

PROLOGUE

I'm Watching You

By K. E. Ward

Gray clouds moved swiftly across a black sky, riding with the anxious winds. The sky was ready to rip apart at any moment, and the trees were tossing and swaying as the temperatures plummeted. A storm was coming, that was for sure: the town of Early Winter hadn't seen an inch of rain for two months. The air was misty and the tree frogs were humming in a cacophonous symphony, and the moon, a half-crescent of radiant light, was casting an eerie glow on the streets of the town.

Leah's stepmother stood behind her in the mirror as she tried on a new dress.

"That one looks beautiful on you," she said.

Leah squinted into the dirty full-length mirror, examining her twelve-year-old figure with disdain.

"I don't like it," she said.

Connie brushed her soot-black hair back gently behind her shoulder as Leah adjusted the straps.

"You're just going out with Mona," she said. "She doesn't care what you look like."

Leah was slight of figure and had big, angular bones. Her skin was yellow and when she was born, all the nurses thought she was jaundiced. Her lips were lush and full and red, and her eyes were the color of mint gumdrops. Her skin, though yellow, was flawless: she possessed a certain glow that was unmatched by any of the girls her age.

From outside, a branch of pine needles brushed against the window.

"It looks like a storm is coming," Connie said. "You might need to take your umbrella."

That night Leah was going to go to a party with her best friend, Mona Child. They had been best friends since the second grade, ever since a bully had taken one of Leah's drawings and ripped it up. Later, Mona found it in the trash and taped it together with scotch tape and gave it back to her, saw the tears on her face, and offered to give her the French vanilla pudding from her lunch.

Connie was a wonderful stepmother. When her mother Danielle had been alive, Connie was a friend of the family through the Methodist church. When Danielle died seven years ago from breast cancer, she was an immense support to the female members of the family. Five years ago, when her

father came to her with the news that he wanted to remarry, Leah was happy.

Leah finally found the right dress. "I think this one will work," she said.

Connie smiled at her with love in her eyes. "You look stunning."

Connie left the room and Leah turned back to the mirror. She examined her eyes and saw two bright jewels shining back at her.

She picked up a silver charm bracelet from the top of the bureau and gingerly fastened it to her wrist. She owned several charms from the various cities she had traveled to during to her life—Seattle, New York, Chicago, Detroit, Los Angeles, Philadelphia—although so far, she had never been out of the country.

Around her neck she fastened the ruby necklace that had once belonged to her grandmother. "Grammy" didn't have a lot of money, but she liked having nice jewelry, and in particular she liked rubies, which were her birthstone.

Leah noticed how her collarbone jutted out from her creamy flesh. Even if she weren't so thin it would have still done that; but the recent weight loss certainly accentuated her prominent bones.

The dress she chose was black, short, and sleeveless. Her long legs exposed, Leah could have passed for a few years older than she was. Satisfied, she twirled around in the mirror, smooching at the seventeen-year-old who stared back at her.

She left her long hair down, and she wore no make-up. She didn't need any. She was already seductive in her own right.

But leaving the room, she felt the oddest sensation, like the rush of wind against moist skin. She stopped dead in her tracks, her delicate fingers still on the light switch. "Mama?" she called.

There was no answer. Leah felt a shiver run through her body. "Mama!"

She began to run. Fear overcame her; all her other senses were dulled. Thoughts of murder and blood and horror flashed before her eyes in a fit of panic.

But in climbing down the stairs, her heel caught in the wooden railing, and she fell. Tumbling awkwardly down the carpeted steps, Leah felt the wind knocked out of her as she went blind from confusion.

At the bottom, she landed with a loud *kerplunk!*

"Leah, I'm right here."

Connie was standing over her, looking very concerned. Leah felt childish and stupid sitting there in a heap, a rug burn on her knee.

"Need some help up?"

But Leah was relieved. "Yes, thank you."

As Connie helped her up, Leah noticed a tear on her dress. "Oh, no."

Connie dusted her off and examined the tear. "Oh, it's nothing. I've got a sewing kit and I can fix you up in no time."

Shakily, Leah walked over to the mirror and straightened her tousled hair.

Just then the phone rang. As Connie answered it, Leah checked her handbag. Ten dollars and a cell phone just in case she got stranded somewhere and needed to call home.

"It was Mona," Connie said. "She says she's running a little late. I still don't understand why you want to wear a dress for a girls' night in."

Leah was close with her stepmother. She confided in her about all the little things that happened to her, and over the years, a mutual trust had built up between the two of them. Which was why she felt a pang of guilt that she was lying to her about this party.

But why would she let her go to a high school party? Leah was only twelve, and in the seventh grade. She went to Harris Middle School and had only three friends to speak of: Mona, her best friend, Christie, and Hope.

But Mona's parents were not going to be home tonight. They were going to go to a company ball in downtown Minneapolis and weren't going to be back until the morning. Mona and Leah were going to sneak out of the house, walk across town, and mingle with high school boys as long as they wanted to.

"Remember, call me whenever you want to," Connie said. "Day or night, I don't care. Your father's not going to be home until next Thursday, but I have the number of his hotel if you really need to get in touch with him."

"I know," Leah said.

Together, they gathered Leah's overnight bag, sleeping bag, and pillow, and set them on the front porch. By the time Mona arrived, the sky was completely black and the humidity was so thick that it was sticky. Tree frogs or cicadas—Leah didn't know which—were loud and symphonious.

Mona grabbed her red-and-white Snoopy sleeping bag. Her normally subdued eyes had sparks of mischief in them as the two girls walked to the car.

"Did you get the address?"

"It's in Stony Hill."

"That's way across town."

Mona's aunt was waiting with the driver's side door open. "Shut up," Mona said.

Mona was a highly intelligent young woman, but an underachiever. She was placed in academically gifted classes but failed out after her first semester at the middle school. She was petite, rake-like, and with a head a short, mahogany-brown hair. Her eyes were tiny but wise, and her cheeks were pudgy.

Connie waved good-bye from the front door, but then changed her mind and decided to walk over to the car in order to give Leah a kiss on the forehead. "Have fun watching *Sixteen Candles*," she said.

"We will," Mona said.

Connie waved good-bye again and then Mona shut the door. "If this night goes well, we'll be looking at sixteen cans," Mona whispered.

Leah giggled.

"Quiet, you two," Aunt Becky said.

"Gee, I wonder if Brendan would like that movie? Do you think he's like that guy Molly Ringwald goes after?"

"Mona, come on."

"Well, one thing's different: he doesn't have a girlfriend."

Leah grew quiet. "Yeah, I know."

"Maybe it'll be just like the movie, Leah. Maybe you'll end up with him."

But there was a difference between the handsome rich boy in *Sixteen Candles* and Brendan: Brendan hated her.

For two years Brendan and his friends had been taunting her and teasing her.

She knew she wasn't popular. She had only three friends in the whole school, only three people she trusted enough to talk to and to open up to. These last couple of years had been hard to take, and her three friends had had a steady earful of her heartbreak and torment.

In grade school, they mimicked her and made fun of her at recess. They called her "rat face" and "vampire girl." They advised any new student to stay as far away from her as possible, with no good reason to do so.

And so, with no friends, she lived each day as though it were a lucid nightmare: hoping that it wasn't real, waiting for it to end.

But it didn't end. In the sixth grade, it got worse. With the heightened awareness of their sexuality, Brendan and the boys continued with their torments, but with added

emphasis. They scrutinized her body, the way she moved, and her physical attractiveness. As a result, Leah never received any offers for dates, and furthermore was insulted, made fun of, and even threatened by other girls.

But during all this, Leah kept a secret: deep inside, deep in that place in her heart where treasured emotions were kept, she longed for him.

And not just longed: she ached. For the first time in her life, she was beginning to feel sexual desire, even though it was in the most unlikely and dangerous place. Even though, if she really faced reality, her desire could never be satisfied.

To love the person who burns you is a strange thing: for Leah, it fueled the first flame of passion of her tender adolescence. And though he continued to hurt her, she loved him even more: burning with ever-growing intensity every time he uttered the words, "That girl is disgusting."

He was going to be there tonight. Brendan was a popular kid, and he had tons of friends: some of them were even in high school. Leah felt nervous, and yet excited: she felt in her heart that he wouldn't try to make fun of her, not tonight, but what could happen? Many things.

She wanted to make a good impression on the older kids. She was happy that she was going to have a chance to talk with some people who didn't know anything about her reputation as a "loser," and she was excited about the possibility that she could meet someone new.

And, above all, she was excited about seeing Brendan. Strange as it was, every time she saw him, even caught a fleeting glimpse of him, her heart sped up and her pulse raced.

Mona was holding her hand and she realized that she was biting her lip and her knee was bouncing up and down.

She could barely see Mona's face in the darkened car, and the moving shadows and passing lights as they drove past street lamps gave an eerie effect.

"It'll be alright," Mona said softly. Then she whispered, "You look sexy."

Leah squeezed her hand. She remembered what a classmate named Devon once told her. "Don't tell him you love him," he warned.

"Why not?" she said innocently, and yet defiantly.

"He wouldn't react well."

When they arrived at Mona's house, Aunt Becky saw them inside but then quickly left them alone. "I've got a hot

date," was all she said, and then she was all tires and rubber.

The house was dark, silent, and cool. The girls trudged inside with their bundles and flicked on the lights, then went into the den and called Christie and Hope three-way.

"We're almost there," Mona said.

"Oh, I wish I could come," said Christie.

"Me, too," said Hope.

"We'll tell you all about it. Remember, this is Leah's night. The whole reason—well, the main reason—we're going is to see Brendan. The rest is just a bonus."

"Yeah, yeah."

"Can you take pictures for us?"

Leah laughed. She put down the extension and wandered into the kitchen. Her eyes landed on a half-drunk bottle of red wine standing on the counter. She'd heard somewhere that Mona's father was an alcoholic, but she never asked Mona herself if the rumor was true. Personally, she chose not to drink or do drugs. It was a conviction, a value, and a belief that both her natural parents had instilled in her while she was very young.

Mona got off the phone and had stars in her eyes.
"I've got to get dressed! Hope told me Anthony is going to be there!"

Leah chuckled.

As she waited, the wind kicked up again. For a moment it was so wild that one of the trees looked like a head banger at a Guns 'N Roses concert.

When they left, the air was cool and both girls were wearing sweaters.

The walk was going to be a long one—about two miles. Leah opted to take her uncomfortable flats off and go barefoot instead, but Mona braved it, saying that she didn't want to risk stepping on something rusty.

The first half-mile was familiar territory—all within the boundaries of Mona's neighborhood since she was five. Beyond that, they came to the outskirts of the business section: gas stations, corner groceries, a few restaurants.

What they needed to do was loop around so that they could bypass the more dangerous streets (although in Early Winter, even the most dangerous street was highly safe).

They walked a little bit further, and then Mona got tired. "I have a pebble in my shoe," she said.

"But we haven't even walked a mile yet," Leah said.

Mona mumbled something.

They continued on, and after consulting the map, phoning Christie a couple of times, and back-tracking a couple of times, they arrived at the correct street.

The seedy split-level house was nestled between many layers of thick foliage at the end of a dark, winding gravel road. It was the nicest in the neighborhood—a run-down section of town that, ordinarily, Leah's stepmother would never let her come to. The houses were crumbling and deteriorating, and the trash buckets were strewn all along the road, their contents spilling out onto the ground, littering the withering grass and the broken pavement. Rednecks in tube tops and cutoffs (despite the fact that it was forty degrees outside) were sitting out on their porches, husking corn and smoking their cheap cigars. Strange, twangy music wafted from the open windows, and giddy laughter and the angry shouts of a couple fighting could be heard from the street.

But as the night masked its ugliness, its beauty was revealed. The moon above was a shining crescent in a deep black sky, and the neighborhood, set on a hill high above the rest of the town, gave a breathtaking view of the lights of downtown.

Leah's legs were covered with goose pimples, and as the two girls walked down the long driveway, she braced herself against the chilly breeze that blew by.

Walking by, no one could tell that there was a party going on in the house that night. It looked vacant and neglected, with no light coming out from the front windows. The gate was open, but one couldn't see any cars in the driveway.

As they neared the house, she began to see the shadowy shapes of people hovering on the porch and in the balcony and the orange glows of lit cigarettes. She began to hear soft music coming from the interior of the house and to feel the vibrations of the base.

Beside the front porch, some beer cans had been thrown and left.

Leah immediately felt pangs of anticipation. She wanted to see Brendan badly. She had wanted to catch a glimpse of him all week, but he hadn't been at Harris—something about a family ski trip. She knew that he was going to be here tonight because Devon—her only male friend—had guaranteed it.

They walked through the front door and it was mostly dark. People were dancing, lounging on the sofas, talking in groups, and standing around. She smelled a strange odor

and saw clouds of smoke rising through the partially illuminated air. Girls and boys were partying raucously as beer spilled out from their solo cups.

She saw a light and decided to follow it, grabbing Mona's arm as she did so. The light was very faint. She heard the sound of music thumping loudly, and decided that it was coming from downstairs, as was the light. She reached the darkened kitchen and the door to the basement. An amber light came from underneath it.

She opened the door and descended the stairs.

As soon as she set foot on the floor, a boy handed her a solo cup of beer. She shook her head but the boy said, "What, you don't drink? Join the freak parade."

Leah had no choice but to keep the drink in her hands.

Someone handed Mona a drink, too. She had the same expression on her face. "Was this your idea of what this party would be like?" she said in Leah's ear.

The music thumped and more people were down here partying.

Not once did it go through her mind that she shouldn't be here. Her parents had trusted her, and she had lied.

Leah looked down at the cup in her hands. She had never tasted beer before. She smelled it, and it smelled vaguely like a sweaty sock.

"Where's Brendan?" she asked Mona.

"There's so many people here, and even though it's a small house, he could be anywhere," she said, looking around cautiously.

Leah looked around, picking at her clothes. She felt insecure and young here with all of the older kids, who all seemed to know each other and know what they were doing. She took a seat next to the window, and cradled her beer.

She saw him across the room after several minutes. As he came in, several friends were surrounding him. She lifted her eyes to him, feeling her heart lurch and then speed up, strumming at an unbelievably fast pace. She was unable to pull her gaze from him, yet at the same time, she was terrified. "He's going to humiliate me," Leah said to Mona.

"No, he won't," Mona said. "Look, he's having a good time. We've been over this."

Brendan blended in easily with the high school crowd. He was only twelve, but he looked seventeen: tall, broad-shouldered, muscular. He was an athlete. He played for the Harris football team and he was sure to make Varsity in his freshman year at the high. His hair was dark and straight, and he had a habit of flicking it back with his head when it got into his eyes—his dark, probing eyes.

Leah thought that his eyes most closely matched the color of a stormy sky above a restless sea. His features were sharp and looked sculpted, his nose straight and defined, his jaw prominent and jutting. And his lips—pouty and sultry for a boy—were all that Leah could do not to stare at.

Her heart quickened even more as she looked up shyly in his direction. She felt the coolness of the silver locket against her breast as her chest heaved slightly. She stared at the plastic cup in her hands and before she even thought about it, she took a huge gulp.

Strangely, she did not become dizzy. She was exhilarated. She stroked the cup and turned away from Brendan when she saw that he was beginning to look back at her.

He was talking with some people. He was laughing. She felt blood rush to her face when she looked back at him and saw that, again, he was looking at her.

Embarrassed, she decided to go upstairs. "Where are you going?" Mona asked.

Leah could barely speak. "I need to get some air." She took another swig of her beer. Swarming through her head were doubts and pangs of guilt about lying to her parents about what she was doing tonight. She felt bad

that she had betrayed their trust after they had proved, time and time again, that they were faithful and trustworthy to her. Scenes from her childhood flooded her memory: happy memories with her mommy and daddy, going to the park with her brother, going on family vacations. She shouldn't have done this to them, not after all they had done for her. Just as she reached the first step, she felt a hand on her arm.

"Don't go."

She turned her head.

It was Brendan.

She turned to him and looked into his eyes. His eyes were soft, and kind. She had never seen such a look on another person before, especially not him. She had never been touched so softly before. She looked down at his hand, which was still on her arm, and then back into his face. Her heart melted.

"Don't go," he repeated.

She smiled slightly.

"Don't I know you?" he said.

The music seemed to become softer and the room cooler as Leah opened her mouth to speak. "Of course you know me," she said. "We go to school together, remember?"

He removed his hand slowly and then scratched his head. "Oh, right."

"It's kind of dark in here," she said. She took her foot off the first step and placed it back down on the floor.

"You wanna go somewhere?" he asked.

Mona was nodding approval.

Leah nodded, feeling excitement well within her at an intolerable level, and at the same time, feeling calm.

"Sure."

