



Refuse ^{To} Be Silenced

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Chapter 1: How did I get here?

*There are many times
 When I have sought to retell
 Another's story as my own
 Inspired by the words
 And actions that talent and love provide
 Even if but just a fantasy,
 So it is no wonder
 That I have continued to be disappointed
 For I am not those characters
 Nor am I my neighbor.
 I am me,
 And this is my own story
 Never told before now
 And never to be finished
 Until my soul parts from my flesh.
 I hold the pen.
 I control my tale.
 Though I do not control the tale of those
 Who enter my book,
 Invited or not,
 They have their own pens
 And if they so choose that our stories
 Shall not be one,
 Then that is how it must be.
 I am not afraid of the end,
 But I am afraid of the journey.
 I fear when I am told to fear not
 Because I cease to stop comparing
 My story to the others.
 So forever disappointed will I be?
 No, no, no
 There is a plan for me.
 I may not know what it is
 Or who is in it and who is not,
 But the story is mine
 And somehow,
 Regardless of the fact that I am not a princess
 Waiting on my knight in shining armor,
 I just know that the journey,
 And the ending,
 Will be fantastic.*

It is a Monday morning. I grab my toothbrush and my toothpaste from their containers. I squeeze the paste ever so gently as to not release too much onto the frayed bristles. I brush my teeth back and forth, back and forth - a task so ordinary and done multiple times everyday that it almost becomes mindless. My trance is broken when I rise from rinsing my mouth and catch my reflection in the mirror. I can barely stand to look for more than a second for I cannot face the girl staring back. This past year has changed me more than I would have liked. Before now, I was the girl who always smiled, who always saw the good in the world and in herself, a girl who loved her family and friends and Jesus with such passion, a girl with hope for tomorrow and strength for today. This face looking back at me now tells a different story. I am weak. I am worthless. I am scared. I am ugly. I am voiceless. I am powerless. I am alone. I am a victim of verbal, emotional and sexual abuse. *How did I get here?*



I grew up in the small, country town of Alvin, Texas located on the outskirts of Houston. The city hotspot is the local Walmart and we all thought we had made the big time when we got an Olive Garden, if that gives you any indication of how little there is there. We are famous for being the hometown of pitcher Nolan Ryan, who was inducted into the Baseball Hall of Fame in 1999. He is the crowning glory of good ole Alvin. His old house where he raised his three children with his high school sweetheart, Ruth Holdorff, is just a few miles down the old county road where my grandparents have lived for nearly 40 years. A local family just recently sold the

property to somebody who tore the house down, though they left the private tennis court and baseball diamond.

It's a close community, one I have called home for 21 years. My family and I like to ride our bikes around the high school, and we rarely make a trip without seeing someone we know. It's sort of an everybody knows everybody place, just like everyone knows Stanton's Grocery is the best place to go get a BlueBell chocolate ice-cream shake before they close the diner at 3 p.m. In the spring, just as you can see summer approaching, we all make our way out to Froberg's Farm to pick some fresh, locally grown strawberries, and maybe sneak a few bites of the sweet fruit before taking our baskets to the register. If you want to enjoy the best barbecue baked potato you've ever eaten, it's a known fact you must go out to Joe's Barbeque and order yourself a plate. Life is simple in Alvin. It's easy. It's comfortable. It's home.

For 21 years I have known the same people, and the same people have known me. My name is Kelsey Elizabeth Purcell, daughter of born and raised Alvinites John and Melinda Purcell, and twin sister of Elyssa. Some have called us the "All-American family." My parents married back in July of 1991. They've beaten the odds and have stayed married for more than 26 years.

My parents have never been overly affectionate with each other, but they don't have to be to show their love for one another. You can tell by the way they do little things like when my dad randomly buys my mom new snowman or gingerbread man decorations for her Christmas collection, or when my mom packs my dad some lunch when she knows he's going to have a long day at work. Of course, like any couple does, they've been through their fair share of trials. The biggest trial came in 2005 when my family went through the hardest time we've ever faced.

I will get to that later, but it was during that horrible time that I watched my mother stand by her husband when he needed her most, when she saw he was hurting. That is love. *In sickness and in health.*

Their relationship has always been based on trust and love, though my dad loves to poke fun at my mom just to get a few laughs from my sister and me. They dated for six months before getting engaged, during which time they dated other people throughout the beginning. Both of them made the conscience decision to remain virgins until marriage, so their wedding night was the first time either of them had experienced sex. They've always set such a good example, and I've always wanted to be just like them.

We were raised in church. As children, we attended Sunday school at the First United Methodist Church, then later moved to Alvin Bible Church when my parents decided they wanted my sister and me to come to accept Christ on our own time instead of through confirmation. Alvin Bible Church was a little white church on Rosharon Road and had a few loyal families in attendance each week, most of whom were over the age of 60. Every Sunday, we sat in the pews and sang hymnals as the Marchands led worship. Around Christmas, the children of the church would put on a play, and naturally Elyssa and I were involved. Growing up, my sister was very shy to the point she would barely speak to anyone who wasn't immediate family, but for whatever reason, the child could act on stage. She would be cast for one of the main parts, while I, the outgoing twin, would seethe with jealousy as I studied my one line for the part of Angel #3.

I loved going to church. My faith has always been very strong. I've never questioned God's existence; I've just always known Him and loved Him since early on, in fact, I don't

remember a time when I did not know Christ. My mom likes to tell the story of when I was little, strapped into a car seat in the back of her minivan. She was driving through town running a few errands when she heard my little voice calling out from behind her.

“Mommy, I love Jesus,” I said. “I believe in Him.”

Then I went back to doing whatever it was I was doing, probably throwing a sippy-cup at the front windshield or making goofy faces at Elyssa. She said she was taken aback by my spontaneous comment, but it made her smile. She said she could see the love of Jesus in me through the way I loved others. I’ve always tried to be kind to everyone, though I haven’t always been successful. It takes a lot to make me mad because I truly do my best to always see the good in everyone, even when they don’t see the good in themselves. I believe everyone has a story, and even when it looks like someone has it all together, they’ve been through their own struggles.

Maybe it’s because of the way I try to live my life judgement free, or maybe it’s because of that “Jesus love” in me that my mom talks about, but people have trusted me with some deep things in my short life.

I have had four people come to me contemplating suicide. The first was my freshman year of high school. He was a classmate, but not someone I would call a friend necessarily. He said he didn’t know why he felt compelled to talk to *me* about his thoughts, but there he was, trusting me with something so heavy I was not sure how my heart could handle it. Nonetheless, it

was one of those moments where everything started to make sense. Like I said, everyone has a story, and I am no exception.

March 23, 2005 was a bad day for my family. My mother, sister and I were at my grandparents house. My dad was unable to go with us because he could not get off work. I remember I was sitting on the floor in the living room when we heard what had happened - it was all over the news; there had been an explosion at the oil refinery my dad worked at and there had been many casualties. At eight years old, I did not understand what was happening. All I knew was mommy was on the phone trying to call daddy and she was crying because she couldn't reach him. I sat there with my sister watching the television display images of a workplace in pieces and a community devastated. I remember running my fingers through the carpet as I prayed. *I was so confused.*

Eventually, my dad called back and he told us he was okay, but he was not okay. He was very far from okay. The months that followed that tragic day brought a rain cloud over our family. The smiling, always-cracking-a-joke man I had always known was not there. Instead, there was a shell of a man with saddened eyes and a short temper. I remember praying, "God, please make Daddy better. Please don't let him be sad anymore." *I prayed that prayer relentlessly.*

Time continued passing, and Dad only got worse. I was too young to know what was wrong, I just knew it was bad. Some nights, I would crawl into bed with my sister and play "My Grandfather Had a Store" with her until we eventually dozed off to the sound of dad's feet pacing the ground in our living room. *He never slept.* One night, my mom joined us in Elyssa's bed and said there was something she wanted to share with us.

“Girls,” she said. “I know you’ve noticed that Daddy has been acting differently lately and I think I need to let you know what’s been going on. Daddy has been very sick since the explosion. He saw a lot of things nobody should ever have to see. A few weeks ago, your dad was awake during the night. He was in the living room thinking about how he didn’t know if he could live like this anymore. He wanted to take his own life long before then, but he said he knew he had to be here for you girls. But that night was really bad, and he found himself face to face with Christ in the living room. He told your daddy everything would be okay and said he would soon get help. The next day, we went to the doctor and he has already been doing better.”

I don’t think I understood the magnitude of that conversation while it was happening, all I could think was “why did this have to happen to our family?” It was not until years later that my dad finally sat me down and shared the horrors of what he experienced back in 2005. What I didn’t know before was that my dad was not near the explosion when it happened, but he went into it to pull people from the fires and debris. My dad has always had a passion for weight-lifting and his strength is impressive, but when he described the day of the explosion, I realized God’s purpose for him. He told me about how he heard a voice as clear as a bell say to him, “I made you strong for a reason. Go in there and help those men.” He obeyed and pulled friend’s and co-worker’s bodies from the rubble. He said he had never carried anything heavier than a dead body before. *Honestly, I don’t think he ever stopped carrying the weight of death on his shoulders.*

Like I said, I never knew why my good, God-fearing family had been put through such a terrible sadness until that night my freshman year of high school. Then, it all made sense. My dad, the explosion and the thought of suicide had all been to prepare me for this moment with

this young man. I was able to use my dad's experience as a story of hope and strength for my classmate. I'm happy to say he is alive today, and though I don't keep in close contact with him as to never reveal his secret, I can say he seems to be very happy.

Three more like him followed over the next five years. I'm still not entirely sure why these people have trusted me with something like whether they should live or die, but they have, and each time I'm there for them no matter what.

I suffer from anxiety; it's something that runs on the Purcell side of the family and, of course, it was passed on to me, so I take on each of these situations and struggle a bit. I care so deeply about people in general, so it hurts me if I feel like I can't make their pain go away. Their pain becomes my pain and I lay in bed wide awake staring at the ceiling praying God uses me to help them.

On nights when I struggle, even as I have surpassed my teen years, all I want to do is crawl into bed with my mother. She does not understand what its like to be consumed with anxiety, but she knows how to handle someone dealing with it. She'll take my hand and hold it and softly rub it with her fingertips until my uncontrollable breathing and crying has subsided. She kisses my head and holds me until I fall asleep, assuring me all will be better in the morning. She knows how to be there without being overbearing. The thing with my mom is we all give her such a hard time about being cheap and stubborn and the fact that she could "talk the ears off of a wooden indian," but at the end of the day, she is the glue that keeps our family together. I could not imagine life without her. She has such a strength that comes out when we need it most, she cares deeply for those she loves even when her love is not appreciated, she goes above and

beyond to make our house a home and she is like a tiger when it comes to defending my sister and me, which is how I know she'll always be there for me.

People say “mother knows best,” and in my experience, this has been a correct statement in every instance. Mothers have a gut feeling that we as children don't always buy into until it's too late. In middle school, I can remember my mom telling me “don't wear all of that eyeliner, it doesn't look good.” Did I listen? Absolutely not because I thought it looked fantastic. Should I have listened? Absolutely yes because I looked like the grudge which, for those who don't understand the reference, is not a good look. Even with boys, I ignored her advice, forgetting she was a young girl in love with the wrong boy before she was ever my mother. *I should have listened to her on a lot of things, but I didn't.*

My sister is another story. She is my best friend, my go-to, my womb-mate, my forever love. She and I have always been so close. Everyone says twins have a special bond, and not that I would know anything different, but I have to agree with them. We've been there for each other since before we ever took our first breath of air, and that is something I would definitely classify as special. However, being twins, we were constantly compared growing up. She was the skinnier, more athletic, prettier one, and I was the smarter one. *I think that's about the only thing I've ever been better than her at, but I would rather be the lesser of us two because I just love her that much.* I would take every illness, every heartbreak, every ounce of hurt if it meant she would never have to feel pain.

When we were 17 years old, we were sitting in my dad's truck eating a quick meal outside of the building where we practiced. We waited in the warmth of the truck to avoid going out into the cold until it was absolutely necessary. It was December, and even though we don't

get many cold days in Texas, I remember this day being particularly chilly. As we ate our sandwiches, we listened to music and talked sports - *pretty much the only topic of conversation we ever discussed.*

“You know, if one of us ever had to be seriously injured,” I said to my sister, “I would a million times over rather it be me.”

I wasn't sure why I said it, I just sort of said it out of nowhere, but I meant it. She was such a talented athlete and her passion was like no other I have ever seen; I could not bear the thought of her talents going to waste. If she was to ever be injured, it would crush her.

Elyssa was the athlete who put her entire focus on her game. She would wake up at 6:00 every morning to workout, doing her Insanity Beachbody videos. I would drag myself out of bed around 30 minutes before it was time to leave to go to school and as I'd cross the hall from my bedroom to the bathroom, I would hear the voice of Shaun T yelling out commands and see Elyssa faithfully obeying him. Her form was perfect. I tried doing a video workout with her one time and I could barely catch my breath after the warm up. *Like I said, my athletic ability has never been at the level of my sister's.* But anyway, Elyssa would finish her morning workouts, go to class, work out or practice during our athletics period, come home, go into the backyard, hit volleyballs for about two hours, come inside, leave the house, go to the gym, then start the cycle over the next day. She is a maniac, but her hard work ultimately paid off with her breaking six school records, accepting a full-ride scholarship to a Division 1 school, being named an All-American and having the most killer six-pack you've ever seen.

We grew up doing everything together; took all of the same classes and sat next to each other in each, played on all of the same teams, participated in all of the same organizations, had

all of the same friends. *There really was not Kelsey without Elyssa or vice versa. We were the definition of two peas in a pod until one day, we weren't anymore.*

The day we separated to go to college was a day I had dreaded ever since she committed to play volleyball at the University of Central Florida in Orlando and I had committed to play in Wichita Falls, Texas at Midwestern State University. We had always been the “Purcell sisters”, “the twins,” “the Purcell girls,” never just individuals. I think that was part of the beauty of separating for college, as difficult as it was, because we were allowed a time for self discovery, a time to embrace our own dreams and ambitions, a time to no longer be constantly compared and a time to have a fresh start. *Lord knows I needed a change of environment after high school.* It was not like I was running from a bad reputation or a mean girl or anything like that. No, in fact, high school had been a great experience with the exception of one bad thing, but I'll get to that soon enough.

I was the good girl, the Jesus freak, the waiting-until-marriage-virgin, the nerd, the volleyball player, the twin and the nice girl, and I was perfectly fine with being judged for those things. I had never felt shame for being who I am, but I was ready for a fresh start nonetheless for I had experienced love and heartbreak like I have never experienced before during my sophomore and junior years of high school. Having my heart broken absolutely shattered me. It was one of the most impactful experiences I have ever had, and though it was extremely difficult to get through, I got through it and I learned from it. It shaped me into who I am today, and it definitely shaped how I would handle my next relationship.

Not many know of the events that went on behind the door of apartment 424, a mile away from my college campus. Not many would understand the hidden hurt that lied beneath smiles of

seemingly happy Instagram posts. Not many would fully comprehend the emotional turmoil I was put through for months because, well, I didn't tell anyone. It was all about appearances; maybe if everything *looked* like it was okay, it would actually become okay. *At least that's what I wanted to think.* You see, there was a time when things were good, really good even, but that's not why I'm here. I'm here to tell the story of how I almost let one guy ruin me. My boyfriend, Cameron Jay Webber Jr., almost brought me to my end, but he didn't. But to tell the story of me and Cameron, I must first start with the story of me and Nick.

Chapter 2: Nick

*Be it coincidence
Or be it fate
You were brought into my life
Our paths have crossed
Right now we trail
But tomorrow is uncertain
We hope we dream
Of everything
Turning out how we planned
But if we awake
And our paths have forked
Then I only wish
For your remembrance*

Nicholas Moore was a nice boy from a nice family who lived two streets down from my house, though I never met him until my freshman year of high school. He was raised as I believe any boy hoping to become a man should be raised: with a little tough love. His family owned several rental properties around town, and Nick and his two brothers were expected to spend their weekends working for their dad making repairs in the trailers and houses. Nick hated

working on those trailers and swore he would burn them to the ground the day his dad handed them over to him.

At 13 years old, Nick was given the body of an old Chevy Blazer his dad bought for \$300 and told he would have to work for the money to buy the missing parts and build the car into a functioning vehicle if he wanted to drive it some day. His young hands were already callused from years of hard work and swinging a baseball bat. Nick was good at baseball. He grew up playing the sport and had dreams of going on to play in college. His favorite saying was “if you can dream it, you can do it,” and that’s exactly how he lived his life. He was carefree, ambitious, goofy and he radiated with positivity.

What first attracted me to this reggae-loving, baseball-playing surfer dude was his kindness. Everybody liked Nick. *How couldn't they? He was wonderful.* He looked at the world on eye-level, no one was above him or below him, just equal children of God trying to make their way in this world.

I first met Nick on our first day of high school. We had English together, and we both faced every freshman’s worst fear and got lost trying to find the classroom. We weren’t the only ones, and when another teacher saw us looking panicked and confused, he escorted us to the right location. I didn’t know it then, but Nick said he knew from the first time he saw me he wanted to be with me. He said he thought I was beautiful. *Hmm, beautiful. The impact of that word never fails.*

Nick and I started out as great friends. We sat near each other in class and we would talk every spare moment we had. He constantly made me laugh. He was sort of the class clown, and I

ate it up. I knew he was special, I knew I loved being around him and I knew I wanted to be friends with him for a very long time.

The first time I ever asked Nick to hang out outside of class was in January of our freshman year. I was waiting on my mom to pick Elyssa and me up from Driver's Education where a sour old woman taught us the rules of the road in the most monotone voice you've ever heard. Nick and I had been texting- just small talk - and I remember feeling nervous all of a sudden.

“Do you want to meet me at the basketball game tonight?” I texted him. *Goodness I was anxious, but why?* I only saw him as a friend. We had never discussed anything romantic, we had never been flirty, so why was I so jittery about asking this boy to the basketball game? Maybe it was because I feared he wouldn't think of me as a close enough friend to meet outside of class, but that seemed silly. Despite all of my worries, he texted back with a simple “yes, I will see you there,” and that was how it started. From that point on, we spent a lot of time together in class, outside of class, texting, calling. He was a great friend, until one day, it all went up in flames.

To this day, I am saddened by the memory I am about to share. It was a Friday. I was walking down the hallway of my high school's foreign language building, on my way to fourth period Spanish. I arrived to class early, as any nerd does, and waited in my chair for the bell to ring and class to begin. Suddenly, my good friend Niha poked her head in the door and shouted at me.

“Kelsey,” she squealed. “You need to come outside into the hallway right now! Nick is waiting for you.”

“Okay,” I thought. I didn’t suspect anything significant noting the fact Niha was always loud and excited about everything, so I figured my good friend Nick was just wanting to say hi like he normally did.

I stepped out into the hall and the second I did, my heart dropped into my stomach. Standing there was my beautiful Nick, holding a bouquet of flowers and flashing a smile that beamed from ear to ear. *Oh no*. I knew this was going to be more than just a hello. My mind raced and my knees buckled as I walked toward him, knowing I was probably about to break his heart.

He was radiating with excitement and his smile grew even bigger as he handed me the flowers and asked me a question.

“Kelsey Purcell, I have been wanting to ask you this for a long time now, so here it goes: will you be my girlfriend?” His faced glowed with confidence as if he already knew my answer to his question, but he was wrong. *He was so wrong*. I began to feel a knot in my throat that made it difficult for me to breathe, much less speak. I could feel my eyes welling up with tears and my cheeks turning four different shades of bashful.

He must have noticed too because his confidence immediately began to fade. I can still see it so clearly: the look on his face as I cried out the words “I can’t, I thought we were just friends.” *It was awful*. That larger than life smile turned into a stunned expression of hurt and

embarrassment. I watched the corners of his lips go from touching the edges of his face to circling the drain just below the center of his nose. I could not handle seeing him like that any longer, so, with everyone staring at us, I ran away into the hidden walls of a bathroom stall, crying one of those loud, ugly cries that comes out when there is a storm in your heart. Worst of all, I realized I held onto the flowers in my moment of panic and confusion, so there I was, looking at the beautiful display of life in front of me, knowing I had just pushed a beautiful soul out of my own life.

The bell rang for class to start, so with one look in the mirror at my smeared mascara and runny nose, I came to terms with the fact I looked miserable, but I did not care because my outer appearance could not even begin to express the anguish I was feeling inside. I had lost one of my best friends in this world, and I thought for sure he was gone for good.

To make things worse, I had my next two classes with Nick. Normally, we would walk to class together, laughing and joking, then we would sit near each other in class and chat every time our teacher turned her back, but that didn't happen that day. No, instead, I waited a few minutes after the fourth period dismissal bell rang before I left the classroom, just to make sure I wouldn't bump into Nick in the hall considering our last meeting in the hallway had not been something I wanted to relive. Once I got to fifth period English, Nick was already there. He was sitting in the back, silent, and he refused to look up. I had never seen him look so sad. As his friend, all I wanted to do was make him feel better and see him smile again, but how could I do that knowing I was the source of his grief?

I took my seat without saying a word. Slowly, the rest of the class started piling in, and to no surprise, three of my classmates asked me about the flowers on my desk and why I looked so

sad. I just shook my head and said I couldn't talk about it, though seconds later they all realized what had happened when they saw Nick with the same, sad expression on his face.

It was awkward, and when the bell rang to leave, I had no earthly idea what we had been taught because the entire time I was sitting there, my mind was on Nick. I kept seeing his face when I told him "no" over and over, like a song on repeat in my mind. *I hate the idea of anyone being hurt, but to think someone was hurting because of me? Unbearable.* I was sick. Everything around me was clouded and all I wanted to do was fix things. Quickly, my dismay turned into frustration.

Why did he have to ask me to be his girlfriend? Why did he have to mess up the good thing we had going? Boys always do this; they want more from me than what I can give and then it makes me feel like the bad guy! I'm sick and tired of this feeling.

My frustration was short lived, and I went back to being sad. Time went on, the flowers died and my relationship with Nick did too. He started dating someone new, a nice girl named Marisa, and did not speak to me again, at least not for a very long time.



It's funny how the changing of the seasons can bring some changes in life as well. The fall semester rolled around after a gruelingly hot summer break. Volleyball season had started in August, so I was no stranger to hanging around the school by the time classes began. As I entered all seven of my classes on that first day back, I felt a little disappointed each time to not see

Nicholas Moore sitting in one of the desks. It had been a while since we had talked, but I had still hoped we might reconnect.

The summer had given me some time to think about everything that happened between us, and I had realized I had pushed him away, just like I had done with every guy before him. I would definitely call myself a very open person, but when it comes to guys, I have always struggled with being guarded in fear of getting hurt or rejected. Nick had never given me a reason not to trust him with my heart, so I was forced to ask myself some questions. *Had I been shallow and not liked him just because he was a little shorter than me? Was I unable to see past appearances?* Don't get me wrong, Nick was cute, but the height thing - *as bad as it sounds* - did bother me. My mom always said "it takes a very confident woman to date someone shorter than her," and I was not that confident. But now I was seeing things differently than I had before; I was looking past the height difference and seeing his heart. *Gosh, why would I turn that kind heart away?* Nick was one of the best people I had ever met and I truly felt so drawn to him. Even though I had not seen him in months and even though he had a girlfriend, I could not control my thoughts. He crossed my mind every day.

Nicholas Moore consumed me. I would see him walking to class sometimes, hand-in-hand with Marisa, and it would make me sad. *That could have been me.*

Eventually, I decided to text him and finally apologize for what had happened between us. I wanted to say I was sorry for hurting him and hoped we could be friends. That's all I needed to say, and Nick and I seemed to be back on good terms. Of course with Marisa in the picture, I knew I had to lose my feelings for him because I could never disrespect someone's relationship. Still, I was glad to know Nick no longer hated me.

I don't know if it had anything to do with me, *I sure hope it didn't*, but just as a chill could be felt in the autumn air, Nick and Marisa broke up.

It sounds terrible for me to say a part of me was happy, but I couldn't help feeling a little excited and hopeful for the possibility of Nick still having feelings for me; however, I knew I couldn't rush into anything because he needed time to heal and I wasn't sure how he felt about me. *Could he ever get over me rejecting him the year before? Was he still hurt, but wasn't showing it?* I didn't know. Then, one day right before Homecoming, Nick texted me.

Let's be clear about one thing: Alvin High School does not do Homecoming like most schools do Homecoming. We have dress-up days during the week, yes. We have a fun football game, yes. But we do not have a Homecoming dance because, let's face it, the people of Alvin do not care enough about getting all dressed up and spiffy to host a formal dance. Instead, everyone is completely satisfied showing up to the game in paint-splattered overalls and over-sized mums that hang so low they get caught under your feet. *It's all a part of that redneck culture we in Alvin hold so dear to our hearts.*

When I heard from Nick, it's not like he was just texting me so he would have a date to the dance, because we didn't even have a dance. Instead, I knew he just genuinely wanted to talk to me, so talk we did. It seemed as though nothing bad had ever happened between us; we were back to being the same old good friends we had once been before that ever-so-tragic day in the hallway before Spanish class. I knew his guard was probably up with me, so I decided if I was going to spend time with him, I had to make the first move. I asked him to go to the Homecoming game with me and some friends, then go to dinner as a group afterwards. It had to

include other friends so he wouldn't think it was a date; I did not want to scare him away just as I got him back. He said yes.

I was on cloud nine, but I had to keep my cool. My guard was up too because I had never liked someone this much. With all that happened between us and the feelings I was developing, I knew he had the potential to hurt me, and that scared the hell out of me.

The evening went smoothly, so smoothly in fact, we began to see each other more and more. I remember the first time he came over to my house, I spent two hours cleaning until everything was spotless. *Because guys totally pay attention to that stuff, right? No, but it didn't matter.* I just wanted everything to be perfect for him because he was perfect to me.

Days turned to weeks, weeks turned to months and Nick had totally captured my heart. I was not *in* love with him, but I did love him as a genuine human being. He absolutely intrigued me with his witty remarks, his fun-loving personality and the way he treated me and everyone else. He was so good to me. Not a day would go by where he wouldn't make me feel special, whether it was by him sending me a nice text, bringing me some sort of sweet-treat to school or passing me a hand-written note in the hallway.

But even still, three months had gone by and he had not popped the question. Part of me thought he might not ever ask me to be his girlfriend again after what happened the first time, but I knew deep down he wanted to ask me so bad. Some girls do not care about labels, but I am not one of those girls. It takes me a while to get to the point of putting a label on a relationship, but once I get there, I'm all about it, and I was all about having the title of Nick Moore's girlfriend.

Up until this point, Nick and I had only ever gone to each other's houses, met up at school functions and gone with groups of friends to various places like the movies and a haunted house. My parents were big on the rule of "no dating until you are 16," so I was never able to go out with him, just the two of us; that was the rule, and I was a rule follower. But then, at 15 years and 364 days of age, my parents made an exception, and decided they would allow Nick to take me out. He had been to our house a few times and my parents liked and trusted the boy who was stealing their daughter's heart, so on December 1, 2012, the day before my birthday, I went on my first date.

All I can say about that night was it was filled with flaws, but to me, it was perfect. I had volleyball practice, so Nick picked me up from the gym. Despite my efforts to look my best, I looked more like a sweaty mess. I can still remember my outfit that my mom helped me pick out; a black and white striped top that flared at the waist, cherry-red skinny jeans, gray and black flats with bows on the toes, all topped off with a straightened up-do and cherry-red lips to match the pants. I looked like I had just stepped off of a Paris gondola ride and it was definitely too much for dinner and an amusement park. I did not care though, because I wanted to impress him. When he arrived at the gym, he was a nervous wreck, but once he saw me, he gleamed.

Instead of taking his car, he had borrowed his older brother's truck and made sure to give it a fresh wash and wax before coming to pick me up. Apparently, he had been preparing for the evening all day. *Too freaking cute.* He made sure to be a gentleman as he opened my door for me, then walked around to get in and take off. We chatted a bit, then decided to go to the amusement park first: a place called Kemah Boardwalk. Kemah sat right on the water near Galveston Bay and was all lit up for the holiday season.

We decided to get on the ferris wheel first and as we made our way to the top, we could see for miles. The twinkling lights reflected on the bay and cast out a rare beauty only seen in certain flashes in life. The other rides were not quite as easy-going, but I sucked up my fear of rollercoasters and drop-zones and ended up having a blast. Unfortunately for us, our night had to come to an end because I had an 11 o'clock curfew, and I could not break any rules on my first date ever. During our visit to Kemah Boardwalk, we had totally lost track of time and ended up in a rush back to my house, skipping out on our originally planned dinner. As we hurried back, Nick and I caught each others' eyes more than once, smiling and only speaking from time to time as we did not have to say the words out loud to know how we were feeling. As Nick would go on to cringe about this from that day forward, one of our moments of locked eyes was interrupted by him plowing into the curb and then getting super flustered and embarrassed. I thought it was funny, but he did not.

He could do no wrong in my eyes because he was the first guy I had truly liked with every piece of my existence. *Not to mention, he was the first guy who had enough patience with my guarded ways to stick around.* So, riding shotgun in his brother's single-cab truck, I finally felt the walls I had built begin to crumble, and I was ready to let him in completely.

He must have sensed it because as we got closer to my house, he decided to make a pit stop in our high school parking lot about two minutes away from my house, and about a minute away from his.

"What are we doing?" I asked.

“Well,” he said as he put the truck in park. “I have something for you, but I’m going to need you to get out of the truck for a second. Hold on, I’ll get the door.” I was a little confused by what was going on, but I nervously waited as he came around to my side of the truck and opened my door for me.

“Okay, now I want you to sit up here,” Nick said, pointing at the hood of the truck. He gave me a hand as I climbed up, still questioning what he was doing.

“Okay, now wait just a second.” He went back to the truck and rumbled around in what I suppose was his secret hiding place. I heard the sound of tissue paper rustling as I gazed up at the stars. It was a clear night with very few clouds to be seen, and I found peace in my nervousness while looking at those small pieces of Heaven. Nick returned a minute later with his hands behind his back and the biggest smile on his face.

“*This* is for your birthday,” he said as he revealed my gift. It was a little James Avery bag; I recognized the brand as soon as I saw it. I had never owned anything from James Avery before and my excitement made me squeal as I placed my hand over my mouth. Nick crawled up onto the hood and sat next to me, pressed against the windshield as I delicately opened the little peach-colored box. Inside there was a beautiful necklace. It was a heart with another little heart inside of it, and I thought it was the most beautiful necklace I had ever seen because *he* had given it to me. *Cut us some slack, it was young love.* He latched it around my neck and from that point on, I would wear it every single day until the day we broke up.

After a few minutes of me doting over my new accessory, Nick slid off the hood of the truck and told me to wait there once more. He returned carrying a bouquet of beautiful flowers.

This was it. Round 2: same question, different outcome.

“*These* are for a question I want to ask you,” he said with that same childlike grin that had me captivated by this boy. “Will you be my girlfriend?”

“Yes! Of course I will,” I said through my smile. And just like that, Nicholas Moore and Kelsey Purcell were officially a couple.

Chapter 3: First Love

*When I see his face
I see an array of memories.
When I see his hair,
I feel it's soft texture running in between and around my fingers as I grasped his head in my hands.
When I see his eyes,
I see blue,
And a look of despair which masks what used to be a loving gaze every time our eyes met.
When I see his nose,
I remember it's touch against my cheek, caressing my face in a soft embrace.
When I see his lips,
I feel my back against a brick wall with my eyes shut,
And I feel the butterflies in my stomach from that night his lips first met mine.
When I see his chin,
I remember complaining about his small attempt to grow facial hair; always asking him to shave it, and him laughing and taunting me with his furry face.
When I see his ears,
I hear the vibration of my phone as he texted me saying he had finished working in the yard, later finding that those beautiful ears had been burned by the sun.
When I see his face
I feel a little bit of pain*

*Deep within my heart,
And I look away.*

I never knew how extensively I could love someone until I fell in love with Nick. It took me breaking down in the pouring rain (literally) to realize I loved him, but I got there after months of not letting myself fall, and when I finally did fall, Nick was there to catch me. I'm not going to sit here and pretend Nick and I had a flawless relationship because we definitely had our conflicts, but even as I look back on our relationship years later, I smile because the good moments always outweighed the bad.

There are so many memories I treasure with that boy, but a few stick out in my mind. Our relationship was a whirlwind romance, and Nick was the Prince Charming of my fairytale. My favorite memory was from when we had been officially dating for seven months. We never celebrated "months," but we figured six months was pretty significant. We planned to do something special then, but it did not work out because I was in Florida playing in a volleyball tournament, so we settled for a seven month celebration. I did not expect for us to do much, just maybe go out to a nice dinner and exchange gifts, but Nick had planned something special for the two of us.

Dinner was a given, so Nick took me to a steakhouse nearby and I wore my blue, floral dress as I never stopped trying to impress him, even though he constantly told me he would love me just the same in sweats and no makeup. The dinner was nice and we had great conversation just as we always did, but the whole time we were eating, my mind continued to drift off in curiosity about what the surprise would be. He told me he had something special planned, but he would not reveal what it was yet. *He was always good at keeping secrets.*

After our meal, we hopped into his car and the surprise began. Let me just start by saying, I would have been just fine with only doing dinner, but Nick always went above and beyond to make me feel special. *That sweet romantic of mine.* I never expected him to spend all of his hard earned money on me, all I ever cared about was him showing me effort - *which he always did.* So anyway, I anxiously awaited this surprise he had planned for me, and I had no earthly idea of what it could be.

After about 15 minutes, we pulled up to Nick's friend's golf course. *Hmm, strange.* Are we going to play golf - a game I had never played before? How would we have enough time for a full-game anyway? The sun was going down and everyone was leaving. *Oh well, I'll just go with it.*

Apparently, the vacant course and setting-sun were all part of the plan from the beginning. Nick had worked out an agreement with his friend Sean to take me out there right as the course was closing. Sean had arranged for a golf cart to be left out for Nick and me to drive out to the middle of one of the greens, so Nick told me to go ahead and take a seat in the golf cart while he loaded it up with some items from the trunk of his car: a picnic blanket and a radio. *Hmm, I think I know where this is going.* I felt a rush; that same kind of pit-of-your-stomach rush you feel after a first kiss with someone new.

Nick drove a little recklessly out to one of the greens. He was trying to scare me and I laughed at him and his teasing by giving him a little squeeze on his shoulder. It was so playful and cute and fun, but then it was time for things to get a little more serious. When we got to that "perfect spot" Nick had picked out, he parked the cart and spread the blanket across the soft, plush grass.

“Would you like to lay down and watch the sunset with me?” he asked. *Gosh, my heart.*

“I would like that very much.”

I smiled as I sat on the blanket. He returned my grin as he took out the radio and played the playlist he had created for me and the evening. He laid next to me and held me close. As we laid there watching an array of oranges and pinks and yellows disappear from the sky, I looked deep into Nick’s eyes and swore to myself I would remember every detail of this night for as long I lived.

We didn’t have to speak a word to feel the immense amount of love between us, so instead of talking, we danced. I’m not much of a dancer and I easily get embarrassed at the thought of dancing in public, but with it just being the two of us there under the stars, I danced. I swayed in unison with my love just as our hearts beat as one, my chest against his. With my head resting on his shoulder, his arms around my waist and the sound of “Iris” by the Goo Goo Dolls echoing off of the trees, he broke our silence with a soft whisper in my ear.

“I love you, Kelsey Purcell.”

“I love you too, Nicholas Moore.”

It was one of those things you don't have to say out loud because it's already known, but in a moment feel compelled to say over and over because of the emotions pouring in all around you. I loved this boy with everything in me. I never expected to, but I could not help it - I was unconditionally in love and there was nothing that could have changed my heart's mind.

When the sun was no longer in sight, replaced by darkness and the moon, Nick decided it was time for phase two of his surprise. We packed up our blanket and radio and drove out a little ways when suddenly I saw where he was taking me. There was a bridge connecting two separate parts of the golf course, and it was lit up. Strands of white lights lined the wooden crossway to create the most romantic scene I had ever experienced. We walked hand-in-hand, stopping in the middle to look up at the night sky and share a kiss through smiling lips.

It was the sort of night of which dreams are made and wishes granted. You would think we had a love that would last forever, *I know I did*, but eventually the sun set on our relationship, and instead of bringing a magical night, it brought a terrible fight.



Heartbreak is a grueling process of hurt and healing, but mostly hurt. Just as I never knew I could love someone as much as I loved Nick, I never knew I could be so hurt by someone as well.

January 4, 2014 kickstarted the eventual demise of my relationship with Nick. It was the day I tore my ACL and meniscus during a club volleyball tournament on the North side of Houston. Remember when I talked about sitting in my dad's truck and I randomly said to my

sister, “If one of us ever had to get seriously hurt, I would a million times over rather it be me”?

Well, this was three days later. *Weird, I know.* You never go into a game expecting to get hurt until you get hurt, then it’s all you can think about; just like you never go into a relationship expecting to get hurt, until you’ve been heartbroken, then it’s all you can think about. Well I got two reality checks in a week and a half’s time.

Ten days after my injury, Nicholas Moore broke up with me. It felt like I had been shot by a cannon. Our ending had truly come out of nowhere. The guy I expected to stick by my side during this difficult time was leaving me when I needed him most, only leaving me with the explanation that because of my injury, he was too good for me because I would slow him down. This was a very un-Nick-like thing to say, and it quite literally knocked the wind out of my lungs.

I cried myself to sleep every night for a month. I felt like my whole world was crashing down around me. Nick was the one person I wanted more than anyone, and I couldn’t have him. He didn’t want me, and I didn’t know how to handle it.

Volleyball had always been my escape when life got difficult, but seeing as I was totally non-weight bearing for more than two months and unable to play volleyball for eight months, I could not find an escape from this hurt. It was like no other pain I had ever experienced, and it made the pain from my injury seem more like child’s play. My love had not been enough; I had not been enough, and that broke my heart.

For the next few months, I would enter my very first depression. I tried to cope with my pain in many ways including trying to move on with a very nice, Christian guy from the next

town over, but I was not emotionally ready to move on because I was still in love with Nick, and I would later find out Nick was still in love with me.

He and I would continue to talk off and on. He would tell me he made a mistake and he wanted me back, then the next day he would ignore me. Or sometimes I would say I was ready to forgive him and give us a second chance, then I would change my mind and realize I was not ready. Either way, we were never on the same page. He hurt me so badly by ending our relationship and I hurt him by “moving on” so quickly. *It seemed as though too much had happened to repair our broken hearts.* Regardless, love is not logical and I came to terms with the fact that I loved this guy more than I loved myself and I would have taken a bullet for him in an instant. I realized our love was special, so I made a commitment to myself and to Nick that I would work things out with him. He told me he wanted the same thing, but as he always seemed to do post-breakup, he changed his mind.

After about four months of going back and forth, back and forth with the emotional ties, I decided I could no longer allow myself to be hurt by this guy any longer. I loved him, but I needed him out of my life for good because I could not take any more sleepless nights or tear-soaked pillows. I needed him to never talk to me again, so one day I went to Nick’s house to talk. It is still difficult for me to think about to this day because I saw a side of myself I never wish to see again, but I did what I felt I had to do. I was so incredibly mean to him, telling him off as I saw fit because even though I loved him, I could not take his indecisiveness for our future any longer; however, that happening would change me entirely on how I handled conflict in the future. I knew on that awful day with Nick, I did not conduct myself like the woman of Christ I wanted to be, so I vowed to never be that mean to someone again. In one way, it made me a

better, nicer person; in another way, it made me a doormat to be stepped on by anyone who deemed me unworthy and weak. *But I'll get to that later...*

About a year passed and my plan had worked, Nick had not talked to me again, until one day he did. He texted me in March of 2015. It was completely out of the blue and it was the last thing I expected as I sat in a mall in Indianapolis in between games at a club volleyball tournament.

“Hey Kelsey.” *Oh no.*

It was so simple, but it sent my heart into my stomach. I had deleted his contact from my phone so I wouldn't be tempted to text him, but I recognized his number the second I saw it. But, me being petty responded with “Who is this? Is this Nick?” *Of course it was Nick.*

“Yes, it's me,” he texted. “I feel so lost right now.”

“What's wrong?” I asked. I honestly did not know about anything going on in his life, I mean, it had been a year since I had heard from him. He was now more like a stranger than a person I knew like the back of my hand.

He proceeded to tell me about all of the terrible things going on in his life. He had stopped going to school, he quit baseball, he left home, he had gotten involved with the wrong crowd and he had been abusing drugs. My heart shattered. All this time, I thought I wanted him to hurt as bad as he hurt me, but as soon as I knew he was hurting, I just wanted to make his pain

go away. In an instant, the bad blood between us did not matter and I just wanted to be there for him. *How could my sweet boy get so off track?* He had all of the tools he needed to be successful: a great family, intelligence, athleticism and drive. *How had he lost it all so quickly?*

He told me the real reason he broke up with me was not because of my injury at all apparently, that was just bad timing; he said the real reason he ended things was because he had started doing drugs and he did not want me to know because he thought I would be disappointed in him. *For the record, I would have been disappointed because I saw his potential and would never want a bad decision to ruin things for him, which it did.* Nonetheless, I was not judging him now. I knew he made some mistakes, but those mistakes did not define his soul. *Nicholas Moore is a great person and I still have a great deal of respect for him.*

As I read each new message come in, tears rolled down my cheeks. I thought I had moved past him, but in that moment I was forced to face the fact I was still in love with Nick. I knew too much had happened for us to be together again, but that did not matter. He needed a friend and I wanted to minister to him. I told him I thought the world of him and I was sorry for the things I said in our last meeting the previous year. I told him his mistakes did not define him, God defined him. I told him he would get through these trials and find love and success again, and I told him I would be there for him every step of the way.

I meant every word I said, but as weeks passed by, Nick's texts to me took a different turn. Before I knew it, he was professing his love for me, sending me pictures of the ring he had given me for our anniversary (he said it was one of the only things he took with him when he left home) and asking if we could work things out. I could not do it. I loved him - I was still *in* love with him, but I could not trust him anymore. My heart was so fragile, and I feared breaking it

once more would be the end of its beat, so I had to cut off ties once more. I told him I would always be there for him when he needed me, but I did not think it was a good idea to talk regularly because it made it difficult for me to get over him. He understood, but apparently his new girlfriend did not. I did not know her and I did not know they were together when he was texting me. *He claims they were on a break, but that's questionable based on things she said.* One day when I got out of church, I saw I had received a message from Nick's new girlfriend Kaitlyn. She basically told me to leave Nick alone and not to lead him on, which I found to be confusing considering I had told him I could no longer talk to him. Either way, it was yet another breaking point for me. I did not wish to hear from him again because I felt my trust had been violated once more.

I know this all sounds really complicated and that's because it was complicated, and it's about to get more complicated. So what happened next was something I had to do for me. After I graduated from high school, I went on a three-week-long trip to see my "German sister" Jenny in Berlin. Once I got back, I only had three days before it was time for me to leave for Wichita Falls to start practicing with my college team, so I had a thought. *If I was going to finally get complete closure with Nick and everything that happened with him, now was the time to do it.* So I decided to write him a letter.

Dear Nick,

I know a lot of time has gone by since we have been together, but there are some things that have been weighing heavy on my heart for the last year and a half and it is time I start being honest not only with you, but with myself. I am leaving for Germany tomorrow and when I get back, I will only have 3 days until I leave for college, so here it goes; complete and utter honesty.

When you texted me for the first time in almost a year back in March, I cannot tell you how surprised I was. I asked who you were when you texted me not because I didn't recognize the number (I dialed that number so many times I couldn't forget it if I tried), but because I was in disbelief you were texting me at all. When I saw the text, I acted angered when telling Elyssa, but really I was just very confused, but more so happy to be hearing from you—as crazy as that sounds. When you told me WHY you were texting me, it absolutely broke my heart. Your world was crumbling and though for so long I had hoped something bad would happen to you, I never actually meant it and it hurt me that I was unable to help you. I barely slept for the next three nights because I couldn't get you off my mind. Your situation made me cry (you know me, always crying) and I felt like I was to blame for some of it. A few days later, you texted me a picture of the ring. That text to this day blows my mind. I was standoffish with you about it because I didn't want to put myself in a situation to get hurt again, but really that ring changed everything.

Here is what you don't understand; for almost a year I truly believed you hated me, that you had moved on from me, and that I had been forgotten. Before, I had always thought that even though things didn't work out between me and you, you would look back one day and think of me as your high school love, the one you had loved the most regardless of the fact you had dated someone else. However, one day during a volleyball tournament, one of the girls on my team felt the need to inform me that you had lost your virginity to the girl you were dating, and though I had assumed it earlier on, to hear it and have it confirmed broke my heart. It was not the fact that you had given up something I thought was important to both of us; it was the fact she was able to give you something I never could. I've always heard when you have sex, you gain an indescribable emotional connection to the person you're having sex with, so that automatically made me assume she would be more important to you when you looked back on high school someday, and I would be the girl whose name you couldn't remember. Months went by with me thinking that, and it was a terrible feeling, but then you sent me a picture of the ring—the one you gave me for our one year. The fact you had kept it all that time, even while you were dating and loving another girl, made me curious—made me hopeful—that I might still be your “number one love.” But I couldn't tell you how much that meant to me at the time. I was cold with my words because that's how I thought I was supposed to react even though my heart was telling me something else. I knew I still loved you (in a different way than before, but nonetheless I still loved you). I tried to talk to you about it one night, but you never responded to my text, so I decided to give up hope again.

