified. My mother had never hit me before in my entire life.

My mom brought her hands up to cover her mouth and she started shaking her head. "I'm so sorry, Bri. I didn't mean to do it." She kept repeating herself but I didn't hear any of it. I strode towards the door but she reached out and grabbed my wrist, causing me to turn back. "Wait, I'm sorry."

I didn't know what to say to her but I yanked my wrist free and strode out the door. My head and emotions felt just as trashed as Hayden's room. I planned on just leaving but I detoured through the kitchen. My parents never locked up their alcohol and with my dad's increased drinking, he didn't even bother to put it in the cabinets. So I grabbed the two bottles sitting on the counter, went to my car and drove away.

My first instinct was to go to Stacey. Before she would've let me stay the night and help me thoroughly abuse Ally. I knew there was a good chance if I went to her in this state she would still let me in but I was still upset and Stacey was still on my list. I went to the only other person who might take me in.

I hadn't actually seen Caleb's apartment before but I knew he lived in a garage apartment in a neighborhood not far from mine. I drove down the street I remembered him mentioning until I saw his truck parked on the curb. It was starting to get dark and I could see lights on in the house as I walked up the driveway. The staircase went along one side and I tried to hide the bottles as I quietly made my way to Caleb's door. I looked around to make sure there was nobody else when I knocked on the door.

It didn't take long for Caleb to appear on the other side. He ran his hand through his ruffled hair. "Bri? What are you doing here?"

I held up the bottles and they clanked together. "Want to make some bad decisions?"

Caleb stepped out of the way and I went inside.

I'd never been hit by a car before but I imagined it didn't feel too much worse than I did when I woke up the next morning. I could feel the sunlight burning through my closed eyelids, already intensifying my headache. My tongue had a weird fuzzy feeling like it had been stuck to the roof of my mouth all night. I finally opened my eyes and realized I was much closer to the ground than my bed normally was. I was laying on my stomach and lifted up onto my elbows to look around the room. I was on a mattress without a bedframe, wrapped up in a plain blue comforter that smelled of dude and realized I was in Caleb's bed.

The night before seemed a little blurry around the edges like I couldn't quite remember exactly what happened. I started to lift the covers to get out of bed but quickly tightened them back around me when I realized my pants were gone. I sat up straight, drawing the comforter closer as I looked around. The apartment was only two rooms and Caleb wasn't in the main part. I looked to my left and he was standing in the doorway to the bathroom, leaning against the frame brushing his teeth.

“Good morning, Sunshine,” he said through the foam of toothpaste. He wasn’t wearing a shirt, only some grey flannel sleep pants and I stared at his chest before I answered.

“What happened last night? And where are my pants?” All I could think about was that I’d made the dumbest decision of my life and slept with Caleb without remembering anything about it. That wasn’t how I wanted my first time to go. I didn’t want to be drunk and throwing myself at whoever was nearest. I always wanted it to be romantic with someone I loved. How could I let something like this happen? How could I let my emotions get so out of control?

He ducked back into the bathroom and I could hear him spit followed by the running faucet. He came back in drying his hands on a towel. “Calm down. Nothing happened. Your pants are right there next to the bed.”

I looked to the right of the bed and snatched them up from the ground. I wiggled back under the covers and quickly pulled them back on. “How did they come off?” I climbed up from the bed and joined Caleb in his kitchen alcove. He was pouring himself a cup of coffee and then made me one too.

“You took them off yourself. And being the gentleman that I am, I slept on the couch.” He nodded towards the sofa where a throw blanket and pillow were piled at one end.

But I had to make sure. “So we didn’t have sex?”

Caleb laughed which I took as a no. Well that made me feel a lot better. I must have looked a little put out because Caleb apologized.

We sat on the couch, coffee cups in hand, and I felt awkward. I apparently didn't remember much but Caleb seemed to. I asked him what happened last night and he started laughing again.

"I'm sorry," he said as he tried to keep his coffee from spilling, "but I wish you could remember because it was one of the best nights of my life."

I couldn't tell if I should be embarrassed or flattered so I settled on being confused. I wished I could remember the night too.

"I remember coming over here with a couple bottles of liquor. I don't even know what they were"

"Bourbon and vodka. They weren't cheap either. I bet your dad is going to be so pissed."

I glared at Caleb. "You're not making me feel any better. Anyway, I remember you trying to talk me out of drinking. You said it wouldn't make me feel better but I wanted to anyway. We played quarters for a while but after that it gets fuzzy. I can remember snatches of things like—" Oh, no. Bits were starting to float to the surface. I could sort of remember dancing on the coffee table before falling off, crying about Stacey, and calling Ally every foul word I could think of.

Caleb laughed again but didn't say anything else as my trickle of memories dripped in. He got up to put his cup in the sink and stretched in the process and I couldn't help but watch. He caught me staring so I quickly said, "God, can't you put a shirt on or something."

He grinned like he knew something I didn't. "Maybe if you gave my shirt back I would."

I looked down and sure enough I was wearing one of his shirts. It was a band t-shirt I recognized from one of the posters on Hayden's wall that I had ripped to shreds.

"Okay, but I know you own more than one, so where is mine then?"

"It's in the bathroom."

I went to the bathroom as he grabbed a shirt from the floor. I saw him sniff it first before he shrugged and put it on anyway. I closed the door as I quickly changed from his to mine. I dreaded hearing what happened the rest of the night, afraid at some point I had gotten naked or something.

"You ready for the rest of the tale?" he asked as we sat back on the couch. I kept a safe distance from him though he turned sideways to watch me. "Or would you rather go get something to eat and soak up all that alcohol?"

"Let's just get this over with. Tell me how much of a fool I was." I was dreading what he might say if my memories were any indication.

Caleb took a deep breath and began telling me about my first (and hopefully last) drunken night. It had started innocent enough with a few shots here and there. He tried to get me to talk about what had prompted my need for a wild night but I refused to tell him. He tried to pry it out over the course of the night, hoping the drunker I was, the more willing I'd be to talk but I always said he would just be disappointed in me.

We went through the bourbon first which I remembered burning a little until I began to feel numb. Then I could barely tell the difference between it and water. That bottle was gone before ten so we started on the vodka and then my shirt came off. Caleb said I was complaining about it being too hot when I removed it. He gave me one of his

shirts and told me It would cool me down much better than my own and in my drunken state I believed him.

Caleb paused a moment in the story. “You know, it’s kind of funny when you and Hayden get drunk.”

“Why’s that?”

“I thought you would get all moody and depressed when you were drunk but you get kind of crazy. It’s like you keep that side of you locked up so tight that as soon as the walls are down it just breaks free. Hayden’s the opposite. He gets pensive when he’s drunk but he’s the wild one all the time. It’s just weird.”

It was weird that we were opposites even in our uninhibited states. Maybe he kept his side that was like me suppressed all the time too. “I didn’t know Hayden got drunk.”

Caleb reached over and patted my knee and said very condescendingly, “You’re so naïve. It’s cute.”

I shoved his hand away and told him to just keep going.

He talked about when I started dancing all over the apartment even when there wasn’t music on. I had told him all of the names I had picked out for any stars I discovered when I became a successful astronomer. “Then you started saying that Hayden wasn’t all that good of an artist and you had been lying before at the barn. But I could tell you were just saying that so I assume the reason you came over here had something to do with him but you still wouldn’t tell me.”

I dropped my face into my hands, not sure how much more I could listen to. Part of me was glad that Caleb was the only one to experience me in this state but the other

part of me was so embarrassed that he saw it at all. I felt like any romantic feelings he might have felt towards me were gone out the window. There was no way I could recover from this night.

But Caleb kept going, the night wasn't over yet. "Well, you kept wanting to go places. You said you'd try rock-climbing again or we could go car-surfing but I kept telling you no. I didn't want you to leave. Then you proposed getting matching tattoos and that's when the pants came off."

I couldn't even look at him anymore. I pulled my knees up to further hide my disgrace.

"You said you either wanted the sign for Gemini or a portrait of Galileo tattooed on your butt."

I could tell he was trying to hold in the fit of laughter waiting to escape. And I just wanted to crawl in a hole and hide forever. "Is that all?" I could barely get the words out but I wanted to run away as quickly as possible.

Caleb hesitated and I peeked at him through my fingers. He was watching me intently before he went on. "Not exactly. You started to tire out soon after the tattoo business so I tried to put you to bed."

He stopped talking again and I dropped my hands back to my lap, thinking he was done. But he wasn't quite through. "When I laid you down you kept your arms locked around my neck and said you were so happy to have me. And then you kissed me before you passed out."

The silence went on forever and I tried not to move. Maybe if I didn't move or say anything he would forget I was there. But with each passing second my stomach

seemed to fill more and more with lead, until, “I think I’m going to be sick.” I raced to the bathroom and proceeded to throw up everything from the night before.

Chapter Sixteen

I was hunched over the toilet bowl, puking my guts out for a while. When the spasms slowed, Caleb walked me back to his bed and had me lie down. I couldn't look at him but I gratefully snuggled under the covers to hide from everything. I slept for a while more, only wakened occasionally by more dry-heaving. Any time Caleb asked me how I was doing I would shrug my shoulders and hide deeper under the covers.

I didn't make an appearance until a knock at the door signaled the arrival of some pizza. I nibbled at the pizza at first, making sure it went down all right before I began to devour it. I used stuffing my mouth full of gooey pizza as an excuse to still not talk to Caleb and he didn't press it until my phone started ringing. I looked at the caller ID which said HOME and I tossed it into a chair away from me.

It started ringing again a minute later but I ignored it. Caleb leaned over to read the screen. "It's your mom." But I was intent on my pizza.

Another minute later and it rang again. "Now it's your dad," he said as he leaned over to grab the phone from the cushion. "Do you want to talk to him?"

"I'm good." I put my plate in the sink and then crawled back into bed. "What could I say to them? How could I explain my behavior yesterday? I couldn't believe I had destroyed Hayden's room like that. My mom was never going to forgive me but I wasn't too sorry anyway. I couldn't face anyone, not my mom, not my dad, not Caleb. I was only disappointed in myself. I had lost control and I didn't like it.

My phone rang again but this time Caleb answered. He was trying to talk quietly but with just one small room I could easily hear his end of the conversation. "Hey, Mrs. Fairchild. It' Caleb....Yeah, Hayden's friend. I just wanted to let you know that

Brianna's here with me and she's okay." There was a long pause with some mmhmm-ing. "Okay, I'll let her know....Yeah, anytime. Okay, bye."

I was hiding under the comforter still when Caleb came over and sat on the bed. I felt him fluff a pillow to lean against the wall. He stretched out his legs on top of the comforter and just waited for me to resurface. I thought maybe if I ignored him he would go away but he didn't. His patience was longer than mine because I lifted my arms up and then flopped them down on top of the comforter with a huff of air.

"That was your mom on the phone." He looked over from the magazine he was reading.

"And?" I wanted to not care.

"She was just worried about you since you've been gone all night and day." He was still staring at me and it felt like he could totally read me. "What happened?"

I knew he would ask again but I had resolved to tell him already. I had already made a complete fool of myself, how much worse could it get? "I destroyed Hayden's room." There, it was out. I didn't feel any better but it was out there.

"You destroyed his room?" He sounded more awed than angry.

"I don't know what came over me. I was just so angry when I saw Ally and found out my parents were hiding her pregnancy and I saw his room and flipped out. It's a complete mess."

"Whoa, hold on." Caleb sat up more straight and crossed his legs so he could face me. "Ally's pregnant?"

"You didn't know? I thought you two were friends."

“No. We only hung out because she was with Hayden. She got on my nerves most of the time but he was crazy about her.”

That was news to me. They seemed so cozy at the funeral that I just assumed they were friends. So I explained to him about running into her at the mall with all the yelling and then about going home and arguing with my mom. He didn't even seem bothered by my destruction of Hayden's room. He was stuck on Ally's pregnancy.

“So you're sure she's pregnant? And that it's Hayden's?”

“That's what she said.”

“I can't believe it. Hayden's having a baby.” He had this far-off look to him.

“Actually, Ally's having a baby,” I said under my breath.