He led her upstairs. She was sure that her palms were sweating.

The music seemed to grow louder and more intoxicating now. There was no fear in her at this point; only a serene calm that allowed her to follow Brendan upstairs one, then two flights of stairs to where the music was no more than a far-off beat.

No alarms were going off in her head. She sensed no danger; she was not aware that something detrimental might happen to her. Thoughts of her parents left as quickly as they had come.

Left and right, high school kids five, six years older than her were drinking and making out and dancing and smoking.

She felt lighter than air as she ascended the steps to the top floor, to a bedroom in the back corner.

"Look, I'm sorry about all the stuff I've been saying," he said.

She shook her head lightly. "It's no problem."—even though she knew that it had been.

"I've been watching you for a long time, see, and it's not because I think you're ugly. I know I say that, but really I think you're beautiful."

"You think I'm beautiful?"

He closed his eyes for emphasis. "Yes, I do."

She was no longer sitting on a bed talking with a boy she went to school with; she was flying.

Brendan reached over and kissed her neck.

"Wh-what are you doing?"

"Don't you feel it too?" he said.

She tried to say no but the words didn't come out. Instead, she took the flat of her hand and pushed him against the chest.

Only, he wouldn't stop.

And then the fear gripped her. Even more powerful than the excitement and the love she felt for Brendan. But she was too weak to fight it. Dizziness overcame her. The room was dim, seemed to be a place from one of her dreams

with clouds of smoke rising, the room swaying with her alcohol-distorted vision.

It was all so surreal.

She remembered Brendan touching her body, running his hands along her hips dancing seductively to the music breathing against her skin.

She remembered lying down on the bed, but she didn't know why—it could have been that she was dizzy, it could have been that Brendan pushed her or cornered her.

This time, she was holding a beer bottle. What had happened to the solo cup?

How much have I had to drink? She thought. And how long have I really been here?

Time seemed to be in a vacuum, either lengthening or shortening, she didn't know which. Memories from the past as well as visions of her future started tumbling towards her eyes as stars zoomed towards her at a million miles an hour. She was suspended in space, and then she was moving, rushing towards an unknown destination.

It all happened in an instant, and it all happened in an eternity. He was still caressing her hips—those hips curvaceous for a twelve-year-old girl and suddenly she realized that she was not wearing the dress that she had

originally thought that she was wearing but an entirely different one.

She jumped outside of her body for a moment and saw him running his hands along her hips, and saw that the boughs of the dark trees outside were bending and swaying under the wind, and the stars were frozen still in the sky, tiny pinpricks of light in an otherwise black sky, blacker than her hair, blacker than Brendan's eyes.

She wondered if he was really seventeen, and he lied because he had had to stay back a few years in school. No stupid twelve-year-old should kiss like that—like he'd done it many times before.

He was still running his hands along her hips and her pupils were fully dilated; she heard banging on the door but then realized it was only the music. She realized the door was locked. She realized she didn't have the energy to stand, to push him away, to even speak.

She felt the beer bottle drop from her hand but then saw it across the room, atop a wooden chest of drawers.

She saw herself in the mirror, and she looked like a vampire.

"I don't want you," she said.

He leaned against one of his arms. "Is that so?" He was so charming and suave that even when he spoke those

words, he sounded like a good guy. At that moment, something deep within her recognized the sinister evil that lay beneath the surface.

It could have been the evil within herself that allowed her to see it that night; but at that moment, her skin crawled and the hair on the back of her neck stood up and a bracing shiver shook her body so hard that there was no mistaking it in Leah's mind.

It was subtle, but it was there.

It was that night that Brendan Caldwell raped her.

CHAPTER ONE

She woke up in the morning to a room that was bathed in pale light. The window, partially open, allowed a

slight breeze to billow the white linen drapes and to quietly knock the plastic end of the pull-cord against the wooden frame.

Leah stayed in her bed. She examined her room, so still and undisturbed that it was unlikely that anyone had been in here last night. The door to her closet was half-open, revealing a display of neatly arranged tops and skirts, and her bedroom door was closed, locked from the inside.

Her room was completely neat. All the bureau drawers were closed and all the clothes had been picked up off the floor. The wall-to-wall carpet had been recently vacuumed, and the area rug had been recently beaten out. The air smelled faintly like lilacs.

In one corner, there lay a wicker basket full of quilts, blankets, and stuffed animals. In another sat a cherry-wood rocking chair with roses painted on the back of the seat. The color scheme was all blues, pinks and creams; and the furniture was all cherry-wood, even her bed: a feminine design that her mother had picked out. An oval mirror and a rectangular mirror were mounted on the walls, and the ceilings were slanted, the room being as it was on the top floor. The walls and the counter-tops were decorated with pictures and figurines of unicorns and

fantasy princesses, and a pair of ballet slippers hung over the doorknob.

She was wearing a lavender nightshirt and bare legs. The humungous bed seemed to swallow her up in its soft folds, even as the bed did not overpower the large room.

Leah folded back the comforter and sheets and blinked her eyes against the ceiling. Not a sound, save the whisper of the breeze and the distant chirping of a few birds, could be heard.

Memories flooded back to her. She had been sleeping, almost constantly, for days now. The party had been on a Friday, and, looking at her clock, she saw that it was now Monday morning. Though time had passed and much of that night had been clouded by the stupefying effects of alcohol, she remembered everything that happened in that small, stuffy bedroom with perfect clarity.

And how could she forget? She would remember forever the tacky design of the bedspread, the ugly milk lamps on the two nightstands, and even the Gideon's Bible, half-open, on the oak desk.

And what happened in the space of only a few minutes, as it turned out, ended up being the last thing on Leah's mind right now.

She got up shakily from the bed and walked carefully over to her closet. It was filled with an elaborate assortment of complementing colors and designs, all neatly arranged, pressed, hung, and recently cleaned. The shirts were all plain-cut and starched, and the colors were basic and subdued. Nothing flashy; nothing outrageous—just simple and elegant.

She collapsed onto her knees, grasping handfuls of the beautiful clothes—so many of them, so much care taken to preserve them.

She cried softly, weeping into the fabric. And how long had all this been important to her? She wondered. And how long would it be?

She had a queen's room in a nobleman's house. For so long she had been so comfortable, sitting on her bed dreaming up elaborate fantasies in her fairy-tale world. Her parents treated her like royalty, and even though her life had not been perfect by any means, she had always had her fantasy life to return to, that safe place in her dreams where no one could touch her or make fun of her or call her names. There, life was safe. There, life was perfect.

A dress fell from its hanger into Leah's hands. She looked at it, looked at the tearstains on it, and choked on a sob.

She knew the tears—the real tears, for these were just a product of shock—would come later. For now, she just stared at the cream dress she now held in her hands and rocked on her bare feet.

It was prissy. All lace and frills and tiny flowers sewed into the hem. It was something that should have been worn with lace gloves and a straw Easter bonnet. She looked up, exhausted, at the rest of her closet. It all was.

No wonder Brendan didn't really like her.

Dropping the dress from her fingers, she rose to her feet.

One by one, she tore the garments from their hangers. When the closet was almost empty, she stopped at the black dress she had refused to wear last night—the one her stepmother had liked.

It was simple, sleeveless, black. No frills. It exuded sexiness and it accentuated her figure.

She pulled it over her head and squirmed into the fabric. Once she had it on, she spun around in front of the mirror. It needed something more.

She dug around in her vanity bag, tears still escaping from her eyes, and retrieved a handful of make-up. Applying the foundation, powder that was next to white, dark mauve lipstick, and black eye make-up, Leah squinted at herself.

She was not allowed to wear make-up yet and had bought the cosmetics with Mona one day after school in secret. She had been hiding them in her room for about a year now, but hadn't really ever worn them.

Though smiling weakly, she was pleased with what she saw.

She then searched her closet for the perfect pair of shoes, and found them: skin-tight, tall, black leather boots.

What people would say, she didn't care. What people would think, she could only imagine. She knew she looked different now, but that was what she wanted. This was what she wanted.

She arrived downstairs to find her father reading the newspaper and her stepmother stirring a skillet of scrambled eggs.

Without being noticed, she walked across the kitchen and straight out the door.

Walking to school, the sky was completely overcast, and the temperature was cool. She walked purposefully, hitching up her stockings every few steps. Not used to wearing make-up on her face, though, she felt like she was wearing a mask.

She saw other children on the other side of the road who were also on their way to school. She knew who they were; they were some sixth-grade boys who sometimes hung out with Brendan. As she walked swiftly by, holding her head up, they pointed at her.

She ignored them and raced forward.

Her lungs were sore by the time she got to school. When she entered the front doors, suddenly everyone turned and stared at her.

She knew her dress was short; she knew her make-up was heavy; she knew her boots made her look slutty. She didn't care. She plowed through the crowd, ignoring each and every one of their agape faces.

She felt someone run a hand along her hair. "Leah, it's me."

"Mona?" Her voice was low and breathy.

"Leah, you look different. That's why everyone's staring at you. Why did you run out on the party? You never told me why you couldn't stay over at my house on

Friday night. You just said you had to get back and that was it. You just disappeared without a trace."

Leah lowered her lashes, which were now thickly covered with black mascara. "Something happened, Mona—something I don't want to talk about..."

She placed the tuft of black hair she had been playing with gently on her shoulder. "You don't look well—" she caught her tongue, "—I mean, beautiful, of course, but—"

"But what?"

She shook her head slowly. "I've never seen you with make-up on before."

"I have to go, Mona," she said.

As she turned, she saw him. He loomed above the other middle-schoolers both in height and looks. He exuded a presence that was unmatched by anyone else. It was like he knew a secret that no one else on earth knew—and he would be willing to share it—but only for a price.

Leah could have cowered. She could have turned on her heels and walked in a different direction, but she chose not to; she chose to gather all the courage she had left in her little body and face him. She set her feet in place and intended to walk straight for him.

"There he is," Christie said, who had now joined them.

Leah did not feel anger at this point; not even the dull ache of pain. Instead, she watched him with a strange sense of fascination.

"Aren't you going to say hi?" Christie asked. "I mean, after what happened at the party, maybe things will be better between you two now."

His eyes lifted and met hers. For a fleeting moment she thought he was going to disregard her completely; but then just as quickly as he had looked away, he looked back.

Leah couldn't pull her eyes from him.

She realized that neither of them were moving, and so she started walking towards him. But just as she did so, the group of boys he was with starting breaking out in laughter.

"My God! What the Hell happened to the vampire girl? Did she go to a vampire beauty salon?"

Leah stared at Brendan.

"Maybe she went to clown college. She looks more like a joke now than a vampire."

"Or a whore."

A friend shoved Brendan in the shoulder. "Would you do her?"

Brendan eyed her up and down. Without much hesitation, he said, "No... of course not. Would I touch that?"

Leah shivered. Her friends tugged on her arm. "Let's go, Leah. He's just a jerk. Forget him, let's just go."

She wanted to confront him. She wanted to run to him, smack him hard on the jaw, and show everyone just what she thought of him. But she stopped herself.

He hadn't told anyone that he'd slept with her—that was obvious.

She caught his gaze one last time. She was surprised by what she saw: no fear, no guilt, no embarrassment.

She was being made fun of like nothing had happened, and Brendan was taunting her like everything was the same.

She looked at the faces of the kids, and they were jeering; obviously agreeing with the nasty words the boys had been saying.

She hated this school; she always had. She had never fit in the way she had wanted, and even though she had her small group of friends, she felt like an outsider. But for the first time ever, she didn't care.

Two years passed. She watched the world through narrowed eyes and experienced life through blunted

sensations. Not once after that day did Brendan ever again acknowledge her.

She grew older, she grew taller, and she grew more curvaceous.

As time went on, she grew silent.

A thick fog of desolation and quiet anxiety seemed to surround her wherever she went, and this baffled her friends. None of them could figure her out, and no matter what would happen, she wouldn't tell anyone what happened to her at the party that night.

She spoke less, and she chose her words more carefully. She observed life as closely as she could, but always with the sense that everything was muted, dulled. It was as though she were a bipolar depressed patient suddenly on Lithium.

And every time she chose not to speak, but rather to hold it in and ponder it in her heart, the dark feelings would fester and breed within her.

Every time she passed up the chance to defend herself, she guaranteed with more certainty that the next time, she would do the same.

At the start of her freshman year of high school, she sat on the edge of her bed, staring blankly at the wall. She was dressed in a simple sleeveless, white sundress too

chilly for the fall temperatures, a pair of brown, leather t-strap sandals, and the assortment of jewelry that her grandmother had left her before she had passed away. She wore her hair down, where it fell lifelessly past her pale shoulders, and her lips were painted blood red, matted thickly with cheap lipstick bought from the drugstore. She wore too much make-up for a fourteen-year-old, her deep, green eyes dark with liner and mascara, her bony cheeks white with foundation and powder.

She was still except for the uncontrollably nervous bouncing of her right knee, which seemed to move completely independently of her mind.

She transferred her gaze to the window, whose drapes were fully open, and saw that it was still dark. The stars shined serenely in a black, tumultuous sky. Like the anxiety within her, the sky was ready to come alive, emptying itself of its built-up tension. The morning was new, and the sun had not yet appeared on the rocky horizon of Early Winter. The air was cool and the boughs of the sycamore trees outside were gently scratching against the glass of the window.

In her hands was the gun.

Leah rose to her feet and strode across the room. The house was completely silent. There was not even a creak or a groan from one of her parents stirring.

She looked at the object in her arms and exhaled slowly.

It was heavy as she weighed it in her hands.

It had been expensive: all her allowance savings had gone into its purchase. She had been skipping lunch at school for months in order to save up for the one-hundred dollars it had cost. Devon wasn't going to accept any money, but Leah had insisted. He was an eighteen-year-old senior in high school, and he would do anything for her, anything at all: even buy her a gun.

She caressed her bony fingers along its sleek body and sighed. While staring off into space, her jaw set in fierce determination, she held it as though it were a kitten, stroking its sleek body and cradling it tenderly in her arms.

It was small. *All that money for a little bit of metal*, she thought. With her eyes pressed shut, she grasped the object even tighter and held it possessively in her hands.

Her parents were home. If only they knew what their daughter was doing right now, she thought. If only they knew what she was planning..

What, only days earlier, was only one of her many fantasies.

But now it was a real possibility. All she had to do was slip it into her backpack, bring it to his house, and put the gun to the bastard's head. Soon, all her troubles would be over. Forever.

She could barely contain her excitement as thoughts tumbled through her mind. With trembling fingers, she re-wrapped the silver gun in a silk cloth and carefully restowed it in its hiding place: a back corner of her closet that was hidden nicely behind a stack of clean sweaters. Climbing back to her bed, she pulled her covers over her, settling into the warmth.

Time passed. From downstairs, she began to hear the clamor of her parents making themselves breakfast and getting ready for the day. She smelled the pungent odor of coffee and the sweetness of cinnamon buns baking in the oven.

She pulled on some cold jeans and a shirt. Her dirty hair hung limply past her shoulders.

She looked into the mirror and her green eyes were icy and transparent.

Her cheeks were rosy, but hollow.

She looked out her partially open window at the town. The maple-lined street was peaceful and still except for the gentle movements of the leaves swaying in the breeze. The sun was starting to rise, now, and gentle, amber light appeared in swipes across the mostly darkened sky. A woman wearing headphones and a sweat suit jogged past.

Cool wind brushed open her lace curtains and ruffled a stack of papers from her desk. She rushed to close the window as she clamped her hand down on top of the precious pile. It was her collection of poems. She had been writing one every day ever since that night when Brendan violated her in the worst way a boy can violate a girl. She had been twelve then. Now, she had a whole collection.

Some were sorrowful and deeply private. Most of them were angry and homicidal. She never showed the poems to anyone, and instead clung to them jealously and fervently. On the occasional times when a guest would come into the house, she would hide them as carefully as she now hid the gun.

She heard heavy footsteps coming from downstairs. She felt the sickening knot form in her stomach: the same one

that had been haunting her for months. She didn't want to go to school and face the kids who all hated her. She would rather die than do that.

They thought she was strange. Though she still had her circle of friends (Mona, Christie, and Hope) she suspected that even her friends didn't like her very much. It wasn't as though they beat her up every day; but in Leah's mind, they came very close.

They made fun of her. They teased her about her clothes. They threatened her. She'd come close to being jumped by a group of girls on several occasions. They hated her. And she hated them.

But worse was how they'd treated her two years ago: one person in particular.

That was the person she hated most; that was the person she wanted to die.

Leah had grown a lot in the space of two years. Her hips had widened, her breasts had swelled, but in any case, she had lost a lot of weight. Food was no longer the joy that it once had been, and sometimes she would go days without taking a bite to eat.

