

The Incident

By K.E. Ward

PROLOGUE

In the town of Glenwood, New Hampshire, a large, old school building perched on the edge of a hill some two miles from the center of town. It had gray and brown stones and small, square windows encircling its perimeter.

It was Williams Davis Elementary School, the daytime home for the town's bright young minds.

On a cool September day, the sky was completely white with clouds, but no breeze blew through the trees, some of which were already beginning to turn shades of orange and red. Blackbirds dotted the trees surrounding the schoolhouse. Restless, they flew from branch to branch, seemingly in search of more suitable arrangements. The mighty evergreens stood amongst their coloring neighbors as reminders of the recent, indeed very green summer in Glenwood that year. There had been a lot of rain, and of course, a lot of life to show for it. But the residents of the town were excitedly awaiting the prime of fall, arguably their most beautiful season. Nestled between two

peaks of the White Mountains, the town spread over winding hills patched with large areas of mixed forests.

That year, Glenwood was a town of moderate affluence. A few large corporations owned work bases nearby, and the commute from Glenwood by executives was found to be pleasant and easy. Upper middle-class three bedroom homes were more commonplace here than low-income housing or small, same level houses. In its most expensive neighborhood, one could find a house here and there valued at well over a million dollars, but again, this was the exception.

It was a relatively young community. Founded in the late 1800's, as a tourist spot, Glenwood's oldest buildings were hideaways for vacationers. One of its oldest buildings was a bed and breakfast overlooking the dense forest to the north. Another of its oldest buildings was Williams Davis, the schoolhouse, originally meant for students of all ages. The town still attracted some tourists, but year-round was much more popular, in the mid-1980's, as a residents town, than as a vacation spot. Nevertheless, if a tourist roamed the downtown area, he could dine at a nice restaurant, and afterwards go dancing at the town's very own dance club, *The Steamer*.

It was a tight-knit community, and celebrated very little crime on its well-paved streets. Glenwood liked to think of itself as, "an exceptionally safe town." About ten years prior, there was a rash of break-ins in several

of the local houses, causing mild hysteria. Some families resorted to buying extra locks, fences, or guard dogs. Some people decided to exercise their right to bear arms. For the first time ever in Glenwood, both men and women were keeping guns in their houses for fear of future break-ins, in the hopes that these guns could be used in self-defense. It was the seventies, a time when crime was on the steep upward slope.

But the burglars never did come back to strike again. Two of them were caught and jailed, and if there were more of them, they were neither named nor did they leave any kind of trail. For the most part, peace resumed and residents returned to their normal lives, enjoying the tranquility and the beauty of living in a mountain town seated a bit isolated from the remainder of its home state.

At Williams Davis, school had been in session for only a few weeks now. It was well into the afternoon. Recess was long over, and the final bell was yet ring. Still, there was no breeze, and it was as though the wind, along with the children, was holding its breath in anticipation for the clock to reach three o'clock, and release its prisoners at long last.

A few of the cars with parents had already arrived. There were sedans and station wagons, and a few trucks. As the children were dismissed for the day, loud crunches could be heard as their feet trampled on dead, brown leaves

that had fallen to the ground. Certainly, it was the new season, and excitement was alive in the air.

Two boys emerged from the fourth grade wing, their arms over each other's shoulders as they playfully hit and shoved each other.

"You dipwad," said the blond one. "If you hadn't of said anything, Miss Alcott wouldn't've given us any homework." He lightly punched the other little boy, the one with the head of dark brown hair, in in the shoulder.

Mark replaced his glasses, which had fallen down on the bridge of his nose while his friend was rough-housing him. "C'mon, Cory. No WAY she would've forgotten. It's NOT MY FAULT."

"Noogie-time!" yelled Cory. Mark bent over forwards in peals of laughter. Cory pinned his best friend in a headlock and proceeded with the dreaded operation. "You teacher's pet. You weekend homework-giver."

"STOP it! I didn't do it!" By then both boys were laughing hysterically.

"You know you love Miss Alcott. You know you'd love to kiss her and marry her and have babies with her." Cory was merciless in his teasing.

"Look," said Mark, as he laid his hands out in front of him. "All I did was ASK if she had any work for us this weekend. I'm not the one who GAVE it to us!"

"Yeah, and five minutes before the bell rang, too."
Cory gave his biggest grin, a sure sign that he was not really mad at his long-time pal, Mark.

They put their arms back over each other's shoulders and descended down the hill off school grounds, beginning to make the trek by foot to their neighborhood, which was within walking distance from Williams Davis. The coolness outside was a welcome contrast to the stuffiness inside the classrooms. Just a few weeks earlier, Maine was in the midst of a full-blown heat wave, temperatures soaring well into the nineties, but now, in mid-September, by stark comparison, highs were a mere fifty-eight degrees. It was going to be a cold winter, meteorologists predicted.

As the two young boys crossed the street, Mark turned and spoke. "I thought I saw your mom's station wagon. Was she supposed to pick you up today?"

"No, I don't think so," said Cory. He coughed and then rubbed his nose. "Megan has ballet again. She told me this morning I had to walk home." He got an idea. "Hey, we can hang out at my house for a while, if you want."

It was a commonplace occurrence and almost went without asking. But Mark was glad that he asked. "Sure, I guess."

The rule for the bus system was that if you lived a mile or more away from the school house, then a bus would be assigned to pick you up and transport you, but since both boys lived under a mile away, neither of them took

buses. Cory's house was rather far away-- just under a mile. His mother liked it, though-- she liked to see him get exercise sometimes, considering the fact that Cory was slightly overweight for his age.

Cory was a popular kid. In school, he was a chatterbox and a bundle of activity. All the children at school adored him. He had blond hair and bright, intensely blue eyes. He was an excellent socializer, and not shy in the least. He could come up to someone he had never met before and just begin talking without any problems whatsoever. He was good at sports, despite being slightly overweight, and outgoing in any setting. Girls liked him, too, but Cory would have none of that "just yet." He was intelligent, but his grades were often lagging. He preferred friends and fun any day to completing a stack of homework, and it often showed.

Mark, on the other hand, was very shy and most of the time, very quiet. He made excellent grades and always did his work. He was not nearly as outgoing as his friend Cory was, but when the two got together Mark's whole countenance just seemed to light up and they always had fun together. When present, Cory was to be able to bring Mark outside of his solitary world, when usually he would just stay to his introverted self. Mark wore glasses, and had a thin, long face and pale skin with dark, black-brown eyes. Unlike Cory, Mark was nowhere near overweight. At the age of nine, he was gawky and bony.

They entered Cory's neighborhood, Pinecrest, whose entrance was marked by two elegant stone pillars standing on either side of the road. It was a new neighborhood, the last of the homes having just been finished in the past Spring. They were mid-size homes, mostly two-level.

"So what d'you wanna do today?" asked Cory.

"I dunno," responded Mark. "Do you wanna play with your army men again?"

"No, aren't we too old for that?" said Cory. "We're in the fourth grade now. We may as well be playing with my sister's dolls if we play with my army men. Besides, I'm tired of it."

"O.K. then we can do something else."

"I know!"

"Yeah?"

"We can play with my Atari, that'd be fun."

Mark changed the subject. "Hey Cory, do you like Mary?"

"Ewwwwwwww, yuck!!!" he replied emphatically. "She has a crush on me, but she's gross."

Mark laughed and shoved him. "But she looooooves you, Cory..."

"STOP it!"

"Do you loooooove her?"

"STOP it, Mark, STOP it!" They giggled.

After walking a couple of blocks down the road, they came to the shortcut. Into the woods, a row of trees had

been cut down so that electrical transmission towers could be erected there. This turned out to be a nice shortcut from the school to Cory's house, he discovered. It was a bit overgrown with weeds, but it was the most direct route home. Cory followed this route every single time he walked.

Cory ran ahead, shifting his bookbag more comfortably over his right shoulder. "Come on, dipwad!" he yelled to Mark, who was lagging behind.

Mark began to wheeze a little bit. "Hey Cory, do you ever wonder if you could get electrocuted if you climb on one of these things?" He referred to the electrical transmission towers.

"I dunno. Maybe if you get up to the wires." They looked up at one of them and saw the thick power lines dangling high above their heads.

"I saw a bird once get electrocuted by pecking through wires outside our house. I saw it right as it happened, too."

"Was he all bloody and gross?"

"No, he was just dead."

They walked for a good distance, passing a dozen of the towers before reaching the road again, but not before cutting through someone's backyard. They were finally on Spruce Lane, Cory's street.

The remainder of the walk was a short one. All they had to do was walk up one short hill, and then they were

home. They made the trek easily. Mark's asthma was acting up, but only slightly.

Cory's house was 4236. No car in the driveway. No one was home. He checked the mailbox and pulled out an armload of mail as Mark waited on the front lawn. When he was finished, Cory pulled out his housekey, which was connected to a shoelace tied around his neck, and went to the front door and unlocked it.

"C'mon in," he called. They entered the house, which was warm, empty and silent. It smelled of potpourri and fabric softener, and a hint of homemade bread that was probably prepared earlier in the day. The living room was semi-dark because the translucent linen shades were drawn. Cory turned on a couple of standing lights and tossed his bookbag quickly onto the floor, then kicked off his shoes and rubbed his socked feet onto the carpet. "Make yourself at home," he said. Mark carefully set his bookbag on the floor, next to Cory's.

"Can I take off my shoes too?"

"Sure." Mark sat down in a chair and took off his shoes, one by one. It felt good to sit down. Mark took a deep breath as he sat back into his chair and into the cushions. It looked like they were going to be alone for a while. There was no sign of Cory's mother, who was usually at home to greet him when he arrived home from school. Every once in a while, Cory would arrive to an empty house for an hour or two, but it was a strange day when that

would happen. Today was one of those days. They sat in the living room in chairs for a few minutes, finishing up catching their breaths. Then Cory suggested they go get something to eat in the kitchen, where the bread smell was coming from.

"What would you like? We have cookies, and juice, and milk, and sandwiches, if you want."

"I'll have some cookies and milk," said Mark.

Cory took out two tall glasses from the cupboards and filled them both to the brim with some 2% milk from the refrigerator, then went to the pantry and got out an unopened package of oreo cookies. He opened the package, took two paper towels, and put ten cookies on each towel, then he handed one of the towels and one of the glasses to Mark. Without putting anything back, he said, "C'mon, let's go into the t.v. room and watch cartoons."

"Okay." Carelessly forgetting about the mess they made in the kitchen, they happily parked themselves in the den in front of the Mitchell's five-year-old color television set, Mark on the sofa, and Cory on the floor. Cory flipped the switch on the set and they began snacking away and watching away. If Cory's mother had been there, she would have insisted they eat a healthier snack and perhaps choose "another activity besides television," but since she wasn't, the boys were slacking off a bit. They were having a high time.

After the show was over Cory made another suggestion. He suggested they play with his video games for a while. Mark agreed to the thought. Soon they were attacking electronic enemies with electronic weapons. But the activity soon tired of appeal, and after only about forty minutes of playing, they both grew bored.

Mrs. Mitchell still wasn't back. Not knowing what to do, the boys found themselves brainstorming for ideas. "No army men," insisted Cory, who was positive they were too old for it.

"So what should we do?" Cory chomped on his thumb, thinking pensively. He thought for several minutes.

"Well, we can't go bike riding because my bike needs fixing..."

"...Yeah..."

"...and we can't play ball because I lost it last week..."

"...Yeah..."

Cory's face lit up. He had an idea. "I know," he said. He put his pointer finger up in the air and leaned in close to his friend.

"But this is big, Mark. You've gotta swear to me that you will never tell another soul that I showed this to you, ever. You have to promise me that." His voice was low.

"Okay, I promise. So what is it?"

"Mark, I have something really cool to show you, and you will not be disappointed, I promise you." Cory was

wearing a half-smile. Mark could sense that this really was big. "But you've gotta promise me, you've got to swear to me that what you're about to see you will keep to yourself, because I could get in a lot of trouble for this."

"Okay, I promise."

Cory got up from his sitting position and motioned for Mark to do the same. "What you're about to see, stays between us."

"I know, you already said so."

"So you with me?"

"Yeah," answered Mark.

Cory led him to the front hall to the foot of the stairway. "Just, if you hear my mom's car pull in, tell me okay?"

"Okay." Mark's excitement was growing. His best friend was being mysterious. They both giggled as they marched up the stairs, to the second floor.

"This is gonna be so cool," said Cory.

When they got up the stairs, Mark was expected him to lead him into his room, (I mean, after all, there was *lots* of cool stuff in Cory's room...) but instead, they stopped dead in front of Cory's father's study. Mark recognized that room to be that because the first time he ever came over to Cory's house he got lost on the way to the bathroom and ended up wandering into his father's study. But he had never gone back in since. "You wanna go in *here*?"

"Yeah," Cory said nonchalantly. But then he put his pointer finger to his lips. "Remember, don't *tell* anybody..."

Mark was a little uneasy. "Okay, I guess..."

The room smelled of ink and pipe tobacco. It was a medium-sized rectangular room, with a sliding-door closet to one side, and a window to the adjacent side. In the center of the room was an oak-wood desk with a blotter and a typewriter on top. Other than the desk, the study was bare of furniture. The floor was hard wood, and was not covered with any rugs. The most decorative items in the room were the drapes, which were colored a plain royal blue.

Cory pushed fully open the door to the entrance of the room, which had been only partially open. "Let's go inside," he said, his voice almost in a whisper. Mark slowly nodded in agreement. The two boys tip-toed inside. Cory flipped on the light, and closed the door behind them.

Once inside, Cory no longer spoke in a whisper. "You can see the driveway from the window," he said. "That way, if Mom and Megan come home, we can get out quick. If *Dad* comes home," he said, "we'll see *it, too.*"

Cory approached the desk. He pulled out the chair and proceeded to open the right top drawer. Within a few seconds, he carried a small metal lock-box in his arms.

"Ooooh..." cooed Mark, providing the occasion with sound effects. "What's in it?"

"You'll see," answered Cory, a silly grin on his face. He set it down on top of the desk, and disappeared from the room, leaving a curious Mark by himself for a moment. When he came back, he carried a key. "They keep it in their bedroom," he explained, still grinning.

When Cory turned the key and started to open the box up, Mark leaned over in attempt to get a peek. But Cory shooed him away. "Uh uh uh," he said. "Wait till I say you can see."

"Okay."

"Now close your eyes."

The little boy patiently took off his glasses and shut his eyes. "Is it ready yet?" asked Mark.

"Just a second... okay now. You can open your eyes." Mark put back on his glasses and focused his eyes. Cory was holding something behind his back.

"Lemme see," complained Mark.

"Okay okay. Now get ready cuz this is gonna knock your socks off."

"Stop torturing me and lemme see."

Cory pulled out something small and black from behind his back. Mark knew immediately what it was. It was a gun.

"Cory, your dad has a *gun*? You're messing around with your dad's *gun*?"

"Shhh, shhh. Don't wake up the neighbors."

"Cory, maybe we shouldn't be--"

"Shhh. C'mon, Mark." Cory tossed the device up with his hands and then caught it again. "You're not afraid, are you?"

"No."

"Well then play with me."

Mark was really hesitant about this one. "I don't know, Cory--"

"Just one quick game. It'll be fun. Then we can put it back and that'll be the end of it. No one'll find out. I promise."

"Well... I don't know."

"Please?"

"I don't know, Cory."

"C'mon, it's not loaded."

Mark thought about that one. He did find the thought of playing with a real gun exciting. He had seen them on television and in pictures, but never up close, like right now. "Can I see that?"

He handed it to him. "Sure." It was heavy. He looked at the little hole at the end where the bullet is supposed to come out and at the button-thingy, the trigger, where you're supposed to press when you want to shoot someone.

"It's neat," remarked the boy. Cory retrieved the device and held it up to the window, aiming it at the house next door.

"Think I could get that trash can next door?" he asked.

"Maybe," replied Mark. "You would have to go through the window," he added.

Then Cory adjusted his aim to Mark and started giggling. "I'm gonna get you if you don't start running!" he exclaimed.

Mark relented and started giggling, too. He ducked behind the desk as Cory chased him down and made shooting noises with his mouth. "You're dead meat, sucker!" cried the assailant. "Pow! Pow!"

There was plenty of running space in Cory's dad's study. The boys had little to hide behind, but a lot of floor space to chase each other with. Around and around the room they ran, laughing all the time. Mark died about a half a dozen times before it was all over. Then Cory called time to catch his breath. Half bent over, and in between breaths, Cory asked, "Hey Mark, you want it now?"

Mark eyed the piece of machinery. Timidly, he thought it over in his head. It was awfully appealing. But it was frightening, too. Only, he didn't want his friend to see that. "Are you sure?" he asked.

"Yeah."

The gun exchanged hands. Mark was shaking a little bit inside, suddenly overcome by an inexplicable fear. He hoped silently that it did not show. Bravely, he wielded

the gun in the same manner that his friend had just done-- pointer finger on the trigger.

"You ready?" asked Cory.

"I think so," responded Mark. Mark lifted the gun up and started chasing his friend. Again, around and around they ran, laughing all the way.

But then Mark backed Cory into a corner. The gun was aimed straight at Cory's head. Cory had nowhere to go-- not left, not right. Cory lifted up his bright blue eyes to Mark, who was still holding the gun. He made a shooting sound with his mouth. "Pow!"

Cory was breathing deep breaths. He said not a word and made not a move. Mark had him pinned.

Cory said quietly, "Shoot me."

Mark was confused. "What?"

"You heard me," he responded. "Shoot me."

"But I already did," replied Mark.

Cory shook his head slowly from left to right and then raised his arms. "No... I mean *really* shoot me. Pull the trigger, Mark."

Mark was silent for a few moments.

"I told you it wasn't loaded. Don't be a wuss. Just do it." His arms were still in the air.

In Mark's memory years later, the moments that followed were little more than a blur to him. But there was one detail that would never, ever escape his mind about that day: more than any other day with Cory as a little boy

that he could ever remember, how intensely blue his eyes were.

Perhaps it was that the impact of the gun going off in Mark's hands knocked his glasses off his face, and therefore, not ever bothering to fix them himself, he saw very little of the events following Cory's death. But one thing was for certain: the lone bullet that struck his best friend squarely in the forehead, killed him instantly.

It was that Autumn day, at about 5:43 in the afternoon, when a young mother of two elementary school-age children both attending Williams Davis Elementary School, pulled into the driveway with her leotard-donning daughter in her wood-paneled blue station wagon, and thought, *What a beautiful day it's turned out to be*, as she closed and locked the doors, glad to finally have arrived home.

CHAPTER TWO

Pound! Pound! Pound! Mark groaned and covered his head with his pillow. It was too early. And what was that annoying noise?

The seventeen-year-old half-asleep young man blindly reached over to his nightstand and grabbed the alarm clock. With an angry gusto, he hurled it against the wall. *Bang!* Not giving a flying leap that he'd probably dented the plaster, and certainly not giving a flying leap that he'd almost certainly broken his clock, he closed his eyes. All

he wanted to do was sleep. Serious about catching some more shuteye, he gathered up his covers and pulled them over his head.

But the obnoxious pounding noise did not cease. And worse, a high-pitched, squealing voice now accompanied it. "Mark! You better get your butt up right now! You have less than a half hour to get ready and you don't want to be late for school!" Again, the disgruntled teenager groaned.

Damn. He'd forgotten. Somewhere in dreamland the fact that today was the first day of his junior year of high school had escaped his memory. But there would be no escaping it: summer had drawn out long enough, and it was finally time to go back to the place of his nightmares, the place he had been dreading to go to for weeks in advance. No childlike excitement for him, no giddy anticipation on his part about the return to an institution that so many others found, for a reason that was impossible for Mark to understand, useful. Unlike certain other members of his group of friends, including his girlfriend, he hated the imposition of having to spend day after day inside of a cramped building with a bunch of screaming teenagers with an extreme passion. And, it seemed, that was about how much the teachers at that school disliked him, too.

"I'm up, Mom!" hollered the teen, in a weak, sleepy voice.

"And don't forget, you have to pick up Beth today," she answered back. "You don't want to keep a nice girl

like that waiting around. Remember, she doesn't want to be late for school, either." He found it ironic that his mother like Beth. In his mind, they were the last two people on Earth that he would have ever expected to get along.

It was 1990 and a lot of things had changed. Mark was seventeen now, but it seemed to him that he'd already lived a life a lot longer than that...time had gone by achingly slowly since eight years ago, when he'd pulled the trigger on his best friend, Cory Mitchell, killing him instantly. Seasons had passed and relationships had changed...but one thing had remained the same: the constant pang of emptiness that had plagued him since those early days of his childhood was still there, and as encompassing as ever.

Mark sighed heavily. His body was telling him he needed to sleep for at least twelve more hours. His limbs felt like an innertube filled with water--heavy and bloated. His head swam, and he was weak...and it felt as though a two-ton weight were sitting on his chest, threatening to implode his lungs.

Cory had been a light in his otherwise dull life all those many years ago, his only bridge to a social existence. In effect, he was not only his best friend but his *only* friend, filling the space in his life that his parents tried to, but could not manage to, fill.

Mark was a painfully shy boy, and had trouble reaching out to others, in no matter how small a way it would be.

For example, even asking for simple directions from a peer proved to be a difficult task for Mark. His face would flush, he would be suddenly overcome with fear and anxiety, and most often, he would opt not to say anything to another person, unless it was an emergency.

But Cory was the bridge. He was the one person in the world with whom Mark had felt completely comfortable, completely at ease, completely himself. Although the two children were so unlike (Cory was outgoing and Mark was shy), Mark found that with this one boy, he could truly and easily express himself, without the fear of being judged.

And *he* was the one who pulled the trigger. *He* was the one to blame for his beloved friend's death. Nothing, no nothing could take that reality away, no matter how much he longed for it to be. After his death, guilt and self-blame and self-doubt took over the space where Cory had been, almost becoming a physical presence in his life. And suddenly, he was faced with two dilemmas: coming to terms with the tragic death of his friend, and the horrible guilt that accompanied it.

He stared up at his airplane mobile which dangled slowly above his bed. He'd had that stupid thing since he was eight, and every morning, without fail, he would open his eyes and see the cardboard cutouts twirling and flying slowly through the air. He was seventeen...shouldn't he have gotten rid of it by now?

He mustered all of his energy, stood up straight on his mattress and ripped it from the plaster in the ceiling, filled with a sudden rage. He wadded it up into a big ball of trash and sailed it through the air, towards the wastebasket. Air-ball.

He collapsed down again, groggily burying his face in the softness of the pillow, tempted to fall back into the comforting blanket of sleep. His girlfriend was going to be pissed at him for being late.

After a few minutes, he jumped out of bed, suddenly coming to the decision that he really did have to get ready, despite the exhaustion in his body. Why was he so tired all the time? He rubbed his eyes, and yawned.

He was dressed only in white boxers when he padded over to the damaged alarm clock. Amazingly, the secondhand was still turning. It was 7:24 and he had just enough time to get showered and put on some clothes.

He left his room and headed for the bathroom. Inside, the mirror was dirty. Looking into it he saw a leper with drooping eyes and tousled hair. The bones in his face looked especially prominent this morning. He wasn't skinny, but he was nowhere near beefy, either. He had a flat stomach with a few muscles poking out. He turned away from the mirror, went back to his room and flipped on his stereo system. The sound was set to max-treble max-bass. He liked the new style of music. It was angry, passionate, guttural, and raw. Cory would have liked this, he thought,

as he adjusted the speakers. He twirled the knob until it was up to seven. The voice was loud, in-your-face, bloody and angry.

He went into the bathroom and stood in the shower stall, after having stripped himself of his clothes. As he turned the knobs the ice cold water cascaded on top of his head and ran down the crevices of his body. He opened his mouth real wide and drank as much of the tap water as he could before he ran out of breath. He was so damn thirsty. He breathed hard and opened up again for another gulp. He felt like he could drink the Mississippi river dry. He soaped up his body and his hair, then rinsed. The water was finally warming up. He rested his head against the tiles and closed his eyes. He looked from his wet body to the shower floor, where he was transfixed, for several seconds, by the way the water ran down the drain. He realized, with a surprised start, that he had almost fallen asleep standing up.

He lathered his body again with soap, covering every inch, then rinsed off again. He felt dirty, unnaturally so. Then he just stood there for a few moments, letting the heavy stream of water run over him, feeling the sensation of it. He noted, with regret, how his senses seemed somewhat dulled.

When he was finished, he stepped out to a steamy bathroom, breathing in the warm vapors. He wiped off the mirror over the sink with his hand and examined his face

for the second time. No longer a leper, but he looked tired. There were bags under his eyes and his cheeks were hollow-looking. He lathered up and gave himself a quick shave, then he toweled off, and went back to his room.

He hadn't done laundry in ages. He examined a pile of clothes which was lying on the floor and chose a pair of dirty, ripped jeans from the assortment. Then he threw on a long-sleeved black t-shirt with a hole in the shoulder he found flung over the chair behind his desk.

Without combing it, he ran his fingers through his damp hair and curled it behind his ears. He didn't have time to dry it, so he headed downstairs with wet locks.

He was greeted by a barrage of harsh words. His mother was sitting at the kitchen table, coffee in hand, waiting for him. It was a fearsome sight: his mother was in the suit and pumps her job required her to wear, an exasperated expression on her face. During the week, she worked for an accounting firm uptown. It was a tough job; sometimes she worked eighteen hours a day, and it was quite often that he would go days without running into her once. One thing was for sure: the pressures of a high-stress job left her cranky and intolerable to be with whenever she was home. It was just a matter of time, he knew, before he could move out of the house and get a place of his own.

It was a few minutes past eight and his mother was already dressed to go. As soon as she saw him, she put down her coffee and proceeded with the attack.

"You'd better kick yourself into the twelfth grade if you think I'm writing any excuse notes for the first day of school, Mark."

"I know, I know, Mom," was his answer.

She narrowed her eyes. "Just what do you suppose they'll think at that school with you starting off this way? With all the trouble you got into last year? Think, Mark, think. It was lazy and selfish of you to oversleep."

"I know, Mom, I know." He couldn't bear listening to her chastisings. He never appreciated them, but today they seemed especially unbearable.

She crossed her legs. "Seven absences and twenty-two tardies last year, Mark. Believe me when I say I remember that meeting with the guidance counselor we had. I had to take valuable time off of work because of you."

"I'm leaving now."

"Oh, no you don't."

"I'm only going to be late if you keep hassling me like this." The tall, thin, lanky boy placed his hands on his hips.

"Just two more words."

"What's that?"

"Break-fast." She motioned to the plate of two cold pancakes and the glass of orange juice on the table. "You need to eat."

He scratched his temple. "Damn."

"And don't swear. I get enough verbal pollution from the women at work."

Mark rolled his eyes and cursed. His mother had already averted her attention to the daily newspaper; she obviously wasn't taking no for an answer. "Fine," he said, as he sat down. Despite his slightly nauseated stomach, he forced the dry pancakes into his mouth.

By then a baby headache was already starting to grow at his temples. Before long, he knew it would get worse. "Can I have some of that coffee?" he asked.

"No," she said, pulling it away. He continued shoveling food into his mouth, stifling the urge to grab her mug and swipe a gulp anyway.

But it was more than just the physical sensation; somehow the sickness in his body seemed to be permeating his emotions, too, making him feel a sense of deep loneliness that he had been experiencing in an especially poignant way for weeks now.

When he finished his plate, he tossed the dirty dishes into the sink. "When will you be home?" she demanded.

He hitched his bag over his right shoulder. "Beth's got cheerleader tryouts today."

"So when does that mean you'll be home?"

"What do you care?" he chided.

She sighed dramatically. "Don't start with me."

He relented. "I dunno. Seven, I guess. The guys and I might go out again tonight."

She pursed her lips and then frowned. "It's a schoolday, Mark," she said.

"It's not like they'll give us any homework," he replied.

"They might," she answered.

He didn't respond to her final comment. Instead, he gathered his things together. "I'm leaving," he announced, and made way for the door.

She did not ask for a kiss. She didn't smile at him. He knew what she was thinking: she was a single woman with a full-time occupation and a part-time job as a mother. If she was home *some* of the time and asked questions *most* of the time, then she was doing her job. Ever since Dad left home, seven years ago, she ran the place like it was a business.

Mark headed towards his car without looking back. Glancing at his watch, he took note of the time. Good. Beth wasn't going to be mad.

Last year, Mark's father had bought him a second-hand Ford convertible to celebrate his sixteenth birthday. It was about ten years old without a lot of mileage on it. It was a good car; pretty sturdy. He took it everywhere, inside and out of Glenwood. He unlocked the driver's side door and got in, throwing his things in the back, then buckled up and closed the door. Before turning the ignition, he took out a bottle of aspirin from the glove compartment and took a few into his mouth and chewed. He

wincing on the bitter flavor. By now his head was pounding pretty bad, and he silently wished he'd taken something earlier. To cut the taste, he then rolled down the window and lit up a cigarette.

He started up his car and headed for Beth's neighborhood. It took him less than five minutes to get there. Traffic was surprisingly light that morning, despite the start of the new school season. He'd taken back roads where there were no traffic lights.

Her house was practically a mansion. It was plantation-style, with four white stone pillars to the front of the house. It was three-story, with a pool and a jacuzzi in back. The front was painted white except for the door and the shutters, which were painted grey.

The Hammons' front door opened no less than thirty seconds after Mark's car arrived in the driveway, and out she came.

She was a vision that day. She was wearing tight-fitting jeans and a new silk blouse. Her long blonde hair was waved and brushed and left down, falling to the mid of her back. Mark could not help but notice how highly appealing she looked to him that day. She seemed to float down the front steps and glide across the lawn with her dance-like strides. As she approached the car, she took off the purse which was hanging from her shoulder and clasped it with her two hands.

Mark could see that her makeup was heavier than usual. Her eyelashes were thickly painted with dark mascara, and her lips were a shade of deep mauve. It made her look cheap and tawdry--and, if he were honest with himself, he would admit that he was guilty of liking that sort of thing. As she opened the door and got in, swinging her legs over the seat, he could smell the strong scent of her perfume.

Her fragrance was floral and musky. Beth bent over and gave him a soft, wet kiss. "Hi, sweetie," was her hello. She reached over to touch his face, scratching him with her long nails. He grabbed her hand and kissed it.

"Hi, yourself."

He put the car into gear and sped off. As he was driving, he reached into the backseat with one of his hands and retrieved something for Beth. "You left this at my place," he said, as he dropped a black bookbag into her lap. It had a multi-colored embroidered butterfly attached to the back of it.

She frowned.

"What's wrong?"

She rolled her eyes. "You'll never believe my sister," she said. "She is the biggest brat in the world. The only way she'd be happy is if she spent her whole life with a mirror fastened in front of her pretty little face."

"What did she do now?"

"Ally wants to be a model. She spent three hours in the bathroom this morning fawning all over herself. I tried to get in, but she said she needed time to make herself beautiful." Her eyes turned into two smoky slits. "You see what I have to put up with?"

Mark turned on the stereo in his car to the station he'd been listening to that morning.

"I can't believe you listen to that crap, Mark. How can you take that in the morning?"

He ignored her. "Maybe there's a boy at school she wants to impress," Mark offered.

"Yeah, but that's gotta be some boy." She looked at her nails, which were freshly polished and manicured. She was as annoyed as she was annoying today, Mark thought dully. But beautiful.

"Who do you have for homeroom?" asked Mark.

"Miss Campbell. I have her for English, too. Who do you have?"

Mark searched around in his pocket, then found his schedule, a white slip of paper that was thoroughly crumpled and torn, and threw it at her. "I don't know. Read it to me."

"Mrs. Blum. That's like the whole building away," she complained.

They drove past the old courthouse, which, although collapsing from age, was still in use. The six stone pillars in front were partially covered with crawling ivy,

and the stones that made up the front steps were falling out, crumbling. Besides the old schoolhouse, it was a landmark in their small town, the town that Mark had never been able to get away from.

"We never have any classes together. When are we ever going to see eachother?"

As they reached an interseccion, Mark put the car in park and reached over and kissed her. "Whenever you want," he said. He found, usually, that she was a pushover for his kisses.

Beth sat back in her seat. "Oh, sure, you can cut class, but I'm taking college courses this year. Do you realize how important that is?"

"Then we'll meet after school."

"I can't. I have this stupid cheerleading thing I have to go to. All the j.v. babies have tryouts today."

"Well maybe I can come and watch."

"Maybe." Beth looked at her watch. "We better get there soon. I don't want to be late."

Mark turned up the volume on his stereo. As they made the drive, Beth lit up a cigarette and flicked the ashes out the window. She hated the fact that Mark smoked, but she herself was an occasional smoker.

When they approached the school, the traffic started. Cars were coming into the parking lot from all directions. Dozens of kids were swarming into the school. They had five minutes before the first bell was supposed to be rung

when Mark finally found a parking space. As quickly as he could, he turned the car off, got out and opened the door for Beth. Together, they walked to the main entrance.

As they were going in, Mark took a puff from his inhaler. Beth held his hand as they crowded into the building, the air inside clear and cool. The lights looked dim compared to the outside. Eventually his eyes adjusted, and the sight of screaming teenagers looked like a circus. He saw Joey Parrish talking to some short red-haired girl against her locker and intended to go and talk to him.

Joey was the type of guy who would and could be friends with anyone. He was gregarious and talkative, fun to be around, and had a wicked sense of humor. He was a year younger than Mark, but in the same class. They'd been friends for a few years now, and Mark found that he was always dividing his time between Mark and his "other" friends.

"I'll be going now," Beth said. They parted ways with a long kiss. She slipped her hand underneath his shirt and scratched him lightly with her nails. "Don't be late, O.K.?"

Mark nodded in agreement. As they pulled away from each other, the first bell rang, signaling three minutes before the start of homeroom. He watched her disappear down the hall. Then, realizing he didn't have time to speak with Joey, began the search for Mrs. Blum's classroom.

In homeroom, schedules were passed out and lockers were assigned. Just as expected, Mark was placed in remedial courses again. One class, Chemistry, was a repeat for what he'd failed the previous year. He swore under his breath when he saw that it was the same teacher he'd had before. It was Mrs. Crenshaw. She gave the most homework than any other teacher he'd ever had before and always gave Mark stern words for not doing his work. She'd caught him skipping class a couple of times, too. Both times, she sent him straight to the principal's office. Whether it was a low test score or an unexcused absence, every day in her classroom was like a nightmare.

But there was something different about this year than last...something more unbearable. He seemed more tired, less interested, the pressures more immense. He thought about this as he walked through the halls, dazed at being back here for the first time in months.

And Cory...he was thinking more about Cory lately. He didn't know why that was.

He mostly slept through first and second periods, but stayed awake for third and fourth. Fourth period was Mrs. Crenshaw's class. He scurried in amidst the sophomores, and found an empty seat at the back of the room. The bell rang, and the teacher strode in.

After a few moments, the chatter died down. Mrs. Crenshaw stood up straight and tall at the head of the classroom and then spoke.

She said a few words of welcome, introduced herself, and talked briefly about the subject matter for the class, but then, to Mark's horror, she paused, taking in a deep breath. "It seems," she said, "that we have a veteran in our midst this year. Everyone," she raised her hand to Mark. "Say hello to Mark." He stared at the teacher in disbelief as she spoke, although it wasn't like he hadn't been expecting something nasty from her. The students gave weak hellos before she continued. "Apparently, he liked this class so much last year that he decided to come back. But there's just one problem. He's way back there, and I'm all the way up here. So thanks to our new friend, Mark, to whom I'm sure you will all be undoubtedly grateful, for the remainder of the year, we will all have seating arrangements." The students gave loud groans. It was just like before. This teacher had it in for him. Mark glared at her as he moved to his new spot, but she acted like she didn't care. Another nightmarish schoolyear was in store for him, there was no use doubting it.

Fifth period was his lunch period this year. Beth was nowhere in sight. He learned from one of her friends, Lacey, that she had sixth lunch. He found Dan Riggsbee, Drew Santini and Joey Parrish in the cafeteria and sat down to eat with them. They were already lively in discussion.

"I don't believe you."

"I'm telling you, it's true."

"Dan, you can't be saying to me that your parents are going to leave you alone with the house for an entire two weeks. You've got to be kidding me. They don't trust you."

"Sure they do."

Mark slid into a seat beside them. "Hey, guys," said Mark.

"Oh, hey, Mark." Joey moved over to make room. "So when is it gonna happen? When's it gonna go down?"

"Next month."

"Well the proof is in the pudding. Is there gonna be dope?"

"Hell yes."

"I'll believe it when I see it."

Mark concentrated on his food. He wasn't particularly hungry, and still nauseous, but he knew that if he didn't eat, then weakness would be added to his ailments and he began to slowly stuff the hot dog into his mouth. He wasn't listening very closely as his friends discussed an upcoming party; only caught swipes of the conversation here and there. He was surrounded by friends, and yet the ever-growing chasm of loneliness was still there, and growing wider by the second, distracting him.

Joey kept staring at him. Mark frowned. "Why do you keep staring at me?" he asked. Dan and Drew, the two senior football players, stopped their conversation.

"You didn't hear a word I said, did you?"

Mark swallowed a bite of his food. "I'm not feeling all that great today."

Joey leaned on his elbows. "That's been a problem with you a lot lately. You've had bad concentration."

Mark thought about making a joke but thought better of it. "I'm just sick so lay off."

"Okay, okay. Are you going to come to the party?"

He looked into the faces of the others, who were all looking at him. "I'll see if I can make it."

He was still feeling the heaviness, the pain, the nausea, when lunch finished.

In seventh period, Mark was drifting off to sleep when he saw Drew Santini's face framed in the window of the door. He mouthed, "What?" Drew motioned for him to come outside. He raised his hand and asked to go to the bathroom.

When he was outside, Drew said, "I've been looking all over for you, man. Come on." He followed Drew into the boys' bathroom. He pulled out a fresh pack of Marlboros and packed it hard and quick. "Here, man, you want one?" He took it from him and lit it up. It tasted great after a full day of not smoking. He leaned back against the sink and closed his eyes, savoring it.

"So what is it that you wanted?" he asked. "I'm so upset that you had to pull me out of English." He laughed briefly.

Drew reached into his jacket pocket, not smiling, and pulled out a little joint. "This is for the other night," he said, scratching his bare head. "I didn't know when I'd see you, but I brought it anyway. Consider it payment."

Drew, unlike everyone else that Mark was friends with, was a total mystery. Several years ago it was rumored that he had sent his father to the hospital with a severe concussion and a broken leg after a fight about his twenty-eight-year-old brother. Just in seventh grade, the people said, he was sent to a juvenile delinquency rehabilitation facility and left there by his parents. When he finally came back to school, everyone was afraid of him, and with due cause. In tenth grade a small, well organized group of white supremacist skinheads emerged in the form of fights with the black members of the school. Drew decided to join them, completely shaving off his dark hair and getting a real tattoo that said, 'White Power'. But no one really knew the truth about where he stood politically. There were times when he was seen talking to kids of other races with no disdain on his face whatsoever, and at one point, Mark remembered, he was secretly dating a young hispanic girl from Venezuela. But his sheer size and the serious, determined expression on his face made him somewhat intimidating, and less than easy to approach. Everything to him was a big deal. And that scared most people off. Most people except for Mark.

Dan, the fellow football teammate, was also a skinhead, but he made it clear to everyone around him that his membership was not just for show-and-tell. Mark considered him a jerk, but he was able to tolerate him enough to hang out with him every once in a while. Everyone else he knew seemed to think he was a jerk, as well. He made trouble daily. Drew did his schoolwork silently, when everyone wasn't looking. Dan tore up his work in front of his teachers and wrote racist phrases on the blackboard when they turned their backs. Mostly Drew spent all his time with Dan, but he seemed to prefer Mark.

Mark took the joint from him and nodded his head. "Thanks, man." He slipped it into his pocket. "I'll save this for later."

As he came out of his classroom, he froze. Something totally unexpected, the last thing he would have guessed, happened just then. He felt all the blood rush to his head as he squinted his eyes through his contacts, looking through the crowds of students making their way through the halls. There, about ten yards away, he saw her.

There was no mistaking her. She no longer wore bangs and pigtails, and of course she was several years older, but it was definitely her. It was the same face, the same color hair, the same shy smile. Everything about her was familiar and yet different. It was Megan Mitchell, Cory's little sister.

Mark had no idea where she'd come from. He'd not seen her in years, not since the incident. She'd mysteriously disappeared, and he never saw her again until this very moment.

Still frozen, he realized that his mouth was slightly open. He watched as she flipped her dark brown hair behind her shoulder and look around confusedly, as though she were lost.

A moment later, she disappeared into a classroom.

He realized his breath had been taken away. Quickly gathering himself together, he shook his head and went in the direction of his last class, which was located at the opposite end of the building.

After school Mark found Beth heading for the locker rooms. He slid his hands around her waist and then brushed her hair back. "What time does your little get-together begin?"

"It's not a get-together. It's just something I have to do. Are you going to be there?"

"I wouldn't miss it," he said, while brushing his lips against hers...trying to forget, but not very successfully, what he had seen that day.

CHAPTER TWO

This side of the football field was chaos. Dozens of girls littered the north end of the field, some doing calisthenics and others just standing around, waiting for the tryouts to begin. It was for the junior varsity cheerleading squad today. Folding tables and chairs were set up in front of the goalpost for the judges, and some uniform-clad varsity cheerleaders were leading the calisthenics. Soon they would begin teaching the routine for the actual tryout, and Meg Mitchell didn't want to miss a second of it.

She took a deep, cleansing breath of the clean, New Hampshire air. The day was cool and the sky was azure blue, with only a few puffy white clouds floating high above. It was an excellent day to be outside, and Meg noticed that a bunch of kids were sitting in the bleachers who had come to watch. She was glad that they were holding the tryouts outdoors. She had spent her entire first day at Glenwood High School sitting inside, and she wanted to enjoy the good weather and fresh air.

For the occasion, she was wearing a gray t-shirt and black sweat-shorts. As soon as the final bell had rung, she'd gone straight to the girls' locker room to change. She put up one of her feet on a bleacher and tied her shoe, then pulled back her shoulder-length dark brown hair and tied it into a ponytail. She was all set to go.

Girls were congregating towards the center of the field. Meg walked over to the group and joined them. Two

uniformed cheerleaders were standing in front, facing the crowd. They were both tall, and had long hair. One was brunette; the other was blonde.

She's pretty, Meg thought, regarding the blonde. They were from the varsity squad, she figured. Both of them were carrying clipboards. She leaned in to hear what was about to be said.

"Okay everyone, if your name is not on this list, you will not be judged, so sign up now or it's too late, alright?"