“Well, you can stay here as long you need to.” He put his hand on my leg. “But you'll have to go home eventually or you'll have to wear my clothes.”

I finally felt the pressure release from my chest. He wasn't angry at me. He didn't seem disappointed, and he shared in my shock at Ally's pregnancy. I didn't realize just how much his opinion meant to me. I couldn't help myself as I turned to my side and wrapped an arm around his waist.

I stayed over at his apartment for another day, trying to delay the inevitable. He had to go to work so I just pattered around the one room and resisted the urge to look through all his belongings. I did go through his CDs which resembled Hayden's collection. He had a more meager selection of books, though I found a large stack of Maxims.

I was pretty amazed at his independence. We had just graduated and he was already out supporting himself. I hadn't really thought about how he must cook for

himself and do his own laundry. He didn't have internet or a TV but that didn't seem so bad. I thought it might be lonely but I'm sure this arrangement couldn't be too much worse than my living situation. I felt like I lived alone most days but my fridge magically refilled itself while Caleb had to go out and buy his own groceries.

When Caleb came home he tossed his keys on the limited counter space in the kitchen before going to the bathroom to change and I thought I could get used to this. I would be happy waiting on him to come home. It was weird that in the midst of my mini-crisis I would feel like this; that I would almost long to be in a relationship and have that comfort.

He came back out in a clean t-shirt and some khaki shorts. "Did you eat?"

"Yeah, I made a sandwich for lunch."

"Good." He started rummaging in the fridge before pulling out an apple.

"What are you going to do when the summer's over?" I asked, feeling bad for never asking him about it before.

"What do you mean?" He sat on the couch, stretched his legs out before him and sank into the cushions.

I sat down at the other end, tucking my feet underneath me. I was wearing one of his shirts and a pair of athletic shorts, since my clothes were dirty. "Like, I'm going to college in August. What are your plans?"

His eyebrows pinched together. "I'm staying right here."

"Oh."

"What? I like what I'm doing and I never really planned to go to college before."

“Oh.” I didn’t know what else to say. My whole life had revolved around my plans for college and it was always surprising to me when other people weren’t the same way.

Caleb tossed his apple core across the room and made it into the sink with a metallic thud. “Not everyone goes to college,” he said reading my thoughts.

“I know. I just thought maybe you had other plans or something.”

“Why do you want to know where I’ll be next year?” He cocked an eyebrow at me.

“Just wondering.” Was my pulse really quickening? I didn’t know how to handle this. Wasn’t I just getting mad at myself for letting my emotions overwhelm me? “I think I’m going to go home tomorrow.”

“Okay. That’s probably for the best. Your mom has called me a couple times today to check on you again but I told her you’d be home soon. She’s really worried.”

“She’s just worried about how she’s going to put Hayden’s room back together.” My anger wasn’t completely gone apparently. I thought my shame had covered it up but it was still there and still strong. “How could they not tell me about Ally? It’s like I don’t exist anymore.”

“Maybe they were trying to figure out how they were going to handle it before telling you.” What a diplomat.

“That’s not an excuse. They’re excluding me from everything. I didn’t even get to help pick out a tombstone or anything. Just because I wasn’t close to Hayden doesn’t make him any less my brother.”

Caleb held his hands up like he was surrendering. “I know. I’m just trying to help.”

I knew he was but I felt like I might never forgive my parents for excluding me from something so important and though I didn’t want to, I had to go home the following morning.

When I pulled in the driveway I half expected them to both be at work but I could see both cars sitting in the garage. Rather than go through the front door like I normally did, I went through the garage, hoping the small laundry room might give me a little more time before I had to face my parents.

The door leading from the laundry room to the kitchen was cracked open and I crept towards it to see if I could hear them talking. Maybe they hadn’t heard me pull in or come through the garage door.

“I should go out there,” I heard my mom say, followed by the soft thud of her shoes on the floor.

“She’ll be in in a minute,” my dad replied. “Just give her a chance to come in on her own.”

“We’ve should have told her about Ally sooner.”

“We’ve been busy and it seems like she’s never home.” Well that sounded familiar.

I eased the door open and saw my mom sit back down on the sofa though she stayed perched at the edge, ready to spring as soon as I walked in. My dad was leaning

back in his usual chair and clicking through channels with the remote though from my hiding spot I could clearly see how tense his jaw. This wasn't going to be fun.

I just had to go in. I couldn't delay it any longer but mostly I didn't want to get caught peeking in on them like a coward so I stood up straight and eased the door open, hoping it didn't make a noise to buy myself a couple more seconds.

No such luck. It creaked immediately and their heads whipped around. And just as expected my mom jumped straight up from the couch and almost ran towards me. She had her arms outstretched like she wanted to hug me and I could read some amount of relief in her eyes. But there was also hesitation, which caused her to pull up short. It was a weird feeling to be standing in the kitchen, knowing my mom didn't want to or couldn't hug me. I suddenly felt much older than barely eighteen.

Dad was much slower to the kitchen and he stood next to my mom who felt miles away. He put a hand on the counter and looked like he might start to yell at me. Mom had her hands clenched together and resting below her chin as if at any moment they might reach out on their own and embrace me. For my part, I stood awkwardly with my right hand still clutching the door knob. And we all waited for somebody else to break the silence.

I was reminded of the moment when I saw Hayden leap from the school roof towards the tree, when all the sound seemed to be muted during the brief seconds before his fatal fall. Only now, it was more like we were holding our breaths with only the hum of the refrigerator to signal that time still ticked on.

Finally, my dad broke the silence. "Where have you been?"

I expected a “young lady” to be tacked onto the question and replied as if it had. “You know where I’ve been. I’ve been at Caleb’s.”

“And his parents were okay with that? Why didn’t they call us?”

I wondered if parents had a secret phone book with a calling tree attached in case of emergencies. “Caleb lives by himself and he was okay with it.” I knew how disrespectful I sounded. I sounded as if the past eighteen years of their love and support meant nothing to me. But I couldn’t keep the disdain out of my voice.

But my dad started to look darker than ever as he narrowed his gaze at me. “You mean you stayed with a boy for two straight nights without supervision?” I could tell he didn’t want to believe it.

“Well considering your son apparently fathered a child, I’d say you have bigger things to deal with.” It was one of those moments where you wished you could just take a deep breath and suck all those words back in. But instead, they hung in the air. While I expected a tirade from my dad, he deflated right before me. All the while my mom stood clenching her hands tight, darting her eyes between the two of us. I took their silence as an opportunity. I pointed a trembling finger at them. “You should’ve told me about Ally. I shouldn’t have had to run into her at the mall to find out she’s pregnant.” My voice was rising in anger and it felt good to let it out. Better even than wrecking Hayden’s stuff.

Finally my mom spoke in the smallest voice I’d ever heard her use. “We were still trying to process the news ourselves. We didn’t know how to tell you.”

I felt a twinge of annoyance as I heard the echo of Caleb’s words. He must’ve talked more with my parents than he let on. “That doesn’t change anything. You’ve

been leaving me out of everything and this is huge news. What if the baby's not even Hayden's? What then?"

They exchanged glances but I couldn't read their expression. My mom finally unwound her hands and dropped them at her side. Without a word she went and sat on the couch, sinking heavily into the cushions. My dad followed suit but took his place in his chair. I didn't know what to do. My initial urge was to storm out in anger but then we'd have to do this all over again when I came back. Should I stay put or follow them into the living room? Should I stand all defiant like in front of them, demanding answers, or should I sit down and wait for them to explain?

I felt another urge to just go lock myself in my bedroom like I used to do when I was younger and pretend that none of this was happening. But instead I went with the more acquiescent choice and took a place on the loveseat so I could easily see both of them.

The silence was killing me. I just wanted to scream or at the very least, turn on the TV so there was some kind of noise. But I waited. I'd said what I needed to say and now I just wanted answers, anything.

I was surprised when my mom spoke up first. She sounded so tiny and fragile. "We're assuming the baby is Hayden's. We're going to do a paternity test once the baby is here."

"Why don't you just do it now and get it over with?"

"It's too invasive. She could lose the baby."

"So?"

I might as well have slapped her she looked so shocked at my flippant attitude towards what could possibly be Hayden's baby. Her mouth worked as she tried to find the words but I wouldn't apologize. This was Ally's problem. We had enough to deal with without this added burden and I didn't understand why my mom was so worked up over it. What if she got so attached now and then, months from now, the paternity test came back negative? Wouldn't it feel ten times worse?

"What is your problem?"

My head snapped to look at my dad. He was leaned forward with his elbows on his knees, his eyes hard. "My problem? My problem is that you're both getting so worked up over this baby. I don't even think it's Hayden's. Stacey said they broke up every other week and she always had someone to tide her over until they made up again. What makes you so sure it's his?"

My mom answered, "What if it is his, though? What if we miss out on this?"

And then I saw it. As my mom inched forward on the couch and her hands continued to twist together with anxiety, I could see the desperation in her eyes. She was desperate for anything to cling to Hayden with, anything to tether him to this world.

And I wasn't good enough. I jumped from my seat. "And what if it's not Hayden's? What will you do then? What will you cling to?" I was breathing so heavily like I'd just run a marathon. "He's not coming back!"

My mom began to sob and dropped her face into her hands. My dad stood up and looked more terrifying than ever. He jabbed a finger in the air at me. "You're grounded."

I gave a hollow chuckle. "I'm eighteen. You can't ground me."

He looked furious and stuttered before blurting out, “Fine, then just go to your room.”

“Gladly. But it’s only because I have to get ready for work.”

I was lying; I didn’t actually know when I was supposed to work because I had never called. But I just couldn’t leave without putting in the last word. As I turned to go, I saw my dad kneel on the floor and grasp my mom hands in his own. They both leaned forward till their foreheads were touching and I felt even worse than before. They were experiencing an intimate moment that I wasn’t a part of (I was actually the cause of it). I wanted to cry so I ran to my room to compose myself.

It was better this way, I convinced myself. I was fine on my own. If they wanted to be stupid and trusting towards Ally, then I’d let them. But I wasn’t going to be pulled in on it. I didn’t need them. I didn’t need Hayden. I didn’t need Stacey (though she clearly didn’t need me either). I didn’t need anyone but myself.

I got dressed quickly, the threat of tears long gone, and went to work. I was hoping I was scheduled to work because I really needed the distraction. I walked through the front entrance and waved at Ruby, a girl from another high school who I worked with occasionally. She poked her head through the little window of the door to the ticket booth. “Brad wants to see you upstairs.”

She looked like she might want to say something else but ducked back out of sight. So I made my way up the tight spiral staircase to the upper level of the movie theater. The manager’s office was directly in front of the staircase landing and the projection area was off to the right. I could see Brad sitting at his desk so I rapped my

knuckles on the opened door and walked in. “Hey, Ruby said you wanted to see me.” I sat down as Brad shuffled some papers into place.

“Listen, Brianna,” he began as he looked up and focused on a spot over my right ear. This couldn’t be good. He cleared his throat. “Have you clocked in yet?”

“No.”

He started nodding his head and still refused to meet my eyes. “That’s good because I’m going to have to let you go.”

“What? Why?”

“If you had only called to say you weren’t coming in, it’d be a different story but you didn’t show up for two days in a row.” He shuffled more papers. “It’s company policy to terminate after two no call – no shows.”

He finally met my eyes and the pity didn’t help.

“Isn’t there anything I can do?”

He just shook his head. I waited another moment to see if he’d say anything else but he kept his eyes trained on the papers on the desk so I got up to leave.

When I reached the door he cleared his throat again and I wanted to shout at him to see if he needed a cough drop. But instead I just turned around, trying to look as annoyed as possible. He said, “Um, could you leave your vest downstairs?”

“Sure.”

“And your bow-tie too.”

I tried to be dramatic and rip the tie from around my neck but it was the cheap kind that hooked in the back and it only managed to hurt me. I finally got it unhooked on my way downstairs where I stripped off my vest and threw in a pile on the floor. As I

walked out the front of the theater Ruby called to me, asking what happened but I just ignored her. She'd find out soon enough. There weren't many workers at the theater but they all loved to gossip, so telling the truth would only ruin their fun.

