

To Emily, for her unwavering patience while editing this book.

To Andrew, for standing by my side no matter how hard the
struggle

To my family and friends for providing me with more paper and
pens than I know what to do with.

Finally, to my mother. Thank you for teaching me that it's never
too late to follow your dreams.

Three Little Lies

Melissa Wolff

Chapter One

The train ran clumsily over the tracks, bouncing and jerking, slamming my head painfully against the fogged up glass. My eyes shot open upon impact and I immediately put my hand to my head, feeling for any blood. There was none, thankfully, just a goose egg that I was sure would bruise. I yawned, mouth wide, and glanced around the cart only to realize that I was the only one in a seat. There was no one next to me or around me. I leaned over and squinted to see through the doors; it didn't seem like there was anyone on the train at all. Glaring through the offending window, I realized that night had come and the train was blanketed in darkness. Only a slight hint of light caught the horizon.

What time is it? I stumbled up to a sitting position as my stomach growled. I reached for the bag next to me. My eyes were still heavy with sleep and I couldn't see what was in the bag. Instead, I dug my hand inside, feeling around until finally it clamped around my phone. Pulling it out, I pressed a button and instantly a bright glow pierced my eyes.

I blinked until my eyes adjusted and then looked down to read the time. It was six in the morning and I was nearly at the end of my trip. Thank God. Eight hours on a train was **not** my idea of fun. My body screamed in pain as I shifted in the seat. Trying to settle down, I looked out the window and was greeted by the train station. With a sigh, I began organizing my things. I couldn't wait

to get off the train and away from the badly cushioned seats.

“Next stop, Donahue, Virginia!” I heard over the loud speaker. The obnoxious sounding voice echoed off the deserted cart and verberated in my ears. I stuffed my phone in my back pocket for easy access later and as quickly as I could with my back throbbing, I hoisted my carry-all over my shoulder and grabbed my rolling luggage with the other hand.

I reached the door at the same time that the train hand did, nearly bumping into him. I looked up at him like I looked up to everyone else, with blatant curiosity. If people were allowed to stare at me, why wasn't I allowed to stare at them? The train hand smiled, stepping to the side to give me room. He was handsome in the lanky, too tall for his body type of way. His nose was thin and narrow, hooking at the very end, but his eyes were a piercing blue, a color only saw in cartoons.

“Evening ma'am,” he said as he tipped his hat for me. I snorted but nodded back before looking down and waiting for the train to finally stop. Moments later the doors opened and I stumbled out, trying to pull my luggage along with me. Much to my disdain, the wheel of my rolling luggage caught on the gap and my suitcase tumbled over, ripping apart and spilling clothes everywhere.

“I'll help you ma'am,” the train hand said as he collected my belongings and slipped them back through the rip. Then, to my surprise, he took out a roll of duct tape and placed three thick pieces over the tear, successfully keeping my clothes inside. “It's not perfect, ma'am, but it will get the job done while you look to get a new one.”

“Thanks,” I said. “I appreciate it.”

“My pleasure, ma'am,” he said. I took out a few dollar bills from my pocket.

“Have a good day.” I pressed the bills into his hand. Stuffing the bills in his pocket, he tipped his hat yet again.

“Thank you ma'am. You have a good day too.” The train hand jumped back into the cart as the horn blasted and it began to chug away.

Though still in the wee hours of the morning, the humidity was thick and assaulting. As I descended the steep steps of the train

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deck, my t-shirt clung to my body and my jeans felt like they weighed a hundred pounds. If it was this hot this early in the morning, how hot would it be later on? I shuddered at the thought. *Great, I've landed in hell.*

I slung my duffle bag over my shoulder and used my free hand to pull my rolling luggage behind me. Through the heat, I glared at the crowd in front of me, searching for my sister. There were so many people in the crowd and, despite my height, I couldn't spot the top of my sister's head. People shuffled around, eyes focused on their cell phones in front of them, bumping into each other as they went. My head pounded and my pulse throbbed in my neck.

"Come on, Rebecca," I muttered. "Where the hell are you? Do you even **know** what it means to be on time?"

"Amber!" I turned at the sound of my name. "Amber over here!" My eyes locked on Rebecca standing on the far side of the train station stop, a tall lanky guy wearing plastic glasses standing next to her. Adjusting my grip on both my bags, I pushed my way through the rest of the crowd and stood in front of both of them. She also wore plastic glasses and her hair was pulled into a side pony tail, the humidity making it nothing but a nest of frizz. "Hey Amber! I missed you so much! How was your trip? Are you hungry?" Questions fired out of Rebecca's mouth at rocket speed and instead of answering them, I put my hand up in her face.

"First of all," I snarled. "Get the hell out of my face. Second of all, all I want to do is go back to the apartment and take a shower. I feel disgusting and I smell like crap. I'm exhausted. Have you ever tried sleeping on a train? Spoiler alert, it's not fun."

"Oh," Rebecca said, faltering. "Okay. We can go back to the apartment. I can make you something there if you want me to."

"Not necessary," I snapped. "I'm not a little kid. I can cook something if I want it. I don't need a baby sitter, no matter what Dad and Cheryl think." Cheryl was my stepmother and Rebecca's mother. She was a younger, skinnier version of my mother with feathered blonde hair. They were a thing for a while, married and had Rebecca. But then five years later he met my mother and they had some kind of fling. It was supposed to only be a fling...until I came along. My father decided he wanted to do the right thing for my

mother and divorced Cheryl divorced so he could be with my mother. But only a few months after I was born, he ‘suddenly’ realized that he loved Cheryl the whole time and decided to go back to her. Original, right? The hair was fake, of course, and fit perfectly with her orange colored tan and silicone breasts.

“Hey,” I looked up and glared at the guy next to Rebecca.

“I’m Jacob.” *Like I care.*

“Yeah, so?”

“I’m your sister’s boyfriend.”

“Where do I send the condolence card?” I muttered, rolling my eyes.

“Hey!” Jacob exclaimed but Rebecca put her hand up before he could say any more.

“Just leave it,” she murmured. Rolling my eyes, I shifted my luggage.

“Can we go? I really need to change.”

“Sure,” Rebecca said. She looked down. “Since the apartment is only a few blocks away...Jacob and I...we talked and we just figured the three of us could walk back together.” Walk? In this heat?

“Great. Amazing. Sounds like a plan. Whatever,” I said. “Let’s just hurry this up.” Jacob clamped his hand over my rolling luggage and I was about to snap at him when Rebecca shot me a look. Grumbling under my breath, I followed as Jacob and Rebecca started back to the apartment. Steam rose from the pavement and I wiped my brow with the back of my hand. Each step felt heavier the longer we walked.

As I followed behind them like some little puppy, I watched as Jacob took Rebecca’s hand and kissed her fingertips. She blushed and then laughed at something he whispered in her ear.

Perfect, loser love. I wonder if Jacob knows that he’s going to need the Jaws of Life to pry her legs open. Laughing at my own thought, I took my iPod out of my jeans pocket, stuck the ear buds in, and cranked up the volume, blocking out Rebecca’s pathetic attempts at flirting. Sweat trickled down my back and even without a mirror I knew that my shirt was nothing but a glove at this point, hugging my every curve.

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Through my music I heard the distinct sound of a whistle next to me and I turned to see a guy smiling at me, his tongue practically hanging out of his mouth. I smirked at him and blew him a kiss. The guy's eyes widened and he turned, his hairy back assaulting my eyes. Rolling my eyes, I gagged and played with my iPod, shuffling the songs around.

I felt a hand grab at my arm and I was jerked around. Rebecca was standing there, facing me, her lips moving in a rapid pace. When she noticed that my ear buds were in and I couldn't hear her, she yanked them out, letting them fall, before putting her hands on her hips.

"You know, I've been trying to tell you about this town for ten minutes now and you haven't even heard a word I said. That's rude, Amber."

"How was I supposed to know that you were talking if I couldn't hear you to begin with?" I pointed out. Her face darkened.

"Well, why would you put your iPod on? That's just stupid."

"It sure is a hell of a lot better than listening to your pathetic baby talk." Rebecca hissed through her teeth. She marched up to me until we were only an inch apart.

"Listen to me," she hissed. "I told dad and mom that I would take care of you, keep you out of trouble this summer so you can get your head back on straight. I promised them that I could do this. Now it would be nice if you actually **worked** with me instead of digging your heels. I will **not** fail because of you."

"Hey, **you** were the one to promise Dad and Cheryl. That was your own stupidity," I said. "I don't want to be here and I told dad that I didn't want to be here. So why the hell would I work with you to help you when I don't have to? Why should this be a walk in the park for you when it's hell for me?"

"You little--"

"Ladies," Jacob said as he stepped in between us. "It's hot and I think that our tempers are getting the best of us. Look, here we are at the apartment. Why don't we all go in and relax. Let's get something cool into our systems and then sit and talk like adults. I'm sure there is some kind of compromise that we can all come to agree with." He squeezed Rebecca's shoulder and she smiled up at him. I cocked my head to the side.

"I'm sorry, when did this become any of your business?" I asked. "I don't remember asking a loser like you to get involved with my life."

"Amber!" she hissed. "That's it, I'm done with you."

Rebecca grabbed my arm and dragged me around to the back of a building. Stairs led to the second floor, where her apartment was. On the first floor was her very own diner. She pushed me up the stairs as I stumbled, grabbing onto the railing for support. Once on the landing of the second floor, Rebecca opened the door and practically threw me into the apartment which was blissfully cool. Jacob entered a minute later, carrying my luggage, and put it to the side as he followed my sister into the kitchen. I slumped down onto the love seat and pulled up one of the legs of my jeans. I ran my fingers over the wooden leg facing me. It was smooth as silk and shone against the bright sun.

Pulling at the pieces of velcro that held it in place, I pulled off my wooden leg and rested it against the chair next to me. I wiped the bottom of my amputated leg, getting rid of any sweat that accumulated there, and let the cool air hit it. When I was finished, I let my head drop and closed my eyes, resting after the long day.

* * *

"Amber!" My eyes snapped open and I looked around wildly. Cold sweat beaded my forehead and my hands were shaking. My wooden leg wasn't next to me but my sister and Jacob were. Jacob held crutches and handed them to me as our eyes met.

"Thanks," I muttered, forgetting for a moment that I didn't like him. "Why are you screaming at me?"

"Because you were screaming yourself," Rebecca said. "You must have fallen asleep and you started crying out." I sat up straighter. *Not this again* I thought. *The doctor said the pills would take care of it.*

"How bad?" I asked. "What did I say?"

"I couldn't understand you," Rebecca admitted. "But it sounded pretty bad. Is everything okay?"

"It's fine," I said sharply. There was no way that I was

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going to tell Rebecca about the dream. "I'm fine."

"There's no reason to be so angry Amber," Jacob said.

"Your sister is just trying to help."

"I said I'm fine," I snapped. "She's not trying to help as much as trying to get on our father's good side. She was **always** the goody two shoes...daddy's little princess. If her perfect reputation wasn't at stake, she wouldn't give a damn about me."

"Amber," Rebecca said. It sounded more like a plea.