The girls huddled around the cheerleaders, taking turns scribbling down their names. Meg made sure that her name was on the list. She wouldn't miss this for the world. Her parents wanted her to have an extra-cirricular activity, and Meg got the idea for cheerleading. She'd taken dance classes in the past, so she thought she might be good at cheering. When they were all finished writing down names, Meg stretched out her legs and arms and shook them. They were about to begin the routine.

"Let's begin by learning a few basic moves, then we'll teach you the routine you'll be performing in front of the judges later on."

The girls spread out, awaiting further instruction. A third cheerleader joined the pair, carrying a large boom box. She set the box down and flipped the switch. Loud music filled the air as they started. Meg had trouble in the beginning; she stumbled a few times trying to perform

some of the fast footwork. The blonde cheerleader clapped her hands together. "You suck! You're all pathetic!" she cried.

"God, what a bitch," said a voice to her right.

She laughed. "Who?"

"Beth, the blonde one. Head cheerleader of the varsity squad this year. I think it's all gone to her head."

Meg turned and looked to where the voice came from. Standing next to her was a smiling, freckle-faced young woman with a full head of medium-length dirty-blonde hair and green, glowing eyes.

"She's very pretty," said Meg.

"Yeah, but she knows it, too," the girl said. The exercise was vigorous and Meg was panting. "Are you a freshman?" the girl asked.

"No. Sophomore."

"I'm a sophomore, too. Hi. My name's Amanda. What's your name?"

Meg smiled and answered, "Meg. Meg Mitchell."

"Are you new here or something? I haven't seen you around."

"Yeah, it's my first day here at Glenwood High School. I've been in private school for eight years... Hayworth Academy down South. Have you heard of it?"

"I think so. An Episcopalian school?"

"Yeah."

"Wow. So this is your first time in public school?"

"First time in a long time."

Amanda touched her on the arm. "Well I hope you like it here. Welcome to the school."

"Thanks."

"Do you think you'll make the squad?"

"I hope so."

"Good luck. I'll be rooting for you." They continued practicing, and before long, it was time to take a break. Amanda and Meg headed for the bleachers and poured themselves some water from the cooler and sat down.

"So why did your parents put you in private school?"

Meg became very quiet. "Several years ago my older brother, Cory, died in an accident at my home. After he passed, my parents became very protective of me, and one of the things they insisted that I do was go to an all-girls' boarding school closeby. Just this summer I finally convinced them to let me go back to public school."

"I'm so sorry..."

"It was a long time ago."

"Was he a lot older than you?"

"Two years." Amanda seemed to sense that Meg was uncomfortable saying anything more about that subject right now.

"So you didn't like private school?"

"It got old. You have to wear uniforms and it's very strict. I've been dying to come to public school for years."

"Well, you're finally here."

"I know. I'm so glad."

"Don't be too glad," Amanda said, with a hearty laugh. "It's not all it's cracked up to be."

"How long have you lived in Glenwood?"

"Four years."

"And you don't like the schools?"

"Well, it's not that I don't like it as much as I tolerate it, you know?" Kids can be mean, and teachers can be tough, just like anywhere."

"I understand," Meg said. Meg's eyes wandered over to the blonde cheerleader, Beth. Beth was chatting with two other girls, both dressed in regular street clothes. From time to time she would sweep her long hair back behind her shoulder and laugh amusedly. Meg was immediately jealous of her. She was model-thin and tall. Meg didn't have her height and she certainly didn't have her figure. She was a 5'2" petite and wanted to lose ten pounds.

Beth looked up into the bleachers and blew someone a kiss. Meg turned around slightly in her seat, then looked back. She was aiming for someone up high.

And then she saw him. She took in a sharp breath. His dark hair was long, and messy. His two eyes were dark as coal and intense, as though he were studying something.

He was wearing baggy jeans and a leather jacket, both of which had tears in them. His elbows were resting on his knees, his chin in hands as he looked back at the girl who had just blown him a kiss, as he gave her a weak nod. Meg could not, as hard as she tried, avert her eyes from him. She was transfixed. Amanda gave her a nudge. "Whatcha lookin' at?" she asked, casually.

Meg turned slowly to her new friend. She was caught up with emotion; for several seconds she couldn't even speak. In that moment, something deep inside of her was beginning, something that somehow she knew would change her life forever, but she could not, would not, and didn't even care to ask why at that point. Amanda was still waiting for an answer--Meg was still groping for words. *Where in the world did this emotion come from?*

"Amanda?"

"Yes."

"I need you to do me a favor... I need you to tell me something," she said. She took in a couple of breaths.

"Sure."

Meg looked at the boy sitting alone on the bleachers. Her heart was suddenly racing; her chest was heaving. "I need you to look up to where I'm looking and tell me who you see." Amanda obeyed.

"That's Beth's boyfriend," she said, without much pause.

"Do you know his name?"

"Mark. Mark Powell. Why, do you like him?"

Mark? That boy is Mark? She could scarcely believe what she had just heard. Meg was shocked. Her heart could have stopped in her chest. She took one deep breath after the other, trying to calm herself down. *But that's Cory's Mark!*

"Are you sure that's Mark Powell?"

"Quite positive," Amanda answered, and took another sip from her drink. "I see him all the time at school. But stay away from him, if you ask me," Amanda said. "I'll let you in on a little well-known secret... Mark's gotten into a lot of trouble in the past. He may be cute, but he's bad news all the way down the line."

She was speechless. For several seconds her head swam. *Mark? Is that you?* she thought. He was taller. His hair was long. No glasses now. But the more she looked at him, the more she began to recognize the scrawny, asthmatic nine-year old little boy in him who almost spent his whole life at the Mitchells' house eight years ago, before the incident with her father's gun had ever occurred.

She was still breathing heavily. Amanda had to practically tear her away when it came time for tryouts to reconvene.

She performed her routine flawlessly before the judges, despite her preoccupation. Amanda performed well, too. After the competition, they were told that those girls who made the squad would be posted up the following

morning, and everyone was dismissed. Meg tried to see where Mark was going afterwards, but she lost him in the crowd. He was nowhere to be seen.

That night at home, the Mitchells enjoyed a peaceful dinner together. Ann Mitchell, Meg's mother, questioned her daughter about the day. "How was school?"

Meg responded quietly. "It was fine." She looked down at her salad and took a bite, not elaborating any further.

Her parents glanced at each other. Lane Mitchell, the father, spoke next. "You've been wanting to go to public school for a long time now. Did you like it there, or were you disappointed?"

"Um," Meg shrugged her shoulders. "I guess I liked it."

He smiled. "So tell us more. What were your teachers like? Did you run into any problems?"

She glanced up from her plate. "My teachers are all okay. They're nice people."

"Well, good," he said.

Ann asked, "Did your cheerleading tryouts go well?"

"Yup."

"When will you find out if you've made the squad?"

"Tomorrow morning," she said. She wasn't much in the mood to talk.

They finished their dinners, and afterwards Meg's mom and dad went into the den to watch some t.v.. Meg cleared the table and loaded the dishwasher, then went up to her room to be alone. Once on her bed, she grabbed her favorite doll from her pile of stuffed animals and began to play with it. Its name was "Molly." She brushed the doll's hair back gently with her fingers and then held the doll in her arms, cradling it.

She'd had a tiring day and all she wanted to do was sleep, but Mark was still heavy in her thoughts. *I wonder if he saw me*, she thought, as she lay back against her pillow. She sighed a heavy sigh. From the time of hearing his name this afternoon up till now, all she had thought about was Mark.

It was an accident. She'd been in the second grade when it had happened, and she remembered it like it was last week.

She'd arrived home, still dressed in leotard and tights, and went into the kitchen while her mom went upstairs to find her son.

It was then that the screaming began. Police cars and an ambulance arrived, and little Megan Mitchell was whisked away to a motel room with her dad so that she wouldn't see anything or hear anything.

The next day, grown-ups explained to Meg that her big brother Cory wasn't going to be around anymore. Cory was gone forever.

One thing she *did* remember hearing that day was: "You killed my son!" Over and over again, "You killed my son!"

Meg wiped a tear away. Over time, she learned what had really happened in that study that September day... it was simply, and plainly, an accident. But not once after the incident did she ever see Mark again.

It was a long time ago. And she was a lot older now: she was fifteen years old. She was not a child anymore. But seeing Mark again for the first time in eight years sparked new feelings of grief for Cory that she'd not had in a long time. But she could not attempt to deny that seeing him also sparked some excitement deep within her. *I wonder if he would remember me*, she thought, and then closed her eyes and went to sleep.

The next morning at school, Meg checked the gym to see if she'd made the j.v. cheerleading squad. Sure enough, her name was on the list. Curious to see if Amanda had made the squad as well, she checked the list again for her name and sure enough, it was there. Happy and satisfied about what she'd just learned, she floated through the beginning part of the school day.

At lunch, she wandered into the cafeteria and went through the line. After she paid for her food, she carried her tray into the dining room and looked around for a seat. Yesterday she'd eaten alone. Today she was fully prepared to do the same, but just before she sat down at an empty

table, a familiar voice sang out, "Meg! Over here!" It was Amanda. Meg smiled a relieved smile and happily joined her.

Amanda's table was three-quarters full. "Meg, this is Kate and Laura... Kate and Laura, this is Meg." They all shook hands. "We met yesterday at the cheerleading tryouts. We're going to be on the squad together."

"Oh really? Congratulations."

"Thanks. I'm really looking forward to it."

Meg chatted with the group for a while before noticing a booth on the far end of the cafeteria. Mark and three other boys were sitting in it. "Guys?" she said. "I'll be back in a few minutes."

"Where are you going?"

"I'm going over to talk to someone." She got up from the table, abandoning her half-eaten lunch. She made a resolution that she was going to talk to Mark.

She was all nerves. The boys were joking and laughing as Meg wove her way through tables and approached the booth. They did not look up when she stood before them. She was shaking, she knew. She mustered together her courage and cleared her throat.

"Um, Mark?"

He slowly looked up from his hamburger and stared at her blankly for a few seconds without saying a word.

"Hi, um, my name is Meg Mitchell... and you may not remember me, but um..." Still not a word.

"But, um... a long time ago you were friends with my brother Cory in elementary school, and we used to play together sometimes and I thought I thought..." She glanced at the boys. Silence. They were all staring at her. Her heart was fluttering rapidly. She wanted to turn and go at that moment but she told herself, *Just say more.*

"I thought I would come over and say hello because we used to be kind of friends, you know?" Her voice was a bit shaky. She bit her lip out of frustration. One of the boys started laughing.

"Hey Mark, you've got a fan," he teased.

Meg turned red in the face. Her palms were beginning to sweat. "Yeah, Mark, a girl came over to talk to you. I think she has a crush on you, man."

Mark said nothing.

"Uh-oh, where's Beth? Now Mark, you're not going to cheat on her, are you?" Mark shoved the boy named Dan, who was seated across from him.

"Where did she come from?" one of the other two boys asked. Mark did not respond.

She waited for someone to say something.

"Meg, is it?" Mark said, finally.

"Yes."

"Yeah, I remember you."

"Good, because--"

"I'm not interested."

"What?"

"I said, I'm not interested." Meg was confused. She tried to figure out what he meant by what he'd said.

"But I didn't offer anything..." she said, bewildered.

He gave a quick answer. "Whatever it is that you came here for, I don't want it."

"What do you mean?"

"What I mean is... don't bother. That's all there is to it. Just turn around and go back where you came from, and leave me the Hell alone." The boys were giggling. Meg felt as though she'd been slapped in the face. She stood there for a long moment reeling from the harsh words. Stunned, she left the table without saying another word. As she silently walked back to her own table on the other side of the dining room, she could feel the tears beginning to well up behind her eyes. When she sat down, she could no longer hold them. She began to cry.

"Meg, are you okay?" The girls' concern was eminent in their voices.

Meg sobbed for a good while. "No... but I'll be alright," was her answer.

CHAPTER THREE

Seeing Meg that day was the last thing he wanted. It was the wrong time and the wrong place. Over and over again, Mark tried to justify what he had done in the cafeteria that afternoon. He was alone in his room,

listening to the stereo. His mother was at work, as usual. He'd arrived to an empty house, used the spare key hidden in the porch light to open the door, and spent the afternoon finishing up the first of the schoolyear's homework assignments downstairs on the cardboard table in the den. Dan was at football practice; Joey was out with his girlfriend; and Beth was doing her cheerleading thing again. Mark had some time to himself, and so he decided to heed his mother's warnings of the previous morning... after all, he didn't have the greatest reputation at the school... and what the hey... it couldn't hurt to do a little work to start the semester off right. It had only taken him an hour to do his homework; then he went upstairs and closed himself off in his room.

It had been a long time since Mark had seen Meg. The last time he saw her, she was a couple of feet shorter and her hair was in pigtails. She was a bright, cheerful, smiling child, and much like her brother, always full of energy. She had a touch of shyness in her, but she never hesitated to play with the boys when she was allowed to. Yeah, he remembered her. But it was a long time ago, and many things had taken place since they were children. But in fact, now that he thought about it, he couldn't ever remember seeing her face since grade school. Not since *the accident*. Mark sighed and cupped his face in his hands. It was a subject he cared not and dared not to think about in recent days; he found that whenever he thought about it,

questions would arise, still, after all this time, one after the other, that could never be answered: *What would have happened if the gun had not been loaded? If I had not pulled the trigger, would Cory still be alive today?* And more often, *Why didn't Cory fire the gun at me?*

Mark moved from his bean-bag chair on the floor to a reclining position on the bed. He picked up a magazine from his nightstand and began to flip through the pages. He didn't, under any circumstances, want to think about this right now, but try as he might, the thoughts kept coming, and he knew that there was no way to stop them.

Cory. Ah, yes. His childhood friend. Eight years ago, Mark had had to come to terms with the fact that his best friend was gone. A young boy's life was suddenly ripped away, and a quiet family was devastated by the loss of one of its beloved members. That was clear as were a number of other things. He was only a young boy, but Mark knew full well at the age of nine that life at the Mitchells' would never again be the same. As hard as he tried not to, over and over again he always came to the same conclusion: it was he who was carrying the gun at the moment of Cory's death, and it was he alone who was responsible for it.

He thought about the way he'd treated Meg at lunch today, and he admitted he felt bad. Seeing her was simply a shock to the system, that was all. (Or, at least, that was what he told himself.) For years now, all he wanted to

do was forget the incident that took place with Cory that September day. And Meg's face was a living, breathing testament to what he'd tried so hard to leave behind.

He knew where she'd gone all this time: private school. He'd heard it from some of the neighborhood kids a few months after it happened. Not that Mark was around when she left. He was out of school himself, but not to another facility. More like an *institution*. Three and a half months, to be exact. Shortly after Cory's death, he was admitted into the psychiatric unit of a children's hospital downstate, where he was medicated and given extensive therapy. He was gone from school for such a long time that he had to stay back a year.

While Meg was being transferred to an all-girls' academy, Mark was being poked and prodded by doctors. He remembered the events leading up to his admittance into the hospital: he shook, and cried, and did not utter a word for days at a time. His parents tried to feed him, but Mark refused to eat meals... at one time he was nearly twenty pounds underweight. Mark stayed home from school for two weeks until at last, his parents took him to the emergency room. When he first got to the hospital, they force-fed him through a tube.

It was a plain brown and green building with a flat roof and a wooded lot surrounding it. Inside, the floors were tiled with brown and green tiles, and the walls were painted shock white. It smelled of rubbing alcohol. The

psychiatric unit was tucked into the back left corner of the hospital and was attached to an enclosed (fenced-in) courtyard which you could not see out of, only up towards the sky. The fence was built of brown-painted cedar and stood as tall as eight feet. Mark spent many an afternoon sitting in the sun, looking up at the sky as the clouds moved with the wind currents high up above.

It was a small unit; it consisted of ten rooms that contained two beds each. The gathering and eating areas were to the center of the unit, and at the back was the quiet room, an isolated room that contained a bed with restraints and padded walls. Mark was locked inside the quiet room three times during his stay; each time, he spent most of the hours wailing and moaning and sometimes screaming. To the front was the nurse's station, and every morning, he would have to go up to a nurse to be tested for temperature and blood pressure. On special days, they would draw his blood. Mark hated that; it was one of his least favorite things about being in the hospital.

The other least favorite thing was the therapy. Daily, a man named "Gary" would come in and speak to him about how he was feeling, and in the beginning, Mark didn't say a word. He didn't much like speaking to strangers, especially ones who wore white coats and asked stupid questions like, "Do you ever hear or see things that are not really there?"

Of course he did. At night when he slept during dreams and sometimes even during the day when he daydreamed, he saw lots of things that were not there. When asked to color a picture of what he dreamed about, Mark drew a picture of a dead body with blood gushing out of it. They'd ask him questions, one after the other, about his coloring. *How does it make you feel to see this in your head? How often do you think about it?* And Mark would shrug his shoulders and say, "I dunno. All the time, I guess." They kept him there week after week until finally, the doctors said he was well enough to go home.

When he returned to school, everything was different. None of the kids would play with him anymore. His fourth grade teacher was gentle and sympathetic, but the children were distant and fearful. They all knew where he'd been, and they'd spent the good part of four months grieving for Cory. Despite this, they stayed away from Mark. But the alienation was reciprocal; Mark's former shyness was now a pervading silence. For the concluding months of the school calendar, he barely breathed a word to any of the other students, with whom it was already decided he would not be sharing a classroom the next year. Every day he went to school, ate lunch by himself, and then came home alone.

And his parents, too, were different. They fought every night when his father arrived home. The subject was always something different, something like unpaid bills or a hurtful comment one had made.

Mark spent nights sitting in the stairwell at home, listening to the shouts, wondering if it was ever going to end. He'd hug his teddy bear, Gus (something he hadn't done in years) and cry until he was too tired to listen anymore. Then he'd slip into bed to fall asleep, and wait for the next, much like the previous, day.

One night he cried so hard that he caught the tears in a cup, filling it almost full. Then, when his parents weren't looking, he snuck into the master bedroom and poured the tears onto his mother's pillow, so that they would see it when they got into bed. The result was a grounding and a therapy session. The grounding he did not mind, but the therapy he dreaded. When it came time to see the psychologist, Mark said as little as possible to the near-sighted, near retirement-aged man.

The fighting continued throughout the summer, but in the Fall-- when Mark returned to the fourth grade-- the shouts became silence.

"Mark?"

"Yes."

"You and I have to have a talk."

"What about?" His mother sighed and crouched. Mark was sitting at the table, drinking a glass of milk. He was looking out of the window at the landscape, as usual. From the kitchen's bay window one could see a peak of the White Mountains, and Mark liked to stare at it in the afternoons, when the sun dipped behind the peak.

"Your father and I, well..." she trailed off.

Mark could sense that big news was coming, yet he was calm anyway.

"This is very difficult for me to say," she explained.

"It's okay, Mom. I understand," he said. "What's the matter?"

"Well, it's just that-- let me see, how do I put this?"

"Just tell me and we can talk about it."

"Okay." She took a deep breath. "Mark, do you know what a divorce is?"

Mark stared straight at his mother, unblinking, and bit his teeth together. "It's the death of a relationship," he said, in a monotone.

She smiled. "Precisely. But of course you would know that, you're a smart ten-year-old. How silly of me... but what I guess I mean to say is that... well... your father and I... have been discussing things..."

"Yes." She brushed Mark's hair back and lightly touched his face.

"And as you probably already know, lately we have not been getting along so well..."

"Yes." Mark wore a stoic expression on his face.

She continued. "And recently we have decided to... well... we've decided to part ways."

"You mean a divorce?"

"Yes, Mark. That's exactly what I mean."

He hesitated. "Is it because I was in the hospital?"

"No, no, sweetie, no."

"Is it because of the money? Because you're always arguing about money and the hospital was a lot of money."

"No, Mark, it has nothing to do with you."

Mark's voice was quiet and pleading. "Then why?"

She placed a hand over Mark's hand, which was lying on the table. "Sometimes in relationships," she explained, "these things just happen. Two people can grow together, and two people can grow apart. And in your father's and my case, we grew apart. It has nothing to do with you."

Mark wanted to cry, but could not. For the first time in a long time, his emotions were not getting the better of him. "Before I went into the hospital, everything was fine. But after I came out, you were fighting," he said, with pain in his voice.

She stopped touching him. "It just happens, Mark. It just happens."

And so it went. Two months later Mark's father moved out of the guest room on the main floor of their three-story split-level. It was that night, on a cold December day, that Mark cut himself for the first time. He took an old razor from his father's medicine cabinet, removed the blade, and in his room, he ran the sharp edge along the skin on his forearms until he started to bleed. The pain was a new sensation, one that he liked. He enjoyed looking at the deep red beads of blood pop up on his arms, and he

enjoyed feeling his skin tingle, all over his body, with every scrape. The scars showed up on his arms, but he promptly covered them up with long sleeves, even in the warm months.

A couple of years passed, and then Mark graduated to the middle school. He began making a few friends here and there, and sometimes he went out and did things with them during his time off. He got his first girlfriend, Vicky, at the age of thirteen. She was the same age and had reddish-brown hair. They used to cut class during second period and make out behind the school when Mark was in the seventh grade. But she moved the next year, to some town in Michigan. Mark never saw her again.

It was there, at Glenwood Middle School, that Mark first met Dan, Drew and Joey. Dan and Drew were a year ahead of him, but the same age. Joey was in the same grade as him; he was a transfer from another state. Together, they all started smoking pot the same year. To this day it was a habit he maintained.

Mark couldn't concentrate on the magazine he was reading. Remorse engulfed him about that day at lunch. *Why did she approach me?* he thought. *Why now? Why not five years ago?* But he knew it didn't matter. He had been brusque with Meg, and he knew it. On his way out of the cafeteria, he'd caught a glimpse of her, and she was crying. A real cry. Her hands were covering her face, and she was shaking. A couple of girls were patting her back,

whispering in her ear. Darkness. The room was mostly in darkness, except for a few sunbeams that came in through the half-open blinds on his window. It was too late to offer her a ride home... school had ended hours ago. Yet he wanted... no needed... to do something to make it up to her.

He was going up to Raven's Point that night with Beth. They had agreed upon a date that morning, before school started. He was going to pick her up at eight from her house. That gave him an hour and a half.

So he got in the car and started driving. He knew exactly where he was going. He winded his car along the long-ago, often-trodded path. He drove past the tennis court, past the swimming pool, and past the basketball court in Cory's old neighborhood. He rounded the hill, then stopped a couple of houses down from the Mitchells' place. The lights were on. He stopped the engine and rolled down the window, then lit a cigarette.

It was exactly the same as he remembered it... it even still looked brand new. All the drapes were drawn, and he could not see inside. It was sunset and the sky was streaked with pink clouds.

A man emerged from the front door. Mark recognized him. It was Davis Mitchell. Dressed in suit pants and a dress shirt, he walked over to the driveway and picked up the evening paper. He did not see Mark, who took a long drag from his cigarette inside his darkened car.

Just then, Meg came out, dressed in the shorts and sleeveless top she was wearing today, but no shoes. "Dad!" she called.

"Yes, Meg?"

"Mom told me to remind you that Uncle Earl is coming in town this weekend and she wants you to fix the creaky doors before he gets in. She says he hates loud noises."

"Okay. Sure thing, slugger."

"She says you have to run by the hardware store to pick up an oil can."

"Okay."

"And she wants you to take out the garbage, too." They smiled at each other, adoring looks in their eyes.

"I'm on my way."

"It's good to see you, Dad," Meg said, now standing in front of her father. They embraced.

"It's good to see you, too," he said. Mark put out his cigarette in the ashtray, still staring at Meg. "I realize I don't get to see much of you these days, what with work. I'm sorry about that, sweetie."

"It's okay, Dad. It just makes it more special when I do get to see you." They released their embrace.

"Why so sad?" He examined her face. "Did you have a bad day at school?"

Meg smiled and shrugged her shoulders. "Nothing worth talking about."

Mr. Mitchell put his arm around Meg. "That's alright. I won't give you the third degree tonight. Hey," he said.

"What's that?"

"Congratulations on making the squad."

"Thanks, Dad." They walked together back inside the house, arms around each other.

Mark waited until they closed the door behind them, then put the car into gear and left.

Beth was in high spirits that night. She had just stepped out of the shower and had wet hair when Mark arrived at her doorstep, hands in pockets. "I'll just be a sec!" she called, as she towel-dried her hair. She was still wrapped just in a towel, so he knew it would be a while.

Mark waited dutifully on the front stoop, but Beth's mother invited him in. "No, thanks," was his answer. Her parents liked him a lot, but it was partly due to the fact that they were under the assumption that their relationship was a lot more innocent than it was. Even though he liked them too, he generally avoided any and all interactions with parents, and he would rather they not chit-chat with him tonight.

"You sure, Mark?" Mrs. Hammon asked. "I can pour you a glass of iced tea while you wait."

"I prefer to wait outside, Mrs. Hammon."

Ally walked by, and upon seeing Mark, she belted out, "Beth! Your loser boyfriend is here!" She was what her sister called, a "brat," but Mark saw the charm in her. She was loud-mouthed at times, but she could also be really sweet.

Mrs. Hammon laughed and cupped a hand over Ally's mouth. "She's kind of hyper tonight," she explained, as they went into the next room.

Ten minutes later Beth was ready to go, hair slicked back, and wearing an a-line silk mini-dress. Mark watched her approach the front door, noticing how curvacious the dress made her look.

"Hiya," she said.

"Hey," he answered.

He helped her put on her sweater, then Beth yelled over her shoulder, "Mom! I'm leaving now!" and they descended the steps and made way for the car.

"I had the greatest day today!" she exclaimed, as they got into the car.

"You're happy," he said.

She smiled a toothy smile. "Yup," she said. "Cathy Agroni got cut from the squad... Thank God I don't have to deal with that bitch anymore. She got caught fighting with one of the other cheerleaders and the coach pulled them both."

"Was that the girl you hated so much last year?"

"Yes."

"What about the other one?"

"Oh, she was a bitch, too. I don't mind at all that she's gone. Just wish our coach could've figured it out at tryouts... it'll be a headache getting replacements."

Even when Beth was happy, she was complaining. It was a trait he'd noticed early in their relationship.

"Mark? Why are you so goddamn quiet?" Beth asked, crossing her legs and smoothing her skirt down. He hadn't noticed that he had been.

"I'm sorry... I'm probably just thinking about school," he replied.

"Yeah, right," she said, then gave him a shove.

"I'm driving!"

She eyed him. "What's on your mind?"

"What do you want to know?"

She bit her thumbnail. "I want to know what you did today while I was at practice."

"I did my homework."

She laughed. "That's a first."

"It's not funny."

"You're right, you're right. I shouldn't laugh."

He turned a sharp corner. They fell into silence. The drive to Raven's Point was a long one-- forty minutes. But Beth often insisted they go there... the scenery, she said, was unbeatable, and at night, hardly a person drove by. She loved nature, and she loved being outdoors. She liked to drink and listen to the music under the stars when

the sky was clear at night. She loved the dew under her bare feet, and the sound of crickets chirping in the woods.

Mark had brought a six-pack and a bottle of brandy with them tonight. They were in the trunk, hidden under some newspapers and blankets and a tarp. When they arrived at the park, Mark went around to the back, unlocked the trunk and brought out the alcohol. He removed a can from the six-pack and gave it to Beth. Then he gave one to himself. He turned up the stereo, and they found a spot in the grass to spread the tarp and blankets. Within a half-hour, they were beginning to get drunk.

Beth started kissing him all over. "Wait," he said.

"What's the matter?"

He hesitated. "I don't know, Beth."

She shrugged her shoulders. "But we always do this." She leaned over and kissed him again, more deeply, on his neck. He pulled away.

"We *always* do?"

"Yeah."

He paused. "I just don't know if I can do this, tonight."

She kissed his hand. "Thoughts of school and homework overloading your brain muscles, Mark?"

"That's not it," he said, surprised by his own words.

"Then what?" It was Meg. He couldn't stop thinking about Meg. But Mark couldn't think of a way to tell Beth that. He didn't know how to tell her that he thought that

she was being shallow. He didn't and couldn't give an answer to her question. "Come on, Mark," she said. "Please?" She moved closer to him, so that he could feel her breath on his face. She straddled him. There was no way for him to protest, and he knew it... so he began to kiss her back. "Don't you love it when I touch you?" she breathed, in between kisses. He had to agree.

They made love, for a good while, underneath the stars. As Mark was brushing Beth's hair away from her shoulders, after they were finished, he picked up the bottle of brandy and took a gigantic swig. He lit a cigarette and smoked the entire thing, one drag right after the other. *Just another day in the life of Mark*, he thought, as he drifted off to sleep.

CHAPTER FOUR

Meg stared into the full-length, rectangular mirror which was nailed to the back of her closet door, and scrutinized her reflection. Her dark brown hair was hopelessly straight, and shorter than she'd like it to be-- it fell just past her shoulders, in a plain bob cut. She no longer wore bangs, the way she did as a child. It was a very thick head of hair, which made it very difficult to manage and style, so most often, Meg just wore it down with a part on the side. Nothing terribly interesting. Her face was round, which made her look younger than she was,

and her cheeks were full, which made her look heavier than she was. Her mother said it was just babyfat, that it would go away, but Meg was pessimistic about the whole thing. She was determined that she was going to be full-faced forever. The high cheekbones gave her a slightly exotic look, but that was the only good thing she could say about her face. Her eyes were a mixture of brown and green, and depending upon what light she was in, had specks of gold in them. Against her fair skin, they appeared fiercely dark. Meg disliked her eyes intensely. She would have much preferred to have translucent, glowing, light blue eyes like her brother did. She was petite; 5'2", with an average bust and a full derriere. She wanted to be taller, at least a couple of inches, and have a smaller figure. She wanted long, blonde hair with waves in it, and all the boyfriends in the world. Like a Barbie doll. She twirled around, examining herself, and frowned at what she saw. She was going to have to parade around in a skimpy cheerleading uniform soon, and she didn't have time to lose weight.

She still wore her nightgown. It was morning, and she had to go to school today. She picked up the brush from her vanity table and glided it through her hair, brushing out all the knots she'd put in it while she slept. If nothing else, she wanted to make her hair look neat and shiny for the coming day. Once finished, she ran her fingers through her mane and shook it out. Then she found

two brown barrettes and clipped them onto either side of her face, to add something decorative. She looked into the mirror and gave herself a quick, insincere smile. The barrettes did little to improve her self-image. She adjusted the barrettes, then opened her closet door wider and began looking for something to wear.

It proved to be a challenge. She weeded through blouses, t-shirts, shorts, and jeans, but nothing seemed to look right. She held up each item against her frame, to see how it would look, but nothing satisfied her. Either it was the wrong color, or the wrong style. So she walked into the closet and began throwing articles this way and that, some on her bed, some on the floor, in search of the perfect outfit. Nothing made her look just right. Nothing made her look beautiful. But then again, maybe nothing ever could. She was at a loss.

"Meggie?" she heard.

"Yeah, Mom?"

The woman rapped on the door. "Do you want me to take you to school today?"

"Yeah, if you can," she hollered, through the closed door.

"Well, hurry up, then," she said. "You've not got much time." Meg looked at her clock and her mom was right. She'd been spending all morning picking herself to pieces. But she still had no clue about what to wear. Everything made her look heavy.

She finally decided upon a pair of stonewashed jeans and a turtleneck sweater. The sweater was baggy enough to hide her figure, and the jeans were sort of in style. She put on a pair of black, leather boots and laced them, then put on her watch. She spritzed some perfume, a sweet, floral scent, on her wrists and neck. Then she left the room in disarray, the piles of thrown clothes still on the bed and floor.

While starting to descend the stairs, she turned around. The door to Cory's room was half-open. Not knowing why, she felt a pull to go inside. She'd not been in that room in months, and perhaps, neither had her parents. Every few months, her mother ritually went into Cory's room to dust, and vacuum, and sit in the rocking chair. Meg never saw what she did while she sat in the rocking chair, but she probably cried.

It was cool in his room. All the vents were open, but the windows were closed. On the wall next to Meg's room, several wooden shelves were nailed up, holding a large collection of stuffed bears and other animals. His bed was neatly made, the comforter and sheets the same ones Cory had used when he was alive and living in this house. The room was decorated in shades of blue; the bedspread was blue plaid, the carpeting was royal blue, and the wallpaper was light blue. A couple of baseball posters were pinned up on the wall above his bed, and some baseball bats were lying on the floor next to his nightstand. A circular,

blue rug was lying in the center of the floor, on top of the wall-to-wall carpeting.

Meg sat down on the edge of his bed, and ran her hand along the comforter. Her parents had kept this room exactly the same as it had been eight years ago. The unwritten rule was that no one was ever to change it or to mess it up. Her father had once suggested that they turn it into a guest room, but was met with silence, and then tears, by her mother. They never spoke of it since.

Meg admitted, she missed her brother. She missed his vitality, and his cheerfulness. As a little girl, she often played with him when the other little girls were not around, and she missed that. He was a gracious brother, and at times, very loving. But he could be pushy, too. Sentimentality would not alter her hindsight where Cory was concerned. The pain of his absence still gnawed at her heart, but she admitted, the wounds were not fresh. Time had thickened her skin somewhat about his death. She wished she could say the same thing about her mother. After all this time, some nights, it was as though the accident occurred just yesterday.

"Meggie! We have to go!" she heard. She leapt up from the bed, straightened the covers, and quietly exited the room.

"I'm coming!"

That day at lunch, Meg did not see Mark in the cafeteria. His friends were not there, either. She looked all around, at all the tables and booths, and in the line, too, but didn't see them. She was hoping to catch a glimpse of him that day, and throughout the morning had kept an eye out for him, but he was nowhere to be found. So she sat down with Amanda and her two friends and said hello, and began eating her peanut butter-and-banana sandwich, after getting a soda from the drink machine.

"Hi, Meg. Are you feeling better?" Kate asked, as Meg peeled back the foil on her chocolate pudding, dipped her finger in and sampled the dessert.

Meg smiled and nodded her head. "Couldn't be better," she assured them.

"Did you hear? Two spots have opened up on the varsity cheerleading squad."

"Where did you hear that?" Meg asked, curious.

"The coach's assistant. We ran into her today before homeroom. She said they were looking for two girls to fill in." There were going to be no tryouts this time. They were going to pick two cheerleaders from the junior varsity squad, based solely on the coach's recommendation. Something about a fight and two girls lost their places. Meg's interest was piqued. They chatted for a bit more about cheerleading, and talked about the day's events. Then, to everyone's surprise, Meg changed the topic of

conversation. "So tell me more about Mark," she said, in between bites.

Silence. They all looked at each other. For a few moments they didn't say a word. "The guy who made you cry yesterday?" Amanda said. She gave Meg a sympathetic look. Then she leaned in close for a whisper. "Didn't I tell you everything you needed to know at the cheerleading tryouts?" She was referring to her warning.

Meg swallowed and looked at Amanda. "You told me he was bad news, but you didn't tell me why. Just tell me whatever you know."

Amanda and the girls were still hesitant. "You never told us what he said to you, Meg," Laura said.

"Yeah, and why you got so upset," Kate interjected.

"I just want to know more about him, that's all," she said, without elaborating on the short conversation.

They all started talking about Mark at once. "I heard he got suspended from school last year for keeping hard liquor in his locker," Laura said, with a matter-of-fact tone in her voice.

"I heard he was busted for smoking pot at a school game," Kate said.

"Didn't he vandalize the principal's office last spring?"

"Yeah, apparently he smokes a lot of dope and he's a heavy drinker. He's always getting into some sort of trouble."

"He's just the sort of guy that Beth goes after: a bad boy," Kate said, with half a laugh. Meg took in the information with sincere interest.

"Does he do drugs?" she asked, even though her question had already been answered.

"Yeah, and that's not all..." the girl trailed off. "He's been known to get into all sorts of crime." Meg sort of flinched, but she hoped they did not see that. She wasn't going to ask what kind of crime he had gotten into.

"What kind of drugs does he do?"

"Oh, everything," Kate said, with perfect confidence. "I'm sure he's tried everything that there is," she added, and then said, "even the hard stuff."

"How do you know this?"

"Oh, rumors. When you've been going to school with the same people for a number of years, news travels."

"Why are you so interested in him? Do you know this guy?" Laura asked.

Meg shrugged. She didn't want to reveal anything, not now. "Sort of, but it was along time ago." She became very quiet. She didn't want to say what her mother always said-- that Mark was the one who killed Cory. She said, plainly, "He was best friends with my brother, before he died."

"What did he say to you?"

She shrugged again. "It's not important now." They didn't ask further. If they had, she would have ended the

conversation. She gave Amanda a long look, signaling that she was ready to stop talking about it. Amanda understood. They finished their lunches, then after a while, the first bell rang, and lunchtime was over. Meg gave one last scan around the cafeteria, looking for him, but still, he was not there. They scrambled up from their seats, and headed towards class.

It was raining outside when school was let out. Meg hadn't brought her umbrella, and she was supposed to walk home that day. So she stood out front, under the awning, waiting for the rain to die down. It was thundering and lightning, and the sky was dark with rain clouds. She wanted to wait at least until it was safe to walk.

"Megan?" someone asked. "Little Megan Mitchell?" She turned. There stood, umbrella in hand, a young man with a huge smile on his face. He was sandy-haired, wearing glasses, and stood about six inches taller than her.

She smiled back, not recognizing him.

"You don't remember me?" he said. "It's Jeff Finch. We used to go to elementary school together, way back in second grade." She looked more closely at his face, and then recognized him.

"Oh, hi! I do remember you." She laughed nervously. They were play-mates at Williams Davis Elementary School. "I see you're prepared for the storm..." she said.

"Oh, you don't have an umbrella?" he asked. "Take mine. I'm getting a ride today. I have karate practice, and then I have to go to work."

"It's been a long time since we've seen each other."

"Yes, it has been. What, eight years? Whatever happened to you, Megan? I haven't seen you in forever."

"It's just Meg now," she said, "and I've been in private school."

"All this time?"

"Yes."

"Well, listen."

"Yes?"

"There's a dance coming up, the homecoming dance, and I was wondering if you'd like to go with me. It'd give us a chance to have some fun," he said. "Do you like to dance?" he asked.

"I do," she said. "And sure, I'll go with you."

He smiled. "Here, let me give you my phone number." He scrawled his name onto a piece of notebook paper and handed it to her. "Give me a call, okay?"

"Sure," she said. She watched him walk away, then get into the passenger's side of a waiting car. With a smile on her face, she opened the umbrella, and began the trek homewards.

As she walked, she listened to the rhythm of the rain beating down on top of the umbrella and the distant

crackling of thunder. She couldn't wait to go home, kick off her shoes and cozy up in a warm, dry house.

She'd not walked two blocks when a black convertible pulled up beside her, its stereo booming. The passenger's door opened, and the music was turned down. "Meg?" he said. It was Mark. Meg stopped in her tracks, and bent down to look at him.

She approached the car door. "Get in," he said. "You shouldn't be walking in the rain, especially when it's thundering out, and your house is a long ways from here."

She got in, obediently. She shook out the umbrella, folded it up, and pulled it into the car. It was nice and dry in there. Mark's stereo was playing an alternative song she liked. She closed the door, and he put the car into gear and drove off.

When she looked at him, he was staring at the road. His face was not shaven, and his hair was messy. His jaw was set. At first, she didn't know what to say; she was surprised. "Thank you, she said.

"Don't mention it," he answered. The car was littered with empty bottles and trash, and cassette tapes were strewn all along the floor and back seats. It smelled like cigarette smoke. Mark's jacket and bookbag were thrown hastily into the back, but Meg kept her bag on her lap, where she hugged it with her arms. Already, she was getting a lot of homework.

"Do you know where I live?" she asked, even though it may have been a stupid question.

He didn't hesitate. "I remember," he said. "Spruce Lane."

He had the same face; long, thin, and heart-shaped, but no more glasses. He was Mark, alright. She could tell that the more she looked at him. He was very quiet. When he was a child, he was shy. But now, she thought it was more like reservation.

He smelled slightly of cologne, and it was a light, musky scent. Meg wondered if she should apologize for approaching him yesterday. But she hesitated to say anything about it, because she didn't want it to come out wrong, like she was fishing for an apology. So she remained silent, wondering what to say to him next.

He turned the steering wheel, and they turned onto a residential street. What Meg didn't want was for the opportunity to speak with him to come and go, without her ever having said anything to him. So she spoke up. "I'm sorry I came up to you yesterday," she said, hoping it sounded alright. He didn't avert his eyes from the road.

"It's been a long time since I've seen you," he said, coolly.

"Too long," she said. "A lot has happened since then."

He tensed his jaw, concentrating on the road. "I'm sure it has," he said, glancing into the mirror.

She felt a little awkward, not knowing what to say. "What have you been doing all this time?" she asked, hoping that her question didn't sound too ordinary. He turned to her, briefly.

"I've been surviving," he said, simply. She detected a hint of sarcasm in his voice, but wasn't sure if she'd heard it or not. She hugged her bag more closely around her lap.

"Is that all?" she said.

"No," he said. "but most things in my life wouldn't be too cheerful a topic of conversation, if you know what I mean." She nodded her head, slowly.

"I suppose you've stayed in Glenwood all this time..."

"Unfortunately," he said. "Glenwood is a depressing town, so isolated from the rest of the world. If I had my own way, I would leave this place. But I'm only seventeen. Where can I go?"

She agreed. "You have only a few months before your birthday, right? Then you can go wherever you want."

"It's true," he said. "But if I leave, I wouldn't be able to finish school, and I'd be letting down my parents."

She admired him for saying that. But she doubted him. "You don't really care about that, do you?"

He turned, just for a moment. "Some days I care about it; other days I don't."

"Are you much of a student?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, do you like it? Is it something you actually enjoy?"

He then laughed. "Actually, no. I hate it."

"So is it your parents that's keeping you from leaving?"

He looked at her, his big, brown eyes intense. "I like to show them what it means to stay and stick it out."

She smiled, even though she didn't know what he'd meant.

When they arrived at Meg's house, the rain had mostly stopped. It had been a short drive, and Mark hadn't asked for directions once. She wanted to talk with him more... she wanted to ask him questions, she wanted to hear more about his life.

The car was stopped in the driveway. The engine was still running. "I know this may be an imposition, but..." He looked at her. "Won't you just visit with me, for a little while?" she asked. He didn't respond just yet. "The rain has stopped, and we wouldn't even have to go inside... we could go for a short walk in my backyard, in the woods. Please, Mark," she said. "It's been such a long time since I've seen you."

He considered the request. "I suppose so," he said. "I've got nowhere to be right now. That would be alright with me."

He turned the car off, and they got out of the car. The air was cool and damp, and breezy. The dead leaves

under their feet were wet with fresh rain, making it a slippery journey to the wooded backyard. They walked around the front of the house, around the side, and followed a graveled pathway to the back.