Then, you texted me the day before graduation. Another surprise. After the last time, I swore I'd never text you again, but as soon as I saw your number pop up, it was as if my heart surrendered to my pride—just as it does every time I see or hear from you—but you ended up disappointing me then too. At first, I acted like a complete bitch toward you because you had just posted a picture of you and the other girl three days

earlier on Instagram. That picture seriously crushed my heart—you tend to do that a lot. I immediately unfollowed you because I couldn't bare to see pictures of you and another girl; to this day, it is still hard for me to think about. However, what was super bizarre about this situation was getting out of church one morning and seeing a text from your ex/not-so-much-ex about how she had read all of our messages and I needed to stop texting you. Honestly, that whole thing pissed me off so much, but I mostly felt hurt knowing our personal messages had not been kept private, thus making me glad I had not opened up more. That is why I have decided to write a letter this time, to be seen by your eyes only preferably. Since you broke up with me, I have not been completely honest with you or myself, so this is just me getting it all out there. You are the only person I can talk to about all of this because you're the only other one who understands what we had.

Something about you was special to me, something far beyond my own understanding. It is that something special that has prevented me from fully getting over you regardless of all you did to hurt me, all I did to hurt you and a substantial amount of passed time. I believe the love we had was real and I'm sorry for ever saying yours was not. I know you loved me; I've never doubted that. The fact that you are my first and only love leads me to believe a piece of me will always love you. You captured my heart the night you first kissed me and a piece of it will forever belong to you.

I still think about you every single day, though I hate to admit it. There are many times I catch myself wanting to text you or tell you what is going on in my life and ask what is going on in yours. It's weird to me that we used to know almost everything about each other, but now know close to nothing. I lay in bed at night and think back on certain memories and feelings. I think about the night on the golf course. I can still remember the dress I was wearing, the songs that were playing, the bridge lined with lights, and the kisses we shared. I think about hanging out at your house, "watching TV," and you getting mad at your mom for not shutting the door every time she entered and exited the room. I can still see the look on your face—the same look every time—that you made right before you leaned in to kiss me. I think about the the time you had mono and me teasing you knowing full well how badly you wanted to kiss me, yet knowing you couldn't get me sick. I think about working out with you and playing tennis and 3 a.m. phone calls where both of us were barely awake, yet neither wanting to hang up. I think about the perfect date with John and Katie, I think about that passionate kiss between the cars, I think about the Fourth of July and watching the fireworks on the hood of your car and I think about you surprising me with a chocolate milkshake from Whataburger after one of your games. I think about our one year and crying as we went through the scrapbook I made you because I realized in that moment how much I loved you. So many memories. Such a pure love. I used to only think about the end and all of the bad things, but now I treasure the many great moments you gave me.

If I could do my life all over again, there are some things I would change, but meeting you is not one of them. I wish I could've been more open to things. I realize now

I was over-the-top ridiculous about many things. Most of it was because I cared about you so much and didn't want to see you get hurt; I wanted you to be the best person you could be. Funny how me trying to protect you is what ultimately drove you away. Second thing I would change is I wish I would've taken more risks with you. I wish we would've snuck out one night, or I don't know, done something a little bit crazy. But I was too stuck in my ways of being the good girl.

You hurt me so bad, and we both know this, but I also take responsibility for hurting you. After we broke up, I tried to move on too fast. I was so hurt and in such a low place, I didn't know what else to do (not making excuses, just saying). Even now when I am asked what my biggest regret is I tell people that is it. Honestly, it was stupid and I was in love with you the entire time I was with him. I was never happy. I wanted you and no one else, but by the time my commitment to him was done and I broke up with him 4 days after prom, it was too late. You were gone.

At this time, I want to apologize for any hurt I have caused you. Our relationship was good (I would call it great), but our breakup was messy. You were more than just my boyfriend, you were my very best friend, and the guy who I thought I might actually end up with as crazy as it sounds. I loved you with every ounce of my being and I would have never ended things with you had it been my choice. I know we are two different people now, we've both changed a lot and a lot has happened since we were together. We have a long history, you and I. From freshman year misunderstandings to me laying here tonight—a high school graduate—writing this letter, still not over you.

Thank you for all of the laughs, the smiles, the kisses, the butterflies in my stomach, the tears, the heartache and the love. Thank you for all of the memories.

With Love,

Kelsey

P.S.- Here are a few quotes I found that pretty much summarize exactly what I'm feeling:

“The first time you fall in love, it changes you forever and no matter how hard you try, that feeling just never goes away.” - Nicholas Sparks

“You will always love your first love..they will always be in your heart, always. Now that's a promise of always and forever. No matter how much pain and tears they put you through, you will always love them, and if you don't that shows they weren't your first love.”

“First love. That’s exactly what they are. Those are the ones that introduced you to everything, made you love them, loved you back, and also broke your heart. But no matter how hurt you are, you’ll always love them. Always. They’ll stay with you forever. And not only will you notice it, but deep down you will compare every other person to them. And none of them will live up, because that person was your first love. Then after months of letting go, when you finally think you are okay with letting them go, they’ll call, or you’ll hear “your” song, or you’ll pass by a place that was important to both of you, or see a movie, or something that reminds you of how much they meant and how much you really loved them and realize you’re not completely over this person as much as you hoped.”

He received my letter and texted me to talk about it a few weeks later when I was already six-and-a-half hours away in Wichita Falls, but we did not talk for long because I had already said all I needed to say in my note. We would go on to text only briefly from time to time for the next few months during my fall semester at Midwestern State University, but it was mostly small talk.

The last time I heard from Nick was two years ago when he called to tell me he had just gotten out of rehab. He said he wanted to tell me because the time when I was in his life was the last time his life was good, and he wanted me to be proud of him. *I was proud of him. I will always be his cheerleader.* What we had was something special and even in the loss of my great love, I learned so much about life and about myself. I must say though, I know things did not work out between Nick and me for a good reason, but I have not felt a love as great or experienced a kiss as electric as those I shared with my high school sweetheart; maybe it was because he was my first love or maybe it was something else. All I know is I would enter my next relationship as an entirely new person with an entirely new perspective, all thanks to Nicholas Moore.

Chapter 4: Cameron

*I lay in bed and listen to my heart beat
 It pumps and it pumps
 Bringing life to the rest of my body
 The thud of its rhythm
 Matches the changing of my thoughts;
 I am unable to concentrate on just one thing
 My mind is scattered
 And my clouded thoughts feel like a jigsaw puzzle that is impossible to solve
 Bum bum
 Bum bum
 There it goes again
 Doing its best to keep me from my sleep
 But I guess that is what happens when someone new and exciting enters your heart for the first
 time
 He changes my beat,
 The very beat that brings me life,
 So therefore he is changing
 My very existence and state of being
 He is bringing me life in a whole new way I have yet to experience until now
 He makes my mind foggy
 And thoughts jumbled
 And prevents any type of clear concentration
 Because he is all I can think about.
 Bum bum.
 Bum bum.
 And my heart skips a beat.*

For the first time in over two years since Nick and I had broken up, I was finally content-happy even- with being single. After visiting home from college for Christmas break and making the decision to officially end my volleyball career, after struggling to come back from my injury, I entered a new semester feeling rejuvenated. I had enjoyed my time home with my friends and family, and for the first time ever, I enjoyed my freedom - even doing something totally un-

Kelsey-like by kissing a total stranger at a club. *Now, was the kiss good? No; the guy was sloppy and smelled like cigarettes, but I did relish in knowing I had the courage to go out of my comfort zone and kiss someone unknown, disgusting as it may have been.* I was never very confident in my ability to attract a guy I would actually be interested in, but going into the new school year, I was okay with not attracting someone.

All break, I kept telling myself I wouldn't date again for a while, and when I'd finally decide to date again, I would never date another athlete. This was because I saw what happened with Nick when he and I broke up. From my experience, when you end a relationship with an athlete, you don't just break up with that person, you break up with the entire team, and no matter how wrong their teammate might have been, they will do their very best to make you feel as unwelcome in their group as possible. So there it was, my mind was made up. I would never date another athlete again. I'd always dated athletes before because they could relate to my schedule, but since I dropped the jock life and entered the nerd herd, I felt like I would steer clear of any guy who wore a jersey. *A true testament of a real player.* However, like always, I was thrown a curveball in the game of life, and it made me question my recent decision.

I first met Cameron in January of 2016, the beginning of my freshman spring semester. We were in Environmental Science together, but I never really paid attention to the scruffy football player in the back of the auditorium. He didn't exactly catch my eye, probably because he was not the most attractive guy on campus, not even close. He stood tall at 6'4" with pale skin, dark hair and a larger-than average gut. His face had not yet matured and was scarred from years of aggressive teenage acne. He was basically a 20 year old stuck in a 12 year old's body (minus the height).

Besides that, I really wasn't looking to meet a boyfriend. We had a lab together, and he sat near me. I recognized him from social media. Not only was he friends with several of my old/former teammates, but I had prayed for this guy before.

A few months before, I had seen a post on Twitter that asked everyone to pray for Cameron because he was in the hospital. The details of why he was there were unknown to me, but whatever the reason, it seemed serious. I had no idea who he was, but I remember praying, praying hard, for that young man in those tweets. I didn't know it then, but I was praying for a guy with whom I would eventually fall in love.

The first time we ever spoke was on the evening of February 7. We found ourselves in the living room of a mutual friend's house cheering on the Denver Broncos to a 24-10 win over the Carolina Panthers. It was The Sheriff's last ride before retirement, and I was happy to see Peyton Manning take home one final Superbowl trophy. I had made a last minute decision to go to the gathering, but once I got there, I was glad I went. Several football players were there, many I had never spoken to before, and I enjoyed talking to them. Cameron was there too, but if I'm being honest, I couldn't have cared less about him being there.

"Hey, I need to run and go get another drink, so I'm going to need you to make sure no one takes my seat. Guard this chair with your life," he said to me. Clearly he was trying to be cute. *It wasn't working.*

"Okay," I responded. "I will defend it to the death." *Eh, whatever - I could be friendly.*

The second he walked off, I went back to speaking with the smooth-talking junior quarterback about our favorite show *One Tree Hill*, and a solid two minutes later someone plopped down in Cameron's seat. I did nothing to stop him. *Oops*. He came back a few minutes later and playfully scolded me for failing to do my job, and I joked back with him, but that was the extent of our conversation. It wasn't flirty, it wasn't anything more than friendly small talk, and when I left, I thought nothing about it, or him.

The next day, I was in the kitchen of my dorm building when I received three notifications from Instagram and one notification from Snapchat. *Oh no*. The millennial way of flirting was slapping me right in the face when I saw that Cameron was the reason for every notification - he liked three of my older pictures on Instagram and added me on Snapchat by username (*looked like that mutual friend had passed on my information*). Whenever you're interested in someone, getting their attention is flattering, but whenever you aren't interested, it's almost annoying and definitely awkward. But, I had class with this guy, he seemed friendly, he was nice, so what the heck? I added him back with the sole intention of making a new friend.

After that, he would send me messages each day. Pretty generic. Nothing flirty. We began smiling and waving to each other in class, and in lab we would make small talk. I liked this guy, but in a second cousin, twice removed kind of way. I wasn't interested in him romantically at all, but as a person he seemed great. *Don't they all at first?*

The true beginning to the story of Cameron and me was the day we went hiking together in the Wichita Mountains in Lawton, Oklahoma on February 27, 2016. It was a Saturday afternoon and I was sitting in my crowded little dorm making "music videos" which really just consisted of me using goofy Snapchat filters. Out of nowhere, I had the urge to get out of

Wichita Falls and go do something active. I had seen classmates post pictures on social media of hiking in Oklahoma and I thought it would be the perfect choice for the beautiful, spring day. At this point, Cameron and I were speaking on a regular basis and truly becoming friends, so I went for it and asked if he wanted to go hiking with me.

“Yeah, when do you want to go?” he responded.

“How does now sound?” I asked.

“Perfect.” I didn’t know it at the time, but apparently “now” was not actually perfect at all. He was in the middle of eating lunch with his friends, but he took off from the cafeteria and ran to his apartment to wait for me. He said he was so excited, and honestly, I was too. Cameron didn't bring his car with him to college the first two years he was there, so like any “gentleman” would, I picked him up and we started our a-little-over-an-hour drive to Lawton.

I thought it would be a little awkward - just the two of us in the car driving for that long, but the conversation came easy. We talked about the basic “20 questions” type things such as school, family, friends and interests. *We got really deep and revealed our favorite colors. Mine was pink. His was orange.* He told me all about his hometown of Lakeland, Florida and I teased him about how it seemed like every crazy murder case or odd-ball breaking news story came out of the sunshine state.

“Well I hope you don’t have a habit of consuming ‘bath salts’ and eating people’s faces off,” I joked. He didn’t take it to heart, but defended his home.

“Florida is the best state,” he said. “Why else do you think everyone wants to move there after they retire? You just can’t see it because everyone from Texas takes state pride to a whole new level. It’s like Texans are prouder to be Texans than they are to be Americans.”

“Heck yeah we’re proud,” I said. “Texas is definitely the best state in the nation. *Everything is bigger and better in Texas!* One day you’ll realize it, you just haven’t been here long enough.”

“I think I’d like to stay here after graduation, actually,” he said. *I was intrigued.* “There are a lot of opportunities here, especially for me since I’m going into business management. I really like the Dallas area, but I think I’d be open to going to Houston too.” *Hmm. Interesting. Houston, huh? Was it just a coincidence he mentioned my hometown or was he already trying to ensure he might be around for a while? I guess I would have to wait and see.*

We proceeded to drive through the mountain range, finding our desired location of Mount Scott, all the while chatting and jamming out to some classic Taylor Swift songs, which Cameron confessed was one of his favorite artists. He’d probably say now that he only said that to get a laugh out of me, but I saw that undeniable glimmer in his eyes when he sang along to lyrics like “our song is slamming screen-doors, sneaking out late, tapping on your window.” I’d be seeing

that same glimmer many times over the next year and a half, but instead of it being there for Taylor, it would be there because of me.

We parked my little Civic on the side of the road and looked up at the mountain we were about to take on. It wasn't massive, but there weren't any trails from the bottom to the top, so we were forced to walk along the winding road. Between jumping out the way of cars and motorcycles, we got to know each other a little better - beyond just the surface. I began to tell him about my dad.

"My dad is the greatest person I know," I said. "I admire that man so much. He is incredibly selfless. He's worked hard his whole life to provide for my family. Pretty much anything my sister and I ever needed or wanted, he made sure we had it. We don't even ask for much of it, he'll just send random gifts in the mail a few times a week. I think that's just his way of showing love; like it's his love language."

Cameron listened intently.

"My parents don't really buy me a lot of gifts. Don't get me wrong, they've always given everything I've ever needed and then some, but I don't really want or need gifts. In fact, this past Christmas, I told my parents not to buy me any gifts and instead I went to the local homeless shelter and helped feed people in need of a meal." *Oh my gosh. This guy, this guy is wonderful.*

Wow.

I couldn't quite explain why, but as soon as he spoke those words, I began to see him differently. This not-so-attractive guy with a buzz cut, broken-out skin and a little extra cushion around his mid-section had such a beautiful heart, and it made my own heart flutter.

It took us a couple of hours and a whole lot of sweat to reach the peak, but once we did, the view was worth every sharp pain we were feeling in our legs and every near-death-experience we had when walking up the road. We stood at the top and before us lied God's creation in its purest form. Rolling hills and towering mountains were flecked with evergreen trees and brush, and kissed by the rays of the sun. The sky was the most perfect shade of blue, clear of even one drop of sorrow. It was almost serene, standing on the edge of the mounted boulders, looking out upon nature untouched. We walked down the side of the peak a little ways, though Cameron preferred not to look down because, even at his 6'4" stature, he was afraid of heights. *Lord, help him.* We found a spot that was a little more secluded from the rest of the summit's admirers, and there we sat, close but not too close. For the first time all day, we didn't speak.

I had the urge to kiss him. It was the perfect setting, perfect timing and, in my eyes, with the perfect person, but I didn't know how he was feeling. *Oh gosh. Why was I even concerned about all of this?* I was finally happy being single, but this guy, in all of his selfless ways, was getting in the way of that. *Ugh.* I didn't want to want him, but as we sat there staring out at miles and miles of breathtaking beauty, the fact that I wanted him was undeniable.

No kiss ever came, but I could tell something changed for both of us in that moment. The silence had made the return home feel different. I recognized myself getting that same familiar feeling I'd once had so many years ago when I first realized I liked Nick. It was like no matter

how bad I didn't want to like him (*and believe me, I didn't want to at all*), I couldn't help it. I did, and it scared me.

Later that night, hours after we had parted ways and gone back to the comfort of our own rooms, I was laying in bed, hardly able to feel my legs, and he sent me a message just before I went to sleep.

"It really was a great day with you."

"I haven't had such a nice time in a while. I couldn't have asked for a better day," I responded. *It was true. Ever since I had gotten back to my room, I had been playing "The Best Day" by Taylor Swift on repeat because I'm incredibly cheesy like that.*

"Hopefully there will be more to come," Cameron replied.

"There will be." *Wow. I surprised myself with my own confidence on that one.*

"Sounds great to me. Good night beautiful." *Beautiful.* There's that word again. *Beautiful.* He did make me feel beautiful, and I hadn't felt beautiful in a really long time. I wondered if he knew I thought he was beautiful too.

And so our story began.

Chapter 5: Uncomfortable

*A new beginning arises
 A chapter unwritten
 Waiting
 For a drop of ink
 To expose an unknown destiny
 It is fresh
 Blooming into a story
 Filled with glories
 And hardships
 But it is imprinting
 Onto the pages
 What was always supposed to be
 The plan
 The Creator
 The Lord alone
 Writing the tale
 Of the pen,
 His children.
 He knows what lies in their hearts
 And He reveals it
 Through the written works,
 And when two stories collide
 He makes it beautiful.
 An endless chapter
 Of an endless tale
 About the people
 Crafted by endless love*

The day after our hiking trip, I awoke and felt, well, happy. I was going to see him again today. During our drive home the day before, I had invited Cameron to go to church with me. He said he was a Christian (a check in the box on my list of priorities for guys I date), but didn't really go to church; however, he said he would love to get into going again. I attended First Baptist Church, and I knew the lively music and down-to-earth pastor would make him feel welcome in the house of God. I didn't care if he was a love interest or not, I just absolutely loved the idea of having someone to go to church with me. Before then, I went alone, though I never

once felt alone. The presence of God during songs of worship always left me feeling rejuvenated and surrounded with the purest love imaginable. *It fulfilled me.* Still, I smiled at the thought of worshipping God with someone new.

I picked up Cameron around 10:40 a.m., assuring we would get there early enough to get a good seat. When I pulled up to his apartment, he was already standing near the road dressed in a Ralph Lauren Polo collared shirt, dark-wash jeans and dress shoes. He looked very nice, but for some reason, his body language was off; he seemed nervous.

The entire time we were at church, he was stiff, like he couldn't just relax. I kept trying to joke around with him by nudging his side and trying to get him to sing along during our time of worship, but he'd only flash a quick smile and go back to looking unsettled. *Hmm, maybe he wasn't actually into me? Maybe he was like all of the other guys before him who found my faith to be too much to handle. Maybe he would leave too.*

The service ended and all of the church goers made their way back to their cars, as did we. At this point, we hadn't really established how the rest of the day would look, and now I felt nervous to ask.

"Do you want to go eat or do you want me to take you back home?" I asked.

"We can go eat." He didn't sound very confident. *Ugh. Why are boys so hard to read?*

We jumped in the car and drove to Olive Garden after a rather awkward conversation about where we should go. He wasn't being decisive and he wasn't acting like the cool, collected, Taylor Swift-loving guy from the day before. Cameron's demeanor left me feeling confused.

Once we got to the restaurant and sat down, the tension only continued to get worse over salad and breadsticks. We made small talk, but it felt forced. It was as if I was trying to pull, tug rather, a decent conversation out of him, but he was not having it.

I watched his mannerisms closely: his leg shook the table as it bounced frantically, his nostrils flared out as if he was having difficulty breathing and his eyes remained on his plate, only glancing up every so often. This is not what I wanted to be the follow-up to such a perfect day. Yesterday we had climbed mountains, today we were walking in a valley. *Man, maybe inviting him to church and lunch was a mistake.* Normally, I would have given up right there, but Cameron was different. He was special. Cameron gave me hope that I had not felt since Nick, so I sat across from him and tried to put myself in his shoes.

I could tell he had feelings for me. *Okay, so maybe he's scared too since he told me it's been two years since his last relationship.* I thought about how me and one of his roommates/best-friends, Will Burns, had talked for a while before I started attending Midwestern State after we hit it off at a kickback during my official visit. *Okay, so maybe he felt weird about that, but he shouldn't because Will and I hadn't talked in a while and we had never even kissed.* I thought about how he told me he was trying to lose weight after he hit over 300 pounds during Christmas Break. *Okay, so maybe he was insecure about himself and was self-conscious now that his feelings for me were becoming more real.* Whatever the case, I knew I had to show him it was okay and I was interested in him too.

“What are you doing later today?” I asked with a smile as I finished swallowing a bite of creamy fettuccine alfredo.

“I don’t really have any plans,” he said, shifting uncomfortably in his seat.

“Well, would you maybe want to catch a movie with me?” My eyes met his and for the first time all day, he seemed to relax ever so slightly.

“Yeah, that would be cool,” he said. “I’ve actually been wanting to go see Deadpool. Have you seen it?” *Yes, just last week.* But I did not want to put a damper on his enlightened mood.

“Yeah, I’ve seen it, but I would totally go see it again. It’s super funny, plus this time I’ll be watching it with you, so that will make it better,” I said enthusiastically. Cameron perked up. Finally, he seemed to be getting comfortable again. So that was it, we had now extended our plans for the day and I would be seeing him again tonight.

When I got back to my dorm, I could not get my mind off of this guy. *What was coming over me?* I was in no way, shape or form physically attracted to Cam, but emotionally I was intensively drawn to him. *But so soon? How could this be with me, the girl whose heart was as guarded as Area 51 and about as mysterious as it is well?* I did not know, but for once in my life, I stopped questioning everything and just gave in to my heart’s desire. I didn’t want to wait to

see him, so shortly after we parted ways, I asked Cameron to join me in feeding the ducks at Sikes Lake, a man-made lake on campus where hundreds of ducks and geese live peacefully.

It was a beautiful afternoon. The weather was cool enough to avoid any sweating, but warm enough to wear shorts and a t-shirt comfortably. We picked a shaded area in the grass right by the water and sat down. As we threw out little pieces of bread to our demanding entourage, we talked about life and love. *Yes, I know, it was another incredibly cheesy moment, but honestly, that's just my life - one big ball of cheese.*

“Have you ever had your heart broken?” I asked Cameron.

“Honestly, no. The last girl I dated, Taylor, I was with for three years, then I decided to end things, but I was never even phased by it.” *That's really odd.*

“You were with her for three years and you didn't care at all when it was over?” I asked. *I was confused.*

“Not really,” he responded. *Maybe he was just like other guys after all.* “I don't know, of course I loved her, but I don't think I was ever really *in* love with her. She would always be on my case about hanging out with my friends instead of spending time with her. She and I had actually been friends for a long time before we dated because her dad is my dad's best friend, so I think we were together out of convenience.”

“Honestly, that makes me feel bad for her,” I said, a little bit taken back by his lack of emotion. He acted like Taylor meant nothing to him. I could not relate to or understand that because Nick had meant everything to me.

“I mean yeah, I felt bad that I hurt her especially when she would send me texts with old memories or songs that were important to us; I wouldn’t respond and I knew it bothered her, but I was just so done,” Cameron said. “And I really wasn’t a good boyfriend to her anyway. Sometimes, she’d piss me off and I let a few days go by without responding to her. I honestly didn’t care about resolving the problem and I didn’t care about how she felt. It was immature, but I just wasn’t invested.”

This was not how I expected this conversation to go. He was disappointing me with every word he spoke. *I thought he was different.*

“Oh, okay. Well that probably really hurt her. I would know because I’ve been in her shoes. I was very in love with my last boyfriend. His name was Nick. He absolutely broke my heart and I thought I would never get over it, but I have, though it wasn’t easy at all,” I said. I went on to tell him the story about how Nick had broken up with me, all of the back-and-forth, him getting into a really bad situation and us finally being done, but on good terms. I know you’re not really supposed to talk about your exes with a new love interest, but I couldn’t help but share my story. Maybe if Cameron could see heartbreak from my perspective, he would have a little more sympathy for his ex. He didn’t say much in response to my story, except for calling Nick a douchebag for letting me slip through his fingers.

“Nick isn’t a bad guy,” I responded. “He made some bad decisions, but he really is a good person. We both made mistakes in the relationship and breakup. I still care about him and want the best for him, but I know he is no longer a part of my life for a reason.” Cameron smiled.

“Yeah, everything works out or doesn’t work out for a reason,” he said. “But I’m glad things didn’t work out between you and your ex because then I probably would not have gotten to know you.”

We shared a smile as we both sat with our arms wrapped around our knees. *Hmm, funny how he would eventually make me ball up like that again one day, but that will come later in this story.* I was enjoying being there with him. It was incredibly peaceful. Even as we were surrounded by quacking ducks and passer-byres making laps on the walking-trail, it felt like it was just the two of us. It was funny, because for the first time ever when talking about Nick and our breakup, I did not feel sad - not at all. I wasn’t sure if it was just because of the passed time or because of Cameron, but I liked that it no longer hurt.

This pale, pudgy football player who was trying (*and failing*) to rock a buzz-cut was making me hopeful again. I was hopeful that I could love once more. I was hopeful I would be the girl to change him in his ability to fall in love. I was hopeful we might be in each others’ lives for a while. *Stop Kelsey! You cannot be optimistic with love again! Remember the last time you got hopeful? Let me remind you: you got your heart broken and you ended up depressed for many months. Listen to what he said about his last relationship! What would make you any*

different? As strange and naive as it sounds, a piece of me believed I would be different to him. I was not sure why I felt like this, but part of me believed God had put this big ole guy in my life for a reason beyond my understanding. *I wasn't wrong*. Of course, I would grow to believe God placed Cameron in my life to be in it forever, but I would eventually learn God placed him in my life to be a lesson from which to mature spiritually.



That night, Cameron and I met at my car to go to the movies. I decided to go for a casual-cute look by wearing a soft, long-sleeved baby blue shirt with my white skinny jeans that made my butt look good. *I had to dress to impress haha*. Cameron wore jeans and a Nike t-shirt; an outfit that was considered dressing up for him. *Typical jock. I like it*. My mom always said, “if it takes a guy longer to get ready in the morning than it takes you, he needs to go.” Well, based on Cameron’s appearance, it looked like he took a solid three minutes to get ready while it took me about an hour, so he was doing just fine according to Mom’s standards.

We drove to the local Cinemark and I was pleased to see we were two of just a few movie goers on that particular Sunday night. I love going to the movies - *it is one of my favorite things to do* - but what I love even more than going to the movies is going to the movies when there is hardly anyone else there. It is fun to watch a flick and be totally transparent in your reactions to the jokes and the tear-jerking moments, not to mention not having to worry if the other people in the theater are judging you for crunching your popcorn too loudly. If I had been with one of my friends, the mostly-empty theater would have been ideal to cut-up and laugh during the movie,

but I could not do that with Cameron. I had to be on my best behavior while we were on a date. *Could I even call it a date? He paid for my ticket and snacks, so maybe? Maybe not?* I wasn't sure, but either way, I wasn't comfortable enough with him yet to fully relax.

Cameron didn't seem comfortable either. He had gone back to acting nervous around me again. I think it was mostly because neither one of us knew exactly how to act around the other or knew what 'this' was just yet. As we sat down in our seats, I wondered if he would put his arm around me or even just lean in close, but instead he shifted his weight as far away from me as possible, under the strict restraints the small seat allowed. *Okay, this is awkward.* Oh well, I guess he did not want to make a move too quickly. I was fine with it. *Okay, okay, maybe I was a little disappointed, but could you blame me?* All I wanted was to have clarity about where his feelings were and maybe where this was going, since I certainly had no clue what I wanted.

The Marvel film played and we watched in silence. Cameron was careful not to reach for the popcorn at the same time I did because God forbid we touch hands. To make matters worse, there was a pretty graphic sex-scene at the beginning. *Oh Dear Lord, please let me die now. Thanks Hollywood, let me just crawl into a ball and die.* This brought up a very important question in my mind: did Cameron know I was a virgin? Did he also know I was saving myself for marriage? Was he a virgin? These were things that would have to be discussed if we did in fact have feelings for each other. I knew a lot of the football players probably knew I was saving myself. There's this thing called locker room talk, maybe you've heard of it, and a couple of the guys on the team had actually tried getting with me. Obviously we know how that went. *N-O. #Virgin4Life.* So, naturally I assumed Cameron probably knew what he was working with, but would it be a deal breaker like it had been for so many guys before him? It sounds terrible to say,

but I assumed Cameron was probably a virgin too. I knew he was not the most attractive guy and seemed really sweet, so I thought he probably was just as inexperienced as me. My mind wandered. *Focus on the movie, Kelsey!*

When we finally made it through the most awkward two hours of my life, we left the theater and headed back to campus. Cameron lived in the apartment complex across the street from my dorm, so once we parked, we walked down the sidewalk toward our separate buildings together.

“I really had such a great weekend with you, Kelsey,” Cameron said. My heart skipped.

“I had a great weekend with you too,” I said as I smiled back at him. “I’m sad it has to end.”

“Me too,” he said. “You are such an amazing person to be around.” *My Heart.*

“I feel the same way about you,” I said while beaming ear to ear. We reached my dorm building and paused in front of the door. “Well, I guess we’re back. Thank you so much for tonight. I guess I’ll see you in class tomorrow?”

“Yes, you will,” he said. Suddenly, he looked extremely nervous and excited all at the same time. That’s when Cameron leaned in to kiss me. His kiss was faster than Road Runner trying to escape the traps of Wile E. Coyote. You would have thought I was the one who surprised him

with an unexpected smooch because he immediately jumped back, shifting his weight from foot to foot the moment our lips met.

It was probably one of the worst, most awkward kisses I have ever experienced in my life, but even still, I thought it was an incredibly sweet gesture. He was so nervous he barely avoided missing my puckered mouth! I tried to calm him and reassure him that the feeling was mutual by stepping toward him and kissing him back. *Oh gosh*. It was just as bad as the first, and he jumped back quickly again, although this time his smile was brighter than the moon shining down upon our faces. It was kind of cute; it was almost like he was one of those children on the black-and-white Hallmark cards getting his first kiss. *Okay, so he's definitely a virgin*.

With smiles on both of our faces, we said goodnight and went our own ways. After showering and putting on one of my dad's 3XL t-shirts that I loved to sleep in, I crawled into bed and stared at the ceiling. I felt, well, happy. The events of the past two days replayed over and over in my mind: the hiking, church, lunch, feeding the ducks, going to the movies, all sealed with a kiss. *Oh gosh, the kiss. It was so bad, but I didn't mind. We could work on that, right? But wait, if we worked on it, then that would mean I would be seeing him more in the future?* I began to panic. *What had I gotten myself into?* I had just gotten over Nick and was finally at the point of being happy as a single 19 year-old, and these feelings I was starting to get for Cameron were jeopardizing my singleness. Yes, I was over Nick, but I was absolutely not over the memory of heartbreak caused by love lost. If I started something serious with Cameron, I would be putting my heart at risk again and I was not ready for that - not when I *just* stopped feeling that sting of pain from the first heartache. *Nope, nope, nope. Walls are coming up. I'm guarding my heart because I have to protect myself*.

Here I was again, in a situation where a great guy had feelings for me and I had feelings for him, and I could feel myself pushing away just as we started the race. *Typical me*. I could foresee myself ruining things in fear of getting hurt. I knew I liked him, but I also knew I didn't want to be tied down to one person; that meant things were serious and I was not ready for 'serious'.

Looking back now, part of me wishes I would have ran then. Part of me wishes I would have pushed him away because then I wouldn't have gotten hurt. *I guess that's just the risk you take in love.*

Chapter 6: Drowning

*Rescue me, Oh Lord.
Rescue me, rescue me.
I find it hard to take a breath.
I am drowning
Drown-
Dr-
Gasp!
Alive in You.
Rescue me, Oh Lord.
Rescue me, rescue me.
I cannot do this on my own,
It is You I need.*

Do you know what it's like to have an anxiety attack? If you do, I'm so sorry. If you don't, be grateful because it's one of the worst feelings in the world. I don't know what it's like to drown, but I imagine it's a similar feeling. It's like no matter what you do, you can't breath. No matter how many times you tell yourself you're okay or try to convince yourself things really aren't that bad, you can't control feeling overwhelmed. There is a tightness in your chest that feels as if 20 tons of weight is crushing you, but you don't have the strength to remove the

heaviness. Most of all, though, the worst part is feeling helpless. The walls push in on you and the world becomes a very dark place. Your eyes see all that surrounds you, but your mind does not comprehend them because there is a cloudy sensation masking your sanity. It is awful, and it is something I have dealt with since I was 14 years old.

Anxiety attacks were always bad for me. I'd go through the usual cycle of hyperventilating, uncontrollable crying and feeling as if my soul were detached from my body, but once it was over, it was gone. I would go through these cycles about three or four times a year, which was still horrible in the moment, but they faded along with the passing of time, so they were manageable.

Things with Cameron had been going pretty good, but I still felt myself pushing him away. We were spending a lot of time together, almost every day in fact. We acted like a couple, but we weren't a couple. Every time things would progress with Cam, I found other reasons to remain closed off. So, it turns out Cameron was not a virgin. *He was just a bad kisser.* In fact, he had been with three girls, which was not necessarily a bad thing to me, but it was the first time I had gotten serious with someone who did not share my desire to save myself. I really did not judge him at all for having had sex in the past, but it did worry me because it was intimidating. I thought he would want or expect things from me that I just could not do, but he said a girl like me was worth the wait. As much as I wanted to believe him, I was not sure if he understood how difficult waiting might become as his feelings for me got stronger, but he always reassured me. Then there was the fact that Cameron liked to party and I did not. Again, his lifestyle did not necessarily bother me, but I knew those fundamental differences in interests could become problematic. Again, he reassured me our differences were fine and he was actually tired of

partying because he was ready to settle down. And again, I was not sure if I believed him, but I tried.

He was making such an effort to win me over, but I was not sure if I wanted to be won over and I was frightened by my developing feelings. *Getting hurt again was the last thing I wanted or needed right now, so pushing him away was the answer, right?* I needed clarity that I did not have, so of course, my anxiety came in and made things even more unclear.

On top of that, some other things started to go wrong. My sister, who was away in Orlando, had reached a breaking point after she dealt with a coach who made her feel as though she was not good enough. She was by far the hardest worker on her team and when she was recruited, her coach told her she would likely be the best setter to ever come through the University of Central Florida volleyball program. Unfortunately for her, the beginning of her college career was less than ideal. The first week of practice, she called me crying saying for the first time in our lives, she had experienced an anxiety attack. The pressure to be the best compromised her skill set and she ended up being a Red Shirt, which meant she would not play for a year. This was actually a good thing for her because it took off a lot of pressure, but it motivated her like nothing had before. She would show up to practice hours early to work on her own or with one of the assistant coaches, she would stay late and she would work out harder than ever before in the gym and in the weight room. As she trained harder and harder, her game-play got better and better. She was doing well in practice and never complained about not playing in the games because she understood her time would come soon. But nothing she ever did was adequate for her coach. One error and she was incompetent, and that's when he broke her.

Elyssa began to make some questionable decisions. She said she had had enough of trying to be perfect all of the time because even at her best, she was still not good enough for her coach, so why bother trying at all? She decided the UCF volleyball program was no longer a good fit for her and began to look at transferring. Over Christmas Break when I came home saying I no longer wanted to play volleyball anymore, Elyssa came home saying she no longer wanted to play volleyball at UCF. *Sorry Mom and Dad*. She ended up being recruited by a school in Hammond, Louisiana called Southeastern Louisiana University, but she would not start attending the school until August of the next year, so in the mean time, she stayed at UCF as a non-athlete. This is when things started rapidly changing for Elyssa.

With her new care-free mindset, Elyssa began partying and drinking and experimenting with guys - things she had never done or had an interest in until this point. In fact, she had not even had her first kiss until this point, so it was a lot of change in a short amount of time. My beautiful sister, who I had always known better than the back of my hand, was becoming less and less recognizable, and that saddened me. I felt like I was losing her, like I was losing a piece of myself. I wanted to stop her from making mistakes, but I had no control over that from 18 hours away, so I started to panic.

Elyssa was not the only source of my anxiety, though. School was stressful, as usual. I was taking 17 hours that semester which included a lab, a foreign language class and an honors class. Not to mention, I have always put an enormous amount of pressure on myself when it comes to school because I'm a perfectionist and anything below a 4.0 would have been a disappointment to me.

As if that was not enough, there was a new element with me starting my first job. I accepted a position at the local YMCA as a day camp counselor for grade-school children. I loved my job, but waking up at 5:30 a.m. to be at work by 6:00 a.m., then immediately going to class, then going straight back to work until 5:00 p.m. was not exactly a schedule I adjusted to very well. I loved the kiddos and they made coming in so early a little easier, but I was not sleeping most nights. You see, I have this fear of waking up late any time I have to get up early, so it usually takes me several hours to fall asleep in the first place, then when I finally do fall asleep, I wake up multiple times throughout the night in complete panic mode thinking I've overslept, and finally, I end up waking up before my alarm goes off (*because yay anxiety*). So anyway, I did this whole sleep-but-not-really-sleep thing while I was working at the Y, so then I ran into the problem of trying not to fall asleep in class (something I had never had a problem with before).

It was too much at once. What may have been pebbles to others, were my boulders, and I was overwhelmed. Instead of having anxiety attacks three or four times a year, I began to have them three to four times a week. Of course, just as things started to go right again in my life and I was beginning to let someone in again for the first time in years, my mind had to fail me.

"Why? Why do I have to be so crazy?" I would think. Certainly that's what I was - crazy - because no one in her right mind acts like this all of the time. I would break down constantly: a text from Elyssa, I'd break down; just sitting down to eat lunch alone, I'd break down; praying before going to sleep; I'd break down. Hard as I tried, I could not stop it. It was a freight train on iron tracks, and I was but a grain of sand lying in its way. *There was nothing I could do.*

I remember when things got particularly awful. It was Sunday, March 13, 2016. I had gone home for the weekend to see my parents. Even though the drive took me about seven hours, it was always worth the time on the road to be at home with my family. I remember this weekend being particularly good. We had gone to the Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo that Saturday to ride rides and to see Billy Currington perform in concert. For those of you who aren't from the Houston area, let me just tell you, the Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo is a big freaking deal. Everyone puts on their best pair of boots and shiniest belt-buckle and heads on down to the rodeo to enjoy everything from concerts to bull riding to carnival rides to fried Oreos. With the sound of "yee-haw's" being called from all around and the smell of grease in the air, it's always a great time to spend with fellow 'country folk' and 'redneck companions.'

It was a great weekend. Being home and being with my family was always more than enough to get me feeling rejuvenated and loved. I was so happy, so it hit me like a bus when my dark monster crawled out of the shadows that Sunday on my way back to Wichita Falls.

There was nothing abnormal about the drive: same old highway, same old car-tunes, same old me. But that last part, the "same old me" part, was what really made the difference here because the "same old me" hadn't been doing so well lately.

Going home had been an escape from my worries and my troubles, but as I made my way back to reality, my stress from my sister's decisions, my classes, my job and my indecisiveness with Cameron all began to crowd around me. Being in the car was suffocating, and slowly my heart began to race faster and faster, my breathing became more and more unsteady and the tears began to flow harder and harder.

Then, for the first time in my life, I began to have thoughts...very dark thoughts. Each time I would pass under an overpass, I would imagine turning the wheel and crashing into the brick wall. I imagined how the car would crumble with me inside and then I would finally be free from the pain of this world and the world would be free of me. *One less crazy person to worry about.* If I died, I would no longer have to feel so helpless in my battle with anxiety, but then I thought about those I would be leaving behind. If I died, my family would never recover, especially not my dad. My dad worries about me a lot, and when he worries, his dark monster consumes him, much worse than mine consumes me. If I died, he would die, so I snapped out of my thoughts and erupted into even more tears. Even though I would not have actually driven my car into the side of the overpass, just knowing that thought had even crossed my mind scared me to death. I did not know what my future held, but I did know I did not want to drag anybody else into this mess. This was it, when I got back to Wichita Falls, I would tell Cameron goodbye forever.



I arrived back to my dorm around five o'clock that afternoon. I was incredibly exhausted, emotionally drained and physically shaken. Cameron had called me during my drive to say he wanted to see me when I got back because he missed me. *Oh no. He missed me.* I was not worthy of being someone somebody missed, especially not this sweet guy. Of course, when we talked briefly, I did not let on to how I was feeling and the experience I had. Instead, I chose to talk about the happy things that happened the day before at the rodeo, just as any *normal* person

would. I needed to save the hard stuff for when we were face-to-face, so about 30 minutes after I got back, Cameron came over.

I was sitting on the edge of my highly-elevated dorm-room bed, feet dangling off the side. My feet rubbed against each other in my nervousness as Cameron stood facing me.

“How was your weekend at home?” he asked. *Okay, small talk first, good.*

“It was really nice, actually,” I said. “It felt amazing to see my parents and my friends because, as I’ve told you a little bit about, I’ve been have a hard time lately.” I began to feel a knot in my throat as I knew now would be a good time to bring up the drive.

“I bet it was, and I’m happy you got to be with them, but I would be lying if I said I didn’t miss you,” he smiled. Then I think he realized something was not right. “Hey, what’s wrong?” he asked as he tipped my chin up so I could no longer look at the floor.

“You can’t miss me, don’t miss me,” I cried. He looked confused.

“Kelsey, why would you say that? Of course I’m going to miss you. You mean so much to me - ”

“But you can’t miss me and you shouldn’t care about me,” I said with my eyes meeting the floor once more. “I - I have to tell you something.”

Cameron looked concerned.

“What is it?” he asked. His voice was so gentle and kind it made me even more sad for what I was about to do, but I knew it was for the best. It was better for him this way. It was better for everyone to be without me.

“Well, today, when I was driving back here,” I said, my words slow and filled with cries. “I began to have certain thoughts, thoughts I have never had before, and I’m ashamed.”

“Kelsey, what are you talking about? What’s going on? Are you okay?”

“No, I’m not okay,” I cried. “I was not going to act on it, but every time I drove past an overpass, I imagined myself..” I had to pause for a moment. “I imagined myself driving my car into the wall.” My crying became uncontrollable and I buried my head in my hands. I didn’t want Cameron to see me like this.

Cameron put his hand on me and when I finally looked up, he had tears in his eyes. *This is exactly why he doesn’t need to be in my life: he doesn’t need this, he doesn’t need to hurt for me.*

I continued.

“I am crazy, Cameron. I’m literally crazy, and you shouldn’t have to put up with this, no one should have to put up with this. I can’t...I can’t see you anymore. I can’t drag you into my mess.”

He blinked and the tears that had swollen up in his light-blue eyes were released down his face. He once told me he rarely cried, so I knew this was really hurting him. *I’m so sorry. I did this.* The expression on his face was one of great sadness and concern. His bushy eyebrows were raised and his eyelids were sunken as he tried to gather his thoughts.

He got close to me as I sat elevated on the bed, and put his hands on my knees as he looked me in the eyes and said, “you are not crazy, and I’m not going anywhere. I adore you.” *I adore you.* Even today, as I remember that moment, tears are brought to my eyes. In that sliver of time, I felt completely accepted for who I was, baggage and all. In my weakest moment, in my rawest form, Cameron *adored* me even as I tried to push him away. *I think that is part of why what comes later in this story is so surprising.*

When you let someone in to your darkest moments and share with them your deepest struggles, you might as well be giving them a #10 blade to cut you open on an operating table because you’ve already exposed your internal affairs to the outside world. Now in some cases, that person sews you up and kisses your scars, *adoring* you for the rest of time, just as you are, flaws and all. In other instances, the patient is not so lucky and the person in control of your surgery decides to take the vulnerable places you have exposed and infect them. The problem with opening yourself up and sharing your downfalls with someone new is you give them control, and it is up to them to either use your weaknesses against you or to love you regardless.

Cameron made me feel safe. I trusted him when he told me he adored me. I trusted him when he told me I wasn't crazy. My faith was misguided, but being the naive 19-year-old I was, I chose to believe him anyway.

I wrapped my arms around my big fella and held him tightly. He stroked my hair as I cried into his shoulder.

"It's okay, Kelsey," he said. "We're going to get through this together."

Chapter 7: The Fault in My Heart

*I have walked alone
For many miles
I have masked my tears
With many smiles*

*I have feared your love
When you're by my side
But I'm finally seeing
How we collide*

About a week had passed since I had told Cameron about my terrible thoughts from my drive back to Wichita Falls. As I went through the motions of going to work and going to class that week, I kept hearing Cameron's words repeat over and over in my head: "I adore you... I adore you... I adore you." As I would sit and scribble notes as my professor rambled on about American government, it was almost as if I were in a trance. "I adore you... I adore you... I adore you." I realized I adored him too, and that scared me to death.

I had been absolutely crazy, head-over-heels in love with Nick; he was the only guy I had ever loved, and we all know how that ended. Two years, it took me TWO YEARS to get over him. I went through some very dark days in my struggle to bounce back from that heartache, but I had finally let Nick go, and now Cameron was in the picture and I worried I might be starting the cycle all over again. I could not risk getting hurt again, I couldn't do it. So yet again, my fears crept in, and who else but my dark monster was leading the way.