"Amber stop this...come on."

"Rebecca just shut up," I said. "I don't want to deal with you right now, okay?" Using the crutches, I stood up and faced my sister. "Where is my room?" Rebecca's head was down and she was gnawing on the edge of her thumb. It was her one nervous habit. "Rebecca?"

"It's the room on the left," Jacob said, answering for her.

"Dinner is in an hour, don't fall asleep again." His voice was noticeably cooler and his eyes lost their spark.

"I won't," I responded with the same flat tone. Using the crutches, I slowly made my way to the room and closed the door. Once it was locked, I slid down until my behind met the floor, and let the door hold my head. Out of the corner of my eye I saw my wooden leg next to the nightstand by the bed. My hand tightened around the handle of my crutch and I swung at the leg, knocking it to the ground.

Staying perfectly still, I listened to the noise outside of my room; a combination of murmured words and clanking dishes. It was only a matter of time before she would call our father to tell him how horrible I was and how I was ruining her perfect life. *Too freaking bad* I thought. *This is what happens when you send me away like some common criminal.* It was Cheryl's idea to send me to live with Rebecca and I knew it was because she didn't want to deal with me. She didn't want her name tarnished once her society friends found out what her step daughter was up to. So her solution? Convince my father to send me hours away...too far to cause any more damage. What could I say? My father was weak and he agreed almost instantly. Before I knew it I was on a bus heading to Virginia.

Well, he'll be regretting it as soon as Rebecca calls him.

And I promise it will only get worse from here.

* * *

“Are you settling in alright?” Rebecca asked as she took a bite of her burger. Ketchup trickled down her finger and she licked it up with the tip of her tongue.

“Sure,” I said. “I’m fine.”

“Do you need anything?”

“No.”

“Do you want anything?”

“No.” Rebecca sighed, twirling her hair around her finger.

“I’m trying here, Amber,” Rebecca said. “I get it, you don’t want to be here. But you’re not going away and I’m not going to let you slide by like Mom and Dad did. I actually want to help you.” Help me? She wanted to help me? That was a joke. Rebecca didn’t do anything for me...not if she didn’t get anything in return. Rebecca was in it for herself; always had been and always would be.

“Well, I’m so sorry that this is such a burden on you,” I said, my voice dripping with sarcasm. “I’m sorry I’m making you try oh so hard. It must be such work for you to be nice to a bastard sister you never wanted.”

“Amber, your sister loves you,” Jacob chimed in. “She was telling me all about you...you and her. You guys were attached at the hip when you were younger. Don’t let things change now.” I nearly choked on the lettuce I was chewing. Attached at the hip? Was he delusional? The closest I got to Rebecca was the thick wall between the two of us when I visited my father. She never tried to spend time with me; never asked me to do anything with her. She treated me like the dirt stuck in the crack of her favorite pair of sneakers.

“That’s funny,” I said to Jacob. “I guess I blocked those years out. I didn’t realize we were so close, Rebecca.” Her ears burned and if Jacob noticed it, he didn’t say anything. He took a swig of his bottle of beer, smacking his lips as he swallowed.

“So tomorrow,” Rebecca said, not so subtly changing the subject. “I figured you’ll spend the morning with me, helping out

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around the diner, and then Jacob can take you to the meeting.”

“Meeting?” I asked, cocking an eyebrow.

“You know, the mandatory Alateen meeting Dad set up for you. The one you have to go to.” Right. The addict meeting for teenagers. One stop shop for dropping off all your loser children so you didn’t have to deal with them for a few hours.

“Jacob doesn’t have to take me to the meeting,” I said sharply.

“I don’t mind doing it.” I snapped my head at my sister’s boyfriend.

“I don’t remember asking your opinion,” I snarled before focusing my eyes on Rebecca. “I don’t need some babysitter bringing me to and from the place. The meetings are bad enough, okay?” I shoved two forkfuls of lettuce in my mouth, zeroing in on the sound of crunching as I chewed.

“Fine,” she said. “But what if you get lost?”

“Uh, there’s something called GPS,” I said after I swallowed. The lettuce felt like mush sliding down my throat. “It’s on every single phone. I’m fifteen, Rebecca, not five. I think I can get there and back without my oh-so-caring older sister or her boyfriend holding my hand.” Not wavering for a minute, Rebecca smiled and nodded.

“So it’s settled then, you’ll go by yourself,” she said. “But I expect you to come back right afterwards. Don’t start wandering around over here. And anyway, I’m going to need your help for the dinner crowd.”

“Sounds like fun.” I pushed my empty plate to the center of the table, placing the fork on top of it. “I’m finished eating. Can I please be excused?”

“Sure, where are you going?” I shrugged, standing up and stretching. *Anywhere far away from here.*

“Outside to get some air,” I said. “Maybe around the block or something. I don’t know.”

“Keep your phone with you so I can call if I need to.” Rolling my eyes, I saluted my sister and stomped out the door.

“Why don’t you put a leash and collar on me instead,” I muttered. “At least then you’ll be able to keep ahold on me for as long as you want.” As I stepped on the sidewalk, my body jerked

and I landed with a sharp thud on my ass. Gravel cut into my palm and blood trickled out, staining my fingers.

"I'm so sorry." I looked up to see a guy standing there, staring at me, worry etched all over his face. "Here let me help you up." He grabbed my arm but I yanked it away, slamming my elbow painfully onto the concrete. Biting back a curse, I cradled my arm and stared at the urchin in front of me. "Oh God. God I can't believe you hit your elbow too. Do you need a doctor? Maybe a hospital? Here, let me help."

"I'm not some bird with a broken wing, dammit," I hissed. "I'm fine. My arm is fine." He took a step closer and I stepped back. "Get the hell away from me you damn klutz." The guy frowned as he stared at me.

"I'm really sorry I—"

"I know, you didn't mean it," I said, cutting him off. "You already said all that crap." I waved my fingers in the air. "I'm still alive, so you can go now." He didn't move; he kept staring at me, his eyes wide and his chin tight. *Oh God please don't tell me he's going to cry. I'll deck him if he sheds one single tear.* "Well, what are you waiting for? I said go."

"My name is Ethan. Ethan Hunter."

"That's good. Do you want a medal for it? A cookie maybe? Or better yet, a gold star?" No matter what I was saying, this guy wasn't budging. Using my good leg for balance, I stood up. I was nose to nose with the guy and if possible, his eyes widened even more.

"Do you have a name?" he asked. I could smell the peppermint from the gum he was popping. I rolled my eyes; was this guy serious?

"Everyone has a name," I pointed out. "So really, that question is kind of moot."

"Well, what's your name?"

"None of your business," I said.

"Are you new around here? I mean this is a pretty small town and I know almost everyone but I don't recognize you."

"I don't live here," I told him. "I'm visiting my sister for the summer."

"Oh that sounds like fun."

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“Clearly you don’t know my sister. If you met her, you would know that this was anything but fun.” I didn’t know why I was talking to him. He was annoying and rude. Who went up to a total stranger and started talking to them? Especially after they just knocked the same stranger down not once but twice, slicing her open like a rag doll? I dropped my eyes and took a step away from him. “Now if you don’t mind...” I fished around my pocket before producing a pack of cigarettes and a pack of matches. Balancing a cigarette between my lips, I swiped a match and cupped my hands, bringing the cigarette in. The burning glow at the end of my mouth contrasted with the darkening sky.

“Cigarettes will kill you, you know,” he said.

“Life can kill you,” I retorted. “I think I’ll take my chances over here.” Ethan shrugged, batting away the smoke around us.

“It’s your funeral,” he muttered. *Yes it is.* “See you around, I guess. And again, I’m sorry.” I watched as he disappeared around the corner, and then leaned back against the brick wall. Finally. Clearly he didn’t know how to take a hint. Above me I heard the back door to the apartment open and footsteps on the deck.

“Dammit,” I muttered, snubbing the cigarette out on the wall. I tucked the butt inside my pocket; I would have to get rid of it later.

“Amber are you down there?” Rebecca’s voice pierced through the darkness.

“Yeah I’m here,” I said, praying that she didn’t smell the smoke from where she was.

“It’s getting dark out and I don’t like you being out here alone. Come inside.”

“I’ll be right there,” I said and slid the pack of cigarettes, along with the lighter, snugly in my back pocket. With a sigh, I ascended the steps.

Chapter Two

The single fan in the cafeteria of the community center whirred pitifully, pushing the hot air around the room. My leg stuck painfully to the plastic chair as I looked around. There were about a dozen of us in the room, all sitting in a circle. Marci, the leader, sat in between a boy whose eyes were so sunken in I could barely see them, and a girl who kept tugging at the ends of her hair, chewing at her bottom lip. I sat back in my seat and adjusted my shorts. My wooden leg was bothering me and I shifted but it didn't help. The heat was causing unwanted friction between my skin and the top of the prosthetic and the only way I could stop that was if I took the prosthetic off, using crutches instead. But crutches caused more staring than the leg did.

"Welcome everyone to another meeting here today. It looks like we have a couple of new members. Would any of you like to stand up and tell us about yourself?" The others looked around the room, too polite to push us. *They probably don't want to hear any more about us than we want to share. This isn't circle time, after all.* "Anyone?" Still there was silence and someone coughed awkwardly. "Okay then, why don't we just get started? Who wants to speak first?"

"I will." I glanced over to see a kid with spiked hair and a muscle shirt move up to the edge of his chair. "For those of you who don't know me, my name is Bailey and I started with this

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group a little over two months ago.” Bailey looked at Marci and she nodded in encouragement.

“Keep going,” Marci said. “We’re all listening.” I snickered into my hand. *All we need are marshmallows and a camp fire.*

“Well, see yesterday I went to a party at my friend’s house. Her parents have this giant liquor cabinet and my friend, well... she knows where the key is. Her parents were out of town so she swiped the key from their room and it was a free for all, you know? Anyone could drink anything and she didn’t care.” Bailey ran his hand through his spiked hair. The rest of us were silent as we waited for Bailey to continue. “I have to tell you all that I did not have one single drink last night aside from water and pop. There it was, all this liquor and I didn’t want to touch a single drop of it. Just the look of all the bottles there, filled and waiting, made me sick. So instead, I left and went to spend time with my cousin at the park.” Everyone clapped and Marci got up from her chair. She walked over to Bailey and pulled him up into a hug.

“I’m so proud of you,” Marci said. “You showed great judgment and it looks like you’ve really made some positive changes.”

“I have,” Bailey admitted. “I want to be better...for my brother, you know? I want to be the type of guy he looks up to. I don’t want to be the screw up anymore.”

“That is a great goal,” Marci said when she sat down. She gave Bailey one last smile before picking up her clip board and flipping through the pages. Her eyes darted up and locked onto mine. “It’s Amber right?” I nodded. “Well, Amber, why don’t you tell us a little about yourself?”

“I would rather not,” I said. “I’m not really into this mushy, spill all my feelings, type of thing.”

“Well, you have to tell us something, Amber,” Marci said. Her eyes narrowed. “It’s the rule at these meetings. Everyone has to say one thing at every meeting. It doesn’t matter what you say, you just have to say something.”