Underneath the trees, the ground was perfectly dry. The foliage was thick, and had blocked out the rain. "Tell me honestly," Meg said, as they walked deeper, side-by-side into the woods. "Do you remember me at all?"

He was quick to answer. "I remember lots of things about you, Meg."

"But you would care not to remember?"

He gave her an apologetic look. "That's not true." She was sorry she had said it. She wiped a strand of hair from her face.

"I came upon you so suddenly, without warning...you must have been shocked to see me after all this time. I'm sorry if I frightened you."

He slipped his hands into his pockets. "It happens when two people are separated for a long time, I suppose," he said, and looked down at his feet as they walked.

She followed his gaze to the frayed cuffs of his jeans. "Are your parents still together?" she asked. They followed a dirt path that led them amongst Douglas Firs and Pines, up and down small, rocky hills. Further into the woods lay a small stream and beyond it, a paved path for joggers and bicyclists

"No, they've been divorced for six years now. I live with my mother and every other month I visit with my father in Maine."

Meg nodded her head. "They used to be such a happy couple, from what I remember."

"They had their moments. But things change. I have to remind myself in the mornings when I wake up that nothing is constant."

"Or else you would forget?"

"Or else I would cling too tightly to what I have, which is a lot right now."

"You don't sound convinced of that."

"In the eyes of my parents, I have everything."

"What about your own eyes?"

"I don't trust my own eyes." They reached a steep incline underneath a row of Douglas Firs that looked to be an excellent spot for sitting.

"Shall we sit here?" she asked. He nodded in agreement. The ground was dry. Mark pulled out a crumpled pack of Marlboros and took one of the cigarettes out and put it into his mouth. Then he pulled out a lighter and lit the end, and began to smoke.

Meg watched him with curiosity and caught a whiff of the white smoke as it floated past her nose. She eyed him as he took a long drag. She had never smoked a cigarette in her life, following the strict orders of her parents and her schoolmasters who had both threatened and warned. But

secretly, she had always wanted to. "May I have one?" she asked, timidly.

He looked at her with surprise. "Go ahead," he said, after some hesitation. He offered her the crumpled pack.

She immediately coughed. Mark said nothing. She felt awkward holding it in her hand, felt embarrassed that she'd made a spectacle of herself. She suddenly didn't know why she was doing it.

"My parents don't trust me at all," she said, stifling a cough. "They never let me do anything."

"Are they still together?"

"Yes, but sometimes I wish they would split up, the way they're so cold to each other sometimes. They put the whole focus on me, I think, to detract from their failing relationship. I'm supposed to pretend that nothing is wrong, and I usually do."

"You don't have to."

"I feel like I do. If they didn't have me, I think they might not have anything." She finished off the last of her cigarette, then put it out in the ground. "They're so strict," she said. "I can't stay out late, or go to parties, or do anything, really."

"Maybe you're not missing much," he said.

"The only way I could convince them to let me come back to public school was to promise them that I'd be on top of my studies, and not get into any trouble."

"That sounds fair."

"You're lucky, Mark. You're a senior this year. You're almost finished with school."

"No--I'm a junior."

She gave him a questioning look. "Why?" He tensed up. She could sense that he was uncomfortable.

"I had to stay back a year," he said.

"Were you behind in your schoolwork?" she asked.

"No, not exactly. I had to go to a psychiatric unit of a hospital for three and a half months when I was in the fourth grade." His gaze was steady.

It came as a shock to Meg. This was the first she'd ever heard of it. "My parents never told me that," she said, quietly. He took another drag from his cigarette.

"Maybe there's a lot of things your parents didn't tell you," he said. She knew exactly what he was insinuating. And she agreed. It was common knowledge at the Mitchell home that her parents blamed Mark for the accident.

"I'm sorry--"

"It's not your fault."

"If Cory were here, he would have fought for you," she said, and came closer to him.

"But he's not."

"I know." She'd finally mentioned Cory's name. She was wondering how to approach the subject, without being too tacky. Mark finished off the last of his second

cigarette, then stood up and dusted off the back of his jeans.

"I have to go," he said.

"So soon?" asked Meg. He didn't look her in the eyes.

"I have to go home and call my girlfriend," he said, dusting off his jacket.

"Beth?"

"Yes."

"I've seen her. She's head cheerleader for the varsity squad, isn't she? I saw her when I tried out for j.v. squad. She's very beautiful," she commented.

He nodded, still not looking Meg in the eyes. "I'm sorry but I have to go, Meg."

"Thank you for visiting with me."

"No problem," he said. Then he turned and left, leaving Meg alone in the woods.

CHAPTER FIVE

The wind blew all the clouds away that evening, and by nighttime, a great number of stars were visible. But in Mark's vantage point, they all looked like blurry lines of light. If he had not been more experienced with drinking, he would have been stumbling. But instead, he quietly slipped into his house, using the spare key, and tip-toed up to his room. Like a pro. It was late; about two

o'clock in the morning, and the house was completely dark. The air was cool and dry, and it felt good on his skin. His mother was sleeping in the master bedroom with the door open, and she was snoring. *Damn.* As carefully as he could, he quickly opened the door to his room, which was prone to squeal when opened slowly. He didn't want to wake up his mother and be faced with a grilling session. Thankfully, it didn't happen.

Safely inside his room, he collapsed onto his bed. He was still high on pot and buzzed from alcohol, but coming down. He was dizzy and light-headed. He'd been at Joey's house, drinking and smoking for hours, and his body felt drained of all energy. The room spun around him, as he lay in the semi-dark. Some moonlight offered the ability to distinguish various shapes inside the room, but for the most part, the room was masked in darkness.

The bed felt comforting; warm and soft. He didn't change out of his clothes. He didn't even take off his jacket. He merely sighed and closed his eyes. He pulled his covers possessively over his body, and curled up on his side.

Immediately after talking with Meg, he'd headed for Joey's. "Something strong, Joey," he said, and was given chemicals with no questions asked. Laughter, chatter and smoke filled Joey's living room that evening, but Mark was quiet and serious. He stayed to himself. Beth was there,

but he didn't talk much with her. He wasn't much in the mood to listen to her daily whines.

Before long, he fell asleep. But the dreams were disturbing, and vivid. Mark tossed and turned, his blood still thickened with the alcohol he'd been drinking all night.

They were in the woods, behind Cory's house. It was a lot of fun to go into the woods behind Cory's house because there were a lot of places to run and to hide, and some of the trees were good for climbing. That day Cory decided he wanted to play hide-and-go-seek. The woods stretched for miles, so they both knew that it was going to be a good game. Golden sunlight streamed down upon the earth, broken up by the leaves in the trees overhead, although dark storm clouds were forming in the distance.

"I'll hide first!" yelled Cory.

"I'll find you wherever you go!" challenged Mark.

Mark leaned against a tree and covered his eyes. He was going to count to one-hundred. "One, one-thousand, two, one-thousand, three, one-thousand..."

Mark could hear the shuffling of running feet.

"...ninety-nine, one-thousand, one-hundred one-thousand. Ready or not, here I come!"

Mark looked behind trees, and steep hills. He looked behind every tree and hill within a quarter-of-a mile radius, but Cory was not there. He had mysteriously

disappeared. Mark could hear the crackling of thunder overhead. It looked like it was about to rain.

"Cory, where are you?" he called, projecting his voice deep into the woods. Only the sound of echoes came back. Cory was gone.

"Here I am!" From behind a tree, out jumped little Megan. She wore two short little braids on either side of her face and had bangs. She wore a short yellow dress, with patent leather shoes and lace socks. She was a beautiful second-grader, with dark hair and light skin.

"Megan, we have to find Cory!" Mark said. "He's lost in the woods!"

"No, silly," she said. "He's not lost. Let's play a game." She began to run away. "Catch me if you can!" she hollered.

"Don't go!" Mark pleaded. He didn't want her to leave, because he was afraid she would be lost forever. But the little girl wouldn't stop. She kept running, and Mark chased after her. "Stop, Megan, stop!"

When he finally caught up to her, she was giggling. He tackled her and then they were both lying on the ground, then rolling in the leaves. "You're silly," she said.

"Why's that?" he said. He kissed her on the face. He'd always wanted to do that.

"Because you forgot to say please."

He was smiling at her now, glad that she hadn't gotten lost, too. "Please. But I didn't ask you for anything, Megan."

"Yes you did, silly Mr. Potato-head," she said. "Did you already forget?"

Bewildered, he looked at her adoringly and said, "What did I ask you for?" He looked up at the sky, which threatened to open up and pour down upon them at any moment.

She giggled, and threw leaves up in the air. Lightning crashed, and thunder boomed in the distance. "If you can't remember I'm not telling..."

Before he could pull out of her the information he so desperately wanted, a voice spoke up. "Pull the trigger, Mark." It was not Megan who'd said it. The voice had come from out of nowhere. It was Cory's voice, but he was nowhere to be found. Mark looked all around, but no one was there. Mark looked at his hand. He was holding a gun, and the gun was pointed directly at Megan's head.

Mark lurched out of bed, and coughed and coughed. It was only a dream. He shook, and sweated all over. His head still spun from the drugs, so he got out of bed, and poured himself a glass of water, then chugged it down. Then he bent his head, and began to cry.

"Meg?"

"Yes?" They were in the hallway. It was Monday morning, and Mark had seen her enter the school as he'd parked his car. He'd finally found her at her locker on the first floor. It was twenty minutes before homeroom.

"I've been thinking about that conversation we had," he said, as he approached her at her locker, out of breath, "and I'm glad we got to talk."

Meg was visibly surprised. She placed a thick Chemistry textbook in her locker, and turned around, to face him. She looked tired. There were bags under her eyes and her hair was a mess. She put down the bookbag she was carrying and closed the door of her locker.

"I don't get to visit with people like that very often, and I just wanted to tell you that," he said, in a low voice. He was telling the truth. It was even an understatement. He never got to visit with people like that.

She gave him a quick, harried smile. "How did you find me?" she asked. "I never seem to spot you when I look for you at school."

He laughed quietly. "Maybe you don't look well enough," he said. He looked around. Then he added to the comment, "At school I like to be inconspicuous; that way, I don't get in as much trouble."

She gave him a flirting look; something out of the ordinary for Meg to do. Given her shyness, it was downright daring. He was taken aback. "You mean if the

teacher doesn't see you cutting class he can't give you a detention?"

"Yeah." He was glad to see her, and this gladness surprised him. She zipped closed her bag.

"Where is Beth?" she asked, noticing that he was alone.

"She's with her friends." He shifted the weight on his feet, then scratched his temple. "Look, Meg..." He sensed that she liked him. He could sense her growing attachment for him. He could see the emotion in her eyes every time she looked at him now.

"Yes?"

"I'm sorry about the way I treated you that first day..." He looked into her eyes with an expression he hoped came across as sincerity.

She interrupted him. "I caught you off guard, and I shouldn't have done that. After several years, I come out of nowhere? I should be the one to apologize." She looked at her hands.

"No, that's not it," he said, giving her a more serious look. "I should have been more kind to you. I have no excuse for myself."

"Then what is it?" she asked.

He took a deep breath. "Maybe it's just that you remind me of him, that's all."

"Who, Cory?" She was so casual about it. Mark could hardly believe it.

"Yeah." Their gazes locked. A chill ran through Mark. He looked at her face, and it was the same as Cory's. Different coloring, but same bone structure, same shape eyes, and nose, and chin. He remembered the dream he'd had last night, and shuddered.

"Does it bother you that much?" she asked.

He shook his head. "No." She looked down again. He didn't want her to leave. "Can I take you home again today, after school?" he asked.

"If you want to," she said.

"It's the least I can do, after everything," he said.

"You don't owe me anything, Mark," she said, quietly. "But if you want to take me home, I'll let you." They said their good-byes, and left for homeroom.

She was waiting by the flower-pots at the South entrance of the school, alone, when it came time for him to pick her up. "Are you ready to go?" he asked.

She nodded. "Yes." He led her to his car, which was parked closeby. He cleared a place for her in the passenger's seat before she sat down. "I got this car as a guilt present," he said, as he buckled himself in. "My father said he had a few hundred extra dollars that were just burning a hole in his pocket."

"That sounds feasible," she said. "Maybe he was telling you the truth."

"There's something you should understand about my father," he said. "The divorce cleaned him out pretty good and my father doesn't make a whole lot of money. There's no way he would have extra money just lying around. It was a guilt present, no doubt. He'd probably been planning it for months."

"It's a nice car," she said. "Makes me wish I had a driver's license."

He turned the ignition and backed out of the parking slot. Kids were everywhere-- pouring out of the school entrance, walking along the sidewalks, and in the parking lot. He wove his car through pedestrians and made his way to the exit.

"Does your father do that a lot?"

"What, bribe me?"

"Yeah."

"He's been doing it for years now. Every time I see him he gives me cash and prizes."

"Does your mom know about it?"

"No."

"What do you do with the money?"

He hesitated. He knew very well what the answer to her question was. "Drugs, mostly," he said.

She made only the tiniest reaction. It was as though she already knew. "Lots of them?" she asked.

"As many as I can find," he affirmed.

"Doesn't it take a toll on your health?" she said.

"Probably. But it's something I never think about."

She changed the subject. "Did you have a good day at school?" she asked.

He looked at the rear-view mirror. "These days, no day is a good day at school for me. I'm lucky if I make it through the week alive."

"That bad?"

"Probably worse."

"But why? You're so intelligent."

"I used to think so. But over the years, school has become harder and harder for me, and now I'm just waiting to graduate, if you know what I mean."

"Is it just school that's difficult, or is it your life, too?"

That made him silent.

"What's it like having divorced parents?" she asked.

"I don't think about it very much, but if I did, I'd say it's like playing for two opposing teams at one time."

Mark was an only child, and while growing up, he often asked his parents why they never tried to give him a sibling. "One is enough," they'd say. Then they'd add, "But it's none of your business, Mark. Only grown-ups can decide that."

The real story, he found out later, was that his mother, Judith, had gone through hysterectomy surgery shortly after Mark was born, because the doctors told her that she was a high-risk mother due to her high blood

pressure and anemia. His father was so disappointed in this decision that he went out that day to an adoption agency for a preliminary interview, but the reply came back from Judith, "Mark would not accept a child whose birth parents are different from his own."

In actuality, Judith Powell did not want to have another child to take care of; she was tired from taking care of her baby Mark already. A hysterectomy was not even a medical necessity, but Judith downplayed the word, "optional" for her husband.

But both parents soon made it a habit to blame Mark for things. Not spending much time together anymore? The baby's been sick. Didn't get any work done? The baby was crying. No sex life? The baby. Always the baby.

Mark was a shy, sensitive child. He rarely acted up, but his mother and father still found ways to blame him for practically everything going wrong in their marriage. "We shouldn't have had a child," his father once said, out of exasperation, and Mark had heard it.

It should have stunted his emotional growth back then, but it did not. He was sometimes emotional, but not overly so. He was generally a happy child, with a mind for intelligence and a gentle, polite nature. The real moment of change came at the age of nine, at the moment the bullet left the gun. And from then on, Mark was never the same. A quiet, unassuming child became an emotionally imbalanced

youth, and then an angry, rebellious teen right before his mother's very eyes.

Who was to say what caused the divorce? Certainly key elements were already missing from their relationship before the incident and the hospital stay. But a sick child could naturally bring to mind the illness existing within the marriage already. Mark was never told what went on while he was away, but he knew that to bring it up would probably just be opening up a path that neither of them would want to traverse.

And after the divorce, the two parents continued to blame Mark for things while at the same time coddling him for the remorse they felt for breaking up. The bipolar nature of their treatment towards Mark left him feeling confused, and angry.

Meg spoke up. "Do you do drugs because of your parents?" she asked.

He shook his head, surprised at her question. "No."

"Then why?"

He couldn't answer. To his friends, it was just fun. All he could think to say was, "It's mindless, Meg. That's all it is." The answer seemed to satisfy her, and she dropped the subject. They drove to Meg's house, and he left her off. After he watched her ascend the front steps to her house, he lit a cigarette, and drove away.

"Meg Mitchell, Amanda Hanfield, you both made the varsity squad. Congratulations!" The junior varsity cheerleaders clapped. The girls were sitting Indian-style in a semi-circle.

"When do we start?" Amanda asked, smiling practically ear-to-ear.

"Promptly at three-fifteen this afternoon. You'll be fitted for uniforms and you'll get to meet the rest of the squad at that time," said the coach.

"Can you believe it?" Amanda said, as she turned to Meg. "We're actually going to be on varsity!"

Meg was happy, too. "But Beth is going to be our captain, right?"

"Oh, who cares about that?" she said. "We're only sophomores! This is great!" Amanda high-fived a teammate. "Coach?"

"Yes."

"Do we get to cheer with varsity at the pep rally?"

"Yes, you do." Amanda clapped her hands together and squealed.

"I'm so excited!" she exclaimed.

Meg hugged her. But inwardly, she was more nervous than excited. She was an excellent dancer, but her gymnastics were lacking in skill and strength. Plus, Beth was going to be her captain, and she was intimidated by her. She was the type of girl you didn't want to go against-- popular, beautiful, confrontational, and

outspoken. If Meg couldn't keep up with the more difficult routines, she was afraid she'd be singled out, and she was the sort of person who preferred to blend in with the crowd, rather than be a spectacle. What's more, Meg had been spending some time recently talking with Beth's boyfriend. It was a wonderful opportunity for her, but she dreaded it the same.

But when time came for practice, Beth was all smiles. "Welcome to the team," she said. "Hope you guys are ready for some hard work."

"We're ready for anything," Amanda said. They were in their gym clothes, ready to start the calisthenics. They had already been fitted for uniforms, and now they were going to warm up. Amanda and Meg stayed side-by-side, and said hello to the other cheerleaders.

They were inside the gymnasium today. It was another rainy day, and the football field was soggy with rainfall. A girl wearing a high ponytail and leg warmers put on a Madonna tape, and soon they were sweating to "Like a Prayer." Halfway through the workout, Beth sidled up to Meg. "I hear you're friends with Mark," she said to Meg, over her shoulder.

Meg nodded, slowly. "We were friends a long time ago," she said.

"He's all hugs, isn't he?"

"What do you mean?"

She laughed a hearty laugh. "What I mean is, he can be a little rude sometimes. It takes him a while to warm up to people."

"You're his girlfriend?"

She nodded. "We met through some mutual friends. Funny thing, he never mentions you. I just happened to notice the two of you talking in the halls yesterday. How did you meet him?"

"He was friends with my brother in elementary school. It's been a long time since I've seen him... we've only been talking for a couple of weeks now."

"Oh, so that was it. He mentioned something about a boy who was killed a long time ago, but he didn't throw in many details. I suppose he was talking about you?"

"That's my brother."

"He never tells me a blessed thing."

"He took me home yesterday. I hope that's alright with you."

She smiled big. "Mark can do whatever he wants to. He's a big boy. I trust him. Meg, right?"

"Yeah." She nodded.

"You're hilarious." Meg was only slightly insulted. "Are you going to the homecoming dance on Saturday?" she asked.

Meg nodded. "I have a date."

"Good! Is it someone I know?"

"Jeff Finch."

"Don't know him. But listen..." she leaned in closer, looking over at Amanda. "I'm having this party after the dance... if you want to come by, you can bring this guy Jeff." She whispered, "Just don't bring Amanda, okay? She can be a loudmouth sometimes, and the guys wouldn't like it if she came."

Meg looked over at Amanda, who was working her hardest at the calisthenics. "Are you sure about that?" asked Meg. "She seems really nice to me. She was the first friend I made here."

Beth wiped a blonde strand of hair from her face. "Seriously, Meg, she's not the sort of person I'd like to be at my house for a number of reasons..."

"Like what?"

She was still whispering. "Are you into booze?"

Meg looked at Beth. "Of course," she managed, even though she'd never had a drop of alcohol to drink in her life, other than communion wine or sips from her parents' drinks.

"Well that's the thing," she said. "Amanda's what we call, a straight-edge. There's going to be some mad liquor at my parents' house that night, and I'd be afraid that that girl would rat on us and spoil the fun if she came. Do you understand what I mean?"

"Sure," she said.

"Great," Beth said. "The party starts at ten. Make sure you have a ride and if you don't, I'm sure I could find someone for you. You don't drive yet, do you?"

"No. I'm still fifteen."

"Catch me after practice for my address and remember, no straight-edges allowed. They're no fun and they suck. We're going to have a blast." Beth nodded to a girl at the front, who was waving for her to come. "Gotta go, Meg. Duty calls. Catch you later."

She smiled and nodded. "Good bye... thanks for the invitation."

"No problem." Meg turned her attention back to the calisthenics, which were almost over. Beth made her way to the head of the crowd, to begin work on the routines. Amanda was looking at Meg questioningly. "What was that all about?"

"Oh, she saw me talking to Mark," she said.

"Was she bitchy about it?" Amanda asked. Meg could see the rivalry already.

"No, she just asked me about it, that's all," she said.

They learned the first of the routines, which were surprisingly easy compared to what Meg thought they'd be. Catching up with the rest of the girls wasn't so difficult after all. At some schools, cheerleading routines were based more on dance, and at other schools, cheerleading routines were based more on gymnastics. Here at Glenwood

High, the routines were more dance-oriented. Meg liked that. She'd taken eight years of ballet and was dancing on pointe when she finally decided to quit. Plus, she'd taken five years of jazz dance. Her flexibility and grace were outstanding, and her stamina was good, too.

Amanda was an ex-soccer player, and so she had a lot of strength. Even though she'd never stepped foot in a dance class, she was a good cheerleader, and the moves seemed to come naturally to her.

"Do you want to hang out after practice?" she asked Amanda. She wasn't about to tell her what Beth had said, but she felt guilty about it.

"Sure," she answered.

"Let's hang out at my house," Amanda suggested. Meg agreed. She'd never been there before. Still in her gym clothes, she made a quick trip to the pay phone in the school's stairwell and called her mother.

"Have a good time, honey," she said, and then they hung up.

Amanda's mother was driving a new, gray minivan. Amanda rolled open the back door and a toddler was strapped into the middle seat. He cooed when he saw them.

"What's his name?" Meg asked.

"Andrew," she said.

"Hi, there," Meg said, as she climbed into the backseat, Amanda behind her. He was carrying a rainbow-colored rattle, but he wasn't rattling it.

Amanda's mother and brother both had the exact same color hair that Amanda did-- dirty blonde. Her mother had almost the same hairstyle, as well--straight and coifed, only it was a bit shorter: it fell to her chin. She was an amiable woman, with a smile just as big or bigger than Amanda's.

"Nice to know my daughter's making new friends," she said. They rode swiftly to a neighborhood on the East side of town. Their house was two-story, and made of brick and plywood. It was painted baby blue, with pink trimmings. Mrs. Hanfield grabbed the mail as they walked by the mailbox. "Home sweet home," she said.

Amanda led her straight upstairs. The walls of her room were plastered with magazine cutouts of celebrity men, some wearing shirts, some not wearing shirts. On one wall, she had pinned up two posters-- one of Denzel Washington, and one of River Phoenix. She had her own phone, which was set up beside the bed. She had a canopy over her bed, and both the canopy and her bedspread were trimmed with lace. Dirty clothes and magazines were strewn all along the hardwood floor, and Meg had to weave her way through the mess to get to a place wher she could sit down.

"So tell me," Amanda asked, once they were both sitting on the bed, "do you really like Jeff?"

Meg giggled. "Oh, he's cute," she said.

"You have to like him," she said. "You have a date with him on Saturday night."

"Are you going to the dance?" Meg asked.

"Maybe," Amanda said. "But I don't think so. No one's asked me." They had taken off their shoes and socks and were painting their toenails bright shades of red. "I don't want to go alone and look like a fool, you know?"

"Most people go alone, don't they?"

"Not at this school."

"I'm not even sure if I like Jeff, you know, in that way."

"So why are you going out with him?"

"Oh, I don't know. It's just something to do, I guess."

Amanda studied her painted feet. "I guess I'm not too popular with the boys around here."

"Why do you say that?"

She looked up. "A bunch of boys got together last year, started saying some nasty things about me," she said.

"Like what?"

She concentrated, maybe a little too hard, on touching up her nails. "They said things like, I was a dog-face, I was geeky, fat... about everything wrong with a girl that there can be. Word got around about what they'd said, and one day at school, everybody was laughing at me."

"So what did you do?"

"I tried to ignore it. But one of the boys who had said this, was the same boy I'd had a crush on for about two years... more or less, I was in love with him."

Meg stayed silent.

"It hurt my feelings like Hell," she said. "I didn't have many friends, and suddenly everyone was gossiping about me. I felt like an outcast."

"So did the pain ever get better?"

"I kept it inside. I thought about getting back at the boys who did it, but I never had the courage to do anything. To this day, whenever I think about it, it still hurts. They probably have no idea that what they said about me back then had such a profound impact on me."

"Sometimes guys can be jerks."

Amanda smiled weakly. "Yeah. I guess you're right." She continued painting her nails, and they didn't say another word about it for the entire time that Meg was there.

"Amanda?"

"Yeah."

"Have you ever gotten drunk?"

"Why do you ask?"

"Just wondering."

She considered the question. "No. Not so far as I can remember..."

Meg giggled. "But I mean, *would* you, if someone offered to buy you some drinks?"

Amanda smiled. "Actually, you know what? I think I would."

She ate supper with the Hanfields that night. Lasagna, hot bread, and a fresh tossed salad. Andrew made a mess with his dinner, but was talking up a storm.

"Thanks for letting me stay, Mr and Mrs. Hanfield," she said.

Mrs. Hanfield responded, "You're very welcome. Feel free to come over any time you want, Meg. You've been a delight."

The week went by quickly. Meg's English class was reading *MacBeth* and Meg curled up every night that week on the sofa in the living room to read portions of it, sometimes two or three times over. She adored Shakespeare.

On Saturday, Meg spent the day preparing herself for the dance. She washed her hair, blow-dried it and curled it, and gave herself a facial in the upstairs bathroom next to her room. She wore makeup, but only for special occasions, and tonight was a special occasion. She brushed on some brownish-red eyeshadow and some matching brownish-red lipstick. She lined her eyes with charcoal liner and colored her lashes with black mascara. Then she filed her fingernails and painted them with clear polish. Her perfume was a scent called *Dusk Flowers*, and it was a sweet, musky scent.

She changed into the outfit she'd laid aside for herself for the big event-- a black, A-line skirt, and a cream, linen blouse. She rolled up a pair of nylons onto her legs, and slipped into a pair of black, leather flats. She fastened a sterling silver chain around her neck, then fastened a sterling silver bracelet around her left wrist.

She had talked to Jeff a few times during the week, and he had agreed to go to the party with her. But she knew they wouldn't be able to stay long-- she told her mother they'd probably catch a bite to eat after the dance, and would be home around midnight. She didn't tell her about the party, because she knew she wouldn't be allowed to go.

Jeff picked her up in a cab, for he was also fifteen and unable to drive, and as they pulled up to her house, the cabbie tapped on the horn, signaling their arrival.

Meg checked her purse; Beth's address was still there. She crossed the front lawn and went to the waiting cab; the backdoor was open and Jeff was inside. He was wearing black dress pants and a striped button-down shirt, but no blazer. "You look nice," he said, commenting on her outfit.

She waved at him. "Thanks," she said. "So do you." He invited her to join him.

She did, then she closed the door behind her. The cab driver stepped on the gas and they began heading towards the school.

The dance was held in the school's gymnasium. The cover price was five dollars per person, and Jeff paid for the both of them. A d.j. was set up, and the partially darkened gymnasium was filled with incredibly loud music. Meg put her fingers in her ears as they surveyed the scene. A handful of kids were dancing to the heavy beat of the music, while most others were standing around, talking. Jeff went over to the buffet table and retrieved her some cookies and punch. It was six-thirty in the evening, and the dance had just begun. Meg suddenly wondered if she should have come; she didn't know very many people at this school. But she placed the thought out of her mind. She was going to have some fun.

And she did have fun. Jeff danced with her a couple of times to slow songs, and to fast ones, too. He introduced her to some of his friends, who were also there. Amanda, as expected, did not come, but Kate and Laura did. Meg hung out with them for a little bit, in between dances.

When the event was winding down, Meg pulled out the folded piece of paper with Beth's address scrawled on it from her purse, and handed it to Jeff. Like the rest of the night, she had to practically scream in his ear. "I think we should get going, don't you?"

He nodded. He said good-bye to his friends, and then they both left the gymnasium, hot from a full night of dancing.

Meg's first thought, when she saw Beth's house was, *This girl is rich.* It was a huge house, and beautiful, too. Cars were parked up and down the street, and on the lawn.

Standing on the front porch, Meg became nervous. She had no idea about what to expect from this party--all she knew was that Beth Hammon was throwing it. She'd never been to a high school party before, and certainly not one that was meant for popular kids like Beth. Was she going to stand out in the crowd?

After Jeff rang the doorbell, a cheerleader with black hair and rosy cheeks answered. She was toting a beer can and Meg eyed it, warily. As soon as she saw Meg she said, "I know you." Her body posture was relaxed as she leaned against the frame of the door and took another sip of her beer. She turned to Jeff and said, "Hi, I'm Courtney." She offered her hand, which was moist from the perspiration from the beer can.

"Jeff," he said. They shook hands.

"Well, come on in," she said. "Beth's out back talking with her boyfriend. I can never seem to tear those two apart. It's like they're glued together or something. Just make yourselves at home." She led them inside, then left them standing in the middle of the Hammons' great big foyer. They were still wearing their coats.

Meg grasped Jeff's hand as she took in the details of the room. Beth's living room was twice the size of Meg's.

It was furnished with an authentic Italian sofa, glass tables, and a Persian rug over a white wall-to-wall carpet. The lamps were all made of crystal, and a crystal chandelier hung from the ceiling. Everything about the place reeked of luxury and richness. To Meg, who came from an upper middle-class home, the concept was somewhat foreign.

Apparently, most of the kids had already arrived, and were lounging around, talking. Practically everyone in the room was holding a drink. Meg became even more nervous as she took note of this. Would they expect her to drink, too? She remembered that she'd told Beth she drank.

The kids were hanging around in clumps, some sitting, some standing. They hovered on and around the luxurious leather sofas, in the halls and just about everywhere else, filling the vast spaces of the interior of the house. Meg guessed that there must have been at least forty kids there that night, partying away.

The music was loud, but not blaring. It had a heavy beat and an interesting rhythm to it--dance music. But no one was dancing.

Meg and Jeff gingerly took off their coats, still standing in the middle of the foyer. "Well, shall we mingle?" Meg asked, draping her coat over her arm.

Jeff nodded slowly. As Meg looked out at the crowd she recognized several of the faces, but they all looked like they were heavily absorbed in their conversations.

Just then, Beth and Mark walked into the room. Meg immediately straightened. She locked her eyes onto Mark as he entered. Beth's arm was hung lazily around him. His long hair was neatly combed and casually curled behind the ears, and his clothing was the same as usual: ripped jeans, dirty t-shirt. They looked like the perfect couple, both of them: both tall, both thin, both handsome. Meg smoothed out the creases in her skirt and lowered her eyes to the floor. She heard Beth's voice saying hello to a number of people. "Hey, you two," Beth said.

Meg lifted her eyes. She clasped Jeff's hand tighter and whisked the hair out of her face. "Hi, Beth." She looked up shyly in Mark's direction. "Hi, Mark."

He bent his head lower as a "hello."

Beth was carrying a glass in her hand which looked like it contained about four shots of liquor. She took a small swig and then said, "Want a drink?"

"Got anything non-alcoholic?" Jeff asked, sounding slightly agitated.

"Gosh, I'm sorry we didn't have any Pepsi-cola for you tonight... although I do think there's some coke in the fridge."

"No thank you," he said.

Meg glanced at Jeff. "Beth, this is Jeff Finch. We went to the dance together."

"Pleasure to meet you," she said, holding out her hand. "Did you have a nice time?"

He nodded. "It was fun. We danced."

"Were there a lot of people there tonight?"

"Some."

Beth glanced at Meg. "Meg? Did you have fun?"

She looked at Mark, who was looking back at her. "I suppose. But I noticed that you weren't there."

"Oh," she said casually, "I was busy getting ready for the party. You know how it goes."

There were a few moments of silence when Meg didn't know what to say. "You've got a really nice home."

"Oh, thank you. It's my parents' place, really. They're out of town for the night, so I basically get to do with it whatever I want. Would you like to see more of it?"

Meg blushed.

"Come on, Meg," Beth said. "I'll show you around." Beth took her hand, tugging her away from Jeff.

She looked behind her shoulder and Jeff waved at her as they left the foyer. "Wanna sip?" Beth asked, offering her some of her drink. Meg eyed it, then shook her head. She was scared of drinking, when it came right down to it-- not only of the physical sensations of it, but also of her parents' reactions if they were ever to find out. She looked around, and the party was in full swing. Laughter and chatter filled the rooms. "I'll get you your own, then," Beth said, not asking if Meg wanted it or not. Mark was still attached to her; Beth's two arms were around the

both of them. She took both her arms away, careful not to spill her drink, and headed for the bar. Meg and Mark were now alone.

She felt her face flush as again, she didn't know what to say. "You didn't come to the dance," Meg said, once Beth had disappeared down the stairs.

He nodded. "Beth doesn't go for things like that," he answered.

For some reason, she'd expected them to be there, and was surprised when they weren't.

Just then, Beth came back, drinks in hands. "It's a whiskey sour," she said. "I made it myself." Meg held the drink in her hands, and felt the coolness of it against her skin. Without drinking any, she just stared at it for a long time. Beth noticed. "Drink it," she urged.

Everyone else at the party was either holding a beer or an alcoholic beverage. She didn't really want to drink, but she didn't want to be the only one here who wasn't doing it. Around her, chatter and music filled the air. Meg held the cold glass to her lips, and partially closed her eyes. Mark was watching her, and she felt his eyes, his gentle, but scrutinizing, eyes. In fact, *both* of them were watching her. She very quickly took a small sip, and with surprise and shock almost coughed. Fumes had gone down her windpipe. She smiled through her watery eyes to let them know that she was fine. To prove it to them, she again lifted the glass to her lips. Again, it stung going

down. After another, and then a few more sips, she decided it wasn't so bad. She continued drinking the powerful mixture. "It's good," she said, lifting her glass. A little bit bitter, but pretty easy on her throat. Just her luck, and neither of them would notice that she was a novice.

Beth took her by the hand and gave her a short tour through the house. On the upper level there were seven bedrooms, all with plush, white carpeting and luxurious furniture, and on the lower level, there was a huge den with a large-screen television and a wet bar in the next room.

Halfway through the tour, Meg looked down at her drink and noticed that it was all gone. "Let me get you another," said Beth, taking the glass from her hand. Meg was beginning to feel faintly dizzy. Before she could protest, Beth was back with another whiskey sour. "I could get you a beer, instead," she said. "Or something else, if you're into the hard stuff..."

"No, I'm fine," Meg said. She took tiny sips, few and far between this time. Mark disappeared somewhere; and soon Beth decided to wander away to talk with a number of her friends. The music gradually started to seem louder than it was before. And so did the talking; people seemed to be raising their voices higher to fight out the music. Meg talked with a few fellow cheerleaders, trying to wear her brightest smile. She got involved in several

conversations, mostly with people she'd been acquainted with before.

More kids arrived. The house seemed to be at its full capacity. A half hour went by, and Meg was relieved when she looked at her watch and saw that it was quarter-till-twelve. She wasn't the best socializer, and she knew it. Talking with kids she barely knew was a tiring exercise for her. It took a minute before she realized that she had no idea where Mark or Beth were. And then it hit her: she'd not seen Jeff since they had first arrived, and Beth had whisked her away to get her a drink and give her a tour of the house.

Quickly, she excused herself from the conversation. Feeling the room sway as she walked, she first looked around the room that she was in, scanning people's faces. Jeff was not in the living room.

She headed for the stairs that led to the basement. Descending them, she passed a couple who were kissing each other passionately.

Once on the lower level, she again scanned people's faces. He was not there, either. She stopped someone who looked like he was alone and asked, "Have you seen Jeff Finch?"

"Who's he?" the guy slurred.

"He's kind of short, with brown hair and brown eyes. Muscular."

The guy shook his head. "Haven't seen him."

Meg went upstairs, then tried the upper level. A bunch of the doors were closed and locked. When she tried one of the doorknobs, it opened quietly. Inside, a boy and a girl were locked in a passionate embrace on the bed, tearing each other's clothes off. Meg felt shocked and embarrassed at seeing this. Quickly, she closed the door.

On the way back down, feeling exasperated, she ran into Beth, nearly knocking her down in the process. "Meg, what's the problem?" she asked. Her eyes were glassy-looking.

"Do you know where Jeff is? I have to get home."

Beth held her arms, steadying her. "Okay, Meg. Just don't panic. We'll find him."

Together, they searched the house. She was relieved when they finally came to someone who said, "I know where he is."

They went outside to the back porch. There, under the moonlight, stood a group of kids she recognized from school standing in a small circle. The group of kids was passing around what looked like a small cigarette to Meg, but the smoke didn't smell like the smoke of a tobacco cigarette. After taking a moment to figure it out, Meg realized that it was drugs. They were passing around a joint. She looked down at her mostly untouched drink and felt uncomfortable as Beth spoke soft words to the group. She was feeling the dizziness within her own head, trying to remain steady on her feet. She was wondering why she had

been so adamant about wanting to stay here tonight, but then the reminder came.

Mark was with them. "He went home, Beth," Meg heard.

Meg's heart lurched. "Did he say anything?"

"Just that he didn't want to be around all the drinking."

"Dear God. That's all he said? Did he take a cab?" Mark left the group and he and Beth motioned for Meg to come with them. She was anxious to leave this place, to get away from the drugs.

They entered the house.

Meg started to shake. "How am I going to get home?" she stammered.

"Didn't you come by cab?"

"Yes," Meg said. "But we came together. And I don't have enough money on me to hire a taxi."

Beth and Mark exchanged glances.

"...And besides, if Jeff doesn't bring me home, my parents will get suspicious."

Beth looked worried for a moment. "Okay. Mark, you take Meg home. Meg, you're not going to get in trouble, we promise."

Mark grabbed his keys. Meg took a long, deep breath and then followed Mark outside.

He left? But how could he have done that? Without even saying good-bye? Meg was confused by this news, and

the licquor in her system didn't help any to speed up her cognition.

The air was cool and dry again. Meg and Mark walked silently, side-by-side, to his car, which was parked to the front of the house. Meg's slip made swishing noises as she walked, but, she hoped, were only audible to her. When they got to the car, he unlocked the doors, and she climbed into the passenger's seat. "Do you and your friends do this all the time?" Meg asked.

"What, party?" he said.

She nodded, but then realizing they were in the dark, said, "Yeah."

"Beth has a lot of friends... many more than I do. One of them is usually throwing a party every weekend."

That wasn't what she'd meant. "Are you high right now?" She could see him more clearly now; her eyes had adjusted to the darkness.

"Only slightly," he said. "The stuff's not kicked in yet... but it should very soon. Why, do you want some?" He had offered, but somehow Meg sensed that he didn't want to give her any. She'd detected a little bit of sarcasm in his voice.

"No," she said, waving her hand. "We need to get going. My parents would kill me if I don't get home by curfew."

He nodded, then started up the car. The night air was so clear that it looked like millions of stars were visible

overhead. Meg rolled down her window and breathed in the fresh night air. "This was the first party I'd ever been to, except for birthday parties when I was a child," Meg said, reaching her hand partways out the window.

He didn't respond to her last comment. Instead he said, "Have you ever had a drink before?"

She wasn't going to lie. "No."

"And I suppose you'd never had a cigarette before, either."

She put her face up to the window and enjoyed the cool breeze. "Never," she said, and closed her eyes.

CHAPTER SEVEN

It was the night of the homecoming dance and Beth's party, and Mark was, yet again, taking Meg home. All those years ago, he thought he'd never set foot on that property ever again. But there he was, making it almost routine going over to the Mitchells' house. He was oddly not surprised that Meg had never done drugs before... sure, even private schools were infested with them, but Meg had a glow about her, almost like an invisible, protective shield that surrounded her wherever she went. It was a freshness, a newness, an innocence that encased her, and would not seem to let go, he observed. He admired her for this, and he thought that he would always admire her for this.

"Just tell me one thing," he said, as he concentrated on the road. He was staring rather fixedly at the yellow lines in the center of the road that went by in blinding speed, one after the other. Bright lines of color in the middle of black pavement.

"Yes?" she said, in a mellow voice.

He realized that there was a dull ache of emotion beginning to form behind his eyes, and he almost croaked out his words. "Why are you being so nice to me?" He clenched the wheel tighter, glancing into the rear-view mirror. The sound of the engine and the turning of the wheels was monotonous, hypnotic.

He saw her head turn towards him out of the corner of his eye. He wished she weren't so *sweet*. So *accepting*. So *validating*. He had no room to hate her. She sighed sleepily and said, "Why wouldn't I?"

It was a simple enough answer, he thought. And it sounded only natural coming from Meg. But how could she say that so easily? How could she be... so... *forgiving*?

"I saw you at the football field that day," she said, continuing to speak softly, "and I knew that I wanted to be your friend again. What does time have to do with anything?" She looked at the hands which were folded in her lap. "Sure, we've both grown a lot, and we're probably both very different people now..."

"Meg, you're not that different from what I remember..." he interrupted.

She stopped mid-sentence and gave him a thoughtful, probing look. "How do you remember me, Mark?" she asked. It was a loaded question, and she had a knack for asking loaded questions.

He paused, still concentrating hard on the road. If he were really honest with the both of them, he would say that he remembered her as clearly as he remembered his own name... that the memory of her face never left him, even with her extended absence. But he wanted to choose his words very carefully. "You were cheerful," he said. "But also very quiet at times. You were a very shy little girl," he said.

She gave a look of surprise. "I always thought that you were the shy one," she noted.

"Perhaps we both were." His mind flicked back, almost like a hallucination, to a young Megan wearing a crisp, new, white pinafore, shyly showing off her new frock to an equally hesitant nine-year-old Mark, as Cory played with a pogo stick around them. He remembered the dark shine of her hair, the bounce in her knees, the squealing sound of the pogo stick bouncing up and down, and the smell of wood burning in the air as Mark pushed his glasses up higher on his nose with his index finger, and gave her a slight, crooked smile.

"Do you think I'm still as shy as I was when I was a little girl?" Meg asked.

"Wouldn't you know if you were?" he asked.

"What do you think?" she questioned.

He considered for a moment. "No," he said, shaking his head. "not as much, I don't think. You have boldness in you now... something that I didn't see when you were younger."

She smiled enigmatically. "Boldness." She considered the word. "Like deciding to approach you on the second day of school."

"Yeah. Kind of like that."

"I was cheerful?"