Cameron was amazing. He was so kind, he treated me incredibly well and I loved being around him, but the fact he was so good made me want to run away faster. He was obtainable, he was real, our feelings were real, which meant all of this could develop into an official relationship, which meant there was potential for hope again, which meant there was potential to have my hopes crushed and my heart broken. I could not separate Cameron from Nick, as hard as I tried. Nick and I had also just started out as friends, Nick was also very kind and good to me, and Nick broke my heart, so wouldn't Cameron do the same? I had to end this, for good this time.

“Hey Cameron, we need to talk,” I texted him.

“What's up? Is everything okay?” he asked.

“I keep thinking about how you said you adore me, but you shouldn't. I can't get attached to you because I'm just going to end up getting hurt. I really am damaged goods. Nick broke a piece of my heart that took a long time for me to repair. A piece of me still feels broken. In fact, I

feel like a piece of me will be broken for a very long time. I know I have my walls up, but it's because I honestly don't think I can go through another heartbreak. I don't know how my heart could handle it. I just can't let my walls down. It's tough. You have treated me so perfectly and your kindness means the world to me, but you can't adore me because I don't deserve to be adored right now. I'm not ready to be someone that someone adores," I said. "I don't think you can separate your feelings for me and I'm just not ready to fully commit to you, so I think it would be best if we cut off communication." *Running was all I knew to do when I got scared.*

He took a while to reply.

"Kelsey, you're pushing me away like you said you would. I don't know why you just won't let me in. I'm not going to hurt you." *You can't prove that.* "I'm not Nick."

"I'm sorry Cameron, but I can't do this anymore. Your feelings are so strong and it makes me feel guilty because I can't get there right now, and that's not fair to either of us," I said. "I truly do care about you so much, but that's why I have to let you go."

He didn't accept that answer.



The next day, we both left for Spring Break. Cameron flew into Tampa to visit his family, and I flew into Orlando to visit Elyssa. We were in the same state, yet miles apart at heart. The vacation came at the perfect time, and it was wonderful to see my sister. I had missed her so much and when we were reunited, the girl I'd always known was still there despite my worries, and that was reassuring. My sister's presence has always brought me such comfort, so in a time when I desperately needed comforting, she was my safe haven.

The first night I was there, we did something I never did: we got drunk and went out dancing. Now hear me out, I had never been drunk in my life because I really didn't drink, so it did not take much for me to get there. My sister, who went out multiples times every week, had built up her tolerance to about one drink less than what would cause liver failure. *Understand we were on two totally different levels, so please try not to judge me so harshly when I share this next part.*

Well, me being the girl who never drank and also being the girl who was ready to escape from reality for a little bit, was "encouraged" by my sister (who was given the nickname "Bad Influence Bear" for a good reason) to take six consecutive shots of Vodka. *God help me.* First of all, I'm glad I took them in the privacy of my sister's dorm because I gagged after every single shot I took and nearly puked after three of them. I looked like a hot mess and I felt like one too. It didn't take long for the alcohol to kick in, and once it did, I was not prepared. *Pretty sure I gave a whole new meaning to the phrase "she ain't ready."*

There was a bus at UCF that gave students a free ride from campus to the club district in Orlando. Elyssa, her friend and I were the only three people on the bus and, in our drunken state, decided to sit in the very back. At this point, I was past the point of being a hot mess and onto the

point of one shot away from death. *Good grief, it was awful.* Everything around me was spinning. My head felt heavy, like a bobble head, so I plopped down on my sister's lap. Even with my eyes closed, my dizziness was inescapable and all I wanted to do was go to sleep. *As you can tell, I'm a great person to go out with if you're wanting to really turn up that night (ha).* With every bump in the road, my stomach turned more and more until finally I knew I was going to get sick.

I jumped up from my seat and immediately fell back down.

"I'm going to throw up! I'm going to throw - !" I shouted, barely able to get the words out as the vomit quickly crept up in my throat. Lucky for me, my knight in shining drunkenness, Elyssa, came to my rescue and she ran in a jagged line to the front of the bus to snatch the little trashcan located beside the driver. Just as she reached me, I hurled into the garbage, throwing up all of the alcohol; that day's breakfast, lunch and dinner; my entire stomach; my intestines; my lungs; you name it, it was coming out of my body. Once I finally finished rejecting what should have never entered my system in the first place, I felt so much better. *Glory be to God, hallelujah Jesus.* Though I recovered quite well physically, there was no recovering from the damage done to my pride from throwing up on a public bus. *A freaking public bus, people! That's BAD!* Anyway, I decided I was not going to drink for the rest of my time there, that is, until I got a special visitor.



After my night of humiliation, Elyssa and I decided to take it easy for the rest of my time visiting. We were able to visit Daytona Beach and get hit on by a man who looked to be about sixty years old. He offered us champagne and a bubble bath, but we politely declined. Additionally, we relived some old childhood memories by spending two days at the most magical place on earth: Disney World. Other days, we just hung out and went shopping and played with puppies and watched movies. It was truly so nice, but I still could not get my mind off of Cameron.

I knew he was hurting because he would tweet sad song lyrics and he even posted a picture of his friend Naomi, thanking her for being there for him during a difficult time. *I don't think he realized it was hard on me too.* I really cared about Cameron, but that's exactly why I knew I had to let him go. Even still, the heart and the mind do not always agree, and my heart was telling me to get him back and trust him. I wanted to listen, but my mind was fighting a tough fight.

Since we first started seeing each other, Cameron and I had a song. It was "Collide" by Howie Day. It came on one time when we were in the car and we both loved it, so every time I tried to push him away, one of us would end up sending the song to the other one. It was our way of staying connected, replaying the lyrics:

I've found I'm scared to know I'm always on your mind

Even the best fall down sometimes

Even the stars refuse to shine

Out of the back you fall in time

I somehow find

You and I collide

It hit me hard every single time I heard it because it reminded me of my fear to love. *I'm scared to know I'm always on your mind.* It terrified me. I hated I had become that person who was afraid to fall again, but as the old saying goes, the first cut is the deepest, and Nick had cut me deep. In my time of being single, I realized I couldn't get hurt if I was alone; my heart could never again be left trampled on the ground. But then I'd go back to those last verses in Howie Day's song where he says, "I somehow find, you and I collide," and I would be right back to wanting to listen to my heart. Cameron and I had collided, and together we made something beautiful. There was something so special about him and what we had going, *I knew it*, but I didn't want to accept it. *Was God trying to show me He had answered my prayers and sent someone new for me to love? Was I trying to ignore the Creator of all that is and is to come?* What happened next, I believed was a sign.

It was my last day in town before I had to leave, and while Elyssa was at the gym, I sat in her room and listened to "Collide" on repeat. The music took me back to him, just as it always did. It brought me some comfort, but then I remembered he was gone, and the hurting returned. As if by fate, at that exact moment, Cameron texted me.

"Hey. I know you said you don't think we should talk anymore, but I can't let you go. I miss you. I'd really like to come see you tonight if you're not doing anything. Please let me come see you," he said. *Whoa, was he fighting for me? No one had ever fought for me before.*

“Hey. I know what I said, but I’ve missed you too. Isn’t it a pretty far drive for you to come to Orlando?” I sent back.

“Don’t worry about the drive, I have to see you. I need to talk to you,” he said.

“Okay, well Elyssa and I don’t have plans tonight, so if you want to come over, you can. We’re having dinner at a pizza place called Lazy Moon. Want to meet us there?” I asked.

“Yes, I’ll be there. I’m going to bring Rick with me because he has a girl he wants to see who goes to UCF,” he said. Rick was Cameron’s best friend, someone he trusted with everything. I figured he probably knew a lot about me and I hoped he didn’t hate me for hurting Cam. *I never meant to hurt him.*

“Okay, we’ll see you at 7:00,” I texted.

As if God enjoyed irony, it rained that night. Thankfully, Elyssa and I only caught the beginning of the storm when it was just a drizzle, but Cameron and Rick were not so lucky. By the time they got to Lazy Moon, the rain was pouring from the sky and made their 10-foot walk to the front door seem more like a swim through the Atlantic Ocean. They stepped through the door, soaking wet. Their clothes were drenched, and when Cameron took off his hoodie, it became apparent his heart had been through a storm of its own. *He looked so...well, sad.* When his eyes met my gaze, he looked uncomfortable. *Why did he come if he didn’t want to see me?*

Does he think I'm a terrible person because I keep pushing him away? My mind raced. *Was he here to tell me off?* I was not sure, he told me before he would sometimes get really angry, but I could not imagine that side of this sweet guy. I hoped he would not be rude to me, but I figured I'd find out.

Cameron and Rick finished ordering their food and came to sit down at the table with Elyssa and me.

"Hey," I said quietly. I wasn't sure how to play it cool when I was so nervous to see him. "You must be Rick. It is so nice to meet you. I've heard a lot about you."

"It's nice to meet you too," Rick said. "I've heard a lot about you as well." Then, he gave Cameron one of those looks where it was like he was saying, "I know some things she probably doesn't know that I know." *Oh no, yikes. He hates me.* He must have seen my concern because he added, "all good things," laughing. *Oh geez, I hope he's being serious.* I chuckled a little. *This is going to be a long night.*

As time went on, Cameron seemed to relax more, which made me relax too. We all ate our pizza and laughed and told stories from our childhood. Rick liked to embarrass Cameron with funny little stories, and Elyssa liked to tell stories about me. It was as if we were at dinner with our parents and they were all exposing our every secret we had wished to remain hidden under the comfort of time. It was all in good fun and it was nice to see a different side of Cameron. He looked so comfortable and at ease sitting there with his best-friend-turned-wing-man. It suddenly occurred to me I was more comfortable too with my sister there. It's like we

were both in our safe-zones and it began to occur to me I had been the one preventing this level of comfort between just the two of us during the past few months. I had been so reluctant to let someone in, I walked around wearing a suit of armor. So many times, Cameron had tried to take off that armor and so many times I had added another layer to block him out. Yes, I shared some very personal things with him - everything from my history with Nick to my family's dark days after the 2005 explosion. He knew the intricate pieces of what made me *me*, but he didn't know the full me. He tried, God, he tried so hard, but I couldn't trust him. *I couldn't trust any guy.*

Now here we were sitting in a pizza parlor in Orlando, Florida of all places and I was feeling more at home with him than ever before. For the first time, I wanted to let him in. *I couldn't tell you why I felt that way, I just knew that's how I was feeling, so now I had to figure out what I was going to do moving forward.* I had put this boy through so much back-and-forth emotional drama, I could not let him in just to push him away again. No, if I let him in, it would need to be for good. *Was I ready for that?* My question would soon be answered.

After we finished eating, we all went back to Elyssa's apartment-style dorm and opened a few bottles of beer for the guys and Smirnoffs for Elyssa and me. *I know, I know, I said I would not drink again during my trip, but with Cameron there and my heart split wide open, I needed some liquid courage in my system.* Again, it took very little alcohol for me to get tipsy. *At this point, I realized I was a tired drunk.* We were all just sitting there talking and I literally began to fall asleep in my chair. *Way to play it cool, Kels. You're doing great.*

Elyssa and Rick were not ready to call it a night with my drunk-ass, so they both decided to go out and party. Cameron opted to stay with me. He was not drunk at all.

“Kelsey, I really think you need to sober up so we can talk. I really want to talk to you - ”

“Cameron, I’m so tired. I’m sorry about this, I’m sorry about everything,” I cried. *Oh gosh, turns out I’m an emotional drunk too.* Just as I began to lose myself in a funnel of sobs, one of Elyssa’s roommates walked in, took one look at me and went to the kitchen to make me a peanut butter sandwich, a meal I had packed in my lunch box almost every single day throughout grade school. *Yes, I was one of THOSE people who preferred her sandwich without jelly.*

Cameron took the sandwich from her and helped me up from my chair.

“Come on, let’s get some of this sandwich in you and get you to bed,” he said.

“Okay, okay, okay,” I said. *I also repeat myself a lot when I’m drunk.* We walked into Elyssa’s bedroom and Cameron helped me lay down on the bed. He took a seat in her desk chair and folded his hands together with his elbows on his knees as he watched me struggle to lift the weight of the enormously heavy sandwich. *Must’ve been all of that protein in the peanut butter.*

“Cameron, I - I - I don’t want to eat this sandwich; it’s too hard,” I whined. *Gosh, I was being so annoying.* “I can’t even keep my eyes open.” It was true. I was so exhausted from the alcohol, I felt as though my eyes were being stomped on by the Sand Man himself.

“No, no, you need to eat. Here, let me help you,” Cam said. He got up and sat next to me on the edge of the bed. I immediately laid my head in his lap because clearly I was thinking so

logically. He tilted my head back so that my mouth was facing upwards. I expected a kiss, but instead I got a sticky bite of peanut butter and dried-out bread. Once I bit off the initial piece, I let the food just sit there in my mouth since chewing proved to be too difficult of a task.

“You really need to eat,” Cameron persisted. *Fine, Mr. Pushy.* He stroked my hair, then started tracing the outline of my face with his finger as if he was drawing me. As he circled around my nose, I chewed. He went around my eyes, I chewed some more. He traced my ears, I chewed until I finally got down my first bite. We continued doing this until I had eaten three of the four slices of my sandwich (*Elyssa’s roommate had been kind enough to cut it into squares for me, just like Mom used to do*).

Suddenly, I had more energy. I grabbed the last piece of sandwich from Cameron’s hand and tried to feed him. It was an attempt to be cute, but I failed miserably as I smeared peanut butter across his face. We both laughed one of those belly-laugh until our eyes met, then the laughs died out. His ocean blue eyes met my pale green eyes and together we got lost in each other. Cameron leaned down and kissed me.

“You know, just because I’m a virgin doesn’t mean you can only peck me,” I said. *Ahh, liquid courage kicking in at last.* “I need to feel passion and these kisses just aren’t cutting it for me.”

“I -I didn’t know. I was so worried about taking it too far because I didn’t want to upset you - ”

“Cameron! Just kiss me!” I interrupted, and kiss me he did. *Finally! He gave me some heat, he gave me some fire, he gave me some tongue! God bless!* It still wasn’t the best kiss I’d ever had, but it was much better than his past kisses. For the first time, I saw potential with our physical connection.

After a much needed, much prolonged make-out session, Cameron wanted to talk. *Okay, decision time, decision time. Oh no, oh no.*

“These past few days have been really hard on me,” Cameron said. “I’ve missed you so much and I didn’t see what you sent me coming.”

“I know you didn’t and I’m sorry,” I said. “I just felt like you could not separate your emotions and your feelings from just being friends with me and that made me feel guilty. I could not make a commitment to you because I didn’t know what I wanted and I didn’t think it was fair to keep you going back and forth. I thought I didn’t want to be tied down to one person; I thought I wanted to date other people.”

He nodded as he looked down.

“But,” I continued. “As I have been presented with numerous opportunities to meet new guys here in Orlando, all I’ve wanted is you.”

He looked up. There was an expression of shock and relief on his face like if a penny he had thrown into a wishing well had served him good luck.

“I’m not ready for a title,” I said. “But, I am ready to start *thinking* about one, and you know how tough it’s been for me to even get to this point, so work with me here,” I chuckled. His grin stretched across his entire face as he laughed a little under his breath.

“Yeah, I think I can work with that,” he said.

We spent the rest of the night cuddled up on the couch watching the movie “The Fault In Our Stars,” but with how I was feeling, I could foresee no fault in my own universe.

Chapter 8: Double Win

*A failing heart was once mine
Shattered by the weaknesses
Of disappointment
And betrayal*

*A lost purpose
Replaced by a restored faith
A faith in the goodness of man
And the power of our God*

*Sometimes we cannot see
Beyond our insecurities
Blinded by a selfish love
Waiting to be healed*

*But when our eyes are opened
Through a vulnerability of the soul*

*All is better than it was before
The start of something beautiful*

*All things happen for a reason
That is how the saying goes
Truth is revealed in this spoken word
We just have to open ourselves to see it*

*I have been outside myself
Seen my internal emotions
Break down my exterior bondage
And I have seen myself overcome the pain*

*All it takes is a little light
To overcome the darkness
All it takes is a little love
To mend a broken heart*

There is a certain beauty about the game of football. Some just see it as a bunch of sweaty guys hitting each other as hard as they can which can be seen as barbaric, but I see it differently. Maybe it is because I have played sports since I was four years old, but I know what goes into making each play during a game happen. It is easy for spectators to show up on Saturday night and see guys running around for a few hours, but really, the game is just the end point of an entire week (for some, an entire life) of training and film and conditioning and practice and meetings and studying play books and analyzing the opponent and attending community events. The game is the fun part where the young men get to take the field and put everything they have worked toward on display. There is a brotherhood within a team, so when they go out on the field, the bond they have created through doing all of the little things is each individual player's motivation for playing in every single game. They work hard to better themselves so they can go out on Saturdays and kick ass for each other.

In a way, football reminds me a lot of love. You work together to build a relationship and establish a bond before ever officially taking the field. In relationships (or at least in my relationships) there is an element of trust that must be established before I can stand by your side in battle and be certain you will protect me just as I will protect you, or at least fight harder than we've ever fought trying to do so. I'm not oblivious to the way things are in the game of love; I know just like in the game of football, sometimes you are going to win and sometimes you are going to lose because no matter how bad you want it or how hard you have worked for it, you are simply outmatched by fate. Sometimes, you have to tip your hat to your opposer and congratulate him on a good fight, but other times, your opposer tips his hat to you. If you are playing a game just for the win, then you will never truly know victory. If you are playing a game because it is what pumps your heart and runs through your veins, you will never fail.

When you enter a new relationship, there is no guarantee you will bring home the trophy and the glory and the praise, but that is part of the beauty of it because you must have faith. If you have prepared properly and analyzed what you need to analyze, then you should enter the game without any fear of loss; you should take the field with the outmost confidence because you love what you are doing.

Cameron and I had been through a tough pre-season of our own with my anxiety and guarded-heart being the primary issues for my reluctance to enter the field. But now, I was ready. I wanted to call him mine. He felt like he was already my boyfriend because we acted like a couple and did most everything together. We had even begun sleeping together. *Just sleeping, no sex.* Before Cameron, I had never planned on sleeping in the same bed with a guy until he was my husband, but most nights when Cameron would come over to see me, he would stay over late

and we would both end up falling asleep by mistake (*though I now think he did it on purpose. He was grooming me*). After a few times of this happening, he started staying over on purpose. I felt weird about it at first, especially considering I was normally crushed against the wall as I tried to share my twin bed with a 270 pound guy, but I eventually got used to it and actually felt safe and at ease with him by my side. *Hmm, it's funny how things change.*

One of my favorite memories was on a rainy weekend at the beginning of April. Cameron and I had woken up that morning to one of those classic “April showers” you sing about in elementary school. It was a light rain, but the weather man predicted it would be drizzling all day, and what’s better than a loaded breakfast burrito on a rainy day, or any day for that matter? We got up, got ready and drove over to Cameron’s favorite breakfast hotspot, El Norteño 2, located just a few minutes away from campus.

You know a Mexican food restaurant is going to be good when you walk in and you are the only white customers in the joint. The authentic food and the friendly atmosphere made for a perfect morning. In between bites of scrambled eggs and bacon, Cameron asked me a question.

“What is your biggest fear?” *I already knew his: heights.*

“Hmmm...,” I thought aloud. “My biggest fear is probably ending up alone.” He looked puzzled.

“Why would you fear ending up alone?” he asked.

“Well you know how I am,” I said. “I have a hard time letting someone in when it comes to relationships.” He understood this well.

“I feel like you’ve let me in though,” he responded, still looking troubled by my answer.

“Yes,” I said. “I have let you in, but I still don’t know if this will all work out in the end.”

I took another bite of burrito. *I don’t have to talk if my mouth is full.*

Cameron looked upset by my response, but I did not see the big deal. He knew all of this already.

“I just don’t want to get my hopes up is all,” I continued. “I did that when I dated Nick and that only led to me getting disappointed. I’m enjoying each day as it comes, but I’m not focused on the long-term at this particular point in my life.” I was being truthful, though I hated to admit to myself Cameron was making me want to see a future. I just was not sure of how far into the future I could look.

“I guess I understand that,” he said. He stopped eating his breakfast. “But don’t you think having that mindset could be what ultimately causes you to end up alone?” *Shit. He was right. Maybe me trying to avoid my biggest fear would actually cause me to realize it.*

“You’re probably right,” I said, admitting fault in my logic. “Either way, I love my time with you now.” We went back to finishing our meal, washing it down with a little small talk.

Even though we had moved past the conversation, I could tell he was thinking about it. What he had said made me think too; it made me question myself. *Had I become pessimistic? I've always been an optimist, had that changed?* I suddenly realized there would be many rainy days in life, but after the storm comes the rainbow. I had to turn this day around.

We left El Norteño 2 and walked to the Dollar General next door. Our lab instructor for Environmental Science was helping with a fundraiser for poor children affected by natural disasters, and she had asked everyone to bring in donations if we felt compelled to do so. Cameron and I both loved helping those less fortunate than us, so together we walked down the narrow aisles and picked up things like toothbrushes and toothpaste, toiletries, non-perishable food items, coloring books and toys. While we were looking at the toys, Cameron picked out things a boy might like and I picked out cute things for a girl.

As if by fate, we both stumbled across a gender-neutral puzzle. It was Beauty and the Beast themed and its box was made to look like an old-time, classic fairytale book.

“This is literally us,” Cameron laughed as he held it up to show me.

“I was thinking the same thing,” I giggled back. “Obviously, you’re the beauty and I’m the beast.”

“Duh,” he laughed. “Well, I think we should buy this for us to put together today. We can stay inside, maybe cook some dinner together, play a few games and work on this puzzle.”

We went back to Cameron's apartment and that's exactly what we did, minus actually managing to put the puzzle together. It turns out, a jigsaw created for ages 7+ proved to be too difficult for us. It was a fairytale day even though our kitchen utensils didn't sing and my ballgown was actually a t-shirt and leggings.



With many days like our rainy day engraved into our book of memories, I felt the happiest I had ever felt since entering college. Cameron and I had gotten so close and I was ready to make things official, but I knew I would have to say something to him in order for that to happen since I had told him not to ask me to be his girlfriend approximately 17,000 times in the early stages of our relationship. *Plus, I have discovered most men need you to tell them EXACTLY what you want in order for them to do it.*

April 9, 2016 was not like any other Saturday; it was the day of the Maroon versus Gold Spring football game. All semester, Cameron and his teammates had been limited to lots of weight training and conditioning, and a few weeks of 5:30 a.m. practices. Now, they were finally able to strut their stuff out on the field in an inter-squad scrimmage. This was the first time I would be going to a game and actually have someone special to cheer on. It reminded me of the old days with Nick when I would go watch him play baseball in the heat of the day and sit as far away as possible from all of the "cleat-chasers" who would wear tiny little outfits and hold up signs in an attempt to pick up one of the other guys on the team. Lucky for me, football was a lot

more interesting than baseball, so I was more excited to cheer on Mr. 89 than I had ever been trying to avoid the other baseball girlfriends.

All day leading up to the game, Cameron did not want to overexert himself, so we decided to chill and hang out in my dorm. We started off by watching his favorite movie, *Step-Brothers*, because apparently it was a sin that I had never seen it. After the movie, Cameron and I crawled into bed to lay down. I was not tired at all, but Cameron definitely was as he drifted into a deep sleep. With the sun shining through my blinds, I looked at the beams casting shadows upon his face. It wasn't like looking at a Giorgio Armani model, but my heart fluttered anyway as I watched him sleep. He looked so peaceful. I wondered if it had anything to do with me being there. *What is he dreaming about? Is he dreaming about me?* I dreamed of him from time to time during the night, and I dreamed of him constantly during the day. Ever since our conversation at breakfast, I had let myself dream. I dreamed of a future with him in it, though I did not allow myself to dream of forever.

I caressed his hand as he slept, only allowing my fingertips to glide ever-so-gently against his skin as to not wake him. *Does he know how I feel? Can he feel how I feel?* I hoped he did. I wished for a moment that he could see himself through my eyes, like somehow my thoughts could pass through my fingertips, into his body, through his veins and into his mind. If he could see himself the way I saw him, perhaps he would no longer be so insecure. I thought he possessed one of the most beautiful souls I had ever known. He made me feel adored with every word he spoke, every kiss he gave and every glance he made. He told me he had never before felt the things he felt for me. He said I was special. He said I was different. *Does he know I think he's special too?*

He awoke two hours later, and by that time, it was time for him to go get ready for the game. We kissed goodbye and I wished him good luck. I told him I would be there watching him, front and center, and that's exactly what I did.

That night, I cheered my Maroon Mustang on to a victory over the opposing gold team. It was a good game, but if we're being honest, I just kept my eyes on Cameron the entire time. Even when the offense came off of the field, I watched him on the sideline cutting up with his teammates, having a good time. He was totally in his element, and that made me care for him even more. I was proud to be there supporting him, not because he was the stud of the team, but because his shining, radiant, loving personality was on display for everyone to see, and it was amazing to watch.

Everything he did made me proud. I cheered with sheer delight at every little thing he did. Even though he was not supposed to be paying attention to the crowd, Cameron would flash me a wink or a wave from time to time just to make me feel noticed. *What a cute little flirt.* I may not have been in uniform, but I was his biggest cheerleader, and I was starting to feel like he was mine as well. We both encouraged each other so much when it came to our passions and our goals, and that is exactly what I had been wanting from a relationship. There was no more denying it; I wanted to make number 89 mine.

When the game ended, I met Cameron on the field. As I walked up to give him a congratulatory hug, he put his hand on his forehead and threw his head back laughing. *What's funny?*

"Man, could today be any better?" he asked with a toothy-grin. *Oh, just you wait.*

“Congratulations on the win,” I shrieked, and planted a kiss on his lips. *Whoa, PDA alert!* I normally had a no-kissing in public rule for myself, but in this instance, I could not control my desire to kiss my guy. I had never been more attracted to him than I was in this moment because regardless of the fact that he was not physically attractive, his heart shined through in everything he did.

“Thank you! Thank you so much for coming,” Cameron said. “It meant so much seeing you in the stands.”

“It was my pleasure,” I said, and hugged him again. “I know you must be exhausted, but do you want to grab a bite to eat?”

“Yeah, I’m starving,” he said. “You know I’m always hungry.” *It takes a lot to maintain an offensive lineman’s figure.* After Cameron grabbed a quick shower and changed into clean clothes, we sat down and ate some pancakes at IHOP, then went back to his apartment to lay down and get some rest.

I showered and took off my makeup before crawling into bed with Cameron, who was already starting to doze off. I was normally incredibly insecure about not wearing makeup because, to quote *Steel Magnolias*, “there is no such thing as natural beauty,” but with Cameron I felt incredibly comfortable in my own skin. He was always telling me how beautiful I was, even when I thought I looked a mess, but what meant even more was how he talked about my figure. I

am even more insecure about my body than I am about my makeup-less face, but Cameron constantly told me how much he loved my curves, and I believed him. Don't get me wrong, I don't think there has ever been a time in my life when I would have classified myself as overweight, but growing up with a twin sister who was as big around as a toothpick made me feel a lot bigger than I was actually. However, Cameron did not see my flaws; he only saw me, and he thought I was beautiful.

So anyway, I lifted the blankets and cuddled up right next to my big guy. I rested my head on his shoulder and my hand on his chest and felt his breath. As his chest raised, part of me would lift too, moving in unison like birds flocking to warmer weather. Laying there, I already felt like we were one, and for the first time since we met, that didn't scare me.

"I don't think you understand how much it meant to me to have you there tonight," Cameron said. I was surprised he was still awake. "I never have anyone in the crowd cheering for me specifically."

"Well I loved it, Cam," I said. "But I know your parents are always watching you play."

"Yeah, but that's different," he said. "They don't get to be here for the games since they're so far away, and yes, I know they watch the live stream, but it was just different being able to look into the stands and see you there in the flesh. Plus, you were looking so beautiful as always, wearing *my* shirt and it made me feel lucky knowing every other guy there was jealous." Cameron was referring to one of his old football t-shirts he had given me to wear before the

game. It was a 3XL, the same size my dad wore, but he had lost 35 pounds and had dropped down a size, so he gave it to me to sleep in. A piece of me loved the idea that I would have a piece of him to keep bundled around me anytime I wanted. I suddenly felt compelled to ask Cameron a question.

“Are you ever going to ask me to be your girlfriend?” I asked bluntly. Cameron sat up and looked at me. *He was wide awake now.*

“I’ve wanted to ask you since the day we went to that mountain, but you kept telling me that’s not what you wanted.” *He was right; there was no defending myself there.*

“Well it’s what I want now, it’s what I have wanted since you came to see me in Orlando,” I said. *Gosh, I was starting to feel emotional.* “It’s not easy for me to open up about all of this, but I care about you so much, Cameron. I want to be with you. I want to be with you so badly. So please, just ask me already.”

Cameron was glowing. “Will you be my girlfriend?” he asked. “Officially?” he added. I glanced over at the time. It was 11:51 p.m.

“No,” I said. “But ask me in nine minutes and I’ll tell you yes.”

“Why?” he laughed.

“Because April tenth has a much better ring to it than April ninth,” I said through grinning teeth. Cameron laughed and laid back down.

“You know, you’re ridiculous,” he said. “But you’re amazing. You are the kind of girl every guy wants to marry.” *Pitter-patter, pitter-patter.* I leaned over and kissed him until the clock struck midnight, and this time when he asked me the same question, I answered, “yes.”

Chapter 9: When We Were Us

*Beautiful days, beautiful days
Why did you have to go away?
Beautiful days, beautiful days
Why did you lead me astray?*

*Beautiful days, beautiful days
I now see you in a different way.
Beautiful days, beautiful days
You faded into gray.*

Have you ever been to an aquarium? Have you ever seen all of the majestic critters swimming around in giant glass tanks, almost appearing to wave as they pass overhead? All of the oranges and purples and yellows and greens are enclosed within an entirely blue home, and as you watch these little lives swim past you, the beams of light from above reflect off of the water and dance upon your face. It’s incredibly serene to be a part of and to watch. But if you think more deeply about what you are witnessing, you may end up taking pity on the animals. They are confined within tiny walls instead of living freely in an immense sea. They are

controlled in where they can go and what they can be, simply for someone else's entertainment. But then you have to wonder, do they even know what they are missing or have they accepted there is no escape? Do they realize the walls are there or have they just accepted imprisonment as a way of life? Do they know they are being controlled whenever they are supposed to live freely as creatures of God or have they no hope for anything else? And then we must reflect on ourselves, the people who come piling in time after time to look at them. Without us, they would have their freedom, or perhaps never lose it in the first place, but because we keep feeding into what we are told is okay, we ignore what we know in our hearts is not okay.

Sometimes we are the ones in a glass cage, restricted by others' expectations for us. We lose hope for a better life and we lose sight of who we really are, but we feel as though there is nothing we can do to get out. Then sometimes we are the spectators watching it happen when we know it is wrong. So which ones of us will break free? Which ones of us will speak up?

Cameron and I went to an aquarium once. We drove two hours to get to it because that is about how far you have to drive to do anything fun outside of Wichita Falls. Wichita Falls is about two hours from Oklahoma City and about two hours from Dallas, but Dallas is normally an easier route because you do not have to take toll roads to get there. So anyway, on this particular Saturday, Cameron and I made a little trip down to Dallas to visit the highly-acclaimed Dallas World Aquarium. Several friends of ours had recommended it for its beautiful scenery and exotic animals.

When we arrived, we were pleased with what we saw. The Dallas World Aquarium is unlike any aquarium I have ever been to in my life. For starters, it is enormous, and is made up

of several stories, resembling a rainforest. The land animals primarily roam fairly freely, especially a sloth which was “straight chillin” on a branch in the middle of a walkway.

“Sloths are my spirit animal,” I said to Cameron.

“I think they just might be mine too,” he laughed.

“No, no, you are much too big to have a sloth as your spirit animal. A sloth would never play football,” I joked.

“Well, you are much too pretty to have your spirit animal be a sloth,” he said. *What a sweetie!*

“Oh please,” I laughed. “There is no other beauty like the beauty of this sloth. Gosh, to live life like this without a care in the world; that’s the dream.”

We continued to make our way around the tanks and the exhibits, and I stood in awe of the beautiful creatures. It was such a great day.

At the time, I did not really consider the feelings of the animals as I stood in freedom watching them, but little did I know, it would not even be a year before I would find myself locked behind the confines of a glass tank of my own. Just as I stood in silence now, many others would watch me, ignoring what they witnessed.

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During the first few months of our relationship, Cameron and I had become an essential part of each other's lives. We were bound together by tough times, followed by a flood of happy memories. We were always doing something, whether it was going to a fun house to ride go-carts (and Cameron, being as competitive as he is, made me crash into the wall), or going to the worst glow-in-the-dark mini-golf course you've ever seen, or moonwalking down the lane at the bowling alley, Cameron and I were so incredibly happy. We reached a point where we had become each other's family, so naturally we wanted to introduce each other to the rest of our family. Simply because of proximity, Cameron met my family first. Obviously, he had already met Elyssa over Spring Break, and he had won her over, so the next to come was my dad.

Let me start off by saying I love my father, but the man is not going to be the next great fashion icon. Dad had made a trip up to Wichita Falls one weekend because I had been nominated for a school-wide award and attendance at a banquet was required. More than anything, I wanted my two favorite men to meet, so the day of the banquet, I asked my dad to meet Cameron and me for lunch. Dad picked out a Mexican-food restaurant which is normally not a safe bet the further away you get from the Mexican-American border. The bland food would be the least of my worries for the day.

Cameron and I arrived at the restaurant first and decided to wait in the car for my dad to get there.

"Are you nervous?" I teased Cam.

“Of course I’m nervous,” he said. “If it was your mom, I wouldn’t be, but it’s your dad, so there’s a lot of pressure.”

“You have this all backwards, my sweets,” I laughed. “My dad is much easier to please than my mom, though they are both honestly so cool. You don’t have to worry about my dad, he is going to love you.” Just as I got out those last few words, we saw my dad’s maroon Toyota Tundra pull into the parking slot directly behind ours. Suddenly, *I* was the one feeling nervous and I could not even bring myself to look at him get out of his truck.

“Oh, I’m not nervous anymore,” Cameron laughed. “I think your dad and I are going to get along just fine.” *What made him say that?* I looked into my rearview mirror and instantly realized why Cameron said what he said.

My dad is a big, strong man, and apparently he had decided to put this part of himself on display the day he met my new boyfriend. He was wearing a green, plaid cutoff shirt and fire-retardant Wranglers with the bottoms tucked into his work boots. The get-up resembled something Larry the Cable Guy might dress in for one of his shows. I was mortified. Of course at this point, I had told Cameron plenty about my hometown of Alvin, and I had spared no details as to the country (*some would say “trashy”*) ways of my birthplace, and here my dad was, dressed like he had just gotten done with a hard day of working on the family farm. *Wow Dad, are we going to slaughter our own cow for the fajitas? Gosh!*

We got out of the car. Cameron nodded his head and smiled as he reached for my dad's extended hand.

"Mr. Purcell," he said. "It's nice to finally meet you."

"Hey Mr. Cameron," my dad replied. "It's nice to meet you too."

"I like your shirt," Cameron said. *God help me.*

"Oh, thanks brother," Dad responded. "I bought it at Tractor Supply this morning." *Lord, please take me now.*

As we made our way into the restaurant, I whispered in Cameron's ear, "I promise you my family is not a bunch of hicks."

"I kinda love this," Cameron whispered back, mocking my embarrassment. *Asshole.*

The rest of lunch went fairly well, minus the fact that Cameron was trying so hard to be on his best behavior, he began eating nachos with a fork. *You're doing great, Sweetie.* Of all times to suddenly obtain some manners, was while we were eating nachos really the best? Regardless, Cameron and my dad hit it off, just like I knew they would. They were both what you'd call a "man's man" in the sense they both loved to watch sports and lift weights and talk

about cars. I stayed quiet most of lunch as to let them bond, but many times I had to hold back giggles and eye-rolls at their attempts to impress each other.

My dad was always surrounded by women at home with a wife, two daughters and two female dachshunds. He basically breathed in as much estrogen as he did oxygen, so any time the poor man had an opportunity to have guy-time, he ate it up. My sister once bought a goldfish. *Don't ask me why she did this, she just got bored one day and bought the thing from Walmart.* Although we did not actually know its gender, she decided the fish was a boy and named him Ollie. On multiple occasions, I caught my dad sitting on the edge of my sister's bed looking into the fish tank at good ole Ollie. *I can't make this stuff up.* He would just sit there and stare as if in a desperate attempt to be around another "male." *Which, knowing his luck, Ollie was probably actually Olivia.* Ollie survived a solid three weeks in the Purcell home before he died one day after Elyssa accidentally sprayed her perfume too close to his tank and the contaminated water killed him. *He even died a feminine death.* So yes, even a "male" fish was unable to survive the Purcell women, but my dad had somehow managed to conquer us for a couple of decades. Either way, he loved being able to talk about all of the things guys talk about that he normally could not discuss due to our desire to talk about nails and makeup and cute boys.

"Do you like to hunt and fish?" Cameron asked my dad.

"Oh yeah, for sure," Dad responded. *Hmph!* I had never once seen my father go hunting, and my sister and I had gone fishing with him only a handful of times since our birth. He went on to have an in-depth discussion with Cam about different types of fish and hog hunting and

fishing poles and guns. *Oh please!* That is how I knew Dad was eating this guy-talk up; because I knew damn good and well he did not have an interest in hunting and fishing, but anything that wasn't wrapped with a pink bow and sprinkled with glitter was an upgrade for him.

In a way, I sort of loved how well they got along. Of course, my dad had gotten along really well with Nick too. Nick would even come over to our house to work out with my dad from time to time, which always shocked me because I thought my dad would be one of those over-protective fathers, but he was actually super cool with the guys Elyssa and I dated. But this felt a little different, probably because Cameron was a football player. My dad had played throughout grade school and always loved the intense, aggressive competition, so being able to talk to Cameron about the offensive line and footwork and weight-training was hog-Heaven for him. My two special guys, my two big ole teddy bears, were two peas in a pod, and I couldn't have been happier. *They were alike on the surface, but I would eventually see Cameron was wearing a mask that far exceeded my dad pretending to hunt and fish.*

My mom came later, during the beginning of summer. I had to stay in Wichita Falls for the first six weeks of summer break to take two-classes I needed in order to stay on track to graduate early, so Mom and my best friend, Brianna, came to visit me while I was there. *Their meeting was not as humiliating as the meeting between Cam and my dad since my mom had decided to leave her burlap-sack dress at home that weekend.* It was simple: Cameron came over and joined us for a game night where we played Heads Up using my phone, and laughed hysterically as we tried acting out various television shows, animals and activities. It went flawlessly, just as I hoped it would. My mom loved Cameron and he loved her. *Of course, he*

*would later tell me he thought she was a total babe, which obviously I knew my mom was hot, but come on! Don't be checking out my MOTHER when you're with me!*

So now that Cameron had met the people most important to me, it was time for me to make a trip to Florida and meet the people most important to him.



It had been a while since I last had one of those “meet the family” moments, so I was a little nervous as I boarded my plane to Tampa. As I looked out upon the runway, I thought back on when I first met the Moore’s at Nick’s 16th birthday party. I was the only non-family member or close family-friend that had been invited, so that made me even more nervous to attend the gathering. Once I got there, my nerves went away and I had such a wonderful time playing pool, looking at Nick’s baby pictures and releasing paper lanterns off into the night sky like in the Disney movie Tangled. I instantly fell in-love with Nick’s mom, Annie, who was so incredibly beautiful inside and out, and his dad, Tom, who was always cracking a joke. Tom may have been hard on his sons, but I always said if they’d had a daughter, he would have spoiled her rotten. I loved being around them, and I think they loved having me around too. It was the first time they had ever had a true girly-girl around the house, and I think it was a nice change for them.

Cameron had warned me he too had never really had a girly-girl in his home. I was a bit surprised by him telling me that considering he has a sister, Kaylee, and I assumed she was pretty girly based on all of the cute pictures I had seen of her, but Cameron insisted she was...umm, “burley.” According to Urban Dictionary’s definition, “burley,” when used to describe a woman,

means “big, manly, intimidating, or huge.” *Such a nice way to describe your sister, Cameron.*

Between his word choice for describing Kaylee and him telling me she had never liked any of the girls he had dated in the past, I was most nervous to meet her.

I would also be meeting his little brother, Keaton, who was far from little. I had seen pictures, and Keaton easily out-sized Cameron, which was saying something. Cam warned me he and Keaton butted heads a lot due to a gap in maturity levels (*which to Keaton’s credit, he was just a sophomore in high school, so he was allowed to be immature*).

Then came his mom, Kara. All Cameron had told me was his mom was pretty quiet and sweet. She was the one who booked my ticket to come visit them, so I took an instant liking to her. You know some of those people where you don’t know them, but you just get a really good feeling about them, like he or she is a great person? Well that’s the feeling I got with Kara. I could not tell you why, but I felt a connection to her before I ever saw her face-to-face.

Next, I knew I would have to meet Cameron’s dad, Cameron Sr. My Cameron had told me his dad was the person he admired most in the world. He said his dad never graduated high-school, but still found success and a comfortable life working in construction management. He told me about how his parents married young and had Kaylee, the eldest of the three kids, soon after. He said his dad had always provided so much for the family to where his mother did not have to work until she chose to when Cameron got older. He said because his parents married and started a family in their early twenties, they were still pretty young themselves which meant they lived a little differently than my parents. He said his dad liked to go out to bars and get rowdy from time to time, and though Kara went with him some, she rarely drank. It was apparently because of this behavior that his parents almost divorced a few years ago. *Apparently*



*alcoholic tendencies lead to martial problems.* His dad's interests were not something I was used to seeing from an adult since I had only seen my parents drink a handful of times in my life, and never once have I seen either of them drunk. Regardless, I was not in any place to judge, it was simply different than how I had been brought up.

Last, I would meet Cameron's favorite person in the world, his grandma, Gun-Gun. The name "Gun-Gun" came from Kaylee being unable to pronounce "grandma" at an early age, and it stuck. *Personally, I think it's the most precious name for a grandma ever, but then again, she is one of the most precious human beings ever, so it fits her.* Gun-Gun was incredibly important to Cameron because she was always so supportive, loving and she taught him to love God. I knew I could never compare to that amazing lady, but I was so excited to meet her.

Cameron told me she had lectured him when we first started dating. Apparently she told him not to mess things up with me and to treat me right because I was a good, Christian girl. *Did she know something I didn't? Why would she feel the need to get onto him before he had done anything wrong? Had he done something wrong in the past? I would find out eventually.*

So there I was sitting in my crowded seat, thousands of miles up in the air, going over the notes in my mind, trying to prepare myself for what I could expect from each person. *Gosh, I hoped they would like me.* Cameron had told me a thousand times they already loved me even though they had not yet met me because they could see how happy I made him, but I needed to see it for myself. I needed them to like me because I knew how important family was to both of us, and if I did not mesh well with his family, our relationship was not going to look promising.

“Ladies and gentleman, welcome to Tampa International Airport. Local time is approximately 1:20 p.m. and the temperature is a toasty 88 degrees. For your safety and comfort, please remain seated...” I zoned out as the flight attendant made the announcement we had arrived to our destination. *Shit, this is really happening, I’m really here. Oh my gosh, I’m about to meet the family. Does my hair look okay? Will they like my outfit? Oh God, please calm my nerves.*

My heart raced as I tried to imagine how his family would be toward me. Obviously, they had to have been nice people to raise such a wonderful son. I knew it would all be okay, but that did not stop my knees from buckling as I walked out of the terminal.

It did not take long before I saw Cameron and his parents standing near the baggage claim to greet me. Cam’s eyes lit up when he saw me, and he pointed me out to his parents who greeted me with two big smiles. I did not even make it to Kara and Cameron Sr. before Cam scooped me up in a giant embrace. His hugs were the best, and this was one of those “I’ve missed you” hugs, so it was even better than normal. I caught a glimpse of Kara as Cameron hugged me tightly and I could see her smile. I could tell it was genuine; one that showed me she was happy to see her son so giddy. When Cameron finally let me go, I stepped forward and gave each of his parents a big hug.

“It is so lovely to meet y’all,” I said. *Leave it to a Texas girl to greet her new boyfriend’s parents with improper grammar.* “Thank you so much for booking me this flight.”

“We were happy to do it,” Kara said. “We are glad you are here.”

“Absolutely,” Cameron Sr. said. “We hope you make yourself right at home for the next few days.”

We made our way to the baggage claim with Cameron’s arms wrapped around me. He was being very affectionate in front of his parents; something I had never felt quite comfortable doing. After getting my things, we hopped in Cameron Sr.’s new truck and made our hour-long drive back to their house in Lakeland.

Lakeland is a fairly large town, with a population of about 106,000. The city is famous for its excessive number of lakes, hence the name “Lakeland.” In these lakes live the descendants of royal swans donated by Queen Elizabeth and her family back in the 1950s. Everywhere you go, you are bound to see a picture of a swan in some way, shape or form since the occupants of Lakeland seem to be rather proud of their royal gift.

Often times, swans are known to represent grace, beauty and eternity. One of the sweetest facts about the birds is they mate for life. At this point in my new relationship, I was not fully seeing eternity, but I was seeing the possibility of eternity. *Is Cameron my mate for life?* He certainly did not embody grace or beauty, but his heart did, and the heart and the soul are the only things that last forever anyway, right?