“Fine,” I said. I pushed my lips into a thin line. “You really want me to say something?”

“Yes.”

“Are you sure about that?” I hissed. “Because trust me, you won't like what I have to say.”

“Try me,” Marci said, her voice just as menacing as mine was. The rest of the group turned their heads left and right, as if they were watching a tennis match. I slid to the edge of my own chair until my arms were resting on the tops of my thighs and everyone got a nice view of my rack under my shirt. I heard a lot of the guys gulp and I could feel the girls' eyes burning into mine.

“When I have sex, I like to be locked up. I mean really locked up. I love the feel of metal handcuffs cutting into my wrists as I squirm and beg for more. Sometimes, there's even a whip involved.” Marci's hand flew up to her mouth and her eyes looked like they were about to pop out of her sockets. The guys whistled and the girls screeched. “I told you that you wouldn't like what I have to say.” I stood up and turned, ignoring the stares of everyone around me. “See you next week.”

I sauntered out of the room, letting the group gape behind me. When I got to the front of the building, I pushed the door open and let myself out into the street. I pulled the cigarette out from behind my ear and put it to my lips, lighting it immediately. I stood there, the cigarette hanging from my fingers, and watched cars speed by. Well no one could ever say I didn't bring the drama. *If only I could be a fly on the wall right now. I would love to know what they're saying about me.* Just thinking about the horrified faces around me had excitement bubbling in my stomach. *They won't forget me anytime soon. Be memorable, that's what my father always said. I definitely made sure they knew I was there. Daddy would be so proud.*

As I leaned against the front of the building, I tried to smooth my hair down. When I left my house my hair was pulled in a tight ponytail against my neck. But as the day wore on, little pieces were falling out, and frizzing around my face. *So much for straightening it smoothly. Maybe I should cut it...like chop it all off. That would get rid of that problem. Damn southern heat.*

“Hey,” I looked up to see Bailey standing in front of me. “That was quite a performance in there. I didn't know that you became such a great liar.”

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“Yeah well I could say the same thing about you. Pop, really? Who the hell says pop?” I asked.

“Everyone who lives here, or haven’t you noticed?” I handed Bailey a cigarette which he accepted. Then I cupped my hands so that that fire from the lighter caught the edge.

“I didn't know you were in this group...I thought your parents sent you to Canada or something.”

“Nope. I'm here in good ol' Virginia, just like you,” Bailey said. “I’m staying with my aunt...the only person who doesn’t want to kill me...yet.”

“I would say congratulations but we both know that being here sucks.”

“Yep...and it's all because of that damn party.” I nodded as I put my head on my friend's shoulder. I was happy to see Bailey's face in the group, despite pretending that I didn't know him. It made me feel a little bit better. Bailey knew what I was going through. He was the shoulder I had cried on and the one who told me everything was going to be okay. We both know that it wasn't true but the words still comforted me. He was the one who kept me going as long as I did.

“So how's your sentence?” he asked. “How long?”

“Sucks,” I said. “I’m stuck here all damn summer. Maybe longer. You?”

“Until they release me.” I snubbed my cigarette butt out and pushed myself off the wall. “I have to go. I have to meet my sister at her diner. See you later?”

“Yeah,” Bailey said. He handed me a folded piece of paper. “My new cell number. The ‘rents took away my old phone as some sort of punishment. I think they were trying to seclude me or something. I don’t know. But, screw them, you know? I opened up a new account and got myself a new phone. The ‘rents know nothing about it. Here, here’s the new one. Call me.”

“Thanks, I’ll definitely call you,” I said. “And I’ll write down all the numbers from my phone and give them to you next week after group, okay?”

“Cool.” Bailey hugged me and I hugged him back. “Oh and Amber?”

“Yeah?”

“If you ever do end up getting into all that kinky shit...call me up okay? I wouldn't mind it one bit.” I punched Bailey in the arm and he grimaced.

“Perv,” I said.

“Oh come on, Amber,” Bailey said. “You know you're not into that stuff. You just said that shit to get people's attention.” I narrowed my eyes at him.

“You don't know half of what I've done,” I told him and he cocked an eyebrow.

“Oh?”

“Yeah,” I said. “You don't know everything about me, Bailey. I have a whole side to me that you've never seen.”

“Uh huh, sure.” I rolled my eyes.

“Whatever, don't believe me,” I muttered. “I don't care.” Bailey nudged me.

“Don't be like that, Amber,” he said. “You know you love me.”

“Yeah, yeah.” I smiled at him. “Whatever.”

* * *

The air conditioner in the diner did nothing to fight the heat. Smoke from the kitchen swirled to the ceiling leaving dark circles behind. I adjusted the Daisy Duke shorts and crop top I had on. Rebecca nearly had a coronary when she saw what I was wearing. She went on and on about how inappropriate it was. I ignored her, though, and went down to the diner before she could stop me. She was still furious at me and shot daggers every time we passed.

So there I was, standing next to a table, wearing an apron that was longer than my shorts, listening to a couple murmuring amongst each other. Next to them, a baby babbled in her carriage.

“So that's a chicken on rye with macaroni salad on the side, a roast beef sandwich with pepper jack cheese, and two lemonades to drink?” I asked. The woman nodded and handed me back the menu. I turned to the man only to see him staring, point blank, down my shirt. I pretended to drop my pen and as I

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stood up, I leaned close to the man's ear. "Put your filthy eyes back in their sockets and pay attention to your wife, you sick bastard." The man blushed.

I stood up, gave the couple a smile, and brought the order to the kitchen. Glancing over my shoulder, I could see the couple arguing. From the way it looked, the man was telling the woman how I was disrespectful and rude. If only the wife knew exactly what was going on in her husband's head when he stared at me.

The bells over the door chimed and I looked up to see Ethan walking in. His mouth broke out into a smile when he saw me and then his eyes flickered down to my leg before looking back at my face. Ethan climbed onto a stool by the bar and put his cell phone on the counter.

"Yes, I have a wooden leg," I snapped at him before he could say anything.

"I wasn't going to say anything," Ethan said, his voice timid. "All I was going to say was hi and then I was going to say that you look very pretty today." I rolled my eyes and sneered at Ethan.

"What would you like?" I asked. My pencil was poised over the notebook I clutched in my hand.

"A root beer float and a grilled cheese sandwich."

"Seriously?" I asked. "A grilled cheese sandwich? What are you? Five?"

"Say what you want but a grilled cheese sandwich is a classic." Ethan had a point. There was nothing better than a grilled cheese sandwich with tomato soup on a cool fall day. *Do they even have cool fall days here?* "So are you ever going to tell me your name?"

"Why should I?"

"Because if you don't, how can I ask you to hang out?"

This caused me to pause. Ethan wanted to hang out with me?

"That's not a good idea," I told him. "I'm not the type of person you want to hang out with, trust me. Just ask my sister."

"Why not?"

"Because I have more baggage than you would imagine."

"I don't care."

"Just no, Ethan." I said. "We can't hang out...we just can't."

You don't want to associate with me and I'm sure your parents wouldn't want you to associate with me either."

"But-"

"Drop it, Ethan," I snapped. "No means no." I ripped his order off my pad and hung it up in the kitchen. With one last glance back at him, I ripped off my apron and threw it on the shelf behind the counter. "You're too good for me so stop trying." I slid into the back and grabbed my bag that I put there after group. Taking the stairs from the kitchen to the apartment, I let myself in. I brushed my hair away from my face and fanned myself, attempting to cool myself off. Jacob was sitting on the couch watching some black and white movie with subtitles. He didn't spare me a glance as I passed him and went into my own room.

I closed the door behind me and went to lock it when I realized the knob had been changed. There was no lock there anymore. *What the fuck?* It had to be Rebecca's handiwork. *I can't believe she took the damn lock off my door. What does she think I'm going to do behind this door? Shoot up until I'm dead? Dammit, man.* There was nothing I could do about it so, closing the door tightly, I jammed a box in front of it and then slid onto the chair in front of a laptop. Opening the laptop, I logged on and was immediately greeted with a picture of two girls, one with fiery red hair and the other with golden blonde hair, arms around each other's shoulders, smiling into the camera.

"Madison I miss you," I said as I ran my fingers over her face. "What happened to you? Where are you? Are you alive?"

It was three months, two weeks, and four days since the last time I saw my best friend. The last time I saw her the weather was crappy. A mix of rain and hail was falling steadily from the sky, hitting the ground with such force that it would jump back up and splatter the closest thing to it. Madison wanted to walk home from school, mostly because she didn't want anyone to know that her mother really forgot about her; she wanted to make it seem like it was her choice to walk, not that her mother was thoughtless. The truth of the matter was that her mother was either at some tanning salon, or getting some kind of Botox, and forgot about it... forgot about her. Still, Madison put

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a smile on her face as she begged me to walk home with her.

I refused to...I mean it was cold and I was wearing nothing but a skirt, tights, and a thin long sleeved shirt. I didn't even have a jacket. Basically, I was completely unprepared to walk and no convincing from Madison would change my mind. So with a hug and a wave, she went her way and I went mine. I caught the bus that afternoon. That was the last I saw of Madison.

Everyone, even Madison's parents, believed that Madison was nothing but a runaway. She didn't like how her parents were treating her so to 'teach them a lesson' she up and left, went to stay with someone for a while. It wasn't the first time Madison did that and I knew that. I also knew that it was something more. Something serious happened to her.

No one would listen to me, though, despite the flaws I pointed out about their idea that she was a runaway. If she ran away, why would she have left all of her money at home? Why wouldn't she pack her favorite Louis Vuitton bag or her Ugg shoes? Why was her Tiffany bracelet still sitting next to the matching necklace and earrings? I knew that Madison wouldn't leave without what she thought were her prized possessions, but Madison was gone and all of her stuff was still in her room.

That was why I snuck into her house when her parents were out at work, and grabbed Madison's laptop and her journal from her room. Her parents weren't going to notice that they were gone, let alone miss them. They didn't care, they knew that she knew they didn't care, and that's why they just assumed she left. But I cared. I loved Madison, she was my best friend and I was going to find out what actually happened to Madison, even if no one else was around to help me...And obviously no one would. I discreetly asked around, everyone just assumed what her parents thought, even my parents. Or course, my parents cared about me just as much as her parents cared about her. That's what we had in common.

Clicking on the icon, I let the internet load up on the laptop and then logged myself into her email. If there was any type of start point in finding out what happened with Madison it would be in her email. Anything and everything that Madison

did she did on her computer. *I will find out what really happened to you, Madison. Maybe I'll even find out where you are. I'm not going to give up like everyone else, I promise I thought. You mean too much to me to give up just like that.*

I opened the first email that popped up on the screen. It was an email sent the same day that Madison disappeared.

Dear Ms. Porter,

We are contacting you to inform you that we have received your application for the young gymnast summer program held here in Trapp University. We here at Trapp University greatly enjoyed your essay of your accomplishments and your determination to one day enter the Olympics. The essay was heartwarming and honest. That is why we would like you offer you a place in our summer program starting June 8, 2012. We believe that you will be a great asset to our summer program and look forward to meeting you again.

Please call us at your earliest convenience to go over the details of the program.