"Yes, always that way. You were always wanting to do some fun activity to pass the time, and you had a special way of suggesting ideas to us. You'd run up to us and say, 'I know! I know!' And you hardly ever complained, but you cried, you cried a lot."

"I don't cry as much now," she said, and then added, "Only when I'm very anxious."

"Your mother was always the one to comfort you," he said.

"But not anymore," she said.

"What do you mean?"

"A good way to describe my parents is that they're like silicone mannequins with computer implants. They have pleasant things to say, but mostly, they just sit silently in front of the television eating their dinners completely oblivious to each other and me."

"I thought you had a wonderful relationship with your father." He remembered sitting in his car, watching Meg and her father talk in front of their house, but didn't want to mention it to her.

"No," she said. "I love both my parents dearly, but honestly, they don't have a clue as to what my inner world is. They couldn't give you any kind of an answer if you were to ask them what their daughter's emotional life was like. They ask nice questions, and I give them nice answers, but that's mostly as deep as it goes."

"You should spend a week at my house," he said. "By Tuesday morning you'll be bound for the store to get a pair of earplugs to block out all the screaming."

"From your mother?"

"Yes," he said. "She won't stop. Nothing I do is good enough for her. Something's always worth fighting over."

"And what about Cory?"

Mark stopped, but didn't turn to look at her. "What about Cory?" he said.

"Doesn't he affect you, I mean, still? I mean, we've been talking about our lives, and honestly, both our lives are linked by this one person. My brother. And we've hardly talked about him."

"I know," Mark managed, and it came out as little more than a whisper.

"You said I remind you of him. You also said it didn't bother you all that much. But yet the first time I ever tried to speak with you again, eight years after the *incident*, you cursed me out. Every day of my life I have a constant reminder of his absence: his empty room is right next to mine. His death is still such a deep part of my inner world, and how can you possibly say that it's not part of yours?"

"It is." Mark's voice was more forceful this time.

She looked at him gently. "So let's talk about it."

He felt he was in no position to decline. "Okay. What's on your mind? Your heart?" By then, they had arrived at Meg's house and were parked along the curb. All the lights were out in the house.

She leaned over him, and looked out the window and up. "My parents have gone to bed. They won't notice if I step in a little late," she said. She smelled nice. Her hair was floral and musky.

"Let's get out," he said. "It's stuffy in the car." The darkness in the shadows was almost tangible. A short shadow was cast at the side of the house, and it was almost scary placing a foot in such darkness, not knowing if you were stepping on a stone, or a slippery leaf, or even a snake. They walked to the back of the house, back to where they had walked before, into woods that were bathed in moonlight. "Are you dizzy?" he asked.

"I had about one drink," she said, whispering. "But I think it's worn off now."

He nodded. "I'm not particularly dizzy myself." The breeze was cool, but not cold, in his opinion. But Meg had not brought a sweater with her, and she was shivering. "Would you like my jacket?" he offered.

She turned, rubbing her arms. She smiled, and accepted the offer. "Thank you," she said. She wrapped the tattered, leather article around herself. As she warmed herself up, they stood together for a few moments not saying anything to each other. Then she said, "You and Cory used to play here. Do you remember?"

Mark could not have forgotten. "I do."

Her teeth chattered slightly. "Sometimes I joined in, but a lot of the time, Cory wouldn't let me," she said. "He said, no girls allowed."

"He was afraid of cooties," he said. "But I often stuck up for you."

"I remember that," she said. "That was nice of you. You said, 'C'mon, letter play.' But he was a bully, Mark."

"I know."

"You were best friends with him because you wanted to get on his good side."

"I know."

"When you first met him, he stole all your lunch money and he made you cry your eyes out."

"I know, Meg. But I was happy that he decided to be my friend. Not just my friend but my *best* friend."

"He not only bullied you, but he also bullied *me*."

"I know, I know. And I hated him for that."

"He was popular, Mark, but only because he befriended the kids he bullied, did you know that?"

"Yes. He shouldn't have done it, but what was I to do? I was only a little kid. I didn't like to go against the grain. He was a pushy little boy at times, but we all have faults, don't we?"

She faced him. "Tell me. Do you think of him often? Does he haunt your dreams the way he haunts mine?" She was close to him now.

He thought of the dream he'd had recently where he was looking for Cory but found Meg, instead. He looked at her face again, and was aghast. In the shadows, it could well have been Cory himself, peering up at him, at the very spot where they used to play. "All the time," he said, in a whisper.

"He used to hit me and shove me around and call me names," she said. "and yet I still loved him."

"I hated him for what he did to you," he said.

"So much that you would kill him?"

She knew the answer as well as he did. He shook his head. "No." This last was barely managed. Before he could realize what was happening, Meg reached up to him, and brushed the side of his face. Mark, startled, grabbed

her wrist just as her face was nearing his, and he backed away. She was planning on kissing him. His voice was only a raspy whisper. "You're supposed to hate me," he said, and backed away completely. He grabbed his box of Marlboros, which had dropped to the ground, and began to walk away. But Meg stopped him, her voice wavery.

"Where are you going?" she asked, her voice broken.

He looked at his watch, which he could not read in just the moonlight. "I was going to go home."

He couldn't tell if she was crying or not. "Mark, you shouldn't be driving," she said.

"I'm perfectly fine," he said.

"You're on pot," she said, then added, "and probably alcohol, too. They have laws about driving under the influence these days."

"I've done it many times before."

By now, Mark knew that Meg was sobbing. "Does it hurt you that much, to think about him?" Mark asked.

Meg didn't respond to the question. Instead, she said, "Tell me something."

"What?"

"Did you ever forgive yourself for shooting him that day? I mean, really." She took a step forward and he could see the tears on her face reflecting the moonlight.

He was too tired to lie to her. He said, simply, "No."

She was standing about two feet away from him.

"Because I'll tell you the reason why I think your drug use is selfish."

"Why?"

"Because there's nothing to forgive. I know the whole story, Mark. Cory bullied you into playing with the gun and firing it. There's nothing to forgive because it's not your fault."

Mark hesitated. "How could you know the story?"

"It's common sense, Mark. I know Cory and I know you."

"Your parents said nothing?"

"Just that you killed him."

Mark was taken aback. "And why do you think I'm selfish?"

She paused, and took in a long breath. "Because you think you're in so much pain because of the fact that you killed your best friend all those years ago, but it's senseless. All this time has gone by and everyone has deserted you, and so you turn to drugs." More tears slipped down her face. "It's wrong, Mark. You're not thinking of anyone but yourself, and you're hurting everyone. It's *wrong!*" Meg turned partways around and started running.

Mark became suddenly confused. It was like *déjà vû* with the dream he'd had. Suddenly, out of nowhere, she had started running. She had dropped the leather jacket and he

quickly picked it up, then started running after her. He dashed through the woods, dodging trees, with the wind whipping his hair back behind his face. About a hundred yards later she collapsed onto the soft earth, panting and wheezing. Mark was just behind.

"You think you're in so much pain, and I'm *not*?" she asked, in between pants.

"No, Meg, I *don't*," he said. Mark was panting, too.

Meg grabbed a jagged rock from the ground and lifted it into the air. "Then watch *this*."

Before Mark could stop her, Meg quickly carved a vertical line into both arms with the sharpest edge of the rock. Mark immediately grabbed it from her, then pinned her to the ground. The cuts were deep, and bleeding. Meg let out a soft moan, and then passed out, probably from exhaustion and pain.

During the several minutes that Meg was passed out, Mark tore up his shirt and wrapped it around her bleeding arms. When she came to, he was holding her. By then, he was sorry he hadn't kissed her back. "It's okay, Meg. Just me," he said, as he wiped her hair from her face, and then when she was ready, he led her back to her house. No more words were spoken that night, and it was just as well. Enough excitement had taken place already that evening. He silently opened the front door for her, and left.

"Beth, we have to talk." Mark was at his father's house in Maine. He was sitting on his bed, with the receiver of the telephone pressed to his ear. It was long-distance, but his father had given him permission to make the call.

Beth's voice sang out. "Does it have something to do with your father?" she asked, inquisitively.

"No," he said. "It has to do with you and me."

"I'm in my nightgown..." she said, seductively.
"...nothing else on..."

He sighed into the receiver. "Be serious, Beth. Now is not the time for that. My dad's in the next room."

"Well, alright. It's just that I'm so lonely right now..."

"Where's your sister?"

"She's spending the night at a friend's house. The place is empty. Just little ole' me."

"What about some of your friends? Could you hang out with them?"

"No. I stayed late after practice talking with the coach, and they all disappeared to go downtown. They deserted me!"

Mark paused. "Beth, there's something I want... well, I need to talk with you about, and it can't wait."

"Mark, you sound pissed off about something."

He caught his breath. "No, Beth, that's not it." He relaxed a little bit, realizing that he was gripping the phone very tightly.

She waited a few moments. "So what is it?"

"How have you been feeling lately?" he asked, with out-of-place concern in his voice.

She had noticed the strangeness of it. "What kind of a question is that?"

"I was just wondering how you were doing, because you seemed really stressed out lately, and I was worried about you. I also wanted to know what's been on your heart."

"My *heart*? Mark, what have you been sniffing lately? This isn't like you."

He ran his fingers through his hair. "We never *talk* about things," he said. "Maybe we should start."

She seemed to be considering. "You know, you're right. I've been meaning to ask you about that new cheerleader we have on our squad who's friends with the dogface."

"No, Beth, not like that. I mean, what are you *feeling*?"

Beth sounded impatient. "Like a million bucks, what do you want to hear? I'm really dying to know, Mark, what's up with the new girl you've been hanging around?"

Mark heard the television come on in the next room. "There's not much to tell, Beth. I took her home a couple of times, and that's all."

"You wanted to talk, so talk," she said. "Meg says you guys were chummy a long time ago. Any of that old spark left?"

"You're joking. We were just kids."

"She seems to take a liking to you, I think. I see the way she looks at you."

"You were probably drunk when you thought you saw it," he noted, although he knew she was right.

"But I'm afraid... well, I think, my dear, that she's another loser..."

Mark sat up straight. "What do you mean by that?"

"She was practically coughing up her drink at my party last week. I'm thinking she just decided to take one in order to try and fit in, and that was all." Beth laughed. "Did you see the date she brought? I'm amazed he didn't bring in the cavalry to try and break us up."

"And?"

"And she's friends with the dogface, too. Amanda Hanfield. How low can you go?"

These insults angered Mark. "Beth, she's not a bad person. You just have to get to know her."

"Well, I suppose she's better than an empty slot on the cheerleading squad, anyway," she said.

"We're not *talking*," he said. "That's the thing about you. You're always wanting to complain about things instead of talking about what's really going on."

"So what are you getting at, Mark?"

He took in a deep breath. "I think we should take some time off, you and me."

Beth didn't sound upset. "Are you serious?"

"Yes, I'm quite serious," he said.

She stayed silent for a moment. "What made you decide?"

She deserved to know. "It's someone else."

CHAPTER EIGHT

She had made a fool of herself. Humiliation and regret swarmed through her. Meg ran the events from the previous night through her head carefully, but she could not figure out how she could have been so stupid. What on earth had led her to actually try and kiss Mark? And after all, why in the world would he kiss her back? No, nothing could erase what she had done last night; she could not simply hop into her personal time machine and go back and fix it all. This wasn't, after all, some science-fiction novel.

She sprawled herself on her bed, still in her nightgown. It was morning, and golden rays of sunshine streamed in through the slats on her blinds, making a striped pattern on the carpeted floor. The sunlight-filled room had the air of a Sunday, yet Meg knew that it was a Saturday. She felt a little sick to her stomach, as though she were feeling the beginnings of a cold. She figured it

was the drink she'd had last night. Probably her very first hangover. And really, how strong had it been? Probably very. Her actions last night conveyed that of a young woman who had been loosened. She was supposed to go to the mall today with Amanda, but she felt like calling her up and saying that she couldn't make it. She wanted to close herself off in her room for a couple of days and just disappear from the face of the earth.

She picked up a paperback that she was in the middle of reading and went through ten pages. When she set the book down, two knocks sounded on her door. Without Meg even answering, the door swung open. "Megan, we have to have a talk."

Her mother was dressed in tight jeans and a cowl-neck sweater. Lines of concern etched her otherwise youthful face upon her forehead, and around the mouth. Her long, thin fingers were clasped tightly in front of her abdomen, and her posture was careful, worried. Her fair skin looked pale in the morning sunlight, as golden highlights from her naturally dark brown hair glinted in the sun.

"Yes, Mom?" Meg sat up on her elbows, then sat forward on top of her legs. She had not sounded as enthusiastic as she would have wanted to; fatigue had drained her of the energy.

Her mother breathed deeply through her nostrils. She took note of Meg's tidy room, and didn't say anything about it. Then she sat down carefully on top of Meg's crimson-

and-fuschia flowered bedspread. "I saw you coming home with a gentleman other than Jeffrey last night," she stated, her voice flat and authoritative.

Meg rubbed her eyes, still sleepy but becoming more awake by the second. It is funny how sickness, when only very slight, is almost pleasant. "You did?"

"Who was it?" The lines of concern on her face had turned to lines of moderate severity.

Meg opened her mouth to answer. "It was someone I met at the dance..." She looked at her mother's pursed lips. "Jeff had to go home early... and I wanted to stay..."

"Don't lie to me, Meg. I know who it was."

Meg stared at her mother. "You do?"

Ann crossed her legs. "Late last night, after your father and I had gone to bed, I heard a car pulling up to our house. I was having trouble sleeping, so I went up to the window to peer out. It was you, alright. Arriving home. But not with whom I had expected."

"I can explain."

"Meg," she said calmly. "I know you're not giving me the whole story. Where did you go last night and whom were you with? Tell me the truth."

She knew it was useless to try and make something up. "I sort of went to a party after the dance."

Mrs. Mitchell's eyes widened. "You *what*?" She straightened the hair around her face, as though a neater

mane would assuage her anger. "I figured as much. And this Jeffrey boy... he didn't come, did he?"

She shook her head, slowly.

"I didn't think so."

"He was going to, but..."

"But you found someone more interesting to traipse around with? Like Mark Powell, I presume?"

Meg nodded her head, slowly. She opened her palms to the ceiling. "It was just a party. All the kids nowadays are going to parties."

"Megan, you know you're not allowed to go to parties."

"I'm sorry Mom... it was just an innocent little get-together, I swear."

She studied her daughter. "Your father and I laid down the rules a long time ago, Megan: You are not to go to any parties, not even if it's a small group of friends that we've met and have approved of. But something tells me this party wasn't as innocent as you are letting on, my dear. The fact that you didn't even tell us that you were going is cause for concern."

"You're right. I should have told you."

"And one more thing: you're never to see that boy Mark again. Do you hear me?"

Meg blinked. "But Mom, why?"

She sighed sharply, with the beginnings of tears forming at the corners of her eyes. "You know damn well why, and I don't have to repeat it to you!" Meg flinched

at hearing her mother swear. Her mother's sudden passion was shocking, and Meg was left struggling for words.

"I'm sorry you feel that way," she said, finally. "Is it because of the accident?"

Mrs. Mitchell turned her back to her daughter and crossed her arms. "It's much more complicated than that."

"Is it?"

She spoke through clenched teeth. "He was the one who killed your brother, Meg. Doesn't that mean anything to you?"

"I guess it just means a whole lot more to you than it does to me."

"Look, I just don't want you to have any sort of a relationship with this boy. From the looks of what I saw of him last night, with his long hair and dysfunctional-looking jacket, he's probably a shady person. Not the sort of young man I would want you to hang around. And just how long have you been prancing around with this fellow, anyways?" The woman turned back towards her daughter, eyes now dry.

"Not long. Since the beginning of school."

"That's what your father and I were afraid of. All sorts of funny characters hover around public schools."

"He's not a funny character, Mom."

"In my book he is, Meg. I know you're young and naïve right now, but you'll learn."

"If that's how you feel, then I understand."

Ann Mitchell raised her chin. "You're grounded for a week, Meg. For going to a party and breaking curfew. Now I hope you'll understand, but I don't care to talk about this subject any further." It was the end of discussion. No room for arguments, Meg knew.

She spent the day finishing up her homework and doing household chores. At dinnertime, her parents were still and silent. She made the meal: spaghetti and garlic toast.

After they had mostly finished eating, her father spoke. "Your mother tells me you broke curfew last night, and you went to a party."

"That's right."

"I'm glad that she grounded you, Meg. You know you're not supposed to do these things."

She folded her hands in her lap and looked at them. "You're right. I should have obeyed the rules. It's my fault."

Her mother and father made eye contact. "And this Mark Powell character... well, we thought we'd closed the book on him a long time ago, you see."

"And what did you conclude?"

They made eye contact a second time. Davis Mitchell said, "Honey, the incident with Mark Powell should not be discussed at the table when we're eating."

"But you've never wanted to talk about it. Ever. If now's not a good time, then when is?"

Davis sighed and adjusted his glasses. "Well, I suppose."

Meg dropped her fork on her plate and straightened the napkin in her lap. "How come Mark never came around after Cory died?" Meg asked, peering across the table at her father.

"Well..." he began. "I suppose he never had a reason to. Mark was friends with Cory, not with us. After the incident, Mark was put away for a while, and we lost contact."

"But you never made an effort to speak with him, did you?" demanded Meg.

"Sweetheart, our family was going through a crisis. And Mark was probably being well taken care of by his own family."

"So you never once spoke with him after that day?"

Davis scratched his temple. "No."

Her mother interjected, "We were the ones suffering a loss, Meg. Not him."

Meg shook her head. "I just think it's a shame. Considering the fact that his parents probably blamed him, too."

Her parents looked at each other. "Just what are you saying? That we blame Mark for our son's death?"

"What I'm saying," Meg began, "is that children of that age are still very impressionable. And knowing Mark the way that I do, I know that he was a very sensitive boy."

Alienation can and does send out a strong message, one that is difficult to ignore."

"That's enough," he father said. "Now finish your food."

Meg crumpled up her napkin in her hands and threw it on the table, then she got up from her seat and moved to leave. "Sweetheart, honey, where are you going?" her mother called.

She looked over her shoulder. "If you don't want to talk about it then why should I stay?"

Dear Mark,

I'm writing this letter to you because I don't know if I'll ever see you again. My parents have told me not to talk to you ever again, and besides, I don't even know if you would want to, after what happened last night. I'm sitting in my room, thinking about the huge mistake I made when I tried to kiss you. I was completely out of line, and I should never have done that. But what bothers me most about this situation is, I don't know if I'll be able to stop the feelings I already have for you. You know, I think I'm in love with you, and I don't think anything can stop that. Not the fact that you have a girlfriend, not the dismissive attitudes of my parents, not the pain that I know you still feel and I still feel over losing Cory. And I don't know what to do about it. I have a sinking sensation that I'll never get a chance to hear your voice

ever again, and it tears me apart. At least I have this letter to send to you, and hopefully my parents won't tear it out of my hands. Please write back.

Love, Meg

Meg balled the letter up in her left fist and lit it with a match. She watched the glowing flames lick up the sides of the paper, devouring it like prey, turning it into black ash. She let it drop into the bathtub, then washed the ashes down the drain. It was a stupid idea. As though he would care to even read it.

It was nighttime already. Her mother and father were downstairs watching television. Meg slipped noiselessly into the kitchen and retrieved a glass of orange juice. She swallowed the sweet liquid down quickly, then wiped her mouth with the back of her arm. The darkness outside was thick, and enclosing. She could faintly see the horizon through the window but mostly, just her reflection. She was wearing her blue terry-cloth robe, and nightshirt. Nothing on her feet. Wind tossed boughs of trees up against the glass, making howling and scraping noises. Meg checked to see if her parents were looking, then when she saw that they weren't, she discretely took a half-empty bottle of vodka from the cabinet and added some to the remainder of her orange juice. Within minutes, she was feeling a pleasant dizziness that she had only last night been introduced to. She carried her drink upstairs,

feeling the soft fuzziness of the carpet under her toes, listening to the soft blare of the television set in the other room.

For about fifteen minutes she flipped through a Lady's Home Journal on her bed. Then she heard the familiar creaks and groans of the stairs as her parents made their way to their bedroom. She didn't want tonight to be boring. She had lost Mark, so why not try and have some fun?

When the lights outside her door were turned off, Meg changed back into a pair of jeans and a heavy sweatshirt. The wind outside was still restless; still tossing boughs this way and that, as though rain were threatening to blow in. But according to the forecast, rain would not reach Glenwood until the morning. She glanced at herself in the mirror, seeing the paleness of her own skin and the darkness of her hair, and smoothed out her jeans. After several minutes had passed since her parents had retired, she slowly opened the door to her bedroom. Sucking in her breath, she descended the stairs carefully, and tip-toed across the foyer into the living room, then into the kitchen. Her rubber-soled sneakers barely made a noise against the linoleum, just very soft squeaks. She went through the kitchen, then opened the sliding door at the back of the house quietly and slipped quickly out into the cool night air.

The crickets and the tree-frogs were singing their nightly tune. She closed the sliding door carefully behind her. Wind whistled through the branches of the trees, which were beginning to bare in this the beginning of Fall, and from time to time Meg's hair was swept up with the current of the breeze and tossed in odd directions. Black branches looked like twisted, gnarly veins against a midnight blue sky. The trees themselves looked like huge, bowing bodies that swayed with the force of the wind. And the moon was not quite full; in just a day or two more, it would be.

While still close to the house, Meg tread lightly on the bed of pine needles and dead leaves underneath her feet, which crunched with each step. Still sucking in her breath, mostly out of superstition, she let out the air slowly and deliberately from her lungs. It was cool enough tonight for her breath to fog up a little bit in front of her face, but ever so slightly. Sounds echoed between the trees as she entered the woods, and she could hear herself breathing. Shadows from the trunks and branches of trees loomed over her path, and she was careful to test the earth ahead of her with her foot each time before setting her weight down upon it.

An owl hooted in the distance. She heard the sound of squirrels scurrying. The air smelled crisply of pine needles and fresh earth. Meg felt small amidst the tall, slender trees. She continued to walk, hugging her arms

around her body to protect against the chill in the air, yet she was still shivering in her sweatshirt and tight jeans.

She came to the small clearing she where she often stopped to read or to rest. A huge rock jutted out from the soil at the top of a mild drop, at the bottom of which there was a small stream. It was fun to go fishing for crayfish in that stream, sitting on that rock... she and Cory used to do it all the time when they were growing up, using makeshift fishing poles. She placed a warm hand on the cool, damp surface of the rock, and brushed off the excess dirt. Then she tucked her hair behind her ears and sat down. She sat, hugging her knees with her arms, gazing at the moon, for quite some time.

At one point she thought she heard a noise, but it could only have been the soft gurgling of the stream below, because the sound was so quiet. It could have been any of a multitude of sounds already filling the night air. But when Meg heard it again, she knew that it was not coming from nature.

Instinctively, she rose to her feet. Before she made a sound, he placed a finger to her lips. "No, you don't have to get up," he whispered. She let out a soft cry of surprise. "Just me, Meg." It was Mark. Suddenly without her arms wrapped around her body, she shivered even more fiercely from the cold, and she looked at him with surprise and inquisitiveness.

She barely saw anything of him; his most distinctive feature was his reflective eyes. He was very close to her; he was breathing quickly, and deeply. That was the sound she had heard.

She was astonished that she had not been more frightened. It was as though she were expecting him.

His finger was still resting on her lips. Slowly, he lifted the other hand to her face, and softly touched it. "You're cold," Mark said. His breathing was heavy, as though he had been running.

She nodded, shivering. He clasped her hand. "But your hands are warm."

"What are you doing here?" she whispered, as the wind howled around them.

He leaned forward, still clasping her hand, and brushed her mouth with his lips in answer. She quivered as his hand reached down and brushed her right breast.

"What are you... why..." she broke off. His hand began to stroke her breast, while the other hand touched her thigh.

"I've come because I feel something for you," he breathed, as he kissed her mouth sweetly, gently. "Just as you feel something for me..."

She closed her eyes, and let out a soft breath as she embraced him.

"I shouldn't have pushed you away," he said.

"And I shouldn't have come on so strong."

"No." He kissed her lips. "You were perfect."

Never in her life had she been touched by a boy in that way before. It had been her first kiss. And she felt, instinctively, as though she wanted more.

He cupped her face in his broad hands and proceeded to press wet kisses upon her eyelids.

When she reached the nerve, she kissed him back. "Oh Mark, I thought I'd lost you. I wanted you to feel the way I feel about you."

"And I do." He kissed her neck.

"What are you doing here?" she repeated.

"I came because I couldn't stand to be apart from you any longer," he said. "I thought about what happened, and I realized I'd made a huge mistake, one that I'd never stop paying for unless I did something about it."

They embraced in a powerful, passionate kiss. Mark's long arms were completely wrapped around Meg's petite body, as Meg's hands were grasping Mark's shoulders.

"I don't care what the reason is," she said. "All that matters is that you're here..."

Somehow they made their way to the ground. Mark was lying on top of her caressing her hair. "I don't want anything to ever happen to you..." he said, gazing into her eyes. She could see the contacts in his large, intense eyes.

When Meg returned to her house that night, she knew with absolute certainty that nothing in her life would ever again be the same.

CHAPTER NINE

On Monday, Mark yawned through a series of long lectures during school. He was not prepared for his classes; during third period he was singled out for not doing his homework and was asked to stay after class for a stern word from the teacher. "You'll never get far in life if you don't learn a little discipline one of these days," he was told. He made a silent promise to himself that he was going to try to do a better job in the future.

At lunch, Mark spotted Meg chatting away with her new friends at a round table, and that made him happy. The sight of her made his heart soar with a warm, fast beat that made his cheeks flush. He decided not to approach her, but instead to just watch her from the opposite end of the cafeteria, sitting at a booth with Dan, Drew and Joey. They were talking about sports, but Mark hardly heard a word of it. He was deeply absorbed in watching Meg smile in her shy way and flick her thick, dark hair behind her shoulders and laugh.

After the long school day was over, Beth approached him at his locker. "Thought I'd find you here," she said,

giving him a once-over. Her bookbag was slung over both shoulders; she was carrying a pile of books in her arms.

"Hey, Beth," he said, slamming the metal door shut. "What's up?"

"Oh, just passing by. On my way to practice, in case you'd like to know. There's a big game coming up, and all of us girls need to polish our steps."

"Anything you wanted?"

She shook her head. "Nothing in particular," she said. "But since you asked..." she bit the end of her pinky. "...I was wondering. You still want to be friends with me, right?"

"Of course, Beth. We can still be friends."

"Well, in my experience," she said, "friends are frank with each other. Can I be frank?"

"Sure."

"I know who it is you've had your eye on. It's that cheerleader girl, the one you took home because her date ditched her, isn't it?"

Mark was silent. He nodded his head, slowly. "Yeah. What about it?" he asked.

"Well," she said, "and I'm being frank here, but I'd advise you to be careful with that girl," she said. "She's quite the innocent, you know. And fragility breeds jealous parents. That's one of mine, you know."

"So what are you getting at?" he asked.

She laughed. "Oh, just that I know you, Mark, and you're almost exactly the opposite. Wouldn't want a nice girl like that crushing under the pressure to keep up with you, would we?" Beth gave him a warning look, held his gaze for a few moments, and then turned to leave. "Oh, and one more thing," she said. "Just remember that news travels fast. One minute you're a promising new student, the next you're the victim of a malicious circle of rumors."

"Are you making a threat?"

"Not at all," she said. "Just saying it like I see it, that's all." Then she added, "Just being a friend."

He spent some time downtown with the guys, sitting around talking and smoking cigarettes, then when he was pulling his car into his driveway, he noticed a big blob on his front porch. Narrowing his eyes, he realized what it was. He quickly put the parking brake on, unbuckled himself and rushed out of the car. Meg was hunched over, lying on the stoop.

"Meg, what's happened?" he demanded.

"Wha--?" she blurted, and her speech was slurred. Her breath smelled strongly of alcohol, and her eyes were red and puffy.

"What's happened to you?" he demanded again, holding her in his arms.

She coughed, and weakly held onto him. "It was Beth..." she slurred. "After practice... we hung out... I'm so dizzy..."

"Come inside," he said, and guided her up and through the front door.

Once inside his room, she slumped down into his bed. "I'm sorry, Mark," she said, with eyes closed and arms waving slowly through the air, "I just wanted to have some fun, like you do..."

Mark felt hot anger rising into his face. He shot downstairs and quickly picked up the phone. "Beth, what were you thinking?" he yelled.

Beth's laughing voice sounded jovial, and overly relaxed. "As I told you, Mark, she's running to catch up with you. Seriously, Mark? I think she was trying to impress you."

"What did you give her?" he pressed. She was carrying on a background conversation while on the phone with Mark, and he heard several other voices chattering and laughing through the receiver. "Dammit, Beth, talk to me!"

She was less than impressed with his urgent tone. "Oh, just a few Valiums, a couple drinks and some smoke, that's all."

He was angered by her nonchalance. "Don't you realize that she'd never done this stuff before?" he pressed.

She hushed a couple of the background voices. "Well, it's not like I didn't warn you..." Mark slammed down the

phone, having had enough of Beth, and ran back up immediately to Meg.

"Meg, are you okay? Do you need me to bring you anything?" he asked, stroking her cheek.

She sighed and groaned and then said, "My mom is going to kill me... I need to get home."

Mark bit his lip, suddenly realizing the mess they were in. "Ok, don't worry Meg. I'll take you home. I just want to make sure you'll be alright in the car, that's all." He looked into her red, droopy eyes and knew then, for certain, that he alone was to blame for this.

His heart heavy, he picked her up and helped her into his car. He knew that when her parents saw her, they would immediately smell the odor of alcohol on her breath and body, but he didn't care. He wanted her to be safely back at home, and in one piece, at least.

The drive to her house was silent. He looked over at her a few times, and she was sleeping in her seatbelt. When they arrived, she was still sleeping, and he had to gently nudge her to bring her back to awareness. "Come on, Meg. Let's get you inside," he said, and unbuckled her seatbelt.

She opened her eyes slowly. "Still dizzy," she said weakly. "Don't know if I can walk."

"I'll carry you then," he said, and walked around to the other side of the car and pulled her out. She was surprisingly lightweight.

As they approached the front stoop, the door swung open. The first thing Mark saw was a pair of cream Italian leather pumps, attached to legs clad with translucent cream stockings. Then it was the scent that attracted his attention; a faintly Oriental perfume wafted towards his nose, and it was a rich, luxurious scent. Mark set Meg down, light as she was, on the stone entrance, and looked up to the woman who was standing in the doorway.

"Hello, Mark," she said, in a rich, deep, feminine voice. He was struck dumb for several seconds.

There she was. Her short hair was neatly styled; it was curled under at the ends, and seemed to catch a spectrum of highlights in the light of the day. She was taller than Meg, and trim, wearing a silk suit and blouse.

Mark had not seen her since he was little. "You can let her go right here," she said. "Meg, go straight up to your room. I'll deal with you later." Meg scampered inside, wobbling a little bit on her way up to her room. Mrs. Mitchell turned to Mark with slight curls on either side of her mouth. "I would ask to what do I owe this pleasure, but I see my question has already been answered," she said, as he straightened up.

"Mrs. Mitchell, it's nice to see you again," Mark said formally, even though he knew his formality would get him nowhere.

She tapped a pen onto the heel of her palm. There was a thick silence between the two of them, as she glared icily back at him.

"Just cut to the chase, Mark," she said, still glaring, still speaking coolly, "I suppose you know how my daughter got into the condition that she is in?"

He nodded. "She was drinking with a friend of ours. She had a few pills and some drugs. The combination wiped her out."

She pursed her lips and studied him. The uncomfortableness between them was almost unbearable. "And this isn't the first time you've seen my daughter, is it?"

He did not deny it. "No, ma'am."

"Well," she said, smoothing out her hair, "I see you've managed to destroy both my son *and* my daughter now. Good day, Mark. Please, don't ever come around again, or I'll be likely to call the police to remove you." With that, the door was swung closed.

"I wasn't the one who..." he started to say, but the door was already closed.

He turned, and went slowly back to his car. He didn't know where he was going. He didn't know what he was going to do. But he knew that there was only one way to stop the vicious cycle of destruction that had been started so long ago.

Trees. Everywhere, trees, and overgrown weeds. They were so tall that only a small portion of the sky was visible overhead, and what little he did see was patched with starch-white clouds. He was sobbing heavily by now. Thankfully, no one had seen him drive up to Raven's Point, park his car and then disappear into the woods. He wanted it that way. He wanted to be completely alone.

He had walked about a half mile into the wilderness, and now he was doubled over, crying and sobbing, soaking his t-shirt but he didn't care. The gun was stowed carefully in his right pocket. He'd made sure to buy the same kind that had been used on his best friend in the world, Cory Mitchell.

He never told anyone that he was suicidal because no one cared to listen. Meg might have listened, but she was taken away from him.

He cocked the gun, and then fired.

CHAPTER TEN

"He's not here, is he?"

Amanda was chomping on a peanut butter-and-jelly sandwich, and her cheeks looked like a chipmunk's. She took a gigantic swallow, and said, "Who?"

"*Mark*," Meg said impatiently. "I've been looking for him all day. He's not here, is he?" she repeated.

Amanda took a second swallow. "Well, I see his friends over there--" She pointed to a booth on the wall closest to the lunch-line. "--and he's not with them." She shrugged her shoulders. "Maybe he went off campus. He is an upper-classman." At Glenwood High, only upperclassmen were allowed to go off-campus during their periods off.

Meg turned her head back round to Amanda and sighed. "I know, but I've been searching for him the whole day. I even know where a couple of his classes are now, and he wasn't there."

"So he's sick," she replied.

Meg bit her thumbnail thoughtfully. "I suppose you're right. I suppose I don't have any reason to be worried."

"So don't be," Amanda encouraged. "I'm sure after what happened yesterday, he's bound to be a little under the weather."

Meg's eyes darkened, remembering the aftermath of her outing with Beth. She had a dim memory of Mark finding her and bringing her home, but a much more stark one of waking up with a throbbing headache to her mother's harsh scoldings. Not at all impressed with Meg's sickness, she'd unleashed a string of attacks almost immediately upon Meg's opening her eyes to the twilight. Her father was downstairs, uninvolved, watching the television set, probably trying to drown out the shouting voices from upstairs.

Oh, why had she agreed to go with Beth that afternoon? Looking back, it was much like the wolf in Granny's clothes... she was ever so sweet in inviting her to come over, and wouldn't it just be the most fun?

She knew why she did it. She wanted to impress Mark. All his friends, she knew, were a lot tougher and more street-wise than she ever was, and she hated being thought of as innocent. She wanted, for once, to be the impulsive one, the daring one, the exciting one. And after being somewhat intimate with him... perhaps she felt vulnerable.

"Do you think I looked like a fool?" she asked Amanda, who lifted blonde lashes lazily in reply.

"From what you told me, Meg, he's probably more concerned than judgmental right now."

"And what about you?" she asked. "Do you think I was crazy for what I did?"

Amanda smiled weakly and patted her hand. "Of course not. Maybe you were a little stupid, but not crazy." Amanda's humor was very blatant. "I must admit, I had no idea that the two of you had a history together when I first told you not to go near him, but the story remains the same: Mark has caused a lot of trouble in the past. When you told me about your older brother, then later when you told me that Mark was the one who pulled the trigger--"

"By accident, of course," Meg interjected.

Without missing a beat, Amanda went on, "I was shocked out of my mind. I knew you had to be with him, to talk

with him, to get whatever curiosities you had inside of you out of your system, but I was still wary of him, and I would have advised you to take all precautions necessary. After all, he's already gotten you into trouble, hasn't he?"

Meg saw her point.

"But listen," she said, leaning in closer. "If it's any consolation, I know that you have deep feelings for him, and I know that no silly teenage pot-smoking record can take that away...am I right?"

Meg looked into her bright green eyes and nodded carefully.

"So, Meg," she said, clasping her hands together, "Go be with him. See if you can make a difference. But don't get sucked into his depressed lifestyle. That would only be defeating the brilliance of your presence in his life." Amanda paused to give her a knowing look. "Besides," she said. "I'm pretty damn sure he feels deeply about you, too."

"I care about him so much," Meg blurted, suddenly gasping for breath. "that sometimes I don't know what to do with myself."

"It was love at first sight, wasn't it?"

Meg wrung her hands and gasped at the effrontery. After a long pause, she spoke. "I suppose it was. Not technically, since we knew each other when we were children, but yes."

"Then figure out what exactly you mean to do about it, and do it."

"But we've already--"

"I don't mean *that*," Amanda broke in. "I mean, after what's been done, do you want to have a serious relationship with this boy? After all, one night doesn't necessarily mean anything more than itself in the nineties."

"Amanda!"

"Come on, Meg, it's the truth."

Meg's cheeks became hot and flushed with embarrassment. "It just *happened*..."

"Have you talked with him since?"

"No."

"Not once?"

"Nope."

"Well, it's only been a couple of days. And have you thought about Beth? What did she have to say when you went over to her house?"

Meg rested her forehead against a propped-up arm.

"Nothing. She said they hadn't spoken in a while, but they were going to go out that evening...the rest is kind of a blur," she admitted.

"Still going out?"

"Apparently." The tone of the conversation turned sharply gloomy.

"You didn't tell her anything, did you?"

"No," Meg said. "How could I have? I didn't think it was the proper time and place to break such news. Besides," she went on, "Mark would probably be the better person to tell her."

"You're right about that," Amanda agreed. "Best not to meddle in other people's affairs."

Meg was bombarded with a sudden unpleasant thought. "Amanda? What if he's not planning on telling her?"

Amanda laughed softly. "You're already worried about *that*? It's only been a couple of days. Give him time. Maybe he even told her last night, after he dropped you off at your house. Have you seen Beth today?"

Meg thought. "No."

"Well, I'll be with you at cheerleading practice. We'll see her then, okay?"

"Okay." The bell rang. The masses of kids got up from their seats and threw trash into bins before heading through the double doors into the main building of the school. Amanda and Meg got separated in the crowd, and several tall boys obscured Meg's view of her.

But Amanda's shouts broke through the crowd. "Meet me after school, outside the locker room!"

"Okay!" she hollered back.

But Meg's anxiety about Mark continued throughout the rest of the day, and she found that she could not concentrate in the rest of her classes.

After the final bell rang, Meg met up with Amanda and told her that she was going to skip practice and walk to Mark's house.

"Just don't let your parents find out," she warned, and gave her a brief hug.

The walk was an easy one. It was a pleasant day, partially overcast, and Meg walked much of the distance staring at the shadow in front of her, which bobbed up and down with each step. She was nervous, and yet excited, finding herself hungry to see Mark again after what had taken place between them over the weekend. She'd not been able to speak with him properly when she'd gotten drugged and drunk, and she was anxious to see what he thought of her for doing that...whether he was frightened or disappointed, shocked or maybe sympathetic.

It took fifteen minutes to get to his house, and she surprised herself by remembering which way to go to get there.

His house was a grey split-level badly in need of a paint job. The wood panels looked dingy, and the paint was beginning to peel at the corners, and the little flakes were forming small piles on the ground. Garden tools were thrown haphazardly around the lawn, as though someone had begun to do some yardwork a long time ago and had forgotten about them. After all this time, somehow the house looked smaller and darker than she remembered it. The one brightness about the place was a floral wreath hanging

cheerfully on the front door, filled with silk purple irises and red poppies, but it looked odd and misplaced next to the seediness of the house.

Meg walked up the stone pathway and went up the steps to the concrete stoop, which was covered by an awning. She took a deep breath, steadying herself. She lifted her fist and knocked loudly on the grey door three times. She waited, holding her breath.

After a brief moment, the door slowly creaked open. Mark's mother was standing there, dressed in a sweatshirt and sweatpants. Her face was swollen and blotchy, and remnants of tears were still in her shrunken eyes.

"May I help you?" the woman asked, obviously trying to fight back a sob.

"Are you alright?" Meg asked, suddenly rushing to her side.

The woman wiped away a stray tear. "It's my son-- he's in the hospital--" Her voice trailed off. Meg gasped. *Oh, no!* She could see that the woman was practically frantic.

"Where?" Meg demanded. "What happened?"

The woman was shaking, trying to control her tears. "Underwood hospital. He tried to kill himself. I'm on my way there now--"

He'd tried to kill himself? "Take me with you," Meg pleaded. "I'm a friend of his. I'm sure he'd want me to be there."

"Megan Mitchell?" she asked weakly, a glint of recognition in her eyes. A large tear dropped from her chin. "Is that you?" Meg nodded. "I've not seen you in years..." Her voice was hoarse and quiet, just above a whisper.

"Please," Meg said. "I want to see him."

"Alright," she said. "Follow me to the car."

The car trip was tense and silent. Meg stared out the window, watching the trees and houses go by, and chewed her bottom lip to pieces as they drove the few miles to the hospital. She looked over to her left briefly a couple of times and Mark's mother was gripping the steering wheel so tightly that her knuckles were white. She listened to her jagged breathing and waited for them to near the town's local hospital.

When they were at an intersection, Meg asked, as calmly as she could, "What did he do?"

After some hesitation, she answered in a hoarse voice, "The kid went and shot himself. They found him up at Raven's Point yesterday, bleeding from a head wound. Campers heard a shot, and rushed to the scene."

"Had you known he was missing?"

The woman shook her head, still looking at the road. "He was gone all hours of the day, most every day. First I heard of this was when the police called me last night to tell me my son had attempted suicide."

Meg was shaken. "How bad is it?"

"He was in critical condition yesterday, and today he was in stable condition. He's still got tubes running all throughout his body, but they've just given him his own room, and that's why I was about to return to the hospital. To see him." The muscles around her mouth were twitching. Meg noticed for the first time that she wasn't wearing any makeup.

As they neared the entrance to the hospital, Meg took note of the luxurious garden that ran the length of its perimeter. It was devoid of any flowers, for the Fall season had already begun to rear its cold head, but Meg guessed that it contained tulips and azaleas during the Spring months. In between buildings, there was a space where a white gazebo stood with ivy entwined through its slats, and inside of it was a wooden swing where people most likely sat to enjoy the garden. Too cheerful, Meg thought, for what lay inside.

Heading into the parking section, Mrs. Powell retrieved a ticket and moved into a parking space near one of the entrances. She turned the car off, put the emergency brake on, and lifted out the keys.

Once inside, the building had the quiet and hushed air of a hospital. The floors were well polished and squeaky clean, and tiled black and white, checkerboard-style.

They rushed through the wide halls, following the signs, and made way to Mark's room. He was on the third

floor. Meg was lit with fear. Was he going to be alright? What was he going to look like? They quickly got an elevator and stepped out to a nurse's station.

"Mark Powell's room, please."

"And you are?"

"His mother." Her voice was urgent and impatient.