But there was a prettiness, a delicateness about her face that seemed somehow impossible for the features that

she possessed: taken individually, she would have been plain. But put together, the effect was stunning.

Most of the time she painted her lips blood-red and powdered her skin until it was next to white. She used perfumes, nail polishes, glitter roll-ons, and scented lip gloss generously.

She was thin bordering on anorexic, and the black hair next to pale skin made her look even more like a vampire.

The rowdy boys at school still called her a whore, but in reality, she was a virgin.

At one point she started telling everyone, including her friends, that she had slept with two older men. Brendan, probably having heard the rumor, most likely wouldn't know what to think.

But Leah didn't care anymore what Brendan thought. He had claimed her body once, but he would never do it again. He had degraded her, humiliated her, mortally wounded her spirit, and left her for dead.

Oh, sure. They said it was a suicide. But Leah knew who was responsible. She bet that cold-hearted monster even smiled when he learned that her best friend had jumped off a 200-foot cliff.

He'd been the reason, the only reason, that Jeremy had decided to leave the party that night, wander into the thick darkness, and hurl himself off the rocky edge.

Jeremy was gay. Not very many people knew that. Leah was the second person he had ever told. The first person was Brendan.

Now, he knew very well that Brendan was not gay. But apparently, he was in love with him. He couldn't take another step until he let him know just how he felt about him.

Leah didn't blame Jeremy. Brendan had strikingly dark hair and prominent features that were unforgettable. He was only twelve years old at the time, but he looked seventeen. He was taller than the rest of the boys, with a strong build and a classic, athletic face. The two had been friends since the third grade, and since then, they'd done everything together.

But when Jeremy came out of the closet, Brendan didn't react well. He turned on Jeremy. He said he never wanted to be his friend again. He started making fun of him at school. He told everyone he was only friends with him because of his money.

Leah rung her hands as she thought of the past.

Jeremy started to look pale and distraught whenever Leah saw him. She demanded to know what was wrong, but he wouldn't tell her.

Finally, one day, he did. Leah was a little bit offended that she was not the first person he told, but she also felt sick to her stomach that Brendan would treat him this way.

Inside, she was hiding her own feelings for Brendan Caldwell.

But she wouldn't let them show. Truth be told, she was ashamed of them.

The night of the party, Brendan apparently didn't know that Jeremy was going to be there. When he and his friends saw him, they broke into their usual teasing and carousing. To show people that it wasn't bothering him, Jeremy drank and smoked pot with everybody else.

At one point, the two boys found themselves alone. Jeremy broke into a tearful monologue, explaining why he shouldn't have put Brendan into such a terrible position, begging him for forgiveness, telling him he loved him, he loved him.

But when they rejoined the crowd, Brendan relayed the entire conversation to the group. He announced to everyone that Jeremy was gay.

Torn by humiliation, dizzy from drugs and alcohol, he separated himself from the party. Just before he jumped off the high cliff, several people noticed that he was missing. But no one went after him.

Leah hated herself for having feelings for Brendan. She told no one about it. It was, essentially, her deepest, darkest secret. She would rather people think she hated him than loved him any day. The latter would humiliate her as much as Jeremy had been humiliated that January night.

So one day, she confronted him.

It was a blistery winter day, and Leah was just twelve. It was right around the time that the police had stopped interrogating all of the kids who had been at the party, and the town of Early Winter was recovering from the shock of Jeremy's death.

Everyone was satisfied with Brendan's account of what had happened that night, and even Jeremy's parents were willing to move on.

But Leah wasn't satisfied.

One day, she paid him a visit.

"Brendan, I know you're responsible for his death."

He was so charming and so suave, especially for a twelve-year-old. Even when he said, "Is that so?" he sounded like a good guy.

But Leah saw right through him. From the very beginning, something deep within her recognized the evil that lay beneath the surface.

It could have been the evil within herself that allowed her to see it; but at that moment, her skin crawled and the hair on the back of her neck stood up and a bracing shiver shook her body so hard that there was no mistaking it in Leah's mind.

It was subtle, but it was there.

She re-opened the door to her bedroom after a full day at school. Her backpack was still on her shoulders. It was dark outside again, and the trees were shivering restlessly.

The impending storm had still not come.

She had an odd feeling—as though everything in her room had been disturbed but then put back into place.

She rushed to her closet, her stomach sinking the way it does when the elevator goes too fast.

Her hands were shaking out of fear this time. *Please, God. Let it be there. Let it be there.*

She pulled it out from behind the sweaters; exactly where she had left it. She let out a huge breath, lightheaded from the sudden panic. It was in her hands, and everything was alright.

"Leah?"

She spun around, her heart thudding in her chest. She lowered the gun, which was still wrapped in the silk. What was that?

It had come from downstairs. Her mother was calling to her.

"Leah, are you starting your homework?"

She couldn't find her voice. After breathing deeply, she said hoarsely, "Yes, Mom."

She closed her eyes. Some birds were chirping happily just outside her window. She was overreacting. She had never owned or done anything illegal in her life; that was why she was having such a hard time right now—right now and ever since she had first laid hands on the gun.

As she continued breathing deeply, calming herself down, she sank into her bed. Her head throbbed and she was dizzy.

It wasn't the legal consequences of owning a gun that she was worried about, she thought; it was the mere thought of being stopped from what she knew she had to do. And that was to take back all the hurt that had been inflicted upon her and kill Brendan Caldwell. With fiery passion, she knew that she would not be satisfied until and when he was lying on the ground, his head split open and bleeding.

She had come so far and had done so much. She had figured out the right person to go to in order to buy a gun. Cameron: sweet, gentle Cameron, would never betray her. She'd left no trace of her intentions besides her silly poetry; but that could easily be destroyed.

Her record was so clean you could wipe your face with it. All her family, friends, and teachers thought of her as something of a goodie-two-shoes. It was only the low-class, rowdy boys who thought of her as a whore.

Boy, would they be surprised when the police interrupted class to put handcuffs on her. "Going down in a blaze of glory," or so the song went, she would finally show the kids how their cruelty really made her feel; and what it could really make her do.

She let out another breath, finally feeling more at ease. It was only her imagination that someone had been in

her room, she thought. She looked at the gun, stroked it, then decided to lay it on the desk.

She was obsessed, and she knew it. Thoughts of Brendan consumed her mind day and night, dominating her life, thoughts, and actions. She woke up and breathed his name. She went to school and hunted for him in the halls. She rode home on the bus, looking forlornly out the window, dreaming about the day when she could finally put an end to all her sorrows and kill him. What an exquisite and glorious release from torture it would be to finally be rid of the person who was responsible not only for the tragic end of someone she had loved so fully and completely that she couldn't imagine a day when they would be apart, but also for the inconceivable torture that she had had to endure privately for more than two years now.

Stewing silently in her anger all this time, she saw no other way out.

She wanted revenge.

She opened the bottom drawer and pulled out her yearbook from the previous year. Blindly, she opened it to Brendan's picture. She hated him for being so photogenic. There he was, a broad smirk on his face, his dark brown hair curling under his ears. She sneered at him. He had taken Jeremy's life but he wouldn't claim hers—of that she

would make sure. Turning on her music and placing the earphones on her ears, she pulled out a pair of scissors and began cutting.

She didn't want to just kill him; she wanted to make him suffer first. She wanted him to shake with fear the way she trembled with love for him.

Two weeks went by and nothing happened. Leah found herself looking for him every opportunity that she could; during history class, at lunch, walking through the halls. As desperately as she wanted to, she couldn't take action.

It was Fall, and the temperatures were plummeting fast as the deciduous trees displayed growing variations of colors.

Leah's clothes were too tight and not warm enough for the stiff chill that was settling over the town. As puddles froze and frost emerged on the morning grass, her mother pulled out the trunks of winter clothing from the attic.

Leah went to school in hushed anxiety, waiting for the time that she could catch a glimpse of Brendan, wondering if this was going to be the day that something would happen, something that might change everything. She was waiting for the right time, the right setting, and she had

been watching and listening with anticipation as the days and weeks went by.

One day, she stopped abruptly when she saw him at his locker. Her heart was thudding in her chest. Swarms of kids pushed past her, nearly knocking her over, as she moved to hide behind a corner. For the first time in a long time, she began to have second thoughts. He was only a boy, she thought. Perhaps he really did not mean to cause the harm that he did, after all. Feelings of compassion welled up inside her for him, the feelings that she had been trying so hard to deny. She pressed her eyes shut. *This is nonsense*, she thought. He killed the boy she loved, a boy who never deserved the humiliation and cruelty that Brendan had given him. He had been an innocent victim, and the criminal had just walked away, unpunished. His locker now in full view, she made up her mind and scribbled the down the number and stuffed it into her bookbag for later. Brendan would get his just deserts, that was for sure. Looking around to make sure no one had seen her, she hurried away and bounded down the hall.

The rest of the day, she felt dazed. She sat through class not really hearing what her teachers were saying, thinking mostly of what she was about to do, her

excitement, and yet also fear, growing in intensity as the day wore on.

She rehearsed her intentions over and over, making sure that she had thought of every possible consideration. If she made a false move now, then she might never be able to pay Brendan back for the evil that he committed.

She ran into her friends after school and pretended to be interested in their chatter, but really she was preoccupied with her plans. On the bus, she stared out the window and listened to the wheels turning on the road, lost in her dreams.

Her mother noticed a change in her. "Earth to Leah," Connie said.

Leah dropped her fork. "I'm just not hungry," she said quietly.

"Then you may go to your room." She excused herself and climbed up the stairs.

The next day, she followed him through the crowded halls of the school. Surreptitiously, she found out his exact class schedule, room numbers, and names of his teachers.

She didn't consider herself a stalker; that would have to mean that she was obsessed. In her mind, Brendan wasn't

worth being obsessed about. She considered compiling information about him a necessity if she was going to go about this the right way.

That afternoon, sitting in her kitchen, she found out his address and zip code. Looking further, she found out the name of his parents and brother and sisters. She found out his birthday, even his locker combination. She wrote these down in a special journal that she kept in her room, under her bed.

She became friends with his friends. She started talking with his ex-girlfriends. Casually, she found out bits and pieces of information under the guise that she just wanted to get to know him better. No one even gave it a second thought. Imagine their surprise when they found out he had been murdered by the friendly, curious girl who said she wanted to send him a birthday card.

By some stroke of luck, she found two people who were willing to let her listen in on their telephone conversations with him. They probably thought she was madly in love with him, but she didn't care. She was getting what she wanted. More and more control.

She grew restless.

Thumbing through an old King James Bible, she found the perfect scripture. It was from Leviticus:

And your enemies shall rule over you.

She typed it up. The next day, she slipped it into his locker.

It had been the first move, on her part. Only time would tell what the repercussions of her actions would be. She trembled with an even greater anxiety than she had felt before, overcome with a chill that no heavy coat could warm. It was difficult for her to wait. She had the gun in her closet—the means to commit the crime. But she knew she would not be fully satisfied if she did not make him suffer first. Brendan Caldwell deserved no second chances. This was it. He was going to die.

Over the next few days, she sleepwalked through school. She watched the clock, waiting for the brief moments in between classes when she could catch another glimpse of him. She felt unreal, as though she had one foot here on earth and the other in the afterlife.

She felt drugged, even though she wasn't on drugs. She stopped doing her homework, and spent her hours after school holed up in her room, playing with her pictures, bits of information, and other toys having to do with

Brendan Caldwell. Thinking that she was doing her homework, her parents didn't disturb her.

Another two weeks went by. The nights were getting blacker and colder. Again, nothing happened. Leah was bursting with anxiety. She had to know, at least, what Brendan thought of all this. She had to strike, and she had to strike soon. She couldn't let time get the better of her and let this opportunity pass her by.

Her friends had no idea what was going on. They didn't know about the gun and they certainly didn't know what she was planning to do. And she wasn't about to tell them, either—they surely wouldn't understand. They were good for sleepovers and mall visits, but not for homicidal confessions.

She found herself slipping another note into his locker the next day. She was going to get a late penalty for class, but she hadn't wanted anyone to see her while she committed the act. Slipping into her seat, her friend Christie scolded her for being late.

"Where were you?" she whispered.

"I had to go to the bathroom," Leah lied.

Inside, her adrenaline was pumping in full force. Every step she took, every little thing she did to belittle

Brendan, was a rush better than any snort of cocaine or injection of heroin she could put in her body. She was high on revenge; and it felt good.

Christie fell into step beside her after class. "Wanna go with me and Mona to the mall after school?" she asked.

Leah tried to think of an excuse, but could find none, so she reluctantly agreed.

She was preoccupied the whole time. When she arrived home, the skies outside were dark and her parents were in the living room watching television.

Without greeting them, she went straight to her room and locked the door. After she turned on the light, she closed her shades and curled up on the bed.

She stared at her half-open closet. The gun was in there. When would she muster the courage to use it? She sighed, stretched her arms and yawned. She was tired from walking all over the mall.

Soon, she told herself. *It just has to be at the perfect time, that's all.* Before she knew it, as she rested her head against the soft, fluffy pillows, she was fast asleep in her clothes.

She found herself alone with him the next day. Neither of them had done their homework, and so both of them had been sent out into the hall while the teacher went over the answers in class.

They sat in silence for several long moments. "Did you get my messages?" she breathed suddenly. Her voice came out weak and scared. She wasn't supposed to be the one who was scared.

He looked taller than usual standing right next to her and more languid, relaxed. His dark hair accentuated his good looks. The effect gave off a sexiness that took Leah aback.

"I don't know what you're talking about," he said.

Preoccupied by the scent of his cologne, Leah mustered together her courage and stood up straighter. "I think you know." It was supposed to sound threatening. This didn't sound threatening. Leah pressed her eyes closed, feeling the tingle of nerves all throughout her body. She hated this boy; she knew that now. She didn't like him. She could never like this rotten piece of filth.

"I don't know."

"I think you do." Two girls came walking by. They said hello to Brendan. Leah was sitting next to him. Her voice caught in her throat as she watched them chat

briefly. Brendan was a popular guy. He had a lot of friends. Even still, Leah felt rather stunned as she sat there, stewing in her own silence.

When they left, she turned to him. "The messages—" she said, her cheeks beginning to burn. "I slipped them in your locker."

Understanding lit his face. Jovially, he said, "That was you?"

Leah could have gnashed her teeth. It was like a slap to the face. So, he didn't take her seriously. Well, he would.

"Yeah," she said quietly.

He smiled. "Well, I'm glad I finally know." Up close, he was even more handsome and athletic-looking than he was from a distance. He was a football player, already on Varsity even though he was a freshman. Leah felt small and insignificant next to his tall, muscular frame.

"You hurt me," she said bravely.

He looked up in surprise. "How did I hurt you?" he asked.

She searched for the right words. His voice had come out almost tenderly—but gruff at the same time. "I started smoking pot because of you," she lied.

"Oh, you smoke pot?" he said. "So do I."

She bit her lip. Emotions were coursing through her, and yet nothing she could say seemed to come out right. All she could do was stare at him through her big eyes and wait until the teacher called them back inside. She had just missed her opportunity.

That night she pulled out her journal and called him. He answered on the second ring.

Despite her anger, they had a long, satisfying conversation. Brendan was hopelessly willing to talk. Leah noted, with surprise, how easy it was to talk with this most unlikely partner in conversation.

"Who did you think it was?" she asked.

"Several people," he said. "It could have been any of a number of people who don't like me."

At the end, he suggested that they don't say hello to each other in the halls. He said it was crazy how many people he already did that with.

It was a joke. Leah could have taken it that way.

But as she put her head to her pillow that night, it bothered her.

She stewed in her anger once more. She cried in her room that she had missed her opportunity to take revenge against the evil Brendan Caldwell.

She wrote a furious account of her hatred for him and his friends, fraught with bad adjectives, and brought it with her to school.

It was another cold day. The leaves were turning brown and the smell of wood fires permeated the air as they made the bus trip to Early Winter High School.

Leah was wearing her usual caked-on mascara, heavy foundation and dark lipstick. Her friends circled her outside on the sidewalk during lunch, their lunches spread out around them. When Christie and Mona stood up to leave, Leah turned to Hope.

"I need to talk to Brendan," she said.

"Brendan Caldwell? So go and talk to him."

"No." She shook her head. "I can't. I'm afraid. You go. Go and fetch him for me."

Hope gave her a strange look. "Well, alright. I'll be back in a minute."

Brendan came ambling in her direction a few minutes later. Leah was breathing heavily. She felt dizzy and light-headed. She thought she was going to have a panic attack; but then the memory of her anger enabled her to retain her calm.

She showed him what she had written. She watched as his face fell.

He walked away.

She followed him; but he wouldn't talk to her. With his jaw set, he didn't even lift his head to her. She felt like crying, but nothing came out.