Thank you and congratulations.

Sincerely, Ms. Lynn

I closed the email and smiled to myself. So Madison made it, she really made it. The Trapp University summer gymnastics program was the one thing that Madison really wanted to do. It was in upstate New York, far, far away from her parents and filled with others who loved gymnastics as much as she did. It was for the whole summer, starting the day after school ended and ending right before Labor Day weekend. Day and night she would talk about the Trapp program and all the benefits of it. She practiced six days a week for three hours in the morning and three hours in the evening. I couldn't keep track of how many parties Madison missed because she was training and practicing. The girl lived and breathed gymnastics and she

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was finally recognized. *And she didn't even get a chance to go* I realized. I stared at Madison's picture one last time. *Damn it Madison, what happened to you? Give me some damn clue so I'm not going through this blind!*

The door to my room swung open with no warning. I slammed the laptop closed and turned sharply to see my sister standing in the threshold of the door, her hands on her hips, glaring at me.

“What the hell did you say to your group leader today?” Rebecca hissed. “Actually don't answer that. I already know what you told the group today and to say that I'm disappointed would be putting it lightly. I. Am. Mortified.”

“Why?” I asked. “It's Marci who should be mortified. I told her that I didn't want to talk but she told me I had no choice. So I let it all out.” I paused and smiled. “But you don't have to worry. It's not true...none of it is. I haven't had sex and I don't plan to until I'm 40 at this rate. I mean, really, who would have me? The girl with the wooden leg?”

“You could have fooled me with the way you dress and how you talk,” Rebecca said. “What possessed you to say those things, Amber? Do you want people to think you're white trash? Hell, where did you come up with that, anyway?” Rebecca paused. “Wait a minute. I bet you don't give a damn what people think as long as they're thinking about you. You want the attention; the reaction. That's what all this is about, isn't it?” I shrugged.

The truth was, was that I only said things like that to keep people from asking stupid questions. Or questions in general. There was a wall around me; a thick wall that I constructed myself. I only let a few people on the other side of the wall and Marci wasn't going to be one of them. Neither was Rebecca. I was still counting down the days until I could get the hell out of there.

“You are going to call Marci tomorrow and apologize for your mouth,” she told me, her voice even. I bet she had rehearsed this in front of the mirror. “Then you and I are going to go shopping. Dad deposited money into my account. There's no way I'm going to keep letting you walk around looking like a stripper.

It's degrading and makes me look bad.”

“Right because it's all about you Rebecca,” I said. “The whole freaking world revolves around you.”

“Here in Virginia, where I live, where my friends are, and where I have a business, you bet your sweet wooden leg, yes it does all revolve around me.” I flipped Rebecca off and before I knew it, Rebecca crossed the room and grabbed me by the upper arm.

“Rebecca get off of me, you're hurting me,” I said.

“Listen to me, Amber. You better get your act together. I agreed to let you live here because Dad and Mom begged me to. Yes *begged* me to. Your mother called Dad and told him that she couldn't handle you and asked him to help out. Dad then called me. So right now, the only one who wants you here, and I'm using wants as a very loose term, is me. Maybe you should start appreciating that.”

“Well, I didn't want to come,” I shot back. “I didn't ask to come here and I'm sorry if I'm such an inconvenience for you. If you hate me that much then I'll leave and you can go back to your pathetic excuse for a life.”

“I'm not going to let you do that,” she hissed

“Why not?”

“Because I promised Dad that I would look out for you.”
“So? What does that have to do with anything?”

“Well Dad has to have **someone** to depend on,” Rebecca said. “Someone has to be the good daughter.” Rebecca let me go and stumbled back into my seat. “Call Marci tomorrow and then we're going out. Jacob will handle the diner.” She retreated back into the hall and slammed the door behind her, leaving me sitting on the chair, rubbing my sore arm.

Chapter Three

“Hannah Postern, a twenty-four year old Pre-Law student disappeared last night. Her roommate states that Postern was working the late shift at the Neal's Bar down on Hasentel Street and never came home. She has a six month old baby girl, Angie. The police opened an investigation and Postern's parents have begun a search party for their missing daughter,” the reporter on the radio said. *Where are these women disappearing to?* I wondered.

I turned off the radio as I put the finishing touches of make up on my face. I studied myself in the mirror and grimaced. I was wearing a short sleeved, boat neck shirt with a pair of denim capri's that hit my knee right before the prosthetic. It was Rebecca's idea of a good, proper outfit. “Proper” was Rebecca's life motto. She didn't understand the concept of freedom of expression or marching to the beat of her own drum. As long as everyone liked her and she was regarded as perfect, Rebecca was fine. I, on the other hand, felt suffocated by the bland fabric.

Tugging on the clothes, I desperately tried to find some way to make them my own. It was too hot for scarves and the jewelry wasn't cutting it. I still looked like a mini version of Rebecca and my stomach churned at the thought of what people would say. Eyeing the closet, I weighed my options. If I changed

and went back down to the diner, Rebecca wouldn't say anything...not in front of everyone at least. She would have to wait until the end of her shift. By then I could be out of the diner and off on my own. But there would be hell to pay later. It just wasn't worth it.

Pulling my hair up into a rubber band, I grabbed my camera off the dresser before leaving the room. The kitchen was empty when I got there and I grabbed an apple out of the fruit bowl, biting into it roughly. Juice squirted into my mouth, dribbling out onto the neck of the shirt. Wiping the juice off with the back of my hand, I finished the apple and threw the core into the garbage. My stomach grumbled, begging for more, but there was nothing more to eat. The cabinets were practically empty; the only food available was frozen. *And why would she keep food in the apartment if she has the diner right downstairs?* My pride kept me from eating any of the diner food; I would have to wait until I could escape and then get myself something substantial to eat. Did this dump of a town have a McDonalds? I had to find out and soon.

I shuffled my feet across the apartment and took my time descending the steps, stalling as much as possible. I didn't want to be in the diner any more than Rebecca wanted me there. I opened the door and was greeted by the sight of my sister and Jacob furiously cooking food on the stove. They were having some type of argument using only whispers. They didn't see me so I slipped out the door, grabbed my apron, and positioned myself at the front counter, tucking the camera safely at the back of one of the shelves. There were two other servers on the floor so I leaned against the wood counter, watching. They walked from table to table, writing down orders like a couple of drones. None of them smiled or tried to engage in any sort of conversation with the customers. *There goes their tips for the day. Pathetic.*

Despite how furiously Rebecca and Jacob were cooking, there weren't many people in the diner. An elderly couple occupied the back corner booth and a few teenage girls nursed early morning milkshakes at one of the tables. The sun was already bright outside and I could feel the heat from its rays

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through the front windows. People were bound to drive to the beach in this weather and I had a feeling that business at the diner for the day would be slow. The bells over the door chimed and I turned. *No effing way. He did **not** come here again.* Ethan waved at me, weaving his way around the empty tables. A thick book was tucked under his arm.

"I'm pretty sure that stalking someone is illegal in this state. Actually I think it's illegal in every state. Am I really going to have to call the cops?" I asked and Ethan smiled cheekily.

"I'm not here to see you, it's just a benefit," Ethan said. I cocked an eyebrow.

"So why **are** you here?"

"I'm here to see Jacob." He smiled. *Little shit*, I thought.

"Why would you want to see that pain in the ass?" I asked, glaring at him.

"He's my big brother."

"Your big brother?" I asked with disbelief. "How is that possible? He's pale and you're...not." Ethan chuckled and shook his head.

"You can say it," Ethan said. "I'm black. I've come to terms with it." *And he thinks he's a comedian too. How sweet.*

"Okay not the point," I said. "What do you mean he's your big brother?"

"The Big Brother, Big Sister program," Ethan explained. "My father... I love him but lately he hasn't exactly been around to hang out with. Too busy doing his own thing I guess. He's throwing himself into work to stop thinking about... Well it doesn't matter what he's trying to forget. But since he hasn't been around, he enrolled me in the program to give me a positive influence. He was afraid that if I grew up without some kind of role model that I would end up in the street."

"And it's easier to find someone else to do the work for you." I understood that perfectly. My parents had pretty much done the same thing by dumping me on my sister's doorstep.

"Exactly."

"Gotcha," I said. "Well I'm the sister of the girl that Jacob is dating, screwing, whatever." I finally admitted. There was no reason to try to keep it a secret anymore. Ethan would find out

eventually.

"I know," Ethan said. "I've met Rebecca and she told me a lot about you, Amber." The statement was unnerving. Rebecca and I didn't see eye to eye about my history. So why was she talking about me? What was she saying? Suddenly I wanted to go in the back and demand answers.

"So you knew who I was but pretended you didn't? What the hell?" I narrowed my eyes. "Why the hell would anyone do that? That's just...creepy."

"You know, if I do say so, the red hair fits you," Ethan said with an amused grin playing on his lips.

"And why is that exactly?" I tapped my foot against the floor, waiting for Ethan to say something. *If this is some pick up line, I'm going to deck him. I swear.*

"Because that hair is fiery and it matches your personality...fierce and wicked. I like it." His words sent chills down my spine. He shrugged and turned his attention to the menu in front of him.

"I'll go get Jacob for you," I said, unable to think of any retort. I could feel the heat in my cheeks. I turned and pushed my way through the swinging door to the kitchen. Rebecca was nursing a cup of coffee and Jacob was scrubbing his face with his hands. "Jacob?" Jacob looked up, his eyes wary. "Um, Ethan is here? He said that he was waiting for you. That you're his...Big Brother?"

"Oh, right, Ethan. I forgot he was coming," Jacob said. He slapped his palm to his forehead. "I don't have time to hang with him today."

"I'm sure that Amber wouldn't mind keeping him company." Rebecca said staring at me pointedly. 'You owe me' she mouthed to me and raised her eyebrows. "They're the same age. Maybe Ethan will rub off on Amber." Jacob's face turned a deep shade of red as I bit my bottom lip to keep from laughing. Rebecca had no idea of the innuendo that came out of her mouth. "So, Amber, you wouldn't mind hanging out with him right? I mean at least until Jacob gets some time later?"

"I guess not since you already told him everything about me," I retorted.

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“And he’ll be alive when you get back?”

“I can’t make any promises.” I said as I turned to go back to the dining area.

“Funny,” Rebecca said, sarcasm dripping from her words. *I thought it was.*

Ethan's fingers were playing with a straw, twirling it around his fingers as his foot tapped against the side of the counter. He was laughing with one of the other servers and even from my place against the door I could see that she was blushing.

“Ethan.” My voice was sharper than I intended. The server stood up stiffly, gave me a look, and then scurried away to some people who just sat down.

“Amber,” Ethan replied with the same sharp tone. Then he smiled again. “What's up? Where's Jacob?”

“Change of plans,” I said trying to sound excited. I might have been mean but I wasn't mean enough to make someone feel unwanted. At least not all the time. I pasted a smile on my face, my cheeks hurting from the effort. “I know you wanted to hang out with Jacob but I thought since I'm new and, obviously, I'm lacking friends, that maybe you and I could hang out. Maybe you can show me around? Didn't you want to do that at one point?”