As we were driving, I began to question the fate in all of this. *How did a girl from Alvin, Texas meet this guy from Lakeland, Florida? What are the odds of that?* To me, it had to be God. He had clearly intended on us meeting and dating, but for what purpose? *Were we to be eternal swans on the lake of life, or would we be more like the vegetation they eat?* I could not tell you

why, but part of me knew Cameron was going to be special. Part of me knew he was going to be my swan. *I didn't know what I thought I knew.*

My visit with the Webbers was amazing. The first day I was there, we went over to his Aunt Grayce's house to eat dinner with his aunt, two cousins, mom, dad, brother, sister, Gun-Gun and Glen, Gun-Gun's boyfriend. *Cameron always hated the idea of Gun-Gun having a boyfriend, so naturally I teased him about it.* I thought meeting everyone would be overwhelming, but they were all so good to me, I immediately felt right at home. I heard a lot of "I'm so glad you're here" and "we've heard so much about you." I knew they had accepted me before they ever met me. Before I knew it, I was already cracking jokes with Cameron Sr., giving him a taste of my sassy, playful side. Kara was quiet, but she was so sweet. I felt a level of comfort around her that drew me in like a firefly to light. Kaylee was great, and I could not see what Cameron was talking about by saying she would be the hardest to win over. We were two very different people, but Kaylee was fun to be around. I loved how she teased Cameron, and I would play along with it. Gun-Gun was just as beautiful as Cameron had described. The kindness in her heart was reflected through the light in her eyes, and I knew God had made her special.

After dinner, we went back to Cameron's house with just his immediate family. We decided to have a game night, so we broke out Pictionary. *Oh Lord Jesus, I have not played Pictionary in years! What if I make myself look like an idiot?* It turned out to be the most fun game of Pictionary I have ever played in my life. By the grace of God, Cameron and I completely dominated everyone else. The funniest part was whenever Cameron was drawing an indian and within a few seconds of him drawing, I guessed Pocahontas. Turned out, I was

correct. *Cameron Sr. was shook, and I mean SHOOK.* He was in total disbelief that I was able to guess the correct answer so quickly.

“How the hell did you guess Pocahontas?” he shouted. He was being a little loud; he had been drinking. “All Cam drew was an indian, and you guess Pocahontas?” We all died laughing.

“I saw an indian and the only two famous indians I really know are Pocahontas and Sacajawea!” I laughed. “It was just lucky!”

“No, no, no! I’m not buying it, you’re too good at this game. We might as well all stop playing now because it’s already over. Pocahontas! Can you believe it?” he said. *Like I said before, SHOOK.* We were all belly-laughing at Cameron Sr.’s inability to believe my “superior guessing skills.” It was a great moment. It was the first time I remember thinking, “I’m with family.” That night, I fell asleep happy.

The next morning, we got up and drove to St. Augustine where the Webbers had rented hotel rooms right on the beaches of the Atlantic coast. The beach town was incredibly precious and I was super excited to be there with Cameron and his parents. We did not waste any time walking down to the water after grabbing a quick bite to eat. Kara and Cameron Sr. just wanted to rent loungers and soak in the sunshine, but Cam and I were more interested in swimming around in the beautiful blue water.

It was playful and fun, but as soon as we realized his parents had fallen asleep in their chairs, we decided it was safe to go out a little deeper and be alone for a while. Cameron carried

me on his back until the water was up to his chest, then he brought me around in front of him.

*Big guys have the ability to move you around like a rag doll.* I wrapped my legs around his waist and my arms around his neck.

“Why are you so good to me?” I asked as I kissed him.

“You make it easy,” he said. “If I could give you the world, I would because you deserve everything you could ever want.”

I tilted my head back into the water to wash the hair from my face. “I don’t deserve anything; none of us ‘deserve’ anything, but I am incredibly grateful that God put you into my life,” I said. “I mean look at us right now. I’m here with you and your amazing family in this beautiful place; I’m wrapped in your arms, and all I can think is, ‘there is no place I’d rather be than right here, right now.’” Cameron kissed me long and passionately.

“Wherever you are, is where I want to be,” Cameron said. “You are my home.” He was starting to feel like my home too. *It’s funny how when someone steals your heart, a piece of you forever resides with them. I wish I could get that piece of me back.*

Eventually the sun set on our evening and with the two passing days, it set on our time in St. Augustine as well. The fantasy had to end and I had to go back home, but as I touched down in Houston, a part of me longed to be back in Florida.

## *Chapter 10: "I love you"*

*The heart is glass  
 It is fragile and delicate  
 Sometimes, the glass is clouded with dirt and dust  
 From the outside world that have disturbed its beauty  
 And make it impossible to see through  
 However, the glass can be cleaned to gain back its transparency,  
 Its vulnerability,  
 But still it is scarred by residue  
 From the damage that has already been done  
 And, just as glass, the heart can be easily crushed  
 Shattered  
 Into an infinite amount of tiny, insignificant pieces  
 Yet, though it is tedious work and difficult to do  
 The pieces can be put back together  
 All it takes is a spark to start a fire  
 A fire that can melt the multitude of pieces back into one  
 Without leaving a trace that they were ever apart  
 Love is what crushes and mends one's heart  
 Love makes the broken glass whole*

I had known a great love once, and that was with Nick. I was head over heels in-love with that guy; so much so, I feared I would never love someone as much as I loved him, but I had also never met Cameron. Then, when I met Cameron, I never thought I would fall in love with him. He had a great heart, but I could not see my guarded heart falling for that goofy, self-conscious, low-maintenance Florida boy. I knew I really liked him, but love? Love was a different story. I am not a girl who falls easily, but when I do, I fall hard, and I knew once I fell, I'd be at the point of no return.

I knew Cameron was in love with me long before I was in love with him. It was one of those things I could feel with everything he did. After every kiss, he would look me in the eyes with a longing to speak those three little-but-not-so-little words, but he would not. *Probably*

*because I told him not to do it.* “Please don’t tell me you love me before I tell you I love you; it will scare me off and I don’t want to feel pressure to say it back. I want to say it when I mean it,” was the disclaimer Cameron was given months earlier when I started getting the vibe that his feelings for me were growing increasingly stronger. Cameron was always one-step ahead of me in his feelings. *I was not sure how to handle it.* I guess it made me feel safer in a way; less vulnerable for sure, but then again, it also scared me ever so slightly. I wanted to catch up to him, but that’s not something you can force. *To be honest, I never quite caught up to his feelings.*

I remember the exact moment I realized I loved Cameron. It was early September. The football team had been away all weekend for a game. I had kept up with their progress through the live stream of the game online, cheering them on from my bed at home. Even though it had only been two days, I missed Cam. *Like really really missed him.* The team drove through the night to get home in the early hours of Sunday morning and, despite being exhausted, Cameron came straight over to my apartment. I was beyond ready to see him.

He was tired, so all he wanted to do was lay in bed and watch movies all day. *Good with me, I just want to spend time with my big sweetie.* I normally open my curtains and blinds to let in the sunlight; I love natural light and only turn on lamps when the sun starts to set, but on this particular day, I closed the curtains and turned on one, dim light in order to help Cameron relax. His eyelids were heavy and laid low, casting a dark shadow in the curvature of his sockets. His growing hair was untamed from a long bus ride where he leaned his head against the window and woke up once every twenty-minutes. His clothes were wrinkled and stained from a spill on the bumpy highway. Needless to say, he was not a sight for sore eyes, but rather the cause of sore eyes, but I could not stop looking at him as he laid in bed next to me. His head was resting on a



stack of pillows while I sat upright with my legs crossed over each other in an elementary school criss-cross-apple-sauce fashion. My eyes traced every part of him as he watched “When Harry Met Sally” intently.

*God, I love this man. Oh no, I had finally admitted it to myself.* This beastly man laying by my side had stolen my heart, and oh my gosh, I loved him. I loved him like bees love honey, and I suddenly felt compelled to tell him, but I decided to wait. His birthday was coming in a few days and I decided that would be the greatest gift I could give him, but dear Lord, God Almighty it was difficult holding it in once I realized I loved him. *I suppose that was karma for me asking Cameron to wait and hold it in for so long.*

In the days leading up to Cameron’s birthday, he could do no wrong. He would clean the kitchen after I cooked. *I love you.* He would call me beautiful. *I love you.* He would breathe. *I love you.* With every step he took, every breath he breathed, every look he gave, I loved him, I loved him, I loved him and it took everything in me to not blurt it out. I wanted to shout it to the heavens: “I LOVE YOU Cameron Webber!” But I controlled myself in order to give him the most perfect birthday I could imagine.

When September ninth came around, I was barely hanging on by a thread. It had only been a week, but I could barely contain my feelings. Cameron had brought in his 21st birthday with a group of friends and stayed out partying all night. I understood that boys will be boys, and he needed time with the guys to get a little wild. I patiently waited for my turn to come around later that afternoon.

When I opened the door, my eyes were immediately drawn toward Cam’s chin. It had a huge gash on it, which he apparently gained when he tried (*and failed*) to climb over a fence. *I*

*didn't pose many questions asking for details.* I wanted to doctor him and kiss his wounds because, well, I loved him. *In case you did not get that the first one-hundred times I mentioned it.*

He proceeded to tell me about his fun night with his friends, only highlighting the most important events. *Guys tend to get right to the point during a conversation, while women like to describe every detail of every detail.* After he finished telling me about the drunken, hot mess of a night he had, it was my turn to get straight to the point. It was time for me to give Cameron his presents and card.

“Open the card last,” I said, my heart racing. Cameron sat in his normal place on my love seat while I pulled up my ottoman and sat directly across from him. I was so nervous, not because I feared he wouldn't say it back - *I knew he loved me* - but because I knew saying it out loud made it real. *No turning back now.*

Cameron first opened the painting I had done for him. It was on a medium sized canvas with a mustang and his football jersey number followed by the bible verse 1 Corinthians 16:17. He loved it, but I knew it was about to get better. Next, he opened his big gift, which was a Tampa Bay Lightning hockey jersey belonging to Steven Stamkos, his favorite player. He was stoked, but still I waited for the big reveal of the “I love you.”

As his fingers carefully opened the envelop, I felt tears well up in my eyes. I was suddenly overwhelmed with emotion as I watched the guy I loved find out I loved him. I could see him reading and I watched his blue eyes move ever so slightly left to right. With each line he read, a tear made its way down my cheek.

*Cameron,*

*I have waited for a little time now to tell you exactly how I feel about you, and I think your birthday is the perfect time to get it out there. I love you, Cameron Webber. I love you so much my heart can hardly take it. I am so happy to spend your 21st birthday with you, but more so, I'm happy to spend life with you.*

*Love,*

*Kelsey*

The girl of many words, had nothing left to say. It was short, sweet and to the point, but it said exactly what I needed it to say. When Cameron finished reading it, he looked up at me with the biggest smile on his face. He looked back down to read my words again, as if in disbelief, then looked up once more with an even bigger smile. At first, all he could do was smile and re-read the card, but once he finally came to believe what he was reading, he said it back.

“I love you too, so much,” he said as he leaned in to kiss me. “I’ve wanted to tell you for a while, but you told me not to.”

“I know,” I said back through tears. “I wanted it to be right, and now it’s right.”

“When did you realize?” he asked.

“A week ago when we were watching When Harry Met Sally,” I said. “I don’t know what it was about that moment, but I just looked over at you and thought ‘God, I love this man.’ It has been so hard not telling you this for the past week, but I wanted to wait so I could make your birthday extra special.”

“Well, you succeeded because this is the best gift you could have given me,” he said. His eyes began to fill with tears. He kissed me again. “I love you so much. Damn, it feels good to finally say it out loud! I love you, Kelsey! I love you!”

I laughed. “I love you too, Cameron! I love you, I love you, I love you!”

We spent the rest of the weekend on Cloud Nine, hardly able to stop ourselves from saying those three words over and over and over. I had forgotten what it was like to be in love; it was the greatest feeling in the world. This was something I had never expected when I first spoke to the heavy-set, pale guy at the Superbowl watch party who asked me to save his seat. Thinking back on everything we had been through together over the past eight months, to finally be at the point of saying “I love you” just made sense. There were moments of doubt, there were moments I wanted to run away and hide from love, but here I was caught up in something real. Love is so raw and so wonderful and so vulnerable. I felt like I had just ripped my heart from my chest and handed it to Cameron, trusting him to nurture it and care for it always.

Part of me was terrified by the thought, but then I realized I trusted Cameron with all I had. He was so kind and gentle and sweet to me, and I had never been more comfortable with anyone

in my life. I felt totally transparent with him, like I could share things from the deepest shallows of my heart and it would not change the way he loved me. Part of me wanted to believe this thing, this very real thing we had, just may be something that would last forever, but I could not let myself think too far ahead. Cameron had hinted at marriage and a family and growing old together before, but for now, I was content with “I love you.”

So yes, I had known a great love once, to the point I thought I would never love again out of fear of love lost, but I had never met Cameron. Then I met Cameron and fell in love and thought I would be happy forever, but I was mistaken because I had not yet met the *real* Cameron. No, the real Cameron would not come out for a few more months at a time when love was supposed to be in the air and all around. For now, I was enjoying living in my fantasy world, and that fantasy world was about to grow much deeper than I ever imagined.

### ***Chapter 11 - “I Promise”***

*When you are going through life  
 Sometimes you find yourself on top of a mountain  
 Other times, you find you are in a valley  
 The happy times are plentiful  
 The trials are many  
 But when you reach the peak  
 And see all you have overcome to get there  
 It is amazing, breathtaking even  
 But the thing about reaching the highest point is  
 There is nowhere to go  
 But down*

There is a piece of me that wishes I would have never fallen in love with Cameron, the same piece that wishes I had never met him, but when I sit back and really think about it all, it

was better to have loved and lost than to never have loved at all. *I know, I know; it's cliché, but it's true.* Once I fell in love with Cameron, I felt like there was no going back. I did not see any other guy, no wandering eye, because he was it for me. His love had put blinders on my eyes to where I could see nothing else. *Perhaps that is why I was blind in ignoring the bad things about him too. Funny how that happens when you fall in love.*

After that sweet moment in September where we expressed our love for one another, Cameron and I had peaked. *Or so I thought.* I could not imagine a happier life there in Wichita Falls, and I knew Cameron was the biggest reason for my happiness. He was so good to me, constantly surprising me with his kindness. At random, he would bring over flowers or Reese's (my favorite candy) or send a sweet message, and I would do the same for him. We were constantly striving to please each other by working on the little things, especially during football season when we weren't able to see each other as frequently as we had before. It was a balancing act, but we made it work and we got through a more difficult test in our relationship. We aced that test because we had such a trust in one another to where we understood each other's busy schedules and simply enjoyed the time we did have as one.

When the season came to an end, I was sad for my sweet left tackle because I knew how badly he wanted to win playoffs, but I was also sort of happy to have Cameron back to myself. The team had lost just before Thanksgiving Break, so I was thrilled to bring my big fella home with me.

Cameron fit in with my family so well, we had all begun to accept he might be around for a while. One evening when my dad and Cam were spending time together watching football, my mom and I ran some errands and had a little "girl talk" while driving around in the car.

“Okay, so I have been wanting to get your opinion on Cameron,” I said. “Like your true, unfiltered opinion.”

“I like him, you know this,” she said. “We all like him.”

“Yes, but do you have any concerns at all?” I asked. I wanted an outside perspective because as they say, *love is blind*.

“There is nothing immediately alarming. He seems to be a nice boy and he’s good to you and that is what matters,” she said. “The only thing I can even think that might be an issue, and it’s only because you’ve mentioned it to me before, is that he is not as intelligent as you might like. I know you said it is sometimes difficult to have in depth, meaningful discussions with him.” This was true; I had expressed my concern of Cam’s inability to have a deep conversation. It’s not like he could help it, he just wasn’t a deep thinker, but I thrive on having intellectual discussions. I have always loved discussing the abstract and God and life, and getting various viewpoints on each, but Cameron’s responses never went too far beyond things like “I don’t know,” “it’s cool, I guess,” and “good.”

“I know, and that is definitely an issue for me, but I do love him, Mom,” I said.

“I know you do,” she replied.

“Like, I really love him. I think he might be the one.” I even surprised myself when I said this out loud. I was not sure if that was how I truly felt, but I wanted her reaction. Cameron had told me many times he thought I was the one and he would discuss marriage and babies, and again, I felt like I was playing catch up, but I wanted to want the same things as him, so I went along with it.

“I could see you ending up with him,” she replied. *Whoa.*

“Really?” I was a bit baffled. Normally I saw my mom as being a bit pessimistic and overly-cautious when it came to love, but here she was telling me she saw potential.

“Yes, if that’s how you feel, then that is how you feel. We like Cameron and we like the two of you together, so if it ends up working out, then great,” she said. *Who are you and what have you done with my mother?*

I never forgot that conversation. *Hmmm, maybe it will work out between us.* I had not really given myself the freedom to extend my hopes that far, but now I had Mom’s approval and it was making me question if Cameron really was my forever. What I didn’t know was at the same time I was having a conversation about my future with Cameron with my mom, Cam was having a conversation about his future with me with my dad.





About a week after Thanksgiving, my 20th birthday came. For the past few weeks, Cameron had been dangling a carrot in front of me by telling me he had a really special surprise planned. I had no idea what it could be, but Cameron made it out to be a pretty darn big deal. I was shocked he was keeping the secret so well considering he could never keep a secret. Normally, he would get so excited, he would end up revealing the “surprise” before he ever had the chance to follow through with it. He was like a child around Christmas time who can’t stand to wait to open his gifts, so he slowly rips away at the wrapping paper little by little until the present is visible. *It was sort of cute.*

When my birthday arrived, I felt super excited, and I had not felt super excited for a birthday since I was 16 and legally able to drive. The only thing Cameron had revealed to me was that it would take us a little more than two hours to get to our destination. This made it obvious that we were either going to Dallas or to Oklahoma City. Cam told me he would pick me up around 3:30, so naturally I started getting ready at 1:00. I don’t think most guys understand the amount of work some of us girls put in to trying to look beautiful for them. If Cameron’s surprise was as special as he made it out to be, I wanted to look worthy of receiving it, so I went out and bought a new dress from Dillard’s: it was an indigo blue, lace dress with sleeves that flared at the wrists. It was a short dress and it was cold outside, so I paired it with a gray petticoat, nude tights, a silver necklace Cameron had bought me and sparkly, silver heels. *It is my opinion that every girl needs a touch of sparkle on her birthday.* I topped off the look with an intricate up-do I had seen on Pinterest and thick, winged eyeliner. *No look is ever “perfect,” but this was pretty darn close by my ultra-girly standards.*

When Cameron got to my door, he could not stop smiling.

“You look so beautiful,” he said. *He never shorted me on compliments, always boosting my confidence.*

“Well you look pretty beautiful yourself,” I laughed. We took a few pictures, said goodbye to my roommate, then got on the road.

As soon as I saw we were taking the exit for Lawton, I began to make guesses as to what we might be doing. *Perhaps he was taking me to my favorite restaurant, The Cheesecake Factory, and the closest one was in OKC? Perhaps we were going to the Myriad Botanical Gardens? Perhaps we were going to the mountains? Hmm, the mountains.*

Sure enough, Cam drove toward none other than the Wichita Mountains, the place where it all began. I looked over at him and grinned. He smiled back.

“I wonder where you’re taking me,” I joked.

“We’re just taking a little detour,” he teased back. “I wanted to take the scenic route to the restaurant.” We kept smiling and looking over at one another, listening to the soft music playing as we drove through the sea of oranges and browns. I was engulfed in the beautiful place where I had first realized I was interested in Cameron many months earlier. Some would have said our true beginning was the day of the Super Bowl, but for me, Mount Scott was where our journey truly began.

As we approached the sign for Mount Scott, the car slowed and I realized we were about to turn and go to the top. Driving was a much shorter trip than our long hike around the winding road, but then again, our trip had actually been much longer this time around with months of heartache, then acceptance, then totally falling in love.

During the drive to the peak, there was a point where Cameron turned the music off, and it was just the two of us riding in complete silence, but there was absolutely nothing silent about what was going on in my head. With every inch we moved, a new memory came to mind. *God, I love this man. I love this man.* I was overcome with emotion. Everything about the last year had been leading us to this very moment, like a runner crossing the same finish line where he started.

The knot in my throat grew bigger and bigger as we got higher and higher up the mountain. I looked out across the expansive terrain and hoped Cameron could not see my reflection in the window. I did not want him to see me crying; this was supposed to be a happy moment, but I was stricken with emotion and could not keep it together. I wiped away tears before looking over at my partner in crime, and to my surprise, he had tears in his eyes as well. *Whoa. What is about to happen? Is he just overcome with emotion like me?* I wasn't sure, but I thought it was sweet to see him like this. We were connected by this great love we had between us, and I think we quite literally were feeling every feeling all over again, leading us to this peak in our relationship. We were on the rise, and I prayed with everything in me that we would not descend.

Once we reached the top, Cam parked the car, then finally broke our silence.

"I'm going to need you to get out of the car for a minute," he said. *Hmm, the last time I was asked to get out of the car was with Nick when he asked me to be his girlfriend. Is Cam*

*about to ask me a question too? What's going on?* Cameron stepped out of the car and came around to open my door. It was a cold, December day and the wind was ferocious from 2,464 feet above sea level. My tightly pinned hair was freed by the blowing of the whistling air around me. This chaos reflected the chaos going on in my mind. Cameron had gone back to the car to get something that had remained hidden for the past two hours, so I stood alone against the elements. The frigid air caused a chill to go down my spine and I shivered profusely. *Ten percent from the cold, 90 percent from nervousness.*

One minute felt like one hour as I waited anxiously. *I love anxiety.* I heard the car door slam shut from the aggressive wind, and saw Cameron come out from the shadows shortly afterward. The sky was gray, filled with a number of dark clouds, but Cam looked like a ray of sunshine as he floated in my direction. His hands were in his pockets and his face was red; it looked like he was holding his breath. *What is going on with him?*

Tears were already in his eyes as he tried to muffle up his words. I knew exactly how he was feeling because I felt the same way. Our journey had been overwhelming, but a good kind of overwhelming, and now we were here on the top of a mountain, looking at one another through tear-filled eyes and locks of flowing blonde hair. We had seen ourselves come full-circle in the relationship I never expected to last. Finally, Cameron opened his mouth to speak.

“We have been through so much,” he cried, then paused to gather himself. “And it has all led us back here to the place where I realized I was going to love you forever. From that day until now, and from this day forward,” he cried. “I will love you always.” Cameron pulled out a red box from his pocket. Inside was a beautiful diamond ring.

He continued.

“So I want to make you a few promises. I promise to always love and care for you. I promise to always treat you right. I promise to protect you from any harm, and I promise we will build this relationship around Christ because I know something this special was crafted by Him. I love you with everything I am, Kelsey Purcell.”

I could not find the words to say anything back through my flood of tears that were forever making me one with the mountain. He placed the ring on my finger; our promise to God and our promise to each other. I looked down at the beautiful piece and could not fathom the amount of love and joy I felt.

“I love you so much,” I responded as I threw my arms around his neck and kissed him in a deep embrace. We were still figuring out life and ourselves, so an engagement was not the answer right now, but this commitment with this ring was Cameron’s way of promising me the world one day, when the time was right. But in my eyes, he had already given me the world.

We got back into the car and made our way out to Oklahoma City; a first time visit for both of us. Cameron revealed we were in fact going to the Cheesecake Factory, and of course I was ecstatic, but nothing could top the experience we just had.

“I had it custom made at the same jeweler where my dad bought my mom her engagement ring,” Cam said. I could tell he was very proud of his purchase. *Why wouldn’t he be? He did so*

*good*. “I had to have my dad help me with picking it out and designing it and such because he is awesome with that stuff. I just wanted it to be perfect.”

“It is perfect, you’re perfect. I love it, and I love you,” I said as watched my ring shine as it caught the light of the sun peaking through the clouds. The way it sparkled made my heart flutter. The intricate design was uniquely crafted just for me. The band was made of white-gold, with the ends remaining separated by three circles of little diamonds, centered in the middle of the band. It was beautiful.

I could not conceal the news as a secret, so I immediately texted my sister, Brianna and my mom a picture of my new accessory along with an explanation of the meaning behind it. My sister called me immediately, and I could hear her crying through the phone.

“I am so happy for you, Bear,” she said. “You know how I get those feelings about people and they’re almost always right? Well, when you first started dating Cameron, I got the feeling you were going to marry him someday, and now you’re here, and I just knew it and I am so incredibly happy!” She was thrilled.

I laughed. “Bear, you are amazing and so sweet. I am so happy. I am so, so happy.” It was true; I had hit my peak. But remember how I said once you reach the top, there is nowhere to go but down? Well, that is what happened with me and Cam. In my mind, promises are forever. In my mind, promises are something you make with the intention of keeping them. But to Cameron, the promises he made were just temporary. To Cameron, promises were made to be broken.

## ***Chapter 12: Being a Christian and Being a Girlfriend***

*Am I looking in a mirror  
Aged forty years?  
Will I smile the same smile  
And cry the same tears?*

*Should we try to be like them?  
Should we try to improve?  
Are they truly happy?  
Or is their yellow actually blue?*

Shortly following our moment on the mountain, it was time for Cameron and I to part ways once more for Christmas Break. I love being able to go home and be with my family, but, for the first time ever, the thought of going home made my heart ache a little. I felt like Cameron was part of my family, so leaving him to go see my parents and Elyssa felt bittersweet. The thought of going four weeks without him was unbearable, and my parents knew that, so on Christmas day, they surprised me with a plane ticket to go bring in the new year with my big lug.

It is funny when people say things like “new year, new me,” as if the changing of a calendar date would actually have an impact on the fundamental traits within each person’s heart. Nonetheless, most resolutions include goals for self-betterment, and mine were no exception. I wanted to tone up; not that I was ever over-weight, but I wanted to be in my best physical state ever. Also, I wanted to work on getting closer to Christ. I had always loved me some Jesus, but since Cameron and I started dating, I found myself focusing less on God. *Perhaps it was a shift in priorities?* I hoped Cameron and I could start doing things for Jesus together, and I even wanted to look into going on a mission trip to help others and show our selfless love for Christ.

Last, I wanted to be the best person and girlfriend I could be. With Cameron and I finding ourselves in a new commitment, I knew things were very serious and I wanted to love him like I had never loved anyone. As bad as it sounds, I still found myself trying to catch up to him. I loved him, gosh, I loved him, but I still felt like it did not compare to the great love I had for Nick. *Perhaps it was just a first-love thing that couldn't be topped.* There was a frustration about my feelings being behind, but I would never let Cameron know. I loved him so much, and I truly felt like if I kept loving him with all I had to offer, I would eventually find a love with him that surpassed my love for Nick. *I was wrong.*

Regardless, those were my resolutions and I could not wait to bring in the new year with my sweet fella in Florida. This trip would be different because I no longer felt the pressure of meeting the family for the first time or hoping they would like me. I had already established great relationships with them, especially Kara. Kara and I kept in contact fairly regularly, and she was special to me. *She is still special to me.* Cameron used to laugh about how his parents would always ask about me before they asked about him anytime they talked. I thought it was sweet, and I truly felt accepted as one of their own.

We started my visit off on a great note with Lakeland seeing its coldest day since the start of winter, and what better to do on a cold day than go iceskating? Cameron took me to the Civic Center where a temporary ice rink had been set up for the Christmas season. Cameron's brother, Keaton, came with us, but only to watch and take super blurry pictures of us trying not to lose our balance as we glided across the icy surface. We were that cheesy couple holding hands and taking videos that everyone hates. *Heck, if we would have been anyone else, I would have hated us too.* There could have been a million people skating in that rink, but it still would have felt



like it was just the two of us. It was perfect, Cameron was perfect. *Ha, at least in that moment he seemed pretty perfect. That would soon change.*

For most of my visit, we just enjoyed each others' company by playing darts, killing the game of corn hole, going to an indoor trampoline park with Keaton and watching lots of football. It was simple, and even though I was a ways away from Alvin, I felt at home. The Webbers were my family, and everyone doted over Cameron and me as a couple. There was no question we were going to be together forever; Cameron made that clear to everyone by giving me the diamond. His mom, sister and Gun-Gun all loved the ring and asked to see it on my hand. We were all in love with an idea of forever, but sometimes what you want is not a forever you wish to keep.

During my first visit, I was unable to meet Cam's second set of grandparents, Marshall and Mary Moore, due to limited time with us going to the beach for a couple of days. Of course, Gun-Gun was Cameron's favorite person on planet earth, but he also dearly cherished his mom's dad and his wife. You see, Gun-Gun had been married to Kara's dad, Marshall, for many years until they divorced due to his alcoholism. After the divorce, he officially came to terms with his addiction, cleaned up his act and has been sober for decades, but he had not gotten his life together in time to save his marriage. Marshall was a good man, but he made his share of mistakes. It was not until he met Mary that he truly turned his life around and looked to Jesus for guidance. Mary was incredibly strong in her faith, and when we met, we sat on her couch talking about our Savior for hours.

Mary was battling cancer. *Though she refused to say the word "cancer" out loud as to not give it any power over her.* She simply said she was giving it to God and trusting Him

through it. *I would end up taking her advice later on with her grandson.* I loved her immediately. Marshall was a little more quiet, but he was very kind. Cameron told me everyone said he got his looks from his grandpa, and I could see why. They both sported the same large stature and the famous “Moore brows,” which were a little unruly and a bit too thick.

It was neat listening to the stories of Marshall and Mary, giving me insight to a young Cameron I had never known. I always loved getting to hear about the person Cameron was before I came around. He was a little more reckless before he met me. *Shocker.* It would seem as though Cameron took after his grandpa in more than just his appearance, living life with a bit of an edge, pushing the boundaries and perhaps having a little too much to drink from time to time. *The trend of alcoholism in Cameron’s family made me fear for what Cameron might become.*

We were all sitting around their kitchen table when Mary stepped outside for a minute to take a phone call. That is when Marshall said something that surprised me greatly.

“I love my wife,” he started out. “She has been so good to me, but I have some great regrets from this life. I hurt your Gun-Gun, my Mindy, very badly because I could not stop drinking. She is a good woman; one of the best I have ever known. The Lord knows she tried so hard to make things work, but she had to protect herself and the kids. I have so much respect for that woman. You take care of her, Cameron. And take care of Kelsey here too. There is too much to lose in this life to go around making dumb decisions. As long as you two keep your eyes on God, you will make it work.” *Hmm, is Marshall still in love with Gun-Gun? Was she the one that got away? Why did he sound like he was warning Cameron not to lose me? Did he fear he would*

*do something to drive me away?* So many unanswered questions, but it would not be long before a few of them were answered.

Looking back, I feel like I should have seen all of the signs right there in front of me. It's like God was trying to scream at me "PAY ATTENTION! TURN BACK NOW," but I only saw what I wanted to see, so I missed every sign to turn and run.

Once we left Marshall and Mary, we made our way back to Cameron's house. Something was off with Cameron and I could feel it. It felt like he was mad at me, but I was not sure why he was mad.

"Is everything okay?" I asked.

"Everything is fine," he said shortly.

"Okay," I said, not convinced. "Well, I really enjoyed meeting your grandparents. They really are such beautiful people."

"Yeah," Cameron said. *What the hell is wrong with him?*

"Cameron, seriously, what's wrong? I can always tell when you're not happy, and you definitely don't seem happy right -"

"I'm extremely sexually frustrated," he grumbled.

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“You don’t do anything with me! It makes me feel like you don’t desire me at all, and that fucking sucks!” he shouted.

“Whoa, Cameron. Can we please have a calm conversation without you shouting? I’m sorry you’re frustrated. I give you all I can, but you know I can’t have sex with you,” I said.

“Yeah, you’ve made that clear,” he snapped. “But you only want to do things maybe once or twice a week, and that is not enough for me!”

“I’m sorry, but I don’t always want to do those things because it makes me feel guilty,” I said. It was true; I had only done some sexual acts with Cameron out of a feeling of pressure and obligation rather than a true desire to actually do them. He would treat me differently when I did things; he was nicer, so I would do them, but I was not completely happy with it. My faith and my strong moral code told me the things we did were just leading to other temptations, but part of me felt like I had to compromise some of my own beliefs since Cameron was compromising his desire to have sex. *He made me feel that way.*

“Great! That’s great! Just what every boyfriend wants to hear: his girlfriend feels guilty pleasing him,” he said. “Well that’s just fine. I’m never touching you again! We can kiss, but that

is all because I'm not going to feel like I'm the one who is making you feel guilty!" *Why was he getting so mad?*

"That's not what I'm saying, and you know it," I said back. I was starting to feel frustrated myself. "I told you from the beginning this wouldn't be easy for you. You think I don't have urges? Of course I'm tempted! But I don't know what I'm missing out on, and you do and that's the main issue! I was very upfront with you from the beginning about how I am, and you told me you understood! I may not be able to have sex with you, but I'm *trying* to keep you happy in other ways, yet it's still not enough!"

"You act like all I want is sex!" he shouted. This was turning into a screaming match very quickly. "If all I wanted was sex, your ass would have been gone a long time ago! I just want to feel like you want me!"

"But I do want you, and I tell you that all the time!" I shouted back. "Now you are sitting here yelling at me because I don't do enough to please you, and I'm sorry, but I'm doing my best! You know this is a topic that is uncomfortable for me, yet here you are making it worse!" I began to cry. *I was so incredibly frustrated by the situation.* I knew this would come up eventually, but so soon after such a momentous moment? I thought him giving me the promise ring was his way of showing me just how on board he was with my abstinence. *I guess not.* We rode in silence until we got back to the house.

We sat in the driveway, neither one of us ready to get out until we cleared the air. I hated the idea of anyone, especially his parents, knowing we had just gotten into an argument. My eyes were still swollen from crying, and I was confident if his mom saw me, she would know something was wrong. *Mothers have a way of knowing things even when we try to hide our pain.*

“I’m sorry,” I said after minutes of sitting, looking at the dashboard. “I’m sorry if I made you feel unloved or like you were not special in any way because I am uncomfortable with anything sexual. I will try to be better.” *I did not realize it then, but this is where the manipulation began. I was always apologizing just for the sake of making things better, because he always made me feel like I was the problem.*

“See, you shouldn’t have to try. I want you to do things because *you* want to do them, not because you feel obligated to do them,” Cameron said. *That’s not what it feels like.*

“Well, when you get upset with me, it makes me feel obligated,” I said. He scoffed. “But, I do want to try to do more because I want you to be happy. When you’re happy, I’m happy.” *Hmm, I meant it at the time, but later, that statement would be revoked.*

“I just want us to do more because I think sex is important. It’s not the most important part of a relationship, but it is still a huge part of it,” he said.

“Yes, I believe it is too, but I do think it is something very special that should be saved for marriage,” I said. “I think it’s difficult for you to understand that once I am married, this guilt I carry will be no more. I will gladly give myself to you completely, but right now, I just can’t do that. I love you so much. So much. But I love Jesus more.”

“I understand that, I do. All I’m asking is that we mess around a little more - and that does not have to mean going all the way,” Cameron said.

“Okay, I can try,” I responded. “I promise I will try.”

“Okay, that’s all I ask,” he said. “Now come here and give me a kiss.” He leaned over and kissed my lips in a very insincere way. I did not want to kiss him in this moment. Why would I after the things he said? But, I allowed it anyway to avoid anymore conflict. *This was the start of my reoccurring behavior of putting up with hurtful things for the sake of avoiding hostility.* We went inside and went straight to Cameron’s room to change into something more comfortable, and to give my eyes some time to look normal again.

As I undressed, I could feel Cameron’s eyes looking me over. They burned through me and penetrated my soul. I knew what he wanted from me and I hesitated to feed into it, but more than anything, I wanted him to love me. *I know, I know; it sounds incredibly weak, and maybe it was weak, but love cripples you.* I desperately wanted to be accepted and loved by the man I so dearly accepted and loved, so instead of throwing on a t-shirt and yoga pants, I stood in front of him in my bra and underwear.

“Come over here,” he said as he sat on the bed. His voice was soft. It made me trust him. I walked his way slowly, a million thoughts running through my mind. *I knew I would not have sex, but how far was I willing to go?*

He caressed my bare stomach with the backside of his hands, tracing my curves and following the lines of my body. His lips kissed just below my breasts, then he paused and looked up at my face. There was desire in his eyes and there was fear in mine, but I knew I had to hide my discomfort. *I didn't want to make him mad again.*

“What do you want?” I asked.

“I just want what you want,” he responded.

“I don't know what I want,” I said. “I just need you to lead me.” Lead me he did, pulling me down onto the bed and kissing every inch of my body. He removed my underwear, then his own.

“Cameron, we can't,” I said with tears coming into my eyes. “I want to give you everything you want, but I can't give you this.” A little out of breath, Cameron stopped what he was doing and sat up on the edge of the bed. He saw I was upset, and instead of getting mad he said, “I know, it's okay.” I began to cry.



“I’m sorry,” I cried. “I love you so much and I know this is hard for you. I understand if you can’t do this anymore. You shouldn’t have to give up anything to be with me, so as hard as it is for me to say, I get it if you don’t want to be with me anymore.”

“Kelsey, giving up sex is nothing in comparison to giving up on you. I don’t think you truly understand how much I love you. When I gave you that ring, it was not for show; it was because I meant what I said. I want to marry you one day, and even though we have different views on the value of sex, I do think it is worth waiting because it is important to you.” *Ha.* I crawled up beside him and kissed his cheek.

He continued. “I know this is hard for both of us.” He paused. “Do you want to say a prayer with me?” His offer shocked me. He had never really been the one to encourage faith in our relationship, so to have him sit there next to me and ask for us to pray together was incredibly special. *From monster to angel with the snap of his fingers.*

“Of course I will,” I responded. So there we sat, hand-in-hand, praying for God to guide us in our relationship and give us the strength to remain pure until marriage. The moment I was seeing before me was truly beautiful, but it wasn’t real.



When Christmas Break had come to an end and I got back into the swing of things with a new schedule, new classes and new assignments, I began feeling content. Life was good, I was happy and I felt like this semester would be one of my best yet. I knew the spring semester meant Cameron would only be fairly consumed with football instead of being completely consumed like he was during the fall. I was also super excited because I knew I would be making a trip to New York City in March for the National Model United Nations Conference. *Oh Lord, I'm exposing my nerd self to the max right now.* Additionally, I had accepted a job with a local club volleyball organization coaching 10-12 year old little girls, and I had begun working out with my friend Yvette in attempt to work for the best body I had ever known. Things were looking great, and I was feeling confident in where life was leading me. My New Year's resolution to make my relationship with Christ stronger began to be an even bigger priority in my life, so I started implementing "more Jesus" into my day.

I have never been ashamed of my faith, and most people who know me, know my faith is very strong, so I was not surprised when I was approached by my friend Cindy, the editor of the school newspaper, to write a column about my faith. I accepted and decided to take the approach of what it is like to be a Christian in college from my personal experience. On January 31, 2017, my piece was published, for all to see, in *The Wichitan*:

*Being a Christian in college is not always easy. My whole life, my faith has been the central piece of me, and it is on the basis of faith that I have made most of my decisions. Most people look at Christians and automatically label us as 'judgmental,' when really our faith calls us to love all, and in fact, a lot of times we are the ones who end up being judged.*

*Being a Christian in college means facing temptations I know I cannot give into for the sake of misrepresenting God. If there is a party, being a Christian means me saying 'no' to alcohol because drunkenness does not allow me to fully represent my Lord. It turns out that saying 'no' to alcohol can actually lead to more ridicule than saying 'yes,' because people assume I am stuck-up for not accepting the beverage.*

*Being a college student in general means gaining a whole new level of independence, and privacy, we did not have in high school or previous years. With this, comes even more temptation. Being a Christian in college means having to go through many rejections by guys the moment I tell them I am saving myself for marriage. It turns out that many 'men' out there see only a body to use rather than a heart to love. This has been the most prominent topic of my ridicule seeing as my virginity has become the talking point in various locker rooms across campus. I have been labeled a 'Jesus Freak' because of a choice I have made to please God.*

*Being a Christian in college means having professors lecture to my classes about how believing in God is ignorant. Being a Christian in college means having my peers look at me like I am crazy when I talk about my love for God because they are 'above such childish beliefs.' Being a Christian in college means taking a humanities class and having the professor discuss every religion from the book EXCEPT Christianity (which took up nearly half of the textbook). Being a Christian in college means having to defend my views to people who demand facts, but do not understand the beauty of faith. Being a Christian in college means trying to show all of these people God's love through me, which sometimes means sucking it up and putting on a smile even on days I want to break down and cry.*

*Being a Christian in college means I have the choice to get up and go to church on Sunday's or not; get involved in a Bible study, or not; pray daily, or not. Before, going to church and praying was a family affair, but when I got to college, no one was here to force me to go. With this comes the temptation to stay out all night Saturday, sleep in until noon on Sunday, and forget about going to church. However, I have found that going to church and being around people who are like-minded, and feeling the presence of God as I sing out songs of praise is therapeutic. There is nothing like that feeling.*

*Though it may seem like church is the only place where I have found people who share my love for Christ, I have found such beautiful souls in other*

*college students. Most of my friends here have become my friends because we were able to find each other in a place where our faith, the very essence of who we are, is questioned daily, but still not be shattered. College has also been the place where after many boys have rejected me for my values, a man has accepted and loved every piece of me. So yes, being a Christian in college is not always easy, but the love I feel from my friends, the love I feel from my fella, and, most importantly, the love I feel from my God has made being a Christian an easy choice.*

I had been incredibly transparent with my words, but I was proud to have written them. It is not easy putting yourself out there in such a way as I did. I definitely received ridicule by some non-believers, but the amount of praise I got in return made publishing worth the vulnerability. There were people who texted me, direct messaged me and came up to me in public - *some friends, some classmates, some strangers* - all telling me about how my words inspired them. At the end of the day, that is all I have ever wanted out of life: I have wanted to bring happiness to others, and help those who do not know God, come to know Him. I was feeling good about my piece, but there was one person I did not feel very supported by, and that was Cameron.

His reaction to what I wrote was mild. He did not have much to say when I needed him to say something, anything, to make me feel like I was doing the right thing by sharing my perspective. I thought he would love it, especially the part about him. I had written about his love and acceptance for me because I think I was hopeful it was actually true, but when he could hardly manage a smile after reading my column, I questioned it all.

“What do you think?” I asked.

“It’s good,” he responded. *Detached.*

“Did you like the part about you?” I asked with a grin, hoping he would smile back. He didn’t.

“It was nice,” he said bluntly. *Wow, don’t sound too excited there.*

“Thank you,” I said, brushing off his tone. “I’m glad you like it, I just want your support.”

“You have it,” he said, not bothering to even look me in the eyes.

“Okay,” I said, unsure. I hoped he really did like it, but it would turn out, despite his denial, that column would set off a series of events I could have never predicted. Ten days after my column was published, a landslide hit our relationship fast and hard, leaving me covered in mud, unable to recognize myself or the man with whom I had fallen in love.

### ***Chapter 13: Unable to speak***

*Happiness has an expiration date  
Or at least that’s how it seems  
Eventually rain clouds will hide  
The joy of bright sunbeams*

Nelly Fertado asked the age old question I’ve been asking myself over and over: why do all good things come to an end? I think sometimes we get too comfortable. Things are going so

well, we forget there is hurt and pain and suffering in the world, and it can strike us at any moment. I know that's exactly what happened with me. I was comfortable with Cameron, more comfortable than I had ever been with anyone in my life. He made me feel *untouchable*. He made me feel *loved*. He made me feel *happy*. For the first time in a long time, my walls were down. This was it; I had found the person I wanted to spend the rest of my life with - no more dating, no more searching, no more awkward first kisses - I was done. That's what got me in trouble: I was complacent. I never thought this man of mine would hurt me or leave me. I never thought this man of mine was *capable* of hurting me or leaving me. I was wrong.

I don't think I'll ever forget the night it happened, the night I lost my voice. It was Friday, February 10, 2017. It was the evening before our friend Lucas' birthday, so we met him at a local bar to celebrate. We arrived around 10:00 p.m., but Lucas had been there since 6:00 and had been drinking the entire time. Needless to say, he was not looking so hot. Cameron and I sat at the reserved table with all of his other friends and made small talk with them. Everything was fine between us. We had both chosen not to drink, so instead we just ordered food, which took about an hour to get and tasted mediocre at best. The service was horrible, the music was crappy and Lucas was laying on the floor of the men's restroom, throwing up, almost the entire time we were there. Cam and I were side by side, hand in hand at the table. It was not a typical Friday night for us, but the vibe was definitely typical Kelsey and Cameron. In between bites of greasy sandwiches and sips of odd-tasting water, the manager stopped by our table.

“Hey y’all. The guy on the floor in the restroom, err, Lucas I think he said, needs to go. He’s been in there puking his guts out for the last hour and I can’t have that. Someone needs to go get him and he needs to leave.”

“Hey man, I’m sorry for all of this. We’ll get him out of here,” Cameron replied. Cam and Lucas’ brother then went into the restroom to get him. When I first saw Lucas, he looked as pale as Elmer’s glue, and had an expression on his face which resembled what I’d imagine coming face-to-face with death looks like. We got him into the car with my roommate, Emily, and watched as he hung his head out of the window, vomiting every 30 seconds or so, until the car eventually faded from our view. It was then that Cam and I decided we should head back to my place and call it an early night.

We hopped in the car and drove back to my apartment. The whole night, nothing had felt unusual between us. We held each other’s hands on the center console and listened to the radio on the quick ride back. We made small talk here and there about our poor friend, wondering if he and Emily had made it back to his house safely. Nothing was wrong. It was very normal. It was always so normal.

Cam and I had gotten into certain habits of no longer trying to keep things exciting or impress each other. Many days, he would come over and all he would want to do was watch Netflix, which is fine every now and then or perhaps just before bed, but it was becoming the only thing we did together most days. It was not like things were bad between us, but I was feeling distant because we would sit there on my love-seat for a couple of hours and not talk at all. Sometimes, I would attempt to strike up a conversation with him about his day, but I would

usually give up on anything meaningful within a few attempts due to his one-worded answers. It had been bothering me for a little while, but I kept it to myself in hopes it would get better. My hopes were flawed: it wasn't getting better, so I figured I'd better tell him how I was feeling. *I thought maybe he had noticed the same thing.* All I wanted was to be the best version of us.