"And this is Megan...a friend."

"Right this way." The stern, uniformed nurse pulled out a manilla folder and led them to a room halfway down the hall in back of the nurse's station, and they followed her single-file.

Mrs. Powell gasped. Just as she'd said, tubes were coming out of him from practically every orifice. The woman rushed to his side and started brushing back his hair with her hands, as tears spilled down her cheeks and splashed onto Mark's body. Meg was aware that her own pallour had suddenly become white with shock, and she knew that she was shaking slightly. How could he have done this? And why? Why now? Bandages were wrapped all around his head, covering his eyes. A tube was coming out of his mouth, and another out of his nose. Next to him, a heart monitor rang a steady beep!...beep!, and a breathing machine was pumping oxygen into his lungs.

These sounds were like a whirlwind around Meg's head, as she felt her whole world crashing down around her. The scene was so unreal: just that afternoon, she was talking calmly with Amanda about him as though nothing catastrophic

had happened, and now here she was, standing at his hospital bedside, watching as the machines helped him to breathe. The nurse tapped on Mrs. Powell's shoulder. "He won't know that you're here, ma'am. He's unconscious right now."

"I don't care about that," she said, wiping a tear away. "He's my son and I'll be with him right now, if you don't mind." She gently stroked the arm that was not connected to an i.v. and spoke soft words to Mark, as Meg looked on in horror. "Where is my ex-husband?" she asked, as if the thought had just occurred to her.

"A man was here just earlier," the nurse replied, and checked the i.v. bag. "Do you wish to see the doctor?"

Mrs. Powell stroked Mark's limp hand and looked up tearfully to the nurse. "Right away, if at all possible."

"He'll be here shortly, then." The nurse turned and left, and the two women were left alone with Mark, whose heart monitor was still throbbing a steady tune.

Meg looked at her watch. It was four o'clock. If she was later getting home than she usually was, she knew she'd have to face her mother and tell her where she'd been. But she didn't care. It was an emergency, and it had to do with Mark's life.

When the doctor came in, he explained what had taken place. Using x-rays to illustrate his speech, he told them that if the bullet wound had been any lower, his optic nerve would have severed. Mark would no longer have been

able to see. And if the gun had been placed just a centimeter back, Mark might not even be alive right now.

The doctor then said, directing his voice to Meg, "Miss, if you don't mind, I'd like to speak with Mark's mother alone now. There are some matters we need to discuss which concern only family. I hope you understand."

Meg obediently stepped out into the hall and waited. After the door closed, she watched as a hunched-over patient wearing a hospital gown strolled slowly across the tiled hall, his i.v. in tote behind him. Several people were sitting in plastic seats near the nurse's station, and Meg decided to have a seat.

An hour went by, and the door remained closed. Meg glanced at her watch again. She was soon going to be expected back at home.

When Mrs. Powell emerged with the doctor, fresh tears on her cheeks, but looking a little more alive, Meg jumped to her feet. "Is he going to be alright?"

"Quite alright," the doctor said. "As I've told Barbara here, I'm confident that Mark is going to make a full recovery."

Meg breathed a sigh of relief. "May I see him again?"

"Go ahead...but be brief. Visiting hours are almost over." She padded cautiously into the open room and saw what she had seen before; nothing had changed. He was still unconscious or sleeping or whatever the nurse had

said, and hooked up to all sorts of machines. She sat down beside him and examined his face.

"Why is there a bandage covering his eyes?" she asked.

"Blood flowed into them and had to be drained," the doctor explained.

Meg felt her own tears beginning to well up in her eyes. "Why would he do this?" she asked, quietly.

"Perhaps in the future he can explain it to you himself."

A hand reached out and squeezed her on the shoulder. "Come on, Megan. Let me take you home. It's getting late for you." Barbara Powell's hand remained on her shoulder, and Meg reluctantly got up.

"I just wish there was more I could do," she said.

The woman smiled. "Your presence here was enough," and she got out her keys from her purse.

When they arrived at Meg's house, both her mother and her father were home.

"Where were you?" her mother demanded. "Were you with that slimy, Godforsaken person again, the one I told you *twice* never to see again?"

"Something happened...something awful," she replied, drained of all energy.

"You didn't go to practice?"

"Mark's in the hospital, Mother. He tried to kill himself...he almost died."

Both parents turned to stare blankly. A shocked silence followed. Meg was scarcely aware of what was happening, because she was in such a foul mood that anything could have gone by her, but before she knew it, her mother was raising a shaky hand to her mouth, saying, "Oh, dear," and then collapsing onto the floor.

"Ann!" Her father rushed to her aid. "She's fainted, Meg. Help me to lift her up."

When they carried her over to the couch, her mother regained consciousness. "I must have passed out..." she said. "But I'm alright."

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Mark woke up to the sound of a heart monitor with a tube coming out of his nose. "Mom?" he asked weakly. "Where am I?"

Everything was dark. But then a hand lifted off the gauzy bandages from his eyes, and he could see. He was in a bed, in a hospital room. And his head throbbed with a dull, but intense pain that wouldn't cease. "My head hurts," he managed, even though it was painful to try and speak.

"Hush, Mark," came a familiar voice. "You're just waking up. Try not to stir so much." It was his mother, and she sounded more soothing and loving than he'd remembered her sounding in years. His father was standing

tall and still at the foot of his bed, his hands clasped in front of him so that the muscles in his forearms were flexed, watching him silently. The tufts of grey hair atop brown were glinting in the white light of the sun, and his defined jaw was set, hardened into an expression of solemnity. His eyes were equally as solemn and dark, contemplative. His mother turned round and said, "Nurse, he says his head hurts." He heard the sound of the hospital intercom coming from the hall; the door was open a crack.

"I'll be back with the Percodan in just a moment."

Mark blinked his eyes, and even blinking hurt. Something crusty was built up in his eyelashes. "What's in my eyes?" he asked, and his voice was broken and hoarse.

"Blood, sweetie. They did the best they could cleaning you up, after what you did." The memory came flooding back to him: wandering into the woods, crying and alone, then putting a gun to his temple and firing. *And how was it that he was not dead?*

Mark moaned. The nurse came back, and inserted a pain killer into his i.v. He tried to lift up his arm, to feel his head, but it was too weak. All the energy was drained from him, but somehow he still managed to cry.

"I'm sorry, Mom--"

"Hush."

He felt his head reeling, throbbing even more intensely. "I've done something bad..."

"We can talk about it later, Mark. You're just waking up."

As the painkiller kicked in, Mark began to feel a little bit better. A food tray was brought in, and his mother began to feed him delicately. As he ate, food dribbled down his chin and onto his chest, and his mother promptly wiped it away for him. In all honesty, he felt like a young child being fed by his mommy. But he was hungry, and he eagerly and thankfully, if not with effort, swallowed down the food. After eating, he began to feel a little bit more energy buzzing throughout his limbs. He was feeling high from the pain medicine, and he now felt the desire to talk.

His father was still staring at him, his hands still clasped together and his feet slightly apart. "Dad?" He came closer.

"Yes, Son?"

"What's going to happen to me?"

His mother answered. "As soon as you recover, they're going to take you to a psychiatric hospital. It's the law. There's no way around it."

His tears continued to flow. "What will they do to me?" His voice was broken.

"Honey, they're going to make sure that you're working alright emotionally. Don't worry about that. They'll take care of you."

He'd been in one of these places before. Life there had seemed cruel and unnecessary. He didn't want it to happen again. He could feel his heart speeding up.

"But not until you're better physically," she went on. "We have to make sure your head is alright before we transfer you to another place."

"I don't want to go," he said flatly, even though he was in the middle of crying.

"You have to, Mark. If you don't go voluntarily, they will have to commit you...and you don't want that."

"When will I be better?"

"Doctor says you'll be here about a week. Then you'll have all the time in the world to explain your actions." His father, his jaw still set, his eyes still solemn, sat down in the chair next to his ex-wife's.

"It's not going to be like when you were a child," his father said. "You're going to go to a place for adults this time."

He weakly lifted up the hand which was connected to the i.v. "Why didn't I die?" he moaned, mostly to himself.

His father spoke. "You were a very lucky young man," he said. "And thankfully, a poor shot."

"Did they find the gun?"

"The police have it, Mark. You obtained it illegally." His mind was filled with sudden fear.

"Meg--"

"What are you trying to say?"

"Meg. Meg Mitchell. Is she alright?"

"She visited you yesterday, here in this room."

"She did?" He was filled with a tiny seed of hope.

"What did she say? Was she upset?"

"Hush, Mark. You're getting excited. She came by after school to our house, and I drove her here. You were asleep then, but she spent a good while visiting with you."

"Is she going to come again?"

Barbara and Mike Powell looked questioningly at their son. "Why would you want her to come again? Is this girl special to you?" his mother asked. "I thought you were dating Beth--"

"No," he cried. "That's over. I broke up with her last week. And yes, Meg is special to me."

"This is news," his father replied. "Is she your new girlfriend?"

"Not exactly," he said.

"But isn't she Cory Mitchell's sister? The boy who died?"

"Yes," Mark agreed.

They looked thoughtfully at their son. "My God. That must be it. All this must have something to do with Meg..." His mother was filled with sudden concern. "I'd not seen her in years, and now suddenly, she's back in your life. That *has* to be it."

Mark was too weak to reply. "And what's with all the changes recently?" his dad asked. "You weren't happy with Beth? What happened?"

"Mike, don't," his mother scolded. "He's in no condition. Let him rest for a while."

But Mark waved his mother's comments away. "It's not Meg's fault," he said as emphatically as he could, "it's mine. I'm the one who's to blame here, not her."

They sat looking down at him, shaking their heads. "But Mark, don't you remember that the last time you went into the hospital it was after you shot Cory?"

"No!" Mark insisted. "You can't bring her into this. If you end up blaming someone other than the one who's at fault, something bad always happens. If it has anything to do with Cory, then it's *still* not her fault. It's *still* my own, in every way." Mark's heart was pumping wildly now. The nurse showed up to tell his parents to tone down the conversation; he was still very weak.

"Very well," was their answer. "He'll have plenty of time to talk about it in the mental hospital."

The week went by very slowly. For much of the time, he watched the room's television set and sipped iced water from a sippy cup from his bed. Not many visitors. Gradually, he regained his strength, and nurses periodically came to his room to take him for light strolls through the halls to rebuild his stamina. As the week came

to a close, a social worker came to pay him a visit, briefcase in hand.

She knocked on the slightly adjacent door quietly, and slipped into the stuffy room. "Mark Powell?" she asked.

"Yes, that's me," he said, now with much more strength.

"I'm a social worker from Rolling Hills Hospital, and I'd like to ask you a few questions."

"Sure. Come in." She walked over to the bedside chair and took a seat. Then she opened her briefcase and pulled out a clipboard, along with a small stack of papers and a pen. Mark was alone; his parents were at home, taking care of business.

"My name is Judy Clout. I'll be working with you for your intake to the hospital. Mind if I begin?"

"Not at all." She put on a pair of square spectacles and examined the papers in her lap.

"This may take a while, so I hope you will be patient with me," she commented.

She proceeded to ask for his name, date of birth, social security number and other personal information in a very business-like manner. He answered the questions quickly and efficiently. Turning over the page, she asked, "Do you have any thoughts of harming yourself right now?"

"No," he answered, expecting the question.

"Do you have any thoughts of harming others right now?"

"Not at all." Even though they were run-of-the-mill intake questions, it bothered him to be asked them.

"On a scale of one to ten, one being the most depressed, ten being the happiest, how would you rate your mood today?"

"Five."

"Are you hearing or seeing anything right now that is not there, for example, voices, hallucinations...?"

"No." She proceeded to ask a long list of similar questions, about fifty of them, and each time, Mark came out with a prompt answer. He felt like he was being led into the lions' den, with no way out. He felt helpless and he was helpless to stop it. He'd tried to kill himself and survived, and this was the consequence.

She was a plump woman, with long, steel-grey hair which was tied tightly into a ponytail. Even though her face was round, and soft, she looked stern with her deep-set eyes and small mouth.

"How long will I have to stay there?" he asked, gingerly. He knew that his fate was resting partially in her hands.

"That depends on *you*," she answered curtly. "A psychiatrist will have to evaluate you and determine for himself whether you're ready to leave or not, but the decision is based on your readiness to be discharged, and personally, I wouldn't rush it. A gun to the head is a serious attempt on your life. You really wanted to go."

Mark felt disappointment, mixed with anger, welling up inside him, but he managed to control it. "I'm not suicidal anymore," he stated, defending his case.

"That may be, but until you're stabilized on meds and evaluated, they won't let you go."

So he was stuck. Nothing could prevent the hospitalization.

She proceeded to ask Mark for his signatures considering release forms and other agreements, then said, "Insurance stuff I'll talk over with your parents. We don't need to cover any of that here."

"When will I go?"

"Sometime today an ambulance will pick you up and bring you to Rolling Hills."

"Why an ambulance?"

"You're still considered a threat to yourself, and we want to take every precaution."

"Why can't my mother drive me?"

"It's policy. Considering the nature of your attempt, we have you as high-risk."

"Am I going to see my parents before I go?"

"I can have the nurse's station give them a call."

His parents came, and his mother brought him a duffel bag full of clothes and toiletries. Four hours after the intake, a male nurse pushing a wheelchair showed up at his

room. "Mark Powell, I'm here to take you to the ambulance."

"I can walk."

"Policy." Policy, policy. He felt like a criminal being taken to jail.

He was wheeled through the hall, a bandage still wrapped around his head, and felt the cool air rushing at his unclothed skin. They got on a large elevator, big enough to hold wheeled beds, and made their way down to the emergency entrance, where the ambulance was waiting. Once inside, two men in nurse's uniforms strapped him down tightly onto a stretcher, so that he couldn't move his arms or his legs. "Is this necessary?" he asked, twiddling his fingers and feet.

"We have to do this," they explained. "Don't worry," they said. "It's a short trip."

But it wasn't that short. The trip took at least a half an hour, all the while Mark feeling like a mummy strapped in, unable to move.

When they arrived, a paramedic opened the double doors at the back of the ambulance and the other one unstrapped him and helped him to his feet.

The hospital looked small from the front, but Mark was told that this was deceiving. It was a one-level institution and was spread out over several acres, and was actually quite large on the inside. At the front, the windows were small, and square, and the walls were made of

concrete. The roof was shingled black, giving it the look of a house. Thick bushes surrounded the building, covering some of the windows.

They entered through the main entrance to a waiting room, and one of the paramedics spoke briefly with the receptionist. A phone call was made, and Mark was quickly ushered inside the inner part of the hospital, without the paramedics. Behind him, the doors clicked. Locked inside.

The man who had ushered him inside extended his hand. "I'm Pete," he said. "I understand you've already been through intake. I'll be leading you to your wing." The halls were narrow, and carpeted. Mark held his duffel bag like a briefcase tightly, possessively.

The man tried to make polite conversation. "You in school?"

"Uh-huh."

"What grade?"

"Eleventh."

"You'll be graduating soon, then?"

"Hopefully."

"Good job. My daughter's in the eighth grade. She's going to high school next year. She can't wait to start. Hey, you hungry?"

He felt his stomach rumbling, and by the darkness outside, he knew it was past dinnertime. "Yeah," he admitted.

"I'll have the cafeteria send you a tray. You can eat after you get settled in." They rounded a corner and approached a set of locked double doors. The jovial man used a key that was hanging around his neck to unlock them. "Adolescent wing," he announced. "Home sweet home."

Pete escorted him down a hall which was connected to several medium-size lecture room with dry-erase boards. They were all empty except for one, where a pair of boys, who looked like they were about fourteen, were passing back and forth a nerf ball. When they got to the nurse's station, a buxom middle-aged woman with orange-red hair asked for his duffel bag.

"It's just my overnight things," he explained.

"I have to check for sharps," she said. She dug through the t-shirts, jeans and underwear, and retrieved a plastic razor. "You can't have this," she said. "I'll put it in your cubby."

"When can I shave?"

"Look at the board." She pointed upwards. "Between eight and ten in the mornings. We have to have someone watch you."

"I'm not about to cut myself," he protested.

"Sorry. It's part of the rules."

Pete left. "Good luck," he said, as he waved. Mark was urged to have a seat.

"You'll find your bag in your room, but first we have to take your vitals and have someone give you a tour." The

nurse took his temperature and blood pressure, and weighed him. "The doctor has ordered you be put on Lithium. You'll start your first dose tonight."

"Lithium? Isn't that for manic-depressives?"

"You'll see your doctor first thing in the morning. If you have any questions, ask him."

"When do I get to see my father? My mother?"

"Visiting hours are daily. Someone will explain the schedule to you on the tour." After she drew his blood and gave him an arm bracelet, she motioned for a young man of about the same age as Mark with a blond crew cut to come and show him around.

"There's not much to see," he explained. "There's the commons area," he said, pointing to an open area with lots of couches and some snack machines, "and the rooms are spread out along this hall here..." He indicated to the hall perpendicular to the one he'd arrived through. "And the cafeteria is across the building. They take us out of the wing in a group during meal times."

"What do we do during the day?"

"Oh, they have us doing stuff just about every hour. Sometimes we have classes, sometimes we have therapy, sometimes we play games. And with doctor's visits, we don't get much free time."

He showed him the kitchen, which was stocked with snacks, and pointed to the pay phones, located just outside

the t.v. room. "We have a gym, and you can even go to Church on Sunday mornings, if you want."

Mark went to his room and slunk down on his bed. He was currently without a roommate. He sighed, got up, and stared at his reflection in the mirror. He needed a shave, but he looked healthy. He wondered if they'd shaved off the hair on his head. He partially removed the bandage, and saw that they hadn't touched it. The bullet hadn't been far enough back to blow a hole behind his hairline. He stared at the hole, which was sewed up on both sides with garish stiches, and felt a sense of awe that he'd survived.

It was probably at that moment that Mark accepted his fate at being here, in a mental hospital. He needed help, even though he didn't like to admit it. And in all reality, he'd almost rather be here than at school, after what he'd done. If he were at school, he'd have to explain things to people, and that was one thing he was not good at. He rarely ever understood the things he did...how would he explain himself to other people?

He was supposed to go to groups here and open up. He was going to be expected to talk to therapists and tell them what was going on inside his head. It was supposed to be a transitional period. And all while locked away, like a caged animal.

But would they expect him to go down deep, to that private place deep inside him where he rarely went? That

sensitive center, the one he knew existed but hardly ever dared to touch? He feared they might, and he shivered at the thought of it. Other people who'd dared to try and go there had been met with bloodiness and gore...would he let himself be vulnerable again? Or even scarier, would they force him to be?

He was woken up by the sound of his own screams, the tail end of his dream. He'd been dreaming he was nine years old and in the hospital, strapped down in the quiet room. A nurse nudged him rather roughly on the shoulder. "Your meal's here," he explained. Mark got up and ate the Salisbury steak and corn, and chugged down a glass of milk.

In the morning, a loud pound on his door woke him up. "*Wake-up time! Wake-up time!*" a male voice called. All the doors were being pounded on.

Mark climbed out of bed, still groggy from sleep, and took a shower. In line with regulations, he had a male nurse watch him shave off the thick stubble which had accumulated on his face. He gave the razor back to the man, and brushed his teeth.

Once dressed, he went to the med counter to retrieve his morning dose, then he went into the commons area to join the morning meeting. Both girls and boys were already seated sporadically atop the couches and chairs, waiting for it to begin.

As he entered, several of them lifted their eyes to him. "New kid?" they asked. He mumbled an affirmation and sat down at an empty seat. He wondered how long a person had to be there to be considered a "new kid." Surely not long; surely people didn't stay here but for more than a couple of weeks at most?

A group leader entered the scene, and everyone became quiet. "For those of you who are new to the group here this morning," she said, "every day we go around and say our names, how we're feeling and what we plan to accomplish today. So if you're ready, we can start."

Everyone was on a first-name basis. When it was Mark's turn, he said his name, and said what came off the top of his head, not too enthusiastically. "I'm feeling fine, and I hope to accomplish seeing my doctor," he said, and left it at that.

After it was over, he joined a group of kids congregating by the double doors, waiting to be delivered to breakfast. The food was terrible. The only thing worth eating was the oatmeal, and it was soupy and lukewarm. He filled up on orange juice and a semi-fresh banana.

Then came time for group therapy. His first session of it. He was quiet and pensive as a young boy and a young girl talked about their current lives; the boy's parents were going through a divorce, and he wasn't doing well in school, and the girl was anorexic, and had to be taken to the hospital because she wouldn't eat.

Mark wasn't planning on sharing, but when the young girl was finished talking about her mother, and Mark said, "I'll pass," the male group leader said,

"I'm sorry, but you have to talk. Talking is the only way you're going to get better."

Mark was silent for a moment. He was hugging his arms in his lap as he looked from side to side, quickly examining the faces of the three other kids in the group and then finally, the group leader's. Why should he trust them?

"I'm here because of a suicide attempt," he said flatly.

"Does it have anything to do with that bandage on your head?" the group leader, Tom, asked.

Mark nodded.

"Tell us about it. And don't worry," he added. "Anything that you talk about in this room stays in this room. It's confidential."

Mark swallowed and looked down at his feet. "I don't know if I should talk about it," he said.

"Why not?"

"Because it's stupid. I made a mistake and I'm sorry for it."

"The suicide attempt, you mean?" Mark nodded and shuffled his feet. "What did you do?"

"I shot myself," he said. "I let down a lot of people and I'm sorry."

"Mark, let me remind you that family members are not present right now. You can feel free to talk about whatever comes to mind. Why, in your estimation, did you attempt suicide? Were you depressed?"

"No." The answer came quickly and definitively.

"You weren't depressed? What kind of thoughts did you have? Were you hating yourself? Blaming yourself for anything?"

Mark raised his head. "That's just it. I *didn't* blame myself for anything. That's *why*."

The counselor, a bit surprised, spoke calmly and evenly anyway. "Would you care to explain?"

Mark cradled his arms as if he were cradling a baby. "It has nothing to do with what's going on now, it has something to do with something that happened a long time ago, I've just been reminded of it, that's all."

"Were you fooling around with drugs, or substances of any kind?"

Mark laughed. "Practically everything."

"And do you think that this incident, what happened in the past, contributed to your drug use?"

Mark glared straight at the counselor. "I do them for myself. I do them for *fun*. Why can't anyone understand that?"

The counselor remained quiet for a moment. "You know, we can talk about this incident, if you want." His voice was soft and gentle now.

Mark shook his head slowly from side to side. "I'm done. You can move on to the next person now." The counselor gave him a long look, but thankfully, decided to let the issue drop. He proceeded to give the remaining girl some time to speak. Mark couldn't listen. He was feeling agitated and angry already. He was wondering if the medicine was making him feel that way.

During the second group, Mark was pulled out to see the doctor. "Mark, did you survive the night?" he asked, sounding authoritative yet friendly.

Mark nodded.

"I've put you on a low dose of Lithium but we'll have to check your blood daily. Lithium at high enough levels can be toxic, and we have to watch for that."

"Why did you put me on that?" he asked.

The doctor pushed up a pair of glasses higher up onto the bridge of his nose. "I looked at your history, and you seem to have a tendency for mood swings."

"Have you diagnosed me as bipolar?"

"Tentatively, yes. What we want to do is keep you here and observe you while you're on this new medication, see how you do on it."

"And how long will it take for you to observe me?"

"Well, so long as you're not suicidal, you're taking care of yourself, and you're participating in groups, I estimate it might take only a week to two weeks at most."

Then you can go home and go back to school." Mark's heart sank. It seemed like an awfully long time to be here. Already, time was dragging.

"And what if I don't agree with your diagnosis?" Mark asked, boldly.

"Well, let's talk about it. What about it do you question?"

"I mean, what if my suicide attempt was a realistic reaction to a very real situation in my life, and not the product of a dramatic mood swing?"

"Do you think that's what it was?"

He wasn't about to sabotage himself. If he led this doctor to thinking he was still suicidal, he would surely be in the hospital for longer. "No. Just a thought." And in fact, he *wasn't* suicidal. What he was feeling right now was more like pent-up anger, not self-hatred. Anger at himself for embarrassing his family, anger at the hospital for keeping him here against his will, anger at God for not letting him die...

The doctor scribbled down some notes, straightened the pile of papers he was scrawling on, and dismissed him. Mark left the office feeling no better off for having seen him.

His parents came during visiting hours bearing gifts. Snack foods, paperback books, and more clothes.

"Are they treating you alright here?" his mom asked, sidling up to him.

Mark was quiet. "I can't wait to get out of here."

"They won't let you go until the doctor says you can leave," his father said.

"I know," Mark replied. "He said it might be a couple of weeks. I'm going to miss a lot of school."

"Well, it won't be like last time," his mother said. "You'll not be gone for nearly as much time. I can already see you getting better."

Mark glanced outside, at the clouds rolling calmly by in the deep blue sky, and wondered about Meg. In this whole messed-up, crazy play of his life, having to do with Cory, he'd never accounted for love. And as soon as it was in his grasp, it seemed, he did something to push it as far away from him as possible.

He wondered if she would ever find it in her heart to forgive him. That night as he lay in his narrow bed underneath the flimsy blanket and sheets, he said a prayer. *Dear God, please let me see her one more time.* And fell asleep.

CHAPTER TWELVE

The bleachers filled up quickly with eager spectators as time neared kickoff for the weekend's big game. Meg was clad in her cheerleading skirt and sweater, holding her pom

pons in front of her. Mark's friends, Dan and Drew, were big-time players for the team, and were predicted to be the stars of the season. Everyone was excited and happy; everyone, that is, except for Meg.

"Something on your mind?" Amanda asked, as they looked up at the crowds in the stands.

Meg glanced over at her friend. "Just nervous, that's all." It was more than that. Right now Mark was in a psychiatric hospital, and all she could think about was that she hadn't seen him in over a week. Why hadn't he called? Was there some reason for the separation? Perhaps they were telling him things, like why never to speak to her again.

She knew she was probably overreacting. But there *had* to be some connection between their relationship and his suicide attempt...he'd tried to kill himself just days after they first got together. Hadn't there?

Amanda nudged her. "The game's about to start."

When the band started up, that was their cue. They ran out onto the field and started to perform their cheer. Meg was confident and enthusiastic as she executed a pike jump and some fast-moving footwork, but as the group rotated positions halfway through the routine, a wayward foot poked out right into Meg's path. Thinking quickly, she tried to dodge the unknown person's foot by running around it, but her reflexes weren't quick enough. She ran

right over it, and fell squarely onto her bottom, right in front of everyone.

"Oops," said a voice above her. Beth was standing there, the corners of her mouth twisted upwards in a grin.

Meg's cheeks flushed hotly into a deep shade of crimson as she looked up helplessly at her assailant, then at the crowd, and sat for a few moments in surprised confusion. Then, all together, she realized what had just taken place: Beth had stuck her foot out on *purpose*.

"Why did you *trip* me?" Meg asked, as she started to get up, lit with anger.

Beth shrugged her shoulders. "It was an accident."

Meg climbed up, aided by Amanda, and brushed off her bottom. "No, it wasn't," she said. "You *wanted* to make me fall. Why?"

The spectators were whispering amongst themselves in the bleachers as Meg realized that they'd stopped performing their routine. The football players were laughing. Amanda tugged at her elbow. "Let's just finish the routine, okay? People are watching."

Meg dusted off her elbows, still shaky from the fall, and relented. Reluctantly, she returned to position and they finished their routine.

But when they headed for the bleachers, Meg approached Beth. "Have you got something against me?" Meg asked, still shaky and flushed with embarrassment.

Beth wore an 'I'm-so-innocent' smile. "No. Have you got something against being a good cheerleader?"

Meg felt hot anger rising in her chest, but she firmly pressed it down, knowing that a bout of rage would most likely get her nowhere. "Is this about Mark?" she asked pointedly.

Beth laughed. "What ever gave you *that* idea?" Then she swung her long, blonde hair dramatically over her shoulder. "It's not like we were going anywhere."

"So you know."

She glared boldly into her eyes. "Of course I know; he admitted it to me."

"And you're angry at me because of it?"

She squinted her eyes and crossed her legs. "Mark was just a fling, Meg. A fling that turned out to be eight and a half months, no less, but definitely just a fling. I couldn't be happier that he's found someone he can genuinely be on the same level with."

"I'm sorry," Meg said, "I know you were together for a long time."

"Don't be," Beth answered, a lilt in her voice. "I was losing interest anyway. We were on different wavelengths; he was a screwup at school, and I was an overachiever. We would've never worked."

"Then why did you trip me?" Her anger was still churning, and once more, she fought it down.

Beth gave a wry smile. "Just like a loser," she said. "Doesn't even know why she's not invited."

Meg looked disbelievingly back at the head-cheerleader, who now had a jeer on her face. "What?" she asked.

"First Amanda, now Mark..."

"What's wrong with Mark?"

She lifted her chin. "Oh, he's great in bed, and all that, but frankly, he's got some serious psychological problems going on. Just look where he is right now."

Meg wanted to hit her. She wanted to smack her one right in the jaw.

"So you never cared about him?"

She shook her head slowly from left to right.

"No...but I'm thinking he liked it that way. It's amazing how twisted people can be sometimes."

Meg was disgusted. As soon as the game was over, she walked off the field, and didn't look back.

"I'm going to see Mark in the hospital," Meg announced at dinner the next night. Her mother had done the cooking that evening; they were dining on rack of lamb and baby carrots on their good china. The table was covered by their nicest cream tablecloth, and candles lit the atmosphere.

Her parents sipped their port wines. They looked frankly disinterested, as though they had already tired of

arguing about Mark. But just as cold as ever, her father remarked, "How *is* that young man doing?" and lazily set down his wine glass.

Meg was unfaltered. "How should I know? I haven't talked with or heard from him in over a week."

"And you're interested in seeing how he's doing?"

"I'm going to go see him," she agreed. And added, "Tomorrow, if I can." An unnatural silence followed. Meg, seeing that her parents weren't going to add anything positive to the subject without more probing, continued. "Amanda says that if I go see him, it will be a show of support, and I'm sure he needs a lot of that right now."

"Does she?" her mother said, now with slight irritation in her voice. Meg looked from parent to parent, hoping for some sign that they'd changed their minds about Mark after all, and saw the wisdom of her being a part of his life, and him being a part of hers.

But her father broke the silence by saying, "You continue to press this issue, Meg. I wish you would see how this is ultimately damaging to our family, but you just don't seem to care."

"But, Dad--"

"No, Meg. Listen to me. People go into the hospital all the time, but we can't feel sorry for them all, now can we?"

"He means a lot to me."

"Well, he shouldn't. Your mother and my feelings should come as the first priority to you right now, not some goof you found off the street."

Meg put down the forkfull of vegetables she was holding back down onto her plate and heaved a heavy sigh. "Nomatter what you say, I'm going to see him."

"And how will you get there?"

"His mother will drive me."

"And you're certain she will be willing to?"

Meg chewed and swallowed. "If she won't, I can always find another way to get there."

"I'm sorry, Meg, but we cannot allow you to go."

Meg set her glass down with a bang. "What is it that you two have so against Mark, anyway? It's not like he murdered Cory in cold blood. If you really think intelligently about the situation, it's more Cory's fault than it was Mark's. In fact, it's more Dad's fault than anyone's!"

Her mother gave her a razor-sharp look. "Your father's gun was locked in a safe which was, on top of that, in a locked drawer, the key being in a separate room. We took every precaution we were advised to. How Cory managed to open the drawer and to find the key means that his actions were very deliberate...what it tells us is that he wanted to impress his friend. As for our ownership of the gun...we had every right to own one...it was for our protection as well as yours. And what you must remember,

Megan, is that Mark was the one who fired it. He was nine years old, and not a tiny child by any means. He should have known better, and the mistake he made cost us our son's life."

"So you do blame him, then."

There was little pause. "Now that things are out in the open, I suppose there's no cause in hiding it. Yes, we do."

"Dad, do you always shuffle your feet behind Mom and agree with what she says?"

"That's enough, Megan. I have a mind of my own but this time, your mother is right. I don't want you having any contact with Mark, even after what's happened."

"Not even if I could help him?"

"It's not our responsibility."

"It sounds to me like you're out for revenge. Maybe you agree with the 'eye for an eye' train of thought, but I don't. One life has been taken away, but I have the chance to save another. And I don't care what you say, I'm going."

There was something strange about this whole situation that Meg couldn't quite put her finger on. There was a pattern here...her parents downright blamed him for the accident, Mark's parents split up shortly after it happened, and everyone in his life either didn't seem to care or thought negatively of him because of it. Everyone, that is, except for Meg. And the night they were together,

she had been so tender, so loving. It just didn't seem to make sense. No doubt blame and alienation had damaged Mark's self-esteem over the years, but somehow, Meg's kindness had sent him over the edge. Meg wanted to get to the bottom of it, and she wanted to know why it was possible for her presence to play a role in his self-harm.

Against her parents' wishes, she skipped cheerleading the next day and marched straight to Mark's front door. "I need to go see him," she explained to the now neatly-dressed, made-up woman.

"I don't know if they'll let you see him if you're not family," she answered, with a shrug and a sigh. With make-up on, she looked more severe and unforgiving than Meg remembered her to be. The lipstick was dark and matte, and the make-up did little to conceal the many frown-lines that had accumulated on her forehead and around her mouth.

"Well, at least let's try," Meg urged.

She sighed, seeming less willing to help today than she had the previous time they had met. "Then I'll phone them," she agreed, not looking up. Setting her purse down, she went into the kitchen to make the call. Meg, not having been invited in, sat down carefully onto the edge of the large, Victorian, living-room sofa, its seat-cushions a deep shade of burghundy. Large, fluffy pillows were thrown haphazardly onto its seats, and its backs were threadbare and torn. On the perpendicular wall there was a matching

loveseat, and the set inspired a hint of romance amidst a rather dreary setting. She let her bookbag drop to the floor while still holding the shoulder straps, and looked around the room. Other than the aging grandfather clock and the sofa and loveseat, most of the decor was modern, yet heavily used and in need of thorough cleaning. The wall-to-wall carpet was standard grey, covered intermittently by plum and blue floral-patterned area rugs, and was obviously heavily trampled on. Beer-bottle lamps sat atop metal stands, and newspapers and magazines littered the metal coffeetable, and overflowed to the floor. Framed photographs of gardens lined the walls, while an old tapestry was nailed up near the front door. The old was beautiful yet damaged, and the new was already decomposing.

Barbara Powell re-entered the room. "You can come," she said, the beginnings of a frown on her lips. "They're giving you permission."

"Would you be willing to give me a ride?" Meg asked, feeling like she was becoming more and more of an imposition. "I've no way to get there."

"Alright," she agreed. "Just let me get my things." Meg eyed her as she picked up her purse again. She looked harrassed. She wasn't making much eye contact, which worried Meg.

They bustled to the car, an '89 red Toyota sedan. Mrs. Powell unlocked the door to allow Meg inside, then disappeared into the driver's side.

"Has he said anything about me?" Meg asked, as she turned the ignition and they started on their way.

Mrs. Powell peered into the rear-view mirror and frowned. "Oh, yes. He's asked about you. But I've been meaning to ask you about that..."

"Yes?"

"I was in such a rush that first day, I barely said hello to you. I was a mess."

"I can understand why."

Mrs. Powell paused. "Megan, what have you been doing all this time? And why do I suddenly see your face again?"

Meg detected the concern in the woman's voice. "I was at private school for eight years," she said.

"No, not that," broke in the older woman. "I mean, why did you suddenly decide to be a part of my son's life again?"

"Well, I've only now returned."

"And you've not seen Mark for all this time?"

"Well, no. I began speaking with him again the second day of school. I walked up to him at lunch...he wasn't too happy to see me at first."

"At first?"

"Right. But then he took me home one day, and we got to talking some more, and we became friends."

"More than friends?"

Meg felt that she owed this woman some honesty. "Er, yes. But not right away."

"I see." Then she said, "Meg, I hope you can imagine my concern...Mark was severely traumatized by what happened with your brother, and it was around the last time he saw you."

"I can imagine. We talked about it some."

"He was hospitalized the last time, did you know that?"

Meg said quietly, "Yes."

The woman had been casting occasional glances to her right, but now turned her full attention to the road ahead of her. "I'm going to be honest with you right now. Mark and I don't have the greatest of relationships. I'm sure nine days out of ten he'd rather be living with his father, and nine days out of ten I wish he'd grow up." Meg wondered why she was telling her this. Then she continued on. "But when something like this happens, it can scare you. You want to find any reason there could have been for it happening, and make sure that it never happens again."

Meg was quiet. When she spoke, it was in a mouse's voice. "If there's any way that I was involved, I want to apologize," she said.

The woman's laugh was guttural. "I'm not blaming you, Meg," she said. "What I'm suggesting is that there might be a connection between your presence and his suicide

attempt. There's a difference. One assumes fault, the other attempts to account for a connection."

Meg thought, privately, if only her own parents had been so fair to Mark. "What do you want to know?"

She flicked her turn signal. "Had you noticed anything strange about his behavior in the last several weeks? Has he said anything to you which might have led you to believe he was suicidal?"

She pondered the question. "Well, like I said, I've only just begun to speak with him again for a few weeks."

"You said he was unhappy to see you at first. Why do you think that was?"

She looked out the window. "He was surprised, I think. I came upon him too suddenly. He wasn't ready to see me."

"Are you sure that's why?"

Meg bit her thumb. "Why else?"

Mrs. Powell made a soft groan as someone ahead of her cut her off. "Teenaged drivers," she muttered. Then more audibly, "I have a fear that Mark is one of those reckless young drivers I see so often on the road, but he never lets me near his car." Meg waited patiently for the woman to respond.

"Why else?" Meg repeated.

She pulled in a deep breath. "That's what I'm trying to find out right now," she said, airily.

When they pulled into the parking lot the clouds in the sky were grey and puffy and threatened rain. The clouds on the horizon were thin and pink, making it look like sunset, even though it was early afternoon. The air was cool and damp, and the moisture clung to their clothes and skin. Meg thought the hospital looked like a cottage from the front, with the shutters against square windows and black shingles.

They breezed through the front double doors and announced their presence to the lady at the front desk.

"Are you here for a visit?"

"Yes."

"Wait just a moment. I'll have someone bring you back." Meg didn't like the receptionist. She glared at them as though they were a pair of rhinocerouses in a restaurant.

They took seats in the pleasant waiting room. It was adorned with plastic flowers in ceramic vases, and the walls were decked with framed watercolor landscapes. Elevator music piped in from speakers situated at the corners of the room. Oddly, it was nice, and Meg folded her hand patiently in her lap.

Five minutes later, a woman named Sarah Riggsbee appeared to bring them into the interior of the hospital. "Right this way," she said, in a calm, deep voice.

They followed her down a corridor to yet another set of double doors. She unlocked them, and allowed them

inside. "Visiting hours are over at eight o'clock," she said. "When you're ready to leave, someone from the nurse's station will let you out."

They thanked her and she left. "Where's Mark?" Meg asked Mrs. Powell, whispering into her shoulder.

"Let's go check." They approached the nurse's station and told them who they were looking for. A pleasant-faced man with a badge paged Mark over the intercom.

Less than a minute later, Mark appeared. He was freshly shaven, but looked tired and worn. His cheeks were hollow, as were his eyes. The bandage was still in place, wrapped tightly around the breadth of his head, and he looked like he could have been a zombie in an old black-and-white film if he held his arms out in front of him and shuffled towards them.

"Hello, Mark." Their eyes met. Even with his messy hair, drugged eyes and worn face, he looked like he didn't belong here.

"Meg?" She felt the desire to run up to him and hug him, but with people watching, she decided not to.

"Your mother brought me," was her quick explanation.

"Let's go somewhere and talk, okay?" his mother said. He led them to a vacant room filled with chairs and they sat down.

"I'm not going to give you any explanations today, Mom," he said. "So if that's what you came for, you can forget it."

She lifted her hand. "Now, now," she said. "That isn't what I'm after. I just wanted to see you, that's all. Meg came by this afternoon and I thought it would cheer you up to see her, so I brought her."

"That's quite a change," he said, flicking his eyes towards Meg, letting them rest on her for several moments. "The person I remember you being is one who always has an agenda."

"Well, maybe I *have* changed," she said.

Meg was startled that he so openly argued with his mother in front of her. "You're pissed at me, aren't you?" he said.

"For what?"

"For trying to off myself. That would be your natural reaction, right? It was a selfish thing to do."

"No, Mark. Concerned." Meg listened in silence. "In fact, it's been kind of a wake-up call."

"That's why you brought Meg...that's why you wanted her to see me like this...in here..."

Mrs. Powell's eyes darkened. "I thought you would be pleased, Mark."

His eyes rested on her a second time, and his gaze looked distinctly sad this time, not matching the anger in his voice and words. "Well, you're here...so there's nothing I can do."

Mrs. Powell's frown deepened. "If you'd like to speak with Meg alone, I can give you some space."

Mark didn't respond, so after a moment the woman got up and left, leaving them to talk. Meg didn't know what to say at first. "Look, Mark..." she began, groping for words. He was looking down at his hands, but when she spoke, he looked up tentatively at her. "I don't look down on you for being here...Actually, I think it's a miracle that you're alive...I just wanted to see you, that's all...I hope that's alright with you."

He bounced his knee up and down. "My mom gets on my nerves," he growled.

She wished that there was not a camera pointing directly at them. "What does she do that makes you so angry?"

He blinked, now jiggling both his knees up and down, his hands under his legs. "She doesn't care that I'm here. It's her stupid reputation she's worried about. If I'd died it would have been better...she wouldn't have to tell her friends that her son had to be put in a nuthouse."

"Don't say that."

"Why?"

"I'm sure she cares. Why else would she come?"

He blinked again, with difficulty, as though the bandage made it hard for him to see. "I dunno. Maybe she feels she has to."

Meg gave him a half-smile. "Is it alright that I came?" she asked.

She was surprised when he began to cry, and through tears he looked at her. "Meg, you're the only person on Earth I wanted to come, even with the way things being the way they are." He covered his face with his hands and began to wipe the tears away.

She touched his arm. "It's okay, Mark. I'm sorry."

He answered back, "You've nothing to be sorry about. I'm the one who got myself into this stupid mess."

"But didn't it have something to do with me?"

"Is that what my mother told you?"

She shrugged. "Maybe."

He muttered, "That bitch."

Despite warnings about no touching on the unit, Meg felt the desire to embrace him. She took his hand and then slid her tiny arms around his body, but he pulled away.

"I'll get you in trouble," he said.

Meg steered the conversation back to the subject.

"But what if your mom's right?" she said. "The last time you went into the hospital, it was right after Cory died. Maybe I shouldn't even be here."

"No," he protested. "Don't go. It's not like that at all. Look, I know I'm a bit difficult to read, and I know I don't let people in on my feelings so much, but I'm going to start."