“Sure,” Ethan said. His eyes sparkled and he looked as excited as I was supposed to feel. “I didn't think that you would want to hang out with me.”

“Well today is your lucky day, I changed my mind.” I looked down at my clothes. “Give me a few minutes to change and I'll be right back, okay?”

“I'll be here.” I hesitated and then gave him one of my rare smiles. When I got to the kitchen I glared at my sister who seemed proud of herself. *She might have won this battle I thought but she sure as hell didn't win the war. The war's not over by a long shot.*

* * *

Five minutes later I was back in my short shorts and skin tight tank top, my camera slung over my shoulder and sunglasses on my face. Ethan and I were walking down the street attempting

not to get run over by the mass of people who were trying to get to different places. Ethan kept looking down and then looking away. I rolled my eyes.

"If you want to ask me about it you can," I said. "You wouldn't be the first person to ask me and won't be the last."

"No, it's rude to ask," Ethan said with a huff. "My parents raised me better than that." He sounded offended at my suggestion. *Oops.*

"Well fine, here's the story," I said. I licked my lips and wiped my sweaty hands on my shirt. It never got better, telling the story. Flashbacks sucked. "I was at a party about three months ago. My friends and I got drunk...and I mean really drunk. We were playing some game on the Wii and then there was a fight. Before I knew it, one of my friends pushed down this bookcase full of these text books. The books and the bookcase fell on my leg and shattered everything inside of it. My nerves were shot, my bones were shattered. Really, they had no choice but to amputate."

"Wow, that's a story," Ethan said. We stopped next to a building and Ethan squatted down, eye level with the prosthetic. "I love all of these decorations on the wood. Who did them?"

"I did," I admitted. "I figured if I was going to have this stupid thing for the rest of my life then at least I could attempt to make it a fashion statement. I like to stand out."

"That's a bit obvious," he teased. "But where did you get the wooden leg? I thought they only made them out of metal and plastic and whatnot."

"My mother knew someone who sculpted it out of wood. She couldn't stand to think that I would have a leg that didn't look like a leg," I told Ethan. "So she paid him a shitload of money to carve me a leg. I did the rest."

"You have talent, I'll give you that. Was it hard to adapt?"
I'm still adapting.

"More than you could ever imagine," I told him. Goosebumps raised on my arms. "Can we go now? I'm bored of talking about me."

"Sure," Ethan and I continued to walk, only stopping to let me take some pictures, capturing the essence of Virginia. He

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kicked tiny rocks that were in his way, sending them flying across the street.

“Hey,” I said after a minute. Ethan turned. “Smile.” I pushed down the button on my camera and took a picture of Ethan, hitting his face, illuminating him. I checked the screen. “Perfect. You have that look.”

“What look?” I shrugged.

“I can’t explain it,” I admitted. “The wholesome, boy next door look. Bright eyed and bushy tailed, almost.”

“Thanks,” Ethan said and I couldn't tell if he was blushing or not. Ethan tugged me towards the drugstore. “I have to get something, do you mind?” *As if he’s giving me a choice.*

“I guess not.” I followed Ethan inside, shivering at the abrupt change in temperature. Ethan hurried down one aisle but instead of following him, I went down another aisle. I searched the shelves until I came to the nail polishes. I looked for the boldest, most eye catching colors.

I grabbed a couple of bottles and, making sure there were no cameras watching me and no employees around, I slid my prosthetic down, causing a small gap. I slipped the bottles through the gap and heard them fall into the hollowed out square I had created and then pulled the prosthetic back up. I carved the hole out so precisely that it looked like it was supposed to be there and no one ever questioned me about it. It was my secret hiding spot. Making sure that they were safely in there, I stood up and went to go find Ethan.

“I got what I needed, do you want to get out of here?”

“Sure.” Ethan left the store and I followed behind him.

When we got outside, Ethan turned and stared at me, waiting.

“What?”

“I could have bought you the nail polish,” Ethan said. “I don't mind.”

“I don't know what you're talking about,” I said.

“Yes you do. I saw you slip the nail polish in your prosthetic.” *How could he have seen it? I made sure no one was around!* I pushed Ethan up against the wall.

“You saw nothing, got it?” I hissed. “Just don't tell

anyone.”

“I won't,” Ethan said. “I know how to keep secrets.” He paused. “Trust me...I've kept worse secrets than this.” He paused, staring at me. Waiting for something. *For what?*

“Good,” I said. “Let's go somewhere, let's go have some fun.”

* * *

“I came here when I was a kid,” Ethan said after we walked nearly a mile. “My mom and dad used to take me here to have picnics.” The park was filled with nothing but flowers and trees. The hum of the cars and chatter of the people was muted the farther we walked. It was quiet and tranquil...the perfect spot to just sit and think. And take pictures. I put the camera to my eye and started snapping away as Ethan sat on the grass, still talking. “I remember I used to chase fireflies here at night while my parents stargazed. After I was done, my mom would help me put them in a jar with holes in the top. We only kept them there for a little while but as a kid, I found it amazing...magical even. It was like I had my own little night light.”

“Sounds like you had the perfect childhood.”

“I did,” Ethan admitted. “But people grow up and childhoods disappear.” I moved my face away from the camera and looked at the boy on the grass. His eyes were downcast and he was playing with a piece of grass. He looked...lost.

“At least you had a childhood. My childhood consisted of being schlepped between my mother and my father. Rebecca isn't my full sister, her mother is my step mother and she hates me. I mean like really despises me,” I told him. “Cheryl, that's Rebecca's mother, enrolled me in finishing classes, so even when I was a child I wasn't supposed to act like one. The only one who didn't care how I acted was Madison.”

“Who's Madison?”

“A friend,” I said. “She...she disappeared a couple of months ago. Everyone thinks she just ran away, even her own parents think that, but I know it's something else.”

“What do you think happened?”

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“That's the thing...I don't know. I just know it's more than people think it is.”

“So what are you going to do about it?”

“I'm going to find out what happened to her,” I said.

“Before they shipped me down here, I took her laptop and her journal. Those were the two things she couldn't live without. I figure there has to be something there; some kind of story hidden.”

“What if there isn't a story?” I shook my head.

“Ethan there's **always** a story.”

* * *

It was so hot that I climbed into bed that night, with nothing but underwear and a bra on, and took out Madison's journal. The edges were bent and the book was becoming tattered. I opened the cover and ran my finger over my friend's familiar handwriting.

January 1, 2012

Dear Journal,

Happy New Year. Well it would be happy for me if I actually had someone to celebrate it with. Someone other than Amber I mean. I want a boyfriend...really bad. I want someone who will excite me and make my life a little better. Life here is just so boring. It's the same crap every day and I'm really getting sick of it.

I go to school, attempt to pass my classes, hang out with Amber, go home, and then sleep. It's the same thing the next day, and the next, and the one after that. My life is so Vanilla! Why can't I be one of those girls who goes to parties and gets wasted? Wait...I am one of those girls but I have no interesting stories that go along with it. I just get drunk, make out with a few guys and that's it. What happened to dancing on tables and flashing random people?

I went dress shopping today for my sweet sixteen party and none of the dresses looked right. They either looked too old

or too girly. Then of course my mother started getting aggravated that I couldn't pick one out and did her whole looking at her watch and sighing really loudly thing.

If that wasn't bad enough, she then proceeded to tell me that she had more important things to do then to sit there all day and watch me try on dress after dress. I apologized, as she presumed I would, and told her I just wanted it to be perfect. She told me that it would never be perfect if I was the one that was wearing it. Some mother, right? I think any words of affection would kill her.

I just wanted this one thing to go right. I wanted to go out with my mother and have some fun. I barely see my mother because she's at this function or that meeting. I miss her and I thought that this would bring us together. But it ended with her fuming and me crying. Kind of like all the other times that we try to spend time together. It's the same damn thing with my father. I can't win.

I don't know why I bother to try anymore. It's obvious that my mother doesn't really care about me. I'm sure that she wouldn't even notice if I just left. I could leave the house with all the money in my bank account and run away and I doubt my mother would even try to look for me. Let's face it, neither of my parents wanted a child. I was an accident and they never let me forget it.

I hate this life. I can't wait until I move out and move on to something a hell of a lot better. And, of course, Amber would be right by my side.

YOLO

Madison

My stomach was in knots and I wanted to cry for my best friend. Even without reading her journal I knew the pain that Madison went through. I couldn't count how many times she called me crying about something her mother did or the way her father said something to her. It was obvious that they never wanted a child and her father definitely didn't want a daughter. Madison's parents treated her more like a tenant than a daughter.

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It broke my heart to see Madison hurting. I begged her time and time again to come stay with me, live with us. My mother wouldn't have minded, she loved Madison like a daughter and treated her as one. But Madison refused saying that, no matter what, her parents were her parents and she still loved them. With a sigh I turned the page and continued to read.

January 17, 2012

Dear Journal,

Yes, I am aware that I haven't written for over two weeks and I'm sorry but there's just not much to talk about. Midterms are coming up and, as usual, Amber is studying like a banshee. I, on the other hand, refuse to study. My theory is that if I don't know the material by now then no amount of studying is going to help me. So I'll wing it. But Amber isn't like that. Amber is the good student. Maybe that's why we get along so well. We are such opposites that we match each other.

Anyway, Amber surprised me with something today and I cannot believe that she actually pulled it off. A few days ago Amber went online and looked up how to create fake IDs. She said she was bored but I think it's because she met this guy at a photography class that she takes and she totally likes him. Like drooling from the mouth, puppy dog eyes kind of like. She's totally smitten.

But he invited her to a club, to listen to music mostly. The club is an eighteen and over club and she didn't want to say no so she just figured she would make herself a fake ID. Oh, did I mention that this guy is in college and really, really hot? Well he is, which is probably why Amber was going through all the trouble.

Anyway she found this how to website and told me that she was going to make herself and me each an ID. Honestly I thought she was lying. It's not that it was so hard but Amber... Well Amber is Amber. She's a good girl. Sort of. Well that doesn't matter. What does matter is that she actually pulled it off!

I didn't believe it at first but she showed me the card and

it was awesome. She made me one too and on our cards it says we are each twenty-one. I am so excited to use mine! Amber already used hers and she said that they didn't even bat an eye.

This is the coolest thing that has happened to me since the year began. Maybe things will change.

YOLO

Madison

My fake ID was stuffed in my wallet, between a credit card and a wrapped condom. I kept the ID hidden as much as I could; I couldn't risk anyone finding it and taking it from me. My fake ID was my gateway to some fun and excitement.

Dismayed at the lack of information I got from the two journal entries, I put Madison's journal back between the mattress and the box spring, out of sight from anyone who happened to come into my room. I tucked my hands behind my head and stared up into the ceiling. So far I had nothing...no clue, no lead, nothing to give me an idea of what happened to my best friend. She still just disappeared without a trace. *But who can disappear like that?*

Chapter Four

“I am so glad that this group made such progress today. We definitely had a great meeting. There was a lot of sharing and a lot of tears but I think we all made great strides. I have such faith in this group,” Marci said, pointedly looking at me. Her eyes glistened with unshed tears. “I know that it's taken a while for everyone to get used to everyone else but I'm glad to see that no one has dropped out of the group. You all are working really hard and I am so proud of you.” Marci started to clap her hands and after a moment, a few others joined her. The rest of us, though, sat there silently. “I thought that we could end today by going around and telling each other what we hope to accomplish in our lives. I think that if each one of us has our own goal to reach while we are working on ourselves we'll figure out the path we need to take.” I raised my hand. “What can I do for your Amber?”