I sat out in the mall parking lot in my car with my head resting against the steering wheel. I didn't want to go home again and see my parents. I wouldn't be surprised if they hated me. I couldn't go to Stacey and I was sure Caleb needed some alone time after I'd spent two days invading his space.

So I just sat there and let reality sink in. I'd been fired from my first job. It was like getting a big, fat, red F on homework. I'd failed. It was becoming my new norm and I didn't like it.

Chapter Seventeen

I finally went home but didn't see my parents the rest of the night or the next day. I stayed locked in my room. I heard them getting ready in the morning and their soft footsteps as they passed back and forth in front of my door. A small part of me hoped one of them might knock on the door, might offer the olive branch to me. I felt like I couldn't bridge the huge chasm I'd created and hoped they might. But they didn't.

When I knew they were gone, I finally crept out of my room and went to the kitchen for some breakfast. As I ate my bowl of cereal I began to feel the weight of the last few days. I no longer had a job which meant I no longer had anywhere I had to go. What was I going to do with all my time? There was still almost a whole month until I left for college. There wasn't really enough time to get a new job and I just resolved to find a job once I started school. I tried watching TV but nothing caught my interest. I tried getting on the computer but there was nothing I wanted to search for and I'd already had my fill of Hayden's videos.

I paced restlessly in the familiar pattern from the day I rampaged around Hayden's room and was again drawn to his door. My mom had closed it again but I had no hesitation about entering his room anymore. I didn't even feel that invisible barrier like I was invading his space because it no longer looked like his room. I could see around his bed where my mom had attempted to straighten things back up but the destruction was too much for the neat stack of CDs she'd made. It almost looked like a wild animal had been released in the room. I felt a little uneasy because the animal had been me.

My intentions this time were much more subdued. I wanted to find something tangible to explain what was going on. Maybe a note that confirmed my doubts about Ally.

So I began searching. It was slow going because I'd made such a mess that I had to dig through everything. I started in the closet because that's where I typically hid things. I pulled down shoe boxes full of baseball cards he'd collected when he was young and dug through the clutter of dirty laundry on the floor around his shoe collection. Buried in the corner I found another box, but this one was full of Polaroid pictures and I wondered who still owned that kind of camera.

They were all from high school and featured Hayden's small group of friends. I recognized Caleb's barn in the background in many of the pictures through various stages of being graffiti-ed. I slowly flipped through the pictures and felt a tug deep in my stomach every time I saw Hayden's face. Half of the time Ally was in the picture with him and they were always laughing and smiling. All the other pictures of Hayden were motion shots. He only ever stood still with Ally.

There were pictures of Hayden being supported by his friends while he painted up high on the barn walls. I started laughing because they looked like reject cheerleaders. And in the next shot they were all sprawled out on the ground with spilled paint but they were still laughing and having a good time. More pictures showed the guys stripped down to the waist and practicing some kind of boxing or martial arts fighting. They were still laughing through the streaks of blood.

Despite their bizarre activities, they all looked so happy. And none more so than Hayden who never looked like he'd rather be elsewhere or with other people, like he

never thought about anything going wrong or that tomorrow might never come. I stared at the last picture in the box, one where his head was thrown back, mid-laugh, while he clapped his hand on Caleb's back. I couldn't remember a time I was that happy. I mean, I'd had some good times and great laughs with Stacey but had never been so consumed as Hayden seemed to be. I didn't even have a group of friends like he had. I had a couple friends other than Stacey but not like his group of friends.

Then I heard, across the silence of the house, the garage door lifting. I shoved the box of pictures into the back of the closet, keeping the last picture of Hayden and Caleb. I slipped out of Hayden's room and back into my own. I stowed the picture under a stack of books next to my bed as I heard the laundry room door close and keys clatter onto the counter.

It was still early afternoon and I wondered why someone would be home already but I didn't want to stick around. I grabbed my purse and my keys and headed for the front door, hoping whoever it was was still in the kitchen. But as I was about to turn the corner into the foyer I heard my dad call out, "Brianna, is that you?"

I paused, still facing the door, "Yeah, I'm going out."

He walked around from the refrigerator and popped the tab on a beer. "I thought I grounded you. Or are you going to work?"

I turned around feeling antsy, ready to get out of the house. "I was fired yesterday. I'm just going out."

He looked like he might protest but I turned on my heel and said over my shoulder, "I'll be back tonight." I didn't want to see him open another beer before three o'clock so without a purpose I jumped in my car and began to drive.

The more I sat out in the parking lot in front of the rock climbing place, the more I wondered what I was doing with myself. I had spent eighteen years building my life with all of my quirks and beliefs, thinking this was the only way to live and everyone else had it wrong. I was good at school and well on my way to a fulfilling career after college. I hadn't thought it was important to build strong bonds with people other than Stacey because I knew I'd never see any of them again once we all went to college. I also hadn't thought the distraction from schoolwork would be worth it.

So what did I have to show for all of my hard work? I had no friends left, no brother, and no memories. I was left with the realization that Hayden had lived a better life than me, had better friends, and would be remembered.

I had to go in. I had to do something other than study calculus or write application essays. I had to live.

I steeled my nerves as I went up to the counter inside and asked to climb.

"Do you have a partner?" the girl behind the counter asked as she looked towards the door as if someone might follow me in.

"No." I had just assumed I could do this on my own. I wanted to believe I didn't need Stacey or Caleb to make all my decisions for me

"Okey-dokey." She typed into her computer for a minute. "If you'll just have a seat over there and I'll see who's available."

I sat down on a hard plastic bench and my leg instantly began to bounce. I could still get out of this. I mean, who did I have to prove anything to but myself? I was

already a failure by being fired, what would matter if I just left? It would save me the failure of not being able to climb the wall again. But I didn't want to live the half-life I was already living. I needed to do this; I needed to conquer this.

As I was mentally debating, a guy hopped over the low wall separating the entrance area from the climbing area. "Are you the single?" he asked. He looked like he was in his early twenties and looked sturdy enough to keep me from plummeting to my death.

"I guess." I wished I sounded surer of myself but he led me over to a free area by the wall. I was thankful it was a slow day. I didn't need an audience for my impending disaster.

"Have you done this before?" he asked as he got the harness ready for me.

"Kind of."

He looked at me but didn't question. "Well, good thing the easy wall is open." He got me into the harness and placed a helmet on my head. "You ready?" he asked as he hooked the rope to my harness and began bracing himself.

I walked towards the wall and placed a hand on a hold but hesitated. It felt like a loaded question. Am I ready for what? This wall? Probably not. Life? Definitely not.

The worker urged me to climb whenever I was ready to go. I had just taken a deep breath to climb when I heard, "Brianna?"

"Oh, god," I mumbled to myself. I didn't even have to turn to see who it was. She had been popping up unexpectedly so often all summer that I wondered if Tiara had somehow placed a GPS tracker on me at some point.

“Hey, Bri. I didn’t know you climbed.” She had walked over to me and I turned from the wall. She was wearing tight, spandex capris with a matching tank top. She still had her harness on but was taking off her helmet as she walked up.

I took my hand away from the hold as my determination to climb dissipated. The last I’d seen Tiara I’d begun to warm up to her but now I just felt annoyed.

She must’ve sensed it because she took a small step back and cocked her head to the side. “Am I interrupting? Do you want to be alone?”

I let out a sigh. “No, it’s fine. I don’t really climb. This is my first time. I didn’t know you climbed though.”

She instantly brightened up again. “Oh, I love climbing. I did it one summer at church camp and fell in love. In fact, I was hoping to actually go rock climbing outside sometime this year.” She was so enthusiastic; it reminded me of Hayden’s picture. What was I enthusiastic about?

“Climb or get off the rope,” my belayer called. He had his arms crossed and his feet spread and looked incredibly impatient.

“Sorry,” Tiara called. “My bad. I’ll let you get back Bri. Good luck.”

“Thanks.”

I watched Tiara bounce her way to the counter to turn in her equipment and put her tennis shoes back on. “Are you ready now?”

The guy who was supposed to be hoisting me up into the air was so impatient I didn’t have time to contemplate the difficulty of climbing the wall. Instead I just said, “Yes.”

“Climb on, then.” He braced himself and grasped his end of the rope with both hands while I placed both of my hands on the wall.

I could feel the rope grow tauter as I lifted myself from the floor. I really only had to think about this one move at a time. I tried to focus on the next place to put my right hand and then my left hand. Then my foot found a new hold and I pulled myself up some more. My arms began to shake almost immediately with their spaghetti-like strength but I mentally pushed aside those thoughts. As I climbed, one hand or foot hold at a time, I thought of everyone I’d let down recently: Stacey, my parents, myself. I didn’t know what I was doing anymore but I found myself wishing for the first time in my life that I was more like Hayden. I wished I took life less seriously and wasn’t afraid of failure.

Failure was actually starting to look good on me because before I knew it I was out of room. I couldn’t climb any further.

“Go ahead and ring the bell.”

I looked down to see my belayer. He looked surprised. I hadn’t expected to make it to the top either but it had been almost easy when I didn’t worry and think so much about it. From my vantage point, the ground looked so far away. I gave the bell a nice, loud ring so everyone else would know my accomplishment.

“Okay, now just lean back and I’ll let you down slow.” This turned out to be the hardest part as I slowly leaned away from the wall, letting my fingers linger on the holds before letting my full weight hang from the rope. I had to close my eyes as I descended until my feet were firmly on the ground again.

Before the guy could help me even unhook from the rope I started bouncing up and down, a la Tiara. “I did it. I actually did it.”

“Congratulations,” he said as he worked to get me unclipped. I wasn’t sure how heartfelt it was but I didn’t care.

“Oh my goodness, Bri! That was amazing.” Tiara was leaning against the railing that separated the concession stand from the climbing area. “I thought you said you didn’t climb.”

“I thought you left. I mean thanks.” I didn’t notice her stick around but I was so excited that I was glad there was someone genuinely happy for me. When I got unhooked from the rope and took my harness off, she came around the railing and gave me a hug. I thought, what the heck, and hugged her back. I barely noticed how bony her back felt or that I was usually uncomfortable hugging people.

“You should definitely come climbing again,” she said as she pulled back to let me take off my helmet.

“You know I think I might.”

Tiara squealed and gave me another tight hug before listing off all the days and times she normally comes. I started to think that maybe having Tiara around wasn’t such a bad idea. She definitely could put me in a better mood, which was something I needed right now.

I couldn’t remember the last time I was so excited, certainly, not any time this summer. I couldn’t stay still, I had to tell someone. I went to the front counter to pay for my session and return my climbing shoes. I was eager to continue sharing my success.

My first instinct would be to go tell Stacey but I didn't think I could just yet so instead I drove to Caleb's, not even sure if he was home. I parked on the street and raced up the driveway. I didn't know where all this adrenaline came from but I had definitely been missing out. Hayden must have had the right idea with all his crazy ways of feeling like this. I knocked at Caleb's door and waited for him to answer. It took a few minutes but when he finally did I just threw myself at him. I held him in a tight hug and chattered away about my climbing expedition, talking so fast I doubt he understood a word I said.

It wasn't until he pulled away to get me to calm down that I realized I was a little damp and Caleb's hair was wet.

"Sorry I just got off work and out of the shower." He backed away from the door to let me in. "So what's going on?"

I sat on the couch like it was my second home. I was even too excited to be embarrassed from hugging a half-naked, slightly damp Caleb. I immediately launched into my story, skipping the part about my parents but ending with my triumph at the top of the climbing wall.

"Congratulations," he said. Then he leaned over and hugged me again. But by now I had calmed down a bit and was hyper-aware of my hand on his naked back. I was so aware that the rush of adrenaline was starting to creep back.

I giggled nervously. "God, don't you own a shirt?"

He looked down like he forgot what he was wearing then bolted to his dresser and wrenched a t-shirt from one of the bulging, half-shut drawers. He pulled the shirt over his head and sat back down. He said, "So I guess I was a bad luck charm then?"

“No, you weren’t. If anything you just made me nervous,” I said. I didn’t mean to tell him that but figured if I was being honest, I might as well be totally honest. “I never would have tried it without your suggestion anyway. I just think I needed to do it on my own.”

He nodded and looked thoughtful but didn’t say anything.