She sat up straight. "So what is this about?" She watched him dry his eyes. "You seem like you've had a miserable life since that day, eight years ago, when you

accidentally shot Cory. Everyone I know and everyone I come in contact with call it, 'the incident' because they don't want to talk about it. My parents called you a murderer, you went into a hospital, your parents broke up...and since then you've been beating yourself into a pulp with drugs and God knows what else. Then I come along and fall in love with you, and it pushes you over the edge. It doesn't make sense, Mark. Please try and explain it to me."

He had been listening quietly. She'd just told him she was in love with him. "You're too good for me..." he began.

"I don't believe you," she answered.

He lifted up his palms. "I'm sorry, Meg..."

It was a moment before Meg realized that Mark was breaking up with her. She felt a sob rising in her throat. "So it's because you felt indebted to me, that's what you're saying?"

He nodded slowly and started to cry again. "I wasn't lying before when I told you that you were the only one I wanted to come and see me."

"Just not as a girlfriend?" He nodded and wiped a tear away. "I see," she said. The two fell into silence.

When his mother came back, the conversation was all but over. Meg returned her gaze to Mrs. Powell, stunned and confused. Hadn't their passion been real? Or had she just imagined it? What Mark just revealed to her made a

lot of sense in relation to everything else, yet Meg didn't want to accept it. She looked into his dark brown eyes, almost covered by the white, gauzy bandages, and knew that he was being honest with himself.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Mark was standing over Meg's dead seven-year-old body lying on the forest floor, gun still in hand. He had just killed her. High above his head, dark thunderclouds flashed intermittently, giving a spectacular light show, but still, the rain had not come.

Mark dropped the gun and fell to his knees. What have I done? he thought, while staring incredulously at her body. He reached out and touched her, and wailed, "Don't play dead, Megan! Now's not the time for games!" but she was lifeless. "You have to tell me what is was that I asked you for!"

Just then the skies opened up and the rain began to pour down. In just a few seconds, Mark was soaked down to the skin. His fleeting thought was that Meg's nice yellow dress was going to be ruined, until he realized that it had already been stained by the blood from her head.

A red river flowed from her body down the hillside, underneath and on top of the leaves. There was nothing he could do. She was gone. Mark buried his face in his hands, and sobbed beside her.

But the next time he looked up, her body was no longer there. In place of it was Cory, lying down in the same position that Meg's body had been in. Rain-soaked, he slowly sat up and faced his friend. Answering Mark's last comment, he said, "You asked me to leave you alone, remember, dipwad?" Mark was speechless as Cory grinned broadly. "You said I was a no-good bully and you'd pop me one if I didn't leave you alone."

"Go away," Mark breathed, "You're just a ghost. Leave me alone!"

Mark jerked awake. He had been thrashing on his bed violently for hours, and the beads of sweat on his forehead attested to it. When he opened his eyes, he became disappointedly aware that he was lying in a hospital bed, not at his house, with a roommate snoring at the other side of the room. He pressed his eyes closed, damning the fact. The beds were not as nice as the one he had at home; this one was covered in plastic and was only a single, so there was not much room to toss and turn on...when he had awoke, he had nearly fallen off.

It was dark everywhere, and after ten o'clock no one was allowed to leave their rooms except for emergencies. In the hallway, he could hear a girl crying and mumbling while a staff person talked lowly to her. Mark sighed and pulled the flimsy blanket over his body. At night, a staff person patrolled the halls, ducking his head in rooms every

so often to make sure everyone was alright, so Mark knew that even to get up and sit for a while with a light on was out of the question, if he were to be left alone in peace. He was confined to the darkness of the room and to his bed. If he were at home, he would get up, go outside, and get some fresh air, but here, he was a prisoner.

He thought about his encounter with Meg that afternoon. He'd not been expecting her. It had broken his heart to see the look on her face when he'd told her he didn't want to see her anymore, at least not in a way other than a friendship.

He looked at his roommate on the other side of the room, whom he could barely see in the dark shadows of the night. He was curled up on his bed, facing the wall to the outside, snoring loudly.

He tossed a rolled-up pair of socks at his head and hissed, "*Tony!*"

Tony snorted and sleepily awoke. "What's a?" he mumbled, smacking his lips together. Mark threw another pair of socks at him and the roommate yelled, "Hey!"

"Tony, wake up," Mark whispered across the room. He could hear the rustling of sheets as the big and tall fourteen-year-old boy shifted around on his bed.

"I'm up," he said. "Is it time for breakfast?"

"No," Mark answered. "It's the middle of the night. Don't be so loud or the hall guard will come and yell at us."

"Sorry," Tony mumbled. "What do you want?"

"What did you do with that stuff you smuggled in?" he asked, being careful to speak quietly.

"You wanna get high?" Tony perked up at the request.

"Like hell I do."

"So, Mark. Tell us more about the girl you've mentioned briefly, the one who came and visited you here. What's her name? Meg?"

Mark hadn't shaved that morning. He'd spent the latter part of the night stoned and he didn't want a staff person to see he was having trouble shaving himself. He ran his hand along his stubble thoughtfully and looked out sleepily to his small audience. "I knew her a long time ago," he said, knowing that opening up meant points in his direction.

"How long ago?" the group leader asked.

"When we were kids. I was in preschool with her older brother when my family first moved to Glenwood."

"And you were friends with him?"

"Not really. He was a lot bigger than me and he used to tease me a lot. He was kind of a bully."

"So how did you come to meet Meg?"

He sighed. "In about the third grade, Cory and I became friends. We started sitting together at lunch, playing together at recess, and trading baseball cards after school. It was not long after that we became best

friends, and we spent long hours at each other's houses every week."

"And you had many encounters with Meg at that point." This last was more of a statement than a question.

"Yes."

"And you befriended your own bully? Was it kind of like a peer pressure thing, you did things with him and was nice to him because you were afraid of him?"

Mark shook his head. "No, not at all. We really liked each other."

"And how did Meg factor into the relationship?"

"She didn't have many friends that she played with after school, so her mother often insisted that she play with the boys."

"Did that get on your nerves?"

Mark tugged on his lip. "Not me. Cory, yeah. Even if he wasn't a bully anymore, he still teased his sister mercilessly. Once he made her climb a tall tree, knowing full well that she was afraid of heights, and then left her up there while he went inside and watched t.v. Whenever I could, I stuck up for her."

"So you liked her?"

He shrugged. "She was a little girl. She was pretty. Yeah, I liked her."

"But the other day you mentioned something about a tragedy that occurred while you were in the fourth grade. Tell us what happened."

Mark squirmed. "I shot her brother," he said simply, without emotion.

"On purpose?"

He paused. "No. It was an accident."

"What happened?" the chestnut-haired woman repeated.

He drew in a long breath. "I don't know, really..." he began, holding up his hands. "Cory said he had something neat to show me and I was intrigued. Then we went up into his father's study and he unlocked a lock-box, and inside was a gun."

"How did he get the key?"

"He'd found it, I guess. It was in his parents' room."

"Go on."

"Cory was pressuring me to play with it and use it, even though I didn't want to. I didn't want to look like a coward in front of him, so I took it and we chased each other with it. One thing led to another and then Cory was telling me to press down on the trigger, because it wasn't loaded."

"And the gun was aimed at him?"

Mark's voice was strong and even. "Yes."

"Did the little boy die?"

"He died instantly."

"And you didn't see Meg or the rest of Cory's family for eight years?"

"That's correct."

The woman steepled her hands in front of her mouth pensively. "Tell me more. How, after all this time, did you get together with his sister again? Did it come as a shock to see her? What kind of a role does she play in your life?"

Mark was quiet for a moment. "I was mad when she first found me, not shocked," he said. "Even though she probably thought differently."

"How did you meet her?"

"At school. She approached me."

"What did you do?"

"I cursed her out and told her to leave me alone, I wasn't interested in anything she was offering."

"And why do you think you were angry?"

He shook his head, looking at the ground. "I guess I thought--well, I *expected* her to feel the same way about me that her mother had felt."

"Which is what?"

"I murdered Cory."

"But you didn't."

"That's not how his mother feels. She thinks I was responsible."

"So because you assumed that Meg felt the same way about you, you were angry that she approached you at school, correct?"

"Not that she approached me," he said. "I was angry at her for what I thought she was at the beginning, for what I thought she might try to do."

"Tell us more about your relationship with her. How did things develop beyond that initial blow-up?"

Mark scratched his head underneath the bandage. "I felt bad I'd cursed her out," he said. "Things developed from there."

"What sort of things?"

"Talking, at first. I took her home a few times. She got stranded at a party and I had to drive her back to her house. After a while, I realized she had feelings for me."

"Romantic feelings?"

"Yes."

"Did anything happen?" Mark nodded but didn't elaborate. "Are you still seeing each other?"

"No," he said.

She smiled, looking directly at him. "The last time you went into the hospital, it was following your friend's death. And now, you've just reunited with his sister. I'd say that there's a strong connection. First, you're cursing her out, then something happens between the two of you, and now it's over. And all within a short period of time, am I right?" Mark nodded. "Would you care to try and explain?"

It was an echo of what everyone was trying to tell him. "She was too nice...I suppose I wasn't ready for the way she was treating me..."

"How? With respect? Kindness?"

"All of those things. Respect, kindness, forgiveness, love, humility...and I couldn't take it."

"Why?"

He stopped rubbing his face. "Because it reminded me that I didn't deserve to be treated that way."

"I don't understand."

"She asked me one time if I'd ever forgiven myself for shooting Cory, and I said, 'no.' But if I were really honest with myself, I would say that I never really blamed myself..." he trailed off.

"Go on."

"...like a normal person would..."

"A 'normal' person?"

His words were now broken. "If I'd have been a better person, if I'd had courage in any way, I would have felt remorse for what happened that day, but I didn't."

"I see."

"I blamed Cory." It was now out in the open. He could no longer hide it.

"You blamed him for his own accidental death?"

"No," Mark said emphatically. "I blamed him for ruining my life. I blamed him for everyone else blaming me."

"And you think that was selfish of you?"

Mark took a long pause. "You're never supposed to blame the victim," he breathed.

A long silence followed as the counselor waited for Mark to add something else to his last comment. When he didn't, she said, "Let's go back to Meg. You said you were angry when you first saw her, but then you felt bad about it and began a relationship with her. What were the factors that drew you to her at that point in time? Was it guilt?"

He heaved a sigh. "She was so forgiving, so open, so loving, and I didn't want to reject her after what had happened with her brother."

"So you felt you owed her a relationship, even if your heart wasn't in it."

Mark sat bolt upright. Had his heart never been in it? Could he really say definitively that he had never had an inkling of a feeling for her, too? "I suppose," was his quick answer, even though he wasn't entirely satisfied with it.

"So why did you attempt suicide?" the counselor asked, her eyes bearing kindness.

He was preoccupied with her previous question now, and couldn't get the thought of not feeling anything for Meg out of his mind. He grudgingly attempted to answer the last question. "I looked at my life, and I saw a pathetic person. I hated myself for what had happened with Cory,

and I hated myself even more for what I was about to do to Meg..."

"Which is what?"

He ran his tongue over dry lips. "Before she met me, this last time, when we were older, she'd never smoked or done drugs or even kissed a boy. She admitted these things to me in the car one night, when I was taking her home."

"Go on."

"But after she met me, one of the first things she did was ask me for a cigarette. Just a couple of weeks later I found her drunk and stoned on my front porch..."

"And you slept with her."

He hesitated. "Yeah."

"So what you're saying is..."

"I've ruined her innocence. I started her on a dark path."

"So is that why you tried to kill yourself?"

Mark ran his fingers clumsily through his hair. "I didn't want it to happen twice. I wanted there to be some way I could save her."

The counselor smiled a genuine smile. "But suicide is not the way to do it."

He looked back at her, weakly. "It seemed like the appropriate answer."

They had pizza in the cafeteria that day, and it was okay. Mark sat with Tony and a new boy by the name of Les.

He was fifteen years old and was put in the hospital for punching out his father. They said his diagnosis was attention deficit disorder, and he was taking Ritalin. "At my high school," he said, "I sell it to my friends who don't have ADD 'cause they say they get a buzz from it. Sorry, I can't give you any here 'cause they watch you take it then make you stick out your tongue."

Mark was frankly bored with both boys, and instead concentrated on his pizza, which was soupy with oil.

After lunch, they went to the gym. Basketballs and raquetballs were handed out, and Mark decided to shoot some hoops. Several people chose to simply walk around the gym, while a few others just sat and watched.

Ten minutes into his game, a nurse appeared at the gym door asking for Mark. "You have an appointment now," she said. He threw the ball to another guy, replaced his shirt, and exited the gym with the nurse.

"With my psychiatrist?" he asked.

"No, a social worker," she said. "Your parents will be there, too."

When he stepped into the office, his mother and father were sitting in separate chairs, and a woman social worker was seated at a rectangular oak desk with an opened manilla folder in front of her which was stuffed with papers. She invited Mark to take a seat. The social worker introduced herself as Marie Jenkins.

"Are you going to let me leave?" he asked, after he sat down on a stuffed orange chair.

"That's what we're going to discuss in our session today...the progress you've made while you've been here, meds, and possible discharge. The bulk of our discussion will center around what will happen when you leave the hospital. You see, treatment doesn't end on the last day of your inpatient care."

"What do you mean?" asked Mark.

"Well, you'll have to follow up with a psychiatrist. You've been put on meds that need monitoring. And later we can discuss the options for outpatient therapy."

Mrs. Powell leaned forward. "How has Mark been doing?"

Ms. Jenkins shuffled through her papers, found one, and regarded a chart in front of her. "According to his therapists, he's been opening up in group and participating in activities. Staff on unit say he's made some friends, and gets up on time, showers and takes meds with no problem." She looked up at Mark and posed her next question to him. "Mark, how do you assess your time here? Do you think you've made progress while being here?"

He nodded. "I think I've learned a lot. I've learned that it's not good to stuff your feelings down, that's it's better to talk about them before things get out of hand."

He had forgotten that she was a professional, and read between the lines. "And to you, what does it mean for things to 'get out of hand,' to use your words?"

Mark thought for a moment. "Well, I guess it's good to talk about your feelings all of the time, even if it doesn't seem like they're about to get out of hand. What I guess I mean by that is, you start to get depressed, and you start to feel like hurting yourself."

She was tough. "But what happens if they *do* get 'out of hand'? What do you do then? Sometimes simply talking about things is not a cure for depression or feelings of self-harm."

"Go to a professional?" he said. The answer seemed to satisfy her.

"Right," she said. "Mark has the right idea about talking to someone before a crisis occurs, but he has to remember that if one *does* occur, he has to go immediately for help, and that's called personal accountability."

"And also it's therapeutic to talk," added his mother.

"Exactly," said the social worker. "Anything else you want to add, Mark?" He shook his head.

"What about his medicine?" asked his father, his elbows on his knees.

"Do you have specific questions about it?"

"How long will Mark have to be taking the Lithium?"

"Well, I'm not a doctor," she said. "But in my experience, the bipolar patient usually has to be on some sort of medication for the rest of his life to remain stable, if that's what their true diagnosis is."

Mrs. Powell turned her head and muttered an, "Oh my God."

"True diagnosis?" his father said.

"The doctor has labeled Mark's diagnosis as tentative. That means that if Mark should find a private psychiatrist and this new doctor is not happy with the conclusion that our doctor has made, he can change it. We've only been monitoring him for a short time, and of course it's not etched in stone."

"You said something about blood samples?"

"Yes. After his discharge from the hospital, should he continue to be placed on Lithium, he will have to go in for a monthly blood test just to check his Lithium level. We don't want toxicity, and the level will show his doctor if his dose needs to be lowered." She twirled a finger into one of her black ringlets. "There's another issue I want to bring up with you two while you're here..."

"Yes?"

"We checked his urine and found traces of marijuana and methamphetamine use. Had either of you been aware that Mark was abusing drugs?"

A deep frown etched into his mother's face, and Mark squirmed. "I certainly didn't," she said politely. "I

suspected he drank beer on occasion, but I had no idea." She raised her brows accusingly towards her ex-husband, whose name she still bore.

His face was equally as stern as he gave a sardonic laugh. "I see him less than once a month. If anyone should have known, it would have been her."

The social worker, acting very professional, ignored the last statement for its accusatory value. She promptly handed each of them some brochures and said, "You may read these at your liesure. Some of them are about AA or NA, and some of them are about substance abuse in general. Now that you know, it's a good time to start educating yourselves about this issue."

Barbara Powell looked as though she'd been slapped in the face. "Mark, you never told me about any of this. Is there more I should know about? Something that didn't show up on the test?"

There was, of course, but Mark didn't want to talk about it in front of the social worker. Moreover, he didn't want to reveal it to his parents. "It's true," he admitted. "I did drugs, but I'm willing to try and work it out."

"A twelve-step program might be the best option for Mark, being as how he's seventeen years old now. There are a few young teenagers at these meetings, but mostly adults."

"We'll look into it," said his father, patting his knee with his hand.

"Now shall we talk about discharge?" Ms. Jenkins asked, reshuffling her papers. Mark's parents nodded their heads in agreement. "Mark has been here for a week and a half, and in my opinion he's made significant strides towards self-recovery while he's been a patient here." She cleared her throat discreetly. "If the doctor agrees, I believe that Mark is well enough to go home tomorrow, if he feels up to it. How would you like that, Mark?"

He nodded his head. "I'd like that," he said.

"So what we're looking at is a discharge plan. Does Mark have a strong support system in place? Does he have a friend or family member he can always rely on to talk to if he ever feels like self-harming?"

"Well, my brother lives out in Indiana," Barbara Powell suggested. "They always got along really well when he was growing up."

"Does that sound like someone you can rely on, Mark?" He nodded his head in agreement.

"As for friends," she said, "I would avoid the ones with whom you've done drugs with, but if you have someone in mind that's close to your age, that might be a possibility as well."

Mark didn't know of anyone, but he nodded his head anyway.

"Anyone else?" she asked.

"My counselor at school," he said.

"So we've got a few people in place. What about therapy? Have you thought about giving Mark a regular therapist?"

"I'm sure the both of us could afford to send him to a psychologist."

"Do you have a psychiatrist lined up?"

"Yes, we do." She asked them to write down the name and number of the new doctor onto a form.

"Okay. Lastly, it's my recommendation that he attend outpatient groups for a week here before returning to school, but that's up to you to decide."

Mr. and Mrs. Powell looked at each other. "I don't think he can afford to miss any more school," Barbara said. "He's not the greatest student, and he's already a year older than all of his other classmates."

"Well, that's your decision," she said kindly. "Thank you for your time. I'll give you a call in the morning to tell you what the doctor has decided, and if he's discharging Mark tomorrow, I'll give you a time when to come and pick him up."

The next day, after he saw his psychiatrist, the news was given: he was going to return home. While the other kids were in the gym, he went back to his room, packed his things into suitcases, and went through discharge procedures.

When he stepped outside the front double doors of the hospital, he was a free man. No longer locked inside the building, he waited for his mother to come and pick him up. He breathed in the fresh air from outside, smelling the pine needles, and couldn't ever remember feeling so exhilarated.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Jeff Finch approached her the following Monday at her locker. She'd been avoiding him for days now...she'd been seeing him in the halls and at lunch, looking at her with bug-eyes, and she'd seen him so often she wondered if he was following her. He sauntered up the hallway, stopped when his eyes settled on Meg, and squinted as though to make sure he was really seeing whom he thought he was seeing. Then when he saw that her eyes were focused back on him, he gave a friendly wave. Feeling guilty, Meg politely waved back.

He stopped just inches from where her locker door was swung wide open. "Meg, I finally caught you," he said once he'd stopped, his hair still wet from his morning shower. Meg didn't really want to talk to him, but she knew she couldn't get out of a conversation. She'd been crying and moping around the house all weekend, trying to get the thought of Mark out of her mind. Her eyes were still swollen and sore and itchy, and she didn't really want

anyone to see her looking like this, as though she'd had a whopper of an allergic reaction. She was tired and irritable, but it wasn't her nature to be cross with people.

"It's good to see you, Jeff. How are you?"

He was short for a boy but still towered over Meg. He tilted his eyes downward to look at her through a layer of thick black lashes. "I'm fine. Karate's going great. I'm in the running for a black belt next week." He smiled broadly, obviously very proud of himself.

"Congratulations," she said, trying to sound like an enthusiastic cheerleader.

"I haven't seen you in a long time," he said, even though Meg knew it wasn't true. What he'd *meant* to say was that he hadn't talked to her. Every time he came around a corner, ambling in her direction, she'd walk purposefully in another, trying to look like she had somewhere to go. "The last time I saw you it was at Beth Hammon's party. How did everything work out?" He was looking at her with puppy-dog eyes. If he didn't have a crush on her, there was something wrong with his vision.

"Well, I had a drink and talked with a few people," she admitted. She wanted to avoid the topic of Mark with an extreme passion. "Then I went home early...around midnight. To tell you the truth, it wasn't the best thing I could have done with a Saturday night."

"I thought about it," he said, "and I probably shouldn't have left you alone out there, without bringing you home. I was your date, and I basically ditched you."

"No, it's alright," Meg said, with a dismissive wave of her hand. "I got a ride. You didn't want to be around the drinking, and maybe I shouldn't have been around it, either." She recalled her first throbbing hangover with disgusted recollection. "Drugs aren't all they're cracked up to be, you know."

He nodded his head in agreement. "So does this mean you still want to hang out with me?" he asked, his expression eager and hopeful.

Oh, what the hell? He was a nice young man...courteous, gentle-spirited, athletic (she liked athletic boys) and he seemed to really like her. Other than the slight possibility that he was an amateur stalker, he was basically a really good guy. So what if she was used goods now? Mark had approached her suddenly, in the middle of the night, and ravaged her with what had seemed like fiery passion to an inexperienced fifteen-year-old girl. Of course, she had nothing to compare it to, but so what? Not even in her wildest pubescent fantasies before that night did she ever imagine a chemistry as electric, as sizzling as what she'd thought they'd shared. But then Mark, almost as soon as he'd picked her up, had dropped her back down to the floor with little explanation except for "you're too good for me." Part of her wanted to dismiss

the whole thing as Mark's usual style, but her heart just wouldn't let her believe that Mark was the type of person who used women and then tossed them aside when he didn't need them anymore.

She wondered if Jeff Finch would be as eager to hang out with her if he knew what had taken place between Mark and Meg the week following the party. But there was nothing to say that she had to tell him, or anyone. Amanda knew, but then again, Amanda was a trusted friend, unique to most anyone that Meg had ever met.

She thoughtfully regarded his last question, and answered weakly, "Of course I'd still like to hang out with you," again, feigning enthusiasm. Not a stalker, she told herself. More like a lovesick teenager who's been avoided for the past week and a half.

"I've got a car now," he said. "This weekend I celebrated my sixteenth birthday. My parents helped me buy a used Toyota, and it runs great. Would you like to go for a spin with me sometime? I can take you home, or we can go out for ice cream after school..."

Meg smiled. "I'd like that." A sickening knot in her stomach told her, taunted her that she should have stayed with Jeff, her safest and best bet, in the first place.

He smiled broadly and said, "Great. I'll give you a call sometime. Do you still have my number?"

She did, but it was hidden underneath a pile of dirty clothes in a corner of her bedroom, neglected as though she'd never call him again. "I do."

He tilted his head like a smitten Cocker Spaniel and saluted. She smiled up at him as he turned on his heels and sauntered away just as casually as he had walked up to her, hiking up his bag more comfortably onto his back.

It was October, and cold, biting winds were beginning to blow in from the west, rattling the already baring trees and causing their coloring leaves to drift slowly to the ground. Deciduous trees including oaks and spruces were beginning to wield a spectrum of colors, ranging between shades of green, yellow, orange, red, and brown.

Meg shivered as she pulled her windbreaker closer to her body as she looked down at the little stream in back of her house. It was a tiny stream, but despite its small size was a tributary to a larger river about a half a mile to the east. It was the place where Mark had found her and quietly placed a finger to her sensitive lips so that she wouldn't cry out in surprise. She was sitting on the very same rock, again enjoying nature, again cold, and wanting Mark's company.

Lost in her thoughts, she barely noticed the sound of crunching feet approaching. "Meg?"

Meg turned and saw Amanda stepping over roots and stones in her direction, stumbling to get across. "Oh, hi!"

"Mind if I join you?"

Meg scooted over on the large boulder and brushed off the excess dirt to afford Amanda a place to sit. "Not at all."

Amanda sat down and followed the line of Meg's vision. "Not much to see, is it?"

Meg propped her chin up in her palms. "This is my special place. I used to play here all the time with my brother when he was alive."

"And Mark, too?"

"Yes." Another healthy breeze blew by, kicking up dead leaves and twirling them around in funnels. Both girls folded their arms around their bodies, defending themselves against the stiff chill.

Amanda had to raise her voice to be heard above the sound of wind scattering leaves. "How are you coping with things?"

She sighed, and studied the scuffed toes and frayed laces of her flimsy brown, leather boots. She would have to get them replaced, but she'd blown her allowance money lately on stacks of cd's. She shook her head. "There's something about this whole rejection thing I just can't seem to understand."

Amanda leaned back a little bit on her arms, and looked at Meg over her shoulder. "What? You're too beautiful?"

Meg laughed. "No...I mean, he barely said anything to me when he told me he wanted to cool it, but he gave me the impression that he'd never felt anything at all, that he'd only done anything with me because he felt indebted to me because of my brother."

"That's painful," remarked Amanda, who sounded genuinely sympathetic. "So what doesn't make sense?"

Meg blew warm breath into her chill hands, then rubbed them together briskly. "You said yourself you had a feeling he felt deeply for me, too...didn't you?"

Amanda lowered her gaze to her hand, and inspected a silver ring that she wore around her middle finger. "Well, yeah. But I could have been wrong. Listen, Meg, I'm the person to talk to when you want to know about rejection. I've been down that road and I know it like the back of my hand. My heart's been ripped out and hung on the school flagpole for everyone to see, and it's no laughing matter. One of the first reactions you have is denial."

Meg shook her head vehemently. "But this is different. Wouldn't I have known if he'd not felt anything at all for me?"

She brushed a tuft of Meg's hair behind her shoulder. "He probably feels deeply for you as a friend..."

Meg didn't want to admit that Amanda was probably right. "I guess so...but would he have reacted so strongly to me in the beginning if he didn't like me?" Amanda looked worried. "What's the matter?" Meg asked.

Amanda was looking down, playing with a red oak leaf. "Do you remember when I told you about that guy who rejected me and then spread all those rumors about me?"

Meg had a dim recollection about it. "Yeah. But what about it?"

She heaved a sigh. "We were at a school dance...the Halloween one, as a matter of fact, and I was head over heels in love with this boy who was in my Science class. He was tall, broad-shouldered, athletic, sharp-featured, and I thought he was the most gorgeous creature I'd ever laid eyes on in my entire life." She paused to cough. "I didn't have a boyfriend at the time, and as far as I knew, he didn't have a girlfriend."

"Sounds promising."

"I expressed to my friends at the time that if I were to make one wish in my entire life and that it would come true, I would want it to be that this boy would dance with me." Meg smiled at the story.

"What did they do about it?"

A wince of pain flashed across Amanda's freckled face. "I was a lot more shy and withdrawn back then, much like you are now, Meg, so it was amazing that I told them that,"

she said, in a breathy voice. "which also made it all that much more painful when they did what they did."

"What happened?"

Her eyes darkened. "They pulled me over, by force, and said right to his face that I was deeply and hopelessly in love with him."

"That must have been so embarrassing..."

"Actually, it wasn't," Amanda said. "What was painful was what happened as a result of that. He smiled his engaging smile, nodded at me and said he'd be honored to dance with me."

"Were his friends around?"

"Yes. They were all standing there, watching and listening. I must have had stars in my eyes. We went out to the dance floor, draped arms around each other for a slow song, and I felt as though I were in a dream. I went home that night walking on clouds of bliss." She paused for a moment, wrapping her wool jacket around her neck.

"What happened next?"

She studied her fingernails. "The next Monday morning, when I walked into school, everyone was whispering and pointing at me. I didn't know what was going on, so I asked one of my girlfriends what they were saying. She said that the boy I'd danced with told everyone he knew that he'd only danced with me because he felt sorry for me. Not only that, but he'd given a whole slew of other bad adjectives and names for me, as well. Apparently, seventh

graders thought it was devilishly funny and highly entertaining. That's how the spread of rumors got started."

Meg lifted her brows. "I hope you don't mind me asking, but was this guy a 'popular kid'?"

Understanding lit Amanda's face like a lightbulb going off. "Yup. And I think it's someone you know...Mark's friend, Dan Redwood."

Meg widened her eyes. "Did Mark have anything to do with the rumors?"

Amanda sat up straighter. "Actually, no. In fact, I think he was the only one who seemed disinterested by the whole thing."

"I can't believe it," Meg said, staring down at the water. "Have you thought about confronting Dan and his friends?"

"How could I?" Amanda said, forcing a laugh. "They're popular, and I'm not. I think they would just laugh at me if I tried to say anything to them."

Meg remembered what Beth had said about her when she'd invited her to her party. "Still...I think it's cruel of them. They should be held accountable for what they did to you in some way."

"Like how?"

"Ask them why they did it. Who knows, maybe you'll get an answer. Are you still in love with him?"

Amanda grew quiet. "Yes." Her answer surprised Meg. "But we live in two different worlds; he's a star football player, and I'm a cheerleader who got lucky because a couple of girls got kicked off the squad. To him and his friends, I'm nobody. I'm not like them." She took in a deep breath, and suddenly seemed to remember the topic. "But what I guess I'm trying to say, is that sometimes in life, you get rejected. And Meg, there may be nothing you can do to change the person's mind."

Meg looked down and started to pick at the leaf that Amanda had been playing with. "Maybe I thought," she said, "that since we shared a tragedy in our past, that we were destined to be together."

Amanda looked at her sympathetically and said, "A broken heart is never easy..."

Meg first saw Mark again the very next day. He was sitting in the bleachers on the football field, looking lonely and sad, during the last half of cheerleading practice. The bandages that had been around his head were now off, showing slightly noticeably scars on either side of his forehead.

When she saw Beth go up to him after practice, she figured he'd come to see her. Perhaps he'd figured he wanted to be with her after all, after coming to terms with how he really felt.

But when he lifted his arm, motioning for Meg to join him, she found herself growing weak in the knees with nerves. She plodded towards him, squinting in the afternoon sun. They did not greet each other. She took a seat beside him, and noticed how calm he seemed-- different than the ever-annoyed Mark she had come to know.

"It's nice to know you're back," she commented, and lifted her eyes to him. She wanted to approach him gingerly, not knowing exactly how to treat a person who'd just been in a psychiatric hospital for trying to kill himself.

"I got back a couple of days ago," he said, nonchalantly.

"Are you here to see Beth?" she asked, trying to hide the jealousy in her voice. Yes, it was still there, gnawing at her insides like a stomach full of parasites.

He glanced at the blonde cheerleader who was disappearing into the gymnasium. "No, Meg. I came to see you."

Meg fiddled with the pom poms in her lap, feeling a blush come to her face. *Why are you blushing? He doesn't want you, Goddammit!* She watched the rest of the squad retreat into the gymnasium on their way to the girls' locker room and said, "Didn't your therapists tell you never to speak to me again?"

He laughed. "If they'd have told me that I would have told them to go to hell," he said, cradling his fist.

Meg's heart warmed. "I'm glad you're back." They fell into silence, and Mark grabbed one of Meg's pom poms and tossed it in the air.

"What made you decide to become a cheerleader?" he asked.

She smiled at him. "It's like dance, and I've had a lot of dance training. I wanted a way to get some exercise, and my parents wanted me to have an extra-cirricular activity."

"I see." He gave her a sideways glance. "Doesn't it have anything to do with popularity?"

She snatched the pom pom back. "Of course not." She held them both firmly underneath her arms. "I wouldn't think of caring about things like popularity." He nodded his head amusedly. "What, you don't think I'm telling the truth?"

He smiled. "Are you?"

She smiled and gave him a nod. "Yes." Annoyed, she switched the subject. "Are you feeling better?" she asked.

"Well, I've got some nasty scars and I have this horrible medicine to take now, but other than that I'm alright."

"What do they have you taking?"

"Lithium. It's an old remedy for bipolar."

"Do you think that's what you have?"

He gave a thoughtful nod. "Could be. But with all the drugs, who knows."

"You're not very aware of your own emotions, are you?" she asked.

He shook his head. "No."

"Can I see you again?"

"Meg--"

"I know. You don't want to see me anymore, like that. What you said was brief, but clear. You just don't feel that way about me." *He just got out of the hospital. You should be more sensitive.*

He ran a hand over his chin. "I wish I could explain it more. I'm at a loss for explanations, most times."

Meg looked sadly at him. *There's something he's not telling me. There's something missing here...*

He looked up at her with a soulful expression in his eyes. "Do you hate me, Meg?"

She spoke the first words that came into her head. "I think you're being a coward. You're not facing the issue, you're running from it, from me. Just like you've done with virtually every aspect of your life...the drugs, the women, the suicide attempt, and now the breakup. You're running the way you ran when Cory had that gun in his hands...this way, you know the person who gets hurt is yourself."

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

The summer had been long and hot that year, and by stark contrast, the Fall, though still young, had already begun to be bitterly cold, temperatures plunging into the low twenties at night, the highs during day barely breaking forty. Halloween was fast approaching--just in four days, this year falling on a Wednesday, and young kids were stocking up on costumes, face paint, and props for their costumes, as well as thermal clothing to wear underneath them. Candy dishes were filling up, and carved pumpkins were appearing on doorsteps throughout the residential sections of Glenwood.

Mark groaned and stumbled out of bed to a bright, white-skied day. The plastic cup his mother had gotten from the doctor was sitting on the bureau beside his door, waiting to be filled. Now that he was back home from the hospital, one of his new, daily routines was to pee in a cup and have a lab test it for substances. He hated having to do it--it was so demeaning, he thought bitterly.

After he filled the cup and brought it downstairs, he slipped out the front door and got into his car.

Mark wasn't the sort of person to listen to authority figures, especially about the type of friends he should or should not hang out with. It wasn't difficult for Mark to figure out that every single one of his friends were regular drug users, but that reality was not about to stop him from being around them. Dan, the star football player, the proclaimed stud with usually more than one girl

figuratively hanging off his arm smoked dope; Drew, the mysterious skinhead who was also a closet anarchist also did; and Joey Parrish, the popular boy, the man's man of course did. All of these people, including their girlfriends, found nothing wrong with using drugs to enhance their "fun" on a week-to-week basis.

After being released from the hospital, he found himself wandering back to those previously frequented places-- the bar downtown whose waitresses thought Mark and his friends were college students, overlooking their ridiculously crude fake id's; the field behind the junior high school that was no longer in use; Dan's house; and just about anywhere where getting loaded could be kept secretive.

On a Saturday afternoon, he drove for about fifteen minutes through the winding hills of Glenwood's residential streets, not sure where to go, before deciding to go up to Dan's house.

Dan's house looked like a beach cottage, made of unpainted wood and situated with large front and back decks that were on stilts. The garage was huge and covered entirely the level underneath the house, making it a three-level building. It was a common place for Dan's friends to hang out because his parents were rarely home, and when they were, they always turned a blind eye and a deaf ear to what was going on amongst the kids.

As Mark pulled up into the carport, it looked like no one was home. He parked the car, turned the key and slipped out of his convertible gracefully. After he ambled up the rickety wooden stairs that creaked with each step, making his way to the front door, he tried the knob and it was open. He stepped inside unabashedly.

"Hello? Dan?" he called. He heard some footsteps and the muffled sound of some far-off laughter, but no one came to the front. The air smelled thickly of cannabis.

He plodded through the house, peeking in rooms and moving in the direction of the subtle noises. When he reached the back parlor, he opened the door to find Dan and Beth sitting quietly on the tan, leather sofa, sharing a pipe filled with crushed hemp. Dan was shirtless; Beth wore only a man's flannel shirt, with nothing on her legs or feet. She was clearly not wearing any underwear.

"Mark, my boy! You finally got out! Tell me, what's it like to be out of the funny farm?"

Mark stood there for a moment, stunned. "Tell me Beth spilled something on her clothes, and you offered her your shirt," Mark said, not blinking.

Beth said nothing. Her icy stare said everything.

Mark rushed over to Dan, balling up his right hand into a tight fist, grabbed him roughly by the neck and hit him hard on the left side of his face. Dan reeled backwards and looked about ready to topple over until he regained his balance. He held his face, cradling it,

hunched over. "What the hell are you thinking?" he cried, his voice coming out in gasps. "I'm twice as big as you and I could kill you if I wanted!"

"Then do it, you son of a bitch," Mark dared.

Beth raised her voice. "Stop being such assholes, you guys," she said. "Fighting is stupid and pointless. You're friends, remember?" Then she turned to Mark and started walking towards him. When she had approached him and was close enough for Mark to feel her breath on his face, she took the tip of her finger and traced an invisible line on his chest. Before she spoke, she gave him a sexy stare. "What we had was a good thing, Mark," she said, in a breathy voice. "But don't you remember? We broke up weeks ago, and I'm a free woman now." She reached up and kissed him on the cheek. "Stop all this fighting and this jealousy. That same freedom goes for you, too."

He caught his breath, his heart pumping with adrenaline. He wanted to speak, but somehow he couldn't find the words. After a moment, all he could manage to say was, "I said we should take a break, not break up forever."

She pouted. "Don't give me a double standard," she said. "You jumped into bed with that little girl practically the same night we called it quits. And besides," she said, with the beginnings of a smirk on her face, "I'm not sure if I ever want to be in a relationship with you again now. While you were away, I had some time to think about things. I thought about things a lot."

Mark's heartbeat was slowly returning to normal, even though his anger level was not. He stepped back, throwing her hand away. "Is this what you were doing when I was in the hospital?" She raised her chin, not answering him. Dan was cowering in the corner, his eyes steely. Mark's eyes flicked from one person to the other. "I see it is."

"Oh, lighten up," Dan said, still cradling his cheek. "It's not like you didn't know we were together before you guys ever went out."

But Mark didn't stay to listen. He turned on his heels and sailed out the front door, not even glancing back when Dan called, "If you tell Courtney, I'll break your neck!"

Mark went to sleep that night and slept like a two-ton boulder was resting on top of him. If he had any dreams, he couldn't remember them; either he was too exhausted, or it was something in the pot he'd smoked earlier in the day. He toyed with the idea that it had been laced with something. After the run-in at Dan's house, he'd driven to a nearby park, found a solitary spot in the soft green grass at the edge of a large field, the view of it obstructed by several large trees, and smoked a medium-sized joint all by himself. He woke up Sunday morning wishing that the night had been six hours longer.

Mark never went to Church. His parents had been raised Catholic, and were not given the choice as to

whether or not they should attend Mass; subsequently, they made it a point to give Mark the freedom to choose whether or not he wanted religion in his life. As a young child, he often wondered about the existence of a God, but as a young man, he gave up wondering and basically hated the idea that one might exist-- if He were to, in Mark's estimation, He would have to be the cruellest, most unmerciful Being that ever was, given the life that Mark had been handed out.

Mark yawned and ran his fingers through his grimy hair. Another new, unwelcome routine Mark now had to endure was to see a squinty-eyed therapist who looked like he needed a fresh pair of bifocals. Mark had a dim memory of his mother slipping into his room late at night, after he'd gone to bed and reminding him that he had a therapy appointment in the morning. He had no memory of what he'd said to her, or whether she'd stayed and talked to him or simply left, but he knew that she had come. He was not looking forward to the session. The psychologist smelled like cheap Stetson and wore a plaid, button-down dress shirt with wool pants that were cut too short. Much the professor type, his beard was mostly grey, but on either side of his mouth, two large swipes of brown made his face look like a painter had taken a brush to it (Either that, or he didn't know how to use his *Just for Men*). His glasses were thick and goggle-like, yellowing with age, and he rarely ever smiled, even though his countenance was

friendly and jovial. Mark hated being forced into a relationship with a man he'd never met before, and when it came right down to it, a man he disliked.

He'd had two sessions already with the Ph.D psychologist, Dr. Murphy. His office was situated downtown in a two-level building wedged between a corner grocery and a package store, grouped with the offices of three other counselors. It was small and cramped, decorated to the hilt with two padded chairs and a loveseat, with a multi-colored circular rug on the floor. The walls were donned with framed academia, as well as artwork and poetry. Potted plants sat on the windowsill by the window, and by the loveseat, a set of pipes and tobaccos. Dr. Murphy's desk sat in the corner, cluttered by papers, phone, rolodex, folders, and framed photographs of his family-- stills of Dr. Murphy sitting with his short, dark-haired wife and two small children of similar coloring. They smiled broadly into the camera, hugging each other, portraying the quintessence of a well-adjusted family. Mark could picture him wearing a smoking jacket and slippers, a pipe in one hand and a newspaper in the other, as he read by the fire in a log cabin, his children playing at his feet.

The first time they had met, Dr. Murphy had leaned in close, after a thoughtful silence, and said, "You lied while you were in the hospital, didn't you?"

Mark had stared blankly. "I don't know what you mean."

The man had pulled at the hairs on his chin. He had squinted his eyes so that they were almost shut, and leaned forward. "Mark. Are you going to make this hard for me?" he said, his voice almost a growl. "Are you going to shut me out, and not give me a chance to help you?" He had looked intently into Mark's eyes, then down at his lap to where a manilla folder was lying. Looking through the magnifiers in his lenses, he carefully opened the folder. "You signed a release form so that I could look at the records they had for you at the hospital, and I've been looking at them. You must have lied, because several things in here don't add up."

Mark had been offended by the man's effrontery. "I signed the release form because I had to, not because I wanted to."

He had looked up, his eyes magnified by his goggle-lenses and blinked his eyes, as though to clarify his vision. "Well, surely no one held a gun to your head," he commented, and Mark bit his lip at the man's choice of words. After a dramatic pause, he lowered his voice. "Please don't misunderstand me. There's no have-to here, Mark," he said, pointedly and with a sigh. "Whatever you don't feel comfortable sharing, you just say so, and we'll stop. But if you don't help me, then there's no way that I can help you."

But Mark did not believe him. Besides, he had already put up that mile-high wall that could stop anything and everything from getting in. "What makes you think I lied?" Mark persisted.

The man had shrugged, but not because he was confused. "Don't most people, if they want to get out of a place like that?"

Mark had shrugged, an echo to the man's previous gesture. "I suppose if you want it badly enough."

Now, sitting in his room, staring out the window, Mark quietly got up and slipped down the hall into the bathroom to get ready for the day. While massaging his hair with shampoo, he made great care not to put too much pressure on his scars, which were still sore.