“I would like to start,” I said. There was a collective gasp around me. Everyone but Bailey looked bewildered, like deer caught in headlights. Bailey, on the other hand, was smirking and, I knew, waiting for some smart-assed answer to come from my lips.

“Alright then, Amber, go ahead,” Marci said.

“My goal is to find out what happened to my best friend Madison,” I said. Bailey frowned but he nodded. “She disappeared a couple of months ago and I don't know what happened to her. I

miss her and I need some closure, something I can hold on to now since she's not here." I rubbed my eyes with my hands. It was the first time that I decided to let my guard down around the strangers in the room.

"I think that is a very good goal," Marci said. "But I just hope you are careful and don't get yourself into trouble. I don't want anything to happen to you too." I nodded and let my eyes fall to the floor. I listened with only half an ear as the others said their goals, and when we were finally finished the group filed out into the street. Most of the others went their separate ways but Bailey was sitting on a bench, smoking a cigarette, waiting for me. I pulled a cigarette out of my pocket, lit it with Bailey's, and then sat down next to him.

"I miss her too," Bailey said. "I think about her, you know, every day. I should have told her that I loved her a lot more than I did. I was a horrible boyfriend." I shrugged, saying nothing. Bailey **was** a pretty horrible boyfriend. He blew her off, he lied, and he frequently disappeared for days at a time. But that was who he was and Madison knew what she was getting into when she started dating him. He was a challenge, a challenge that she wanted to take.

"I can't tell you what you want to hear," I told him. "I can't disagree and say you were a great boyfriend because we both know you weren't... not at the beginning at least. But Madison loved that about you. She loved the fights, the make ups. Especially the make ups. She talked in detail about how you two made up after every fight. She loved hating you as much as she hated loving you. You guys... you didn't have a typical relationship but you two weren't typical people. She was happy with you Bailey... frustrated but happy."

"But if I was there with her that night," he said. "If I had come over like she begged me to I would have saved her. I should have been watching out for her. But I didn't... I was selfish and I failed. I'm a dipshit. A sad, lonely failure of a dipshit."

"No you didn't fail," I said hotly. "No one could have imagined that she would disappear. It's not your fault, it's not my fault. Madison was Madison... you could barely save her from herself. How were you supposed to save her from someone else?"

Three Little Lies

It's not like she told you anything about it.”

“If she knew about it.”

“Madison knew something,” I said.

“Oh yeah? What?”

“I'm not sure yet.” I squeezed Bailey's arm and he looked at me. “I'm sorry, babe, but I have to go. Drinks tonight? I still have my fake ID and let's face it; you and I both know that we're not alcoholics. We are only in the group because we had no choice.”

“I agree,” Bailey said. “And my ID is in my wallet. I'll pick you up around nine, okay? Wear something sexy.”

“Don't I always?” I said and Bailey wiggled his eyebrows. I slapped his leg. “You're disgusting.”

“And yet you keep coming back,” Bailey said. He pushed me up, slapped my butt, and then waved me away.

I crossed the street but instead of going straight, I turned right and started to meander down a side road. I was off for the day, for 'good behavior' Rebecca said, and I could do anything I wanted. *But what do I want to do? Better yet, what is there to do?* With my hands in my pockets, I gazed around at the buildings around me. They looked old and sad, leaning to one side like an elderly person with a bad hip. This town was just one big elderly person.

The deeper down the street that I walked, the dirtier and sketchier things looked. There weren't many people the farther I got and the buildings blocked out the sun, giving the street an ominous look. It was colder, too. *Alright, time to go back.* I turned and practically ran back to the sunlight and warmth. I felt so naked, exposed, and vulnerable down the dark street. It was like there was something sinister down the street just waiting to grab me.

After walking for fifteen more minutes, my calf was burning and sweat dripped down my neck, hitting my shirt. *There has to be a better way of getting around. This walking thing is killing me. I have to find a better way.* I crossed back up the street, past the community center, and found myself in front of Rebecca's diner. Even on my days off I couldn't think of anything better to do.

“What's wrong?” Rebecca immediately asked as I stepped

through the threshold. "What happened?"

"I can only walk so far," I said. "It's so tiring. I'm trying to figure out a better way to get around." I slumped down on a stool and put my chin in my hands, staring at my sister. As I watched her at the register I contemplated what our lives could have been like if we spent more time together. If my father made more time for me in his life. We could have been friends, maybe, or even closer. I could imagine telling my sister all of my secrets and listening to all of hers.

But we weren't close, my father saw to that, and I barely knew Rebecca. She was like a stranger who thought she could run my life...a life that I had been running myself since my mother sent me to middle school.

"Why don't you take the bike in the shed behind the store?" Rebecca suggested. "It's my old bike and before you say it, yes it's a little dorky. There's a basket and it is neon green. But it works and it's not rusted...Jacob keeps up with it every month. You're welcome to it if you'd like."

"Really?" I asked. "It's okay if I used it?"

"Sure," Rebecca said. "Just bring your cell phone with you so I can get a hold of you. And don't get into any trouble."

"I'll try not to," I said and I hopped off the stool. "Thanks."

"Before I forget, Amber, a package came for you. It's in the apartment." I changed my direction from the front door to the door leading to the kitchen.

"I'll check that out first and then leave again," I said. I gave my sister a smile and picked a cookie off the platter. Rebecca slapped my hand. "See you later."

Back in the apartment I found the box immediately. It was sitting on the kitchen table, all around, and I picked up a knife as I approached the box. Slicing the knife through the cardboard, I pulled the two sides apart and peered into my package. The first thing I saw was an envelope. With the knife now on the kitchen table, I ripped open the envelope and pulled out a card. It had a picture of two little girls on it. On the inside of the card there was a note.

Dear Amber,

I talked to your mother a week ago and she told me that you are now staying with your sister in Virginia. I am sorry that I didn't get to say goodbye. I am writing this to you because my husband and I are moving out of our house, away from the memories and problems that seemed to find us. I was packing up Madison's things, separating them into piles, and I made a pile just for you. Here are some things that I thought you would like to have. The rest of Madison's things are being donated.

I hope you are well and I wish you the best in the future.

Sincerely,
Angela Porter

I dropped the letter onto the table in disbelief. I knew that Madison's mother lacked a lot of emotion but I didn't know that she could be so cold. It was like she didn't care what happened to Madison, or what was still going on. She just wanted to move on with no worries. Her daughter was just another possession to her. *Stupid bitch didn't know how great Madison really was* I thought angrily.

Carefully I flipped the box to the side and shoveled the contents out onto the table, taking great care as they slid out. They fell into a messy pile and, after throwing the box to the side, I started to sift through my new possessions. I broke up the clothes, costume jewelry, pictures of the two of us put in frames, and various types of make up into different piles. As I shifted through the stuff, I stumbled upon a red book. It was an address book.

Curious, I opened the book and flipped through the pages. There were names written down in Madison's handwriting with dates next to them. There was also a duffel bag in the box and I unzipped the top just to find red material poking out of it. *What the hell is all of this stuff?* I wondered. The box only created more questions in my head instead of answering the ones I already had.

"Amber are you okay up there?" Rebecca's voice rang up the stairs.

"I'm fine," I said. "I'll be down in a minute." I put

everything back in the box except for the address book. Tearing the letter from Madison's mother in half once, then again, and again until it was nothing more than confetti, I swiped the pieces into the garbage pail, and brought the box into my room. Grabbing the backpack I brought with me, I shoved Madison's address book, along with her journal and her laptop into it, zippering it closed. Swinging the strap over my shoulder, I grabbed my iPod and headed out of the apartment, using the backstairs instead of the diner entrance. "I'll be back later," I said when I saw Rebecca in the kitchen. "Thanks for lending me your bike. It's cool of you."

"Well, I'm so glad I'm finally cool in your eyes," Rebecca said. I looked up at her but she was grinning. "Remember, answer your phone if I call and be safe. I don't want to explain to dad and mom how you got hurt. They'll never trust me."

"Right and then you won't be the perfect daughter anymore," I snickered. "See you later."

"Bye."

* * *

I found out that Rebecca wasn't wrong when she said that her bike looked dorky. She mentioned the green paint and the basket, but she failed to say anything about the flowers that decorated the seat or the pink streamers that came out of the white, polka dotted handle bars. If I wasn't so desperate to get out and about I would have never agreed to use the bicycle. But it was my only form of transportation and I needed to go. I wasn't the type of person to be able to stick around one place too long. I was a rolling stone, as the saying went.

After checking that the tires were filled with the right amount of air, I swung my good leg over the seat and started to pedal. I went slowly at first, trying to get my wooden leg accustomed to the movement, and slipped from behind the diner. I stumbled, my wooden foot slipping off the pedal, and I met the pavement with a hard thud. Pain shot up my arm and, looking over, I saw blood bead against my skin.

"Damn," I muttered as I pulled myself up, dragging the bike with me. "Let's try this again." I straddled the bike, securing

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my wooden foot on the pedal before pushing off. Making sure that I didn't hit anyone, I angled the bike towards the one street I was told would lead out of the town. I didn't have to meet Bailey for a few hours so I could ride anywhere I wanted without a problem. If I got lost I always had the GPS on my phone. I was set.

The sun beat down on me as I pedaled down the road. It went from pavement to dirt and dust kicked up all around me as I traveled farther and farther away from the apartment. I loved feeling the wind in my hair and the plastic handlebars gripped in my hands. Pushing the pedals hard, I climbed a hill and then let my feet off while gravity pulled me back down the other side. I felt like I was on a roller coaster and I squealed in joy, throwing my head back. I couldn't remember having this much fun in a long, long time.

It was only when I was puffing out air and my leg felt like it was going to fall off did I stop and climb off the bike. I had no idea how far away from the apartment I was but I was surrounded by nothing but trees. I pulled my bike into the shade, propped it up against the trunk of one tree, and sat down on the grass. There wasn't a car in sight for as far as I could see. I took a bottle of water that I swiped from the diner and opened the cap. I let the water flow into my mouth, swallowing greedily. I was hot and sticky, but I felt great.

I took out Madison's address book and looked through the book again. The dates were specific and below the dates were times, durations. It had to mean something but I was stumped. I didn't much believe in a higher power, or signs from anything, but for the moment that I was sitting there wishing that Madison would send me a sign. I crossed my fingers that I would find something, anything, which would point me in the right direction.

As I stared at the book, I heard the rumbling of a car on the dirt road. I looked up to see a red Mercedes convertible driving up, roof and windows down. There was an older man in the driver's seat with a suit on. His tie was billowing in the wind. Next to him was Ethan.

"Pull over," I could hear Ethan say to the older man. The man did and the car stopped right in front of me. "Hey Amber."