“It was just nice to do something I decided to do, rather than following you around and waiting for you to take me somewhere. You know?” He nodded some more and stared at the ground and I wondered if, maybe, I hurt his feelings. In a small voice, I said, “I think I might want to go again though.”

He looked up at me but I couldn’t read his face. I waited and hoped he might ask to go with me or something. But then I wondered, maybe he was waiting for me to ask him. I had made it clear that I needed to do it alone already so maybe he thought I wanted this just for myself. I had already climbed a wall on my own. And I’d already stayed the night at his apartment two times in a row. I could ask him out, right? “You should come with me.”

He lightly punched me in the arm. “I thought you’d never ask.”

I swatted at his hand but couldn’t help feeling like the jab was nothing more than friendly and my adrenaline rush drained. But I played it off, like I was still ecstatic even though a little part of me felt broken already.

Caleb, however, started on an entirely different subject. “So how did it go with your parents?” he asked.

My jaw tightened as the memory of our argument resurfaced. “I don’t want to talk about it.” I crossed my arms over my chest.

“Are you sure? You kind of look like you want to talk about it.”

“Then you are mistaken, sir, because I do not.”

He held his hands up in surrender. “Okay.” He grabbed the remote from his end table and turned the TV on.

I shot glances at him every now and then as he flipped through the channels, waiting for him to start interrogating me. But he just watched the TV, laughing occasionally at some commercial or show.

He was so frustrating and I didn't understand him. I didn't understand boys, period. Then I realized that I wanted him to ask me. I wanted him to try to weasel it out of me. So I blurted out, “I just don't understand why they're so trusting of Ally. They think its Hayden's baby.”

Caleb had a huge grin on his face as he swung his head around to look at me and I realized this was his plan. So frustrating. “What's so wrong with that?” he asked.

“Didn't they break up all the time?”

“Yes.”

“And didn't she date around when they did?”

“Yes.”

“So what if it's not Hayden's? What if they waste all this time with somebody else's baby?”

“But what if it is his? I can't believe I'm defending Ally. She didn't sleep around as much as you think. What if they miss out on all this time with his baby?” He turned the TV on mute and looked serious. The most I'd seen him look since the funeral. “Is it so bad to hope its Hayden's? To hope that maybe a bit of him is still around for the rest

of us? I mean, he was my best friend. Of course I want to believe he's not entirely gone. I'm sure your parents feel the same way."

And then I said aloud what I'd been doing so well at keeping to myself. "What about me then? I share some of his genetic material too. I shared a womb with him. And everyone says we look alike. Why am I not enough? Why does there have to be a baby?"

Caleb's forehead creased as his eyebrows came together. I felt like he was looking through my eyes and into my brain, reading my thoughts. "Are you jealous of the baby?"

"No. I don't know." I had to look away. It felt too intense and this is definitely not where I thought we would end up. Was I jealous of the baby? How could that be possible when I didn't even think it was Hayden's?

"It's not like I expect the baby to be a carbon copy of Hayden." I shot him a look and he qualified, "If it's Hayden's. But you didn't even like Hayden so it's hard to put the two of you together, even though you're twins."

"I liked Hayden."

Caleb laughed and I had to laugh a bit too because I knew I was lying. "No you didn't. And he wasn't always that fond of you either. But you're siblings, I get it."

"I didn't hate him at least."

He reached his hand out and rested it on mine which was picking at the lint on my shorts. "I know you didn't. And he didn't hate you. You're just different people. I told you, I get it."

He seemed so wise beyond his years. And here I thought I was the smart one.

His hand was still on mine as we sat there just looking at each other. It felt like a movie and I had another burst of adrenaline. Just like when I was climbing the wall I felt confident I could do just about anything and I decided to seize the moment. I crawled across the couch and placed my hands on either side of his face. Before he could do anything I leaned in to kiss him. He hesitated only a moment before he snaked his arms around me and kissed me back.

I had only been kissed a couple times before and they were nothing like this. I had felt nothing like this before, nothing so intense.

It was definitely better than getting to the top of that rock wall.

Chapter Eighteen

My head was such a buzz when I left Caleb's house. I finally dialed Stacey's number because I was so eager to tell her what had just happened. It wasn't until I got her voicemail that I realized she might not be talking to me now. But my mood wasn't so quick to drop this time. I wasn't ready to let the feeling go. Caleb and I didn't talk about what it meant. We didn't really talk at all until I realized how late it was. I wasn't worried so much about my parents getting angry at me again, as I just wanted to avoid another confrontation. I wanted to hold on to this feeling as long as possible.

The porch light was on but the kitchen was dark when I got home. I tried to be quiet but the door still creaked closed. I even took off my shoes so my socks could deaden my footsteps. The whole house was dark but I could see a sliver of light spilling out of their slightly open door. I moved quietly, willing my knees not to crack, and I stood outside their door to see if they were both home and awake.

"I think I heard the door," my dad said followed by the rustling of the comforter. "I think I'll go check on her."

"Marty, come back to bed," my mom's voice was quiet and soothing, not broken like I was so used to hearing.

"You didn't hear the way she talked to me earlier," he replied but the comforter rustled again followed by the squeaking of bed springs as he got back in.

"I know. But I think she's really having a hard time with everything still."

She sounded so understanding. She sounded like the mom I'd needed all summer. I pressed myself closer to the wall to listen some more.

"We all are, Jane."

“I know. We’re all coping the best we can.” I could feel the tension between them all the way in the hallway. Between Mom’s chronic absence and Dad’s drinking, they had enough to deal with without my messed up problems too. “And I know how hard you’ve been working to get those videos down.”

I heard an expelled breath of air and assumed it came from my dad. He sounded frustrated as he said, “I just don’t know why that kid’s parents didn’t make him take them down. It would’ve made this a hell of a lot easier.”

I had almost forgotten about that whole mess, I was so wrapped up in myself.

“I know, honey. I’m sorry I wasn’t any more help. I’d just rather pretend those videos didn’t exist at all.”

“That’s why I’m trying to get them taken down from the site.”

They got quiet after the sharp edge in my dad’s voice cut between them. They both sounded exhausted and not just because it was almost midnight. They sounded like they had lived a hundred, hard years. I’d never known any other adults who lost a child but I wondered if all parents in this situation sounded much older than they really were.

I heard a book snap shut and more rustling of the comforter. “Good night, Marty,” my mom said and a light clicked off, dousing the house in complete darkness. He mumbled, “Good night” but there was no exchange of “I love you.” I hadn’t been around when they’ve gone to bed in a long time but I did remember them always telling each other “I love you” before going to bed. They also used to tell me and Hayden that before we went to bed as well. But I couldn’t even remember the last time either of them said it to me.

No, I told myself as I slipped quietly into my own darkened room; I was not going to do this. I was going to hold on to the good feeling left over from Caleb. I wasn't going to let Stacey's cold silences or my parents' deterioration get to me. I changed into my pajamas and crawled into bed. I did my best to shut out my parents' conversation and focus instead on the way Caleb made me feel. I wanted to fall asleep wondering what this development meant for the two of us.

And eventually I did.

I slept in the next morning and didn't hear a single noise as my parents left for work. It was Friday and I had nothing to do. So I decided to go back to my hunting expedition in Hayden's room. I went to the kitchen to make a bowl of cereal and took it with me to his bedroom. I went right in, straight to the closet, where I had left off the day before.

There was nothing more to find in the closet, besides a couple of solo shots of Caleb, which I took with me. I thought about where I hide my stuff: my underwear drawer, behind my nightstand, under my mattress. So that's where I started. There was nothing under the mattress besides a wadded up pair of socks.

The nightstand was also a bust. Behind it was just a bunch of food and candy wrappers. It was absolutely disgusting. The drawer was full of various magazines like *Rolling Stone*, *Guitar*, and *Maxim*. Under the nightstand was a pile of laundry which I was brave enough to dig through even though I had no idea whether it was clean or not. I figured if it was really dirty, the two months of sitting around would really have caused a smell.

That just left the dresser. It reminded me of Caleb's dresser from yesterday. Not a single drawer was closed completely. They were either closed a little crooked or had clothes spilling out. My dresser was the complete opposite. Every drawer held a different type of clothing like one for socks, one for underwear, one for t-shirts, and one for tank tops. I opened the top drawer, which I assumed might be an underwear drawer but it was just shoved full of different items of clothing. There was mismatched socks and undershirts mixed with athletic shorts and a couple of neckties. I felt around to the back corners but there was nothing but clothing.

So I tried the next drawer and the next and the next. It was starting to look like Hayden didn't have any secrets. Maybe that's why he lived so in the moment, because he didn't have any burdens to weigh him down. But I gave the bottom drawer a look anyway. It was stuffed full of cargo shorts. I didn't realize Hayden owned so many clothes until I pulled them out one at a time. I was already starting to think about where I might look next when I saw it. Wedged in the back of the drawer, under everything was a small red box.

I pulled it out to look at it but there was nothing on the outside to say where it came from but I had a bad feeling about it. I knew what normally went into these small boxes. So I slowly lifted the lid and nestled in the box was that fateful little black, velvet box. I definitely knew what that meant.

I set the black box in the palm of my hand and stared at it. Surely, this wasn't what I thought it was. Surely, Hayden wasn't so stupid. I wanted to close my eyes to open it but that would do no good, since I was alone. So I just flipped the lid open and shook my head.

I expected to see a diamond ring, but instead there was just a plain silver band embellished with two hands holding a heart with a crown. It was a Claddagh ring.

I snapped it shut and grasped the box tightly in my fist. What did this mean? I thought people wore Claddagh rings for engagements or as their wedding ring, but I wasn't certain. Surely, Hayden hadn't planned on getting engaged, we were only eighteen! Well, technically, he would be seventeen forever. And I was almost certain it didn't mean they were married. They couldn't be, could they? Ally would have rubbed that in my face as further proof.

It was too much to believe. I didn't even bother to try to put things back so no one would know I had been in here. I just left his room and went to my own.

Questions raced around my head as I paced around my room. How long did he have this ring? Did he buy it a long time ago and then throw it in a drawer after one of the many times they broke up? Did he forget about the ring? When was he going to ask her? After graduation, maybe? Were they going to California together? Did he know about the baby?

And then I wondered, did I now think the baby was his?

I felt dizzy; I had to get out. I put the ring in the top drawer of my nightstand and headed straight for the door. I had my hand on the knob but didn't turn it. I went back to my nightstand and took the ring box out again. It was like a solar eclipse to me. I wanted so bad to look at it, but knew I shouldn't. So I sat on my bed and pulled the red lid off the box. I stroked the velvet of the smaller black box and told myself not to open it.

It frustrated me to no end that I didn't know what this meant. Of all the things I did know about Hayden, I never would have thought he would want to get married so young. In fact, when I imagined us as grown adults I didn't picture him married at all.

So I did what came natural to me and decided to do some more research. It felt like an eternity as I waited for my laptop to boot but finally was able to type "Claddagh ring" into the search engine. Up popped numerous sites selling variations of the ring, some in silver or gold, some with gemstones and diamonds. Hayden's looked pretty simple compared to most of these. But soon I found what I was looking for, a website with the meaning of the ring.

The further I read, though, the more confused I became. The basic meaning of the ring was pretty simple. The hands represented friendship, the heart love, and the crown loyalty. But then there were so many different variations of meaning that depended on how the ring was worn. One way represented engagement, one represented marriage, one represented single, and one represented in a relationship. But another site stated that the ring could symbolize friendship or be given as a Mother's Day present.

How was I ever going to know Hayden's intentions?

I wished Caleb wasn't at work but we had plans to meet the next morning to go indoor climbing again. I didn't want to bother him so I just settled in to click on every single site about Claddagh rings that I could, hoping one of them had a straight answer for me.

I thought I would burst when Caleb came to pick me up. He came to the door but I shoved him outside because my parents were actually both home that morning. I didn't bother with any greeting. I pulled out the ring, opened it and shoved it under his nose.

“What is this?”

Caleb took the ring and said, “Don't you think it's a little soon?”

“What?”

“I mean, we barely know each other. And you should probably work on your proposal.” He was laughing like I was telling some kind of joke. I pushed past him and went to the car. When he finally joined me he was still looking at the ring. “Okay, what is this?” he asked handing it back to me.