It was a white day again, and cold as it had been the day before. Fresh dew dampened the lawn, for it had not been quite cold enough the night before for a frost.

His mother had taken a dramatic change since the suicide attempt. No longer her constantly critical self, she had started to take shorter hours at work to spend more time at home. She was quiet with him now, not loud and nagging the way she once was, and considerate, especially for her. Mark wondered how long the change would last. He knew that the attempt had come as a shock to her, but for the most part, he had no idea what was going on inside her head for her to act so differently.

Stepping out of the shower, the air was cold, and shivering, he slipped on his bathrobe.

It was a Sunday. He had had a strange first week back at school, and now he had to have his day of freedom stripped away from him so that he could go see a man who was supposed to know what was going on inside his head better than he was. His mother was waiting for him downstairs once he was dressed and ready to go. She quietly handed him a bowl filled with cereal and urged him to eat.

"Therapy today, Mark."

"Uh-huh."

"Is he helping you?" The tone in her voice was soft but persistent; a slight smile curled at the edge of her lips.

He handed her the plastic cup he had filled earlier. "I dunno." He went over to the sink and washed his hands, not looking up.

His mother shook her head. "If he's not helping you we can always find another therapist," she said, and it was evident that she was trying to sound helpful.

He dove into his Wheat Chex hungrily. "What about no therapy at all?" Mark mumbled, after chewing and swallowing a mouthful.

His mother frowned, suddenly. "There's no getting out of it," she protested. "After being in the hospital, you've got to talk to somebody on a regular basis...that's

what the social worker recommended. Before it happened, you didn't do that, and things got all stuffed up inside of you. You didn't talk to anyone, not as far as I know, anyway. You surely didn't talk to me."

Mark was surprised at her sudden talkativeness. "How long do I have to see this guy?" Mark asked, his face buried over his bowl.

"As long as it takes. Could be for a long time."

Mark chomped on another spoonful of the cereal. "He's weird, Mom. He thinks I lied at the hospital."

"Well, did you?"

Mark narrowed his gaze, then let it drift to the window. The sky was so white it looked like it was about ready to snow. He let his eyes drift downward, and thought about Meg's harsh words last week. "Why would I do that?"

"You tell me."

Mark heaved a dramatic sigh. "Dr. Murphy is the first person who ever said that, and it was the first thing he ever said to me. You're telling me you're going to trust his word over mine?"

His mother's frown turned back into a smile. "Trust kind of breaks apart when you take a gun to your temple." She tapped the side of the cup filled with pee. "Not to mention finding out you've been taking drugs under my nose and then lying about it."

Mark watched her. Ordinarily, coming from her, those words would have sounded accusatory, judgmental; but now,

they sounded almost playful. "My piss is clean," he said. "You'll see for yourself. I haven't done anything since I've been home." But it wasn't. Mark knew that something was going to pop up on his lab test this time, and that he'd have to confront his mother as soon as the results came back.

"We'll see," she said, but she was still smiling.

Mark finished off the last of his Wheat Chex. The empty void in the pit of his stomach was still there, churning, threatening to swallow him up like a black hole. This constant nausea was something he'd grown used to, but what was he nauseated from? He still didn't know. Nervousness? Depression? Or was it a physical ailment that fed *into* his depression and anxiety?

Once he put his dish into the dishwasher and shrugged into his tattered leather jacket, his mother offered to take him to Dr. Murphy's office. "I'll drive," she said, with a sing-songy voice.

Mark didn't turn her down because he knew that she would insist and insist until either he broke down or she put her foot down. He opened the front door to a cold day and got into the red Toyota with his mom only a step behind him, then they started on the short trip downtown.

She turned to him at an intersection and said, "I hope you talk with this man, Mark. He doesn't look like a whole lot, but I've heard great things about him and I have a

hunch about him. I think he's someone you can really trust. He's also someone who can really help you."

Mark swallowed, his throat dry. Of course he didn't believe her for a second. "I'll try my best."

"It's not something you try to do," she said. "It's something you do or do not do."

"Fine," Mark said. "I'll talk to him, if that makes you feel better."

She smiled, and Mark noticed for the first time that her smile was more like a frown that had been forced upward.

When they got to the office, they sat in the waiting room for ten minutes, reading *Reader's Digest* magazines next to a white noise machine. The walls were sterile white, accompanied by thick, off-white carpeting. Beethoven's Ninth symphony was playing on a small, electric blue boom box which was plugged into the wall.

Then Dr. Murphy opened his door, accompanied by a client who was on her way out. He patted her jovially on the back as they said their good-byes. He was dressed more stylishly today, in a simple black, silk shirt and pants that were the right length. After the client was gone, he waved Mark inside. "Hi, Mark. Come right in," he said.

"I'll be back to pick you up," his mother called softly, picking up her purse and putting down the magazine she had been reading. Mark got up from his seat and passed through the open door.

Once they were both seated and the door was shut tight, Dr. Murphy placed both hands in his lap ceremoniously. "Well," he said, after taking in a deep breath. "How have we been doing?"

Mark sank back into the plush, tan loveseat and felt the dreams and memories spin in his head. He was still hung over from the day before, and he felt unreal. He felt like a ghost, like he shouldn't be here. The image of Meg's lifeless and bleeding body from his dream, days earlier, flashed through his mind. In all honesty, he wasn't doing so hot, either physically or emotionally. To make himself look at ease, he spread out his arms and legs on the loveseat. He gave a halfhearted smile. "As good as can be expected," he said, with a nod.

The psychologist pushed up his goggle-lenses higher up onto the bridge of his nose. He studied Mark's posture, and said in a clinical voice, "The last couple of times you were here we talked about your hospitalization, and subsequently your release...as well as the events surrounding the two. There's been a lot going on for you, Mark, and I imagine that you have a lot to talk about. Is there anything you would especially like to talk about while you're here today?"

Mark shrugged his shoulders, and he knew he probably looked as disinterested in what this man had to say as he felt. "Whatever," he said. Disinterested or not, thoughts of blood and gore were haunting him.

The man sat back and pulled at his beard. "How are you feeling right now?"

Mark shrugged again. "Calm, at ease, relatively happy."

The man squinted his eyes. "Now, why don't I believe you?"

Mark forced a laugh. "Are you still trying to say that I'm lying so that people will let me off the hook?"

He leaned back. "What do you think?"

Mark looked around the room, which was unusually cluttered with papers and stacks of books today. The rectangular window to the right of the loveseat was closed, making the room stuffy, making the air smell musty.

"Okay...maybe I'm not happy," he said, resting his eyes on a prickly cactus which was dangling over the edge of the windowsill. "Maybe it was just something to say, like when people ask you how you're doing, they always want to hear, 'fine.'"

"Do you think that's always what people are after when they ask you questions like that?" Dr. Murphy asked.

"Of course," Mark answered. "They never want to hear, 'I'm doing terrible and I wish I were dead.'"

The man coughed. "And is that really how you're feeling right now?"

Mark looked up. He was holding his hands together in his lap. The wall went up again. "No."

"Tell me. If you're not happy right now, then how would you describe what you're feeling?"

Mark flicked his eyes to the counselor. "A little depressed, maybe," was his answer. "But I'm okay." He found himself reeling off answers that served only the purpose of calming people's suspicions about him, instead of really telling it like it was. Was he really depressed? Or was it something different?

The knot, the void in his stomach was growing larger. Mark pressed his fingers to his forehead as though he were pressing back a headache.

But Dr. Murphy was not put down so easily. "You say you're feeling depressed," he said. "But that's kind of a vague answer, even though it's a clinical one. Just like the last two sessions, you're not talkative, and you're not disclosing much. Something tells me that there's something going on with you that you're guarding, but you can't seem to find the resolve to release it, even though you need to. What *I'm* interested in," he said, "is how you're getting back into the swing of things now that you've been away for some time. Surely you've run into some obstacles, like schoolwork, or relationship issues."

Mark opened his eyes, which had been shut. He thought immediately about Meg, about the way he'd felt utterly rejected by her, out on the football field. He'd been expecting a warm welcome home, only to find that she didn't want to have anything to do with him anymore.

"Schoolwork's been piling up," he admitted, intentionally not talking about Meg. "I have to put in extra hours to catch up, and I'm not doing so well."

The psychologist stayed silent and nodded, allowing Mark time to talk.

"It's pretty much the same," he said, "except that I don't hang out with my friends as much, and I don't have a girlfriend anymore. It's just how it goes. It doesn't bother me at all."

"So you're saying you're fine. Even though there's been some changes going on, there's nothing wrong with you."

"That's exactly what I'm saying, even though I was suicidal a few weeks ago. Why can't you doctors accept that that might have been only be a one-time deal?"

The psychologist squinted his eyes. "Chances are that if you tried to commit suicide, then either you're suffering from an ongoing illness, or you had one hell of a temporary insanity going on. If you don't trust me, Mark, then just say so."

Mark looked at him. "I don't trust you."

Dr. Murphy did not look shocked. "You admitted it to me. That's a starting place."

Mark fixed his eyes on the floor, and knew it was true.

Meg eyed a long, beige, short-sleeved dress with crimson flowers patterned over it. It was hanging over a mannequin in the front window of Macy's, displayed ostentatiously between a case of jewelry and a rack of leather shoes. Already that day she'd bought a Gap t-shirt, a pair of blue jeans, and a costume for Halloween-- that year she was going to be Raggedy Ann-- complete with freckles and red-yarn hair.

No practice that day. At Jeff's invitation, they'd gone straight to the mall after school to pick up some things for the holiday, and of course Meg couldn't resist picking up a couple of extra things for herself along the way. He was standing beside her, and as she looked at the dress in the display window, his hand brushed hers. Blushing, she gave him a quick smile.

"We still have to get *your* costume," she said, holding up her overalls. "Wanna be Raggedy Andy?"

He smiled big. "Of course. Does that mean we go to the party together?" He now had a twinkle in his eyes.

She blushed again. "I guess so." She shrugged. "Do you want to?" They were both invited to one of Jeff's friend's parties-- held on Halloween night. With an extensive back-ground check and an assurance of parental chaperones, her parents had agreed to let her go.

Jeff beamed. "Of course," he said again. "You can be my date again...this time, I promise not to ditch you."

"What's the party going to be like?"

They started walking away from the window, swinging their bags as they moved. "Chips, sodas, pizza... and a scary movie. Nothing like that other party. Good clean fun."

"You call a slasher movie 'good clean fun'?"

"Sure, don't you like seeing someone's guts being spilled out onto the floor every once in a while?"

Meg laughed. "Well, I suppose since it's Halloween..."

Jeff stopped her, holding both her hands in his. "You know, you don't talk much about your time in private school."

"What made you think of that?" Meg blew away a strand of hair that had gotten in her face.

Jeff looked at her tenderly. "I was just thinking about how long you were missing from my life. Last time I ever saw you it was in the second grade, and then suddenly you were whisked away."

"It was my parents. I think their reasoning was that they wanted to somewhat remove me from the immediacy of what happened."

Jeff nodded. "Do you think they were being overprotective?"

"They got to be that way, I think. Private school was just the first step."

He eyed her. "So why don't you ever talk about it, may I ask?"

She roped her hand through his arm and urged him to walk with her. "There's not much to tell," she said. "It was an all girls' Christian boarding school. Not Catholic, but Episcopalian. No nuns roaming around, in other words. Once a week we had chapel, and every day we had to go to theology class."

"Is that all?"

Meg smiled. "I had a few friends, but not many. I was more like a serious student than a socializer. A couple of the girls were royally mean to me."

"Tell me more. What did they do?"

"Oh, I don't know," she said. "I guess they thought I was strange. I wasn't as outgoing as the other girls, and so they started to make fun of me."

"Did they do it a lot?"

"They did it enough to make me cry into my pillow at nights until I went to sleep. Sometimes, instead of praying, I'd try to talk to Cory, whispering into the empty recesses of my room, in the hopes that he would hear me and stick up for me. Of course he never did. He was dead."

"That's sad."

"I was a little kid. It got better."

"Well, one thing's for sure," Jeff said.

"What's that?"

"If anyone tries to do that to you again, I'll black-belt them to kingdom come."

Meg smiled big and they walked back to the main part of the mall, bags in tow.

Halloween came. Their teachers gave them little packages of candy wrapped in tissue paper and ribbon at school, and several of the kids showed up in costume. Meg didn't; she was going to wait until the evening to get dressed up. The party was at seven, and children started showing up at the Mitchell's doorstep at around five o'clock, demanding candy. Meg dug into the huge candy dish that was sitting beside the front door and dropped huge fistfuls of Reese's Cups and Tootsie Rolls into their bags.

A cute little boy wearing a Batman costume hollered, "Trick or treat!" and Meg happily reached for the candy dish, but just as she was about to drop the sweets into his pail, a couple of young teenagers showed up and shoved him out of the way.

"You're Meg Mitchell, aren't you?" one of the boys asked.

"Yes, that's me," Meg said, apprehensively. One of the boys was wearing a cap that made it look like a butcher knife was impaled through his head, and the other one wore a frightening mask that made him look like a deformed ghoul.

"We know about you," said the ghoul, who had fake blood gushing from his mouth. "You have a ghost living in this house. You better watch out, or he'll try some crazy stuff tonight."

"I'll keep that in mind," Meg said, not impressed. "How did you hear about that?"

The boy with the butcher knife through his head grinned. "We know lots of things about you," he said. "We know all about you and that guy Mark Powell, too."

"I don't know who you are or how you got this information," she said, "but I think you'd better leave. Right now." She reached past them, dropped some candy into the arms of some children who had just arrived, and slammed the door in the teenagers' faces. Thankfully, they did not return. Meg went upstairs.

It was a very windy night, and from time to time the power went off inside the house, the old power lines not sturdy enough to withstand the high winds. It was dusk, and dark enough inside the house to necessitate some candles. Meg lit some scented votives as she heard some noises coming from downstairs. Her parents were arguing again; she could hear them yelling from her bedroom.

She slipped out of her jeans and blouse and examined her body before the full-length mirror. She frowned, not at all pleased with what she saw. Twirling around, she scrutinized her bulging abdomen, thighs that were larger than she would have liked, and pudgy arms. Her mother

would have called it babyfat, but Meg thought it had something to do with her weakness for sweets. She wasn't grossly overweight; in fact, she wasn't considered overweight at all for her height, but still, she wanted to shave off at least ten pounds. She was at the very highest limit of being at a normal weight, but she wanted to be less.

She took the shirt and overalls that she had bought at the mall from her closet and slipped them on. Once on, she pulled on a pair of dirty boots and laced them. She then knotted her hair and pinned it up, retrieved the red-yarn wig and placed it on top of her head, and dotted her face with brown face paint for the freckles. She looked at the end result and smiled at what she saw.

Her parents were arguing as she arrived downstairs.

"Davis, you are simply insane sometimes!" her mother yelled, through clenched teeth.

"Oh, now you're going to insult me?" he argued back, equally as incensed.

"What's going on?" Meg asked, coming into the kitchen.

"Your father is being a big bully," her mother said. The lights flickered on, and then off. Their faces looked distorted and scary in the candlelight.

"Now that's not fair," he said. "Why don't you tell our daughter the truth? That you're the one who's being a bully?"

They hadn't even noticed her costume. "I'm going out with Jeff to that party you let me go to," she said, walking past them. "I won't be back until ten-thirty."

Her parents hadn't even heard her. They just continued yelling at each other. When Meg saw the headlights flashing in the driveway, she slipped out the front door and bounded over to the car without saying good-bye. They wouldn't have heard her anyway, she thought.

As she crossed the front lawn to the car, the force of the wind nearly knocked her wig off of her head, but she clamped it down with a heavy hand. Dusk was spectacular-- the clouds were splattered across the skyline in an array of colors-- red, orange, pink and purple, and the grey clouds overhead were moving in an unbelievable speed. The air was blisteringly cold, and crisp.

Jeff was sitting behind the wheel, dressed in his Raggedy Andy costume of matching overalls and wig. "You look cute!" he said. Meg smiled at him.

"I have to be back by ten-thirty because it's a school night," she said.

"No problem," he said. "That'll give us plenty of time to see the movie. See any trick-or-treaters?"

"A couple," she said. "They're so cute. But the funniest thing happened. A couple of young teenagers came by and said that there was a ghost in my house."

"You mean they knew about Cory?"

"I suppose so. But isn't that weird?"

Jeff nodded his head. "Maybe someone's been talking about you," he said. As they drove down Spruce Lane, they saw the shadowy blobs that were kids walking from door to door. Meg could make out the forms of a few witch hats, as well as an animal's tail and some ears on one of the kids.

When they arrived at Gary's house, not many cars were parked out front. His house was a green split-level just outside the borders of Glenwood proper. The lights from inside were casting a warm glow on the lawn outside, in contrast to the eery, greenish glow of the street light two doors down.

Jeff turned the car off, went around to the other side of the car, and opened the door for Meg. His warm hand grasped hers, helping to lift her up and out.

When they got to the front door, he rang the bell. A few seconds later, Gary was standing there, dressed like a red devil, pitchfork in hand.

"Come in, come in!" he urged, stepping aside to give them room to pass. "Party's just getting started! Let me guess. Raggedy Ann and Andy?"

"Good guess."

They strolled inside and saw that the living room had been cleared of furniture. Along one of the walls was a long buffet table draped in a white tablecloth, covered with snack foods. "Dig in, everybody!" Gary called.

Several other kids, in costume, were standing around. Meg immediately spotted Amanda, who was wearing a Little Bo

Peep costume. "Hi, Amanda," Meg said, as she sidled up to her.

"Well, don't you two look like the perfect couple," she said, with a sideways glance, and then a wink.

"You look so adorable," Meg said, regarding her costume.

"I feel ridiculous," she said. "And I think this dress is too small. It keeps riding up, and that Dracula over there keeps looking at my ass." She pointed to a young man who was hovering over the potato chips.

Meg laughed and patted her on the shoulder. "Well, look at it this way..." she said. "At least you didn't come as a French maid, like Kate did." They both looked at her, and she was having a hard time keeping her costume on her body.

"You're right." They stood in silence together for a moment, while Amanda sipped her berry-red punch. Then she leaned in close to Meg. "So, Meg," she whispered. "Are you and Jeff, like, a thing now?"

Meg looked into her eyes and smiled. "I don't know," she answered back. "But he keeps giving me these signals, like holding my hand, telling me he really likes me, telling me we're going out on dates. I think he's really into it."

"Are you?"

She bit her lip. "I think so. I mean, now that Mark's not in the picture, what have I to lose, right?"

Amanda nodded sagely. "Oops, here he comes," she said, looking up.

He approached, carrying two cups of punch and some cookies. "The movie's going to start soon," he said. "Nightmare on Elm Street. The first one. We're all going to go down to the basement to watch it."

"I'm starved," Meg said. "I didn't have any dinner. Has he got anything besides cookies?"

"Some pizza," he said. "I'll get you a slice."

"So," Amanda said, as soon as he left, "do you really like him?"

"I think I do." Jeff came back with the pizza. They were silenced.

After chomping down two greasy slices of pepperoni pizza, Meg watched as the group congregated at the top of the stairs to go down to the finished basement. The lights weren't flickering anymore, and so they made their way downstairs easily under the fluorescent lights.

About a dozen kids were at the party that night. With extra folding chairs pulled out to complement the huge, brown sofa and easy chairs, everyone had a seat in front of the tv. Someone dimmed the lights, and Gary pushed the play button on the vcr.

Meg and Jeff had prime spots on the sofa. They sat right next to each other, Jeff on the end, Meg in the middle. While the previews were on, people chattered excitedly.

It was dark. The amber glow from the tv screen provided little in the way of being able to distinguish people's faces. Gary's mom brought in a bowl of freshly popped and buttered popcorn and placed it on the coffeetable in the middle of the group, and it smelled wonderful, all steamy and buttery-smelling.

Once the previews were over and the movie came on, everyone hushed.

Jeff's hand lightly brushed Meg's during the first scene. Surprised, she gave a little jump. Looking around, all she could see were the silhouettes of kids rapt in attention at the movie, and all she could hear was the creepy music coming from the tv and the sound of people eating their popcorn. No one had noticed her jump.

Slowly, his hand slid over hers. His hand was cool now, although not cold. She let him hold her hand.

Several scenes went by. She could hear the sound of Jeff smacking his teeth together, chewing on some popcorn. She felt the desire to lean into his arms, and so she did. He did not back away. He enclosed both his arms around her, hugging her close.

By the time the movie ended, they were both embracing each other. Just before the lights were switched on, Meg shyly moved away. Then the overheads came on, and Meg blinked and squinted her eyes, not used to the light. She felt sedate and sleepy as she looked up at Jeff, who looked tired himself.

It was nearly ten o'clock and Meg knew that she had best be going. "Ready to leave?" she asked Jeff, who looked like he was about ready to curl up into a ball and take a nap on the sofa.

"Let me just say good-bye to some people," he said. She waited on the couch, yawning.

When he returned he was carrying his jangling keys. "Let's go," he said.

It was all Meg could do not to fall asleep in the car. She'd seen scary movies a million times before, so they never gave her nightmares. They never bothered her one bit, so she felt perfectly at ease to sleep. But she sobered up a little when they arrived at her house. He turned to her in the waiting car and held both her hands, the way he had at the mall earlier that day. "I had a really good time tonight," he said. "Even though there were tons of other kids around with us. One of these days I want to take you out on a real date, you know, to like a restaurant or something."

She could barely see him in the moonlight. "I had a good time, too," she said. "I'm glad you asked me to come with you."

There was a pause, and Meg wasn't quite sure what was going on because she couldn't see Jeff's face or expression, but a second later, he said, "Can I kiss you?"

She was surprised. But without much thought, she said, "Sure. I guess so."

He leaned in close, and when his mouth came close to hers, she could faintly smell the mint on his breath. Then the top lip softly, hesitantly touched hers, and then the bottom lip, bravely and firmly, quickly captured the rest of her mouth.

When he pulled away, she caught her breath. "That was nice," she said.

"Just nice?"

"More than nice," she corrected herself. There was a moment of silence as Meg got her bearings.

"I like you a lot," he said. "I hope I can see more of you."

Meg hesitated. "You will," she said, quietly.

After a while, she exited the car, said a nervous good-bye and returned to the warmth of her house.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

The moon was a silver crescent sliver amidst thick blackness that was the night. Mark looked up at the sky, enthralled with its complexities. Passing clouds of various demure colors, looking like hovering gaseous mists, obscured most of the stars, but the stars that were visible, were brilliant. The violent winds from earlier in the evening were beginning to die down, and he could feel the gentle breeze against his face like a giant's cool, outward breath. It was Halloween, and Mark would have been

content just to stay at home and sit in his backyard, staring at the sky.

But the squeal of the back door opening and his mother's footsteps awakened him from his entranced state. He pretended not to hear it until he could no longer ignore it; she was sitting right beside him on the other deck chair.

"The doctor called me today," she began, and her voice had a distinct edge to it.

Mark didn't give her a glance. He set his jaw, still looking up at the sky, whose clouds were moving briskly across the midnight blue. In contrast, depression and anxiety were hovering over him like a thick fog that night.

"You lied to me. You've been sneaking drugs," she said, with pleading in her voice. He could see her glaring at him from the corner of his eye. He didn't want to be bothered with her overreactions tonight--he was alone, without the company of friends, and he didn't want her irritation to accompany his gloomy loneliness.

He didn't answer.

She slammed her arm down on the arm rest, making a loud slapping noise against the cheap plastic. "My patience is at an end, Mark! Do you have hoards of drugs stored away in your room? I want an answer!"

Mark looked at her slowly. He was filled not with anger or fear or guilt the way some depressions consisted of anger or fear or guilt, but with sadness that night.

During one of his now nightly escapades in his car through the residential streets of Glenwood, he had found his way to Meg's doorstep again. He had slowed his car and parked inconspicuously across the road when he'd spotted Meg standing on the front porch with another person. Then, as though some Divine intervention had led him to be there at precisely that time, Meg and her date had locked arms and kissed.

He would have never guessed that seeing her in an embrace with another boy would have felt so much like a punch to the stomach as it did. There he was, parked across the street and in the shadows, and Meg had gently wrapped her arms around this young boy, willingly letting him kiss her and hold her. He had never even thought that this would affect him so much, and yet it did.

His attention made its way back to the present as his mother was pounding on his arm. "Are you hearing me, Mark? Do you have any drugs?"

"What do you want to hear?" he asked his mother.

She sighed, looking at him strangely. She peered at him for a good long while, not saying anything. It was as though that was the last thing she would have expected him to say. Then, still peering at him, it was as though she were looking into his soul for the first time ever in his life, and she couldn't quite believe what she was seeing. She looked rattled. Just before she spoke, Mark almost thought she was going to say something kind. But instead,

her voice was just as clipped as before. "For starters, I'd like an apology."

He nodded his head, slowly. "I'm sorry."

She pursed her lips. "Good." They didn't speak for several long moments. Mark listened to the wind howling through the boughs of the trees, watched it play with the wayward strands of his mother's hair. Brown leaves floated up into the air, spun around, then drifted to the ground. The biting coldness did not bother him, and it seemed to bother his mother even less--she wasn't even wearing a coat. "Then you'll let me search your room, to make sure you don't have anything in your possession," she said, with a lift of her chin.

Mark looked away and calmly said, "I don't have anything, Mom."

She was more high-strung than she had been in a long time, he finally noticed. She'd not been so angry in a long time. "Then where did you get your dope the last time?"

He didn't answer.

She stared at his feet, adorned in back-and-white Converse sneakers, and sucked in a quick breath. "I wish you'd talk to me," she said. Her previously tight, sharp voice mellowed to a relatively softer, less grating tone. "I thought I'd been more than fair since you'd left the hospital. All I wanted was for things to change, you know?"

And I feel like they're going right back to where they were."

He chewed his lower lip, closing his eyes at her words. "It's not the same, Mom. I'm different. Anyone can tell you that."

She narrowed her eyes. "Then why can't I say that?" she said, pounding her fist down. "Is there something so wrong with me that you can open up to others but you can't open up to me?" The irony was, of course, that he wasn't opening up to anyone.

"There's nothing wrong with you, Mom."

She peered at him again, as though to remind herself that her son was an unsolvable puzzle. "Yeah, well it sure feels that way. I've been treating you with more patience ever since that dreadful suicide attempt, in all faith that you would get better, than I ever got during my entire childhood. Something tells me I need to start treating this whole thing for what it was--a selfish act."

Mark felt bad for her. She'd never been a part of his life. Not, at least, since the divorce. Her attempts to be an active mother were coming across as strained and unnatural. "So I screwed up, okay?" he blurted out, finally feeling defensive, but still, unusually mellow.

She gave him a sardonic smile. "Just don't think I'm going to clean up your mess after every time you make a mistake. That's what your father wanted me to do, and it nearly drove me insane."

Mark hadn't the slightest idea of what she was talking about. He thought about asking her what she'd meant by that, but thought better of it. Usually talking about Dad only made matters worse. Still, he felt a bit of annoyance at being compared with his father.

She smoothed out the creases in her skirt. "If I do find something in your room--"

"--Which you won't--"

"--or even if I don't, perhaps you should consider what the social worker suggested and go to AA."

Mark's previous calmness was beginning to wear thin. "All you've been doing is sending me off to all these programs and therapists. I don't need them, Mom. I don't need any of it."

"So why did you try to kill yourself?"

Mark stared, speechless.

"That's what we all want to know, and what none of us has found out."

Mark said nothing.

"You will go to these programs and therapists, Mark, until you make a breakthrough. We will continue to screen you for drugs, and if you don't get better, we may have to consider putting you back in full-time care."

Mark looked away as though he had been slapped in the face. Sitting there, arms folded across his chest, legs spread out, leaning back, he felt like a helpless baby being held prisoner in its crib.

"You were such a different boy back then," his mother breathed. "So smart, so full of promise. Why'd you have to screw it all up by shooting that poor little boy?"

She got up and left. When Mark heard the squeal of the back door opening and then the slam when it shut, he let out a deep breath.

He looked back up at the sky, and the clouds were racing across the backdrop of bright stars.

Halloween passed, and with the winds came billowing storm clouds, then heavy rains. Sheets of precipitation came down, flooding the streets, gushing down the sides and clogging the gutters. Mark looked out at the thick rain from under the awning over his front porch, liesurely smoking a cigarette.

A car drove up, one he didn't recognize. He squinted past his cloud of white smoke, waving at it with his hand, to try to see who it was. The black sedan slowly pulled into the driveway and squealed to a stop. The driver's side door opened with another, louder squeal, and a familiar figure stepped out.

"Uncle Harry?"

"Mark, it's you!"

Mark stepped out into the rain to greet his uncle. "Come on inside, it's pouring out!"

He was a tall man of about 6'4" and he towered over Mark's relatively meager 5'11". He had broad, masculine

shoulders and a strong torso--in his college days he was a lacrosse star. As he gripped Mark's shoulders and then his hand his hold was firm and vigorous. His hair was thick and sandy brown, and though ten years younger than his sister, Barbara Powell, thick creases of laugh lines showed deeply into the skin surrounding his eyes--eyes that were the same color as the grey-blue sky. His skin was tanned, making his hair look comparatively blond, and rough in texture, giving him a rugged, tough-guy look.

He lived in upstate New York, and every few months he came to visit them in New Hampshire. He was a single man, never married, and enjoyed travelling.

"Did you get a new car?" Mark asked.

"Just signed the lease."

Once they were inside and had disposed of their doused jackets, Mark headed for the kitchen and asked, "Do you want anything to eat? I can fix you some coffee or a sandwich."

"Coffee would be perfect."

"Instant okay?"

"Sounds great to me."

Mark found the kettle in one of the kitchen cabinets and filled it with water from the tap. After he placed the filled kettle on the stove and turned on the heat, he walked back into the front living room and found that Harry had already made himself comfortable--legs kicked up on the coffeetable, head buried in a magazine.

"So what brings you here?" Mark asked.

Harry looked up from his magazine, eyes smiling. "Oh, I'm not going to stay long," he said. "Actually, I came to see you."

"Really?"

"Yeah," he said. "I was on my way to see a friend in Montreal and I thought I'd stop here on the way up. I heard about what happened. You know, the gun, the hospital, et cetera, et cetera..."

Mark gave his uncle a weak smile. "So you know." He lifted a splayed magazine from the sofa and sat down across from his uncle, who was sitting in one of the Victorian chairs. "You haven't been here in ages. I should have figured."

"And I should have come sooner," he said, giving Mark a serious look. "Didn't you know that suicide is a big deal where I come from?"

"Harry, you come from Syracuse."

"Exactly."

Mark smiled at him. Despite most of the people in his family, he really enjoyed Uncle Harry, nomatter how distant his relationship with the man was. "So that's why you came? To see how I was doing?"

He set down his magazine and threw it to the other side of the coffeetable, sighing. "Well, among other things," he said. "Plus, my visit is long overdue."

Mark heard the kettle whistling in the other room and jumped up. "Excuse me," he said. "I have to get your coffee."

When he came back with two steaming mugs of coffee in his hands, Harry was waiting patiently. Mark handed one to his uncle, then carefully sat down with his one of his own.

A short silence followed. "Have things been tough around here?" Harry asked, taking a drink.

Mark took a small sip from his mug. "Oh, you know. The usual."

Harry leaned forward. "You sure? I may be ten years younger than my sister, but I know she can be a real pain sometimes. You can tell me. I won't rat you out to anyone, I promise."

Mark relaxed, if only slightly. He looked around the room, as though he were searching for things to say. The depression he'd felt a few days earlier was no longer the sharp pain of a knife digging into his flesh, but more dull, less intense. "It's got its ups and downs," Mark said with a shrug.

Harry nodded sagely. "I hear they've got you on heavy medicines now. How's that going?"

Mark set his mug down. "I take 'em. They make me feel weird, kinda calm."

"But do they work?"

Mark shook his head. "Not completely," he said honestly.

"You think you need more?"

Mark shook his head vehemently. "I don't want any more. I feel like if they put me on a higher dose, I'll just be a zombie."

Harry frowned. "I guess the psych world isn't perfect, just like people aren't perfect," he said. "But at least you've got something, and at least it's helping you somewhat."

Mark agreed. "Yeah, I guess you're right."

Harry looked at him strangely then, as though something important had occurred to him but he had decided not to say anything. "You were really sensitive, weren't you?" asked Harry.

Mark looked up. "Excuse me?"

"When you were a boy, you were very sensitive, remember that? All the relatives said so."

Mark swallowed a gulp of black coffee. "I don't remember that..."

"Yeah, that's what everyone said about you. Shy and sensitive. Some even said it was a mark of intelligence."

Mark had a vague recollection of it now. "I suppose so."

Harry eyed him again. "Now what do they say about you? Reserved and emotionally unstable?"

Mark laughed. "It comes with the territory, I guess."

Harry shook his head. "It's no laughing matter. Back then, these were just personality traits, but now, they're diagnoses."

Mark nodded. "Things have changed. I've changed."

Harry had a puzzled look on his face. "It's funny, isn't it."

"What is?" His uncle's gaze drifted slowly to the window, where the rain was still drizzling down against the glass, sheeting down in rivulets.

"How people's perceptions of you can change in an instant. Like when you first discover that the trustworthy politician has been embezzling funds from government accounts."

"I don't see how any of this relates to what we were talking about," Mark said.

Harry turned back to his nephew, not seeming to have heard him. "Or worse, if a member of that politician's family had been caught with a prostitute, say, during election. The tide might turn in a heartbeat."

"What does this have anything to do with my diagnosis?"

Harry steadied his gaze on Mark. "Maybe nothing," he said. "Only that I think a long time ago people's perceptions of you changed, even though you may not have changed. Turned on a dime, I like to say."

Mark looked at him. "Do you really think so?"

Harry nodded. "I do."

"Why?"

"Well, it could be for any of a number of different reasons...the emotional problems you had as a child...the breakup of your parents...the trouble you've gotten into lately...people are desperate to judge and label you based on what's going on in your life."

Mark nodded. "So why do you think that is?"

"People are like that," Harry said. He leaned forward. "You see, you can't escape the judgments of others--they are part of what defines your life experience. They are everywhere--in your private life, home life, social life, work life...everywhere. Your success or lack of success in each of these areas is contingent on what people think of you, bottom line."

"I see what you're saying."

"Then let me propose this." He set his mug down on top of a coaster and sat up straighter, extending his index finger. "People judge you--and you know that--to be a certain way. Naturally, you're going to tend to fall in line with what people expect out of you. However," he said, holding up his hands. "If something were to suddenly provoke or disturb what people think they know about you, what happens? Your whole life changes."

Mark nodded his head, listening to the argument. What little light there was left in the room left a grey cast against the walls as time neared sunset. Uncle Harry was so enthusiastic about what he was talking about that Mark

had somehow forgotten to turn on any lights. As a side effect, he was having some trouble keeping up with him. Nevertheless, he was interested in what his uncle was trying to say.

"Change is traumatic," Harry said, with a few wide gestures of his hands. "It's like when a storm front comes through. When temperatures collide, thunderstorms are created. Even if people are wrong about you, even if what they think they know is completely false, it still affects you."

"Are you saying that's what you think happened to me?" Mark asked, finishing his coffee.

"All I'm saying is that people sometimes place you in categories based on minimal facts--and this categorization can either make or break you, depending on the situation."

Mark's head was spinning. "It was the mother," he said suddenly.

"What's that?"

"It was the mother," Mark repeated, staring at his hands which were grasping the empty coffee mug. "That's why I did it. It was because of what she said to me."

Harry was aghast, silent for several moments. "Who, Mark?" he said quietly.

"Cory's mom. And Meg's mom. She was their mother. It's because of what she said to me is why I did what I did."

Alarm appeared in Harry's creased face. He moved next to Mark on the sofa and draped an arm around the back of where he was sitting. "Go on," he said. "Who are these people and what did she do?"

"Cory was that little boy I shot all those years ago, before Mom and Dad got the divorce. Meg is his younger sister, and the mother..." he trailed off.

Harry's eyes were filled with concern. "When did you see her, and why? And what have you been doing hanging around with her? I thought you had nothing to do with that family anymore."

"That's the whole point," he said. "I wasn't going to at first, but Meg wanted to so badly, I felt I couldn't refuse..."

"Meg? You mean you somehow got involved with the daughter? What did the mother say to you?"

"I don't want to repeat it, I can't repeat it..."

"You don't have to," Harry said gently.

"No," Mark said, firmly planting his right fist down. "I should. She told me I'd ruined both her children now, without..."

"Without what?"

"Without even taking into account that I was in love with Meg."

Harry looked at him with the slightest trace of a smile, and together they talked the evening away.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Meg waited impatiently outside of Jeff's classroom as time neared three o'clock. Class had ended early for her and she was supposed to meet him afterwards. She peered at the industrial clock which was mounted high on the closest wall to the door, and saw that there were five minutes left.

Jeff saw her and discreetly waved. He mouthed, *Hi Meg*, as she waved back. He yawned dramatically as though to indicate how boring the class was, then smiled big--crooked and charming. Meg laughed and smiled back.

How can I tell you how I feel? You're gone. The one chance I had with you is over with, and I will never have that chance again. I felt something for you that I only hoped you felt back, but it was all for nothing. I must face the reality that this boy I now smile at and wave to is not the boy that is my all, my whole world, my essence. I can forgive you for killing my brother but somehow I cannot forgive you for not understanding your feelings for me, for leading me on and then dumping me. I love you, I love you, and yet there's nothing I can do or say to convince you to feel the same way back. And I admit that in some strange way, the violent act you committed against my brother led me to you, pulled me to you, drew me to you, locked me to you. Why?

Her reverie was interrupted as the final bell rang. Doors left and right opened, and files of students burst out from the open doors, beginning to fill the previously empty halls.

As Jeff's classroom's door opened and kids began piling out, she stepped aside to let people through. As Jeff finally approached her, she tried to hide the melancholy in her eyes.

"How are you feeling today?" Jeff asked. Obviously, she had not been totally successful. Something of the weight on her shoulders had apparently peeked through and remained visible.

But she waved it off with a gesture of her hand. "Semester's almost over," she said hastily. "We'll be getting report cards soon, and I'm nervous," was her explanation.

He smiled and nodded, seeming to have accepted her answer. She was thankful for that.

He had a slight smile on his face and a glow in his eyes. It was as though he were thinking about something else entirely when he said, "Don't worry about it. Stress always gets a little more intense this time of year."

She nodded, scarcely aware that she was looking down at her hands more than she was looking up into his face. He held out his arms and placed both hands on her shoulders. "Are you ready to go?" he asked.

She nodded again, taking a deep breath.

As they walked, they stopped twice--once at her locker, and once at his. Meg was still getting used to the idea of being his "girlfriend," even though they'd been dating exclusively for weeks now.

He was so kind--overly so, she was afraid to admit, because somehow his kindness to her bothered her. Was she that perverse that she only wanted to be treated with minimal kindness? Surely she was worthy of the treatment that he gave her--he treated her like a princess. He opened doors for her, gave her flowers on occasion, joked with her, complimented her. Shouldn't she be happy with that?

Time had passed since Mark had left her, and she had seen little of him. However, she knew a few things about him: for one, she'd assumed that he'd want to go back to Beth, but he hadn't. The few times she'd run into him he'd been alone, not even with his friends. *Former* friends, actually. He'd even started wearing his glasses again and lost weight. His complexion was more gaunt, his expression more dull, less animated. She was afraid to even say it...but he was beginning to look...like he did *before* the incident--of course, years older. But even still, it gave her a strange feeling to see him like that, like seeing a ghost come alive again.

Conversely, at practice and at games, Beth began treating Meg with more and more respect, even praise. The time she'd tripped her at the football game was long over

with and they'd become...no, not exactly friends, but definitely comrades. Beth gave her words of encouragement, pats on the back, and even got into some conversations with her from time to time.

She had lots of friends now. The small table she'd sat at on the second day of school became the starting ground for a larger circle of friends. She'd met Kate's other friends and *their* friends, as well as Laura's and theirs. Plus, she'd met new people through Jeff, and cheerleading, and she was becoming more and more popular there in Glenwood every day. But whenever she'd seen Mark, he was alone. It was as though his circle of friends had vanished, while hers had grown. A couple of times she'd even seen his former friends teasing him in an unfriendly way.

But even now, she could not stop thinking about him, and sometimes she wasn't even aware that she was doing it. Whenever she'd seen him, she'd sucked in a breath, her pulse quickly rising at the sight.

Jeff grasped her hand lightly as they left the building. "Laura and her boyfriend will be waiting for us at the Pizza Hut. You still up to going?"

She squeezed his hand back. "Of course," she replied. "Why wouldn't I?"

As they got into Jeff's car Meg glanced back at the two-story brick building that was the schoolhouse. It was a relatively new building, but with quaint architecture--a

black shingled roof, red and black bricks, pillars in front--and looked like a plantation from the Southeast. How proud it looked, nestled inside of a mostly evergreen wood, looming tall and sturdy over a manicured lawn.

They drove to the pizza parlor listening to eighties tunes on one of those 70's 80's and 90's stations with the windows open. It was not a terribly cold day, even though it was already December. White, puffy, cheerful-looking clouds floated high up above in the sky, in a day that would soon be over--the sun was already drifting downwards toward the horizon.

As they arrived, other kids were arriving also. "Hey, you guys!" hollered Laura, her medium-length, sandy hair flapping in the mild wind. She was holding hands with her boyfriend, Tom Fairview.

Meg was glad that she didn't have to spend the afternoon at home. Her parents most likely would be fighting again, as they had been for weeks now. Over Thanksgiving, they'd enjoyed an overly-stiff, strained meal. It was as though they still hadn't forgiven her for her association with Mark, and still couldn't forget it. Even now, now that she wasn't talking with him anymore, but was spending time with Jeff instead, the tension was still there, and strong as ever.

Laura walked over to Meg as she got out of the car and slammed the door shut. She smoothed back the tuft of her dark-brown hair that had gotten into Meg's face

affectionately and said, "Some other people are coming, too, but we may as well go inside and order a pizza. Shall we?"

Meg smiled at her and followed her into the darkened restaurant, Jeff and Tom in tow.

Once they'd gotten their menus and had situated themselves at a long table, they took turns choosing selections from the juke box. They settled in, listening to Mariah Carey and Whitney Houston. When the waitress came, they ordered colas and chattered away while waiting for the drinks to arrive. After about fifteen minutes, several people that Meg didn't know personally came to join them. A couple of them Meg recognized as football players from Glenwood High.

"Hi, Greg! Come sit with me!" Kate hollered at one of them, and he sat down on one of the metal chairs. "So Meg, do you have any plans for the Christmas break?" she asked, turning to her.

Meg shook her head. Jeff was clasping her hand. "Just stay at home, probably. I don't think any relatives will come to visit. Hopefully by then my parents will soften up a bit."