When we arrived back at my apartment, I was tired. I quickly changed out of my leather jacket, dark-wash skinny jeans and high heels, and into one of Cameron's 2XL t-shirts he let me have to sleep in. Then, I began the process of converting from princess to popper by taking off my makeup. As I wiped away clumps of mascara and eyeliner, I struck up the conversation I had been wanting to have with Cameron while he was sitting on my bed beginning to pull up an episode of Dexter on Netflix.

"Hey, you know what I've been thinking about?" I began.

"What?" he responded.

"I've been thinking that we've sort of gotten into a bit of a routine lately." *I was trying to keep it light-hearted and as non-abrasive as possible.*

"What do you mean?"

"I just feel like we kind of do the same things a lot of nights, and believe me, I know you're tired from your workouts and I'm tired from my stuff I have going on too, but when all



we do is watch TV and barely talk, it makes me sad. I was thinking maybe we could try to change things up once a week and do something like play a board game or go for a drive with the windows down - ”

“I don’t like going on drives,” he interrupted.

“Okay, well we could do other things - ”

“I don’t make my own money, Kelsey. My dad pays for everything, so I’m not going to spend more money than I already am trying to please you.” *Whoa*. His demeanor had changed. I didn’t mean to offend him. I thought I was simply offering a solution to our rut. I made my way over to the bed and sat down next to him.

“I’m not asking you to spend money though. Going for a drive or playing a board game doesn’t cost - ”

“I don’t like going for drives! There’s literally no point to it. I’m not going to do it, so you can stop asking.”

“Okay, well I like to go for drives, but I guess that doesn’t matter. Then what do *you* want to do?”

“I’m perfectly happy with how things are, I don’t want things to change,” he replied with a snappy tone.

“But Cam, we don’t really talk anymore. We may sit there on the couch together for two hours and not say ten words to each other. All I’m asking is that we try to change things up once a week just so we don’t get bored.” He stood up. His eyes were raging.

“So you’re bored now?” he asked, his volume slightly elevated.

“I’m not bored necessarily, I just think we could be a better us if we - ”

“You bitch! Bitch! Bitch! Bitch! Bitch!” he screamed. Frantically, he stood up and started to throw his things together. I had never seen him so angry. His face was steaming red and his eyes were flaming like I had just opened the gates of hell to his soul. *I was frightened.*

“I’m done, that’s it! I’ve done everything I can to make you happy! You don’t appreciate anything I do!” *Was he serious? I always went out of my way to make him feel appreciated.*

“Being with you is like being with a corpse! You are like a 60 year old man, I swear! If we were any other college couple, we’d be fucking right now, then I’d leave and go drink with my friends! That’s what all of this talk about wanting more boils down to; you’re jealous! You’re jealous of me and my friends because you don’t have any friends of your own!” *Was he delusional?*

I sat there with my legs crossed over each other, stunned. I was not sure what to make of what was happening; I didn't recognize this person before me.

"I'm done! I love you, but I'm done! This is too much, I can't - I can't handle all of this. You're literally crazy!" *Crazy*. With my extensive family and personal history of mental illness, that word stung. He knew how I felt about the word "crazy." It wasn't just a word to me; it still isn't. I hate it with a passion. This man with whom I had shared things I shared with no one else about my struggle with depression and anxiety was now calling me *crazy*. I thought back to the day I told him about my thoughts of driving my car into the side of the overpass. I remembered telling him he shouldn't be with me. I told him no one should be with me because I was *crazy*. His response now echoed in my mind: "You are not crazy, and I'm not leaving you. I adore you." *You are not crazy, you are not crazy, you are not crazy. When did he decide to drop the 'not' from that sentence? Did he really believe I was crazy because I asked if we could do something besides watch TV once a week?* The answer did not matter, all I knew was he knew just how to hurt me because there was nothing worse he could have said in that moment.

He began going through my desk drawer.

"Where is the ring?" he asked. I was wearing it. I rarely took it off. He held up the little red box it came in, and for an instant my mind took me back to the top of that mountain on the night of my birthday. I remembered being unable to speak as we drove to the top because I was overwhelmed with emotion, and here I was again: unable to speak, completely overwhelmed

with a very different kind of feeling. *Had I traded my voice for a ring?* I was certainly learning all that glitters is not gold.

I held the ring out to him and finally worked up the slightest bit of courage to open my mouth.

“Take it,” I said. “You made a promise to me when you gave me this, but right now - right now, you’re not - ”

He snatched the ring from my hand. “I didn’t ask for this! I, I can’t deal with this! I’m young! I’m a fucking 21 year old guy! I shouldn’t even be thinking about marriage! It’s a Friday night! I should be out at a party, but because you don’t like parties, I have to live like I’m fucking fifty!” He was blaming every decision he made on me. *It wasn’t fair.*

I wanted to cry so badly, but not a single tear rose to my eyes. The knot in my throat was suffocating, but I had to stay strong. I couldn’t let him see me as weak even though I had never felt smaller in my life. The walls closed in all around me and I felt my soul detach itself from my physical state. There was nothing left inside my body besides a hollow frame that echoed the yells of this stranger.

He raised the ring box while he gathered his things, readying himself to walk out of the door.

“You’re an idiot! You know how much I paid for this shit? I paid \$1,000 for this thing! But nothing is ever good enough, not even that! Such a fucking waste of my money and my time! This is just too much!” *What was he talking about?* I had never asked for the ring, but I

loved it dearly. I loved him dearly, even in this horrible moment. He was always good enough for me.

He shook his head. “Here!” He threw the box at me. I flinched. “Take it! I fucking bought it for you and I sure as hell don’t fucking want it! I’m done! I love you, but I’m done!”

He slammed the door on his way out of my room. I waited until I heard the second door from the kitchen slam shut before I finally let myself breathe. I hadn’t realized before that I had been holding my breath, but the moment I exhaled, I lost it. My whole world had just been shaken, and I didn’t even know why. If I had known asking to play a board game once a week would have enraged him like it did, I never would have asked. With shaking hands and buckling knees, I walked from my bed to the front door to lock it. I didn’t want him trying to come back. For the first time since we met, I was scared of him. Never before had I feared that 6’4”, 270 pound man, but in this moment, I feared him with everything in me. With the anger, the outrage, I could see in him, I questioned if he would try to hurt me physically. *How in the hell did things go so wrong so quickly?* I could barely stand. I felt incredibly weak. *What happened to the mild mannered man of mine?* What I just witnessed was not a man at all; he was a monster.

My thoughts were so joggled, I couldn’t comprehend what was happening because I couldn’t believe it had happened. *Or maybe I just didn’t want to.*

Feeling completely alone, my first thought was to call Brianna. She picked up on the second ring.

“Hello?”

I couldn't even muffle up a response. I could barely catch my breath. The tears wouldn't stop and the ache of my sobbing gave away my cover.

"Bee? What's wrong?" I couldn't speak. As hard as I tried, I absolutely couldn't do it. I could not speak his hate into existence. *What the hell just happened?* Minutes passed before I could finally get out a coherent word.

"Cameron...just...broke...up...with...me...," I gasped between each word, still trying to catch my breath. "He yelled...so...loudly." I cried and cried and cried. It was so uncontrollable, my chest felt as though it would break through my skin.

"Bee, what? What happened?" I could hear the confusion in her voice. I could feel her sadness.

"He just started screaming...bitch, bitch, and...he said..." I lost it again. I couldn't get out the words to tell her everything he had just said to me. If I said it all out loud, it became real. *This couldn't be real, this couldn't possibly be real.*

"I have never...felt...so small...in my life," I sobbed. "And as...he screamed...I just sat there...and I took it." I erupted into tears. "I didn't have a voice, Bee," I cried. "I didn't have a voice."

I could feel Bri's hurt through the phone. Like me, she didn't know what to say. She just sat in silence for several minutes while I tried to collect myself.

"You didn't deserve that, Bee," she said finally. Her voice was soft. "No one deserves that."

At this point, I decided I couldn't be alone; not tonight, not like this. Bri was doing her best, but she could only do so much from 330 miles away. I needed a friend *here*. I couldn't be by myself, I couldn't face this alone. I hung up the phone, and that is when the silence of my apartment poured over me.

Through blurry eyes, I sent messages to my two best friends in Wichita Falls, Taylor and Yvette. They both came over immediately. I had finally stopped myself from crying, but the second I opened the door and saw the sadness in Taylor's eyes, I felt the wave of emotions all over again.

We stood there by the door hugging and crying, holding each other tightly. *She is such a dear friend*. I needed her comfort, and she gave me a little bit of a calm in the middle of my storm.

Yvette came soon after, and the waves crashed and lightning struck all over again. The three of us sat on my bed, at first in silence, then I finally told them about what I had just experienced. *They both looked down a lot, and so did I*. I was unable to look anyone in the eyes and speak about the way my 'sweet fella' had treated me.

I had never felt more inferior in my life. This guy, this big ole teddy bear I had known, was supposed to protect me. Just like he protected the quarterback on the field, he was supposed to protect me too against all pain and suffering, or in the very least be there to pick me up if it couldn't be stopped. Now he was no longer the defender of my heart, but rather the attacker.

He was supposed to make me feel safe. He was supposed to make me feel loved, but instead he destroyed me. I knew many of the things he said had no validity to them, but I think that's what hurt the most; he had said those things with the sole intention of hurting me. He wanted to pierce my heart. *He succeeded.* I would have *never* done the same to him. I would have never intentionally hurt him. *I still wouldn't.*

I flashed back to all of the beautiful memories we had shared, but each time I tried to imagine the good, all I could see was his enraged face from an hour earlier. His eyes looked as though they might pop out of his skull, his skin so hot it could melt from his face, but why did he get so mad over me asking to *play a board game* once a week? I could not understand no matter how many times I replayed the situation in my mind. *Maybe it was because of his insecurities.* He was constantly saying, "how did a guy like me get a girl like you?" It was as if he never felt good enough no matter how many times I told him he was more than enough for me. The article I had written never occurred to me as being a source of his frustration, but looking back, the timing of it all could not have been a coincidence.

I just didn't understand what had happened; it made me feel like my relationship had been a lie. If I had known Cameron had a side like the one I saw that night, I would have never dated him. He had left it hidden in the beginning, but now that it was exposed, it was a side I'd be seeing again. This guy, this sweet boy who captured my heart many months earlier, had a



temper; a bad one. Unfortunately for me, that temper would eventually bring me to a position where I felt like there was no longer hope for me in this world. *This was it. I was broken and a piece of me would never be restored.*

### ***Chapter 14: Fool Me Once***

*A thorn may pick  
And prick and scar  
And hurt and prick  
And prick and scar  
But  
When that thorn does prick the heart  
The heart will bleed  
Forevermore*

I awoke from a foggy slumber to a beautiful Saturday morning. Yvette stayed over with me that night so I wouldn't have to sleep alone. *Ha. Sleep. As if I could possibly get a good night's rest with my mind racing as it did.* In the passing hours of the night, I lied with my back turned away from my friend so she could not see my tears, I covered my mouth with the sheets so she could not hear my sobs and I stared blankly at the wall and heard the yells she would never hear.

All night, I spiraled down into that heavy darkness I carry with me each day of my life, and I was left feeling hollow. My head was clouded from confusion and sleep deprivation. *Gosh I was tired; absolutely physically and emotionally drained.* The past night was awful - by far one of the worst moments of my life. I had never felt so belittled, especially not by someone I loved.

Cameron texted me during the night trying to apologize, but I couldn't face it yet. *Could I trust his sincerity now?* I wasn't sure if I even knew him anymore. *Was that behavior a fluke or*

*was it a piece of him that had been there all along?* I questioned everything. My entire relationship with Cameron felt fake. All this time I thought we were happy, but clearly he was not. Clearly my vow of abstinence bothered him after-all, though he always said it didn't. It was sickening, it was a slap in the face, it was a knife in my back, it was a hole in my heart.

Eventually Yvette woke up and had to go to work, but not before giving me a huge hug and assuring me everything would be okay. *I wasn't sure if she was right, but I wanted to believe her.* When she left, I felt alone again. It seems as though anytime I feel lonely, I start to become irrational, so even as I was not ready to see Cam, I agreed to meet with him.

I asked him to meet me at Sikes Lake where we had once fed the ducks together so many months ago. A public place was best, I thought, because then maybe he wouldn't yell at me like he had the night before. *Wow, how did this become a fear of mine? Why did he have to do what he did?* He agreed and we met on a bench in the late hours of the morning.

He was already waiting when I arrived. As I inched closer to the bench, I began to tremble ever so subtly. He terrified me. *How did he become unrecognizable over night? How did I become unrecognizable over night?* I had never been the girl to let anyone talk down to me, but after my injury and my breakup with Nick, I had stopped defending myself. It was like I no longer felt courageous enough to speak up because one, I lacked confidence, and two, I never wanted to be as ugly to someone as I was to Nick after we broke up. I guess I decided I would be a doormat instead, and let others walk all over me to ensure I would not hurt anyone else's feelings again, but this was too far. I should have said something to him. I should have told him what he was saying was not okay, but I didn't.

“Hey,” I said in a whisper as I sat down next to Cameron. My fingers shook as I rubbed my palms together.

“Hey,” he said. He looked as though he had not gotten much sleep either. There were dark circles under his puffy, ocean eyes, his hair was going in every which way and I could make out the details of every line and scar on his face. *He was looking pretty darn rough, but so was I.*

We sat in silence for a moment.

“I don’t know what to say,” I finally said. “I just can’t believe what happened last night.”

“Believe me, I can’t either, Kelsey. I don’t know what came over me. Sometimes, I just get really angry and last night was one of those times. I felt like I was being attacked and told I wasn’t good enough.” *He felt attacked?*

“You felt attacked because I asked you to play a board game once a week? I didn’t think I was asking too much,” I said, my voice trailing off toward the end of my sentence.

“I know it sounds ridiculous when you put it like that,” he said, his lips turning up into a slight smirk. “I don’t know. You weren’t asking too much. I just never feel good enough for you. You always want to go do things and sometimes I feel like I can’t keep up.”

“Cameron, I would not be with you if I felt like you were not good enough for me. I told you before, I don’t feel like I’m better than anyone, so to say you’re not good enough for me is not reasonable,” I said. “And I ask you if you want to go do things with me because I love you and because I love spending time with you and because I love making memories with you. Me asking you to play a game or go for a drive was never meant to be an attack on you. I suggested those things because I constantly strived to make our relationship the best it can be because I saw our potential, but now I’m questioning everything.”

“Why are you questioning everything?” he asked. “I did not mean what I said, you know that.” *Do I?*

“I’m not sure what I know, but I think there had to be some truth behind your words, otherwise you would not have said them. Those thoughts had to have crossed your mind at some point for you to blow up and shout them like that.” I began to tear up. “The way you spoke to me...I’ve...I’ve never had anyone speak to me that way in my life. I felt like I was the size of an ant.” Cam looked saddened by my hurt.

“I know what I did was wrong, and I know what I said was wrong, but you have to believe me when I tell you there wasn’t any truth behind it. I don’t know why I said the things I said. I was just so mad,” he replied.

“You said what you said because you wanted to hurt me,” I said back as I stared down at the sidewalk. The cement reflected the morning sun as it rose above the trees. *Beautiful.*

“I felt hurt, so I wanted you to hurt too,” he said after a long pause. “I felt like my character was being attacked, and looking back now, I realize I was stupid for thinking that, but that’s how I felt in the moment.”

“I just don’t see any excuse for it,” I said softly. *I was trying to make sense of it all.*

“I’m not making any excuses. It should not have happened. Kelsey, I love you. I don’t want this to be the end for us,” he pleaded.

“I don’t know how to feel right now,” I whispered back. “I don’t know how to un-hear your words and un-see your face. Gosh, every time I close my eyes that’s all I can see. I don’t know if I can get past this because it makes me question what else you hate about me that you’ve kept bottled up, and it makes me fear it will happen again.”

“I love everything about you. I did not mean what I said. I can only tell you that so many times, but you have to choose to believe me,” he said. “And as far as it happening again, I can promise you it won’t. It never will.” *Another promise that was made to be broken.*

“I love you too. That’s what makes this so hard. I love you, but I don’t know who you are anymore. I - I don’t know if I can do this,” I cried and stood from my spot on the bench. “I need to go. Goodbye, Cameron.” This time, it was Cameron who was left speechless as I walked back to my car, got in and drove off.



The drive back to my apartment was a short one; no more than six minutes at most. When I pulled into my parking lot, Cameron’s name lit up my phone and rang over the bluetooth in my car. *Should I answer?* I decided yes.

“Hello?” I questioned.

“I’m not ready for this to be done,” Cameron said frantically. “I want to work this out right now. I’m about to be back at my apartment and I need to know what is going to happen between us because I can’t keep torturing myself over what happened.” *So this is about you now?* “I love you and I know you love me, and I’ve told you what happened last night will not happen again.” *Oh, but it will though.* “I want you to give me an answer right now: are we going to work this out or are we going to be done? Because if we’re done, I need to start moving on.” *Ultimatum? Okay. Moving on? Okay. It’s been a solid twelve hours since we broke up - since you revealed your monster - but oh no, please, YOU need to move on. How selfish of me to think I was the victim here.*

I thought about what he was saying for a minute. *Did I really want to walk away?* My mind screamed at me, “Run! Run! He’ll do it again! He’ll do it again!” but my heart screamed, “You love him! He said he won’t do it again, so let him show you! You wanted to spend the rest of your life with this man! He gave you a ring to show you how much he loves you! Be with him!” *Oh gosh, the ring.* I couldn’t begin to think about what it meant to me now; I couldn’t begin to think of what Cameron meant to me now. *This was all too much.*

“I can’t give you an answer right now, and I don’t think you have any right to demand an answer from me,” I said. “You really hurt me, and quite frankly, I don’t trust you. I’m not sure how or if I will be able to get that trust back.”

“In an hour,” he said. “Tell me what you want in an hour.”

“I’m not going to give my feelings a deadline,” I responded. *Why was he pressuring me?* It made me want to run away even more.

“I just can’t do this not-knowing thing,” he said. “I would rather know you’re done than be unsure of what comes next.”

“I need some time to think,” I said. “I need to work through this on my own right now, then maybe we can talk.”

“Can we talk tomorrow?” he asked. *He was still pressuring me.*

“We’ll see,” I responded. “I’m gonna go now.”

“Kelsey - please believe me. Please know no matter what, I love you so much.” I could tell he was getting choked up.

“I love you too,” I said, then I hung up the phone.



After speaking with my mother, my sister, my best friends and Jesus, I felt more confused than ever. Everyone was really upset about what happened, my mother probably the most. She was disgusted by the things he said, rightfully so, but regardless of how she felt, she told me she would support me no matter what decision I made. Elyssa was the same way, though she said she felt like what he said had to have some truth behind it. *She was right.*

I could not make a decision in the battle between heart and mind, so I did what one does on a Sunday morning in Wichita Falls, Texas: I went to church. Going to church was normally something Cameron and I did together, but on this day, I went alone. I sat in our normal spot in the college section, but I felt the sting of the empty seat beside me. Chills were sent down my spine when, in the middle of worship, I looked over and saw Cam with one of his teammates in



the middle section, about 20 yards away from me. I was surprised to see him there. He never went to church without me, but I was glad to see him leaning on God during this difficult time for both of us.

As we sang, I tried my hardest not to look Cameron's way. When I first saw him, I had never seen him look so sad. *It was awful.* Regardless of how he made me feel, I still hated seeing him hurt. I could feel his eyes burning into my back, but I refused to turn around. *This was my time to be alone with God and my thoughts, separate from Cameron.*

With every song we sang, my voice became quieter and quieter. I found it difficult to get out the words through my cries. My eyes were closed, my hands were raised to my chest and I felt the presence of God all around me. No matter how alone I felt, I knew I wasn't. God surrounded me and it felt like He was hugging me in my sorrows, wrapping me in His love.

With open ears and an open heart, I listened to the sermon. I think God was talking to me through Paster Bob that day. He preached on how sometimes our paths change and it is okay to let go of the things that hurt us, but we should hold on to the things that don't. I took that as a direct message from Jesus telling me I needed to be done. *There was so much He tried to tell me, but I didn't listen.* I knew I needed to talk to Cameron and end things for good. It would be hard, but it had to be done.

I texted Cam after the service and asked him to meet me at my apartment. He agreed. When he walked in, he looked even worse than he had the day before. *Sleep deprivation will do that to a person.* I did not hug him when I first opened the door, I simply let him in and immediately turned away to take my seat in the chair across from the love-seat. I did not want to sit by him. *Keep your distance.*

He sat down and smiled at me.

“You looked beautiful at church today,” he said. *Please don't try to be nice now.*

“Thank you,” I said. “I was surprised to see you there.”

“I was hoping to see you,” he said. “Plus, I needed to go listen to the message. I've never hurt this much in my life and I was hoping God would give me a sign, and I think He did.”

“I thought the exact same thing,” I responded. “I felt like God was talking to us today. I think He was trying to show us we shouldn't be together.”

Cameron looked puzzled. “Why would you say that?”

“Because Pastor Bob said whenever something hurts you, it is best to let it go,” I replied.

“I did not take it that way,” Cam said. “We don't hurt each other, we make each other happy. We love each other, that's why we should be together.” *I may not hurt you, but you certainly hurt me.*

“Yes, I know we love each other, but love is not always enough,” I said. “I have given this an incredible amount of thought, but I cannot be with you anymore - not after what

happened. When I saw that side of you, it changed everything for me. You say it won't happen again, but I cannot believe that right now. I can't trust you, and if there is not trust, there cannot be a relationship." At that moment I looked up to see Cameron with his hands folded together, his elbows on his knees and tears falling from the tip of his nose. I had held it together so far, but this was testing my ability to be strong.

"I - I just wish there was something I could say...something I could do to make this right. This has been the best year of my life, and I ruined it," he said, looking as if he was talking to himself. He took a break from looking at the floor and looked to me, waiting for me to say something. I didn't speak. "Well, I guess I'll go then."

He rose from his seat slowly and began walking toward the door. I followed behind him. Before leaving, he turned to me one last time and wrapped me in a tight hug. He kissed the top of my head. "Take care of yourself," he cried. "I'm sorry. I love you."

"I love you too," I spoke into his chest, then he left. I waited before the door was completely closed before I finally let myself cry. *God, please tell me I made the right decision.* My mind felt confident it had made the right choice, but my heart, oh my heart, ached. *You just let the love of your life walk away because of one mistake.* Everything about the situation stung. I felt like no matter what decision I made, I would be in pain. Pain consumed me, eating me from the inside out, preying on my insecurities, my anxiety, my depression. *What have I done?*

Perhaps it would have been best had the story of me and Cameron ended there, but even though I thought it was over for good, I would come to realize I was just now entering the

Inferno. By making my next decision, I would be accepting Virgil's hand to guide me through the seven layers of Hell. By making my next decision, I would be choosing to live in a nightmare for many months. *Stupid girl, stupid girl.* Perhaps I should have stayed gone, but there are no accidents in fate. T'was fate that broke me down, but it was always fate that built me up as well.



Although I had called it quits with Cameron, we were still in constant communication. Most of our conversations had to do with how sad we both were, and I began to realize I wasn't sure if I was ready to let go just yet. Just as Cameron had made me a promise on top of that mountain, I had made him one too. *Of course, the guy to whom I was promising my love and devotion was not the guy I now knew.*

Just my luck, Valentine's Day came shortly after my breakup, so at a time when love was in the air, I was feeling more like love was choking me. Cameron and I had originally planned to be together for the holiday, but with everything going on, I did not really care to see him. He had other plans.

He stopped by my apartment out of the blue with chocolates, a candle, flowers and a card. He told me even though we weren't together, I still deserved to feel loved on Valentine's Day. I thanked him for the gifts, but part of me was upset to see him. *If he wanted me to feel loved so badly, why had he treated me the way he did? You don't speak to someone you love the way he spoke to me.* I went on with my day feeling rather down in the dumps. I needed to stay busy, so I went to class, then went to the gym with Yvette.

Let me just start by saying, the day I'm about to tell you about felt quite terrible at the time, but looking back now, I can laugh. Yvette and I liked to take fitness classes at our campus's wellness center, so we were really feeling the love when our instructor informed us the day would be particularly difficult. It was a HIIT class, which stands for head-to-toe workout, and by the end of the class, I felt pain all over - head to toe. As we walked back to the car, I had to take a minute to stop and hurl into the grass. *I was miserable.*

Once I was back at my apartment, my body ached and my stomach hurt so bad, I could not bring myself to stand from my big, comfortable chair. I was spaced out for nearly an hour before I decided to stop wallowing in my own self-pity and get up to order some dinner. It was a Tuesday which meant half-price traditional wings at Buffalo Wild Wings. Cameron and I went together almost every week, it was sort of our thing. I could not bare to sit there alone on any day, but especially not Valentines Day. *Hell no.* Even though Cam had left a bitter taste in my mouth, he could not taint my desire for parmesan garlic chicken wings with ranch. *Mmm mmm, mouthwatering.* I decided to place an order online and scheduled for my wings to be picked up in 45 minutes. Once my order was placed, I passed time by doing one of my absolute favorite things to do: I took a bubble bath, complete with a bath bomb to sizzle away at my tender body and heart.

The day was beginning to look up. *Bubble baths never fail to make me feel better.* I was smelling like lavender, I was about to eat some chicken wings, I was going to watch a movie, life was pretty okay. *Ha! You thought!* When I arrived at Buffalo Wild Wings to pick up my order, I paid upfront, then the girl working the counter told me they were super busy and a little backed

up. She said it would be about 15 minutes before my order of one small wings was ready. *Okay, that's fine.*

I took a seat in the entrance way and watched as the lovers came walking in two-by-two. *Oh joy.* Fifteen minutes passed, and no word from behind the counter. *Okay.* Thirty minutes passed. *Okay. I get it, they're busy.* Forty minutes passed. *I'm pissed.* Finally, I asked someone about my order and five minutes later, it was ready. When I finally received the order I had placed 45 minutes in advance and received 45 minutes late, it was the manager who handed me my wings. She threw my bag down on the counter and did not even bother apologizing for my wait. Up until this point, I had been incredibly kind and patient with the workers, but this was just too much. I walked out the door without a word, steam blowing from my ears. *TODAY SUCKS!*

On any other day, the situation would have still been frustrating because it was in fact ridiculous, but today, I was a bat out of hell. The girl who does not get mad easily was pissed beyond belief. The entire drive home, I screamed profanities, hit the steering wheel and cried. *If anyone was to look over and see me, they probably would have questioned my sanity, but they also did not know the shit I had been through over the past few days.*

Everything I had bottled up was coming out all because of some damn chicken wings. I was hurting, I was sore, I was single, I was hangry and all I wanted to do was go home, eat my dinner, watch *The Devil Wears Prada* and go to sleep. I did not feel like that was asking for too much. *Apparently it was.* When I got up to my apartment and set up my little tray with my dinner, I crawled into a blanket and started my movie. I opened the box to discover they had shorted me two wings. *HELL NO!* The outrage started all over again, but as usual, I did not do

anything about my frustration and instead I harbored it within the confines of my mind. This was my life now: letting people be rude to me, letting people wrong me and just sitting back and taking it. *Who the hell had I become?*



As I mentioned in the beginning of this story, there was a time when I was a girl who always saw the good in others even when they did not see it in themselves, so after Cameron and I had been in contact regularly, my loneliness and caring heart decided to forgive him. It was not an easy decision, but I had made a commitment to him and I loved him dearly, so I figured maybe he deserved a second chance. Besides, if chicken wings could set me off so easily, who was I to judge Cameron for getting angry. *Of course, my anger was not directed at someone, just a steering wheel, but still.* At this point, the good times definitely outweighed the bad, and though this was a major setback, I knew we could get through it.

My terms of condition included telling Cameron this absolutely could not happen again, if it happened again, I would leave. *Ha.* I also told him I would need time to get over it and he would need to be understanding of my hurt. Last, I told him I would not wear the ring again until I was ready, and I did not know when that would be because I could not trust him.

My friends and family were supportive, but they were not happy.

“You know I love and support you no matter what, but I would not get back with him if I were you,” Elyssa said. “He said the things he said to hurt you. Someone who loves you should not want to hurt you. I think he is manipulative and I think he has anger management issues.”

My mom agreed.

“I’m mad at him,” she said. “Abuse is abuse, and the way he spoke to you is abusive whether or not you want to acknowledge that. He does not have to hit you for it to do damage. Bruises hurt, but so do words. I liked Cameron, but this changed the way I view him, and you know I love you and support you if this is what you want, but I would be very cautious because I have a feeling this will happen again.” *Ahh, always leave it to Mom to slap me with the honest truth.* “Your dad and I have gotten in fights before, but the difference is, he has never gotten personal, he has certainly never called me a bitch and there has never been a time where he made me feel like I couldn’t say anything back. I’m a mama bear and I don’t like it when someone messes with one of my babies.”

Her response was eye-opening, but my heart was closed off to hearing what she was saying because, at that point, I was trying to see the best in my man, not the worst in my monster. I was thinking with my heart, and sometimes that is a good thing. Other times, it is not.

### ***Chapter 15: Trying***

*I am in love with a stranger  
A man of my dreams  
But when I awake  
Things are not what they seem*



Do you know that feeling you get when you so desperately want everything to be alright, but instead, everything feels wrong? I do. That's how things were when Cameron and I decided to get back together. As much as I tried to forget the things he screamed at me and the look in his eyes when doing so, I was haunted by his dark shadow. The ghost followed me throughout the day; creeping up around every corner, consuming my thoughts, taking away my smile. People say shadows can only exist when there is light, so I guess that made what came out in the dark hours of the day a demon because everything got worse when I went to close my eyes.

His words were like a skipping record I could not get to stop playing, and with every nice thing he said or did, I only felt saddened by the reason he was saying or doing it. I always hated in movies when a couple got in a fight, say the man cheated on his wife, and to "make up for it," he brings home flowers. *It disgusts me.* Like, not only have you just broken her heart, but now you have also tainted something beautiful with the idea of "I'm sorry." But is he ever really sorry? If he was sorry, wouldn't he be changing his actions, not covering them up with a bouquet of apologies? Or here's a thought: why not do the thing that caused you to say sorry in the first place? *I know: hell of a concept.*

Cameron's kindness felt like the cheating man's roses. I could not trust him like I had before, and I was not sure if I ever could again. I'm not someone who easily forgets things. I tend to remember every detail of a moment just as it occurred when it is something that is either extremely wonderful or extremely volatile. *Don't ask why, it's just how I've always been.* Part of me thinks it has to do with my anxiety because I can't just let go of something; I have to work through it and resolve it before I can move on from it. That's where Cameron and I are very different.

Cameron sees a problem and wants to pretend it never happened, he wants to make it go away, but there was nothing he could do to make this problem escape from my thoughts and from my heart. I shuddered when he touched me, I felt nothing when our lips met, I was cold when his arms were wrapped around me. *Where had our pure love gone?* I wanted it back. I wanted everything to be alright. I wanted that night to go away forever, but I am no time traveler and I cannot rewrite history. I was stuck with the memory engraved in the stone barricaded around my heart, forever written in time. I could not change our history, but perhaps I could change our future.

Change does not come overnight, though that's what Cameron wanted. I could not handle the pressure he was putting on me to "stop being so sad." *I guess it is hard to cover up swollen eyes and a forced smile when you've been crying all night long.* Eventually, Cameron grew impatient. *By eventually, I mean three days.* He expected me to pick up the pieces of my heart that he left shattered, and I was all too weak to do so alone. He was supposed to be my partner in the good times and the bad times, not the creator of my pain.

Nonetheless, Cameron decided he was no longer to blame and the blow up was actually my fault. He said if I had not told my friends and family about what had happened, it would make getting back together easier because now he felt like they looked at him differently. *Ah yes, must maintain your good image for the public.* He also reverted back to how he should not have lost his cool, but he also should not have had to apologize for it - this was something he decided after speaking with his dad. *You remember Cameron Sr., right? Yeah, great role model.* He even changed his bio on Twitter to read "I would rather die on my feet, than live on my knees." He said this was his way of showing me he was no longer sorry for what he did and said to me and I

now needed to get over it. You would think this is where I would have walked away for sure.

*This guy is awful, he does not care about hurting you. Run! Run! Run!* But no, instead, I felt an immense amount of guilt. *Maybe he was right. Maybe all of it was my fault. So let the mind games begin...*



I asked Cameron to meet me in the middle. As hard as I tried, I could not stop being sad with the snap of his fingers, but I figured us spending more quality time together would help and dropping the conversation about what happened would put Cameron more at ease. *Yes, amazing how I was now trying to comfort HIM in this situation.* Cam agreed he would work on controlling his anger and not take offense to what I had originally asked him to do. We started changing the little things: less TV and talking more, sitting down and eating at restaurants instead of always taking it to-go and playing board games (which - *shocker* - Cameron ended up loving and requesting half of the time). In fact, he had gone out of his way to take me to the store so we could pick out some new games together. I was seeing his effort and suddenly, I felt myself becoming a little more comfortable again.

One of my favorite memories from this transitional period was something that was so ordinary to most, but extraordinary to me. I was in the kitchen cooking dinner for Cameron and myself. Cameron was pacing around the living room as we talked. *He could never sit still, I swear he has some sort of attention disorder.* I had my phone playing music in the background, and when our conversation had faded out, I heard what song was playing: I Love a Rainy Night

by Eddie Rabbitt. *Fun fact: I love older songs and I love happy songs, so when you put the two together, my hips can't help but sway.* My dress moved from side to side in harmony with the beat of the classic tune. I was stirring around the sauce on the stove when I felt two hands grab my waist and spin me around. That was when my "I hate dancing" fella started to dance with me.

Around the kitchen and through the living room, we swayed and sang along with Mr. Rabbitt.

"Showers wash all my cares away; I wake up to a sunny day, 'cause I love a rainy night," we sang.

He spun me around and I twirled and I twirled while wearing the biggest grin. When I was a little girl, I was always captivated by the way dresses moved in ballets and Disney films while the performers danced. I always wanted to make my own dress flare out into a perfect circle while being led across the dance floor, and now I was doing it. Of course, this was not a stage or a grand ballroom; it was a little kitchen in a little apartment with bad lighting and thin floors, but I might as well have been a Disney princess in that moment. I had never asked Cameron to make my dreams a reality, but at that point in time, he had given me the world. *It truly is the little things.* Of course, the song came to an end and the sauce started bubbling, so our perfect little moment became a past memory, but my happiness continued throughout the night. *God, I love this man.*

I was actually feeling like maybe things were going to be even better than before the monster came out. I was starting to believe in us again, and it felt really nice. It was after this moment, I decided to start wearing my ring again. I was going to be fully committed; no looking

back, no dreading on the past. Bygones were to be bygones, and I believed that was what God intended. *At least that's what Cameron told me to think.*



Ever since I was a little girl, I have had three goals in life:

1. Remain a virgin until marriage.
2. Never get a divorce.
3. Raise happy, healthy children who love Jesus.

Simple, I know, but those were the only three things I had ever truly wanted more than anything. In my mind, saving myself was a great way to obey God and show the highest respect to the man God created for me. Cameron obviously did not feel the same way. He had been with three girls already, but claimed not to have had the emotional connection he shared with me, with any of them. He said having sex would not just be a physical thing for him, but rather his way of expressing his deep love for me. I knew it was hard for him. He had respected my decision to wait for a long time, but then he grew impatient.

With things having gone so terribly wrong and then so wonderfully right in our relationship, we reached the highest emotional peak we had ever conquered. Cameron had now known what it was like to lose me, and I think it made him realize just how strong his feelings for me were. From my end, I had known a frightening side of Cam and I did not want to see it again, so I was incredibly vulnerable to wanting to make him happy out of fear of the repercussions. *He knew this.* I would try to please him more than I had before, not because I

wanted to, but because I noticed he would treat me differently if I did. He was nicer to me if we engaged in some sort of sexual act, but if we didn't, he was cold and would get mad at me easily. Because of this, I would try to do something out of my comfort zone at least once a week so I could check off the box on my "to-do" list and pray he would be nice to me for a few days. But of course, when you give an inch, there are many people who will take a mile, and Cameron went the distance to take even more away from me.

Although I denied it had happened for many months, Cameron took my virginity. This precious gift, one of my only goals in life, was soiled in the matter of minutes. The night it happened, I was just trying to fulfill my "duty" for the week, check off the box to ensure a few good days, but instead something happened without a plan, without previous discussion, without asking yes or no, and before I knew it, it was over. Cameron seemed happy, overjoyed even, but I was anything but. This precious moment I had built up in my mind ever since the time I found out what sex was, left me feeling nothing. I had imagined it being one of the greatest experiences of my young life, I imagined it would leave me feeling beautiful and loved, but instead it left me feeling sad and dirty.

After cleaning himself off, Cameron came back to my bed and laid beside me.

"That was amazing," he said with a smile, then he looked at me. "Are you okay? What's wrong?" I lost control and a flood of tears began pouring from my eyes. It was one of those loud, uncontrollable sobs that leaves you out of breath. *Now I'm just another number, now I am number four. God, please forgive me.* But I could not even forgive myself. I did not want it to

happen, but I didn't exactly stop it either. I felt as though I had shed my innocence and now I was left feeling naked and exposed.

"I'm sorry for crying," I said. I didn't want to hurt his feelings in all of this because I knew we were both to blame for what had happened. "This isn't what I wanted. I wanted to please God and now I have disappointed Him and myself. I just want to be a virgin. I want to be a virgin." I repeated it over and over. Cameron looked so sad. I hated what had happened, and I was mad at myself and at him for letting things go too far. *I should have said no, but I was afraid.*

"Well, you don't ever have to do it again," he said as he held me. "We made a mistake. It's okay, you're a virgin. We can just pretend this didn't happen. If I had known you would be this upset about it, I would have never allowed it to happen." *But what did you expect? You knew how important this was to me. You knew I wanted to wait.* I could no longer speak. I cried in Cam's arms for the next two hours as I tried to convince myself the earlier act had not happened. *Okay, this didn't happen. I'm still a virgin. I'm re-virginizing myself.* I loved Cameron, but I loved God more and to feel like I was disappointing Cameron with my crying was one thing, but to feel like I had disappointed God was a whole other story. I was devastated. All I could picture was a nail going through the hand of Christ, and I imagined I was the one holding the hammer that was driving Him into the cross.

Completely shaken up, Cameron and I finally decided to turn out the lights and go to sleep. He fell asleep first. His body twitched as it always did and I figured he must be dreaming.

I wished that I had been dreaming too, but you cannot wake up from a nightmare when your eyes are already wide open.

### ***Chapter 16: Chipping away, piece by piece***

*It starts off small  
 You give up one thing  
 Thinking that will be it  
 But once you surrender  
 One piece of yourself  
 It starts a landslide  
 Until your temple  
 Is nothing but  
 Rubble  
 The person you once knew  
 Is gone  
 And as you look in the mirror  
 You see a stranger.  
 He turned your diamonds  
 Into coal  
 And he drags your heart in a bag  
 Behind his feet.  
 He will not stop until he has  
 Isolated every piece of you  
 Until your pieces  
 Are no longer pieces at all  
 But rather dust  
 To be carried away in the wind.  
 Good bye.  
 Good bye.  
 Good bye.  
 To the soul I once knew.*

I once had to complete an online course regarding sexual harassment for a coaching job. As I went through the course, I remember being particularly intrigued by something they called “the grooming process.” The instructor talked about how this process is how the predator makes



the victim comfortable enough to accept the abuse while making her less comfortable to speak up about it. She talked about how the grooming process starts out fairly innocent with the predator isolating the victim and creating more of a friendship to establish trust, then small touching begins (shoulder rubs, inappropriate hugs, the touching of the face, etc.), and before the victim knows it, the behavior escalates. Another part of this grooming process is building trust between the predator and the victim's friends and family. This makes the victim feel like she might not be believed if she comes forward because her friends and family really like the predator. The predator reiterates this point. There is the idea of "no one will believe you if you tell," so the victim feels defeated before ever starting the battle.

Unbeknown to me, Cameron had been grooming me for quite sometime. He walked around the community with one personality - *the very personality that drew me in* - but behind closed doors, I began to see a completely different side of the man I loved.

I could not tell you when exactly the abuse became a regular part of my relationship because it came on slowly at first, then hit like a ton of bricks. I had given Cameron a second chance, despite the warnings of my friends and family, and now I felt stuck. I felt the need to forgive and forgive again, then I started questioning if what was happening was my fault.

There are things I don't remember clearly - *perhaps because I felt I had to forget them to survive* - but I do remember when Cameron first started to make me feel like I was not good enough. I had started losing weight as I worked out with Yvette. At the point where I had lost 12 pounds, Cam began calling me his "chunky monkey." *What did that make him? My "fatty patty"?* Up until this point, he had always praised my body as beautiful, even when I felt insecure about it, as any girl does. My weight loss had just been about me tightening up in effort

to make myself more confident. Cameron saw this and attacked. He knew how insecure I was about my body, so when he would come up behind me, lift my shirt, pat my belly and say there was “more of me to love,” he was quite obviously trying to tear me down.

I had been getting more positive attention from people since my weight-loss and I think it made him feel subordinate. It never mattered how many times I told him I loved him just the way he was - *let's face it, I'm a bit of a chub-chaser* - it was like he felt like he wasn't good enough and had to tear me down to his level.

Next, he decided he wanted to be more like his friends. Almost every guy in his close group of friends had cheated on their past girlfriends, were now single, partied all the time and were racist, sexist and/or homophobic. Somehow, Cameron was jealous of their lifestyles.

“Cameron, all of your friends are single for a reason,” I told him one night when he brought up wanting to be more like them. “There are things you just don't do when you're in a relationship versus when you're single. I'm not saying this about all of them, but there are several of them who are not good influences, so I don't know why you're saying you want to be more like them.” *Turned out, he was more like them than I knew.*

“You know, sometimes I just want to get rowdy with my brothers. If I'm going to be stupid, now is the time to do it. I'm not here for a long time, I'm here for a good time. You just don't like parties, so you make me feel like I can't go,” he said.

“That’s not true at all. Yes, parties aren’t really for me, though I have gone out of my comfort zone and gone to a few with you, so please don’t forget that,” I said. “But that’s not the point. No, I don’t really like parties because I’m not into that, but I know you do and that’s fine-”

“You don’t act like it’s fine because every time I go to one, you act upset,” he interrupted.

“It’s not about the party itself,” I argued. “It’s the fact that you tell me at the very last minute when we already have plans, so then I’m stuck unable to make plans with someone else most of the time. Then, you tell me you are having a ‘guys night’ and later I see a bunch of girls with y’all in your friends’ Snapchat stories.”

“I just leave out details, so what? Don’t you trust me?” he asked.

“Yes, of course I trust you aren’t going to cheat on me or anything,” I said. *Stupid girl.* “But it does seem suspicious when you lie to me when there is literally no reason to lie.” Cameron lied to me all the time. I had no idea why, but every time I would question him about his dishonesty (*normally over dumb things that definitely did not call for a lie*), he would flip it around on me.

“You just think too much. You’re emotional,” he said. *Right, because that is the go-to excuse a man uses when he has wronged a woman.* “I honestly don’t believe you have anxiety. You’re just hormonal and you blame it on being ‘anxious.’” *Ouch. That hurt most of all.* He

knew how badly I struggled with my anxiety, in fact, it was his weapon of choice when trying to manipulate me. *Yeah, a doctor would prescribe me medication I have to take every day for something that isn't there. Give me a break.* He had seen me have anxiety attacks first hand, so to imply I was faking it was unreal. Let me be clear, if he knew for one second what it felt like to have an anxiety attack, I can guarantee he would not be questioning the validity of those awful feelings.

I was weaker then, so it was situations like this which made me start to question my own sanity. *Is this all in my head? Is he telling the truth? I have proof he's lying, but maybe I'm just misunderstanding. Something must be wrong with me, right? He loves me, he would never hurt me.* The list went on and on. He told me if I couldn't tell him word for word what he said, then it didn't happen. *Was I crazy?* Eventually I realized it wasn't just me, it was the way Cameron viewed all women.

For a long time, I believed there was no way Cam could be sexist. He told me early on he loved his Gun-Gun more than anyone, but I began to realize there is a difference between love and respect. My realization Cam did not respect women came one day when he and I were watching Dexter. For those who have never seen the show, Dexter is a blood-spatter analyst during the day and a serial killer at night, though he only preys on bad guys to satisfy his need to kill without breaking his own moral code. In order to cover up his double-life, Dexter attempts to appear normal by marrying a woman named Rita. He really isn't someone capable of love, but he still cares for Rita quite a bit. *Caught up?* Well, here is where Cameron and I become relevant: there was an episode where Rita was pregnant and she got upset with Dexter because he did not come home from work that night (because he was out killing someone, though she doesn't know

that). *Perfectly reasonable grounds to become mad, right?* She “nags” Dexter and catches him in a lie, so she begins to feel very emotional (*raging pregnant hormones will do that to you*) and decides she’s not going to be as understanding as she has been in the past. Dexter, who does not feel emotion regularly, does not seem bothered by upsetting his pregnant wife. *And he wonders why she gets so mad?*

While all of this was happening, Cameron looked over at me and said, “What a bitch. If that was you talking to me like that, you’d get what was coming to you because I would not put up with that, hell no.”

“What are you talking about?” I asked. “She’s totally justified in being upset. Her husband literally didn’t come home that night and then lied about it. Plus, she’s pregnant. Of course her emotions are going to be heightened.”