From then on, she was chasing him.

She stared at him in class. She caught glimpses of him in the halls. He wouldn't talk with her. She followed him after school, after the final bell, to the parking lot. She wouldn't go home until she had seen that he had driven off and she had seen as much of him as she could.

She went home and wept. Draped across her bed cross-ways, she felt like every ounce of her energy was slowly draining from her body. Everything that she had dreamed about, everything that she had wanted, was now crashing down around her head.

But then she looked up at her closet, and was comforted.

She located his house on a map of Early Winter and dreamed about taking the city bus to his neighborhood.

Her fantasy was now different; now, after she brought the gun to school, walked up to him at his locker at school, put the gun to his head and fired, she would turn the gun on herself and do the same. How could she endure a

life in prison with this sickening pain? It was inconceivable.

And then the call came. She was up in her room, playing with her toys, when it happened.

A knock came on her door. "Leah, we need to have a talk."

She felt nausea slam into her in full force. Terrified, she crept to her door and opened it. Her mother was standing there with a look of disbelief on her face.

Her mother had a severe frown on her face. "Did you threaten to kill someone, Leah?"

She should have said no. It would have been his word against hers, and perhaps she would have gotten off without getting into any trouble. But instead, she immediately broke down and wept.

"I see it's true."

Leah was on her knees. "I'm sorry, Mom, I didn't mean to, I'm sorry, I'm so sorry..."

She had gotten a call from the principal. Brendan had told his mother about it, and his mother had called the principal. She couldn't stop weeping. But her gun was safe.

When she was free from her mother, she picked up the phone and called Brendan. She was weeping so passionately

that her voice deepened. It was humiliating, and though she didn't want him to hear her in that state, she proceeded to ask him anyway, "How could you do this to me?"

They told her not to come near him ever again; if she did, she would be suspended. But she knew, even before they said it, that that would be impossible.

She wrote him a mindless letter explaining why she threatened him; but it didn't do her emotions justice. She stuffed it into his hands one day during class, her heart thudding rapidly.

"You know, you're not supposed to talk to me," he said.

"I know," she breathed.

He didn't end up turning her in. But two days later, after his mother had discovered the letter in his room, she was suspended from school.

They took her to a nearby hospital to give her a psychiatric evaluation. She told them she'd slit her wrists, but when they looked at them, they smiled and said, "You must have just scratched them. There's no scar." They sent her home only with a referral to a psychiatrist.

She was spent of emotions by this time. She hated having to talk to a man who thought he knew the inner workings of her mind better than she did. He was a wiry

man in his late forties with a gray beard and a salt-and-pepper crew cut.

He wore Italian suits with red, silk ties. No doubt bought from the money he wheedled away from his patients. His voice was leathery and soft, and his calculating eyes were of an undetermined color behind a pair of wire-rim spectacles.

He had her sit on a leather couch as he took in the details of her appearance, from head to toe. She sat statue still with cold eyes as his glance furtively traced her figure, pausing at the voluptuous swell of her bosom.

"What is it you want?" she demanded, as he straightened his glasses and looked up from his scrutiny. Her posture was defiant and haughty, but of this he seemed to take no notice.

"I should ask you the same question," he said, in his leathery voice. "This is your session. This is what you're paying me for."

Leah narrowed her eyes at the man, seeing through his professional front.

"To start off with, tell me why you're here. You can't possibly have come into my office just to stare at me like that."

She uncrossed the arms that had been folded across her chest. She didn't like this man. She didn't like him one bit. How was she supposed to trust someone who was paid to listen to her?

"I threatened to kill a boy," she said, throwing her gaze towards the window.

He said nothing.

She turned back to him. "Isn't that what you were after? A personal confession?" She chuckled, but there was no humor in her voice. "Maybe I should start complaining about how my mother didn't breast feed me. Then I bet you'd be happy."

"I'm not a psychoanalyst," he said.

She didn't want to break down in sobs in front of this man, but she felt the surge of bottled-up emotions beginning to well up inside her uncontrollably. Brendan, Jeremy, the indifference of her friends, the anger of her parents, all came together as she broke down. Waves of pain washed over her as her body shook with the tension that had been building up gradually ever since she had first asked about the gun. She cried passionately against the couch as the psychiatrist watched her, not saying anything.

He wanted to put her on Lithium. Her parents said no way; they didn't want her to be on any drug—especially one as powerful as Lithium. Leah was torn about the whole thing. She didn't want to screw up her body, but at the same time, she wanted to feel better, not so empty all the time.

Her father found out that his job was going to be relocated to another part of the state. They would have to move out of their four-bedroom, two-story house, and Leah would have to switch schools.

And she still had the gun. She didn't know what she was going to do with it. Maybe one of these days she would gather up the courage to stick it in her mouth and pull the trigger. The world would be a better place, she thought, without her in it.

On a blistery January day, thoughts of suicide were crowding her thoughts. She thought of the various ways that she could go about it. She obsessed about it, even dreamed about it. She secretly bought the book, Final Exit, and hid it in her room.

But Leah didn't have the courage to kill herself. The only courage she had was in her fantasies, and when she finally made an attempt, it was only with a few too many aspirins.

Her friends found out about it, of course. They let a teacher know.

"Did you overdose on some pills, Leah?"

"I have my period. I had some cramps. I might have had one too many—that's all."

She eyed her suspiciously. "Very well, then. If it's only one, then you should be alright."

Minutes later, Leah took the remainder of the bottle in front of one of Brendan's friends. When Brendan found out about it, he went straight to a guidance counselor and turned her in. She was taken out of school and brought to the hospital.

They didn't need to pump her stomach. The bottle of aspirins hadn't been full, and so they let her go with a prescription for charcoal pills.

When she got out of the hospital, she was crying. Tears were dripping down her face, falling from her chin. She wanted to see Brendan again. She needed to see him again.

She persuaded her mother to take her to the last class period of the day. She was weak from crying, but she made it through well enough to catch just a few seconds of him standing outside, talking with a group of his friends out where the buses picked up their loads of kids.

He saw her. His gaze sliced through her body, shaking her even more than the tears had.

She knew she would have to leave him.

In desperation, she persuaded her psychiatrist to set up a conference with him. Everyone thought it was a bad idea, but Leah now had an insatiable need to see him, talk with him, and be with him as much and as often as she could.

The conference was a bomb. She was so anxious ahead of time that she took her first taste of alcohol from her parents' collection of wines. She barely remembered what they talked about, and she spent the good portion of the meeting staring at Brendan's feet, feeling dizzy. As she left the room, his mother glared at her. His father smiled.

She prepared to leave Early Winter. Searching through her jewelry collection, she found her most valuable possession. It was a turquoise bracelet that her father had bought her when she was a little girl. The next day at school, she begged one of his friends to give it to him. The guy came back and said that he had refused it. She fell to the floor in writhing agony, crying and pulling at her hair. She was in the middle of the hall, and kids were walking all around.

"Give it to him again," she pleaded and demanded.

He left and did not come back.

The weekend after she left, it rained in sheets. A friend wrote her a letter that said, "I think God was crying."

CHAPTER TWO

She watched the trees and houses zoom past. The summer was in its full heat, but within the air-conditioned car, Leah was comfortable and sleepy.

Her father was busy concentrating on the road. She picked up her paperback again, but was unable to concentrate as the car bumped and vibrated. Instead, she pulled out her headphones and turned on the music. It was slow, metallic, angry, and self-hateful.

Her mother was staying behind in Early Winter until the house was sold. That meant that she was going to spend some time alone with her father for a while.

The new town's name was Hopeville. She had visited the place twice, but she knew very little about it.

As they reached their exit, Leah turned off her music and looked around. The trees were shorter here. The land was flatter, and the streets were more narrow. But

somehow, it had its own beauty and charm that Early Winter did not have.

Looking up at the white split-level that they would soon be calling their home, Leah didn't see how she would ever be able to appreciate it the same as she had her old house. But once she got inside, she felt immediately that she was home. She collapsed onto the bare hardwood floor, exhausted from a full day of traveling, and flailed her arms around. She was tempted to go to sleep right there in the living room.

A few weeks passed, and cool winds blew their way into town. In the first week in September, she started school.

The monstrous stone schoolhouse was a looming, gigantic structure nestled in a forest of pines. Due to the recent building of a second high school in town, the old fixture was only half-occupied, which made it seem even larger.

Inside, the ceilings were high and it looked like a cathedral, with arched doorways and buttresses. The lighting was inadequate, for the square windows were too small and the electricity was poorly set up. The flickering lightbulbs reminded Leah of flickering candles at a wake.

On the first day of school, Leah covered her face in make-up more thickly than usual and donned an ankle-length dress with short sleeves and a subdued floral print. She covered her body in a layer of cologne and pinned her hair back on either side with a black barrette.

She made little friends. Not that she really cared, at this point. She decided that she was tired of trying to make impressions. She decided that she was going to be a "loner" and eat lunch every day in the library by herself. She proceeded to talk with a few people on a friendly basis on occasion, but the cycle that had begun in Early Winter soon continued.

"Hey, bitch!" a girl yelled. Her name was Stacey. She was "popular"—had tons of friends and always had groupies congregating around her.

Leah spun around. She looked weakly in Stacey's direction, not wanting a confrontation.

"Hey, I'm talking to you! Don't you have anything to say?"

Leah shook her head uncertainly. Stacey approached her, getting unsettlingly close. "I don't want trouble," Leah simply said.

"Yeah, well you're going to get trouble if you don't stay out of our way."

"I don't know what you mean."

"You know what I mean, freak. You're new here, aren't you? Just stay out of our path, and we won't fuck you up."

Leah walked away.

They started to make fun of her. They teased and cajoled her. They followed her partways home after school in order to try and scare her. They, too, thought she was strange.

She had dark hair and wore mostly black clothing. She rarely smiled. She was overconfident and egotistical, they thought. She didn't talk enough; she was too quiet. She didn't go to parties and she didn't hang out after school.

She spent her free hours writing poems and reading horror novels. She dreamed about using the gun, which was still in her possession, and going on a killing spree.

Her mother had just arrived. She couldn't take this anymore. While the days were getting shorter, and the nights were getting cooler, she made a decision.

She called her friends from Early Winter and told them that she was going to run away.

"I'm coming back," she said.

"How nice," they said. "Well, we'll see you when you get here." They didn't believe her; they thought she was

just talking shit. She also told a couple of people from Hopeville. They, also, did not believe her.

She arranged for a cab. She cut class one day to walk into town to buy a train ticket.

On the morning she was supposed to leave, she kissed her parents and told them she had to go to school early to work on a project. She walked to the house where she had told the cabbie to meet her, but the cabbie didn't show up. She didn't know what to do.

In the coldness of early morning, her breath fogging in front of her face, she saw an office complex about two blocks away. She started walking towards it.

When she got there, the front door was open, and she peeked her head inside. A woman behind a desk said, "May I help you?"

Leah threw her hands to the side. "I don't know what to do," she said in exasperation. "I called a cab to come and pick me up to take me to the train station, but he hasn't shown up. May I use your phone?"

"Go ahead," the lady said.

Leah dialed quickly, then waited for someone to answer. But no one did. She then explained her situation to the receptionist, leaving out important gaps of information that might incriminate her. A woman in a pants

suit, who had been listening to the conversation from behind her door, jumped out and spontaneously offered to give her a ride.

Leah felt relieved. Her train was scheduled to leave in less than half an hour, and the station was at least twenty minutes away.

On the way there, she lied constantly. Oh, she was just visiting in town. Oh, she was staying with her aunt and uncle. Oh, they had left early for work and couldn't take her to the train station.

Leah thanked the woman and got out with her bookbag, which was stuffed with clothes instead of books. She rushed to the platform and hopped onto her train just in time.

She was starting to enjoy this lying thing. On the train trip to Early Winter, she engaged in a lively conversation with an elderly woman with a friendly face. "I'm a freshman in college," she said. "I'm going back home for a week because I miss my parents." What fun! The woman didn't even know the difference.

She stepped off the train and headed for the town's main street. Cars were buzzing along, and the street was alive with activity. In that moment, Leah felt the greatest rush of excitement and the biggest feeling of

freedom that she had ever had in her life. She was here alone, and quite possibly, no one knew that she was here. She wanted to fall to the concrete and kiss the ground.

She wandered the streets for a couple of hours, and then decided to call Christie. She found out that her parents had discovered her missing and had been praying for her safe return. Again, Leah didn't know what to do.

She was so close to freedom, but realistically, she didn't have any money or any place to stay. She gave her friend the okay to tell her parents where she was, and ten minutes later, they picked her up and brought her to their house to stay the night. It had been a short rendezvous with freedom, but to Leah, it was worth it.

Her mother was in furious tears when she arrived to pick her up. They had the loudest, most passionate argument that they had ever had right there in her friend's living room.

Her mother, Connie, dragged her back home by force. Leah felt disoriented and dazed as they made the five-hour drive back to Hopeville, Minnesota. She realized, as they were driving, that she had only missed a couple of days of school.

In the coolness of early Fall, Leah lay in the hammock in their backyard, looking up at the tops of the Ponderosa Pine trees. Serene, plump clouds were floating amidst a deep blue sky. Despite the growing tumult within the family, at that moment, Leah felt one of the greatest feelings of peace that she had ever had.

At school, they treated her differently. They didn't make fun of her or tease her anymore. They weren't any more friendly, either, but Leah was satisfied that she had, at least, gotten a little bit more respect.

She thought about Brendan on a constant basis, but by now she had little awareness of it because it was so automatic that it was practically subconscious.

She wrote him letters. Long, emotional outpourings. Every two weeks, she sent him one. Of course, she never got a reply. Sometimes she sent him letters; sometimes she sent other things—like pictures. He must have thought she was insane, but she didn't care.

She turned to food to comfort her. She didn't like to eat around other people; she considered it a highly personal activity. She hoarded food in her room, and ate when her parents weren't home or weren't looking. She

didn't gain weight, however, but amazingly retained her underweight figure.

One night, while her parents were at a concert, she looked in the cupboards for some crackers and stumbled upon some liquor bottles, instead. She pulled one out, opened the top, and sniffed it. She winced.

She had never been drunk in her life; and the only time she had ever had a taste of liquor was in the ninth grade, prior to her meeting with Brendan and her psychiatrist. Nevertheless, she decided to pour herself a glass. Taking just small amounts from each bottle, she mixed and matched her own custom-made drink.

It proved to be enough. She drank quickly and it burned going down. Sitting in front of the television downstairs in the den, she watched a Snoop Doggy Dog video, "Gin and Juice," when it hit. She felt like she was swimming in water, and it was the best song she had ever heard in her life. The room swayed as she lifted her arms and rocked from side to side, dancing to the music, savoring this wonderful, new sensation.

She thought about calling her friends, but thought better of it. She was mindful of her state.

By the time her parents got home that night, she was in the bathroom, vomiting. Thankfully, they didn't hear

her. She told her mother that she was sick, and her mother made her some chicken broth and sent her to bed. Leah wobbled up the stairs and down the hall to her bedroom.

In the middle of the night, she woke up famished. She reached for the chicken broth beside her bed, but it was cold and lumpy. She nearly vomited again.

In the morning, she had her first hangover. She wasn't accustomed to feeling this terrible. But even through her sickness, she knew that she would drink again.

She didn't do it every night; that would be too obvious. Her parents would surely see that alcohol had been taken from the bottles.

But every couple of weeks, she drained enough of the stinging liquid to make her feel dizzy and disconnected from the world.

When she was drunk, she didn't care that she didn't have any friends here. She felt alive; she felt free.

Outside, Leah had the presence of quiet courage and silent strength. She held her head high, spoke with intelligence, and was much more reserved than most of the girls her age. But inside, she was seething with hatred. When once her object of hostility was limited only to Brendan and a small group of his friends, now it spilled

over to practically any person who dared cross her path in any kind of spiteful way. Before going to school in the morning, Leah would fill her thermos with liquor from the liquor cabinet. During her free periods, she would sit in the stairwell, sip her undiluted drink, and listen to her headphones as she glared at the students passing by.

People had thought that she was egotistical; now, they were right. Leah felt a sense of unmatched superiority towards the others—especially those who had once teased and made fun of her. She hated them with a passion, and once more, she began to have homicidal fantasies.

She would pin her hair up and use a hairnet so that no stray hairs would be left behind. She would shoplift a pair of shoes from the local Wal-mart, use them, then throw them in a distant dumpster. She would wipe her fingerprints from the bullets before she used them, and make sure to wear gloves.

She would use a silencer. She would walk to the victim's house, break in through the bedroom window, and kill her while she slept.

While she sat, listened to music, and drank, she thought about the various considerations that would need to be made if she were to decide to finally use her gun.