Kate nodded knowingly. "It's tough when your parents act like jerks. I hated when my mom grounded me for talking back to her. I had a perfectly good reason to do so!" She turned back to her football player, her attention drifting away from Meg.

Jeff leaned towards her. "I think I have just the present in mind for you," he said.

"Oh?"

"But it's a surprise," he said. "You can't find out until you open it." She smiled.

The pizza came. Excitement was electric. They talked more about the upcoming Christmas break and how they couldn't wait for it to arrive. The skies darkened as they spent their time eating and talking.

Halfway into the pizza, the football players suddenly got up to go outside; why, Meg didn't know. At the time, it didn't seem strange to her.

But soon, her intuition told her that something was amiss.

It was dark out by then. After about ten minutes, the football players came back, laughing like hyenas.

Meg turned, a slice of pizza in her hand. Suddenly she was filled with alarm.

"What's wrong?" Jeff whispered, placing a light hand on her knee.

She brushed away his hand and put down her slice of pizza. She wasn't sure what it was, but she was positive that something was very wrong. She could feel it in her heart, thudding, pounding against her ribcage that something here was definitely not right.

"What happened?" Meg asked the football players, who were trying to catch their breaths, but still laughing.

They poked and lightly hit each other, gasping for breath.

"What did you do?" Meg said. "Why did you go outside, and what did you do out there?"

The taller of the two, who had a pug nose and a ruddy complexion, finally answered her. "Don't tell anyone this," he said, trying not to laugh. He was literally panting, gasping for breath. He held up his hands like a goalie would call for an incomplete pass. "But there was this complete asshole standing outside, and we just jumped him."

Meg stood up straighter in her seat, panic beginning to set in. "Who was it?" she demanded.

The boys wouldn't answer at first. "It's not like we didn't do a service to society," the shorter one said.

"Was it a guy from school?" Meg asked, fearing that her intuition about this situation was correct.

"Yeah, a major creep, too. But you can't tell anyone. We may have broken his nose. He's that jerk who screwed Beth Hammon over."

Mark. She knew it even before they spoke it.

She rushed outside, ignoring her food. "Meg, where are you going?" she heard Jeff call after her, but she ignored it. Leaving the lively group behind, she emerged into the cold darkness, looking left, then right, her heart hammering so fast it could have belonged to a hummingbird. Her breath fogged up in front of her face, looking like

white smoke in the light from the restaurant. The air was crisp and dry and she wasn't wearing a jacket--almost immediately her nose began to run and goose pimples appeared on her flesh.

Beyond the weak lights from the restaurant, there was thick blackness. A few moths flew by, caught by the light, but other than that, she could see almost nothing beyond a few feet. "Mark?" she called. "Mark, are you there?" There was no answer. She walked over to the garbage dumpster, where she thought she heard a noise, then looked behind it. He was not there.

Then she stopped and looked at something on the ground. She pressed her finger to it, held it up to the light and saw that it was a small puddle of blood. She shivered as she stood up, rubbing the blood off on her jeans.

That's when she heard the voices. They were unmistakable: Dan Riggsbee's and Drew Santini's low, athletic voices laughing heartily while Beth Hammon's high shrieks of amusement filled the air, off in the distance.

Meg turned her head to listen. Just barely, she heard, "...what a loser! Did you see how we almost made him cry?"

Just then she heard a groan. It was so soft that she might have just imagined it, but a second later, she heard another one just like it.

"Mark?" she whispered loudly. It was cold outside by now, and she had to wrap her arms tightly around herself.

She walked in the direction of where she thought the noise was coming from, and headed straight for the bushes.

Her heart lurched. It was there that she found him, hunched over, holding his nose. "Mark, my God, what did they do to you?" Her voice seemed to echo in the encompassing darkness.

He was breathing heavily and jaggedly. "Mark, are you okay?" She came closer.

It took him a long time to answer. When he did, his voice came out in groans. From what little she could see of him in the scant light, she could see that he was badly beaten up. "Meg...no...please, don't help. It's nothing, just go. I don't need you to help me."

She then wrapped her arms around him, seeing that he was shaking all over from the cold. "No, Mark. I'm not going to leave you. You're injured. How did this happen?"

His voice was wheezy and he was bleeding from the nose. "They don't like me anymore, Meg. But that's my problem. I don't want you to get involved."

The cold made the flesh on her face begin to sting from numbness. "But can you get home? Are they going to go after you again?"

Mark shook his head wildly from left to right. "Please, Meg. Please leave me alone, I'll be alright. I can get home, I have my car."

"What were you doing out here all alone?"

He stayed silent for a few moments. "It's nothing, I was just driving by, that's all."

The door to the restaurant opened and Jeff peeked out. "Meg? Are you alright out there? What are you doing?" She could see his dark silhouette inside the light through the doorway.

"I'm fine, Jeff!" she called. "I just need a minute alone!"

With a confused nod, he closed the door and she could hear the tinkle of the bell as it closed.

"Mark, I love you." She lightly touched his face and kissed him gently on his lips. He did not pull back, only looked back helplessly into her eyes. She felt so brave at that moment and yet so weak--willing to risk everything to tell him how she felt about him, but vulnerable to what he might say or do.

"Why?" he asked, simply.

Amazingly, she knew exactly what to say. "Because you're the bravest person I ever met, and because you had to fight to be that way."

Suddenly, as though passed over with a magic wand, his trembling stopped. She kissed him again, still gently. "I never believed you when you told me it was for guilt."

He stared back incredulously at her. "I expected you to hate me," he whispered. "I expected you to feel about me the way your parents did."

"No," Meg said. She shook her head slowly from side to side. "That's not how I felt at all. My parents were wrong about you. If anyone is the victim here, it's you."

He began to cry, shaken by a new set of trembles. "I didn't want to cause any trouble," he said. "I didn't want to influence you negatively."

"How could you?" she said, "When everything I did I chose to do myself?"

"I love you, Meg," he whispered. She held him and rocked him.

"Mark, listen."

"Please, Meg, just go. I'll be fine."

"No, you won't!" She looked at him and softened. "...you won't be fine," she argued, in a more subdued tone. "You've been beaten up. I'm staying right here with you. Listen." He didn't say anything. "I don't want this ever to happen to you again...I'm going to talk to those people who did this to you."

He sat bolt upright. "No!"

"Why not?"

"Meg, that's suicide! They're dangerous people, they might do something to you as well!"

"I've got to, Mark. And you've got to help me."

"Help you, how? What are you talking about?"

Meg looked at him for a long time. "You've got to pull the trigger."

CHAPTER NINETEEN

After a trip to the emergency room, he arrived home that night to find an empty house. His mother was out and had not left a note. And so, alone, he got himself ready for sleep, and slipped into the cool sheets on his bed.

He slept fitfully that night.

All of her family was there. Uncles, aunts, cousins, parents, and all dressed in black. The church was elegantly structured and decorated simply with white iris arrangements. As Mark walked into the chapel, he could hear the sound of his own footsteps echoing against the walls and the muffled sobs of the mourners. At the front of the church, the casket was open and people were viewing the body. Some of the people who looked at her broke down and cried.

He walked to the front of the church to see the body. As Mark walked by, he felt a deep sense of sorrow and guilt as he took note of how much she looked like Snow White-- bouquet in hand, pale skin, dark hair. He wondered, if he were to kiss her, would she wake up?

But a darkness that he had never felt before was unsettling his spirit. Disturbing thoughts were plaguing his mind, like rats playing in a wall. For one thing, despite his love for her, he knew that he had meant to kill her. But even though he had done that, he knew that he had

not meant to kill Cory. But where were the police? And why wasn't he being hauled off to jail?

A man put his hand on Mark's shoulder. "She's gone, son." It was Meg's father who spoke.

Just then, a sobbing woman approached the casket. "She's dead...my poor sweet girl is dead..." she moaned.

Mark looked at the woman, whom he now recognized as Meg's mother. He broke away from Davis Mitchell's comforting hand.

"Don't you know what's happened?" asked Mark, grasping the woman and shaking her. "Don't you hate me for what I did to your daughter?"

"You did nothing," she said, between sobs. "It was I who let her go out alone, and the fault lies with me. It's my fault that my daughter is now dead!"

Mark was wildly frustrated and confused. "But don't you see? I'm the one who shot her! I'm the one who did it! You should know that I meant to do what I did!"

The woman, masked in a black veil, shook her head and slowly walked away. "Did you hear me?" Mark cried, but the woman was leaving. "I murdered Megan! I murdered your daughter!"

But even though he had yelled it, the mourners seemed not to have noticed.

Mark walked away from the church and ran outside. Outside, the sun was shining brilliantly, in contrast to the dingy grey light he had seen inside the chapel. He

looked up at the sky, shading his eyes, wondering how any sun could be so brilliant.

"Mark!" a boy's voice called.

He turned around. Cory was standing there, wearing a grey suit and black tie. "Cory?" he whispered.

Cory approached him, bearing a gift. "Give this to my sister," he said.

Mark looked down at his hands. He was carrying a Barbie doll, just like the one Cory had destroyed in the fireplace.

"But she's died, Cory," he said, helplessly.

"Look again," Cory said. "You might be surprised."

Mark woke up, but not in fear. He had a strange sensation, as though he had had that dream before.

Oddly, he felt refreshed, almost peaceful.

He woke up in the morning ready to go see his therapist.

After he was comfortably situated on the sofa and the pleasantries were over, Dr. Murphy began by asking what had been going on with Mark in the past week.

"She told me she loved me," he said, opening up his hands.

"And was this the first time she'd ever told you that?"

He hesitated. "Yes."

"How does that make you feel?"

"Honestly? Kind of scared."

Dr. Murphy pulled at his beard; he looked like the stereotypical therapist. "Did you tell her the same?"

"Yes, I did."

Mark had done a lot of thinking since last night, alone in his room, in the safety of his house. "Then where does the fear come from, do you think?"

Mark thought about it for a while. "There's so much uncertainty surrounding the two of us...her parents disliking me...how I told her I'd only been with her because I felt guilty over shooting her brother...her innocence..."

"Do you love her, Mark?"

Mark thought. "Yes. Yes, I do."

"And when was it that you told her that you'd been with her out of guilt?"

"A couple of months ago."

"So why do you think it took you this long to realize that you loved her, too?"

"To be honest, I don't know."

Dr. Murphy gave little pause responding. "That's a perfectly reasonable answer. And it may even be the best one."

Mark looked at the fronts and backs of his hands. "It's just that I feel like I put her through a lot that I didn't need to. Maybe I've not been taking enough responsibility for my actions, and I want to start."

"Like what actions?"

"Like trying to kill myself, for one."

"But, Mark, do you think she loves you any less for doing that?"

He hesitated. "No."

"She sounds special."

"She is."

And then a deeper question, "Do you think she loves you any less for shooting Cory?"

Somehow, he had known that Dr. Murphy was going to bring that up. "er...no."

"Let's switch topics for a moment. I know this situation with Meg is big on your mind right now, but I suggest we go back in time and touch briefly on what happened eight years ago. Are you willing to do that?"

Mark nodded. "Sure, I guess."

"Have you thought more about it in recent days?"

Mark knew that he had. "Yes."

"Have you been brooding about it?"

"...yes," Mark admitted.

Dr. Murphy shifted his sitting position. "Well, have you made any new conclusions?"

Mark was surprised by the question. "I feel like we've come full circle. Whenever there's a crisis or a major change, the incident is involved. It's like I can't escape it."

"Well, the reason I ask is that you talked a lot about it in the hospital. I just want to see how you're doing on that issue."

"Actually, I feel strange about it..."

"Strange?"

"You know, because I killed someone. It's funny, I had this dream recently that I killed Meg and that I didn't get in trouble for it, everybody just acted like it was their own fault. In life, they all blame me for Cory's death, including myself. Only I still don't get in trouble for it."

"Mark, it was an accident. You didn't mean to do it. It's okay, you can relax. If anyone blames you then that's *their* problem. Do you understand me?"

Mark nodded slowly. "But trying to kill myself was no accident," he said.

"Precisely," Dr. Murphy said. "Just don't turn a tragedy that you couldn't help into a tragedy that you *could* help, do you see?"

"What about the hospitalization?" Mark asked.

"The recent one?"

"No, the one when I was nine. It sent my parents' marriage into a tailspin."

"Mark, you're not at fault for that. You couldn't help it when you got sick."

Mark nodded. "Sometimes I think, if only I had been smarter and wondered if there really was a bullet in that

gun, maybe none of this would have happened. From then up until now."

"The thing is, though, it did, and we have to work with what we have, wouldn't you agree?"

A small smile began on Mark's lips. "Yeah, I guess you're right."

Dr. Murphy changed the subject. "How's your mother doing?"

"She's alright. Back to her old cranky self."

"Anything different, though?"

"Actually, yes." Mark grinned. "She's started dating."

As he left the office that afternoon, the sun was breaking through a layer of thick, grey storm clouds that covered most of the sky, creating rays that splayed out in all different directions.

As he walked down the front steps, something occurred to him that had never occurred to him before, stopping him dead in his tracks. An emotion so powerful that he couldn't put it into words then washed over him, almost doubling him over. Without much warning, suddenly Mark felt the desire--*need* to do something he had been warned not to--speak to the one person who had clearly stated that she never wanted anything to do with him ever again. This emotion--this new, powerful force--was so poignant that he

felt almost as though he was going to burst out in tears, but he held firm to his composure.

He needed to speak to this person, at whatever the cost, as soon as possible, and he knew that if he didn't, he would hate himself for a long time.

So, in the cool, damp air of early December, he got into his black convertible and began to drive. Almost as soon as he began on his way, nerves seized him. His hands began to shake with anxiety, and his stomach began to feel hollow. But he knew that he had to make this trip, nomatter how small and insignificant he felt on the inside.

His palms were sweating as he gripped the steering wheel and turned it onto Spruce Lane. There, he noticed one car parked in the driveway--the car belonging to Ann Mitchell.

Mark took a deep breath and steadied himself as he got out of the car. His heart was full, and his mind was racing. He followed the front walkway and walked up the front steps, hesitating for a few moments while he stood on the porch. Then he gathered his courage and rang the doorbell.

When her face appeared behind the glass in the door, Mark waved to her to say, yes, it's me.

She slowly opened the door with an expression on her face that was impossible to read.

"Hello, Mrs. Mitchell."

She glared at him for a good long while, grasping the edge of the door. She squinted as if she couldn't quite believe she was seeing what she was seeing. She didn't speak for a long time; Mark thought that it would be forever until one of them had said anything.

Finally, she spoke. "I don't believe it. I thought I told you never to come here again."

"Please, Mrs. Mitchell. I didn't come to see Meg. I came here to talk to you. I came to talk about something very important."

She eyed him up and down. "What is it you want?" she demanded.

He was shaking, and he hoped that she didn't see his trembles. That powerful, indescribable emotion still had its grip on him, more concentrated now than ever. Was it...joy? He looked down at his feet, then quickly reminded himself not to do that--it only made him look underconfident. "I want to talk about Cory."

She was no more welcoming than she had been when he'd taken Meg home, but Mark thought that he was getting through to her. She closed her eyes, tightly, and reeled as though she'd just taken a punch to the face. Her face scrunched up into an expression of pain as, to Mark's surprise, she said, "Come in."

He brushed past her and stepped into a warm, unnaturally cheery house. A bright fire was blazing in the fireplace, casting warm light against the tidy living room.

The grey sectional was decorated with colorful throw rugs, as was the hardwood floor, which was shined thoroughly into a healthy polish. Fluffy pillows were neatly placed atop the couch, which looked brand new--clean and bright. Mark glanced up at the walls, where black-and-white photographs of the family, including some of Meg, were framed and hung. A grand piano stood in the corner by the bookshelves, and next to that, stood a grandfather clock.

It smelled like hot cocoa.

"Have a seat," Ann said.

Mark did as she requested, letting his eyes rest on a photograph of Meg smiling into the camera, braces on her teeth. She was sitting cross-legged underneath an oak tree, and she still had bangs--that, and her hair was shorter than it was now.

"You said you wanted to talk about Cory," she said, nonchalantly. She sat leaning forward, her arms dangling over the fronts of her knees.

Mark felt calm, all of a sudden. Even though he knew he may never have this chance again, and that that knowledge should have pressured him, he was feeling suddenly brave at being here, like he was in the eye in the middle of the storm. "Yes," Mark began. He looked at Meg's mother and immediately saw the resemblance: they both had long, swan-like necks, large eyes, full faces. The color of their hair was different and so were the color of

their eyes, but their relationship was unmistakably that of mother and daughter.

"I don't have all day," she said. "What have you to say to me?"

Mark thought before beginning. "It was a long time ago," he said. "And I'm sure a lot has happened for you and your family since Cory died. I know that a lot happened for me.

"I just want to apologize, to start off with, right here, right now, for killing your son. I want to take responsibility for taking the gun in my own two hands and playing with it, without permission from an adult, and firing and killing Cory. I know that words cannot express the deep sorrow you must have felt in finding out that your child had been killed, and even though this is eight years in coming, I want to express my heartfelt condolences for the loss that you suffered.

"You see, I realized that through all my grief and self-doubts and suffering, I never apologized to you. I never openly said to you how sorry I was because the thought never occurred to me: I was too self-absorbed to even give it a thought.

"And, more importantly, one of the reasons why I am here is because another thing occurred to me, quite recently: I must never think that I am impressing anyone else with my depression or self-harm, because I am not thinking of how others feel, I am only thinking of how I

feel. It didn't even occur to me that you, Mrs. Mitchell, must feel guilt over Cory's death just as much, maybe even more, than I ever did. And that is how I am truly sorry. For not being sensitive to either your grief or your feelings. I know there may be nothing I can do to make it up to you, but I at least want you to know that yes, I did fire the gun, and yes, I am truly and deeply sorry for it. When you told me I'd ruined both your son and your daughter now, and to never come by again, the thought didn't even cross my mind that perhaps my presence reminded you of something in your past that was difficult to face."

Ann Mitchell didn't speak for a while. When she did, Mark was surprised by her words. "You're right, Mark," she said. "I have felt some guilt about my son, and I suppose my way of coping with things has been to choose a scapegoat. That's probably not fair to you, but I guess I didn't know what else to do. Then I saw you with my daughter, and I felt as though she were slipping away from my grasp. I felt helpless to do anything. I felt as though she were being taken away, as well."

Mark looked at her, and she looked more human now--more on the same level. Her eyes no longer had the same cold glare that they had had just minutes ago, and her face was softer, her expression more vulnerable. "I'm sorry it's taken me so long to make this apology," Mark said.

She looked up, and it was then that Mark could see that she had gotten teary-eyed. "Thank you," she whispered.

Mark let his gaze remain on her for several minutes as she cried. He wanted to put his arms around her and comfort her, but he knew that that would be too much, so instead, he just watched her. At first, she just cried gently, but gradually, her tears became sobs. Not a word was passed between them while this was taking place; Mark stayed silent until her sobs quieted.

"I love your daughter, Mrs. Mitchell," he said then. She barely looked up at him.

"I know," she said quietly. "She's threatened never to speak to me again if I don't accept you."

He saw her for the woman that he guessed she really was: alone, frightened, unsure of herself, unsure of her parenting abilities. Not sure whom to turn to. Threatened by a daughter who was maturing, blossoming into a woman and becoming more confident by the day; highly aware of her own aging status. Feeling trapped by her marriage. Seeing herself as emotionally weak. Mark felt tenderness towards her then. But pity, too. When he spoke of Meg candidly it was because he saw no reason not to. "At first, I didn't want to get involved with her because of all the baggage that was involved. I didn't even want to be her friend because I knew something like this would probably happen. I was selfish and shallow like that, and I made all kinds

of excuses as to why I kept rejecting her. But then, it was guilt that led me to be with her more, because I felt like a jerk for shutting her out simply because I didn't want to be bothered by all the complexities of what was going on."

Ann's tears were tapering off, but she was still trembling, wiping moisture away from her ruddy cheeks with shaky fingers.

"The only thing is, at one point, I fell in love with her.

"I fell in love with her on the day she appeared on my front doorstep, high on drugs and drunk from alcohol...

"...I know that sounds strange, but it's true. It was then that I was faced with the realization that while I could have cared less about working on relationships, Meg would have gone to great lengths to impress me, in a good way, or in that case, a bad way. It was then that I knew that Meg would have risked her life for me--even though I had taken the life of her brother. Bad influence or no, I was astounded."

Mrs. Mitchell's trembles had settled down and she looked to have much more composure. Looking up soulfully into Mark's eyes, she said, "I had no idea."

"I saw her for the incredibly brave woman that she was that day--and, in contrast, I saw myself for the cowardly fool that I feared I'd been for a long time."

He turned to her so that he was looking directly into her eyes. "Mrs. Mitchell, she reached out to me despite the warnings of her parents. I can only say I'm sorry if I am partially to blame for any of her rebellious actions towards the two of you. I didn't mean to cause any unrest. It hurts me to hear of what she said to you, because I can fully understand why you might not ever want to accept me, considering our history. I'm not your flesh and blood but she is, and I don't think this is an important enough issue for a mother and daughter to be separated over."

"No, Mark, it's okay."

"No, it's not okay," he said. "One of the reasons why I broke up with her in the first place, when I was in the hospital, was because I didn't want to be a bad influence on her anymore." He straightened. "You see, the reason why your words were so powerful to me that day--*you've now ruined them both*, is because it was then that I came to the realization that I had not only killed my best friend eight years ago, but was now doing the same to Meg, without even realizing it. I wanted, somehow, to put a stop to it, and I thought that by killing myself, I could.

"Only now do I see that it was the ultimate act of selfishness I could have possibly committed, and at the same time, the turning point.

"You see, for the first time, I realized that what I did to myself was greatly affecting other people: When I woke up in the hospital, bandaged and hooked up to

machines, I watched as my parents hovered around me. I watched their faces, their solemn expressions. I saw the deep concern and fear in their eyes. I watched as my mother cried, wondering if I was going to be alright. And then, when Meg came to see me, my heart literally broke as I watched her sweet, innocent face darken with pain as I told her I didn't want to see her anymore. As painful as it was, from then on I believe I began seeing life through other people's eyes. I then thought in terms of how my actions would affect others, and not simply myself.

"And so I did a lot of thinking and a lot of talking with people, and decided, at some point, that I wanted to recover...

"There's one thing I learned about recovery: you get nowhere if you don't first admit you have a problem. That's something I was never able to do before, but now I can: I can admit that I have a problem with drugs and with depression. And I know that without other people's help I can get nowhere, but I also know that I have made some progress. I don't blame you if you hate my guts for exposing your daughter to all of that, because, frankly, I did, myself."

She was no longer crying, but listening patiently. She balled up the tissue in her hand and spoke. "I don't hate you, Mark. I was just afraid. Afraid for my daughter."

Mark nodded. "I know. But your fears were justified."

She shook her head, slowly. "I treated you unfairly. I judged you based on minimal information. And, you're right, I wanted you as far away from me as possible because I didn't want to face what had happened."

Mark was confused. "But Cory's room...don't you go in there and sit from time to time? Surely you don't block out his memory completely."

She sniffed, rubbing her nose with a fresh tissue. "Not that, Mark. What I mean is, what I did to you. I didn't want to face all the horrible things that happened to you after he died. You went through a lot, and I feel partially to blame."

"Why?" Mark asked.

"You don't remember?"

He shook his head.

"When I came home that day, when I opened the door to Mr. Mitchell's study and found Cory lying there, bleeding...when I ran to him and held him and got all of his blood all over me, I should have told you to go into another room. I should have taken charge, been a parent, but instead, I yelled at you. And Mark, I should not have done that. You were traumatized already."

Mark was dumbfounded. It took him a long time to answer. "Mrs. Mitchell..."

"Yes?"

"...I don't know if you've noticed this, but we've been so busy passing blame around, that we've forgotten something very important."

"What?"

"The incident was an accident."

Mrs. Mitchell smiled enigmatically. After a moment, she got up. "Would you like me to make you some tea? I can fix you something to eat."

Mark waved it away. "No thank you, Mrs. Mitchell. Actually, I want to apologize for taking up your time. I just came here to tell you how sorry I was about Cory eight years ago, mostly. And I want to thank you for letting me come inside, especially after everything that's happened. That meant more to me than you'll ever know."

Ann Mitchell paused, heaving a great sigh. She tried half-successfully to smile through her tears as she set down her ball of tissues onto the coffeetable. But in response to what Mark had said, she added nothing.

After time had passed, he left the Mitchells' home. In the midst of a light drizzle, he drove back to his own house and hid himself underneath the covers of his bed, letting himself drift into a deep, peaceful sleep.

CHAPTER TWENTY

"Amanda, I don't know what to do," she said in exasperation. She was worried in two ways, hoping that

Mark's history of indecision wouldn't swing back again, against her favor, and not ready yet to tell Jeff that she couldn't continue on with him.

She sprawled out on her bed, playing with Molly. Amanda sat on the floor, playing with her Etch-a-sketch. "Just forget him," Amanda warned, over her shoulder. "He's put you through enough misery, and besides, you don't want to get your hopes up if he just changes his mind again."

Meg felt irritation well up within her. "But I *can't* forget him," she said. "He's all I ever think about."

"What about Jeff?" Amanda persisted. "Don't forget, you're going steady with him."

Mark and Jeff were two totally different individuals. Mark was dangerous and exciting; Jeff was comfortable and predictable. How could she choose between two people who had both captured her heart, in very different ways?

"Why do you keep insisting on pursuing Mark? I have to admit, I never did understand why you ever wanted to be with him. From that very first day, all he ever did was make your life miserable.

"I told you he was trouble, you still wanted to be with him. Then he cursed you out, and you still wanted to be with him. He rejected you, time after time, and you still wanted to be with him. So what's the real story, Meg? Why so persistent about this person? And don't tell me it's just because you're in love with him, because I know there's more to it than that."

Meg sighed, feeling unnerved by Amanda's antagonistic mindset today. "When I told him I loved him, he said he loved me too."

Amanda shook out the Etch-a-sketch and began drawing a new picture. "You know, sometimes guys say that just to get something out of you."

Meg crossed her arms. "I can never imagine Mark doing a thing like that. That's completely out of his capabilities, in my opinion."

"I wouldn't be so sure. You'd be amazed at what some of the nicest guys have done, and Mark is not one of the nicest guys in the world, considering his past." She stayed quiet. "Meg, weren't you ever you the least bit upset at him for shooting your brother?"

She didn't say anything.

"All this time," Amanda said, "you've never shown the least bit of animosity towards him, the way your parents have. Are you sure you've been completely honest with yourself?"

"What are you saying, Amanda? That I have some hidden, suppressed anger towards him?"

"You tell me."

Meg was annoyed that Amanda was looking down at the toy, and not into her face, so she took the Etch-a-sketch and threw it across the room. "Hey!" Amanda protested.

Meg lay back against the pile of pillows at the head of her bed, crossing her arms. Amanda stumbled to her

feet, climbed partways onto the bed, and rested her elbows onto the bottom of the mattress. "I'm sorry, Meg. It's just that you've got to look at the whole situation before diving into a decision."

"I've already made my decision," Meg said, averting her eyes to the window. "I just don't know how to carry it out."

Amanda sat down on the edge of the bed. "Have you made plans to see him soon?"

"Yes. I told him to meet me after practice on Friday, outside of the locker room."

Amanda looked at her with concern in her face. "What if he doesn't show up?"

The thought hadn't even occurred to Meg. She abruptly met eyes with Amanda, and was surprised to see that she was dead serious. "Why wouldn't he show up?"

She lowered her eyes to the bedspread, but said nothing. "Amanda, why wouldn't he show up?"

She shook her head. "He's changed his mind before, so why wouldn't he do it again?" she said.

Meg frowned. "I don't believe you."

Amanda was not being herself that night. Meg turned to her, filled with this new realization, and watched her friend. She had walked across the room, retrieved the Etch-a-sketch and started playing with it again. She looked heavily absorbed in what she was doing, and was totally oblivious to Meg's stare. She was acting...like

she was hiding something. "Painting the Mona Lisa?" Meg asked wryly, as she climbed to the foot of the bed and looked over Amanda's shoulder.

"Quit it!" she yelled. Meg grabbed the toy and, instead of throwing it this time, she looked at the picture. An idyllic house, complete with a smoking chimney.

"What's with you tonight, huh?" Meg questioned, letting the toy drop onto the bed. "You've been acting strange all night."

Amanda shrugged her shoulders. "I don't know what you mean."

"For one thing," Meg began, "you used to be very supportive of my relationship with Mark. Now you're telling me to forget him...why?"

"I just don't want to see you get hurt."

Meg was unconvinced that this was the real reason and narrowed her eyes. "Tell me the truth. Why would you rather see me with Jeff than with Mark?"

In her eyes, there flickered two tiny flames of something Meg couldn't quite identify. "It's nothing that anything can be done about, now."

Meg was glad for her honesty. "Dan."

"Yes, Dan."

But Amanda was right; something in her was telling her that she wasn't being completely honest with herself. What

she'd known, and what she'd deliberately kept from Amanda, was that she didn't understand herself why the incident with Mark and Cory eight years ago had actually drawn her to him.

Was she perverse? Did she actually like the thought that Mark had killed her brother? Maybe, just maybe, she had actually *wanted* Cory to die. After all, he *had* been cruel to her when they were children.

Sitting at her vanity table after Amanda had left, Meg shook her head violently from left to right. There was no escaping it. She had to face her feelings now, before she made the decision about what to do about Jeff.

She hated the thought of hurting him, even in a small way. They'd only been dating for a short time, but he already seemed very attached to her, and from what little she'd learned of him in these past couple of months, she'd learned that he was somewhat of a sensitive person.

But something was missing, of that she was certain. There was no passion in their relationship, no excitement.

With Mark, there was.

She closed her eyes tightly, no longer able to bear looking at her own reflection, which stared back coldly at her with minimal emotion. Her skin was deathly pale tonight, its healthy glow drained from her cheeks as though she were ill, and her eyes were large and hollow-looking. The two fiery hazels looked like a pair of unpolished opals, and the lids were heavy, droopy.

The question kept presenting itself in her mind: why did the tragedy of Cory's death draw her to Mark?

And then she knew.

With a clarity of mind that should never have accompanied her somber mood, she realized what she had been holding back all this time.

Lifting and looking at a picture of him which was framed in gold, she felt two tears slip down her cheeks. It was a picture that had been taken just months before the accident, and he was dressed in his baseball uniform, leaning on his bat. She had chosen that particular picture to keep in her room, on her vanity table because that was how she remembered him best: active, healthy, smiling.

She was surprised when her tears transformed into sobs, like a light rain suddenly becoming a downpour. Her limbs felt shaky, her muscles weak, as she shook and cried.

She cried for the boy that was lost so long ago. She cried for her mother's pain, her father's pain, and Mark's pain. She cried for all that could have been but that never was, but she did not cry for her own pain...why?

She knew the answer to that question now. She had never fully grieved for Cory. She had never looked it in the face, as her parents had, as Mark had. She had stuffed it down, deep down inside her where she didn't even try to deal with it for year after year.

As she cried, she felt like she was giving birth, there was so much inside of her. She briefly reflected,

with irony, how she hadn't cried a single tear at his funeral. She remembered how so many others had been weeping, and she'd felt confused and scared at watching them--the grown-ups--express their grief. She'd only been seven, but old enough to feel guilty that she wasn't crying, too.

And Mark was the link. He had not been at the funeral, and yet, he had been deeply affected by what had happened. Sure, there were others around who had known and remembered Cory and were deeply moved by his passing, but there was a difference between how they related to Cory and how Mark related to Cory.

She and he were opposites.

Mark had been blamed for his death. Meg was seen as uninvolved. Mark's life was ripped apart by his death, changed forever by that single bullet, and yet Meg was virtually unaffected by it--outwardly, at least.

She had never fully grieved for Cory and Mark was the key that would unlock all of her pent-up frustrations, anxieties and sorrow, and somehow, she'd known it.

All these years, watching as those around her felt pain over his loss and not feeling it, too, she'd felt like an alien, impervious to any real emotion or sympathetic feeling.

And Mark, more alienated than she, was her last hope.

She'd known that he would make her feel what she had waited so long to feel--the reality of Cory's death; and so, she'd sought him out.

Her mother and father had long ago grieved for him, and though the pain of his loss still lingered achingly within them, the freshness of the wounds was no longer there, the shock, the poignant grief. It was something that had never taken place for Meg, and as people moved on and went about their lives, she found herself left behind in the dust, with no one to grieve with.

And the years rolled on.

Only for Mark, whose wounds were still deep and encompassing, did she somehow know that she would be able to unleash her pent-up feelings that had never been expressed.

But this realization brought up within her a new set of questions: if that was the only reason I wanted to be with him, is this all a sham? Should I turn on my heels now and run?

But nothing could make her doubt her love for Mark. No, nothing could tear her from the boy that her parents had despised, called a "deviant," worked endlessly to try to keep the two apart. The love was real, of that she had no doubt, no matter what had first drawn her to him.

She then faced the horrible, terrifying realization that she had used Mark. She was filled, at long last, with sweet sorrow, but at what price? Losing the boy she loved

forever? And what if Amanda was right, and Mark wised up and decided she was sticking her nose somewhere where it didn't belong?

She didn't even want to think about it. What if he *didn't* show up on Friday? He would have had time to think about whether or not he wanted Meg to be a part of his life, and the thought scared her. He'd changed his mind before, just as Amanda had said, and he might do it yet again.

She felt certain that this was the test. Mark had told her he loved her during a particularly vulnerable time, and decisions made during such times can often be too hasty, she knew. If he showed up, then she would be glad; if he didn't, she knew she was going to have to accept the fact that Mark probably was not going to be in her life.

She slipped on the red, beaded bracelet that Jeff had gotten her for her November birthday. She watched as the prism-like beads caught the light and cast bands of color against the walls.

He was a sweet boy, but dull. She felt guilt for feeling that way, but knew that there was no getting around it. She had to go where her heart pounded inside of her chest, where the touch of her fingers against bare flesh felt tingly and electric, where her emotions seared with joy at the mere mention of the person's name. With Jeff, it was not there.

He picked her up at eight o'clock in his used Corolla. She'd taken extra care that night to pamper and ready herself for the date, using makeup to brighten her dull eyes and liven up her the skin on her face.

Jeff accompanied her to the car and opened the door for her. "Where are we going tonight?" she asked.

"We're going to see a Robin Williams movie," he announced, "unless you'd like to see something else."

Good. A movie was just what she was up for tonight. If they were going to talk all night, Meg didn't know how she could handle it.

They arrived at the theater in downtown Glenwood, called, "The Fenwood Seven," with ten minutes before previews. Jeff parked the car in a spot close to the entrance, and together they made their way inside.

Tickets paid for, they went to the concession stand and bought snacks. Soon they had found seats, and the movie was starting.

Meg went to sleep sometime during the film. When she woke up, her head was resting on Jeff's shoulder and he was gently stroking her hair. Shocked and displeased, she quickly got up.

This was the boy that she might soon be telling that her heart belonged to another; she didn't want to give him the wrong signal. Leaning her head against his shoulder was too cozy-comfy for what she might be about to reveal.

Sitting up straight in her seat, she continued watching the film as Jeff patted her shoulder and whispered in her ear, "You didn't miss much." She felt her muscles tense, feeling nervous about what she would soon have to talk about. She fixed her eyes on the screen until the end credits began to roll.

Jeff made a move to hold her hand as they walked out of the theater, but Meg quickly curled it around her drink cup.

"What shall we do now?" Jeff asked. "We've got some time."

Meg slurped up the remainder of her soda and threw it in the trash, along with the empty box of popcorn.

"Coffee?"

He looked well tonight, Meg noted ironically. His clothes hung off his body in a way that accentuated his good physique: red shirt, khaki pants. He was actually quite attractive, in a very masculine, athletic sort of way, but that in particular was not the main reason why he was looking so well. The main reason was that his face had a natural glow to it that seemed to shine out from inside; he appeared very healthy and happy. Next to Meg, whose pallor was still ghostly pale, despite the make-up she'd used to try and improve upon it, he looked fully alive.

She regretted having to tell him what was going on, but she knew that she must.

Sitting down across from each other at the coffee shop, Meg sipped her latte.

"I love being with you," Jeff said, drinking from his mug. "I want to spend as much time as I possible can with my girlfriend."

She smiled weakly at Jeff, looking into his bright, emerald eyes. He was being sincere, but then again, she had never known him not to be sincere. "Jeff, there's something we need to discuss,"

He raised his eyebrows, cupping his mug in his hands. "Oh?" White curls of steam rose from the mug in his hands, brushing his cheeks.

She knew the risk she was taking. If she let Jeff go and Mark decided not to be with her, then she would have nobody. But she felt she was making the right decision, because she didn't want to lie to herself anymore. Being with Jeff simply wasn't working anymore. "I think we need to break up," she said, as gently as possible.

Jeff stared at her, his eyes not comprehending, at first, what she had just said. "What?"

"It's just not working out between the two of us."

His eyes lowered. "Why?"

She carefully reached over and grasped his hand. "I'm sorry, Jeff, but I'm in love with someone else. I know I may not ever have a chance with this person, but I have to at least try."

Jeff looked at her hand. "I know who it is, Meg. You don't even have to tell me."

"How...how did you know?" she stammered.

He looked into her eyes and his gaze was searing. "I saw you with him, of course."

She looked down nervously, pleadingly at her hands. "Are you angry?"

He shook his head gently. "No. I thought something like this might happen, I just didn't know how soon."

"Then you understand?" She felt a mixture of emotions--surprise, confusion, sadness--well up inside her.

He stayed very still, a stoic expression on his face. "You were with him before me, and from what I've seen, you have a lot of deep feelings for him." It seemed to vaguely answer the question.

She felt nervousness form inside her. "I didn't even know that you knew."

"Of course I knew. You didn't think I asked about you before we went steady?"

Despite her pale complexion, she felt her face flush. "I'm so sorry, Jeff."

He smiled slightly.

She waited for Mark outside of the girls' locker room after practice. The halls in the school were empty save a few custodians pushing mops around. She sat in the stairwell, her pom-poms in her lap.

Her watch revealed that it was almost time for Mark to show up.

She sighed, trying not to convince herself that he wasn't coming.

Five minutes passed. Seven. Ten. Meg sadly got up, lifting the bundle of pom-poms and decided that she was going to leave. As she began to leave, she told herself not to be bothered in the least. He didn't care about her, so why should she care about him?

But it wasn't so. She'd wanted him to be there just as much as she'd wanted her own mother to accept him...now, it looked like he could care less about any of it.

How could she have been so stupid? Caring for a boy, who, from the very beginning, had expressed his profound disinterest in her. His *passionate* disinterest in her.

She had been acting every bit the young, naïve, innocent girl that she was in expecting Mark to show up. And now, she was paying the price.

As she hopped down off the windowsill in the stairwell, she tripped and fell, dropping all of her books and important papers. As she reached down to pick them up, another hand reached down, too.

"Need some help?"

She looked up from where she crouched on the floor and saw a beautiful sight. "Mark!"

He smiled. "Sorry I'm late."

Meg stood up to greet him, and instead of saying anything, she wrapped her arms around him and gave him a gigantic hug.

"I didn't think you'd come," she said.

He lowered his eyes to her. "I'm a new person now. I try to be more responsible."

She smiled at him and placed her hands on her hips. "That's a start."

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Outside on the dusty playground, he took a bullet to his head and shot himself. Ghostly whispers wafted towards her back window, and Meg just knew that he was dead.

EPILOGUE

Mark and Meg went to see Cory's grave together on a cold, wintry January day. The sky was a dull blue, a perfect match for their somber mood.

Of course, they knew that Cory was not there; it was only the resting place of his outer shell, his earthly body. The *real* Cory was soaring with the angels, of that they were certain.

Mark picked her up at her front door, where she had been waiting no more than five minutes. He was wearing a blue suit with a striped tie and he looked perfectly

groomed for the occasion. Meg looked down at her purple dress and when she looked up, Mark was smiling at her.

"The dress is fine," he said, and held out his arm for her, as though they were going to a prom.

And so he escorted her to Eternity Hills, the cemetery where Cory was buried eight years ago. As they approached, the wrought-iron gate in front with the gargoyles sitting on top was unmistakably that of the place in question.

Mark found a parking space, and together they walked towards the grounds.

Meg had not been there in two years; not since her father had insisted they celebrate Cory's fifteenth birthday by paying him a visit. Mark, she knew, had never been there. Not because he didn't want to, but because he would have felt unwelcome.

Once they had found the appropriate place, Meg placed her bouquet of white carnations in front of the headstone which read:

Corin Andrew Mitchell

1973-1982

That was all. No epitaph; simply a name and dates.

She rose from her feet, and after a meaningful silence, she turned her head to Mark. He was praying. She wondered what he was praying about, and instead of asking him, she let him pray.

Following suit, she said a prayer herself:

Dear God, thank you for this opportunity to share my Cory with Mark. Please keep my brother safe.

A long time passed. "Are you ready to go?" Meg asked, gently tugging at Mark's sleeve.

He opened his eyes and nodded, reluctantly. The visit seemed to mean a great deal to him.

They wove their way through the myriad of headstones, markers, and sarcophaguses. While Meg was getting into the car, she noticed that there was a tear in Mark's eye.

"Are you alright?" she asked, once they had started driving. She had not expected him to become so choked up during the visit to the cemetery. A week ago, when they had agreed to go together, Meg had thought it would just be a quick visit.

"Saying good-bye, I suppose," he said.

She closed her eyes and nodded knowingly. "It can take a person a long time before he or she is ready to say good-bye to a loved one."

But he shook his head. "Not to Cory," he said. "I've already done that."

She wrinkled her brow, surprised and perplexed. "Then to whom?"

He looked over at her. "I'm saying good-bye to my past. All of my friends are gone, my life is different now, and I'm making a new beginning."

She looked at him, and felt the strangest sense of sadness in that moment as they neared her house.

Before she got out, she leaned over and kissed him. "Now remember what I said," she told him. "What happened with you and Cory doesn't matter to me; it never did. I love you for the person that you are, and always could be, and will be. I love you for you, and no accident could ever change that."

He caught her lips in a last kiss and said, "I know, and that's why I love you so much."

They were very close; their mouths almost touched. Realizing that her breath was deepening and her pulse was quickening with desire, Meg turned and said hastily, "I'd better go."

He smiled understandingly at her and nodded.

It wasn't like nothing was ever going to happen between them again. It was just the wrong time and place. She got out of the car, nervously smiling at him.

He waved as she headed for her front door.

As she turned to watch him drive off, she saw a grown teenager with blond hair sitting in the passenger's seat with Mark.

She sucked in a breath, covering her mouth with a shaky hand.

Cory! Cory!

But they had driven off.

They had gone.

The End.