I took it and snapped the box shut. “I found it in Hayden's room.”

He pointed at the box. “This is Hayden's? Isn't this an engagement ring?”

“Well, it's a Claddagh ring.” I couldn't keep the condescension from my voice, like I was an expert on Claddagh rings now. “They can be used for engagements. Or marriages, or friendships, or relationships, or just about anything.”

“And he was going to give this to Ally?”

“I have no idea.” I wanted to shake him. “You were his best friend. I hoped you might know.”

“He never said anything to me.” And Caleb suddenly looked so sad. I could imagine how he felt. I thought it was bad to not know my brother, but that was my own fault. It was something else entirely to think you knew someone then find out they kept secrets from you. Important secrets.

We started driving in silence. I was afraid to say the wrong thing so I just kept my mouth shut. I wasn't very good at comforting other people. I just let Caleb brood until he finally spoke up and asked, "Do your parents know about this?"

I was startled at first; I had been so lost in watching the scenery pass by. "Um, I don't think so. I mean it wasn't just sitting on a shelf in his room. It was hidden."

"Hidden? Then how did you find it?"

I felt my cheeks grow hot. "I was looking through his stuff," I admitted.

Caleb took a left turn; we were close to the rock climbing place. "Why?"

I wished I had a high collar on my shirt or something to hide behind. No such luck. "I was looking for some sign that Hayden wasn't really into Ally. Something to prove the baby wasn't his." I felt like the worst person in the world for admitting this out loud, especially after Caleb's hope that the baby was Hayden's. I had a hard time remembering that Caleb was having a difficult summer too.

"Did you find anything else?" His voice was flat and emotionless. He must really be hurt by Hayden keeping this from him. If I were in his place, I would be wondering what else Hayden hadn't told me. "Unlike Ally, he never dated anyone else when they broke up."

"Just some trash, a bunch of pictures, and other questionable items."

He nodded his head but said nothing else. I didn't want to press him. If he didn't want to talk about this I wouldn't make him and before I knew it we were pulling in the parking lot.

It took me much longer to get to the top of the easy climb than it had before. I couldn't manage to clear my mind and focus like I had. I kept worrying about Caleb and

what he was going through, but also about him watching me. Last time I didn't care what my spotter thought about my climbing or what my butt might look like from the ground. What Caleb thought meant everything to me now. But I made it to the top and rang that bell.

When I got down my legs felt like they might give out on me and I wasn't sure I could lift my arms anymore but I was happy. Caleb walked over and pulled me in for a hug. He said, "Great job" and kissed me on the forehead. I sat on a bench to give my legs a rest while I watched him climb with another spotter because I wasn't sure I would be good at belaying. He was on an intermediate section of the wall but made it look easy. He was back on the ground in no time but was grinning from ear to ear. I could practically feel his buzzing endorphins radiating off him.

Overall, the day was a success and in my head I considered it a date. I also considered Caleb my boyfriend even though we hadn't discussed the details. I had never really had a boyfriend before so I wasn't even sure I needed to bring up the idea. It seemed so stupid to worry about things like the status of our relationship but I couldn't help worrying he didn't feel the same about me. Sure he kissed me back and he hugged me when I finished climbing but he was a guy and so hard to read.

I still had no answers about Hayden's potential proposal and I couldn't talk about it with Caleb anymore for fear he might become more depressed. I needed to talk to someone though. I needed to talk to Stacey. The thought of calling her made my insides squirm. This was the longest we had ever gone without talking. The last time was junior year and it only lasted two days. I had gotten mad because Stacey tried to cheat off of my homework. She said it was only math and she was just checking her answers. We didn't

talk until the teacher handed back our papers. I saw how awful Stacey did and felt bad for her so I told her next time I would check her problems as long as she actually did the work first.

I knew she would have information, if not about Hayden then at least about what I should do about Caleb. So after I was dropped off later that day I went straight across the street to her house. I hadn't even seen Stacey in a while and I wondered if she would look different after all this time. I hesitated before knocking. I even turned away to leave but I steeled my nerves and knocked.

Mrs. Greenfield opened the door. She had a towel in her hands and smiled when she saw me. "Hi, Brianna. Long time, no see. Are you looking for Stacey?"

I assumed she didn't know about the rift between us so I smiled like everything was good. "Yeah, is she home?"

"I'm sorry," and she looked it. "Stacey's at work. She picked up an extra shift today. She really loves it there."

"Oh, okay. Thanks." I turned to walk away.

"Do you want me to tell her you stopped by?"

"No, I'm good." I tried not to read too much into the way Mrs. Greenfield looked at me. She looked like she might want to say more but just told me good-bye before closing the door.

In a perfect world, I would just go talk to my mom. She would have all the answers and know just what to say, while having a fresh batch of cookies for me. But this wasn't a perfect world and I didn't know how my mom would take the news that

Hayden had bought a potential engagement ring. So when I went inside I kept it all to myself. I didn't say anything to my parents before I closed myself up in my room.

This time I put the ring in my nightstand and left it there. I tried calling Stacey but got her voicemail again. This time I left a message. "Um, hey, Stacey. It's me." Why was this so weird? I'd left thousands of messages for her before. "I, uh, just wanted to talk to you. There's, uh, just some stuff that, uh, I can only talk to you about. So, uh, just call me when you get this. Bye."

I felt sick to my stomach when I hung up. What if she didn't call me back? Did I make it sound important enough? Maybe she'd just think I was being self-centered again or that my problems weren't worth her attention anymore. Could she have outgrown me as a friend? So I just waited.

Chapter Nineteen

She didn't call.

A small part of me didn't really expect her to but a bigger part had all my fingers and all my toes crossed hoping she would call. It hurt a lot, facing Stacey's silence like this. And I wondered if my freeze out had hurt her this much too. It was worse than the silence I was now receiving from my parents. It seemed they had reverted back to their old tack for dealing with me, by not. I think I had upset them so much they'd just rather not listen to the awful things I might say again.

It wasn't like I would try to talk to them and they would ignore me. We just didn't speak more than necessary. Rather than pick a fight, none of us spoke and I avoided the shared space of the living room and kitchen. It was sort of ironic because they were both home a lot more than they had been at the beginning of the summer. Back when I craved their attention.

To avoid the silence, I spent more and more time rock climbing. I quickly moved from beginner to intermediate. It became harder to get to the top but the thrill of it became more intense. I was starting to understand why Hayden had done all the crazy things he did. I could only imagine the rush he had felt car surfing or skating on vert ramps. I was starting to think he had it right all along. I shouldn't live my life for good grades; I should live it for the rush of living. I had thought he was being selfish by being so reckless but what was so wrong with that?

I surprisingly kept my word to Tiara and went climbing with her a few times a week. She was really good and able to give me pointers. We talked a lot after our

sessions too and it was nice to feel like I had a friend again. We didn't share deep secrets like I had with Stacey but it was still nice.

"Look," Tiara said one afternoon when we were taking a water break by the concession area. "I need to apologize."

"For what?" I asked as I shifted uncomfortably on the hard plastic seats. They felt especially cold through the thin material of my new stretchy climbing pants that felt like a second skin. I took a cheese fry from my plate and popped it in my mouth. I thought they would have more healthy snacks at a rock climbing place but it was about the same fare as at the movie theater.

Tiara kept looking down at her bottle of water and picked at the label. "For what I said earlier this summer. About Hayden."

It took me a moment to realize what she was talking about. It seemed so long ago. But it quickly came back when I remembered how angry I was when she all but condemned Hayden to hell.

But she continued, "I'm sorry if it upset you. I know I can be kind of," she paused, "intense about my faith, especially when my mom's around. But I had no right to say what I did." Her water bottle label was in shreds by now. "I mean, my beliefs mean everything to me, but I had no right to judge you or Hayden like that."

She looked so sincere it was hard to not forgive her. Besides I wasn't quite ready to give up one of my two friends. "It's okay, I understand. It was a bad time for everyone."

"You are so understanding." She tapped her bottle against mine. "I really don't know why you hang out with me."

I didn't really know what to say to her. The honest answer was I hung out with her because I had no one else, besides Caleb, and she had sort of inserted herself into my life. It wasn't exactly my decision, I just wasn't fighting it. But that explanation would definitely hurt her feelings. And the self-deprecating smile she was wearing made me wonder if a part of her knew the truth.

"It's all in the past," I said finally just to ease the awkwardness. "Do you want a fry?" I nudged my plate towards her. She hadn't gotten anything but water.

"No thanks. I'm actually fasting right now."

"Fasting? I didn't know people still did that."

Tiara nodded her head. "My mom and grandmother do a lot. They say it gets them closer to God. They say it helps them learn to push down the Earthly troubles and focus on His grace."

Now I really didn't know what to say. To me it sounded a bit crazy, starving yourself to find God, but to each her own. I guzzled the rest of my water instead and squeezed the air out of the bottle before tossing it in a recycling bin. Tiara followed suit and immediately became her bubbly, bouncy self again.

"I also wanted to run something by you." She looked much more eager this time.

I nodded for her to continue as I chalked my hands for another climb. My new pants were already covered in white streaks from where I rubbed my hands, forgetting they were coated in chalk.

"So I found this organization that has a set climbing area and it's not that expensive to sign up for a trip and I wanted to see if you'd like to come with me."

She said all of this really fast so it took me a moment to catch up. “Outside?” I asked.

“Yeah. The guy I talked to said they go to this one spot all the time and they have anchors already in place. And there are different levels of climbing based on experience, just like in here.” She swept her arm around to encompass the warehouse-like space.

“Outside?” Sure, I had grown to love the adrenaline rush I felt while climbing but it was all relatively safe indoors. There were mats on the ground at the base of the walls in case I slipped. They have a medic always on the premises to deal with everything from mild cuts and panic attacks to passing out and head injuries. If we were outside at some remote location, how long would it take for help to arrive? What if I just fell off the side of a cliff or something?

“Yeah. But it’s totally legit. One of the workers here actually recommended these guys. They take groups out to climb all the time.” Tiara had her head cocked and looked like a puppy ready to play. She seemed to think my issue was with the people who ran this operation, not the dangers of being out in nature, where anything could go wrong. She grabbed my hand in both of hers and begged, “Please, please, please go with me. I could really use a friend to motivate me.”

I was scared. I was already thinking about all the different scenarios that ended with me dead or critically maimed. I knew it could be unpredictable and I liked the controlled environment of being inside. But I had already conquered one fear. I had been scared to even begin climbing, how could I stop now? I tried to channel Hayden and how fearless he had always been. I took a deep breath. “Sign me up.”

Tiara squealed and jumped around me, still holding on to my hand, and caused me to spin in a circle too. “This is going to be so fun.”

Her enthusiasm was infectious and I couldn’t help grinning too, even though it felt like my insides might burst from anxiety.

“Please, tell me you can come,” I pleaded into my phone. As soon as I got home after climbing I called Caleb up to convince him to come with me. I might have needed to start climbing on my own but I really wanted his support moving to a more dangerous location.

“I’m sorry, Bri, but I can’t.” He sounded sad but I couldn’t help but feel upset.

“Couldn’t you just call in or something?”

Caleb laughed. “It doesn’t really work like that. This is a real job and we’re close to finishing a project. I need to be there.” I tried not to throw a fit. It was nice, and a little annoying, how mature and responsible he was being about his job. It was what I used to be like.

“Fine. I concede.” I was glad Caleb couldn’t see me pouting. It wasn’t something I was proud of.

“I’m sure you’ll do great though.”

I didn’t feel any better after we hung up. Caleb kept telling me how great I would do and a small part of me kept thinking he was the one who encouraged Hayden to jump off the roof so what did he know. Maybe his encouragement would lead to my death too.

Then there was a slight knock at the door followed by my dad's voice. "Bri, could you come out here?" He didn't wait for a reply as I heard his footsteps leading back to the living room. I considered just ignoring him. Why break the silence? But my curiosity got the best of me.

When I came out to the living room, my parents weren't alone. They were joined by Ally and a woman I assumed was her mother because they shared the same blond hair and thin frames. Although now Ally's cheeks had lost their sharp edges and it looked like she had a pillow stuff under her shirt. Everyone's head turned to look at me and I felt like I'd just walked into a trap.