Thoughts of Jeremy consumed her. He had been the only person in her life who had really understood her. They talked on the phone every night for hours, sharing their deepest, most personal thoughts. After Jeremy, Leah had never been able to find a friend that measured up to the love and understanding that he had given her.

He had never thought that she was strange. He had never once made fun of her, or made her feel like she was irreparably different from the others. They shared a kinship that was never duplicated.

Leah had one friend in Hopeville. Her name was Camelia and she was a swimmer. When Leah first met her, she thought that she was homeless. Her hair was dirty and so were her clothes. She asked where she lived and she was vague about it.

They went to a restaurant downtown one day after school and ordered grilled cheese with tomato. Camelia asked her, "Do you like it here?"

Leah responded, "What's not to like?"

Camelia had not picked up on the sarcasm. She didn't have any other friends, but that suited Leah just fine. Every day, she was growing to hate the people of Hopeville more and more.

The summer was long and unusually hot. Leah stared out the window every day, refusing to go out and engage in some summer activity. She didn't go out with friends, and lost touch with Camelia.

She stopped drinking for a few months. Instead, she involved herself in her poetry, and wrote two poems a day instead of one. As hot air blew in from her half-open window, Leah looked up and was surprised to see that the day was almost over. She had been writing all day, and then she realized that she had been writing all day every day that summer.

She continued writing Brendan letters every two weeks. None of them were threatening, but all of them had the undertones of quiet anger and desperation. How many years, she thought, would it take to get over the pain that he had caused her?

And she hated herself for not killing him. She hated herself for not having the courage to take what was rightfully hers.

Two weeks before her junior year, Leah was sixteen. She was walking outside in the darkness, taking a stroll around her neighborhood, when she realized her true feelings for Brendan. The stars stood out like brilliant lanterns in a velvety black sky. The warm breeze, which

was considerably cooler than it had been during the day, brushed her hair back and kissed her cheeks. A dog was barking in the distance. On the nearby highway, the rush of cars sounded like a distant, roaring tide.

Leah loved him.

She started seeing him everywhere; in the mall, at the airport, in the grocery store buying papayas. She saw him from the back and was positive that it was him looking at a Tory Amos cd at the record store. She saw him from a distance, and there was no doubt in her mind that he had come all the way to Hopeville, and she was now seeing him. Each time, her heart stopped and her breath quickened. The emotional impact was powerful: afterwards, she would rush home, fall to her bed, and weep.

One time, it really was him. He was taking a train to Seattle and was stopping in Hopeville. She saw him from the back and immediately assumed that it was just one of her fantasies.

But when he turned around, her heart lurched. She stopped breathing. She could hear her heartbeat in her throat. She was frozen still for several moments, but then gathered the sense to run and hide.

Sure enough, it was him. He was walking and talking with his father.

She looked at him longingly as they turned a corner and disappeared.

Leah went home that night, and wrote a poem.

School started up again. Girls started making fun of her again, one in particular with a scrunched-up face and with an eternal expression that was a mixture of disgust and sarcasm. She fantasized about coming to her house, breaking into her room, putting the gun to her head, and killing her.

But she never did anything about it.

Leah was losing strength. Every day after school, she came home crying to her mother, who received her with surprise and confusion.

Connie didn't know the whole story. She, like most mothers, thought only the best of her daughter, and assumed that Leah's intentions were always pure.

She wanted to tell her mother about her homicidal and suicidal desires, but she knew she couldn't. To do so would mean that she would never be able to fulfill any of her fantasies. Hope, for Leah, would be lost forever.

But at the same time, she knew she couldn't, in reality, commit the crimes. Leah, at her most primal level, was a scared, shivering kitten. She wanted her many

tortures to be avenged, but at the same time, she feared the consequences.

She was starting to worry about the gun in her closet.

When she was a senior in high school, she was just about resigned to the reality that she was never going to have friends in Hopeville.

But Camelia, whom she had forgotten about, sat down next to her at lunch one day and started talking with her. "You wanna cigarette?" she asked casually.

Leah was surprised. Camelia didn't strike her as the type of girl to be rebellious. Plus, Leah had never smoked. She was seventeen and didn't know how to inhale. Nevertheless, she agreed.

Camelia had long, blonde hair and plump cheeks. She didn't smile very much, but when she did, it was enough to set any person at ease.

Leah started doing drugs. Her first high was a snort of cocaine that Camelia had slipped her in the bathroom once all the girls had left the stalls.

Almost immediately, she felt her heart pumping in a strong, steady rhythm as her skin began to tingle. She looked into the bathroom's mirror as she was touching up

her makeup, and saw the color rise to her pale, yellow cheeks.

The music was loud and her head was spinning. For an instant, she forgot where she was. But then she looked at the backs of her hands, which were planted palm-down against the floor, and remembered: she was at a school dance. The gymnasium was dark and multi-colored strobe lights were blinking. Leah and her friends had loaded themselves up on pot just before they had entered the scene together.

She was sweating. She felt a heavy force, like increased gravity, weighing her down to the floor. She knew that she would not be able to stand even if she tried.

Her friends surrounded her. As she squinted her eyes to look at them, they looked like they were having fun. They were dancing and laughing, apparently not as affected by the drug as she was.

She swept her gaze across the room and lifted a shaky hand to her face. She tried to stand but was unable to.

Candace came to her and extended her hands. "Come on, Leah! Don't sit out!"

The beat of the music rocked her, invigorated her. She wanted to stay in this moment forever. Close her eyes and just savor it.

For the first time, she had friends. Lots of friends. On a constant basis, she was surrounded by peers. She went out every day, dropping in on various people's houses, getting high, walking downtown. They did everything together, shared everything, and were like sisters and brothers.

Life was surreal at this point. At any given time she would suddenly jump outside of herself and become aware that she was somewhere entirely different than she had thought—kind of like a time warp.

She walked through life in a haze, grabbing pleasure at every opportunity. Now, at the dance, she was vaguely aware that she and her friends had put pinches of pot in the donut holes found at the buffet table before the dance.

She wiped the hair from her face and realized that she now had the energy to stand. She got up, a little shakily, and joined her friends.

Such was life.

She experimented with every drug that she could find. She went to school every day under the influence of

something different, reveling in the various sensations that each of them gave her.

It was time to apply for college. Since her freshman year, her grades had been gradually lowering. But she still had well over a 3.0 GPA, and everyone predicted that she would get into a good school.

Leah didn't look to the future at this point; she savored in the moment. She remained intoxicated as long and as often as she could. She was waiting to graduate and leave this treacherous place, and chemicals helped her in the process.

She showed up at parties, not to socialize with other kids, but to take advantage of the products. She hung around with Camelia's crowd and smoked cigarettes with them behind the schoolhouse.

She was neglecting her work. She was taking the exact amount of credits she needed to graduate, but it didn't even occur to her that she might fail one of her classes and not graduate until it was too late.

On the day of graduation, she asked her Calculus teacher if she had passed the class.

"You'll find out in your report card," he said.

She placed her hands on her hips. "Look," she said. "I need to know if I'm going to be wearing the cap and gown, so I think you'd better tell me."

She'd passed, but barely. That evening, she paraded with her class and with Camelia and got her high school diploma. Camelia's crowd, who was sitting in the bleachers, cheered them on.

Afterwards, she got high.

CHAPTER THREE

As predicted, she got into a good four-year school just minutes away. Before she left, she asked her friend Gary if she could buy twenty doses of LSD to take with her.

He got it for her, but it took a month and eighty dollars. She slipped them into the jacket of one of her favorite cd's, packed her stuff, and headed for the dorms.

Her roommate was quiet and studious. She didn't mind. She was just as quiet and wasn't looking for a friendship, anyway.

One day, she found herself in a strange dorm room with people she had never met before. A boy with long, shoulder-length blond hair turned to her and said, "If you know anywhere I can get acid, let me know."

Leah perked up. "I have some," she said quietly. That was the beginning of her relationship with Cameron.

He asked her to come to his dorm room, where he bought four of the little squares of acid. Soon, she was visiting him on a regular basis.

One day, offhand, she complained about not having enough money for weed. Cameron asked, "Did you make a profit from the acid?"

"No," she admitted.

"You should start. That's one way to get money."

Leah found herself staring at him dreamily during their pot-smoking sessions, wishing that she could run her fingers through that long, wavy hair.

Cameron was an experienced guy. He had slept with many girls, and Leah was still a virgin.

One night, the two of them were alone in his room. Somehow, they started talking about sex.

Soon, they were arguing. "I don't see how you can treat sex so casually," Leah was saying. "It's supposed to be a big deal. You're supposed to really care about the person you sleep with, and I doubt you really cared about all the girls you fucked."

Cameron, who was holding and attempting to clean a glass bong, set it down heavily on the floor and rushed to

her. He grabbed her and shook her arms. "You don't know how hard it is," he growled.

Leah was shaken; but her opinion on the matter was not changed. She was highly aware that she was one of the only virgins on campus, and inwardly she felt very self-conscious about it.

She remembered how she'd lied to all her "friends" in high school about not being a virgin. She had even cut class one day and walked to the store with Camelia to buy a pregnancy test.

In high school, she considered her sexuality one of the most private and sacred things about her, and she didn't think anyone else had a right to know where she'd been or what she'd been doing. But now, she no longer clung so tightly to her secret. Almost all of the kids she hung out with knew that she was inexperienced.

Leah and Cameron started having long, personal conversations. They told each other about parts of their lives that they had not shared with anyone else, but Leah still refused to tell him about Brendan.

She would not tell anyone.

One night, Cameron revealed to Leah that he had strong feelings for Justice, a mutual friend of theirs. Leah was

torn. She liked Cameron, but she wasn't yet sure if it was just physical or if it was something more.

But over the next several days, she plunged into a deep depression. She didn't eat. She smoked two packs of cigarettes a day, and didn't go to class. Physically, she looked and felt like a walking corpse.

Flyers went up on the bulletin boards. There was going to be a gigantic party in one of the dorm buildings. Technically, only over-twenty-ones were allowed to go, but admittance was not strictly enforced. Leah painted her face more thickly than usually, put on a dress and some boots, and proceeded to crash the party.

She didn't see anyone she knew. Instead, she headed for the alcohol. She had two huge Solo cups of some drink she had never heard of, and soon she was dizzy and lighthearted.

Just as she was about to light a cigarette, she spotted Cameron and Justice. She merrily hopped over to them, waving profusely.

She hugged them both, lingering on Cameron. "I love you," she told them, obviously drunk.

Even though she was heavily intoxicated, it bothered her to see the two of them together. They looked so perfect as a couple. Leah stumbled away into the blackness

of the night, the sound of Bob Marley fading in the distance.

She found her way into a boys' dorm. She didn't know where she was headed, just somewhere where she could rest her head without having to walk all the way across campus again.

She found it. It was an abandoned suite with a sofa in the lounge. She fell onto it, exhausted and dizzy. She looked up and saw Bob Marley's face painted on the wall. "Can't I ever get away from you?" she slurred, as she turned over and passed out.

Some time later she woke up with an overwhelming bout of nausea. She knew she wasn't going to be able to make it to a trash can, much less a bathroom. So right there, into the sofa, she threw up.

She woke up in a puddle of her own vomit. It smelled horrible and it was all in her hair and in her clothes. Oh, no! Her dorm was all the way across campus. How was she going to walk there in broad daylight? Everyone would see her with vomit in her hair!

But thankfully, it was early enough. She made it back undetected, then took a long, hot shower in the bathroom. Amazingly, she didn't feel sick. She didn't even have a headache.

Halloween came and went. She was sitting in Cameron's room, finishing off the last remnants of a joint, when all of a sudden he broke down and started crying.

Leah looked up at him. "Cameron? What's wrong?"

She had never seen him cry before; she had thought of him mostly as a "tough guy."

He raised his head slightly, his hand covering his eyes, and said, "It's Justice. She turned me down."

Leah felt bad for him, but he knew he didn't love her. He knew very well that he didn't know the pain of a life-consuming love that rips you apart, thread by thread.

"I'm sorry," she said quietly. "I didn't know."

He lowered his hand. "It's just that, when I finally start to care about someone, it has to end like this."

Leah nodded knowingly. "I'm sure you'll find someone," she said.

A week later, Leah was approaching his door just as he was leaving. "Where are you going?" she asked.

"To the bar," he said.

"Why?" she said. "You have plenty of liquor in your room."

He smiled slightly. "There's a girl there that I want to meet. Something might happen."

Something slammed into Leah in full force. Panic. With Justice, she had known that nothing was going to happen. But this was different; this was a real threat. The mere thought that he was about to have another one of his meaningless affairs made her feel sick to her stomach.

Desperate, she searched for words. "Well, are you sure she's interested? You have to remember what happened with Justice. That was only a week ago."

He patted her on the shoulder. "Oh, dear, sweet, innocent Leah," he said. "It's just sex."

Before she knew it, she was crying. Cameron was standing there, stunned. "What did I say?" he implored.

He made a move to open the door. "Come inside," he said.

He motioned for her to come and sit on the bed. The feelings had come so suddenly, and as such a surprise, that even Leah wasn't sure where they'd come from.

"Tell me what this is all about," he said gently. He placed a heavy arm over her shoulder as her crying quieted.

She wiped at a tear. "Cameron, I have feelings for you," she blurted. "I tried not to let them show at the beginning, but it looks like I was unsuccessful." She looked up hopefully into his eyes.

He seemed to be considering her confession. Removing the arm that had been around her shoulders, he took in a deep breath. "Leah, that's big," he commented. He wiped his face with his hands.

"Please don't say I'm only kidding myself," Leah implored. "I know what I feel."

He chewed on his lower lip. "It's just that you're so innocent," he said. "I don't know if it would ever work."

Leah felt her heart fall. "Are you planning to go to the bar?" she asked.

"I don't know," he admitted, palms open.

"Please don't go," she breathed. In despair, she fell over sideways onto the bed.

Cameron dove down after her. "Leah, Leah, Leah," he said.

She couldn't say anything because she was crying.

He put his face close to hers. "Can I kiss you?" he asked.

Trembling, she nodded. Their lips met in warmth. It was sweet, and soft.

"It's just that you've never made a move on me," he said.

She smiled, swallowing her tears.

Cameron and Leah became a couple. All their friends started calling them "girlfriend" and "boyfriend." He was respectful of her virginity, but at the same time, eager to explore physicality with her.

It was only a week after they first started dating that they consummated their relationship. Cameron was careful to ask permission before each new, little move he tried. Leah always said yes.

The morning after they first made love, Leah got up quickly into the cold, morning air, completely naked. Her skin looked pale against the midnight black of her hair, and her crystal blue eyes were shining with life. Cameron pulled her back down to the bed.

"Where are you going?" he asked.

"Class, of course," she responded.

He chuckled. "Can't you just skip class this once? You kind of had a big night last night. You don't have your first time very often."

Leah gave him a quick, sincere smile. "I'd love to, but I've missed too much already. I can't afford another absence."

He smiled groggily as he rested his head against his hands. His bare skin looked creamy in the morning light.

"Well, at least smoke a bowl with me before you go," he suggested.

"If it's a quick one," she said.

She went to class feeling happy and hazy. She couldn't remember a word of what the professor said, but she was flying high the whole time.

Cameron treated her well. He appeared from out of the bushes to steal a kiss between classes; they ate lunch together on the grass in the courtyard; they spent countless hours talking, laughing. Leah was enjoying one of those rare times in her life when she felt that she was truly happy.

Leah moved into his dorm room. There were rules on campus against that sort of thing, but she did so in secret, and her roommate promised not to tell anyone. One day she bundled up her clothing, carried it across campus, and emptied it in Cameron's room. No one ever found out.

They maintained their drug habits. People were always coming in and out of the room in order to chat and smoke pot. Pretty soon, both of them were drained of funds. They decided to start selling.

Cameron was the one who dealt with the finding and bargaining. Leah merely provided a few dollars here and

there when needed. Soon, they were selling not only weed, but also acid.

They gained a reputation at the school for being the biggest and the best drug dealers. Daily, customers would come to the room, purchase their wares, and sometimes smoke them right there.

It was like high school again: Leah was dizzy and intoxicated all the time, and again, waiting to graduate.

She loved Cameron. But realistically, she knew that he did not love her. They started to have fights about it. Leah thought it had something to do with the many meaningless relationships that he had had before her—that somehow, his heart had been hardened. She was bothered by it, but didn't let it consume her thoughts. She didn't want their relationship to be ruined by it.

They were saving their last two hits of acid for Valentine's Day. One belonged to Cameron; the other belonged to Leah.

Justice came to her, crying one day. "I'm so fucking depressed," she said. "My life is crap. Do you have any drugs?"