“I wouldn’t care if you were pregnant or not, I’d call you out on being a bitch if you were being a bitch,” he said. “He’s the man, and he shouldn’t have some woman talking to him like that.” *Some woman? That woman is his WIFE. His PREGNANT wife.*

“Well how are you going to judge her for being emotional when you have no idea what it’s like to be in that position? A woman goes through a lot when she’s pregnant, and when you are married to a detached, lying, murderous man, those emotions are going to be amplified,” I said. At this point, I was no longer just talking about the show. “So you would yell at me and call me a bitch while I was pregnant?”

“If you’re acting like that, yes, I would,” he said. I was at a loss for words. This man to whom I planned on committing my life, was essentially telling me he would not be understanding of my feelings and emotions ever, not even when I’m pregnant. *How could he say these things? Why was he always so disrespectful?* I didn’t have answers to these questions, and that’s what made me afraid for my future.

A couple days later, Cameron showed his sexist cards even more. So often, he would talk about girls - mostly athletes at MSU, but also my friends (*you know, the friends I didn’t have*) - and call them things like “sluts,” “whores” and “easy.” I could no longer take it when he dragged my sister’s name into the mix, so I decided to tell him how his comments made me feel.

“Cameron, I don’t care if that’s how you feel, but please stop talking about these girls, especially Elyssa, in that way,” I said. “I don’t like to hear it because it’s not fair. You’re over here insulting all of them for private choices they make, but whenever one of your guy friends sleeps around with half the school, he’s praised for it. It’s such a double standard and it makes me uncomfortable to sit here and listen to you talk about them that way.”

“It’s not a double standard,” he laughed. “It’s just how it is. Think about it like this: A lock that can be unlocked by any key is a useless lock, but a key that can open any lock is a master key. You get what I’m saying, right?” Once more, I was speechless. Like I had started doing during most of our conversations like this one, I didn’t respond. *Why should I? Everything I say is disregarded anyway, so what’s the point?*

I stopped trying to fight back on much of anything because he had convinced me everything was my fault. If I wore something attractive, I was made to feel like a slut because he told me I couldn't wear things that would attract other guys. He became increasingly more jealous of me spending time with other people even though he was starting to go out with his friends more. I felt like I had to stop working out with Yvette because he would yell at me for not being done by the time he got off work. The worst was when my mom surprised me and came to visit me for a week. He did not like when she was there because that meant he got less of my attention and that was unacceptable. I would receive rude messages throughout the day and even when I would invite him to go do things with us, he would pout the entire time. I felt like no matter what I did, I could not please him.

Many nights, he would get really angry over things that did not seem like a big deal to me. I remember one time I turned up the radio "too loudly" and it ended with him screaming at me in my bedroom. He would call me names, horrible names, and I would just sit there and take it. It got to the point where I would be so afraid of him, I would end up locking myself in the bathroom. I did this because as I would cry in front of him, he would get right up in my face and laugh a condescending laugh just to belittle my feelings. As I laid in a ball on the bathroom floor, I would hug my knees and wish it would all go away. As hard as I tried to block-out his screaming, I would hear him yelling things like "you're unbelievably worthless," "you're an idiot," and "you're delusional," among other profanities and insults. Through my tears, I would pick a spot on the ground and I would stare at that spot for the hours this would go on. I can remember thinking, "is this what my life is going to be like from now on?" *It was the most hopeless I have ever felt.*

I kept my anxiety medication in the bathroom, and on several occasions, the thought of swallowing a handful of pills crossed my mind. *I could make this go away in just minutes. He can't hurt me if I'm no longer here.* Even now looking back, it is hard for me to think about these times. I cannot believe I let him make me feel so low that the thought of suicide seemed to be a reasonable option to escape. *Ironic, isn't it? The girl who four people have come to contemplating suicide was in a position of contemplation herself.*

When the yelling had finally died down and my tears had run out, I would feel so exhausted, I just wanted to sleep, so I would open the door and crawl into bed. Typically, Cameron was already in bed, staring at his phone. Most of the time, it would be around 1:00 or 2:00 in the morning and I was so drained, I could hardly think. I didn't want Cameron in my bed, but I was too afraid to say anything, so I would pretend I was alone. I would try to imagine he wasn't there, but he would make that difficult when he would roll over and wrap his arms around me. He would kiss my head and say, "Now why did you have to do that? I don't know why you're upset. I was never mad, I was never yelling. If you think I was mad, that's on you. I was never mad." *What? Had all that had happened been in my head? The sinking in my chest would certainly say otherwise.* It was purely mind games. I could have said "I have ten fingers," and he would have told me I was lying, and I would have believed him.

He had me totally under his spell and even though I knew I was in a bad situation, I was too in love with him to recognize his behavior as abusive; however, I was quicker to recognize the verbal and emotional abuse for the ugly monster it was than I was to recognize the sexual abuse. That took me several months to come to terms with, even after we had broken up.



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I think when you are dating someone, it makes you feel more obligated to participate in sexual acts, even if it is against your will. I know that's exactly how I felt. When the sexual abuse started occurring, I did not recognize it as rape because, how can your boyfriend rape you? I never thought of rape as being something that occurred between two people who loved each other. *Rape. I hate that word. It is still incredibly difficult for me to say, especially when talking about how it happened to me.* I think it took me a while to call it what it was because Cameron had me believing there was no such thing as rape. On several occasions he described rape as merely "the slutty woman's shameful excuse to make herself feel better about opening her legs." *Did that make me a slut, not a rape victim?*

Cameron would constantly say I belonged to him, I was "his." He said my body belonged to him, he said my body was "his." I guess that's what made him think it was okay to penetrate me even when I told him "no." After our first time, I was devastated and he knew I never wanted it to happen again until we were married. *What if I married this monster?* That's not what he wanted, so he first taunted me with his words. He said I was worthless to him because I wasn't fulfilling my duty as his girlfriend. He suggested I allow him to have sex with other girls in order to for him to "get the pleasing he deserved." *Regardless, I stayed with him. I could not leave the one I loved, even at the expense of no longer loving myself.*

Eventually, he saw his words were not enough to convince me to have sex with him, so he began to force himself on me. Like I mentioned before, I would still do sexual things with him in order to keep him from yelling at me or treating me like I meant nothing, but I had my hard

line drawn. I did not want to go all the way, but he did, so like always, what I wanted didn't matter. He would get on top of me and pull off his underwear. *Oh no.* "This is too far," I would say. "I can't do this. I don't want to do this. No." It was as if my voice was lost to his aggression, and he would penetrate me, despite my begging. *As he filled me, I felt empty.*

Sometimes, he would stop after a few times of me pleading for it to be done. Sometimes, he kept going until completion. *I guess it just depended on how generous he was feeling that day.* Either way, when it was over, Cameron would wrap his arms around me, say "I love you" and go to sleep. *Is this love?* I did not have such an easy time resting peacefully. Instead, I would stare at the wall and wait until I knew Cameron was asleep before I would allow myself to exhale and cry. I can remember trying to control my breathing so it wasn't too heavy. His hands were locked around my stomach, so I did not want to wake him by breathing too intensely.

When we first started dating, I would have never thought my mild-mannered, kind fella would be capable of such horrific acts. So much had gone wrong in the past few months, I did not know what to make of it all. I never thought Cameron would hurt me, but he hurt me in some form every day. Part of me feared he would begin hitting me eventually, Lord knows I wouldn't be able to stop him if he did. He had hit his dad and knocked him out cold when he was home for Spring Break. Apparently, they were both drunk and his dad got "out of line," and the result was terrible. I couldn't help but think: if he could hit his own father, what could he do to me?

He had me right where he wanted me. He knew between the ring, the display of affection on social media, his "good" reputation in the public eye and taking my virginity, I felt trapped in the relationship. The man I fell in love with was gone, and I was beginning to feel numb in regards to my future. The girl I once knew who always saw sunshine, now only saw rain. *Rain,*

rain go away. Sorrow was my defining emotion. That is when I realized I needed to find a way out of this storm, but I had to be careful.

Chapter 17: My Chains Are Gone

*I didn't even want a relationship
I was happy on my own
But you just kept insisting
And you made my heart your home*

*You knew who I was from the beginning
I never lied, I never pretended
But when you faced those realities
You decided I must be ended*

*The changes I make and the things I request
Are simply done out of love
But you took my fears and used them against me
Instead of choosing to rise above*

*You made me several promises
Not many did you keep
It is because of those broken promises
That I lay here and weep*

*But I wish to be hurt no more
I wish to no longer cry
So now I will pack my things and go
Farewell, adieu, goodbye*

I left Wichita Falls at the end of June after completing the first of my two summer internships. For the second half of the summer, I would be home with my family and that was a relief. *I would be safe.* For nearly two months, I would be away from Cameron, so I knew if I was going to break away from his hold, now would likely be the best opportunity I would get.

Here, he couldn't hurt me. Here, he couldn't come banging on my door in a rage in the middle of the night. Here, my family could protect me.

The thing about breaking up with an abusive boyfriend with a major ego is you have to make him believe he has control at all times. Cam had to think he was making this decision, so I ever so subtly started creating a distance between the two of us. Before things got bad, we would talk almost every night, either through the phone or on FaceTime, but I started finding reasons not to call. As far as texting, I started taking longer than normal to respond. Next, I changed my hair into a sassier, sexier look, and started wearing whatever I pleased (and posted pictures of my new-found confidence). *He hated seeing me doing good without him.* I had to make him feel like I was starting to slip away. I knew if he felt me leaving, he would get angry and do something stupid. I needed him to do something stupid. I needed an excuse to start up a conversation about breaking up. Lucky for me, Cameron fell right into my trap, and within just a few weeks, he gave me an opening.

I was scheduled to have an abdominal hernia repaired on July 13th and Cam made plans to come see me right after my surgery. *Oh joy.* I acted like I was looking forward to seeing him, not because I truly wanted to see him, but rather because maybe we could finally end things face-to-face. I prayed God would give me a sign this was the right decision. *He did.*

To my disappointment, the breakup appeared to have been prolonged when Cameron texted me the day of my surgery and said he was sick and wasn't going to make it to see me because he didn't want me to catch what he had. *How thoughtful.* Turned out, he wasn't too sick to go out drinking and partying with his friends that same night he was supposed to be visiting me. *My prince.* Naturally, Cameron didn't tell me he was at a party, I had to see it on his friends'

Snapchat stories. In fact, he barely texted me at all that night. *Ahh, and here is my opening.* I went to sleep that night knowing I could do what had to be done tomorrow when I woke up.



“Good morning,” Cameron texted. It was 11:16.

“Good morning,” I responded, but there was nothing good about it. I was pissed. He had lied to me for the last time. *Or so I thought.*

“How'd you sleep?” he asked.

“I slept fine, what about you?” I responded.

“I slept good,” he said. *I'm sure you did.* “The curtains make it so much darker in my room.”

“Yeah, they should help a lot,” I said. I was being so short with him.

“For sure,” he said. *Wow. Riveting conversation.*

“How was your night?” I asked. *Must have been fun since you went out even though you were “sick.”*

“Kind of boring honestly. Didn't really do much,” he said. *Ha!* “What about you?”

“My night could have been better,” I said. I wanted him to know I was not happy.

“Yeah I know,” he said. *Of course you know; you're the one who made it suck, yet again.*

“Yep, definitely could have been better,” I said, driving my point home. I was so frustrated, I did not want to talk to him. I wanted to be done. I asked for a sign and God had given it to me. I needed to drive the conversation toward breaking up.

“Okay I get it,” he responded. *Yeah, I'm sure you do, asshole.*

“Do you though? Do you listen when I talk? Because you literally turned around and didn't text me back for an hour the night after I just said something to you about not texting me back,” I sent. *It was true, we had just had this conversation a solid 24 hours earlier. I was trying to push him away.*

“I'm sorry. I just lose track of time and get side tracked,” he said.

“And I understand that happens sometimes, but last night was different... things feel different. I feel like you want out. That's how you're making me feel, and you haven't done or said anything to make me believe otherwise,” I replied. *Plant the seed in his mind.*

“I don't know what I want. I've just realized some things since you've been gone,” Cameron sent. *Yeah, same.*

“If you don't know if you want to be with me, then you shouldn't be with me,” I said. *Let's get the ball rolling.*

“I would just need some changes,” he said. *You can't fix what is broken.*

“I don't know what you need changed because I've already made a lot of changes,” I said. I had compromised so much of myself to be with him and I was done. I had lost sight of who I was and who I wanted to be, and I could no longer take his abuse.

“So have I, but that's the thing. We shouldn't need to change to be together. We should be able to be who we want to be,” he said. *At first, you made good changes: broke bad habits, improved your grades, got closer to God. But then you changed into someone I did not agree to date. You changed into a monster.*

“So do you not want to be with me anymore?” I asked. *Say yes and make this easier.*

“If you have to change who you are to be with someone it's a long life,” he said. *Tell me about it, it's been a long year and a half.*

“It's yes or no,” I said. *Say yes.*

“I just love you so much though,” he texted. *You do not hurt someone you love.*

“But you don't want to be with me,” I said, continuing to nurture the seed I had already planted.

“I do,” he said. *Dammit.* “But the fact I can't fully be myself without you having some problems with it isn't right either.” *I have problems with you making sexist, homophobic and racist comments; I have problems with you dipping because I had a family friend who died young from throat cancer; I have problems with you treating me like I am an object and not bothering to ever take my feelings into consideration, but please, go on.*

“Fully being yourself means being wild and partying a lot, right? So if that's your priority over being with me, then that's what you should do,” I responded. *Why is he not taking a hint?*

“This is exactly what I'm talking about. Partying shouldn't mean I can't be with you. This is literally the issue,” he said. *No, it's just my excuse to get out of this relationship.*

“No, that's what you're telling me essentially,” I said. I had to put this back on him. He had to believe this was his decision. “I'm not saying I wouldn't be with you because you party, you're saying you can't be yourself with me because you party.”

“No I can't be myself because I know that you don't like stuff that I do such as party, drink and dip,” he said. *Just because I don't party does not mean I have an issue with you partying - how many times have we been over this?* “These are all things I enjoy doing and have always done, and those are all things you don't tolerate too well.” *I don't tolerate you always lying about those things, not the acts themselves.*

“Okay, so like I said before, if doing those things is more important to you than being with me, then that's the issue,” I said. I needed him to stop beating around the bush. “You need to let me know what you want right now because I feel like you're done.” *No, I'm done and I'm trying to make you feel like you are as well so you won't hurt me anymore.*

“I never said they were, but they are all things I should feel comfortable doing whenever I want for the next year and a half, and you don't make me feel like it's okay to do those things,” he said.

“I don't think they're good lifestyle habits, but I don't think they're always bad and I feel like I have been way more understanding of that lately,” I said. Cam's insecurities always made

him feel incompetent which resulted in him blaming me. “What I think is you've been around all of your single friends, and you've seen them get wild and you're jealous of their freedom and you've enjoyed your time without me. That's what I think.” *Water the seed, feed the seed.*

“But it's just that fact I know you're putting up a front and acting like it's okay,” he responded. *No, you're just insecure. But also yes because I don't want you to follow in your father's footsteps and be in your forties staying out until 3 a.m. and coming home to a worried wife, drunk out of your damn mind. No thanks.*

“At least I'm trying,” I said simply. I wasn't going to try to explain myself because I had no desire to save our relationship.

“Do you want to know the truth? I have been hanging out with my single friends, and I have had a great time and met new amazing people who I would have never met if it wasn't for partying and hanging out,” he said. *One of those people he met would be his next girlfriend, but I'll get to that.* “And I just think of all the times when we sit in your room on a Saturday night doing nothing because we can't find anything fun to do in Wichita that is PG rated when there's literally 10 different social functions going on.” *Go ahead and act like an asshole again, I'm used to it.*

“Cameron, do you want to be single?” I asked. *God knows I do.*

“It's just tough for me right now. I need time to figure out what I want because when I'm with you I'm with the person I love most, but there are times when I want to get wild and you're just not about that,” he texted. “But I also know that single life and going out too much isn't what I want either. We're just trying to change each other and that's not good at all.”

“That's not fair to me,” I said. *Nope.* “You're literally trying to choose between me and partying. The fact that you even have to think about it lets me know that this is over.” *It was over for me back on that awful night in February.*

“It's not just about partying. It's about spending more time with my brothers,” he said. *Hmm, funny - blame not spending time with your friends on me when you literally choose to spend all of your time with me even when I suggested we spend more time around your friends, but you said “no because they're all pieces of shit.”* “It's about doing what I want or saying what I want to say without having to think of the consequences from you, but I hate to make this your fault because it's not. I've just had a lot of time to think and realized some real things.” *By consequences from me, did he mean the tears when he screamed at me, or the silence as I was afraid to speak up? He said he wasn't, but he was making me feel at fault.*

“You're not good about letting me know where you are or what you're doing or texting me back for hours, but if this is what you want, I will respect it and let you go,” I said. *I let him go long before then.*

“And that's not right of me and I know that.” *Admission of fault? What is life?*

“Can we please wait to tell people?” I said, making the break unofficially official. I wanted to wait because I knew everyone would be shocked. No one knew the hell I had been through for the past few months, so this would seem to come out of the blue to my friends and family. Plus, telling them about the breakup would mean I would have to explain everything else, and I was not sure I was ready to share everything. I was ashamed I had put up with it for so long.

“I just don't even know what I want. I love you so much but I can't hide back the real me anymore. It just feels like I have this animal in a cage all the time that's just rattling to break out,” he said. *Yeah, I have seen the animal in you come out many times. I have been trapped in the cage with you.*

“Then let him free. I can't be with you anymore. I can't be with someone who has to take time to choose between me and partying,” I said, continuing to diffuse the blame away from him.

“I've already told you it's not just about that,” he said. *This was taking too long.*

“Well if you can't be yourself with me, you shouldn't be with me,” I said. *Let's hurry this up. I was so close.*

“And that's the hard part... because you are an amazing person,” he said. “But we don't see eye to eye on everything I would like.” *We don't see eye to eye because you look down on me.*

“Okay, then it's done,” I said.

“I'll always love you and I would love to remain friends and stay in touch,” he said. *No.*
“I'll have to get some things when you get back.”

“You can text Emily and go get your things,” I said. I had no interest in ever seeing him again.

“Is your room locked?” he asked.

“No,” I said.

“Okay,” he said, and that was it. I was finally free, but as much as I did not want to admit it, part of me still felt sad. Cameron did not seem to share the same feeling. Four hours after we broke up, he posted a picture on Twitter of him and another girl from the party the night before. *That other girl would turn out to be his next girlfriend and the girl centered at the root of the question if Cameron had cheated on me, but I'll get to that later.*



A loss is a loss in any form, and even though losing Cameron was a good loss, I still felt a sting inside my heart. I had loved this guy, I still loved him in a twisted way. Perhaps I was more in love with the idea of him: the man I first fell in love with, the ring, the idea of “forever,” but now I realized I was holding onto a dream that had long ago faded away. I still believed in forever, but I had given up on forever with Cameron. When we first fell in love, I was happy. *There could be a more beautiful, Shakespearean way to word that, but to get to the point, happy is how I felt.* My smile was genuine, my heart was full, my hope was endless, but that all changed when Cameron showed me his dark monster. The past few months had left me feeling like the shell of a person. *Hollow. Drained. Hopeless.*

This breakup was very different than my last. I had loved Nick more than I had ever loved Cameron, even when things were at their best, so when Nick said goodbye, I didn't want to let go. This time, letting go was all I wanted. Nick broke my heart, but Cameron broke me. He had left me feeling like damaged goods. *How could I ever let someone in again after the things he had done to me? After the things he had said? After how he turned around and twisted everything I had ever told him?* I was worried I was too far gone to love again, at least for a while, but I was okay with taking a break. *Lord knows I needed one.* The tough part about keeping my struggles a secret was I now had to explain everything to the people closest to me in my life. This would come as a shock, I was aware of that, but I wasn't sure if I was ready to disclose everything. In my mind, the second I said everything out loud, it became real, and I questioned if I was ready for all of it to be real yet. If it were real, that would mean I'd have to

face it and deal with it, and for the girl who had suppressed so much for so long, this wasn't an easy task.

After many hours had passed that day, I finally walked into the living room where my parents were sitting, watching TV. With tears in my eyes, I moved slowly toward them, partly because of the pain I was feeling from my surgery and partly because of the pain I was feeling in my heart.

"What's wrong, Pussycat?" Mom asked.

"Umm, well," I said with a knot in my throat. "Cameron and I broke up."

"What?" my dad asked, sounding incredibly surprised.

"When?" my mom chimed in, sounding equally shocked.

"This morning," I answered as I sat down next to Mom on the couch. I buried my face in her shoulder as I began to lose my composure. *They're going to start asking why soon, and I'm not ready for that.*

Dad got up from his recliner and sat on the other side of me on the sofa. He rubbed my arm and patted my back as I continued to shield my face against Mom. "Well I'm sorry, Doll," he said.

“Sometimes these things just happen, and sometimes all you need is a little break from someone,” Mom said. “Who knows, you both might have gotten a little emotional and made a quick decision. It could still work out.” *Oh no, she really has no idea.* “You’ll be home for the next month, and maybe when you get back, you can go talk to him.”

I lifted my head from her shoulder. *Here is my opening.* “I don’t want to see him again,” I said. “I want this to be it for us. I’ve wanted it to be over for a while.”

“That’s okay, Doll,” Dad said. I was surprised he wasn’t asking questions, but I guess he was more concerned with comforting me in that moment. “You were always too damn good looking for him anyway. You know we liked Cameron, but good grief he was ugly and kind of a dumb ass too. He’d talk about bench pressing 400 pounds, bullshit! There is no way that kid was lifting that kind of weight with those noodle arms of his. See, that was my reason right there not to trust him.” We all laughed. *Leave it to Dad to lighten the mood.*

“John!” Mom scolded. “She probably doesn’t want to hear that right now,” she chuckled.

“No, I do,” I joked. “Keep ‘em coming.” We all sat there for about 20 minutes before Elyssa walked through the room, then we had to go through the whole process again, except this time Elyssa asked why. *I couldn’t bring myself to tell them everything just yet.*

“We just have different priorities,” I said. “He wants to party and mess around with other people, and that isn’t what I want.” By “messing around with other people,” I was referring to Cameron’s suggestion that he have sex with other girls while we dated. For now, I was going to leave the reason for our breakup at that. Talking about the abuse was just too hard, and because, for some gut-wrenching reason, I still loved Cameron. *In some way, I found peace in his violence.* I was not ready for my family to hate him yet; however, he would end up causing me to come face-to-face with my problems just a few days later.

Chapter 18: The Darkest Hour

*Creeping shadow in the night
Take me now
Take me away
You leave me with fear, you leave me with fright
I’d rather die
Than be led astray*

From the second we called it quits, I immediately felt a huge burden lifted from my shoulders. I shed the skin of who he made me become and emerged as, well, the me God had created. I hadn’t realized how much of myself I had lost during that relationship, but I had lost so much, even in the good times. I hadn’t noticed it before, but I had stopped writing when I was with Cam. Writing had always been a huge part of my identity; it was something I loved, it was something I was good at, it was something that made me *me*. *Poems were my favorite.* I found them to be beautiful in their way of being simple in structure, yet complex in meaning.

Most of my poems were about God, and as strange as it sounds, many times I felt as though I was not the one writing them. It was as if God would take control of my hand and guide the

words into existence. Sometimes, I would have to go back and read the poem once it was done because I had no recollection of what I had just written, and that's why I felt like God would talk to me through my writing. It's always been my favorite gift from Him, yet I had allowed it to slip away at a time when I needed it - needed Him - most.

Because I was unable to talk about what I had gone through, I began writing instead. It was my way of dealing with it all without actually having to discuss it with anyone else. As far as the verbal and emotional abuse were concerned, I had come to terms with how badly that had gotten; however, I could not bring myself to come to terms with the sexual abuse. It was one of those things that no matter how bad it was, I could not accept it had happened. In my mind, it was never supposed to happen to me. *But then again, it should never happen to anybody.* My denial of the events prevented me from even being able to write about them, but at least I was making small steps in the right direction. Of course, any time I tried to do anything on my own, it seemed as though Cameron had to come along and shove me in the direction he wanted me to go.

I think he saw me slipping through his fingers; for the first time in many months, he realized he no longer had control and that infuriated him. I should have known when I posted two pictures of myself on Twitter five days after our breakup with the caption "Living by my own rules," there would be backlash. *How could he not be infuriated? He had been making the rules for far too long now, and God forbid I dictate my own life.* With me being newly single, people - particularly guys - took notice and gave me some attention. The pictures received a lot of support from my group of friends, some acquaintances and even a few people whose support surprised me. One of these people was a girl I went to high school with named Kristina Bolden.

Let me start off by saying Kristina is a pathological liar who thrives off of creating drama. I

first met Kristina when we were in junior high. She was friends with my sister, but after seeing the way she would lie about everything (*and I mean everything; homegirl would sit at lunch and say she was eating a peanut butter and jelly sandwich when we could all see she was eating turkey*), my parents told my sister she was no longer welcome in our house because she was not a good influence. *You don't say.*

Anyway, Kristina decided to quote my tweet and say “Damn, look at Kelsey stuntin’ on her ex.” It really wasn’t all that bad and I did appreciate her support, but I was not about to retweet it and make it seem like I had posted the pictures to “get back at” Cameron. *Hell no.* I had posted the pictures because I was finally free and feeling confident again. There was no need to “stunt” on my ex because, quite frankly, I was utterly done with him. All I did was like her tweet to say thank you, then I started getting ready to go out that night.

Elyssa and Brianna had convinced me it would be a good idea to go dance and let loose a little after a tough week, so even though I knew I was not really in the mood, I went anyway. *Maybe it would be fun.* Either way, I knew it would be nice to not have to worry about my troubles for a while. *Ha! I thought.* After styling my hair and touching up my makeup, I went back to my room where I had left my phone on the charger. Cameron was calling. *What the hell?* I didn’t answer. When the screen no longer had his picture blown up and the call ended, I was greeted by numerous notifications from Cameron, mostly threatening, nasty messages. *Why is he reacting like this?*

“Get that white trash bitch out of my notifications or I’ll expose you. I don’t give a fuck about you anymore, so you don’t want to test me,” he sent, among many other nasty messages

attacking my character, my friends and my sister. *What are you going to “expose?” Please tell me, I’d love to know.*

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” I responded. I didn’t know what he was referring to. At that point, the idea he could be talking about Kristina had not even crossed my mind. When I opened Twitter to figure it out, I had notifications that Cameron and many of his friends had retweeted Kristina’s tweet and were mocking me. *Oh gosh.*

“I just saw. I’m not friends with her, I don’t know what’s wrong with her. I’ve tried texting and calling. I’ll get her to take everything down,” I sent to Cam.

I sent Kristina a message and asked her to please take down her tweet and not respond to anything they were saying so they would stop harassing me. At first, she refused because she said I didn’t deserve to be talked about, but I told her it didn’t matter, just please take the tweets down. *I didn’t want drama.* She eventually did, but not before stirring the pot even more. I could not bring myself to read the things that were being said. I had no interest in being a part of any drama, so I chose to rise above the pettiness.

“This is bullshit, you’re a bitch. That piece of white trash Alvin whore is over here saying shit about me calling me an asshole and I’ve literally done nothing to you. I haven’t said anything on social media, but I won’t hesitate to put everything out there. Control your friends. You want to get ugly, I can get ugly,” he said. *Again, you don’t have anything negative about me*

that you could say. I had never said anything negative about him or to him for the purpose of never giving him anything to work with in case he ever threatened me, just as he was doing now.

“I have no part in this. I haven't talked to Kristina since high school and I barely spoke to her then,” I said. *Why did I even have to explain myself? I wasn't involved in anything.* At this point, I put away my phone for a little bit and rode into Houston with my friends. I was determined to have a good time and dance away my worries, but I was naive to think Cam's words and threats were not going to keep me from being able to do that.

I opened my phone to find a series of messages calling me ugly names, threatening me and ending with, “Just stop talking shit about me and leave me alone.” *Funny, you're the one who is blowing up my phone, yet I'm the one who needs to leave you alone.* I shouldn't have texted him back. It was obvious he was out drinking and probably saying things he didn't mean, but I wasn't ready to settle in taking all of his accusations when I had done nothing wrong.

“I have said nothing. Just stop threatening me,” I said.

“That's fine, but don't try to play a game you will never win. Just leave me alone. Y'all can run y'all's mouths to whoever y'all want, but the minute it goes viral and my name gets brought up in front of everyone, it will get ugly. Don't throw rocks in the cave because the bear will come out,” he texted. *What is wrong with him?* I literally had not said one thing about him on social

media. *I posted a picture of myself! That was it!* He was just embarrassed because he realized I looked better off without him, and anytime he got embarrassed, the ugly came out.

I could not keep it together any longer. In the middle of the club, after only being there for about 45 minutes, I asked my sister and friends if we could leave. I could feel myself falling into my dark place where anxiety took over all of my senses and I became out of control of what I think and feel. It was time to go before I had an attack in front of all of these people.

When we got in the car, I texted Cameron back in an attempt to drill some logic into his head. *I should have known nothing could be done to help someone who is so terrible. How could I defend myself against someone who already had his mind made up?*

“Do not threaten me. You’re better than this, Cam. You know me better than this and you know I haven’t done anything. If you can send me one negative thing I have posted about you, do it. You know me, you know I couldn’t put anything out there because as much as I don’t want to, I still love you. I’ve never done anything to hurt you and I’m still not trying to. Please believe me. You just get so blinded when you’re angry and it doesn’t matter what I say, you don’t believe me,” I texted. I don’t know why I cared so much. I should have known he only wanted to hurt me at this point.

“You’re a fucking crazy bitch,” he texted. “I’m happier than I have ever been now that we’re done and I don’t need you. You and your petty friends can go live your sad lives and be a corpse for all that I care. This breakup is the best thing to ever happen to me -.” I stopped reading there. I could no longer put myself in the position to be torn down again. *He only knew how to*

hurt me; it was the only way he knew how to love me. He wasn't happy like he said he was, otherwise he would not have been concerning himself with me or my picture. He was miserable, but as he always did, Cameron had to maintain a certain "cool guy" appearance, even at my expense. As the anxiety attack rushed over me like a tidal wave, I made a decision to block Cam's number so he could no longer hurt me with his words. I had to control something in a moment where everything felt very much so out of my control.



That night was like nothing I have ever experienced. The entire ride home was filled with me being unable to catch my breath. The panic within me was like no other I had ever experienced before - *and I had experienced some bad attacks.* This one had come on like a thief in the night, swiftly and without me expecting it. I thought my dark monster was gone, but his words, his threats, his anger all took me back to those nights laying in a ball on the bathroom floor. Everything he did, everything he said was like a kick to the stomach, taking away my ability to inhale or exhale, or really do much of anything at all. I felt stuck. Unable to move. Unable to think. The tears pouring down my face showed no mercy as they carved a black path down my once-perfect foundation. It was as though the chains I thought I had shed had really been tightened. I thought I was strong, I thought I was fine, but this moment was showing me otherwise. He still controlled me. He still lived in the valleys of my mind, whispering words of hate and disgust any time I showed signs of happiness. As much as I did not want to be, I was

dependent on Cameron. He told me I was nothing without him, and here I was, without him, feeling like nothing.

Brianna held my hand as I looked out the window at the passing lights. The city was alive, but I was dead inside. My stomach turned and I convulsed as I replayed his haunting words in my mind. *This man is going to hurt me. This man has already hurt me.* I wish blocking memories was as easy as blocking a number, but life is not that simple. His war cry was on repeat in my head, and with every word, I sunk deeper and deeper. My seat felt as though it was swallowing me whole. It was just me and the night sky and my ghost, but suddenly my thoughts were interrupted.

“Just breathe, Bee,” Brianna said softly. *We call each other Bee. It started as “bae,” but then we decided that was too basic, so we went with the name of a black and yellow insect instead.* “Shhh, it’s going to be okay.” She rubbed my hand.

My anxiety prevented me from forming the words to respond, so instead, I laid my head in her lap. She stroked my hair.

“You’re going to be okay, Bee, but you have to breathe,” she said. I love my best friend dearly, but I don’t think she could begin to understand what was happening to me. The thing with anxiety is, you know what you’re *supposed* to do and how you’re *supposed* to react, but it doesn’t matter; it doesn’t matter one bit. I knew I was freaking out, I knew I needed to focus on my breathing, but my dark monster wouldn’t allow it. No matter what I did, I could not overcome this attack. I just needed to get through it; it would be over soon. *I was wrong.*

When we got back to my house, I walked ahead of everyone else. I just needed to get to the bathroom. For some reason, the bathroom felt safe to me. It was where I went to escape Cameron's terror, and perhaps it would be the place where I could resolve this feeling of being overwhelmed. I took down the hanging bathmat from the shower and placed it on the floor so I could sit on something other than the icy tile. It only took about a minute before Brianna came knocking on the door. I had left it unlocked, so she gently turned the knob and walked in with compassion in her eyes as she saw me sitting there cradling my knees.

"It's going to be okay, Bee. You're going to be okay," she said. "You're so strong, you'll get through this." I erupted into an even louder cry.

"I'm not strong," I cried. "Everyone always tells me that, but it's not true! If only you knew the things that have crossed my mind. I am weak! I am nothing! I allowed Cameron to make me feel like I was worthless for months, and I never even spoke up! I just sat there and took it!" I was shouting now. All of my sadness and anger and frustration and hurt and bitterness were pouring out of me like a pot boiling over. "He made me feel so small every single day! Every day! And I stayed with him because I was too afraid to leave! That isn't what someone who is strong does!"

Bri's eyes were filled with tears as she looked at me in complete horror of what she was hearing.

“I told y’all the abuse stopped after the first time, but it didn’t! It didn’t stop! It just got worse and I was too embarrassed to say anything because I wanted y’all to love him like I did! I believed he would change! That is not something a strong woman believes! You have no idea what I went through! You have no idea how many nights I ended up locking myself in the bathroom, sitting there wondering how much more I could take! I would see my pill bottle, and think about how I could just take a handful and end it all! That is not something a strong woman does! So stop calling me strong! I am not strong! I am weak. I am weak. I am...” My voice trailed off. I could no longer speak. Brianna looked sick, disgusted almost, with tears flowing down her cheeks. My words hurt her because she saw the hurt in me. She had no idea any of that had gone down, so I knew this would shock her. I probably shouldn’t have dropped the ball like that, but it was an act of pure emotion. I was a wreck and she was there. *She’s always been there.*

At first, she turned away, looking out of the doorway into the hall. I could see she was wiping the tears from her face and trying to gather herself before facing me again. I leaned my head against the shower door and continued to breathe uncontrollably. *Oh no, I’ve dragged her into my mess.* Bri turned back around, crawled onto the floor and hugged me tightly. Looking me in the eyes, she said, “I am so sorry. I don’t know what to say other than he is disgusting and no one should ever have to go through that, but you *are* strong, Bee. I need you to believe that. You are strong because even though it did take you some time, you walked away. You got out, and now you never have to see him again.” I hoped she was right. I didn’t want to ever see him or hear from him again. Cameron destroyed me, even from 400 miles away.

“Let’s get some sleep, okay?” she said gently. She helped me off the ground and onto the closed toilet seat. My body was shaking, something I had never experienced before. The uncontrollable breathing and crying were always a given when having an anxiety attack, but I had never shook and convulsed like I was now. It was as if I was in a tormented state, like an earthquake was rattling me to my core. I felt like a child as she lifted my arms and helped me change my clothes. My arms trembled as she guided each one through the arm holes, left then right. I could tell it pained her to watch me suffer so.

Next, she helped me wash off my makeup. *At least the rest of my makeup that had yet to be cried away.* She took the wash cloth and made soft circles around my face, attempting to dry the tears that were still pouring from my eyes. Her kindness only made me cry more. *This is what love is, this is what love looks like.* Cameron had painted a dark image of love in my mind, but here was my best friend, painting a different picture of a love that has never failed me.

We had been through so much together over the years, but it was really after the unexpected loss of Brianna’s father when we were in eighth grade that sealed our fate as friends forever. When her dad died, I went to the funeral and sat with Bri the entire time, holding her hand through her lowest moment. Now, here she was holding my hand during mine. At a moment where I felt more worthless than I had ever felt before, Brianna reminded me why life was worth living.

Once I was all ready for bed, Bri led me into my room, tucked the blankets around my body and laid beside me. I was still in a complete panic. Anyone else would have gotten impatient with me, but not Brianna. Her patience is without limits, so there she laid. Pulling me close. Stroking my hair. Holding my hand.

“Shhhh,” she kept saying gently. “Just breathe, shhh.” As hard as I tried, I was unable to calm down because my mind and my body were failing me as they had done so many times before.

“I feel so out of control,” I said through heavy breaths. “I’m sorry you’re having to deal with this, I never wanted anyone else to get hurt because of what happened to me. I wanted to just deal with it on my own, but obviously I haven’t been very successful with that.”

“Shhh,” she responded. “As long as we are both on this earth, you will never be alone.”

This is love. I am not alone.

“I love you, Bee,” was all I could muffle out.

“I love you too, Bee. Try to sleep, try to sleep.”

I tried to rest, but my panic lasted long into the night. Eventually, Bri fell asleep on my shoulder, and around 3 a.m. I decided I needed to talk to the only person in my life who could understand how I felt in that moment: my dad.

I tiptoed into his room and gave him a gentle nudge.

“Daddy,” I said quietly. “I need you.” To my surprise, my dad did not wake up in the daze I expected, but instead answered with “Okay, Doll,” and rolled out of bed. I felt like a little girl again, waking him after I’d had a bad dream.

We went into the living room and sat on the couch where I leaned on him, physically and emotionally. I told him about some of the things I had been through over the past few months, but nowhere near everything, and I certainly made no mention of the sexual abuse. *I was still in denial it had happened at this point, and even if I hadn’t been in denial, I would have worried that John Purcell would hop in his truck and murder Cameron right then and there.* He talked me through my anxiety until I finally felt the pain begin to go away. *Dad always knows the right thing to say when I’m like that.*

Before too long, we were carrying on a normal conversation about God and life and the second summer internship I had coming up. For a moment, I was able to forget the things Cameron had said and the things he had done. For a moment, I felt calm. After about an hour of talking with my rock, the exhaustion that always strikes after an anxiety attack, hit me right in the face. I hugged my dad good night, then crawled back into bed with Brianna, knowing I needed to get some rest, for the next day I would have to explain everything to my mom and sister.



I awoke to a beautiful Saturday morning. The temperature was in the mid-eighties, which, for Alvin, Texas, is a nice day.

On our back porch, there are two wooden rocking chairs and a round wooden table. When Elyssa and I are away at college, my parents enjoy many meals together at that table, but when we're all home, we pull up a couple of extra seats and just sit out there and sip on some Sonic drinks while we talk and watch the birds and the squirrels fight over who gets the first bite of seed. It's a place where we do a lot of peaceful talking and observing, but today would be different. As Elyssa and my mom sat quietly in their chairs, I rocked mine back and forth trying to build up the courage to voice my experiences to them. I had always told these two everything, but I had been keeping secrets from them for the past few months. I knew it would be difficult, I knew they would not like what they heard, but I knew it had to be done, so I finally spoke up.

"I have some things I need to tell you about Cameron and what happened in our relationship," I said. I hate to say it, but they didn't seem too surprised by my comment. It was as if the night before spoke volumes to the fact that I was struggling. *They just didn't know it was less about the breakup, and more about having to deal with the things that went down in our relationship.*

For the next hour, we sat and we rocked and we cried. I did most of the talking with Elyssa occasionally speaking up and asking, "why the hell did you stay with him? Fuck that. I would not have put up with that shit for so long if that were me." *Elyssa likes to give it to you how it is, even if that means sprinkling in some colorful language to get her point across. If only she knew about the rape. I couldn't bring myself to talk about it. I wouldn't be able to come to terms with it until my sweet Elyssa was raped in January of the following year.*

When I was done giving them the bulk of my experiences with the verbal and emotional abuse, my mom finally said something.

“I thought I raised you to never let someone treat you that way,” she said. She had. She’d always emphasized the importance of respect in a relationship and said love is not always enough to make up for bad times. She was right. She had most definitely raised me better than to put up with the things I put up with for so long, but she couldn’t possibly understand how much he had changed me.

“You did raise us that way,” I said. “But I don’t think you understand what it is like to be in a situation where you feel like you have no hope. He would make me feel like I couldn’t leave, and I was afraid of what he would do if I did. He played mind games constantly, telling me everything was my fault, or going from screaming at me for three hours to kissing my forehead and denying he was ever mad and said it was all in my head. He put me down on a regular basis, and eventually, I started to believe him. You think I could have just walked away, but there is more to it than you know.” She looked so disappointed.

“It’s just upsetting to hear about the things that were done to you. You are my baby and I want to protect you, but I hoped I had raised you to be able to protect yourself when I’m not around,” she said. “But good grief, he’s a freaking lunatic. There is nothing wrong with you. He clearly has some serious issues with his anger and you no longer have to worry about trying to fix him. The thing is, if he continues on this path, he will never have a successful relationship.

He will ruin others and himself every time, but guess what: he can no longer hurt you. The only power he has over you now is the power you allow him to have.” She was so right. If I was going to heal from this, I had to let go and let God. I knew I was no longer the craft of a troubled boy, but rather the craft of a perfect God.

I had to move forward in my life. I had to believe God would get me through this difficult time by healing my wounds and kissing my scars. I could never take away what Cameron did to me, but I could use it to better myself, and perhaps to help others as well. It was time to go on and never look back. *Ha, if only it were that easy.*

Chapter 19: Sinkhole

*My days are dark
My hours are numbered
Until the emptiness creeps in again*

*It roams through the night
To find me haunted
And consumes me with its sin*

*It swallows me whole
And I fall below
My point of desperation*

*For there I lie
In pain, I cry
God please give me salvation*

It’s never easy starting over, but I think I have an exceptionally difficult time handling loss in any form. I know it sounds weird to say I felt chained to my brokenness and free at the same time, but that’s how I felt.

When I first returned to Wichita Falls, I made it a solid four days before having to return home to my family. The memories surrounding me in my apartment were simply too much for me to handle. It was strange coming back to my life there and not recognizing it at all. *So much had changed.* Everything about being there suffocated me, yet I couldn't bring myself to leave my apartment other than to go to work or to get food. I couldn't even sleep in my own bed because, even though I had been sleeping alone the past month, I had not yet slept alone in the bed Cameron and I slept in together almost every night. *Wall. Hiding. Crying. Trapped.* I tossed and turned, unable to put my mind and body at ease because there was an emptiness underneath my sheets and within my heart. As much as I internally complained about Cameron's twitching and sweating at night, I missed the feeling of having his arms around me.

I had entered the phase of forgetting my monster and remembering my man. The memory of the good times had me trapped, missing a lie that was never my reality. I don't understand why I couldn't completely let go, but that's just how it was. Facing where it all happened reminded me of everything I had lost, and I felt completely and utterly vulnerable. So yes, I made it four whole days before returning home for the weekend; crying a good three hours of my six-and-a-half hour drive to Alvin.

As always, my parents were supportive, but they were worried about me. *To be honest, I was worried about me too.* But, after a long, hard conversation with my mom, I realized it was time for me to pick myself up off the ground and choose happiness again.

"As long as you are afraid to go places because of Cameron, he still has a hold on you," my mom said. "You cannot live your life in fear. You're out of that bad situation, and now you

don't have to be scared. You have to move forward and be the young woman Jesus created you to be.”

She was right. I was living in fear and I needed to stop. That day, I drove back to Wichita Falls with my shoulders back and my head held high; I was not going to be defeated.

With my new attitude in mind, I chose to stay busy to keep my mind off of things. That started with my coaching job at Christ Academy. I was coaching the Junior Varsity volleyball team, a team of girls who were all pretty new to the sport and not necessarily the most talented athletes, but had a drive and charisma that immediately caused them to steal my heart.

We began the season and it was rough. We were not winning games, but the girls were getting better every single day, and so was I. We celebrated the little victories with each passing day, including when I finally went on a very casual date with a nice guy from the area. The girls gave me such a hard time about it because they would “only accept the best for Coach K.” *That's part of what made me love them so much.* Keeping myself occupied with school and work had helped me immensely. I truly felt happy again, but like all things do, my happiness had to be disrupted.

Hurricane Harvey struck fast and it struck hard. I don't think anyone was expecting it to be as devastating as it ended up being. I would see pictures and videos of my hometown in ruins; friends and neighbors had lost so much and it killed me being so far away, unable to do much to help. All I knew to do was pray, and it was during this time of worry and prayer that I heard from Kara, Cameron's mom. She would check-in fairly regularly to tell me she was praying for my community and she even had her employer make a donation to my hometown's school district to help students who were negatively affected by the hurricane. Her love and support meant the

world to me. I had always loved Kara, and when Cam and I broke up, I was more upset about losing his family, excluding his father, than I was about losing Cameron. She had always treated me with kindness, like I was one of her own children. *She's a special woman.* It wasn't her fault her son treated me so poorly, I assumed she probably didn't even know. *I think I assumed wrong.*

Even after Harvey had passed, Kara still kept in contact and said she would like to meet up the next time she visited Wichita Falls. I agreed we should, but I thought she was just saying that out of politeness. I never thought she would actually follow through with it.

In late September, Kara and Gun-Gun came for a weekend to visit Cameron and watch one of his games. *I never went to a game.* I saw her posts on Facebook, so I knew she was in town, but I figured if she wanted to see me, she would send a text.

On Saturday, September 30, I was in the small town of Henrietta, about 30 minutes outside of Wichita Falls, for a volleyball tournament with my girls. After our last game, I got back into my car and pulled out my phone to turn on my music. It was then that all of my messages from the day finally came through. *The service in the gym was terrible.* One of those messages was from Kara.