"Brianna, why don't you have a seat?" My dad took her chair and my only options were to sit on the couch next to Ally or on the loveseat next to mom.

"I'm good." I stood at one end of the couch and a silence fell on the group. It felt like an intervention.

My mom cleared her throat. "Well, Bri. This is Mrs. Pearson, Ally's mom."

"Hi."

Mrs. Pearson said, "It's so nice to meet you, Brianna." She wore a tight smile and somehow I didn't believe her. "Ally's told me so much about you."

I glanced at Ally but she found our carpeting much more interesting. "I bet."

Mrs. Pearson shifted on the couch and looked away. My dad shot me a look that clearly said, "Be nice."

Mom made a nervous laugh that came out high pitched and staccato. It sickened me to see how much she was trying to look happy for Ally and her mom. Something she hadn't done for me. "They came by to share this with us." My mom leaned over to hand

me a photograph. She had a small smile on her face and it was the happiest I'd seen her look since the accident. "It's a sonogram of Hay – I mean, Ally's baby."

I ignored the slip she made as I stared at the picture. I expected to see a fuzzy kidney bean but I was surprised by how much it looked like a baby. I could see the spine and even an arm. They all stared at me, waiting for a response. My mom looked like she hoped I would be excited with her. My dad looked like he was afraid I was going to explode. I did neither; I did nothing but hand it back.

"Look," Dad started in his stern fatherly voice, "Ally is doing us a great kindness by letting us be involved. She could just as easily have left us out." My mom gave a small snivel but Dad continued, "So we would appreciate it if you would be nice." The "to Ally" was implied.

"I haven't even talked to her since she told me. I have been nice." I hated how whiny and childish I sounded while Ally looked like a precious angel in her expectant state.

Mom stood up and came around the couch to stand next to Dad. "We know. We wanted to let you know Ally is due in December and we hope that you'll be able to come see her and the baby when you're done with finals. I'm sure Ally would want you there."

Mrs. Pearson nudged Ally so she said, "Yeah, Bri. It just wouldn't be the same without you." But I sure as heck wasn't convinced. Just one tiny movement of her mouth and that smile would turn into a snarl.

I opened my mouth, considering asking Ally how many guys she really had slept with, but she had my parents totally wrapped. They would all just get mad at me and it wasn't really worth it.

Mom was looking at Ally with tears in her eyes, but not the sad tears she had for me. No, these were happy tears. “Just tell me you’ll try.”

There it was. The olive branch I’d been waiting for. It was so small but they wanted me around. They were trying to bridge the gap between us but it almost didn’t feel like enough, like it had been too long.

“We’ll see.” And I went back to my room.

Chapter Twenty

Well, today was the day. The day I'd have to face a whole new set of fears in the great outdoors. The drive to the outdoor rock climbing spot was a long one. Tiara and I were in a fifteen-passenger van along with the guides, a family of four, and a group of college students. Tiara was right about the guides; they really knew their stuff. They even held a short safety instruction before we left. They went over the equipment to make sure the ropes weren't frayed and the clasps on the harnesses were secure. It put some of my anxieties at ease.

But I had so many other anxieties eating at me. I was still upset with how I left things with my parents. They had made an effort, I could see that, but I couldn't just plaster a smile on my face and pretend I was okay with this. I could restrain myself from verbally attacking Ally in the future but I still didn't believe what she claimed. Because while I found it so easy to block out Hayden, Ally had been a different story. She just didn't like me and constantly inserted herself into my life.

I had tried to steer clear of her after she nicknamed me Pancake but she just always managed to show up. She had pranked me at a sleepover during the eighth grade by convincing the other girls to draw all over me when I was the first to fall asleep. In high school, she made it a habit of always using my locker as her make-out spot. I guess she thought she was rubbing it in my face that I couldn't get a boyfriend, but I just found it really annoying.

This habit of hers was partly how I knew she got around school when she wasn't dating Hayden. Hayden was the only boyfriend of hers who wouldn't make-out at my locker, thank God. That would definitely have been gross, but it was also how I could

tell when they broke up because about once a month, Ally would have some guy pinned down. “Do you mind?” I had asked, usually holding a stack of books I was more than ready to deposit in my locker.

Ally would pull away from Random Guy and smirk at me, “Not at all,” before continuing to swap spit with him. Sometimes the guy would urge her to move down a couple spots but more often than not they were thoroughly trapped in Ally’s web. It was disgusting really.

And it didn’t much matter now because it’s not like I could prove she slept around. I would just have to wait until after the baby was born before the paternity test could prove my point. But the unanswered question about Hayden’s possible proposal was making me doubt everything I knew.

I didn’t know everything about Hayden but I’d always thought I knew him enough. We were twins and twins were supposed to have some unspoken connection. I should be able to find him in a crowd or know what he was thinking before he did. It went against everything else. He was reckless and irresponsible, selfish and smart, fearless and loyal. But he was not romantic and committed. Was he?

“We’re here,” Tiara squealed, breaking into my thoughts. She grabbed my upper arm and shook me in excitement.

“Yay,” I deadpanned.

“Oh, this’ll be fun.”

And she wasn’t the only one excited. The college students got louder as we started to unload the van and the two younger kids were running around in circles yelling

while their parents tried to wrangle them. I kept quiet while Tiara chatted with one of the female instructors as we helped sort the equipment on the ground.

The head instructor clapped his hands to catch our attention and said, “Okay, we’ve got some different experience levels here so we’re going to split up. We have different routes based on skill so you two,” he pointed to me and Tiara, “are going with Oliver and Jenny, the Bensons are with me, and the rest of you are with Claire and Will.” He clapped his hands again. “Alright let’s go.”

We each grabbed some of the equipment and followed in line down a well-defined path. Then we split off, the family took the first fork we came too, me and Tiara took the second while the larger group kept going past us. Jenny led the way and was just as bouncy and chatty as Tiara while Oliver was quiet.

When we reached the cliff face Jenny and Oliver dropped their bags and began to pull out supplies. “Okay, Oliver is going to go up first and run the rope through the anchors already in place. I’ll belay. You guys can go ahead and fit your harnesses.”

Oliver already had a helmet on and his rope secure before I even got my bag unzipped. I tried to watch him climb as I adjusted my harness but my hands were shaking. Oliver was up and down the wall like he’d done it a million times and I began to think maybe I could do this. The rope didn’t go all the way up because there was a part of the wall that jutted out at a sharp angle that looked impossible to climb. You’d have to defy gravity to get around it but it still went pretty high without going to the top.

“Alright who’s first?” Jenny asked in her peppy cheerleader voice.

Tiara patted me on the back. “Why don’t you go first? Get it over with.”

It was all I could do not to run away; instead I got all of my equipment ready. I secured the helmet while Oliver helped with my harness. Jenny was securing the ropes to belay again but Tiara spoke up. “Can I belay?”

Jenny took a minute to consider. “If Brianna is okay with it, then I am.”

Tiara gave me a questioning look and I nodded again. Jenny made sure everything was secure and all the knots were tight. “All right, climb on,” she said.

When I put my hand against the rock it felt like the first time I’d tried to climb. I didn’t know where to start. I analyzed the face and it found it was much harder to find holds. They weren’t conveniently colored like indoors, they blended in with everything else. But Tiara had done it so I could too. I found a bit of rock that jutted out and grabbed onto it, then found a place to put my foot. My other hand found another hold and I was able to hoist myself up. Once off the ground I felt more in the zone; I could almost forget I was outside.

I tried to only focus on the climb but the higher I got, the more the world pressed itself in on my thoughts. I especially couldn’t keep Hayden from my mind as the mantra “What Would Hayden Do?” played in my thoughts. Hayden wouldn’t have been content to just follow the prescribed path. He had to blaze his own. He would have push further than everyone else. If one person made it to the top then Hayden would have had to find a way to go higher.

And I realized I did understand my brother. He wasn’t content with what life just handed to him. He wasn’t content with being mediocre or normal. He had to be independent and extraordinary. So what would Hayden do? Would he stop where the anchors stopped? No, he would push even further.

“Bri.” Tiara’s voice came from far away. “Bri!” She sounded more urgent.

“You’re going too far.” Now it was Jenny’s voice I heard. “You need to come back down.”

So I stopped. I wasn’t Hayden. I was Brianna and I could be happy with that. I didn’t need to push the limits in the same way he had. Just being out here was enough for me. Rather than reach out for the protruding rock half a foot from my hand, I called to come down, leaned back on the rope, and enjoyed the descent to the ground.

“We’ll take a short break before you head up there, girl.” She nudged Tiara’s shoulder before sitting down next to me and passed us a couple of energy bars.

As I opened my wrapper I heard some static from the walkie-talkies Jenny and Oliver had. A voice crackled, “Oliver, you there?”

“Yeah,” he grunted back. His voice sounded like sandpaper, like hadn’t talked in months.

“We got a bit of a situation with the guys over here. They’re getting kind of rowdy. Could you come help?”

He raised his eyebrows to Jenny but she seemed to know what he meant. “Go ahead,” she said. “I’ve got these girls under control.” She shot me a wink and I tried to smile back but I think it was more of a grimace.

Oliver pressed the talk button down on his walkie and said, “Yeah,” before heading back up the path.

“I’m lucky you girls are so easy-peasy,” Jenny said before she took a chunk out of her energy bar. Tiara giggled along with her before guzzling some water. I was

surprised at how much we were all sweating. Even Tiara who hadn't climbed yet was dripping like I was. It was definitely a hot day.

I started to eat my energy bar too and realized that I was starving already. That climb seemed so short but it took a lot out of me. I was proud of my accomplishment and quickly finished the energy bar. Tiara hadn't even opened hers. She was twirling the package in her hands as she eyed the cliff face.

“Aren't you going to eat that?”

“No. I'm fasting.”

Her response sounded robotic. “Again? I didn't think people fasted so much anymore.”

She seemed calm and more reserved than we had first arrived. Her elbows rested on her knees and she wouldn't look at me. “It's a church thing. You don't get it.”

I rolled my eyes, afraid super-religious Tiara was about to resurface. I had gotten so used to laid-back Tiara. “Are you sure that's a good idea today?”

She finally turned her head with a smile perfectly in place. I could see almost every one of her vibrantly white teeth. “Don't worry. I've been drinking plenty of water.” She shook her almost empty bottle.

I still wasn't sure. I didn't know anything about fasting. I know some people could eat while it was dark or only eat certain foods. But I had no idea what Tiara considered it. I debated whether I should say something to Jenny. Was this against their safety precautions, or just common sense?

But before I could decide, Jenny bounced over to us and asked, “Are you ready to go?” She rotated her hands to do thumbs up and thumbs down. But Tiara gave her the

go ahead. I didn't think Jenny could get any bouncier but she proved me wrong as she hoisted Tiara from the ground and reassembled the equipment.

I watched as Tiara got ready. She seemed okay and completely focused, not pale or sick looking. Maybe I was just making a big deal out of nothing. I was pretty good at that.

"You want to belay?" Jenny asked.

I had been staring at the pile of rope. "Um."

"Come on, Bri. You should try it," Tiara said as she secured the helmet on her head. She walked over and gave my hand a squeeze. Hers felt clammy like she had a cold sweat. "I totally trust you." Her eyes were big and pleading.

"I don't know. I've never done this before." I was almost more scared to belay than climb myself. It was easier to trust my life to someone else than it was to trust myself with someone's life.

Tiara threw her arms up. "What better time to learn." Jenny took this as my agreement and got me ready to spot Tiara.

It wasn't as bad as I thought. Because of the way the ropes were and the fact that Tiara was mostly supporting her own weight as she climbed, it felt easy. I was just easing the slack on the rope as Tiara climbed higher. It felt like Tiara was starting to slow down so I tried to brace myself in anticipation for her wanting to stop. She took longer and longer to decide on places for her hands and I was starting to worry.

She was a much more experienced climber than I was and I thought she might breeze through this but when she had scaled about two-thirds of the way up she just stopped. "Tiara, are you okay?" I called. The words echoed a bit as they bounced off the

cliff and back towards the forest. But Tiara didn't answer. I called louder this time. Maybe my voice hadn't reached her up so high. She still didn't answer.