Leah started to shake her head no but then remembered the hit of acid in the freezer. "Well...there is this one

little bit of acid, but we were kind of saving it for Valentine's Day," she said.

Justice clasped her hands together. "Oh, please?" she begged. "We can split it. I just need...something."

Leah reluctantly agreed. Cameron was in class, so she carefully pulled out the plastic-wrapped square of blotter.

"Cameron is going to be so mad at me," she breathed.

That night was a school dance. Leah borrowed a long, blue dress from Justice and was applying her makeup when a call came in on Justice's phone.

"It's Cameron," she said, dropping the receiver to her hip. "He knows."

Leah smiled sheepishly. "Is he mad?" she asked.

Justice said a few words into the phone, then turned back to her. "He says he feels betrayed," she said.

Leah knew she had made a mistake. Cameron wasn't even willing to talk to her over the phone.

But she decided to go to the school dance, anyway. As she walked in, the music was blaring, and the students were all wearing beautiful dresses and sharp outfits. "I don't suppose Cameron will show up," Leah mumbled to Justice.

But he did. Even though they still weren't on speaking terms, somehow they found themselves dancing slowly in front of each other. Leah didn't want to press

the issue. She didn't want to say anything and make him mad. By now, she was tripping heavily and she didn't know if she could deal with a tongue lashing on top of it. She said nothing until the dance was over with, and everyone was leaving and putting on their coats.

"Do you want me to come home with you tonight?"

He looked up slowly to her.

She was having trouble expressing herself. "I mean, should I stay the night in Justice's room or are you too mad at me, or what?" She looked down at her shoes, getting involved in a particularly deep scratch on the right one.

"I'm just mad at you, Leah. That doesn't mean I'm going to throw you out into the street."

Leah nodded her head slowly. "I'll get my stuff, then," she said. "I left it with Justice."

Back in Cameron's room, Leah started crying. The drug, even though she had only taken a half, was making her emotional. Cameron just watched her cry, not saying anything or making any move to comfort her.

Even though she was desperately tired, she couldn't sleep. Her tears seemed to last forever.

By the morning, Cameron and Leah were talking. "I'm sorry I took the acid," she said, looking into his sky blue eyes.

"And I'm sorry I yelled at you," he said, then reached over and hugged, then kissed her.

Everything was fine until a week later. Coming back from class with her bookbag over her shoulder, she found him searching through her things.

She stopped cold. "What are you doing?" she demanded.

"What, do you have something to hide?" he jeered. He pulled something out from behind his back. "What's this?" Glinting in the light of the afternoon sun was the shiny, metallic object that had given her such torture in years past. It was the gun. She'd brought it with her to school, afraid that someone would discover it if she left it at home.

She stammered. "Th-that's, my protection," she said.

He did not look impressed. "Why do you have a gun? A goddamn *gun*?"

She swiveled her hips and placed her fists upon them. "We're drug dealers, aren't we? We've got to make sure no one comes and steals our loot."

Cameron wasn't buying it. "You've got to start giving me some answers, and I mean now."

Defeated, Leah clamored over to the bed. "Alright. I'll tell you."

She had told herself that she would never tell anyone about Brendan. Her past with him proved to be even more personal to her than her sexuality ever was, and she guarded her feelings closely and possessively. But when Cameron discovered the gun in her possession, she knew she would have to tell him the truth. She proceeded to tell him the whole story, beginning with Jeremy, but still, leaving out the all-important detail that she loved him.

Cameron was silent for a long time. Leah thought he had lost his voice or something. But when he did speak, his voice was calm and controlled. "Why didn't you tell me about any of this sooner?" he asked.

She looked down at her palms. "I didn't think it would matter to you," she said.

He closed his eyes, as though containing his anger. "You didn't think it would *matter* to me? Leah, we shared *everything* together. I told you about my life, so why didn't you tell me about yours?"

His anger and disbelief seemed to be growing. "I thought—"

"No, Leah, you didn't think. A gun is serious business. Planning to take someone's life is serious business. To be honest, I don't know what to think about all this." He shook his head from left to right.

"I'm sorry, Cameron." But it was too late for apologies. The next day, he turned her in to school authorities.

The police picked her up, handcuffed her, and took her to jail for a night.

While there, she told them where Cameron's stash of drugs and paraphernalia were.

Both of them were expelled from school.

CHAPTER FOUR

Her parents loaded her clothes and furniture from the dorm onto the back of their dusty station wagon and drove her back to Hopeville. Everyone was staring in hushed awe as she left; they all knew what had happened. Leah felt powerless and humiliated as they went to the administrative office and turned in her key, where she then had to explain to her parents that the remainder of her stuff was in Cameron's room.

At home, the sudden and complete withdrawal of drugs from her system wreaked havoc on her system. She had frequent bouts of violent temper tantrums. During one such episode, she went out back and slammed a rake into the

ground again and again, so hard that it bent the rake askew and deformed.

Her mother panicked. When Leah wasn't looking, she went searching through her room. There, she found an old twenty-dollar baggie of marijuana that Leah had forgotten about. Instead of confronting her daughter, however, she went straight to the doctor.

"Bring her to the emergency room," he said.

There, they injected her with Haldol and diagnosed her with "drug-induced psychosis."

Leah started screaming. The hospital, which smelled thickly of alcohol, was buzzing with activity but no one had been to see them in over four hours. She demanded to speak with Cameron.

"Call him!" she screamed. The nurses were holding her down, preparing to strap her to the bed. Connie told them it was alright and picked up the phone.

"They were dating in college," she explained. As she dialed the numbers, Leah watched her mother's face carefully.

"Yes, I know...yes, I understand that, but..." her voice faltered. "Please. She really needs to speak with him." There was a long pause. Then her mother handed her the phone.

"Cameron?" she asked, after she had grabbed it.

His voice sounded weak and distant. "I can't talk long, Leah," he said.

"Oh, Cameron, I love you," she said. "I've loved you since that very first day in Justice's room when you turned to me and asked me about the acid. I hate myself for everything that's happened, and I hate myself for letting everything go down the tubes."

"Leah, it's over," he said abruptly.

"But Cameron, please." Tears were dripping down silently from her face.

"You're in the hospital now, so let them help you," he said. "Because I can't." He hung up the phone.

She started screaming again. The nurses held her down. "The sedative should kick in very soon," one of them said. Leah screamed until she lost strength.

Soon, she fell asleep.

They put her on a heavy anti-psychotic drug meant for schizophrenics. The first side effect Leah noticed was extreme thirst. Then the fatigue and slowness overtook her. She discovered the meaning of the phrase "Thorazine shuffle." She felt like a non-human—not completely

herself. Her senses were dulled, and her thinking was not what it used to be.

She had lost everything—her place in school, Cameron, her gun, her dignity, self-respect, control, even her power. Not to mention Jeremy. She would never forget him. She felt naked and vulnerable, stripped of everything she had once treasured. She was beyond agony.

She got a call from some high school friends of hers. Camelia had killed herself. Leah reacted with shock, then silence. She couldn't remember Camelia ever being depressed during the time that they had been friends. She was a shy, sweet girl, and didn't even socialize very much until she was a senior in high school.

Leah didn't go to her funeral. Not because she didn't want to, but because she forgot. In her drugged, hazy mind, the days and weeks all seemed to blend together.

This plunged her into an even deeper depression. Camelia, who had so much to live for, managed to escape. And yet Leah, the one who really needed to, was still here.

On a cold day in March, Leah, stripped of her resources and power, went into the garage and fetched a bottle of anti-freeze. She took it to her room, and after her mother had said good night to her, she drank the whole thing.

She didn't wake up for another two days.

Her mother had heard her moaning from another room. She went in to check on her daughter and discovered her sleeping on a wet pillow—drenched from tears. She nudged Leah, but she wouldn't wake up.

Soon, she began vomiting and wetting herself. Connie held out a bucket in front of her face, trying to keep her hair out of the way, and periodically changed her panties.

But Leah was projectile vomiting. She was filling up buckets. A decision was made to take her to the hospital. Even though later Leah remembered nothing of this, as her father carried her to the car, she helped him along by standing and walking on her legs.

They determined the cause of the problem. The doctor was grim as he briefed the family. Truthfully, they weren't sure that she was going to make it.

They fed alcohol intravenously into her veins. They pumped her stomach and then put charcoal into it. They hooked her up to all sorts of tubes and machines, and when that wasn't enough, they decided to transfer her to another hospital so that she could get dialysis.

Her parents were concerned about brain damage as they rode in the ambulance to the other hospital. It was a long trip. A lot could happen in a couple of hours.

She woke up during the second dialysis session and said, "I feel no pain."

Her pastor visited her. The rest of her family visited her. She received flowers. After a week, she was strong enough to be let out of the regular hospital.

By law, they had to place her in a psychiatric ward. Leah didn't want to go, but her mother explained to her that either she go voluntarily, or a judge will force her.

They changed her meds. A doctor spoke with her every day. The hours inside that place dragged as if they were weeks, and Leah wished she could be let out sooner than later.

But they thought she was lying about not being suicidal anymore. It was enough to make her want to have a temper tantrum and be locked up in the quiet room, but she controlled herself.

After ten days, they finally let her go.

Leah still felt weak, but secretly, she now knew that she had the courage to kill. And that made her feel powerful.

Her mother enrolled her in a local community college. Leah was a good writer, so everyone thought that she should take some English classes.

She made straight A's. With newfound optimism and confidence, Leah decided to go out and socialize again. She hung out with the few friends that still lingered in Hopeville, smoking cigarettes occasionally with them, even though she had quit.

She started going to raves and clubs. She went there dressed like a hooker—in short, tight skirts, halter tops, and spiked boots. She almost always made out with someone different each time she went, and on several occasions, she let him do more.

She never forced him to use protection. It was as though she were daring God to give her some fatal disease.

She rediscovered her haughty, sassy attitude and used it every chance she got. She showed her personality with her body, and her mother disapproved.

"You'll break my heart," her mother once commented, shaking her head. Leah just looked at her leave.

Even though she was living dangerously, her grades did not suffer. She made straight A's all the way to her AA degree. The only drug she did was the occasional ecstasy tablet. She was on a roll: energized and self-confident.

But then she dropped again. When she came back to the hospital, they re-diagnosed her. They now said she had "bipolar." Apparently you get really high and really low.

Leah didn't care enough to listen to everything they said. They put her on Lithium, anyway.

She transferred to a four-year school and majored in journalism. Her thoughts, at that point, were consumed with studies and writing. She dreamed about someday having a lucrative career at a major newspaper.

But her mother was concerned about her. She was determined that she was going to drop again. She was concerned that all this success meant only one thing—mania.

She forced her daughter to go to a day-treatment program for the mentally ill on her days off.

She walked into the day room stiffly and uncertainly, looking at all the faces. Some of them were staring off into space with their mouth open. Others were mumbling to themselves, pacing back and forth. All of them had a not-so-there expression on their face. Some even looked intelligent, but you could tell that there was something not quite right about the way they looked longingly out the window.

Leah timidly took a seat, clasping her purse in her lap.

In the mornings, everyone had to do a job. It was like work: dusting, sweeping, mopping, cleaning the

toilets, etc., etc. Then there was a communal gathering for lunch, and afterwards, they all met for group therapy.

At first, Leah didn't want to share. But soon, she thought of inventive things to say: "My mother is upset about my past drug use" or "I'm having a tough time coping with the stresses of school." Those two always went over well.

But neither of them touched on the real heart of the matter. What bothered Leah, what had been bothering her for a long time, was something she couldn't quite put into words without sounding crazy: the dissolution of her soul.

She was getting a lot of mentally ill friends. Not only did she meet people at the clinic, but she also met people every time she went into the hospital. She went into the hospital eight times over the next several years. Each time, they adjusted her medications and observed her for a few days. Each time, she went in because she was suicidal. Except once.

She found herself at the mall with two younger friends who were just graduating from high school. The girl driving them was mad at her, and Leah cocked an attitude. "So just leave me here," she retorted. Soon, she was off and flying. She was running through the mall so quick that the two girls behind her could barely keep up.

When they did, Leah rushed up to a security guard. "See those two girl?" she said, pointing at them. "They're trying to kill me."

They were taken to the security guard station. Mothers were called. The younger of the two girls started crying and then the older one did, too. When Leah's mother picked her up, little was said between the two of them.

Leah stood staring out of her window when she heard a rap on her door. "Leah? I think you'd better go to the hospital. I don't think you're well."

When they got there, they had to wait again. The wait was excruciating. Leah thought about Cameron and about the last time she was here in the emergency room, and she decided to lose it.

She screamed at the top of her lungs. She wouldn't stop; it was as though her life depended on it. She screamed until her lungs became hoarse, not even stopping when they gave her an injection in the hip and strapped her to the bed.

She was in the hospital for three weeks. Her parents visited her occasionally, bearing gifts, but they did little to comfort Leah, who was in despair. None of the doctors thought she would get better, and everyone predicted that she would be there for months. Leah wept in

her room, thinking about the freedom she felt when she owned the gun and engaged in fantasies about killing whomever she wanted.

She had stopped writing letters to Brendan some time ago. She thought about him frequently, but feared the consequences if she were to continue to send unwanted mail. After understanding the hardships of penalties (landing herself in the hospital), she didn't want to take that chance again. She still wanted, needed, to be connected to him, but it was just too big of a risk.

She thought he'd understand.

When she got out of the hospital, Leah resolved to live a clean life for as long as possible. She broke connections with the friends that did drugs, focused her attention on her studies, and resolved that she was going to try to live positively.

She did a very good job. She made it most of the way through school, and didn't once get into trouble.

But just before she graduated, she started using pain killers and sedatives. She gathered up hoardes and popped them like candy. She even got addicted. Without her mother's knowledge, she slowly weaned herself off of them. No one ever found out. But over the next few years, she relapsed twenty times. Eventually, however, she stopped.

She graduated. Everyone was happy. Her family patted her on the back and congratulated her. They threw her a party that night. Non-alcoholic, of course. They said, "We're glad you finally got your life back on track."

CHAPTER FIVE

She moved out of her parents' house and into her own apartment. She had a job lined up with the local newspaper, working as an investigative reporter.

One day, as she was typing in front of her monitor at her apartment, she looked up at the television and stopped. All the old feelings of her youth came flooding back as her jaw dropped open.

There, on the television screen, was Brendan Caldwell.

He was wearing a doctor's coat, talking about aspirin.

Could it be? Leah had always known that Brendan was interested in acting, but even still, she was shocked to see his face and hear his voice.

She was shaken. Over the next few months, she saw him in several more commercials.

Soon, he was doing television shows.

A couple of years later, the headlines read, "Brendan Caldwell—The Next Big Thing."

He was playing small parts in the movies. Leah felt small and insignificant. She was a small-time reporter for a small-town newspaper.

He was "the next big thing."

She found out which movies he had parts in and went to the theaters by herself on her times off. She would sit in the stands, eating her buttery popcorn, her eyes transfixed at the paperboy #2.

She kept her eyes on him the whole time, and never let her gaze drift. She bought multiple tickets, intending to see the films more than once. Yet again, she became obsessed. She watched Brendan Caldwell rise to higher and higher fame. She rented the movies once they were out on DVD and played them and replayed them. One time, she stilled the frame and kissed the screen.

Did she love him or did she hate him? Part of her wanted to think of him as a pimple that she could have gotten rid of if she'd put the medicine on when it was small—but now it was out of control. The other part, the wilder part, passionately adored him.

That part, she kept hidden.

At work, she started saying less and less to her co-workers. She gained the reputation as a quiet, steady worker. She poured her life-blood into her writing, but

kept her thoughts on the young star that was soon to make it big. She even thought about doing a story about him, but knew that her editor would turn it down.

She wore glasses now. Her eyesight had been steadily deteriorating since high school, and now she was farsighted with an astigmatism. She wore her black hair up, out of her face, and all the ladies at work said she looked like a librarian. It was echoes from the past. Leah ignored the teasing.

At night, she let her hair down, changed into some comfortable clothes and some warm socks, and watched her DVD's in the darkness of her apartment. She would almost always be eating or chewing on something. Again, echoes from the past. She was using food to comfort her.

She started to gain weight. One afternoon, she stepped on the scale and gasped. She had gained forty pounds. With tears in her eyes, she balled up her fists and pounded them against the air. She felt like she was losing control. She had to do something to gain it back.

She made several calls, identifying herself as an investigative reporter. The closest she got to Brendan Caldwell was his agent's voicemail, but weeks went by, and no response came. Because she came from a small paper, no one was willing to take her seriously.

She told herself that she wasn't going to do this, but she found herself doing it anyway. With trembling fingers, she moved to dial the familiar digits, but stopped to first look around. She was alone in the office; it was late in the day.