“I am going to take Gun-Gun to Chicken Express by your apartment. If you can come by we would love to see you, if not we understand,” she said. My heart stopped. I had assumed she wouldn't actually want to see me, but here she was and I was faced with a decision. It was clear Cameron was not with them since I knew the football team would already be starting its game day routine. *I would know since I knew his schedule like the back of my hand the year before.* I truly did want to see them even though I knew it would be hard because I loved those women

with every piece of my heart. *It would be my chance to say goodbye.* I texted Kara back and agreed to meet.

My walk from my car to the door felt heavy. It was as though I had acquired the legs of a baby deer, and I shook as my nerves grew stronger and stronger. *It's going to be okay, you know it's going to be okay.*

The minute I stepped into the restaurant, Kara and Gun-Gun's faces lit up. They looked so happy to see me, and that felt really good. *I was happy to see them too.* The whole situation might have seemed odd to most people, and maybe it was, but I felt comfortable the moment I hugged them.

What does Cameron think about this? For his mom and grandmother to visit for the weekend and during that time they want to meet up with his ex, I knew that had to feel like a punch to the gut. But never mind what he thought, he wasn't there and we were and I did not plan on bringing up his name at all. I worried they would, but part of me knew they wouldn't knowing how kind they were. Of course, I assumed neither of them knew the details of the things Cameron had done to me. *It's impossible to admit to the things you're in denial of doing.*
Monster. Liar. Fake.

As we sat at the table talking, Kara and Gun-Gun asked me many questions about school and my coaching job and future plans. I could tell they were genuinely interested in hearing about how I was doing, and that made me love them even more. I asked them about how they had been and asked Gun-Gun how she was liking Wichita Falls since it was her first time visiting. It was casual and comfortable, and the name "Cameron" was not said even once.

Glorious.

I had a nice time. *Gosh, it was good seeing them.* Having them there in the flesh had only reminded me of how much I had missed them over the past couple of months. *They still felt like family.*

Eventually, Kara and Gun-Gun said they had to go because they wanted to get good seats for the game. *I remember when I used to show up over an hour early to games just to watch the warm ups and secure my seat in the front row. So much had changed since then.* It was when we said goodbye that, for the first time, I truly felt my heart break all over. Kara hugged me so tightly and for so long, I could hardly let go when the time came. *It was as if she knew what Cameron had done to me. Perhaps the same thing had been done to her.* When she finally pulled away, there were tears streaming down her face. It was at that point that all of the emotion of seeing them finally hit me like a ton of bricks. The knot in my throat swelled and tears gently streamed down my cheeks. Gun-Gun was crying too as she came in for her hug. We hugged for a while too, but not as long as I hugged Kara. While we had our arms around each other and tears falling onto each other's shoulders, Gun-Gun spoke into my ear.

“We love you, sweet girl,” she said.

“I love you, too,” I whispered, and hugged her even tighter. She eventually let go and we all stood there crying, looking at each other in the middle of Chicken Express. *Not quite the picture from a Nicholas Sparks novel, but it was nonetheless a beautiful moment.*

Kara came in for another hug, and this time she squeezed even tighter and said, “We miss you so much, but we know whatever you do in life, you will find success.”

“Thank you,” I said with a squeeze. “I have missed you too.” I cried even harder, though I tried to collect myself. I didn’t want them to think I wasn’t happy because I was happy, but that didn’t take away from the fact I missed them.

With that, we parted ways, and as I walked out the door, I knew I would probably never see them again. My heart shattered as I drove off and went back to my apartment. *If only every love story had a happy ending.*



After meeting up with Kara and Gun-Gun, I went back to my normal routine of going to class and going to work. The girls on my team brought me so much joy, so when the season came to an end, I was devastated. I needed them to know how much they meant to me, so I did what I knew to do when I was sad: I wrote.

When faced with speaking to the girls after our last game, I was barely able to read what I had written them through blurry eyes and a knotted throat, but I meant every word.

I cannot begin to tell you girls how much you mean to me. I know I say “I love you” all the time, but I want you to understand how much I mean it. When we began the season, I didn’t know any of you and to be honest, I was nervous to be your coach. I was nervous I would fail you, I was nervous y’all wouldn’t like me, and I was nervous I wasn’t going to be able to be fully present for y’all.

You see, not even a month before that first practice, I went through a bit of a personal crisis and my world felt like it had been turned upside down. I cried and cried before I left my parents to come back to Wichita Falls to coach because I didn't know if I could face my problems alone. I was having a very difficult time adjusting to a new phase in life, but every day, I knew I could come to practice and escape my hurt for a couple of hours.

It didn't take long for you girls to completely capture my heart. After a couple of weeks of getting to know y'all, I began to realize just how special this team was. I remember the exact moment I finally felt happy again: I was driving back to my apartment from one of our games, the sun was starting to set and I just started praying in my car. I thanked God for making me happy and making me feel whole again. I thanked Him for sending me you girls. You all were the reason I found my joy in life after a very long time of feeling nothing but hurt. You all were the reason I wanted to get out of bed in the morning (even when we had 7:30 a.m. practice) because I knew I was going to get to see the girls who make me smile every single day.

Overall, we didn't have a ton of wins this season, but I feel like our season was a success. I feel like this season was a blessing from God Himself. We will never have this same team again, so treasure the memories you have made, build on the friendships you've established and grow to be the great women of God you have been created to be. Thank you for allowing me to be your coach. I will forever cherish you girls in my heart.

Love, Coach K

They had saved me. I'm honestly not sure how I would have made it through such a dark time without them. They were the light to overcome my darkness, they were the love to fill the hole in my heart. But when they were gone, I quickly found myself spiraling back into that same familiar feeling just before I enter a full-phase depressive state. It's like I was being forced to face my emotions and emptiness again, and that was never a good thing for me.

A few weeks went by and my anxiety only continued to get worse. I put on my happy face for the public, but when I was alone in my room and alone with my thoughts, I found myself losing motivation to do anything. *I guess we all wear masks.* I missed meals, I stopped cleaning, my laundry began to pile up and I would crawl into bed and sleep during the day. All of those things were very unlike me and I recognized that, but I was unable to stop it.

The night of October 19th was particularly awful. I was in the shower when I lost it; a full-blown anxiety attack washed over me as the water rolled over my body. My tears blended into the droplets streaming down my face, but the sound of my cries could not be concealed at all. Panic was upon me and I could not even explain why. *That's how anxiety works.* I felt so incredibly low, and I felt so incredibly alone, so I did what I always do when something is wrong: I texted my sister.

“I have that sinking feeling again,” I said.

“Bear, I’m sorry,” Elyssa responded.

“Just please say a prayer for me tonight. I have been feeling off for the past few weeks. I don’t know what it is, but I can’t get it together. I feel the darkness creeping in again and I don’t know how to stop it.”

“I will pray for you, Bear. Please be strong and know things will get better. I love you.” I cried even harder because she was wrong. I wasn’t strong at all. I was weak. *I was so terribly weak.*

“I love you too. I’m just having a really hard time right now. I feel so out of control of my emotions. I’ve been feeling like this for weeks. I feel like I’m under water, like I can’t breathe, like I’m not really here. I feel at such a distance from reality. I don’t know how to stop this,” I said.

“Bear, I really think if you've been feeling like this that you should go and see a psychiatrist. It's not healthy to keep all of this in and people can help you feel better besides just family and your friends. Please do that for me,” she said. *I could tell she was concerned.*

“I probably should, I just haven’t because I keep feeling like nothing is going to help. I feel like this emptiness inside me isn’t going away any time soon,” I said. *I wasn’t wrong.*

“But it will,” she said. “You just have to believe that and stay strong. God made you this way for a reason because He has BIG plans for you in your lifetime. You are special.” *Oh gosh, I was beside myself now.* She was my perfect person, and her words brought me hope.

“I don’t know about that, Bear. I can’t even get myself together. How am I supposed to help others?” I questioned.

“You have already helped others. Look at what your volleyball girls said about you. They love you and so does everyone else. Try to get some sleep, emotions really go crazy at night.”

“I know, that’s why this has been horrible - I haven’t been sleeping well at all and that just makes everything worse,” I replied.

“Yeah I bet. Well, try watching a kids movie or something that will cheer you up a bit. I love you so much. I’m tired, but I’ll talk to you tomorrow. Good night.”

“Good night, I love you too.”

I took her advice and decided to put on Disney’s Hercules, but not before I asked for prayers on Twitter, simply out of desperation. About half-way through the film, I found myself feeling much more calm. *Elyssa always gave me the best advice.* The light-hearted plot distracted

me from my pain until I heard a “ping” echo from my phone. It was 12:45 a.m. I glanced over at the illuminated screen. It was a text from Cameron.



“Praying for you... I know how tough it is for you with your anxiety.. I hate to see it. And yes, I did see it because yes I still check up on you from time to time to make sure you’re okay. I know things aren’t great between us, but I’ll never treat you like you were nothing. You mean a lot to me. Always will,” he said. *I didn’t know what to think. I felt so vulnerable.*

“Thank you, Cameron. I’m having a really hard time right now. I just keep feeling myself sinking, and I don’t know how to make it stop,” I responded.

“If you need ANYTHING let me know. I’ll always be here for you. Words are words and stuff gets said that isn’t meant, but you know deep down how I feel and always will feel.” *Words are words. No, words do damage. Words cut deep. Your words destroyed me. What the hell was going on? Why was he texting me out of the blue like this? Did he really care that I was having a hard time or did he have other intentions?*

“I know, and thank you for that. It’s hard for me because you really hurt me, but I appreciate your kindness now,” I texted. “I just don’t know how to get out of this hole I’m in. I pray constantly - I pray to be a better person and to love like God loves and forgive like God

forgives, but then I'm still haunted constantly. I just feel like everything is closing in around me and I can't breathe." *I wasn't sure why I was being as transparent as I was - he knew how to get me.*

"Do you need me? Nobody has to know or find out. But if you need to talk we can. I'm here for you. It won't be weird or negative at all. I know you very well and you can talk to me. I understand you." *What you understand is how to manipulate me.*

My head was throbbing, my eyes had run out of tears, I was exhausted and confused. *Was he really asking me to meet up? Didn't he know he was a big reason why I was feeling anxious? What the hell?*

"I think it would be too hard for me to see you," I responded. It was simple truth. I had avoided him at all costs for the past three months. *Why would I purposefully plan to meet with him after everything he said and did? Plus, wasn't there another girl?* I had no idea what was going on in his head.

"I understand," he replied. "I definitely don't want to make things worse at all, but like I said, if you change your mind, I'm here."

"You're not making things worse, it means a lot that you texted me because, honestly, these past three months I've thought you hated me. That's why I've avoided any situation where I might see you," I said. Even after all this time, I still sought his acceptance. "It was very difficult

for me to deal with my emotions when we first broke up, and honestly I still have to deal with those emotions sometimes, so I know seeing you would re-open old wounds. I just always feel so alone.”

“You don’t have to,” he said. “And you’re not alone in your feelings.” *What?*

“You feel the same way?” I asked.

“Of course, Kelsey. You were everything to me.” *Then why did you make me feel like I was nothing?*

“You were everything to me too, but you chose a different path.” *I had to continue to make him believe this was his decision.*

“I know I did. We just had some differences I felt I shouldn’t have to have with the person I’m going to be with forever.” His response was a bit mind-blowing. Of course there were huge differences, starting with *you abused me*.

“And I agree with that,” I replied. “I understand why we broke up, I’ve never questioned that. I think it was just tough because in my mind, you were it for me - no more dating, no more awkward first kisses, no more getting hurt, and then it all came crashing down around me, and I was suddenly in a situation I didn’t ever expect to be in.”

It took him a few minutes to respond.

“Trust me, I did too, but I felt trapped.” *He* felt trapped? Why? Because I wasn’t okay with him having sex with other girls when he suggested it? Or because he “wasn’t ready to commit” even though *he* bought me a promise ring and told me he wanted to spend the rest of his life with me? Or because *he* was the one being screamed at through a bathroom door? *Hell no.*

He continued.

“I was tired of not fully being able to be me. It wasn’t fair for either of us. My feelings were 100% real though, so don’t question that. I just mean little things, I couldn’t do.”

I was a bit stunned, though, why should I be at this point? *He always knew how to kick me when I was down.*

“I understand. Believe me, I do, but talking about my failure as a girlfriend really isn’t helping this anxiety right now.” *More like my failure as a punching bag.*

He quickly replied.

“You didn’t fail, don’t say that. You were the best thing ever. I’m just at a slightly different speed than you are, and that’s okay. Some things aren’t perfect no matter how hard we try to

make them.” *Yep*. Things were definitely far from perfect, and they weren’t just little things, but I didn’t want to get into it with him, so I kept my response short.

“We tried, we loved, we lost and that’s okay.” *I had lost the man I loved long before we broke up.*

“Sometimes I feel like it’s not okay though, and that’s what still gets me.” *Oh boy*. Now I could see his true intentions for texting me. *Did he want to work things out? Why was he bringing this up?* - especially after he just talked about the reason for the downfall of our relationship being the fact *he* felt trapped.

He continued.

“It’s just like no matter how much I tell myself it’s okay and it’s for the better, it never feels that way, or it doesn’t even feel real. Like when I think about you still to this day, the first thing that pops in my mind is how much I love you and care for you,” he said. “It literally makes me sick you think I’m out here badmouthing you or talking down on you because I never have and I never will. I love you so much, Kelsey. I always will. You get nothing but great remarks from me when asked about you. I just feel numb when I think about us sometimes. Like I’m stuck in time.” *Tell me lies, tell me sweet little lies.*

His whole statement annoyed me. *Of course you shouldn't be badmouthing me, I've never given you a reason to. Am I supposed to be appreciative you didn't go around talking badly about me (even though it would appear you did based on things your friends posted about me on social media)?*

I had to think over my response carefully. I could not let him trick me, but I did genuinely believe he still loved me. The thing with Cameron is, I think that's part of what made him get so angry with me - because he loved me so much, he felt extreme emotion on both sides of the spectrum when dealing with me.

"I think a lot has happened in the past three months. I know some things I wish I didn't know, but I do and it's hard for me to see past them. I think it's good that we're talking about everything because we never really got closure. I mean, a year and a half of love and dedication was ended through text and I never saw you again." *A year and a half of love and dedication from me, that is.*

"I wanted to see you," he said. "And what happened? I'm honest. I have no reason to lie." *I had heard that line before.*

"I've just heard about some of the ways you've moved on because people like to tell me things about you even though it hurts me to hear them. Then there's the way you spoke to me and treated me right after we broke up," I texted. "It was horrible. I have never in my life felt so beaten down. I had the worst anxiety attack I've ever experienced the night you sent me all of

those terrible messages. My body was literally uncontrollably shaking for three hours; you did that to me.” *I was starting to feel angry again.*

He replied, “I was being drug though the mud on social media by your friends. I’ve never once been petty on Twitter.” *More lies.*

His argument was illogical because all I ever did was post a picture of myself, irrelevant to the breakup. He and his friends were the ones who tore me down, and when that happened, Kristina decided to get involved despite my pleas for her to ignore them.

“She wasn’t my friend and I had no idea what she said.” *This was true. I had never gotten involved, so I never even looked at her tweets.*

“To this day, I don’t know what she said other than the first tweet about ‘stunting on my ex’ or whatever,” I continued. “I tried to tell you I didn’t know about it, but you didn’t believe me. That same girl got her dad arrested when we were in high school because she lied and said her dad raped her. That’s the kind of person she is. I told you that, but you wouldn’t listen.” *He never listened when he was angry.*

“I had nothing to do with that; all I did was post a picture of myself, and because of that, I had you and your friends making fun of me, but I’m not bitter anymore. I found my peace because I know I told the truth, and I’ve forgiven you and your friends for making me feel like

that, so it doesn't even need to be discussed," I texted, feeling rather upset. *Maybe I was still a little bitter after-all.*

This conversation was taking me back to that horrible night: the threats, the scorned words, the anguish - all leading to my lowest moment of all time. It was a nightmare I had wished to tuck away in the back of my mind, but was currently forced to face yet again. *Cameron was the demon I couldn't escape.*

He denied having anything to do with the Twitter taunting, then added "Something I can always say to this day is I never talked negatively about you. I just need you to understand I didn't say anything negative. My friends may have talked shit about your friend or what was said, but I never did." *Another lie.*

I knew he'd never admit to it, so I changed the topic.

"Okay, then I'll take your word for it, but beyond that, you still texted me some very hurtful things." *Explain that, Mr. Webber.*

"I did. I was pissed off," he said. *Wow, was he taking responsibility?* "I felt like I was being disrespected when I would never do you like that." *Nope.* "And of course now I know you had nothing to do with it, but at the same time it just looked like you were talking shit." *Makes sense since I never said anything about any of it, right?*

“Okay, well either way, I looked past it and forgave you, even after one of your friends told me you cheated on me,” I said. *It was one of his co-workers who told me.*

“You heard I cheated on you? That really hurts. I don’t know who this ‘friend’ of mine is that is feeding you toy information, but you need to stop listening to them because they are flat out lying.”

I wasn’t convinced.

“You posted a picture with another girl a few hours after we broke up,” I responded. “Of course I believed your friend when he told me. I was devastated.”

“When? The only picture I can remember is when I posted a few on Facebook from summer and one was with a girl.” *Did he really not remember?*

“It was on Twitter from a party you went to the night before even though you told me you were sick. What was I supposed to think?”

“It was a few people in the picture, but okay. And I was sick. I don’t lie.” *He had to be joking right now with the “I don’t lie” comment. He had lied to me so many times I had lost*

count. I think he had just convinced himself he had never done anything wrong; that's what he always did when we were together.

“I’m just saying, that made it easier for me to believe there was someone else; just showing you my logic,” I said, feeling very frustrated and confused.

“I would never,” he responded simply. *Yes, you would.*

“Okay, I believe you,” I said. *I wasn't sure what I believed to be totally honest, but I did know he would never take responsibility if he actually did cheat.* I continued. “I don’t know what to say or do, this is all very out of the blue. I feel so drained and just hollow.”

“I do too,” he said. *Don't make this about you like you do everything else.*

“I’m at the point where I don’t even know how I’m going to get out of bed in the morning. I need prayers,” I said, surprising myself with my vulnerability with him. I wasn’t sure if I could trust Cam, but I did know I needed God. I knew this depression was overwhelming me.

“Don’t say that. I can come to you if I need to, or I don’t have class tomorrow. We can talk then as well.” *Hmm, this was the second time he had mentioned talking, I had a feeling he wanted to see me.*

“Do you want to talk? You keep bringing it up,” I responded. *Blunt.*

“I’m just desperate to make you happy right now because I know you’re hurting and I hate it.” *He really was saying all of the right things, but was it genuine? No, but I was unable to see that through my tears.*

“I don’t even know why I’m hurting, and that’s what sucks so bad about having anxiety,” I said. It was true, I didn’t know exactly what had triggered this attack. I thought I had worked through my emotions, but apparently not. “I think I just feel alone. I keep isolating myself.”

His response killed me.

“I miss you.” *Ah, those three little words I had wanted to hear for so long, but now I wasn’t sure I could handle. I wanted him to miss me because I wanted him to regret what he did and see what he lost.*

He continued.

“I really do, and I tell people about it too, and that’s what gets me. I don’t even try to act tough or hard about it. That’s why it hurts me when you think I’m just out here living it up without you, and not giving a damn,” he said. *He hit the nail right on the head.*

Every word of his last sentence was exactly what I had been thinking for the past three months. I truly thought we broke things off and that was it for him. I thought I was the only one who felt the sting of our failed relationship. I thought I was the only one whose pillow had been soaked with tears.

Then he blew me away again. “I read your book the other day. I cried for almost an hour. I care, I promise.”

He was referring to the book I wrote him for our anniversary. I found it ironic that I had written our story for him, and between chapters used lines from *The Notebook*. Now, here was Cameron saying he never forgot about me, and he never stopped loving me. *Was he my Noah? Was I his Allie? Perhaps I was still holding onto the Cameron I fell in love with, not the Cameron who beat me down every day.*

“I’m shocked you still have it,” I said.

“It’s never left my center console. I take it everywhere with me. It’s my most prized possession over anything,” he said. *I was shaken to the core. He did still care.*

“Even when you were with someone else?” I asked. I wanted answers because this conversation was just leading to more questions.

“I was never with someone else!” he typed back. *His use of an exclamation point reminded me of his yelling. He never liked owning up to his mistakes.*

“Never?” *I didn't believe him.*

“I have a girl I hangout with, but we're just chill. I promise, she hangs out with all of us really. She and her friends hang out with me and mine, but it's not like you're talking about lol,” he said. *Lol? Was this funny to him? Because it was not funny to me.*

“See, this is what it makes it difficult to understand why you texted me. If there's another girl in the picture, I just can't have this discussion,” I responded. “So you've never had anything romantic with her at all? If you have, that's completely your right, but I'd like to know since you're opening up about all of your feelings.”

He took forever to respond, so after twenty-minutes of waiting, I decided to call it a night at 2:40 in the morning. I slept hard, exhausted from my panic episode. *What the hell had happened tonight?*

Chapter 20: The Talk

*In love we die
In pain we live
In hope we are crushed
In despair we are raised
In glory there is downfall*

*In downfall there is glory
In chaos there is peace
In quiet there is noise
Many things are not what they seem
And as they seem, they might truly be*

Message from Cameron Webber at 3:15 a.m.: “I love you forever. I fell asleep, I’m sorry. I miss you, I really do. I hope you get some good sleep tonight. You’ll be in my dreams as always.” *So last night really did happen.*

I woke up still feeling depressed and drained from the night before. My stomach was turning and I eventually got sick. *It never ceases to amaze me how an emotional issue always seems to turn into a physical one as well.*

I never miss class, but today, I couldn’t seem to pull myself out of bed. After thinking over what Cameron had said - noting he had avoided my question about the other girl - I finally responded.

“I fell asleep too. I’m hoping to fall asleep again.” *I knew that wasn’t going to happen.* “I already emailed my professor to let him know I won’t be in class. I still feel too sick.”

An hour and a half later, he texted back.

“Let me know if you need anything today, please.”

“Thank you, I will. I have a busy day today, so I should be better. It’s always better when I have something to keep my mind off things,” I said.

“Yeah, I understand, but still. Just let me know,” he said.

“You never answered my question last night,” I asked, impressing myself with my ability to be so upfront.

“I can’t lie to you, things have happened between us,” he responded. *His earlier text saying ‘I don’t lie’ seemed all the more humorous now.* “It was more of a rebound than anything, nothing romantic or too far, I promise.”

“That’s what I figured.” *I was pissed he had lied again, though what more should I expect?*

“It hurts to tell you that because it never even felt right, and I hated that I even kissed another girl, but that’s it! Nothing more than that,” he replied. I could hear his panic through his message.

“Well you’re still hanging out with her, so I’m sure there are feelings there, and I think that makes you telling me you love me and miss me even more unfair,” I said. *Not only unfair to me, but unfair to this other girl as well.* I was just hurting now.

“Please stop,” he said. “I can’t even begin to let myself have feelings for any other girl, and you know that.” *I wasn’t buying it.*

“I don’t know, a lot has happened. It is your right to move on,” I replied. “You are free to do whatever you want with whoever you want; there is nothing wrong with that, but it makes everything even more confusing for me.” *Starting with, why are you reaching out?*

“Nothing should be confusing, Kelsey. Everything I tell you is straight from the heart and is 100% true. I’ve been wanting to tell you all of this for a long time, but I thought you hated me.” *Finally, something he said that actually made sense.*

“I can tell you I don’t hate you, but I definitely have not been happy with you,” I said. It was true; I had never hated anyone, but I certainly did not have a positive image of him in my mind. *He destroyed me, but still I loved him.*

“I know you haven’t, and honestly, I’ve been doing amazing and having so much success, and it’s stung not having you by my side because you’re a big reason for all of this,” he said. *Please, brag more. I love hearing it.*

“I know. I’m glad you’ve had success, and it’s been weird not sharing the happiness with you, but I’ve been having some great things happening for me as well,” I responded. “I had to

accept a long time ago we were no longer going to be a part of each others' lives." *I had to accept the man of my dreams was just that: a dream, not a reality.*

"I know. I accepted it too, but it's not completely what I want though if I'm going to be honest, but things happened and stuff was said I can't take back." *He sounded so defeated. Was he actually feeling shame?*

"That's a very true statement," I said. "I have forgiven you for hurting me, but I don't think I could ever forget. It took me two years after Nick broke my heart to let someone new in, and when I finally did - when I finally let my walls down - I ended up getting hurt again, and now I'm stuck with having my walls up again, probably for a very long time." *I guessed correctly.*

Then I shifted my thinking. For so long, I said I never wanted to see him again. I had avoided any potential run-in, but now, I was starting to think I might have a golden opportunity to finally say my peace. I bit the bullet.

"I'm not sure that I want to talk in person, but I do feel weird about talking about all of this through text," I said. *I couldn't be too direct, so I waited to see what he was thinking.*

"I would love to talk in person and see you. I'm not going to lie," he said.

“Maybe if that’s what we need for closure, then that’s what we should do, but I’m very hesitant.” *If we met, would he be able to trick me again? I would soon find out.*

We agreed to meet at 11:30 at a picnic table in Lucy Park. I wanted to meet in a public place just in case he lost his temper. *I knew he’d never hurt me with other people watching.*

Okay, this was it; after three long months, I was going to see the man who broke my heart by becoming the monster who broke me.



I arrived first. For 15 minutes, I waited for Cameron to pull up. My anxiety was through the roof as I tried to imagine what I would say to him and what he would say to me. Ever since the breakup, I could not remember how Cameron looked when he wasn’t angry. Every time I closed my eyes, I saw his enraged face - never his smile. When I saw him today, what side would I be seeing - my monster or my man (*well, ex-man*)?

I was still unsure if meeting him was the right decision, but I knew I had to do it so I would finally be able to get closure. *Would I even be able to speak, or will he trap my voice yet again?* I was terrified as I heard each car in the park round the corner toward me, but as soon as I realized it wasn’t Cameron, I would slump back down and rest my elbows on the table.

After what felt like an hour, I heard yet another car coming down the street, and this time it was him. The darkly tinted windows of his Jeep prevented me from seeing his face, so I looked down at my twiddling fingers. *Was he just as nervous about this as me?*

He stayed in his parked car for a minute before getting out. When the door opened, I felt my stomach turn. My desire to get up and leave was strong, yet I felt paralyzed. Each step he took toward me, my heart fell further and further into my stomach. I couldn't bring myself to look up from my fingers. *Tap, tap, tap tap. They were unable to remain still with the storm going on in my brain.* It was as if he was in slow motion, and just when I was almost entirely zoned-out in my thoughts, I heard a familiar voice say, "Come here and give me a hug." *Shit. This was really happening, and I was not prepared.*

I stood up slowly, hardly able to look him in the eyes, and gave him a soft hug. My fingers were balled up in fists as to not touch him too much. His hug was much different than mine. He hugged me tightly, even if but just for a moment, and all I wanted was for him to let go. *This was the moment my chains were reattached.* He was smiling a big smile. *Oh yeah, that's what it looks like when he isn't angry.* We sat down across from each other. Cameron was the first to speak.

"How have you been? What have you had going on this semester?" he asked.

I proceeded to tell him about my classes, coaching and memories with friends. I went into great detail on several of my professors and class assignments, my volley-babies and fun times with my bestie, Erica. *I wasn't sure why I was being so specific at the time, but looking back, I think I was avoiding talking about the breakup.*

"Yeah, I've kept up with your team," he said with a smile on his face. "They really seem to love you, but I knew they would." *Okay, so he really had been keeping tabs on me.*

“Yes, I love them so much. They’ve been really great for me. I don’t know how I would’ve made it through these past few months without them. They truly were the biggest blessing,” I said.

“Yeah, I can see that,” he said. “Well, I’ve been doing really great too, amazing actually.” *I hadn’t asked how he’d been, nor did I really want to know, but I guess he was going to tell me anyway.* “I’ve had a lot of success in football, as I’m sure you’ve seen.” *Arrogant, typical.*

“Yeah, I see stuff on Twitter, I’ve been really happy for you guys, but it does suck seeing your picture plastered everywhere,” I laughed. “Of course, as soon as we break up, you’re the team captain and they put you all over social media. As much as I’ve tried to avoid you, I can’t avoid that.”

He laughed too. “Yeah, I’ve thought about how that must suck for you.” *How considerate.* “But yeah, we’ve been doing great. I’m actually on a watch list to be an All-American.” *Great, tell me more.* “But I’ve also been doing really well in school. I don’t know, I’ve just had a lot of success.” *Awesome.*

“But,” he said. *Uh-oh.* “It sucks not having you by my side through it all.” I stared at him blankly. *RETREAT! RETREAT!* He was branching off into a talk about the relationship. What

would we discuss first? There was so much to talk about, so much I wanted to say that I had harbored within the confines of my head for too long. *I guess it was time to leave the harbor.*

“There is not a day that goes by where I don’t regret my decision to end things,” he said. *Mhmm, ‘your’ decision, keep thinking that.* “I can’t sit here and lie and say I don’t miss you or I don’t still love you because I do. I miss you and I love you so much. You are the first thing I think of when I wake up in the morning, and you’re the last thing I think of before I go to sleep. I don’t know why I’m still like this, but I am.”

I gathered my thoughts. “You just hurt me so bad, and yes, you did decide to end things, but now you have to live with the decision you made.”

He looked down. “I know, and I wish there was something I could do to change things, but I know I — ”

“But it wasn’t just the breakup,” I said. It was my turn to interrupt him. “It was how you treated me during our relationship. You’re not going to like me saying this, but you verbally and emotionally abused me.” *I was not strong enough to confront him about the sexual abuse. Part of me was still in denial of that. He had convinced me I was still a virgin.* “And I’m not saying it was all bad, because it wasn’t. We had some great memories together, some of the happiest of my life, but I also had some of my worst because of you. Whenever I’m curled up in a ball on the bathroom floor, crying as you’re screaming at me through the door, that’s not a good situation.”

He nodded his head as his eyes met mine.

“I know,” he said. “You never deserved that.”

I was baffled. *Was he honestly admitting to the fact he abused me?* He had never once admitted any wrong treatment of me before, and I honestly never thought he would. I was absolutely shocked.

He continued.

“You know how I am. I’m normally a nice guy, usually happy - always with a smile on my face; that’s why we clicked so well from the start, I think. But, I have a hard time controlling my anger. When I get mad, I just get really mad and I don’t know why. I know I blew up on you, but I never should have.”

“Yes, I know. I was usually the one at the receiving end of your anger and frustration. You made me feel so small,” I said. I began to feel a knot forming in my throat, but I took a deep breath and re-gathered myself. I was not going to cry right now. “I would lay there and just cry and cry and cry, and you would continue to put me down. You always took it too far and made everything a personal attack. I never did that to you; I never wanted to hurt you. I still don’t want

to hurt you despite how many times you've hurt me, despite never even receiving an apology, but it's whatever because I stopped expecting anything from you months ago."

"I know. I don't know what would come over me, but I did apologize to you," he said.

"No, believe me, you never have - not once. But again, I'm not asking for one now because I don't expect one." *I didn't believe he was sorry anyway.*

He paused, looking at the table as if he was trying to remember something.

"Well, I am sorry. I am sorry for hurting you. I loved you so much, I still love you, and you never deserved that. You never deserved to be treated that way. You are the kindest person I've ever known, you never deserved that," he said. His face showed remorse. *Was this all an act?* It didn't feel like it. He seemed, well, genuine.

I noted the excessive amount of times he said "you never deserved that," almost as if to say, "I never deserved you." *But really, no one deserves that kind of treatment; I would not wish that hopeless feeling on anyone.*

"Well thank you for apologizing," I said. "It truly means so much to me." I think deep down, I was never quite settled with our split because he had never shown any remorse for his

actions or my feelings. I never thought he'd apologize, but here he was saying he was sorry. I felt a weight lifted from my shoulders; a burden gone, never to haunt me again. *Or so I thought.*

"It's hard, but it's great to see you," he said. "I tried texting you so many times asking if we could talk, but you never responded."

"Yeah, I never received those messages because I had your number blocked." Zinger. "I only unblocked your number about a month ago as a part of my forgiveness process. I know it sounds stupid, but I was trying to let go of any bitterness I still had for you. I never thought I would actually hear from you, much less see you again, and I was perfectly good with that." *Ouch.*

His eyes reflected hurt from my honesty. *Ugh, why was I suddenly feeling bad for him?*

"I tried texting you once every two weeks or so. I couldn't accept things ending and then never seeing you again. I've been going to church every Sunday, and every Sunday I hope to see you walk through the door," he confessed. *Wow, we were on two totally different pages.*

"I changed churches so I wouldn't see you," I said. With every word I spoke, he looked more and more defeated. *Was this how he normally saw me when he would lose his temper?* "But you have to understand why I had to cut you out of my life. The last message I received from you, you were threatening me and saying horrible, horrible things. You have no idea what that

night was like for me because while I was laying in bed having an anxiety attack so bad it caused my body to uncontrollably shake - because of the things *you* said to me - you were out partying with your friends, probably getting drunk and blowing up my phone.”

I was getting too emotional talking about this. I had to stop thinking about it, otherwise I would breakdown in front of Cameron, and I could not do that. I would not allow him to have that power over me again.

“Believe me, I understand why you cut me out, I do. I mean it, but I wish it didn’t have to be this way. I’ve changed.” *I’ve heard that before.* “And I know you’ve heard that before,” he laughed. *Mind-reader.* “But it’s true. I know you have no reason to believe me,” he said. *Nope.* “But I’m hoping I can show you with time.”

I must not have looked too convinced because he started listing off how he had changed. He told me about getting on a new medication for Attention Deficit Disorder, and how it had helped him control his extreme emotions better.

“I know you always told me I should get on something to help me concentrate. I guess I should have listened earlier,” he chuckled. “There’s a lot you were right about. You know, I don’t really party or drink that much either, and that’s what I thought I wanted before, but now it just isn’t. Of course, I like to go out with my brothers and have fun from time to time, but I miss coming home to you. I miss a lot of things about you.”

All of the Facebook videos of how girls handle breakups versus how guys handle breakups were becoming a reality right before my eyes. This whole time, I thought he never cared, and I sure as hell didn't think he missed me. I thought he was living it up with a carefree lifestyle, and a new, wild "fun" girl in his life. Now he was saying he missed me. Truth be told, I wasn't sure if I missed him. Sure, I missed *the idea* of him and just having someone who constantly wanted to see me, someone to love and cook for and sleep beside, someone to share life's moments with, but not really *him*. I had known for a while I wanted more from a relationship, starting with it being abuse-free.

Of course, I missed certain pieces of him like our silly inside jokes of me saying "don't fly away" when he'd shake his legs, and him calling me "baby giraffe" whenever I put my short hair in two little buns on top of my head; our overly-competitive games of Trouble; our talk of baby names and places to live and wedding vows. Those were all great memories that I missed very much, but they didn't make up for the bad. I did not miss all of the arguing, *if you could even call it that*; I didn't miss him laughing in my face as I cried and tried to tell him he was hurting my feelings; I didn't miss going to sleep, afraid of the man next to me. *So, what should I respond to his "I miss you"?*

"Well this is the path you chose. You made a decision, and now you have to live with it," I said, quite bluntly again. *You made a decision to abuse me, and now you have to live with it.*

He looked down.

“I know, and I regret it every single day,” he said. “I just wish I could go back and tell myself not to be stupid, but I can’t do that. Part of me wants to start fresh with you, but I can’t do that either.”

“No, we can’t do that,” I responded. “I forgave you a long time ago, but I don’t think I could ever forget the things you did to me and said to me. I just don’t see how that’s possible. I literally cannot escape those ghosts every time I lay in bed at night and try to go to sleep; they haunt me.” *You haunt me.*

“I know, they haunt me too. You are the best thing that has ever happened to me.”

This time, it was my turn to look down. This was all very difficult to hear.

He continued.

“I mean it,” he said. He was looking me straight in the eyes. *He looks so sad. Is it my fault he’s hurting?* “I messed up, and I can’t take it back.”

I thought on what he just said. It was so much to take in all at once. I still felt confused as to *why* he wanted to have this conversation. *Why now? Why open up about your feelings three months later? Was his purpose to get closure like me? Did he want more?*

“What is your end goal for this conversation?” I asked.

“What do you mean?” he questioned.

“Like, what are you hoping to come out of us having this talk? Because for me, this was supposed to be for closure, but it seems like you may want something more.”

He paused to think.

“I don’t know,” he said. *Of course he couldn’t be direct, God forbid he be rejected.* “All I know is my life is better when you’re in it. You make me so happy, and of course I would love to try to start over new - ” I made a face. “ - and I know that isn’t going to happen, but I will take you in any way I can. I just can’t be without you anymore.”

I wasn’t sure what I was feeling right now. In one way, I was angry. *How dare he try to just waltz back into my life after everything he’s done?* In another way, I was intrigued. I hated feeling that way, but I just did. I felt like time had stopped and three months hadn’t gone by, but then I reminded myself they did.

“I just don’t know if I can handle that, Cam,” I said. “So much has happened; you’ve said some horrible things, not to mention there was another girl - ”

“She means nothing to me,” he replied. “She shouldn’t even be a factor in this conversation.”

“No, she will be a factor in this conversation because clearly she does mean something to you because you kissed her,” I said. He was not going to talk his way out of this one.

“Yes, we’ve kissed, but that’s it, and it didn’t even feel right - ”

“Cameron,” I interrupted. “As I said last night, it is your right to do whatever you want with whoever you want, so don’t feel guilty about anything. I’ve gone on dates too, I’ve tried to move on and there’s nothing wrong with that.”

“I know, but it did feel wrong,” he said. “It felt wrong because it wasn’t with you. You are the only girl I care about, you are the only girl I want. Tiff is just a friend.” *Ouch, she has a nickname.*

“I don’t kiss my friends,” I said. “And again, it’s your right to move on. Hell, this whole time, I’ve been thinking you cheated on me with her and that y’all have been hooking up, and yes, it stung at first, but I moved past it. But now we’re sitting here and you’re telling me you love me and miss me, and I’m telling you if there’s another girl in your life, I’m not having this conversation.”

“One, she means nothing to me. Two, why does it matter if there is another girl if you’re not interested in getting back with me anyway?” he asked. *Oh, so he thinks I really do want to get back with him and he thinks this is me being jealous - okay.*

“It matters because you don’t belong to me anymore. You are no longer my boyfriend, but if there is someone out there who has feelings for you and thinks of you like her boyfriend, I’m not having this conversation because I’m not going to disrespect another relationship or another girl. It’s not going to happen.” My tone was rather aggressive as I was feeling agitated by his inability to be direct.

“Well you shouldn’t worry because she doesn’t matter. She just hangs out with me and my friends sometimes, but that’s all. We’ve kissed, but that’s all,” he said with some force. “I would never date her. I can’t bring myself to even think about being with someone else because deep down, I still can’t picture my future without you in it.” *Oh my gosh.* What was I to make of all of this? I never expected those words to come out of his mouth. *So, he still believes I’m the one? What’s going on?*

“But you have to,” I said. “You have to let me go, just as I had to let you go. It’s hard, I’m not going to lie and tell you it was easy for me to accept, but I did and I worked through it. I think that’s the difference between you and me: I already worked through a lot of my emotions while you were out partying and acting like you didn’t care. Now reality is hitting you and you’re being forced to face those emotions for the first time, and it sucks - believe me, I know,

but you will get through it just like I did.” *Was I really comforting him?* I sat still, shocked at myself because as I looked across the table at my abuser’s disheartened face, I felt sorry for him. *Me! I felt sorry for HIM! Unreal.* I always said I wish he would hurt like he hurt me, but in that moment, I just wanted to make his hurt go away.

“I just can’t accept that,” Cameron said, shaking his head. “I don’t care how small of a way it is, I need you in my life.” *He needs me.*

For months, he made me believe I needed him, but now he was telling me he needed me and I was not sure how I felt about it. For the first time in forever, I felt like I had the upper hand, but I didn’t want it. I had been groomed to be submissive to him, and now he was subsiding to me. It felt weird, but at least it was better than having him belittle me like he had done so many times before.

It hurt me deeply to see him like this. He had never appeared so small. In the past, his pride was much more important to him than any of my feelings, but now he seemed to be laying everything out there. I still didn’t trust him. Nonetheless, I considered what he was proposing. *Could I allow him to be back in my life without getting too invested? Was it possible for us to just be friends after our extended history? Would he betray me again?*

“I will be honest with you, Cameron, I don’t trust you. Once trust is lost, it is very difficult to get back, so I don’t know how to be a part of your life,” I said, noting the sadness in his eyes. “At most, all I could offer you right now is being distant friends, and I’m still not sure if I could handle that, but I can try.”

He perked up.

“That’s all I ask,” he said. “I will take you in any way I can have you.”

At this point, I noticed it was time for me to leave to go to a meeting, and suddenly I felt disappointed. I didn’t want to go, and I didn’t want to go because I didn’t want to leave him. *No. This was not happening.* I hated the fact that it felt good to see him, but it was; it was really good to see him. There was something so comfortable and familiar about sitting there talking with him again, even though it was a difficult conversation. I felt like for the first time in a very long time, I was seeing the man with whom I fell in love. Still, the hour was up and it was time for me to say goodbye.

We walked to our parked cars rather slowly. I could tell he did not want to leave either. I walked slightly ahead of him as to not be directly by his side. *We were no longer walking through this life together, and my symbolic, poetry-writing self wanted to personify the point.* As we reached the cars, I decided to speak up first.

“Well, I’m glad we were able to talk. I think it did us some good to finally get some things out there in the open.”

“It was really good to see you, Kelsey,” he responded. “You know, last night when I was texting you, Tiff started making a comment about how I can’t always be your shoulder to cry on, but I’ll always be there for you.” *Ugh, there’s that nickname again. Why did she even know about*

our conversation last night? Why would he tell her about my personal problems? Based on that comment, it seemed to me like maybe he had told her I reached out to him and asked for help.

Hmmm, was I catching him in another one of his sweet little lies?

“Please don’t talk about me or my anxiety with her,” I said with a bit of a tone. I was pissed.

His smile quickly shifted into concern. *Oops, looks like he realizes he messed up.*

“It wasn’t like that, she just saw I was texting you and she made a comment, but I went off on her. I told her not to say anything about you. I defended you.” *I’m sure you did.*

All I was hearing was that he was with her last night.

“See, this is why I can’t trust you. This conversation went really well until now. Just don’t talk about me with her,” I said.

“I’m sorry, I won’t. I’m not going to talk to her anymore, not after her comment yesterday. I just want to make things right with you; you are my priority. Look,” he said as he opened his car door. He reached inside the center console and pulled out a little maroon notebook. “I told you I kept it with me always. It’s my biggest treasure. I read it all the time.” He was beaming from ear to ear, like a child receiving a gold star for good behavior. All I felt was discomfort.

“I believed you when you told me last night. Okay, well, at least now if I see you on campus, it won’t be as awkward. Maybe I’ll even make it to a football game,” I joked as I got into my car. “I’ll see you around. Overall, this was good.”

“I hope to be seeing you soon,” he said with a smile.

I shut my car door and left the park with a million things running through my mind, none of which had anything to do with my upcoming meeting.

Chapter 21: Just a Dream

*A fragile soul
At day she breaks
At night he takes
The pain away
But when she wakes from her mistake
She only feels the pain again*

A few minutes after I arrived at my meeting, I received another text from Cameron.

“Thank you for that.”

“Yeah no problem, I think it was a good talk,” I responded.

“For sure!” he said.

“Good closure, got to say some things I needed to and so did you, and now I feel like we’re on good terms. Not the best choice to end on telling me about the new girl, but like I said, it’s your right haha,” I said, but I did not think it was funny.

“You asked about her so I wanted to let you know what was going on. It’s impossible for me to like her. Like I said, I still love you! I can’t even bring myself to try,” he texted. *Hmm. Fact or lie?*

“I don’t know, with there being another girl in the picture (romantic or not) it makes things even more weird for me,” I said. I meant it; I would never want to violate girl code. Cameron was no longer mine and if there was another girl in his life, I did not want to disrespect their relationship, even if he had changed.

“I wish it didn’t.” *Really?*

“Well it does, and you have to understand why,” I responded.

“I do,” he said. “But I need you to understand what I just told you as well, and believe it.”

But why should I believe you?

“What do you want me to take from that?” I questioned.

“That I sill love you so much and there will never be another you,” he said. “I don't want anybody right now.” *Every person is unique, of course no one is like me. There will never be another you either; good riddance.*

“So what’s the next step from here?” I asked. I wanted answers. *What are his intentions?*

“I just know I love you, and having you in my life in any way is a huge blessing.” *Hmm, I used to say having you out of my life was a huge blessing. Interesting.*

“But in what way though?” *I wanted a damn straight-forward answer!*

“I want what you want. I miss making you happy,” he said. *Do you miss making me sad too? Do you miss controlling me? Do you miss having me chained to your ankles?*

“I need a straight answer from you. You made me very happy, but you also hurt me a lot,” I texted.

“I'm down to start from scratch,” he said. *What?*

“I don’t see how that’s possible. I don’t think ever being in a real relationship again is possible, you know?” I said. “So much has happened.” *So many things you’re trying to make me forget.*

“I know. I just mean be friends and just go day by day. I’m not pressing anything.” *Of course he had to play it cool. Reputation and pride before honesty and love.*

“What’s your end goal?” I asked him again. I felt like this conversation was going around in circles, but I think it was because I could not get a clear read on his intentions. *I had laid down my walls and met with him, why couldn’t he lay down his and tell me what he wanted?*

“I’m just happy to have you anyway I can. I want you in my life.”