"Is she scared?" Jenny whispered to me.

"I don't think so. She was so eager to come out here. Besides, she's climbed higher than this before at the indoor gym." It was like Tiara had frozen to the wall. It looked like she might be trembling but it was hard to tell if it was from fatigue or fright.

Jenny pulled out her walkie-talkie. "Oliver, can you come back? I think I'm going to need your help."

Oliver's gruff voice was quick to respond. "Yeah."

The only sound came from the birds chirping in the trees and the slight rustle of the wind in the leaves as Jenny and I waited for Tiara to give us some kind of signal. We both had our heads craned back to watch Tiara and I was so scared because I didn't know what to do. Jenny cupped her hands around her mouth to call out again but before she did. Tiara slipped down the rock wall.

I was caught slightly off guard as I felt the full force of Tiara's dropping weight. The rope burned between my hands for a couple of seconds before I was able to get a secure grip again. But Tiara had already dropped a couple of feet. Her body hung limp from the rope.

"What do I do? What do I do?" I felt frantic. I wanted to run away and let Jenny deal with this alone, but I couldn't. I couldn't drop Tiara, no matter how scared I was.

I chanced a glimpse at Jenny and she looked just as scared. Her face was pale white and her arms were stretched out in front of her like she might run under Tiara and try to catch her.

“What do I need to do?” This time my voice was firm and commanding. It worked enough to snap Jenny from her trance and she quickly got to work to help me hold the rope.

“Okay,” she said from behind me, “we’re going to ease her down very, very slowly. Okay?”

I nodded and made sure my feet were firmly planted.

“Just ease the rope, little by little.”

It was hard to keep control. The rope felt alive under my fingers, like it wanted to fly away. Tiara looked like a puppet dropping foot by foot with jerky movements. Finally, her feet touched the ground and we were able to lower her all the way down.

I felt another moment of panic as I ran over to her limp form on the ground. It was so reminiscent of when I found Hayden by the tree. Her legs looked crumpled and her face was coated in a sheen of sweat. Her eyes were closed and her bottom lip hung slightly open. But her chest was rising and falling with every breath.

I sighed out and grasped her hand as Jenny ran over to join us. Oliver showed up quickly after and together they were able to bring Tiara back out of unconsciousness.

Even after we had loaded up the van again and were driving back to town, my hands were still trembling. Tiara kept trying to tell me she was okay and she passed out from the heat. But I wasn’t buying it. I insisted she go to the hospital to get checked, Jenny agreed with me. Tiara swore she was fine and that she would just take it easy the rest of the day.

“Well, call me if you start to feel sick again or something.” I couldn’t stop worrying. It was the most terrifying thing I’d ever experienced after watching Hayden

die. They felt so similar too and I couldn't shake the feeling that I was missing something. It just didn't add up in my head. It also felt weird to be so worried over someone that I didn't even like a few months ago.

Tiara laughed at me as we started to separate to our own cars. "I'm fine, but yes I'll call you."

"Good." It took me a few tries to get my car started and even then I drove below the speed limit the whole way home because I no longer trusted my reflexes. I had been so nervous about my own climb that I hadn't stopped once to think about something going wrong with Tiara's.

Chapter Twenty-One

Over the next couple of days, I watched Tiara like my dad watched the Braves, which was all the time. She told me I was acting like a mother hen and continued to insist that everything was fine. It was just heat exhaustion. We continued to climb inside at Rock On! She said we could try climbing outside when it was cooler and generally treated the whole ordeal like a joke. But I didn't buy it.

Almost every time we climbed, I would get a snack from the concession stand because we were there for so long. But Tiara only ever drank water. It was starting to add up in my head but a part of me didn't really want to believe it.

Was Tiara anorexic? She said she was fasting but where was the line between fasting and anorexia. She also said her mother and grandmother practiced fasting as well. Did they encourage this behavior? Were they also anorexic? And how could I bring it up to her mother without offending her as well? Once I thought all this I wondered how one person could be so self-centered. The signs seemed obvious to me but I was so wrapped up in my own problems that I couldn't see the problems of someone else.

The problem felt too big for me. I felt like I was the only thing keeping Tiara from plummeting to the ground again. I needed help.

I couldn't go to Caleb and I didn't know if Stacey would answer. I suppose I could make her but then would she really care what was going on with Tiara. She disliked her more than I used to.

This was an adult-sized problem, so I needed an adult.

I purposely stayed home that Saturday, waiting for my parents to emerge from the rooms but they were both gone before I woke up. No note, no message. So I waited

around. I made myself breakfast and then lunch. I even did the dishes and vacuumed the living room as I waited for anyone to come home.

Finally, by late afternoon, I heard the groan from the garage door opening and I stood by the laundry room door, waiting to pounce on whoever walked through.

It was my mom and she was laden with shopping bags. “Excuse me, Brianna.” She bumped me out of the way so she could lay everything down on the dining room table. She didn’t say anything else as she started to sort through her bags. One bag tipped over and I could see baby bottles and burp clothes. They were in gender-neutral colors.

I clamped my mouth shut, afraid to say anything now. But I didn’t leave. I just watched her.

Eventually, she looked up at me. She looked tired and there were lines across her forehead. I could also see sections of grey hair by her temples. “Do you need something?”

I couldn’t find the words. She might not want to even help me. I had my lips pressed so tightly together that I wasn’t sure I could open them anyway.

She shook her head at me and started to walk down the hallway towards her bedroom. I followed her a few steps before she turned around. “Brianna, I am not in the mood to play games.”

My jaw unclenched. “I need your help.”

I stood a few inches taller than my mom though I was completely bare-foot. She pinched the skin between her eyes. “Can this wait? I have a migraine.”

“No.”

“Bri. I’ve had a long day.” She turned away from me but I grabbed her arm.

“Mom, I need your help.” I must have sounded desperate enough because she turned back, a question mark on her face.

“You need my help? Since when?”

The honesty started to pour out and I felt a weight instantly lift. “Since always. I’ve just always been scared to ask.”

She watched me for a minute. I saw her eyes dart across my face as if she were trying to look into my thoughts. “Let’s sit down.”

I led her to the couch, took a deep breath, and said in a rush, “I think my friend has a problem. I’ve never seen her eat but she says she’s fasting. And then we went rock climbing and she passed out up on the rope and it was so scary, Mom. I thought she had died and then I saw her lying on the ground like Hayden and I thought I might lose it. But she says she’s fine and her mom does it too so I don’t know who to talk to or what to do about it.” I didn’t even notice that halfway through my fragmented story that the tears had started to flow.

I hadn’t cried since Hayden died and now it all was bubbling over. I don’t think I could have stopped the tears even if I wanted to. But I was relieved to let them just flood my face. It felt good to release everything.

My mom patted my leg and I knew it was still too awkward between us to hug it out. But it still felt nice that she was here and she was listening.

“Start from the beginning.”

So I did. I told her everything. I told her about seeing Hayden, about graduation, and about my fight with Stacey. I told her about Caleb and his barn. I told her about

getting fired from work and about climbing the way the first time. I told her about outdoor rock climbing and all of the signs from Tiara. I did not tell her about Ally.

She didn't say anything until I was finished. "It's okay, Bri. We'll fix this." She patted my leg again and handed me a tissue. Then, she got up and found the phone book. She flipped through it before dialing the number she was looking for. After a minute, she said, "Hi. Is this Mrs. Hallifax? This is Mrs. Fairchild, Brianna's mother." There were a few ticks from the clock on the mantle before her tight response of, "Yes, the mother of the boy who died before graduation." Tick, tick, tick. "Well, we appreciate your prayers. The reason I'm calling is I think we need to talk about Tiara." Tick, tick. "It's something Brianna has brought to my attention and I think it would be best if we could get together and discuss it. Mm-hmm. That sounds great, I'll see you later then."

I had to hand it to my mom. She was a pro at handling the sympathy and the judgment over Hayden's death. I started to realize that that might be why she always looked so broken around me was because of the appearance she had to keep up outside of the house. I hadn't given her enough credit.

Mom got up and put the phone back on the dock and gathered her purse. I jumped up and followed her. "So where are we going? What's the plan?"

"I'm going to go meet with Mrs. Hallifax alone. I think it'd be best."

I held onto the back of a chair as my mom searched for her keys under the pile of shopping bags. "You don't think I should go?" My feelings were a little hurt and I stared at the ground.

My mom patted the back of my hand. "I don't know the extent of the situation and I don't want to embarrass anyone. We could be misinterpreting and I don't want

Mrs. Hallifax to feel attacked before we know how involved she is. I'll call you as soon as we're through though."

"Okay."

My mom left and I was alone again. I started chewing my cuticles. I didn't know how long this might take and I thought I might go crazy at home. I was tired of being alone all the time. And I figured while I had already gone out on a limb to ask my mom for help, I might as well do it again. So I left the house and crossed the street.

I didn't put on shoes and the pavement burned my feet again but I jogged up Stacey's sidewalk and rang the doorbell. I was so happy when she answered. "I am so, so sorry. I blew our fight way out of proportion and I miss you."

Stacey had taken a step back when she first opened the door but now she moved forward to hug me. She almost a foot shorter than me but I felt like a child.

"I'm sorry too. I didn't think about what I was saying. I know it takes you a while to process things I was just afraid I was being replaced and I was kind of jealous."

I always found it weird that guys could be throwing punches at one another one minute, and then be best friends the next. But it was just like that. All it took was actually seeing each other for us to forget what we even fought about. It seemed like it happened a long time ago and we were right back in the middle of our friendship.

Stacey moved out of the way to let me come inside. "What happened? You look like a mess."

I paused in front of the mirror hanging in their hallway and saw how blotchy and puffy my face looked. My eyes were bloodshot and new tears were starting to gather in the corners. I really couldn't turn them off anymore. It took me a while to retell

everything that had happened since we broke up. Just as expected, Stacey was as outraged at Ally being pregnant as I was.

“And she really says it’s his?”

I nodded.

“And your parents believe her too? Wow.” She shook her head. “That’s crazy. I’m so sorry.”

Then I had to tell her about Tiara and I wasn’t sure at all how she would take it. She was definitely surprised. However, she was even more surprised that I had tried rock climbing. For some reason, Stacey found it hilarious.

She said, “I can just imagine you clinging to some rock wall with your chicken legs banging together because you’re so scared.”

“Ha, ha.” She always knew how to bring me out of a funk.

“I wish I could have seen you make it to the top though.”

“You should come sometime.”

“I’ll pass. I wouldn’t want to ruin my manicure.” She held up the back of her hand to show off her hot pink and glitter nails.

It felt so nice to be laughing and joking around with Stacey again. I was still worried about Tiara though and kept checking my phone to see if I’d missed the call from my mom.

It wasn’t until the week before I would leave for school that I actually saw Tiara again. She called me to meet up at Rock On! like we used to. I felt nervous. My mom said it

was hard discussion to have with Mrs. Hallifax. Tiara had burst into tears as soon as my mom had shown up at the door and locked herself in her room. Mrs. Hallifax admitted she encouraged Tiara to fast as part of her religious growth but had no idea how out of control it had gotten. My mom told her how upset I had been over the episode Tiara had when we went climbing and how scared I was to tell anyone. After about half an hour, Tiara finally emerged from her room. Mrs. Hallifax yelled and then cried as well. She decided Tiara might need to go to counseling to work through whatever had driven her to take it so far.

I sat at a table while I waited on Tiara to show up. I had ordered some nachos and instantly regretted it. I was afraid it might look like I was trying to prove something to Tiara, but she was her same bubbly self the moment she bounced through the door.

I stood up as she walked over, unsure of how she might greet me. But she instantly hugged me.

“Thanks,” she said.

I sat back down and she took the seat across from me. I left the nachos untouched but she eyed them. “You want one?”

She took a small, broken chip and put it in her mouth. “You don’t know how hard it is to do that.”

What could I say? She was right. I didn’t seem to know much of anything. So I waited.