She proceeded to make the long-distance call to Early Winter, shaking so horribly that she had to steady herself.

She disguised her voice. "Mrs. Caldwell?"

"I'm sorry?"

"Mr. or Mrs. Caldwell? I'm calling about Brendan, your son."

A pause. "I'm sorry, you have the wrong number."

So they had moved. Leah clamped her eyes shut, feeling the same acute anxiety that had plagued her when she was fourteen.

She never thought she would be doing this again. Not after so long. She was a grown woman now; shouldn't she know better?

But she knew that she could not stop herself; to try would be like standing in front of a moving train. Once it has you, it has you. It was more tenacious than any addiction that she had ever had, and more sinister: this attacked not only the body, but also the heart.

She resorted to more barbaric tactics. She went on-line to one of those celebrity address directories and found a P.O. Box for him. She wrote it down and kept it in her briefcase.

Over the weekend, she took a road trip to Early Winter. Being back there for the first time in several years gave her such a sense of nostalgia that she wished she could stay longer.

Its wide streets, trees that bent over the road, and windy hills brought up deep memories and feelings that had not been touched in ages. To Leah, it was hauntingly beautiful, fraught with shadows of a past that could almost be rectified, ancient possibilities that whispered in the corners of its colorful streets.

Going by memory, she drove to the town's post office and walked up to the front desk. "I'd like a post office box," she requested.

"Certainly," the woman answered.

On the car ride home, Leah was dreamy in her thoughts. Feeling fulfilled for having accomplished something, she went home and brushed open the door to her apartment. All was still inside.

She turned on a light next to the sofa and pulled out her freshman year yearbook.

Slowly thumbing through the delicate pages, pausing at interesting photographs, she then searched for the perfect candidate.

Of course, she couldn't, by any means, remember who all of Brendan's friends in high school were. But judging from his popularity, practically anyone would be a safe bet, especially if they were on a sports team. Besides, she could just pick a name from a hat and say, "I went to high school with you. You may not know me, but..." After all, he was an up-and-coming star. Anyone who went to high school with him would want to get in contact with him, right?

She stopped at a particularly pretty face. She had known the girl, and she also remembered seeing the two talk on occasion. Heck, it was worth a try.

She scribbled the name down. Juliet Faulkner. If she was lucky, the two weren't still in contact.

She typed up a beautiful, short letter. In it, she briefly stated that they had gone to school together, she was highly impressed with his recent career advancements, and was wondering if they could start a correspondence.

Before sealing it, Leah stared at it. She hoped this would work. If it didn't, it might all blow up in her face, and she didn't want that.

She gave it a meaningful stroke, then slowly kissed it. Then she went about her regular day as though nothing had changed.

Three months later, a letter arrived in her post office box in Early Winter. It was the self-addressed stamped envelope she had included in her letter. It was from Brendan Caldwell.

She read it in her car with her sunglasses over her head. It read:

Dear Juliet,

Thank you for writing me a letter. I do remember you!

I would be happy to start a correspondence. My

address is:

She sucked in a breath as she read his address. She got it!

He was living in Los Angeles in a ritzy apartment.

All Leah had to do was find her way there, and she would be

able to see him again. This knowledge brought color to her cheeks and made her skin tingle.

She went home, and collapsed onto the sofa in exhaustion.

She bought a plane ticket the next week. She was going to go in May. She waited eagerly, constantly preoccupied with dreams and fantasies about what she would do, what she would say if she ever faced him again.

When time came, she packed her bags, preparing to leave three hours ahead of time.

While sitting on the plane, she ate from a giant bag of jelly beans and read a Mary Higgins Clark novel. She looked around and several people had brought their laptops. She had forgotten to bring hers. No matter: work was the furthest thing from her mind at this point.

As they approached Los Angeles, she felt her ears popping. She chewed on a few more jelly beans and the pain lessened.

She had brought only a carry-on; she didn't want to risk the airport losing her luggage.

She walked outside, and hired a cab. The air was so hot that her skin almost immediately dampened with sweat, her shirt clinging to her back.

He took her to the nicest hotel that she could afford. It was relatively close to Brendan's apartment, but not right next door. After checking in at the front desk and finding her room, she sank into the bed. It was comfy.

Before she fell asleep, she jolted herself awake. She still had to locate his apartment on the map, and besides, she was famished. She turned on the light beside the bed and decided to order room service.

When it came, she gobbled it down. The food was delicious in her starving mouth. She pinpointed Brendan's location on the map, and decided that the best way to go would be to walk.

She turned out the light, and went to sleep.

In the morning, broad daylight greeted her. She had slept for nearly twelve hours. Tonight was the night, she thought. She would get to see him tonight.

She shivered in her short-sleeved blouse and decided to put on a sweater. It was summer in Los Angeles, but inside the rooms of the hotel, it was refrigerator-cold.

She picked up her map and examined it. She didn't have far to go, and besides, she wanted to wait for the protection of the dark. But then again, it couldn't hurt to scope the place out before she made her move.

She bounded her way down the steps.

Outside, the streets of Los Angeles were buzzing with activity. She blended in with the crowds easily, rapidly making her way towards Brendan's neighborhood. The sun was hot and burned scorching on top of her dark head. Tycoons in suits, homeless in rags, shoppers in t-shirts and shorts, all mingled in what looked like a choreographed flow down and across the busy streets. Leah held up her map, trying to shield her head from the powerful rays.

Smoke from car exhausts nearly made her cough. She stepped into the street, about to cross, when a driver blared his horn at her. Scared, she jumped back, nearly falling over into a man wearing a fancy three-piece suit. "Watch out where you're going," he said, then walked off. Leah regained her balance, then continued forward.

She was nearing the apartment complex. She could see it in the distance, rising dramatically as part of the whole Los Angeles skyline.

Her emotions were swarming at this point. She debated with herself about whether to go the whole distance. It had been a long time since she had seen Brendan face-to-face; would it really be so hard to wait just another few hours?

And then a frightening thought occurred to her: What if Brendan wasn't even home? What if he only lived in this apartment *some* of the time, and somewhere else the rest of the time?

She shook the thought out of her mind. She was thinking worst-case scenario. And even if that were the case, would that really be so awful? Some day, some time, she would see him again. Of that, there was no doubt in her mind.

Cool wind whipped her black hair upwards. Her heart pounded like thunder as she made swift strides in steady determination.

She stopped herself. The apartment building was two blocks away. Brendan's was the penthouse. How was she going to get inside? Her odds of spotting him without going inside were minimal, she knew.

And besides, she wanted to wait until the darkness hid her. Then, at least, she would have a better chance of not being seen by either him or the police.

But the possibility of being in such close proximity to him gave her an ecstatic joy that could not be matched by any feeling she could imagine.

She had started out with a fierce determination to hate him, she mused, but ended up in quite a different

game. No; not simply hate; not simply obsession; but something more pervasive and encompassing—as tenacious as it was glorious.

What started out as a love for her friend had turned out as a quest to conquer her enemy, and in the process, her quest had conquered her.

She knew she was powerless to follow him. Since the moment she had seen him on the small screen, her feelings of desire and need reawakened and returned in full force.

Every step she took towards his apartment, the more control she felt.

But she knew that she could not go all the way; at least, not yet. That would have to wait for the night. She stood, chest heaving with gigantic breaths, looking up at the massive, stone structure that was his home. Her limbs felt warm and alive, and her body was loose, as though relaxed. She didn't even notice that it was ninety degrees outside, that her skin was pouring with sweat.

But a cold front was coming in. It was blowing in even as she stood there. The cool breezes were like kisses of consolation, whispering soft words of comfort as though they knew what pain she was about to endure.

She didn't know how long she stood there. The only thing that managed to tear her away was the angry grumble of her stomach, reminding her it was time to eat.

Reluctantly, she left. She found a café nearby and ordered a latte and a warm croissant. Putting generous amounts of butter on the fresh bread, she ate quickly, then lingered over the coffee until the skies became dark from sunset and she could see her reflection in the front window.

Her pulse speeded up. Her veins constricted, her pupils dilated.

She drank the last bit of coffee, then returned her cup to the counter. Her knees felt wobbly from anticipation and nerves, but she knew that nothing was going to stop her from what she was about to do.

She was practically blind; seeing stars. She didn't know how she managed to walk five blocks without falling, but her ample strides carried her the distance quickly and perfectly.

The night air was considerably cooler than the daytime. Goose pimples arose on the flesh of her arms as she made a move to replace her sweater. Great gusts of wind swept through the packed streets, howling above the sound of traffic.

Leah looked up at the moon, which was now visible, and saw that it was blood-red.

She hid behind a corner, her hair being swept up with the wind, as she approached the building. No one was around.

Her lips felt chapped and bleeding as she ran a dry tongue over them. Her skin felt flushed; she felt weak. She waited nervously and eagerly as the minutes slowly went by, as nothing happened.

A half hour later a woman wearing a purple dress entered the building. Leah's heartbeat exploded. Quickly, she rushed to the door before it swung closed. With one pale, shaky hand on the partially opened door, the other balled tightly into a fist at her side, she gathered together her composure. She was halfway inside.

Looking around nervously, she slipped into the dark, front corridor.

The lights were dim and blinked intermittently. There was a low, grumbling noise that Leah couldn't determine the origin or meaning of; it seemed that this hall went on forever.

When it finally did stop, she found herself at a pair of elevators.

"If I do this, it will change my life forever," she breathed out loud.

She punched the "up" button. The elevator doors rumbled open. She walked inside, wondering if this was all a dream.

She tapped the top floor. The doors closed, and the elevator began to rise.

It opened to a hallway. At the end was a door.

She stopped before it. A heavy, invisible hand was holding her in place, preventing her from going any further. She heard soft music coming from inside and leaned forward to hear more clearly.

But she could not step forward. She could not raise her fist, which was now cold and clammy from sweat, and knock on the door. A force more powerful than herself was acting in one glorious, dramatic sweep right here, right now. A force that had never intervened in her life before this moment, but now furiously taking what belonged to it.

She turned around silently, calmly, and left.

But she didn't leave without a thrust to the calf. Outside, in the blackness of a star-strewn night, she went straight for the dumpster. Violently, passionately, she tore through the garbage as though she were a heroin addict looking for her fix.

As fiendishly as she was going through the trash, it was amazing she didn't eat it. But the glare of a flashlight interrupted her.

"You, there!"

Leah looked up. She knew that her clothes were soiled. Her hands were covered in muck. The beam from the flashlight bounced as the man came closer.

"What are you doing?" he demanded.

Leah may have been crying, but she didn't know because her face was already wet from dumpster slime.

As the police grabbed her arms, Brendan appeared in the mist. Leah's face was dripping and her hair was matted down.

She thrashed against the police officers' grips.

"Brendan!" she screamed. "Brendan, I love you!"

But he stood by and did nothing.

They put handcuffs on her. They pushed her head down as they shoved her in the back of the car. Leah was clawing against the window, screaming, "I love you! I love you!"

But he just stood there, wearing a long overcoat with the shadows masking his expression. The sheriff was standing next to him, smoking a cigar.

Leah wept as the car started. "No!" she screamed.
"Take me back, I need him!"

"Lady, you've got to be quiet," said the younger male officer in the passenger seat.

As they were driving, Leah wept. People on the side of the road and in their cars stared at her and she closed her eyes, wishing that this day could disappear.

They took her directly to the station. Pushing her indoors, all the hookers and drunk drivers wrinkled their noses at her because of the smell.

The next morning, a story was put out into the mass media about Brendan Caldwell and his stalker.

Leah went home a public outcast.

CHAPTER SIX

Leah quit her job. She spent her free hours writing Cameron letters and never sending them. She stared out the window, knowing that it was only a matter of time before money ran out and she would be forced to return to work.

She gained forty more pounds. She was numb from head to toe, gobbling up every bit of comfort she could afford, but not really feeling it. She threw away her bathroom

scale, and bought a whole new wardrobe, full of elastic waistbands and oversized t-shirts.

She went back to smoking. It didn't give her much pleasure, but it gave her something to do—something to pass the tedious hours when she would have been at work. She smoked a pack a day, out on her balcony which faced a small patch of woods.

Her mother grew worried. She wasn't answering her calls, and whenever she did catch her, she sounded flat and depressed. She paid her a surprise visit one April, and found her apartment in shambles.

"Good Lord!" she cried. Leah was wearing a sweatshirt stained with strawberry jelly and elastic-waistband pants. She looked up tiredly at her mother.

"I didn't have time to clean," she said. Connie marched into the bedroom, and found that the bed was unmade. The sheets were dirty.

"I'm taking you to the hospital," she said.

Leah didn't have the energy to protest. She just rolled her eyes and said, "Whatever."

She told everyone there that she was "Mary, Mother of Christ, Bride of God." The doctors changed their diagnosis to "schizo-affective disorder."

The patients all stared at her with google-eyes but she didn't care. From then on, she didn't care at all what happened to her.

The government started giving her money; said she had a disability and couldn't work. Leah was apathetic. They said she should start going to a rehabilitation program full-time, and she said sure, why not.

She was the fattest that she was ever going to get, and her mind was on automatic pilot. She forgot all the passions of yesterday, forgot all the heartaches, forgot all the obsessions. She wanted nothing and strove for nothing. She was the ultimate non-person, and yet, she didn't even care.

She started sending the letters to Cameron; she didn't know why, she just did. Perhaps she'd read somewhere that it's good to make a leap of faith. She sent them one by one, drawing on them with colored pencils, attaching stickers to them, then sealing them with gold seals. She never expected any replies. She remembered what had happened with Brendan, and she expected the same thing to happen with Cameron.

One night, after seventeen no-replies, she wrote a whole book. She filled an entire blank journal with page after page of personal information, crazy thoughts, and

delusions. Basically, she poured her heart out to him. The next day, she slipped it into an envelope and mailed it.

She got no reply. There was only one thing left to do. Say good-bye. So on a beautiful card embossed with silver butterflies, she bid him farewell.

A week later, in the darkness, he appeared in her bedroom. She didn't know how he had gotten in, but then remembered that she had probably left the front door open.

He left as quickly as he had come. And he never returned.

She lost weight. The pounds slipped off easily once she stopped eating to pass the time. Her skin was hanging a bit, but once she joined a gym, she tightened up quickly.

She was twenty-eight. She moved to Minneapolis and found a part-time job at the Times. She worked diligently, and soon, her boss was pleading with her to take on a full-time position.

One day, she looked around and realized that no one remembered the incident with Brendan Caldwell. Either that; or they simply never heard.

He was a big-time star now. He was taking lead roles in prominent films, gaining favorable publicity all around

the world. Girls fawned over him, screamed when he appeared in public, threw their panties at him, that sort of thing.

Meanwhile, Leah was working her hardest. She soon made it to the top, earning her place as one of the paper's staff writers.

She made a circle of friends. She shopped at the fashionable boutiques and bought a handful of party dresses, which she used at night during dinner parties and the occasional club outing.

She met men, and it was her rule to let them come up on the third date. She did not love her men, but enjoyed their male company with casualness and abandon. She enjoyed her sexuality at this point, and did not hesitate to express it to the best of her abilities.

By this point, she knew that Brendan and Cameron were never going to be a part of her life again. Oftentimes with her men, she would pretend that she was making love to one of the two, either one it didn't matter.

One night, her lover pulled away to say breathlessly, "You're amazing. It's like I'm in bed with a different woman every night."

Leah closed her eyes and continued the fantasy, falling into it as though she were sinking into a warm,

comforting pool. That night, it was Brendan. She realized, with irony, that probably millions of girls were having the same exact fantasy.

And she realized that, out of the two, she had never slept willingly with Brendan.

In the morning, her lover was gone. She gingerly picked up one of her shoes, which had landed in the wastebasket, and sat down on the edge of her bed. Sheets draped around her naked body, she sighed.

The at-home pregnancy test was pink. Leah blinked her eyes, reaching for her glasses.

She was not shocked. A little surprised, maybe, but she had been practicing unprotected sex for months now, and her period was two weeks late. She never got a late period, not even when she was overweight.

She dropped the plastic test into the tub and prepared to call her mother. She was not going to happy, even though Leah was approaching thirty and had ample financial resources to take care of a baby. Her mother held onto her traditional Christian values tightly, and knew nothing of her daughter's recent promiscuity.

It wouldn't ruin her, Leah thought. She would have no reason to hang her head in shame, considering the history of their extended family.

And Leah wanted the baby. She didn't care how greatly she would have to alter her fast-paced life, how much stress she would have to endure. This child was a part of her, and she could not deny the pull it already had on her heart.

Her mother, of course, sounded disappointed. "I am concerned about your mental illness, Leah," she said. "Do you really think you'd be a stable enough mother for the child? Some years you're thriving, others you're deteriorating."