“Why?” I asked. *I was being so short with him.*

“Because I love you! I never want to be without you no matter in what way it is,” he said.

“I don’t know what to think. It took me a long time to get over you, so this is difficult. Like, I think it really sucks to hear about you talking about me with your new friend. I don’t like that,” I responded. I couldn’t even bring myself to call her anything more than his “friend,” partially because I was not sure what she was to him. *He said nothing, I suspected something more.*

“I was defending you,” he responded. *Wow, how noble of you, but I no longer need you to fight my battles, especially not battles you created.* “She said something out of line and I shut her down, and yes she is just a friend. I knew you would be concerned about her that's why I wanted to make it clear up front what she was.”

“Yes, but she told you that you couldn't be my shoulder to cry on which shows me she knows I'm having a hard time right now. How would she know that?” *Also, seems like maybe you lied to her and said I reached out to you instead of the other way around. Just saying.*

“Because she saw me texting you and I told her you weren't doing too good,” he said.

Interesting.

“Please don't talk with her about me,” I said. I did not know this girl and I did not want her knowing details of my personal life.

“I didn't go into detail,” he said. “I'm sorry, I won't talk about you anymore.” *That's a promise I'm pretty sure he kept, but I'll get to that later.*

“It's okay. What's done is done.” *It's okay, ha!* I was using the same old line every girl uses when she is frustrated but does not want to get into it.

The messages that followed were fairly casual with Cameron telling me about what he was doing that day and asking about how my day was going as well. It felt weird, but a good weird. I did not like hearing from him and acting normal, but then again I did like it. I was so conflicted. *It is as if his violence was all I knew and all I felt I deserved.* Regardless, I decided to make the most of my day, but I had to talk to someone about what happened. I could not keep it a secret any longer. I decided to tell Taylor.

Taylor had been with me throughout almost every trial of my relationship. She had cried with me, she had laughed with me, she had been angry with me and she had forgiven with me. So it makes sense that God put her in my life on this day when everything was going so right and so wrong all at the same time. We were both volunteering with an organization on campus called Student Ambassadors. With it being Homecoming week, there were a lot of events going on on-campus and Student Ambassadors helped to make sure the events ran smoothly.

As we spread out table clothes and arranged center pieces, I felt compelled to tell Taylor a brief summary of what had happened that morning.

“So, don’t jump to conclusions, but I met with Cameron earlier today,” I said. “I did it to get some closure. I think his intentions were to get back together, but either way, it was a good talk and it was honestly nice to see him.” *I hated myself for feeling that way.*

Taylor had an odd expression on her face, then did a half-eye-roll. “Kelsey, don’t trust him.” *Whoa, this was not a typical, always-supportive Taylor response.* “He’s with another girl.”

“I asked him about that, and he said he didn’t cheat and the girl likes him, but he doesn’t like her,” I said. “I don’t know if I believe him, but that’s what he - .”

“He’s lying to you,” she said. “I saw him with her last night at the basketball pep-rally.”

“He said they’re just friends. He said she has feelings for him, but he doesn’t have feelings for her.” I spoke softly, beginning to doubt the words I was speaking.

“They were hugging and kissing in the stands. He was sitting behind her with his arms around her, and she would look up at him, and they’d kiss,” Taylor said. “He’s a liar, and I was not going to say anything to you about this, but you’re telling me y’all met up, and now it just makes me mad.” *Ahh, it is so wonderful feeling like a fool again.*

“I’m honestly disgusted and embarrassed,” I said. “I literally told him I wouldn’t have that conversation with him if he was with someone else because that’s not fair to her or to me.” I felt sick to my stomach. Yet again, Cameron had lied to my face.

“That’s probably why he didn’t tell you; so you would meet up with him,” she said. Taylor was right. *Cameron always knew how to manipulate me to get what he wanted.*

“Of course that’s why because he’s a freaking asshole,” I said. *Damn, I was mad.* “It’s like, what the hell can I believe now? Did a single word he said to me have any sliver of truth to it?”

No.

“Kelsey, I do think he probably still loves you, but Cameron does not know how to love you. He only knows how to hurt you. I think you should stay away from him.” I felt broken up and betrayed all over again. *Why would he go out of his way to lie and to hurt me again?* I needed clarity. I needed an explanation.

“I need to see him again. I need to confront him with this because I’m so pissed right now, I just want answers,” I said. My hands were trembling.

“I would be very careful, Kels. Someone like that will realize he’s losing what he wants, and he will do anything - say anything - to keep you on his leash,” Taylor said. “You know I love you and support you no matter what, but I don’t think it’s a good idea to hear him out. He’s lied so many times before, what makes you think he’ll be honest now?” She was so right in everything she was saying, but in this battle between heart and mind, my heart was winning. I wanted to see him again, simply to ask him “what the hell?”



After a terrible, horrible, no good, very bad day of being unable to concentrate on anything other than the hurt and confusion I felt, I finally made it home around 11:30 p.m. Cam had agreed to meet with me again, in fact, he seemed quite eager to see me. He had a football game the next day, but he said it did not matter to him as much as seeing me mattered. With a little reluctance, I invited him to come to my apartment. My apartment had been the site where most of the abuse occurred, and my roommate was away, house-sitting with her boyfriend, so it was difficult for me not to feel a little scared about what might happen.

While Cameron drove over, I took a shower. At this point, I did not care about how ugly I looked for his arrival, I just wanted to be clean and relaxed after a day of feeling anything but clean and relaxed. As I washed my hair, I felt the water pour over me and it reminded me of the flood of emotions I was feeling. On one end, I was angry with Cameron. I could not believe he had lied again, but he begged for a chance to explain. *Would this time be different?* On the other end, I felt at peace with him. *I know it sounds crazy, I know, but the familiarity of the old Cameron eased my anxious heart.* It was as if my dependence on him had not truly gone away like I thought it did. *If only feelings could be washed away as easily as soap.*

I dried off, put on my plush, purple robe, unlocked my front door and waited in the chair in my living room. Cameron and I had always sat on the love-seat together, but I did not want to sit near him. No, I wanted to face him straight-on so that physical proximity could not affect the proximity of our hearts. My toes rubbed together and I felt all nervous again. It seemed as though all I ever did was wait on him: I waited on him to arrive, I waited on him to keep his word, I waited on him to be the man I fell in love with in the beginning, but then I realized in waiting, all

I was doing was wasting time on a lost cause. Though here I was, yet again, waiting on Cameron to show up.

The handle to the front door moved and my heart raced. Cameron walked in and sat across from me in his usual spot on the love-seat, but there was nothing usual about him being there.

“It’s funny being here again,” he said. “I thought it would be weird, but it’s sort of like I never left.” *You didn’t. You haunt these walls.*

“Imagine how it’s been for me. When I came back to Wichita Falls, I made it a solid four days before I left to go home because I felt suffocated here. Too many memories; bad and good,” I said. Maybe I shouldn’t have been so honest, but there I was, being transparent about the tough time I’d had post-breakup. *I should have never let him see me weak.*

“I know, there are a lot of things around town that remind me of you. You think I’ve been out here partying it up and not caring, but that’s just not the case. I care, always will,” Cameron said.

“So you haven’t been making new memories to replace our old ones with your new ‘friend?’” I asked. I wanted to get right to the point. *No more small talk or ‘I miss you’s’ until I got a straight answer from this lying, cheating asshole.*

“No, it’s not like that Kelsey,” he said.

“Well it seems to be that way,” I interrupted. “Like, I’m honestly so pissed at myself for believing you again when you were literally just lying to my face.”

“I didn’t lie,” he said. He seemed a little frantic. “She’s just a friend.”

“I don’t care what she is because it is your every right to move on,” I said. “But I can tell you I don’t kiss my friends at basketball games the same night I try to get back with my ex.”

“She likes me, I don’t like her. I can’t bring myself to have feelings for her or anyone for that matter, you know that.” *Do I though?* He continued. “Yes, she’s pretty — .” I made a face and rolled my eyes. *Okay, okay, so she was decent looking, but I was being P-E-to-the-T-T-Y. Rightfully so.* “Oh stop,” he laughed. “She’s not you, but no one is; you know I think you’re the most beautiful girl in the world.”

“I’m not impressed,” I said. *I’m petty, yeah, yeah, I’m petty all the time.*

“Be nice,” Cameron laughed. *Fineeeeeee.* “But seriously, I can’t keep telling you there’s nothing between us because you either believe me or you don’t. She likes me, I don’t like her. We’ve only kissed and even that felt wrong, but I was just lonely and she was there. I feel like I’m repeating myself, so this is where all of this gets confusing for me: why do you care if we’re

together, which we're not, when you said you don't want to get back together? Because you asking about it and acting like you care makes me think you still have feelings for me."

"Because, as I have already told you, I'm not going to disrespect another girl who has feelings for you by sitting here listening to you tell me you love me and care about me and still think I'm the one! It's not going to happen," I said. "And of course there are still feelings there, but mostly just feelings of hurt. This is very hard for me."

"It's hard for me too! You think I have wanted anybody else? Hell no! I have only ever wanted you!" His voice was elevated.

"Well you have a funny way of showing it," I said. "Don't get me wrong, I told you before I've gone on dates, but it's all been very casual and I have been upfront with all of them that it's just dinner and I'm not emotionally available. I tried to move on too fast after Nick, and I ended up hurting two people in the process. I refuse to ever do that again. That's why I'm staying single for a while; because I know I have to work through this on my own." *I have to mend the parts of me you broke.*

"But see, that's exactly what's going on here with me!" He said frantically. "Tiff has been more of a rebound, if anything! The mistakes you made with Nick are the mistakes I've made with you. I need you to see them as just that: mistakes!" I think that was the moment I realized Cameron felt a love for me like the love I felt for Nick, the one I still have and probably will

always have if we're being honest. Of course, I am no longer *in* love with Nick, but there was a long period of time after we broke up where I still felt that deep, passionate, crazy-about-you love. Cameron still had that kind of love for me, I could feel it.

“So, you're still in love with me?” I asked, continuing the conversation I was having in my mind aloud with Cameron.

“I don't know if I'm *in* love,” he said. *Oh great, here comes Mr. Defensive again.*

“So you no longer see me in a romantic way?” I asked.

“Yes, I do.”

“And you say you still think I'm the one?”

“Yes,” he said. *Foiled.*

“And you —”

“Okay, I'm in love with you! I've never stopped loving you. I never will,” he said. “You're it for me. You are my person.” *Now is not a good time to quote Grey's Anatomy.*

“But I’m not though,” I said. “I wanted to be. I wanted it so badly I put up with months of being unhappy, hoping you would change, but you never did.” For the first time today, I could no longer hold back my tears. I stopped fighting my emotion and it began to pour out of me like water from a storm cloud. “I loved you so much! I trusted you with everything, and you threw it back in my face! You treated me like I was nothing, you made me believe I was nothing!” *Oh gosh, I was really crying hard now.* “Here we are, three months later, and I thought this was it, I thought I was done, but you come back and here I am; a mess again! I never deserved what you did to me! I would have never hurt you, but that was all you ever did to me! Everything became a personal attack, everything became my fault! I couldn’t take it anymore, I couldn’t take it!” *I was losing control.* “And now I’m sitting here and I’m mad at myself because I hate that it’s good to see you! I hate that I want to forget all of the bad! I hate that I want to believe you when I know I shouldn’t!” I couldn’t speak anymore. *This was all too much.*

The whole time I was talking, I could not bare to look at Cameron. My weakness was evident in how I looked away, unable to meet his eyes. After a few moments of silence, I finally looked up. Cameron had his elbows on his knees, his hands locked together and he was staring down at the floor. When he lifted his head, there were tears in his eyes.

“I’m sorry,” he said, his voice muffled from a knotted throat. “I don’t know how to make this better. I’m just so sorry. I love you, and...” He had to pause to gather himself. “I don’t know why I hurt you. I lost the best thing to ever happen to me.”

I took a moment to reflect, when I suddenly remembered a note he had written me for our anniversary. It had been tucked away in the bottom of the drawer by my bed. Everything else had

been trashed, but I could not get rid of this particular letter. I think part of me wanted to keep it as a reminder of what once was, a reminder he had loved me, a reminder that some good things turn bad. I stood from my chair, and without a word I went and retrieved the card from my nightstand. The beige paper depicted a black-and-white image of a little girl and a little boy holding hands on a set of train tracks. *It reminded me of innocence, again something that once was, but was no longer.* I sat back down in the chair and began to read what Cameron had written aloud.

“Dear Kelsey,

Where has the time gone? I must say this has been the fastest, but best year of my life. I guess it really is true that time flies when you’re having fun (or in this case, in love). I tell you all of the time, but yet I still feel I don’t tell you enough, I love you more than ANYTHING on God’s green earth. You make me feel a way that no possession, game or person has ever made me feel, and that alone shows me that this relationship was crafted by God. Every time I get lost in those green eyes, my heart skips a beat, then beats 100x faster. Kelsey Purcell, you are my everything. Looking forward to many years with you. So while this is a milestone, it is just a rock on our mountain we are climbing together. Happy anniversary.

Love,

Cameron”

I put the card down and looked at Cam, who still had tears in his eyes. “I feel like such an idiot reading this now. I believed you when you told me these things. I just feel so foolish.”

“I meant every word and I still mean every word. Kelsey, I’m not ready to let go. I refuse to believe this is it for us,” he said. *It’s always about what he wants, not what I want.*

“I can’t...I can’t go back to being treated the way you treated me,” I said. “Things could never be the same as they once were; things weren’t even the same for me at the end. I was so incredibly happy and so incredibly in love with you, but after the first time you blew up on me, I feared you. You cannot be with someone you fear.” Cameron looked down between his knees again. It was as if he felt more and more defeated with every word I spoke.

I continued. “I have finally found happiness again, and though not every day is a good day, clearly,” I laughed as I wiped away tears. “The good days outweigh the bad ones. I have even been branching out more, saying ‘yes’ to things I normally would have been too reserved to say ‘yes’ to. I have found a great support system and love here with Erica and her family. She has been such an amazing, amazing friend; one I would not have gotten to be as close to had we not broken-up. Many good things come from the bad. It makes all of the pain worth it in a way.”

“I know, and I’m really so glad you have such good people in your life,” Cameron said. “I see things you post and you do look happy, and I’ve had happiness too.” *Here we go, let’s make this about him again. Go ahead, one-up me.* “I’ve gotten to spend a lot of time with my friends

and it's been great since I had been spending all of my time with you - which I wanted to, of course." *I'm sure that's not what he told his friends.*

"I know what you mean. It's actually been so cool having the Browns, Erica's family, take me around to places in Wichita Falls I never even knew existed. Like just the other day, we went to this big food truck challenge in Downtown and then to the farmers' market. Stuff like that is so simple, but they've made for some really fantastic days."

"Yes! Exactly! A couple of months ago, Trey Sheppard actually took me to this cool, super old bridge. You know he's from here, so he knows of some interesting places," he said. Yes, I knew quite a bit about good ole Trey Sheppard considering he tried to get in my pants, among half of the MSU female population, freshman year. He was one of the biggest assholes I had ever met; he was obnoxious, cheated on his girlfriends, threw parties where his racist stepdad would come out and yell the n-word in front of all of his black teammates and was overall not a good guy. The thing with Trey is, and I'll give him credit here, he at least *knows* he's an asshole. Cameron was oblivious. So yes, I knew all about him. *Great to know you're hanging out with such a classy guy. Great influence, truly.*

I looked at Cameron who was now smiling as he thought about his memory with Trey. There was a sudden mood shift in the room and in my heart. I could feel some of my pain starting to numb and I found myself searching for an escape from reality. For reasons I still do not entirely understand, I looked Cameron straight in the eyes and asked, "do you want to go to the bridge with me?"

“Right now?” he asked, looking puzzled.

“Yes, right now,” I said. *I was dead serious.*

“Umm, yeah! Let’s go,” he said, taken aback by my spontaneous suggestion. He had not known this side of me before; I always played it safe when we were together, but after finding my freedom, I also found my adventurous side. “It’s almost 2 a.m. Are you sure this is what you want?” he asked. *Hmm, that may have been the first time he had ever checked to see if something we did was actually what I wanted.*

“Yes. I want to go to the bridge.”

Chapter 22: The Bridge

*You told a convincing story
I believed you, every word
It was such a sweet story,
The sweetest I’ve ever heard*

*But then out came the truth
Unlike the story you told
It told a much different tale
One endless time will hold*

*It goes beyond boy meets girl
It goes beyond a love that’s pure
Instead it shows how cruel you are
That not even my love can cure*

Driving through Wichita Falls at 2 a.m. on a Friday night is like driving through a ghost town. We hardly passed anyone else on the vacant roads as we made our way out to the old, rusty bridge. It felt as though we were the only two people on Earth, just us in this big ole world. We were surrounded by darkness and silence, but I saw a light in Cameron as he drove with both hands on the steering wheel. *One of those hands had always belonged in mine as we drove, but not today; not this time.*

When we arrived to the general area where the bridge was located, we were met with a sign blocking the path of the car from continuing any further.

“Well, this is it. We’re here,” Cam said. Without a word, I got out of the car. It was not a chilly night, but I could not stop myself from gritting my teeth and shaking. *Maybe it was because of the overwhelming emotion pulsing through my veins or maybe it was because I knew I shouldn’t be there, but I couldn’t make the shaking stop.*

We walked along a dusty path until we reached the worn-down bridge, out in the middle of nowhere. *Hmm, we were crossing a bridge when I thought our own bridge had been burned. Ironic much?* Not a person was to be seen, nor a sound to be heard as we walked slowly across the wooden planks. I stopped halfway through to gaze out upon the water. It was reflecting the beauty of the stars like an artist paints what comes to his heart.

“It’s beautiful,” I said. “The trees, the stars, the water, all of this.” I spun in a circle to take it all in, though I could not fully grasp the breathtaking ways of God’s art.

“I know,” Cam said as he came to stand by my side.

I kept walking. “I never would have imagined I would be here with you now,” I said. “I never thought I would see you again.”

“I never lost hope that we would come back to each other,” Cameron said. I didn’t know how to respond, so I didn’t. His words contradicted everything I had thought from the moment we broke up. I never had hope nor desire to come back together, but here we were at an old bridge at 2:30 in the morning. I kept walking until I reached the end of the wooden tracks.

Without a word, I made my way down to the bank of the water and picked a place in the grass to sit. For a moment, I sat alone. *God was with me now, I knew it, but what did He want me to do? Was He giving me this moment with Cameron, or was it just my selfish desires blinding me from God telling me to leave the past in the past? I wasn’t sure, but I felt overwhelmed and at peace all at the same time.* I was startled when Cameron interrupted my thoughts and sat down next to me.

“It’s so peaceful out here,” I said.

“I know,” he replied as he gazed out upon the water. I could only see him in my peripheral. I couldn’t look at him. If I looked at him, I knew I would get carried away in the moment, and I didn’t want that to happen. I could not put my heart in his hands again.

I felt Cameron shift and suddenly I knew his eyes were locked on me. *Oh no, please don't look at me. Please don't...please...* I felt a familiar knot gathering in my throat. My heart was overflowing with emotion, but I knew the second I said anything out loud would be the moment I gave him control over me again. I had to fight this urge to speak on how I felt.

“Kelsey, I love you,” Cameron said. *No, don't say that.*

“I know you do,” I said. I began to cry. “But you shouldn't love me. You are making this harder on both of us.”

“But I do love you. I always will, and there is nothing that will change how I feel. You're it for me; you're the one I want to marry,” he said. His eyes were still locked on me, but I could not bring myself to return the glance.

“You say that now,” I said. “But if we were supposed to be together, we would be. God does not make mistakes. We had some wonderful memories that I will cherish forever, but there was also a lot of bad, and that's okay. In love, we learned, and if you think about how much you love me —”

“I love you more than anything,” he interrupted.

“If you think about how much you love me,” I continued. “And I’m not the right person for you, imagine how much you’re going to love the right person God made for you. That’s what I think about; that’s what has gotten me through some hard days because is it not exciting? Like, wow. I cannot even fathom how wonderful that love will be, and I know we will both find it.” *It’s funny how I was trying to comfort my abuser in this moment. But it was also in this moment that I didn’t see him as my abuser anymore. I saw him as the man I wanted him to be. I saw his mask.*

Cameron shook his head. “I already found that love with you. I will never love somebody more than I love you. You’re special, Kelsey. You’re special, and I was stupid. I was such an idiot, and there is not a day that goes by where I don’t regret not being with you.” He clearly was not ready to let go, and he was saying all of the right things. That’s when I made my first mistake; that’s when I looked at him.

Staring into his blue eyes, I saw the ocean in a sea of hollow sorrow. These were not the same enraged eyes that had been burned into my memory, no, these eyes were soft, gentle even. Minutes passed as we sat in silence, staring at one another. *What is he thinking? What am I thinking?* Then, mistake number two was made: my heart made a confession.

“I’m mad at you,” I cried. “And I’m mad at myself for wanting you. I’m mad because I don’t want to want you, but here I am, and all I want to do is kiss you because it’s like none of this feels real. It’s like the past three months didn’t happen. It’s like the stars will fade and the sun will rise and it will be a new day, and all of this will have been a dream. I’m mad because I want one, last perfect memory with you, and I’m mad because I know it shouldn’t happen.”

Cameron was now in tears too. “And I’m mad because I can’t get the image of you with another girl out of my mind. How could I? How could I want to kiss you when your lips were on someone else’s just last night?” I was a mess, and I found myself cradling my knees, just as I had done so many times before on the bathroom floor.

“Don’t say that, it meant nothing. You mean everything to me,” Cameron said. He grabbed my head in his hands, my blonde locks running in between his fingers. Without hesitation, he kissed me. My heart pounded. *This is wrong. This is wrong.* But it felt so right. I had a rush like no other time before with him, and for the first time in a long time, I truly felt loved. He kissed me with such passion, his lips sealed onto mine, his nose caressing my nose. He moved one of his hands down to my back and he gently eased me down onto the grass, never once letting his lips leave mine. My eyes remained closed as to keep the moment as dream-like as possible. *I hate to admit it, but it was perfect.* The pain trapped within my heart could not be felt while I was in this great escape, and I did not want it to end.

When our kiss had finally ceased and our heart beats began to steady, we sat up and looked out upon the water once more. This time, instead of keeping my distance, I held Cameron’s hand and rested my tired head on his shoulder. *What time is it?* I pulled out my phone to see it was nearly 5 o’clock in the morning. *Time is of the essence, right?*

“Tonight has been perfect, but we really should go. You have to be at the school in a few hours to get ready for your game and I’ve already kept you up way too late,” I said.

“You are more important than any football game, Kelsey. I don’t want tonight to end,” he said.

“Maybe it doesn’t have to just yet, but we need to go home.” *Home*. I’d said it like my home was still his home, but I knew it could never be the same again. *This was all just a dream, it wasn’t real.*

We drove back to my apartment without talking. Instead, I played soft music about lost love in part to remind Cameron of the reality of our situation, and in part to remind myself. Everything felt so normal and so abnormal all at once. I knew I was not ready to say goodbye again. *I know that seems strange, but I had felt like I had spent the night with the guy I fell in love with, not the one with whom I fell out of love.*

When we pulled into the parking lot, I knew the rest of the night would be determined by whether Cameron turned off his car to come up, or kissed me goodnight and goodbye and drove off. He turned off his car. *Okay, maybe he’s just walking me up to my door.* No. I opened the door and Cameron stepped inside.

“Would it be okay if I slept here tonight?” Cam asked. “It’s okay if you don’t want me to, I’ll understand. It’s just so late, and honestly, I miss sleeping with you.” There had been a point where I missed sleeping with him too, very much, but now I wasn’t sure if that was the best idea. Regardless of my gut feeling, I said yes.

While Cameron stripped down to his usual night attire of boxer briefs, I went to the bathroom to wipe away my makeup. This felt all too normal. It was like old times when he

would come over because it was routine, and we'd get ready for bed, maybe watch a little Shark Tank. But with mascara smeared across my face as my moist toilette made circles across my skin, I had to face myself in the mirror. *What are you doing? Stupid girl, stupid girl. He's no good for you!* My beating heart quieted my logic, and in an instant I knew what was about to happen.

I stepped into my bedroom where Cameron was sitting on the edge of my bed. Without making a sound, I slowly inched toward him. I was deliberate with every step, knowing this was wrong, but unable to fight my desire to please him. For the first time ever, I actually wanted to make love to Cameron. Every time it had happened before, I didn't want it to happen; he pressured me or sometimes did not even ask, going against my wishes in order for himself to get a sense of satisfaction. Looking back now, I know I was weak and vulnerable in that moment. I had surrendered control to Cameron once more and I was back to being that scared young woman who would do anything to receive his love.

I placed myself between his knees as I stayed standing and he remained sitting. For a moment, I questioned what I was doing. I was breathless as I looked down at my monster and touched his face to ensure what I was seeing and what I was feeling were real. All throughout my life, I had done everything to make other people happy. I had followed all of the rules, and it still did not prevent me from getting hurt. I was tired of feeling nothing, and Cameron was there making me feel pain and love all at the same time. *I'm done being the good girl.* I took a breath and leaned in to kiss him.

I felt weightless. Like all of the troubles that had been pushing me down for many months were finally being lifted from my shoulders. I wanted to remain in this high, so I allowed what

happened next to occur, despite my better judgement. Cameron and I made love that night, and it was the first time I had actually felt something special and real and intimate. Perhaps it was just the whirlwind of emotions that caused the moment to be enhanced, but there I was, on a cloud. When it was all over, I turned my back to Cameron and he wrapped his arms around me.

“I love you so much,” he said. I pretended not to hear and went to sleep.



Over the next week and a half, Cameron and I began to meet up semi-regularly. He wanted more from me than just sex, but I could not let myself fall for him again. I chose to keep things casual, and though I hate to admit it, I sort of liked feeling in control for the first time, so I kept him going along with intimacy. I have never been the girl to seek physical satisfaction, but every time it happened, I was able to escape from my hurt once more, then he would leave and I would be stuck again.

Over and over, Cameron would confess his feelings for me, but I found it difficult to do the same. I did not trust him, but I found myself wanting to trust him. *Maybe he had changed.* My desire to see him and find comfort in him became stronger than what I anticipated or wanted, but there we were: two broken people seeking comfort in one another. Cameron was fighting his hurt from not having me in his life, but also from the death of his teammate.

A little over a month earlier on September 16, a MSU football player named Robert Grays was hit during a game and went down. Most believe Robert died right then on the field, but he

was not officially pronounced dead until days later when he was taken off life support at a hospital in Houston. Robert was in one of my classes, and though I did not know him well, I felt the impact of his death. When Robert died, a piece of our school died too. *No one is supposed to die young.* Above all, I hurt for his teammates, including Cameron; however, I decided praying from a distance was the best way to handle my need to make things better.

On the night of October 31, Cameron came over. *Leave it to the guy who always wears a mask to come out to play on Halloween.* I hated the fact that everything was sneaky; I wasn't telling anyone I was seeing him, nor did I speak too loudly when he was over in fear of my roommate overhearing us. I felt ashamed to be with him and I knew it had to end eventually, but I was not ready to say goodbye again; not yet. I wanted to ride out this high for a little while longer. Unfortunately for Cameron, he was struggling a lot in life. Guys try to be tough and hide their emotions because it's "not manly to cry," so when Cameron reached out that night on Halloween saying he was really low, I knew it was bad.

"I've been thinking about Robert all day today. I can't get him out of my mind. You're not supposed to die young and you're sure as hell not supposed to die playing a game," he said. He broke down crying like I have *never* seen him cry before. To see him hurting, to see him struggle, made my heart ache. I wished I could take away his pain, so that he would not have to feel it any longer.

I wrapped my arms around Cam in one, big hug. "I don't have the right words to say, I don't think anyone does when it comes to something like this," I cried. "I don't know that any of

us will ever understand why Robert had to be taken from this earth so early, but you have to know that beautiful boy is with Jesus now because he had already served his purpose here on Earth. He no longer has to feel the sting of pain from this cruel world, and he gets to go on playing the game he loved most forever. He may not be physically here, but he will always be with you; carrying you through the good times and the hard times. This is a hard time right now, and I hate it - I hate it for all of you guys, but you have to give it to God. God will see you through this for He is the light." I paused to think. "And for when you need someone here in the flesh, I will always be here for you. I love you, Cam." There, I had said it. The words I had struggled to say and wasn't sure I meant, but I knew he needed to hear in this moment.

"I love you too," he said, then he kissed me. "You always know what to say to make me feel better. There is this halo of comfort about you. I need you right now."

We sat for a while longer, hugging and crying together. *I just wanted his pain to cease; I wanted to be his cure.* Many times before, he had used me to escape his feelings. *Well, he had used my body.* Before, I hated it and I did not want it to happen, but now, I knew he needed an escape. This time, I felt it was okay because I wanted him to feel loved. If he needed to use me to escape his pain, I would let him, partially because I knew I was using him to escape my own. That night, we made love again, and for the first time ever, I actually got close to feeling something, but then he stopped. *He was only in it for himself.* I realized this when he turned me around and used my body to please himself, then he got up, got dressed and stood by the door.

“Expect to see me around every day, Kelsey,” he said. *No, no, no. That’s not what I want.*

“Because even though I know it would take a lot of time and work, I want to be with you. I want to love you for the rest of my life. You’re it. You’re the only thing I want in this world.” *Hmm, “thing.”* “I have to go, but I’ll see you tomorrow. I love you.” Then he walked out the door.

I never saw Cameron again. The next day, he texted me he was not sure he could be with me because he was getting attached again, and that scared him. Two days after that, he texted me he missed me. Three days after that (six days after our last encounter where he professed his love for me), he made his relationship with Tiffany official on Facebook.

Chapter 23: Refuse to be Broken, Refuse to be Silenced

*Wipe away those tears
Put on that smile
Perfect
You must look perfect
Do not let others see your pain
Pain is weakness
Weakness is lacking strength
You must look perfect
Be perfect
Hide your sorrows
Forget your fears
They do not care what you have been through
They only care where you are going
And if you do not go
Where they want you to go
Then you are a failure
That is what will define you,
Failure.
You are disgusting.
You are hideous.
You are stupid.
You are not good enough.
You are not worthy of love....*

And so speaks the serpent.

But the creator of the masterpiece whom He calls His child cries out...

*Cry if you need to
Smile because you want to
Perfect
You are perfect to Me
Relinquish your pain to Me
For I have taken it for you
Leaning on Me is a sign of strength
You are perfect
Because I created you
And to Me
You are a work of art
I'm sorry for your sorrows
But there are better days to come
Fear not My child
For I am with you
I know everything you have been through
And I know where you are going
You have a purpose for Me here
Until you stand by My side in the streets of Heaven
You are such a success
Because I am what defines you
You are incredible.
You are beautiful.
You are smart.
You will always be good enough for Me.
And you are worthy of the greatest love of all
For I am love, and I am with you.*

Who have I become? The ghost of someone I used to know. I thought I had gotten past allowing Cameron to trick me and lie to me, but clearly I had not. Clearly, I had been fooled again, and this time, it was my fault.

I should have known his words meant nothing and he was only telling me what I wanted to hear, but I think the little girl in me was holding onto the child-like faith I've always had in the

goodness of all people. Part of me knew the entire time he was lying, but the other part of me wanted to believe he wasn't. All I knew was I felt incredibly stupid for allowing him back into my life at all. Now it was time to be smart, it was time to be strong, it was time to move on and never look back. *For real this time.*

Let me tell you, there is nothing like having a slime-ball ex to give you motivation to better yourself. For me, it started with going back and reading a letter my mom had written me right after I told her about meeting up with Cameron in October. *Yet again, leave it to Mom to give great advice and a reality check.* She wrote:

Let me start off by saying I love you and I appreciate you sharing with me what you are going through.

As you know, I am sometimes a knee jerk reaction person until I have some alone time to ingest and put my thoughts in order.

Needless to say, after not sleeping well, waking up and going through my thoughts about what we discussed, I think you should heed caution. Again, I completely understand having a gamut of emotions running through you, especially after your discussions with Cameron. I know you are a smart, beautiful, loving person and you don't want to hurt anyone, but you must take care of you first - YOU are the most important and protecting YOU should come first. You can't worry about other people because you have to be in a good place with yourself before you can be in a good place for anyone else.

Again, I totally understand having feelings, after all, you guys were “promised.” Like I said, I was once in your situation; however, Jeff NEVER abused me.

After what you said, I think Cameron is sincere with his feelings/emotions; however, I am leery because a manipulator works that way. Has he really changed? Has he learned to control his anger? He was embarrassed when he saw you doing well during the summer, therefore, as in the past, he lashed out and cut you down in a text message.

Then, once he sees your tweet about being depressed, he contacts you. This time, though, with “I’m here for you.” - Again, I would be cautious. Wolves do not go after the strong; they prey on the weak.

Now, I do agree it was a good idea to finally talk since you ended a long term relationship through a text. Yes, I know he still loves you and you still have mixed feelings about him, but you have to think about YOU.

Now here’s where I have to be brutally honest with you. I knew you would probably suffer depression once your coaching came to an end. You seem to do this when you realize you will not be busy, filling every minute of your day with something or someone. I know you love yourself, but I don’t think you are comfortable with yourself. Does this make sense? Like, you are afraid to be alone. I don’t know why other than you’ve always

had someone - your sister since conception. I don't know why because you are a beautiful soul and you should love being with such a wonderful you. I think you need to find YOU and being with YOU before you get into a relationship, whether it's with Cameron or someone else.

Another thing I would challenge you to do is read up on abusive behavior and the cycles. I read a good article on psychological manipulation, and there are many, many other articles and information out there.

I love you my beautiful, smart and kind girl. You are precious to me. I will be by your side no matter what.

Her words struck a cord with me like nothing had ever before. *She was right, she was so incredibly right.* I wasn't comfortable being alone because I had never had to be. I had put up with such torment from a monster just so I wouldn't have to face being by myself. But I think Cameron lying to me again was actually a huge blessing: first because I knew he would leave me alone now that he was with someone new, and second, it gave me the push I needed to become the best version of myself. I was going to get right in mind, body and spirit, and for the first time ever, Cameron had given me the drive to become my personal best.

For starters, I knew in order to be the best version of myself, I had to erase Cam from my life entirely and prevent him from ever contacting me again, so I blocked his number, and this time it would remain blocked forever. In order to erase Cam from my mind, I started writing. *I*

know, I know; it seems contradicting; however, there was something about putting pen to paper (or rather fingers to keyboard) that precisely removed Cameron from my mind and onto a blank canvas instead. As I wrote, I began to feel lighter and lighter. As I finished each chapter, it was as if I was closing that chapter of my life as well.

Next, I began to pray for Cameron, and his relationship regularly. One of the best sermons I've ever heard in my life talked about praying for the happiness of those who have hurt you, and eventually the bitterness you feel toward them will be no more. I found this to be true. I prayed God would cleanse Cameron's heart and help him manage his anger. I prayed he wouldn't put Tiffany through the things he put me through, and instead show her nothing but kindness. I prayed Cameron's hurting would go away, and that he would find true happiness in life. Last, I would pray and ask God to help me forgive him.

When I thought about forgiveness from God's perspective, I began to feel ridiculous since I had not been able to forgive Cameron. I mean, just think about it: every single day, billions of people sin against God. Out of those billions of people, there are countless souls who hate Him and purposefully work against Him, yet He tirelessly forgives and loves them over and over again. When I looked at it like that, I realized I was essentially placing myself above God. If God can forgive us for every single thing we do to hurt Him, every single sin of the world, but I can't forgive one guy for wronging me, what does that make me? It makes me pathetic. *I have since found forgiveness for Cameron in my heart, and let me tell you, it has been the most freeing part of my entire healing process.*

My next step was becoming the best version of myself physically, so I started doing little things that made a big difference in how I was feeling. After watching an episode of Parks and

Recreation that was all about treating yourself, I decided I would start treating myself by doing a little pampering. Once a week, I would deep condition my hair, give myself an at-home facial, lotion my entire body and whiten my teeth. Every other night, I took a bubble bath and completed a 7-step process of skin care to give myself a fresh, glowing face. I started styling my hair more and dressing cuter, not because I was trying to pick up a guy (*that was my last priority*), but because it made *me* feel prettier.

Adding onto taking care of my body, I began working out harder than ever before. I've always been goal-oriented, so it made sense for me to set a new workout goal to push myself. My friend Sam and I registered to run a half-marathon and the training was vigorous. Let me just tell you, I have never been a runner. I am not built like a runner, I do not have good posture when I run and I can never seem to control my breathing very well. Before my marathon training began, the most I had ever run was three miles, and I almost died. If you would have told me then that one day I'd be running that plus 10.1 miles, I would have laughed at you. But, through the process of training and completing the half marathon, I learned I was capable of so much more than I had ever allowed myself to believe.

With my mom's words forever lingering in my ear, I also began to work on spending more time alone. It sounds silly, but this was not easy for me. I'd always had someone constantly around, and this was the first time in my life I had to adjust to living in silence at times. I started off slowly by doing things like eating alone and shopping alone and watching Netflix alone, and it was honestly so nice. My normal thoughts of bitterness and anxiety no longer haunted me in the emptiness of my room. *I was getting better.*

I had learned to love myself and be comfortable with myself, so for the first time in my life, I truly understood what people meant when they talked about how you can begin to love better when you take care of yourself first. I noticed the relationships around me growing stronger, my bonds with friends and family were unbreakable, and I even had several strangers reach out to me and tell me they wanted to be friends with me. They said they noticed how happy I was and how it looked like I was on the up in life, and they said they wanted to be my friend because they felt like being friends with me would make them a better person. *It was the most amazing compliment I could have received.* Old friends would comment on how I had “gotten my glow back,” and they no longer saw pain behind my smile. I was happier than I had ever been, and I never would have thought that would be the case with me being a single woman.

It was when I realized how well I was doing that I decided there were a couple of things left for me to do. There were still certain places and things that carried a bit of a burden with them in reference to Cameron. I wanted him to no longer have any type of power over me, so I made the choice to do something about the mountains and about the ring.



Though it is true I cannot move mountains, I knew the mountains could move me. Instead of trying to erase my past, I decided I was going to take my hurt and turn it into something beautiful, so one day I called up Taylor and asked if she would drive into Oklahoma to go hiking with me. I didn't explain why, that was just for me to know, but she agreed to join me on my journey.

It was a sunny, brutally hot day, but I wasn't about to allow the heat to stop me from conquering one of the last of my demons. The mountains were bittersweet, and as we drove around the winding roads, I was reminded of a time when things were good with Cameron. Over the past few months, I had allowed myself only to recall all of the bad times, but I could no longer deny he had given me good memories as well. The mountains echoed beautiful times with a man I had once loved. He had given me so much more than a feeling of brokenness; he had given me a year of happiness before everything went terribly wrong, and with all the bad he did to me, Cameron had given me a new purpose. Had he not been abusive, I would have never learned how to truly love myself, others and God to my fullest capacity. He gave me the purpose of being a billboard of hope to anyone else going through a terrible situation like mine, to inspire them of the hope to get out and thrive on their own. He gave me a new understanding and appreciation of the world around me, and showed me no matter how bad things might appear, there is always beauty surrounding me.

So, as Taylor and I hiked the Wichita Mountains, I was reminded of some good times, but with each step forward, I was replacing memories of Cameron with memories of my own. The hike was symbolic of how my life had been for the past year: I had started in a low place, climbed through obstacles, overcame tough circumstances and ended up on top. Standing with the sky by my side, I began to feel small in comparison to all that surrounded me, and I was taken back to a memory I shared with Brianna on the beach a couple of weeks after breaking up with Cam.

My parents and Elyssa had gone to Louisiana for the weekend to move Elyssa into her new house. I decided to stay back because I wanted to spend some girl time with Bri, so she came

over to have a girls weekend. We started the afternoon by going to see *Girls Trip*. The comedy had us laughing most of the time, but we ended up in tears. Not to spoil it or anything, but the message at the end was powerful about never letting anyone make you feel small and embracing yourself for who you are, not who someone is trying to make you become. *Super relevant to me at the time, I know.*

Anyway, we stopped at the grocery store on the way back from the movie to pick up some food for dinner. When we got home, we sang karaoke and danced around the kitchen as we cooked. The songs for the evening included “Forget You” by Cee Lo Green, “I Will Survive” by Gloria Gaynor and “Gives You Hell” by the All-American Rejects. *See a trend here?* It was so much fun and exactly what I needed.

After eating and watching another movie, we were cleaning up the kitchen when I spontaneously asked Bri if she wanted to go to the beach. At this point, it was almost 10:00 p.m., so if me being spontaneous wasn't shocking enough, going to the beach in the pitch black of night sealed the deal. Nonetheless, she agreed to go with me. *Yay for having a supportive best friend who takes random, potentially dangerous trips with you when she knows you're on the verge of a mental breakdown.*

We hopped in the car, rolled the windows down and blasted our music as we drove down I-45. I was driving entirely too fast to have the windows rolled down, so our hair ended up in a tangled mess. *Come to think of it, it was a pretty accurate representation of my life at the time.* We followed the highway all the way down to the seawall and ended up parking in the sand.

It was a windy night and a slight chill was in the air, which, for a Texas summer, is rare. We walked side by side along the water, only allowing the cold waves to kiss our toes every so often.

Just the night before, I had been laying in bed, unable to sleep, and I said a prayer through my tears. “God, please give me peace, please give me peace,” I prayed. That was truly all I wanted; just to no longer be prisoner to the haunting memories of the abuse I had experienced. *Part of me thought I might not ever find peace.* I thought Cameron had damaged me beyond repair, but I was not comprehending the power of my perfect God.

As we walked along the shore, I grew overwhelmed by the magnitude of the night sky and decided to lay in the sand, looking up at the stars. Bri laid next to me, though I hardly noticed. I was too enchanted by the things I was seeing and feeling.

Life goes by entirely too fast, but then there are moments that seem to last a lifetime. *This was one of those moments.* Laying under the stars, my eyes gazed upon thousands of twinkling lights, and though that seemed overwhelming, I knew they were just a small part of billions and billions. It makes one feel small laying there, as if all of the stars in the universe are like all of the problems of human life, and you realize, your problem just isn't that big, and at any moment, any single point in time, you can release it up into the universe; give it to God to be made into something spectacular. Really, we're all just a tiny piece of a bigger picture, but at the same time, if even just one piece was missing, the picture would not be complete.

I could feel my heart beating. It was slow, steady. My mind was not worrying over my troubles, but rather, it was engulfed in a calm as deep as the ocean. The sound of the waves were

all my ears could hear. *Peace. Just complete peace.* For all of the worries I'd had in recent time, I had not one worry in this moment.

I could feel the presence of God watching over me. I could feel Him in the ocean. I could feel Him in the stars. I could feel Him in the sand next to me, laying by my side as if to let me know He was there and He was not leaving me.

That moment was a gift, I know it. I do not deserve anything from the creator of all I was seeing and more, but there it was: a gift from the Almighty King of Heaven and Earth. It was beautiful. It was just me and the ocean and God, all lying under the same stars. There was nothing that could ever come between us: not fear, not hurt, not evil. We are bound by that endless night, that perfect moment, that precious gift.

Time will pass me by and a day will be gone, forever lost as an unappreciated memory, but not that moment. No, that moment will stay with me forever.

I was broken from my trance and found myself back on the mountain. God had given me so much in my lifetime, and sometimes I would fail to recognize the beauty of His creation. This whole time, I had avoided so many places that reminded me of Cameron, failing to recognize how each of those places reminded me of God.

As I laid there on the bathroom floor, He was there. As I faced the wall, crying in the arms of a monster, He was there. As I shook and cried uncontrollably, He was there. He had never left my side; not for one second. I had only ever felt alone because I chose to see the bad instead of choosing to see God. Had I grabbed the hand of the One who walks on water, I would have never drowned, but now I could only learn from my mistakes and choose to see Him and only Him.

Standing at the peak of the mountain, I smiled. I found it ironic how in the Bible, God had once asked Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac on top of a mountain to test his faithfulness. Abraham obeyed and thus became a symbol of a good and faithful servant. Now, here I was on the top of a mountain, going through a test of my own. Perhaps God had allowed me to go through the things I went through in order to trust Him more and to serve Him better. If my experience could bring even just one person closer to knowing God, then it was all worth it in the end. I wanted to be a good and faithful servant to the One who never lets go of me, the One whose love has never failed, and the One who has seen me through even the toughest of situations in my life.

It was in that moment I decided I must share my story, so in order to hold myself to it, I found a stick and wrote the words “refuse to be silenced” in the earth beneath me.

As far as the ring was concerned, I decided to turn it into a cross necklace to be worn every day as a reminder of God taking me out of a bad situation, and creating something beautiful with the pain. Time went on, and I continued to heal until every ounce of bitterness in my heart was replaced with love. I made it my mission to do my best to love like God loves, to forgive like God forgives and to be kind like God is kind.



It is a Friday evening. I pick up my laptop and continue writing down my story, just as I have many nights before. My story is imperfect, it is difficult to write and sometimes, I have to step away from it for a moment before I am able to relive my horrors, but the story is mine. As

I shut down my computer and the screen turns black, I catch my faded reflection staring back at me. This past year has changed me more than I could have ever expected, but in the most beautiful way possible. Before now, I was the girl who allowed herself to be run over, who accepted mistreatment as a way of life, a girl who didn't love herself enough to walk away from the things that were hurting her, a girl with no hope or faith in the future she was offered. This face looking back at me now tells a different story. I am strong. I am worthy. I am fearless. I am beautiful. I have a voice and I'm going to use it. I am powerful. I am never alone. I am a survivor of verbal, emotional and sexual abuse, and my story is not over.