"Hey Ethan," I said. "What are you doing here?"

"I live right up the road." Ethan pointed to a house up the hill. I didn't notice the house at all until Ethan pointed it out. But now that I looked at it, I couldn't help but stare at it in awe. Even from my spot on the ground I could tell that the house was big enough to be a mansion. There were two levels that I could see and its own private road. There was a brick wall and wrought iron gate around the house acting like a barrier between the house and the rest of the world.

"That's your **house**?" I asked. "It's...big." I looked at the man next to Ethan. "And who is he? Is he your driver or something?" The man chuckled.

"No I'm his father," the man said and I blushed. "I'm Elliot Hunter. How do you do Amber?"

"Fine thank you," I stuttered. "Your house is amazing sir." I didn't know what had gotten into me. I was never this polite to people, ever, but for some reason Ethan's father kind of scared me. He was so...there. Noticeable.

"It better be amazing," Mr. Hunter joked. "I worked my butt off to get it for my family."

"My Dad is the mayor," Ethan boasted. *The mayor? Really? That explains why he didn't have enough time with his parents while growing up.*

"Nice to know," I said. I gathered up my things and put them back in the bag. "Well, I better go. I have to find my way home."

"We can give you a ride if you would like," Ethan said. "I'm sure we can maneuver the bike in the trunk."

"I have a better idea," Mr. Hunter said. "Why don't I drop you two kids off back at the house and go do what I have to do."

"That's very nice, sir, but I told my sister I would be back soon."

"Her sister is Jacob's girlfriend," Ethan informed his father.

"Well, I'll go by the diner and tell your sister where you are. I'm sure she won't mind."

"And you're sure it's okay?"

"Of course." Mr. Hunter was already in the process of putting the car in park and climbing out. He popped his trunk, took my bike, and like magic, managed to squeeze it into the tiny space

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of the trunk. “Now get in the back and I’ll drop you two off.”

“Thank you.” Ethan opened his door and let me slip into the back. When we were all safely in the car, Mr. Hunter turned it around and drove back to the house.

* * *

“You could have mentioned your dad was the freaking mayor of the town, Ethan,” I hissed at him. Mr. Hunter had driven away leaving the two of us behind. Ethan walked through the house with me following, like a puppy, behind him. “Or that you’re loaded.”

“Why? So I could miss the way you stutter and panic when meeting him? No way!” Ethan laughed. “That was priceless...I couldn’t have imagined something better than that.”

“You’re a jerk,” I said. “You could have warned me so I wasn’t blind-sided. Geez Ethan...I thought we were friends.”

“That’s funny... I thought you were just trying to deal with me because your sister made you,” Ethan replied. I stopped mid-step and stared at him. He knew. I looked down in shame. He knew. I didn’t know how, but he knew. “It’s fine, I get it. It’s not that big of a deal, honest.” But it **was** a big deal.

“I’m sorry,” I said. “I should have told you before.” There weren’t many times I felt ashamed, but this was one of those times. I shrugged, shuffling my feet against the tiled floor of the kitchen. Ethan motioned for me to sit on a stool and I hopped up on one, swinging my legs around.

“I didn’t expect you to,” he said. “And let’s face it...it was the only way I was going to get you to hang out with me. I was taking the chance when I had it.”

“So you had an ulterior motive.” Ethan nodded proudly.

“Of course I did,” he said. “Are you offended now?”

“Now I think that makes us even.”

“Agreed.” Ethan took out two glasses, placing them on the island in front of me. Rummaging through the fridge, he produced two cans of coke, opening them, and pouring each in a glass. With a flourish, he dropped two straws into the glasses and handed one to me.

“Thanks,” I said as I took the glass. Pulling the liquid up through the straw, I let the cold drink trickle down my throat. The bubbles burned and my eyes watered. Swallowing, I looked at him. “And anyway, it’s not like I can get rid of you. You’re around all the time, hanging out like a little puppy in the diner. It’s pathetic. I thought if I hung out with you it wouldn’t make you look so desperate. Really, I had no other choice but to call you a friend.” I turned my eyebrows up, looking at him with false pity.

“Thanks,” Ethan said dryly. “That makes me feel so much better.”

“Well, it should.” I stuck my tongue out at him. He smiled. Balling up the straw wrapper, Ethan tossed it at me, and it fell smack dab down my shirt, disappearing. I saw his eyes drop. “Hey, buddy, my face is up here, not down there.” Using my right hand, I jerked Ethan’s head up until his eyes met mine.

“If you don’t want a guy to stare you might not want to wear such noteworthy clothes.” *Noteworthy? Really?*

“Whatever, it’s a free country,” I argued. “I can wear whatever I want. And it doesn’t mean that you can throw things down my shirt just to have a reason to look.”

“Then you can’t complain when a guy stares. It’s not fair to us.” Oh, I loved it; the whole ‘it’s my fault that I stare at your boobs, I’m hardwired that way’ speech. It was the go-to speech for every guy. Pathetic. I ran my fingers through my hair.

“Just show me around the damn house, would you?” I said. “I’m beginning to regret agreeing to come here.”

“Now who’s being the jerk?”

“Still you,” I said. I motioned my hands forward. “Let’s go, move it along.”

Ethan walked into a room that was filled to the brim with trophies. All different trophies and medals decorated the walls. Some medals even hung from the ceiling. Ethan closed the door and I saw even more medals hanging on the back of it. I weaved through the trophies, eyeing them.

“These are all mine,” Ethan told me.

“All of them?”

“Every single one of them.” I stared at Ethan and he shrugged. “I was a busy kid, you know. My father didn’t want me

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to have any down time. He didn't want me to get into trouble."

"So how did you win all of these? Are you in the Olympics or something?"

"Nope," Ethan said. "Not yet anyway." Not yet? Did that mean he wanted to get into the Olympics? Or was this another dream his father had for him? *Does the man control everything of Ethan's life?*

"Then what are all these for?"

"Everything. Soccer, basketball, fencing, and almost anything else you could think of."

"Fencing." I repeated. "People actually **do** stuff like that?" Ethan laughed, throwing his head back animatedly.

"My father wanted me to at least try everything once. Then when he found out how good I was with them, he wanted me to continue. I don't have the heart to tell him that I don't really want to play sports."

"Why not?" I asked. "Why do what your father wants you to do? Me? I do what I want to do and I don't care about what my family thinks. They have to love me no matter what, right? So why the hell try to be someone I'm not and do things I don't want to do?"

"Because my father and I are all each of us has. He's my only family and I'm his only family. I want him to be proud of me and I want him happy. It's not that I hate the sports...I just don't like them that much. But it's worth it if my father is happy. He is my dad, you know?"

"I know," I said. "But I just think you're being spineless. If you don't stand up for yourself now, then how the hell are you planning on doing that in the future?"

"I'll deal with that when I have to. Right now I'm dealing with this." I didn't know what 'this' was but I bit my lip to keep from asking. "Come on, let me show you the best part." Ethan ushered me out of the trophy room, closing the door behind us, and to my surprise, took my hand. The hairs on the back of my neck stood on edge and my eyes bulged.

"Uh...what exactly are you doing?" I said, hating the way my voice quivered.

"Sorry," Ethan said, dropping my hand. "I don't know why

Melissa Wolff

I did that. It was stupid.” Ethan walked quicker and I had to jog a little to keep up with him. I nearly fell into him when he stopped short in front of a pair of floor to ceiling glass doors. “Now this is my own personal oasis,” he said. I followed his eyes outside and gasped.

Chapter Five

“It’s Olympic sized,” Ethan said as we went through a set of glass doors, stepping into a sun room, a pool dead smack in the middle. “The deepest it goes is twelve feet. It’s heated for those winter nights.” Ethan pointed to an adjacent room. The glass doors were fogged up and I couldn’t see into it. All I could see were shadows. “That’s the Jacuzzi. I don’t use it much during the summer, though, because it’s too hot, you know?” I nodded as if it made perfect sense. In reality I had only been in a Jacuzzi once in my life and that was the summer, before when I was a camp counselor. I was there with Bailey, before he started dating Madison, and he kissed me. My first kiss. *Back when life was simple and everything worked out in the end.*

“Ain’t you the lucky one,” I said. “Most kids dream of having a pool, any type of pool, and you have the best. I guess it’s a perk of having your dad as the mayor. Do you love it or what?”

“Not really,” Ethan admitted. “I feel like I have to act a certain way and do certain things because he’s my father, you know? Like I can’t be myself. I feel like my identity is only tied in with my father and I don’t know when I’m going to be able to dig a way for myself.”

“Well at least your parents care,” I said. “At least you weren’t a pawn, used as leverage in a divorce case. You know your parents wanted you, at least a little bit.” I bit my lip. “At least you

weren't a broken condom baby.”

“No I wasn't,” Ethan agreed. “But trust me when I say appearances aren't what they seem.” I tilted my head to the side.

“What does that mean?” I asked. It was none of my business, and Ethan obviously had his own issues he needed to deal with. I wasn't sure why I was trying to get involved.

“Nothing,” Ethan said. “Hey Amber?”

“Yeah?”

“Hold your nose!” Ethan grabbed me and threw me into the pool as if I was a feather. Water engulfed me, soaking me and making my prosthetic heavy on my leg. I came up sputtering and wiping my eyes. I looked around, trying to catch my bearings, when I felt Ethan's arm around me, leading to the side. I was coughing, gagging on the water. Chlorine burned my nose and throat. I grabbed onto the side as I tried to catch my breath.

“Jerk!” I exclaimed once I saw Ethan's face. “You are the biggest jerk ever!”

“I'm sorry but I couldn't pass up the opportunity.” Ethan tried to brush my hair from my face but I slapped his hand away.

Using my upper body and my one good leg, I lifted myself out of the pool, sliding against the tile floor until I was a good foot away from Ethan. Standing, I tested the sturdiness of the prosthetic before maneuvering myself up onto a chair. Glaring at Ethan, I slid my shorts off, followed by my shirt. Wrapping a towel around my torso, I waited for Ethan to join me.

He climbed the ladder up, his hands gripping the handles until he was out of the pool. I handed him a towel and he blushed when he noticed the clothes on the floor.

“What did you expect me to do?” I asked him. “You soaked my clothes, the only clothes I had. Was I supposed to just stand there in wet clothes until I decided to leave?”

“No,” he stuttered. “Of course not. I guess I didn't expect you to strip down. Most girls would have gone into a bathroom or something.”

“I'm not most girls,” I snapped. “I thought you knew that by now.” I thought that Ethan was going to plop down on the chair next to me but instead I felt his arms wrap around my back and under my legs, lifting me from where I was. I snatched my

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clothes off the floor before he could move me. “What the hell are you doing?”

“Getting you some new clothes,” he said. “You can borrow some of mine to go home.”

“I’m not going home,” I told him. “I’m supposed to meet a friend.”

“Well that’s even a better reason for me to give you something to wear. Unless, of course, your friend likes the wet dog look.” He carried me out of the sun room, up the stairs and into his own room, kicking the door closed behind us. Putting me down on the bed, Ethan leaned up against his door frame and watched as I inspected the prosthetic. *Well aside from being water logged, the thing doesn’t look too bad. Maybe a day out in the sun is all it needs.*

“I wouldn’t be like this if someone didn’t throw me in the pool,” I pointed out. “Thanks for that, by the way.”