Leah was hurt. It had been a long time since she'd been in the hospital, and since then, she'd shown rapid improvement. She hoped her mother wasn't implying that she would be some sort of "Mommy Dearest" or something.

And she wasn't entirely sure that she was mentally ill. After all, what did she have in common with the people whose stares were blank and absent, that time when she walked into the room when she was a teenager? She had her problems, that was well established and certain, but Leah was positive that there was a difference between her

and the rest of the people she'd met with illnesses of the brain.

She was an up-and-coming journalist, becoming more and more famous. She put words and thoughts together effortlessly. How could they say that she truly had a disease which one of the main symptoms of was confusion?

Leah realized her snobbishness before she went too far. Even still, it did not match the self-righteousness and self-centeredness of her youth. She realized that she was trying to justify her motherhood, and she was becoming defensive in the process.

She sat back against her chair, submitting to her condition.

They wouldn't likely take her child away; she had a thriving career and a fairly long track record of stability. She relaxed, rubbing her abdomen.

She was happy. And that was all that mattered to her then.

She continued to work while she was pregnant. They all knew that she was going to take maternity leave, and a couple of weeks before the due date, they threw her a baby shower.

Leah's cheeks were plump from the extra fat as she held up a pair of knitted pajamas and smiled big. "Thank you," she said. "But my baby is going to be a boy. Pink hearts and butterflies are kind of girlish, don't you think?"

Her co-worker blushed. "Oh my gosh, you're right. I totally forgot."

"That's okay," Leah said. "My boy will grow up to be a gender-sensitive man."

The baby came. Leah wailed as her friend drove her to the hospital. "Get me the epiderral!" she screamed.

Hunter Logan was born on August ninth, and weighed six and a half pounds.

She took him home bundled in a soft, cotton blanket. She couldn't stop watching his face; the way his skin was so scrunched up and his eyes were almost closed, and how he looked out with wonder at this strange, new world.

Leah touched his tiny hands and fingers, which clasped hers. He made soft gurgling noises as liquid came from his mouth. She gently wiped it away and caressed the rest of his face, feeling a love and a bond so powerful that even she could not have imagined it.

At home, she placed him in the crib that she had bought with some friends a few weeks before the due date.

He immediately fell asleep, but Leah didn't want to leave his side. She watched him with hushed awe, not totally sure if he was real, half expecting him to disappear into thin air.

That night, she retrieved her comforter and pillow from her bedroom, and slept on the floor of the nursery beside the crib.

Seven months later, stressed from taking care of Hunter, but happy nonetheless, Leah reluctantly returned to work. She'd hired a nanny to watch her son during the day, and at night, she gave him her full attention.

She loved him with fullness and abandon. He was her waking thought, her worry, and her hope. She made eager plans for his future, and dreamed about what surprises lay ahead for them.

Her friends were supportive, but they saw less of her now. Their lifestyles were different. Whereas they liked to go to clubs and parties, Leah stayed home and watched her son. Her social life slowed to a halt, until the only people in her life were Hunter, her parents, and her nanny.

She went on for three years like this. She worked, came home, played with Hunter, and went to sleep. It

continued on for such a long time that her mother became worried again.

"You need to find a man," her mother told her on the phone once. "Hunter's got to have a daddy at some point."

Leah was shocked. She had not even thought about men in such a long time that the idea seemed ludicrous to her. It had been over three years since she'd had sex, and to be perfectly honest, she wasn't looking.

Connie set her up on a blind date with an Italian man from her church. His name was Robert, and the date was a disaster. They barely spoke two words to each other the whole time, and Leah was fidgeting in her seat, worrying about Hunter.

She was relieved when the date was over. When she got upstairs, she called her mother and said, "Please. Don't ever do that to me again."

She started to date again, but slowly. She met nice men through work or through the day-care center, but almost always they were all wrong for her.

That's when she met Duncan Edwards. He was picking up his four-year-old from preschool when Leah noticed him. She was wearing a burlap sundress that accentuated her curvaceous figure, and simple make-up consisting of wine-colored lipstick and some light powder. She had long ago

dispensed with her routine of heavy make-up, and now opted for simplicity.

He, on the other hand, could never have been described as "simple." He was older than the rest of the parents, his dark brown hair peppered with gray and his brown eyes sultry and penetrating. He was wearing a business suit and a navy blue tie, but his attire could not mask his athletic physique. "Which one is yours?" Leah asked casually.

He looked up at her. "Actually, I'm here to pick up my granddaughter. She's the one in the corner, playing with the boys."

Leah looked up coquettishly at him. "You don't look old enough to be a grandfather," she commented.

He smiled. "I married young. My daughter got pregnant when she was a teenager."

"Oh." Leah looked around. "How long have you been married?"

"Actually, I'm divorced," he said regretfully. He looked down pointedly at her finger. "I don't suppose you're married, either?"

She blushed, feeling suddenly self-conscious. "Single parent," she said apologetically. "Hunter never had a father."

He was more attractive than he had been from across the room. She realized, then, that she had not had such school-girlish feelings for a man in quite some time, and the feeling left her bewildered and scared. "You don't need to apologize," he said softly. "It happens all the time. Believe me, I know."

He seemed to genuinely understand. Leah smiled up at him and paused. "Would you like to have lunch with me some time?" she asked forwardly.

He looked taken aback. Then he answered, "Well, of course. I'd love to."

They ate at a trendy restaurant downtown during office hours. They engaged in lively conversation, stumbling over each other's words, laughing at their own mistakes.

He invited her over to his house afterwards and she accepted. When she got through the door, she gasped at the beauty and the vastness of it.

The ceilings were high and hung with chandeliers and oak beams. The hardwood floors shined with a high gloss, and the open spaces were so large that every sound echoed within them. The furniture was luxurious and expensive, and the bay window at the back gave a large, sweeping view of the Minneapolis skyline.

She dispensed with her purse and made herself comfortable in a soft chair in front of the fireplace. Duncan, who had gone into the kitchen, reappeared with two wine glasses and a bottle of perinon blanc.

"You'll have to watch out for me," Leah said. "In high school I used to be a bit of a boozer."

"Were you, now? I'll just have to get you drunk and see for myself." Leah smiled. He proceeded to pour the chilled wine, then handed one to his companion.

"Cheers," he said.

She raised her glass. She drank quickly. But the alcohol went straight to her head. She asked Duncan if she could lie down somewhere. He led her to a guest bedroom and said that she could take all the time that she needed.

She woke up to hot, insistent kisses. They were moist, and inviting. She was still dizzy but the fire in her body propelled her to kiss whoever it was back.

It was dark in the room. The shade was almost completely drawn, but a little bit of sunlight peeked out from underneath it. She raised her lashes slightly to see who it was, and saw that it was Duncan.

"Wha-what are you doing?" she breathed.

He said nothing. He captured her in an even more powerful embrace, kissing the nape of her neck, the space

between her breasts, her abdomen, her thigh. Leah sighed with contentment. She breathed him in deeply, smelling the scent of his masculine cologne. He wanted her, and she wanted him.

By the time she got home, her nanny was screaming at her. She had missed a full day of work and had arrived home late without calling.

Leah marched in nonchalantly, and hung her purse on its peg.

When she went in to go and kiss Hunter, the nanny tried to stop her. "No, Leah, he's sleeping. I've been trying for hours to get him to sleep."

She pushed past her. "Let him wake up."

"Fine, then, you put him back to bed. I'm not going to deal with the consequences."

Leah spun around. "Do you want to still work here?"

The nanny stood there in shocked silence, then bowed her head and went into the next room.

Leah crept into Hunter's room, feeling the tears beginning to fall. "You're my son, after all," she said, but even as she said it, she felt him slipping away. It was beginning again. The same wild, impulsive person was coming out in full force, awakened anew by the possibility of control.

She kissed him, and left.

CHAPTER SEVEN

As it happened, Duncan took control of her life. He dominated her time, ordered her around and played with her emotions.

He was testy at times, sweet at others. He could be tremendously encouraging and helpful, but he could also be a big pain. Leah and Duncan got into huge, walloping fights, but always, their rabid lust and need for each other overpowered their annoyances.

They made love in parked cars, like teenagers. They had sex on the stairs after gloomy dinner parties. They ripped each others' clothes off at work, in public, at the apartment, at his house, and everywhere and anywhere they could get a hold of each other and feel the desperate need that the other inspired.

Leah arrived at his house one evening when the sky was streaked with deep blue and pink clouds that were moving swiftly across the chilly air. She slipped into his front door noiselessly, took off her black pumps and tip-toed into the kitchen.

He was sitting on one of the stools, bent over a glass of brandy. Without raising his head, he said, "You know, I'm going to leave you as soon as my wife comes back."

The black of her hair looked vampirish against her pale skin as she approached him. Making gentle swaying movements, she stopped about a foot away from him and extended her hand to touch the glass. "Give me that liquor," she said softly.

Her lips were swollen as though she had just been kissed. He looked up, perplexed, and gazed searchingly into her face. She touched him lightly on the cheek and he grasped her hand. She was shaking. No man had had this effect on her since Brendan...since Cameron...

"I can't," he said. But then she took the glass in her free hand and downed it in one swallow. Gracefully, she picked up the bottle and poured another one. Without taking a breath, she finished it.

He stared at her with incredulity. "You really were a boozier," he said.

Her eyes were full of pain when she said, "You don't want your wife, who left you. You want me."

He shook his head. "She's coming back, Leah."

With a violent sweep of her hand, she threw the glass into the fireplace, where it shattered. She ran to pick up the pieces and cut her hand. Duncan rushed to her.

"Leah, you're bleeding."

She started to cry. She felt like a baby having a temper tantrum, shaking, beating her arms against his chest, swallowing her tears. But there was no use. Duncan was leaving her, and there was nothing she could do about it. Years before, she had told herself that she was never going to love again, but apparently, she had not learned her lesson.

Yes, she loved him. There was no use denying it now. Perhaps part of her thought that he was going to be the knight in shining armor that would save her from all her past indiscretions. She didn't know. She didn't care. She ran from the house in a fit of tears, covering her face. Duncan called after her, but she didn't look back. "Go to Hell, asshole!" she yelled.

She put the key in the ignition and turned. She didn't know where she was going. She sped out of the city and headed for the back roads. Doing well over ninety, she was racing past pickup trucks and semis. The liquor, amazingly enough, wasn't making her dizzy, but it was

giving her strength. Strength to do what she was about to do.

She pressed on the gas. Trees and houses sped by at blinding speeds. She felt like she was on fire, ready to do what she had intended to do, but was stopped from, years ago.

But then Hunter's face appeared before her like an apparition. Still speeding, tears dripping down her face, she let her eyes drift from the road and instead gave her full attention to the hallucination. "Hunter, oh Hunter!" she cried.

She slammed on the brake. She didn't even really know how she came to a complete stop safely on the shoulder.

Cars were going by serenely. She sucked in a breath as though she had just been submerged in water. She checked herself and saw that she was fine.

Using her cell phone, she called the nanny and asked her if she could stay the night. After she hung up, she went in search of the nearest motel and booked a room.

Before Duncan and Leah broke up, he suggested that she become more ambitious with her talents at work. She never thought that she would be taking a piece of his advice, certainly not after their split.

But as Hunter grew into a young man, Leah searched for her escape through work. She buried herself in her research, poured her heart and soul into the pursuit of recognition, and once again, became quite successful.

Work kept her mind off the cycle of rejection that she was beginning to realize might last forever. While she wrote diligently in front of her computer screen, she thought only of Hunter, with his sandy hair and glowing green eyes, lanky build, and charming demeanor. Work made her feel powerful even as she was powerless to change her past.

One day, her editor approached her with an assignment. Leah was almost forty-five at the time. "I want you to do a very special article," he said.

Leah looked up at the man. "Oh? What about?"

He handed her a stack of papers. "Aging in Hollywood. I have several people lined up for interviews."

She looked down at the top of the pile in her hands. Brendan Caldwell's name was near the top of the list. She returned to her office feeling nervous.

It was too late, she thought. Brendan Caldwell hated her, and would always hate her. As soon as he found out that she was the one doing the interview, he would certainly cancel it.

But she had a dream that night. All her life, all her dreams with Brendan Caldwell in them involved Brendan running away from her. But that night, he was sitting down with her, hugging her. She had never felt so much love in her life.

She walked into the interview room like a bride in a procession. He was sitting there, hands clasped in his lap, his posture friendly, open.

She stumbled to sit down. "Hello, Mr. Caldwell," she croaked.

He didn't speak at first. When he did, his voice was low. "It's been a long time, hasn't it, Leah?"

She wiped the hair from her face nervously. "And I'm sure you'll have a lot to share for the interview."

He placed a hand on her notes. "That can wait. First, let's talk you and me, okay?"

She looked at him suspiciously.

"Do you hate me?" he said.

"No," she said.

"Then, do you love me?"

"Brendan, I was your stalker."

He paused. "I know."

"You see, that's what makes me so angry."

"What? Unrequited love?"

"No, of course not."

"You lie."

"I know."

"Then you do love me."

She paused. "If I admit it, will you leave me alone?"

He smiled. "Yes."

The people standing around didn't know what was going on.

"Did you hate me back then, Leah?"

She looked him straight in the eyes. "Yes, I did."

"Why? Because of Jeremy?"

"That and other reasons, yes."

"I was just a kid, Leah. I'm sorry for what I did. I was sorry then. I suffered a lot growing up. I was even suicidal for a long time."

"What's the point, Brendan? I was your stalker. For years, you wanted me as far away from you as possible. Hell, you even had me arrested. Why are you interested in me now, after all these years?"

He was quiet. "Because I love you. And I hate you."

She wasn't sure if she'd heard him right. "After all this time, you've finally realized that you love me? And you hate me?"

He was quick to respond. "That's right."

"What a pickup line." Then she fell into stunned silence. Remembering that she had work to do, she said, "Let's just do this interview, okay?"

He agreed. The interview went smoothly, even though it was, by far, the strangest one that Leah had ever conducted.

Afterwards, she slapped her notes down and said, "Brendan, I don't want to hear this. I'm sorry, but too much has happened. If you had said this twenty years ago, maybe I would have listened. But now, I just don't think it's possible."

Brendan smiled at her mysteriously. When he left the room, Leah could see that he was disappointed. She then followed him, and his eyes burned into hers.

She went home to her son that night, and thought of Cameron. Of all of her boyfriends, he was the one whom she thought she would most likely end up with. She was not obsessed with him, like she was with Brendan, but she had loved him fully and completely, and would have been faithful to him for a lifetime. The separation from him caused, within her, a tumult of painful emotions, feelings

that she had thought at one time in her life that she would never get over.

While with him, she had been so certain that he would be her husband—that he was the one to take away all of the conflicting feelings that she had had for Brendan. But that's not how it turned out.

In the end, she found out that Brendan had feelings for her.

She talked with her fourteen-year-old son in the kitchen, chatting about his day at school, teasing him about his crush on one of the girls in his math class. Hunter was the real joy and meaning in her life, and there was nothing in this world that would make her take back the years that she had spent with him.

After he had gone to bed, she turned on her computer and began to write. While it was booting up, she filled the kettle and boiled some water for some tea.

She brought her steaming mug of tea back with her into the study and saw the screen saver flickering on the monitor.

The night was quiet and peaceful. Over the years, Leah learned to love living in the city.

She thought about writing a book. Perhaps about her life experiences. Who knows? Maybe somebody would read it.

She began to type, and smiled as she did.

She sent a final letter to Cameron. In it, she told him about her family, the developments with her career, and news concerning some of the college friends he had lost touch with.

She didn't write anything personal. She figured there was a time and place for that, and now was the time to let bygones be bygones and leave it all behind.

Seven years later, she got a call from him. He was never married and his parents had passed away years ago.

"I'm sorry, Leah," he said.

She paused. "Don't worry about it, Cameron. It was a long time ago."

"It's important to me. Now that I'm older, I think I finally understand that I shouldn't have done what I did to you."

"You did what you had to do, and under the circumstances, I'm not entirely sure I wouldn't have done the same thing, myself."

"You're so kind, Leah," he breathed.

She thanked him, but knew that it wasn't true.

After the conversation was over, Leah hung up the phone and cried.

She had spent a lifetime trying to avenge what once went wrong, only to find that the fault lay within herself. Brendan wasn't at fault for Jeremy's death; and Cameron wasn't at fault for ruining her life. Leah herself was to blame for all the tumult of her past: simply by not forgiving them.

Leah pulled out the locket from her jewelry box. She opened it, and inside was a picture of Brendan—the same one she had cut out from the yearbook when she was fourteen.

Beside it, she placed a picture of Hunter, and tears came from her eyes. They were, indeed, two handsome men.