“I’m really sorry about what I put you through when we went climbing. It just became a habit to not eat. I thought it was what God wanted me to do but my mom says I

took it too far.” It was a rare time to see her mouth turned down in a slight frown. “But you know what? The vain side of me also likes how tiny my waist is.”

“But, Tiara-.”

“I know. It’s awful!” I could see her eyes begin to glisten. This must be hard for her. “Mom says I have to go to counseling. She’s been going crazy, trying to look up eating disorders online and fasting and stuff like that. I honestly didn’t think I had a problem until your mom pointed it out.”

My mom. She had definitely saved the day. I felt so grateful. I thought I was so prepared to go out into the real world. I thought I could solve any problem I might face because I was just so smart. But it was nice to know that my mom would still help me out and that I still needed her.

“I’m glad you’re okay. And you know you can call me any time during the semester.”

“Thanks, Bri. You’re a great friend.”

I felt like a bit of a fraud when she said this. I wasn’t much of a friend really. If I were a better friend I wouldn’t have blown up at Stacey. And I wouldn’t have used Tiara as her replacement. If I were a better friend, I might have noticed Tiara’s problem a long time ago or convinced her not to climb that day. But I felt like I was getting better. I had started off the summer with only one real friend. But now, at the end I had two friends and a boyfriend to top it off.

“So are you.” It felt so cheesy to say these things but sometimes you just needed to tell someone nice things. And it was the truth.

I felt like a new girl and the day before I left for school I asked Caleb to go with me to see Hayden's grave. It looked the same as last time. The granite was so bright and clean and was still surrounded by fresh flowers that I now knew my mom had changed every couple of days. I didn't even question how much it cost them to keep it up.

Caleb hung back a minute as I walked up to the gravestone. "Well, I hope you are happy now," I said as I knelt in front of the grave. I rubbed a fallen flower petal between my fingers. "You have made me question everything about my existence up until now. I wish I had known you better. I can't change that though." I was thankful for how dry my eyes were. Besides, I felt happy this time, the happiest I'd really been all summer.

"But I guess I should also thank you. It's kind of because of you that I've done anything outside my normal routine. And I can see why you liked the rush of adrenaline so much. It's addictive. But I also know I need to be myself and that it's okay. I just hope it's enough for my future niece." I reached into my pocket and pulled out the black velvet box. "I still don't know what exactly this means, and I might never. But it's so like you to leave so much unanswered." I leaned in close and whispered something to him that I hadn't said since we were young and inseparable, "I love you."

I thought about just leaving the ring there; maybe burying it there with him. But I slipped it back in my pocket. It felt too important. I stood up and brushed the dirt and grass from my clothes before walking back to Caleb. "You want to talk to him?"

Caleb shook his head. "We talk all the time." He wrapped his arm around my waist and led me out of the cemetery.

Chapter Twenty-Two

December

“Am I too late? Is she here already?” I asked as I skid to a halt in the hospital waiting room.

“No you’re right on time. The doctors said it should be any minute now.” My mom gave me a hug like she wasn’t sure how. It was awkward but I knew it would take a little to get us back where we were before Hayden’s death.

“Hey, Mr. Lancer,” I smiled at Ally’s dad who was a nervous wreck. He kept crossing and uncrossing his legs or making like he was going to get up and pace the room. I gave my own dad a one-armed hug before I sat down and started to unwind my scarf.

It was amazing how much things had changed this semester. It was weird between us when I first left for school. Things were still uneasy between us all but I actually managed to call home a few days in to the semester. We talked on the phone at least once a week and I had convinced myself to come home for Fall Break and Thanksgiving.

It also hadn’t taken much arm-twisting to make Seth and his parents cave about removing the video of Hayden’s death from the internet. Once the police became involved their resolve to freedom of speech crumbled. With that hurdle out of the way, my mom was more inclined to take action against the school. I don’t know if it was because of the stress relief or if she grew more confident with my dad’s abilities to handle these situations. They were still in the early processes of suing the school and administration, but they seemed optimistic.

I asked my dad why they were really pursuing this. I said, “We all know it was Hayden’s idea. Nobody else really made him do it.”

“That’s not the point. We trusted them every day with yours and Hayden’s well-being. They violated that trust by not locking the door to the roof and by not keeping tabs on where the students go while classes are in session.”

I guess I could kind of see their point. But I wasn’t willing to rock the boat so I kept my thoughts to myself for once. I was just happy we were all getting along.

Over Fall Break I was 95% sure I wasn’t going to come to the hospital when Ally went into labor. I actually hoped she would go into labor during one of my finals so I had a legitimate excuse. By Thanksgiving, I had caved slightly and assured my mom I would do my best to make it while still hoping I wouldn’t be able to.

Now that I was here, I was glad I wasn’t going to miss out on everything. I had felt left out all summer anyway. It was Caleb who had really convinced me to come because he was almost as eager as my mom. He had a few doubts about Ally but I think he just hoped so much that it was Hayden’s. It wasn’t until a week after Thanksgiving when we were talking on the phone that he had finally convinced me. “Well, I’m going to be there even if you’re not,” he said.

“I already said I’d try to be there.”

Caleb’s voice had an edge to it that I rarely heard. “You know, you missed out on a lot of Hayden’s life and now you can never get that time back. Are you really willing to miss out on any of his daughter’s life just because you don’t like the mother?”

He really struck a nerve. I had missed out on Hayden’s life which is what tortured me the most. All of my unanswered questions still lingered. The biggest was

what if I had known him better; would I even have these questions? And Caleb was right that I couldn't change time and get it all back. So what if this little girl (because we had found out in September it was a girl) really was Hayden's and she never knew me? I really didn't want to think about that possibility.

I looked around the waiting room and didn't see Caleb anywhere. "Is Caleb here?" I asked.

My mom answered, "He just went with Ally's mom and stepdad to get something to eat at the cafeteria." My mom had called me early this morning to tell me Ally was in labor and I actually did have a final. But it was easy to breeze through before I made the six hour drive back home.

I only had to wait another fifteen nervous, leg-bouncing minutes before Caleb returned with Mr. and Mrs. Pearson. I practically threw myself on Caleb when I saw him. It had been almost a month since I'd seen him last. His job kept him busy so he couldn't visit as much and then I was cramming for finals and had no free time either. Caleb was contemplating even moving closer to my school but I wouldn't pressure him into it.

We sat back down and Caleb draped his arm over the back of my chair. Mrs. Pearson had already gone back to be with Ally. So we were all just waiting for her or the doctor to come out and tell us Ally and the baby were okay.

I kept texting with Tiara and Stacey while I waited to keep them updated. It had been easy to fall back into my friendship with Stacey. We parted for school in August with Stacey swimming in tears but eager for college life. She couldn't wait to get her hands on all the frat boys she could find. I was equally heartbroken but just laughed

instead of cried. We complained to each other about our annoying roommates but overall we both had great semesters.

Tiara and I had also kept in touch. She was going to a Christian school in Alabama so I never saw her but I could talk to her about rock climbing and we made plans for the summer to try some new spots. When I told her Ally was in labor she said she'd say a few prayers and send the request around her prayer circle too. She was seeing a counselor at her new school to help her with her eating disorder. She had happily texted me that her size zero jeans were now too small.

Caleb fell asleep while we waited but jerked awake when Mrs. Pearson came running into the waiting room in tears. "She's here. Our beautiful granddaughter is here."

Mr. Lancer jumped up and ran over to her. "How's Ally?"

Mrs. Pearson grasped his hands and said, "She's fine. They're both fine." She gave him a hug before moving on to hug her husband. My parents and I just stood around awkwardly. None of us knew if we should celebrate or not. It was a little bit longer until Mr. Lancer came back and told us we could see Ally and the baby. We followed him down the hall in single file with me bringing up the rear.

When we went in Ally looked exhausted and didn't take her eyes off the little bundle of blankets wrapped in her arms. Mrs. Pearson couldn't decide who to look at as her eyes darted between her daughter and granddaughter. The guys all hung back but my mom went straight for Ally so she could peek in to see the baby.

Ally finally looked up and noticed the full room. "Everyone, meet Hayley." Ally held up her tiny baby girl and showed her around to everyone.

“Really? You’re going to go with Hayley?” I asked, breaking up the cooing of the grandparents. “You’re going to do that squishing two names together thing?”

Ally got this doe-eyed expression on her face. “Her name’s not Haylison.”

I tried not to laugh because I was sure she wasn’t thinking clearly as she couldn’t take her eyes off little Hayley. “Okay, Ally.” My mom dug her elbow into my ribs but she quickly focused her attention back on Hayley.

“She looks just like him,” my mom whispered and my dad squeezed her shoulder as he looked down at the baby too.

I thought maybe she was just seeing what she wanted to see but as I got a good look at Hayley she opened her eyes and looked at me too. It was like looking at all of the baby pictures of me and Hayden. She had the exact same warm, hazel eyes I had. The same eyes Hayden had. And all of my doubts were gone. The one thing me and Hayden had in common, Hayley now shared. I fell in love with that little girl just as everyone else had.

I slipped out before everyone else but hung around in the waiting room a little longer. One by one the grandparents all left to go shower, change, and eat. Caleb followed too and said he was going to take a nap. “I’ll be by in a little bit to join you,” I told him as I kissed him goodbye.

I had one last thing to do though. I made my way back to Ally’s room. I passed a nurse as I was about to go back in and she told me to be quick because Ally and the baby needed to rest. I said it would just be a minute before slipping inside.

“Hey, Ally.” I walked over to the side of her bed and thought about pulling up a chair but I was too nervous.

“Hey, Bri. You want to hold Hayley? She’s asleep.”

I said yes and very carefully cradled her in my arms and rocked her back and forth. She was so beautiful and I couldn’t believe how quickly this little thing had snagged my heart. I actually felt tears well up. I couldn’t help but think that Hayden would never see his little girl.

Ally looked like she was going to fall asleep at any moment so I passed Hayley back so I could do what I came to do. I pulled out the black box again for the millionth time. I kept it near me at all times and this was the first time I’d shown it to anyone besides Caleb.

Ally saw the box in my hand and said, “Um, Bri. Look, I-“

I held up my hand and cut her off. “Let me explain first, before you get the wrong idea.” I opened the box up and Ally looked like she might say something but I cut in before she could. “I found this in Hayden’s room this summer. I didn’t know what to do when I found it. It wasn’t long after I blew up at you so I didn’t want to tell you about it.” Ally’s already puffy eyes were filling with tears again. “I think you should have it.”

I put the box next to her on the bed and she shifted Hayley so she could pick up the box to look at the Claddagh ring. She didn’t seem to know what to say. “He never even knew,” she whispered. She looked back at me. “He didn’t even know I was pregnant. I had planned on waiting until after graduation to tell him because I knew his plan was to leave soon and I didn’t want to interfere with his dreams.”

I felt as shocked as Ally looked. I had started to assume that Hayden knew about the pregnancy and that was the reason he had bought this ring. Even though I wasn’t sure if his intent was to marry Ally, I was sure the ring was for her. I think a part of me had

hoped he didn't know about the baby anyway. I'd hate to think he knew about this little girl and then decided to perform a stupid trick like he did.

Ally looked at me again. "Are you sure you don't want to keep it? I mean, we don't know for sure it was meant for me."

She kind of pushed the box back towards me but I shook my head. I looked at the little silver hands holding that crowned heart and knew. "It's definitely not for me. I really think you should have it. Or at the least Hayley can have it when she's older."

Ally looked back at her baby and smiled. "Yeah, she should have something from her daddy."

I felt so much better when I left Ally and the baby, both of whom had finally fallen asleep. I knew it was the right decision giving Ally that ring and I felt even better about Hayley having it when she's older. And I finally understood why my parents and Caleb were so eager for Hayley too. It was reassuring knowing that a small piece of Hayden was still around.

Ally and I would never be best friends and my relationship with my parents would never be quite like it was when I was a kid, but life felt good. I was still trying new things and already had some adventures planned for Spring Break when Caleb promised to take some time off to go on vacation with me. I went straight to his apartment and let myself in. He was already passed out on his bed which was no longer just a mattress on the ground. It now had a box spring and frame lifting it up. I'd go see my parents later and go back to see Ally and the baby but for now, lying next to Caleb was all I wanted to do.