“Oh please,” he said. “It was a harmless prank. I was trying to have some fun. You need to lighten up.”

“Sorry but I don’t do ‘lighten up’.”

“Why not? It’s not like you’re going anywhere. You might as well enjoy it.”

“That’s the thing,” I snapped. “I don’t want to enjoy it. I didn’t **ask** to be here and I don’t **want** to be here. This is hell, Ethan, and I have at least another month of it. This is not something I’m enjoying.”

“Not even me?” He asked. My stomach twisted painfully.

“I have to go,” I said instead of answering his questions. I threw on my wet clothes.

“Amber, don’t do this. I’m sorry. Don’t be so serious.”

“You don’t get to tell me what to do,” I told Ethan. “I’m leaving. Don’t try to stop me.”

“Amber-”

“Bye Ethan.”

* * *

“So basically, this guy was trying to have fun, trying to act his age; which is the same age as you if I’m not mistaken; and you

completely overreacted,” Bailey said. We sat in a hole-in-the-wall club nursing two light beers. I could already feel the alcohol getting to my system and I welcomed it. Blood rushed through my ears and my limbs ached.

“He pushed me in the pool,” I said. “I could have drowned because he was being an idiot,” I told Bailey.

“I’m sure he would have saved you,” he said. “You weren’t going to die. Stop being dramatic.” Sticking my tongue out at him, I flashed Bailey the bird.

“And before that, he was staring at my tits! I mean, what the hell?!”

“He’s a fifteen year old kid, Amber, you’re lucky that’s all he tried to do.”

“Yeah well, I didn’t appreciate it and so I left. If you think that I was overreacting-”

“I do think that.”

“Too bad,” I said. “Too damn bad.” I finished my beer in one swift gulp and a waitress materialized next to our table, another beer on her tray, handing it to me.

“Do you dig this guy?” Bailey asked. He was already on his third beer.

“No,” I said. I belched and the two of us laughed as the other patrons eyed us, disgusted. “He is so annoying and he follows me around like a little puppy. Do you know that he knew all about me before I even knew his name? It’s so...creepy! And get this...his father is the bloody mayor!”

“The mayor, huh?” Bailey mused. “Well you sure as hell could do worse.”

“I don’t want to do anything!” I screeched. “I don’t want anything to do with him...he’s weird and so...ugh!”

“And you really want me to believe that you have no interest in him?”

“Yes because it’s true.” I drank more of my beer, quickly catching up with Bailey. “He’s not my type, Bailey. Ethan...he’s a goody two shoes, like the kids at school. It seems like he never does anything wrong. And he’s **always** smiling. I want to punch him.” Soon we were both on our fourth beer and my head started swimming.

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“Funny because it doesn’t seem that way to me,” he said. “Are you sure you don’t have a thing for him?”

“I’m sure,” I said. I went to stand up and the room spun. I sat back down. “I think that this has to be my last one, Bailey,” I said slowly. I could hear my words slurring. I need to go home soon. Rebecca is going to wonder. She doesn’t know that I’m here.”

“Are you sure about that?” Bailey said with a frown. I gave him a perplexed look and he pointed behind me. Even as I swiveled my chair I knew that there was going to be trouble. I was right. Rebecca was standing there, Jacob next to her, her face red and her eyes were nearly popping out of her head.

“Are. You. Fucking. Kidding. Me.” Rebecca ground out.

“Rebecca I-”

“You. Outside. Now.” I stumbled off the seat and Jacob had to grab my arm to keep me from falling on my face. Rebecca glared at Bailey. “Bailey... I should have known you were behind all of this. Do me a favor and stay the hell away from my sister. You are nothing but bad news, Bailey. For all we know, **you're** the reason Madison ran away.” Bailey stood up so quickly that the chair toppled down behind him.

“Hey!” I cried, jerking myself out Jacob’s grip. “Rebecca that was low. Leave Bailey alone, he didn’t have anything to do with Madison’s disappearance. He loved her.”

“Right,” Rebecca scoffed.

“You don’t know what you’re talking about,” Bailey said. His face was red. “Don’t talk about Madison. You don’t know anything about her, or about us. Rebecca you are nothing but a stuck up, spoiled brat that thinks she’s better than everyone else.”

“Watch what you say, buddy,” Jacob said. He was standing next to Rebecca and I slipped myself next to Bailey. “Don’t say anything that you’ll regret.”

“Like what?” Bailey taunted. “Like your girlfriend is a bastard child?”

I couldn’t tell who threw the first punch but within seconds the two men were rolling around on the floor, tables and chairs tossed to the side, and blood was splattering against the wood. Rebecca screamed as I stood there, shocked, with my hands over my mouth and my eyes wide.

Oh crap.

* * *

“Drunk?!” Rebecca screeched as she wrapped up a bag of ice. She placed it on Jacob's left eye and he flinched. “I'm sorry baby,” she murmured to him and she kissed his forehead. Then her eyes whipped to me. “Drunk, Amber, really?”

“I'm sorry,” I said, my eyes on the counter. Shortly after we got home, Rebecca took my fake ID from my pocket and cut it into tiny pieces. There was no way I could salvage it which was Rebecca's plan all along. “I didn't mean to get drunk. Honest.”

“You didn't mean to?” Rebecca asked. “You didn't mean to get drunk? So what did you mean to do, then?” I shrugged. *To forget Madison? Forget this whole mess? Pretend that everything was right for once in my life?* The reasons were endless. “Did you mean to just sneak into a bar and have a few drinks? That's all? You meant to lie to me about everything and hope to get away with it?” When I didn't answer, Rebecca shook me. My head was still swimming and nausea was playing at the very edge of my stomach, threatening to take over.

“I don't know,” I managed to get out. “I wanted to hang out with a friend, someone who actually knew me. I wanted someone to understand me without having to explain everything.”

“So you pick Bailey?” Rebecca shook her head. “Bailey of all people?”

“It's not like there's many people to pick from,” I shot out. “And I already said sorry. What else do you want?”

I walked over to the corner drawer, pulled it open, and extracted a bottle of Tylenol from it. Opening the bottle, I shook out two, slid them in my mouth, and swallowed them dry. I put the bottle back and closed the drawer before turning to my sister.

“You know, I knew you were going to be hard to handle,” Rebecca said. “I knew that you had a little attitude and some kind of smart-ass comment for everything. Dad warned me about you. But I thought you and I were working past that. Day after day I think that you and I are getting closer and you are really trying. And now this shit happens. It makes me wonder if it was a ruse all

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along.”

“It wasn’t a fucking ruse,” I muttered. “God forbid I make a mistake. No that’s not allowed in this house...not with **my** sister.”

“Go to your room, Amber. Just go because I can’t stand to look at you right now.”

“You can’t tell me what to do,” I said. “You’re not my boss.”

“You’re in my house and our father put me in charge. I think that means that I **am** your boss. So get the hell into your room. Now!”

Kicking the chair away from me, I stomped into my room and slammed the door. Through the thin wood I could hear Rebecca say something to Jacob and he responded. *That’s right, Rebecca, go call daddy. God only knows that you can’t handle things yourself. Go call him and tell him how horrible I’ve been and how much of a delinquent I am. I don’t care anymore. I have things in my life that are more important than this crap.*

There was nothing left to do but wait; wait until Rebecca released me from the room. Wait until my father called me to yell at me. Wait to find out my punishment. So, to pass the time, I pulled out Madison’s book and looked at the dates next to the names. Some names had more than one date next to them. *What do they mean? Birthdays? Anniversaries? Death dates?* I flipped through the pages of her journal, desperately trying to think of something, anything, that would make sense. Nothing was popping out at me. When I was about give up for the night and go back to reading Madison’s emails, something in her journal caught my eye.

In her address book, Madison wrote the name ‘Bill’, an email address, and then the date ‘February 28, 2012’. *I’ve seen that name before!* I thought excitedly. With shaking hands, I flipped back to the front of the journal until I found the name. It had the same date next to it. My mouth went dry and my hands shook as I ran my fingers over the letter of the name. *But why this date?* I tried to remember any of my friends who had a friend named Bill. There was no one I could recall.

I was about to read the journal entry that corresponded to Madison’s address book when my door swung open and Rebecca stood there, her face just as red as before, and she was holding the

phone.

“Dad wants to talk to you,” she spat out. “You are in some serious shit little sister. Congratulations.”

* * *

Community service. Thanks to my little stunt, I had no choice but to participate in some kind of community service to ‘rectify my behavior’ according to my father. Apparently working at the diner wasn’t enough, I needed to be responsible for my actions. For the rest of the summer, unless I was at the diner, my meetings, or working on community service, I had to report what I did to my sister. I had to tell Rebecca where I was going, what time I would be back, and who was going to be there. Under no circumstances was I allowed to see Bailey. *So this is what it feels like to be a prisoner in my own home* I mused. *It would easier if Rebecca just put a tracking anklet on me. That way she can see what I’m doing every second of every day.*

“I’ll pick you up at the end of the day,” Rebecca said as I got out of the car. I was in front of the church three blocks away from Rebecca’s diner. She wouldn’t let me walk there, said she didn’t trust me, so Jacob took control of the diner while she dropped me off. “Don’t try to get out of this, Amber, and don’t do anything stupid. I know people here and I told them about you. They are going to be watching you so don’t get yourself into situations you shouldn’t be in.”

“I won’t,” I said hotly. “I’m not stupid, you know.”

“Could have fooled me,” Rebecca snipped. “I’ll be back at four. You better be here.” I glared at Rebecca one last time before she sped off down the adjacent block. I sighed. I had no choice but to go inside the church.

It was empty when I entered and my steps echoed off the surrounding walls. I slid into one of the pews and looked around, waiting for someone to come and get me. I didn’t know who I was meeting, or what I was doing. I was instructed to go into the church, sit in the back pew, and wait. *Wait for what? Some magic trick?* I snickered into my hand. I could hear the ticking of a clock nearby and wondered how long I would have to sit there. I

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shivered as I looked up at the stained glass windows of the church, Sunlight streamed through, creating a rainbow effect on the front. Statues of saints balanced on legs, watching me. I could almost feel the fake eyes following my every move. *Creepy.*

“Well hello again, Amber.” I looked up to see Mr. Hunter staring down at me. I smiled before standing up. *He’s in charge of this too? How does he get the time to do everything? I can barely handle one task a day, let alone his plateful.* “I am so glad that you decided to join us today. I think we’ll have a lot of fun.” Mr. Hunter winked and I chuckled. If he wanted to pretend that I was there under my own accord, I wasn’t going to argue with him. He motioned for me to move over and, confused, I sat back down. Mr. Hunter sat next to me, staring forward. “You’re a special girl, Amber, do you know that?”

“I guess,” I mumbled. *Where is this going? Why aren’t we going somewhere?* My heart pounded against my ribs and my eyes darted around, looking for an escape route.

“I know you’ve been through a lot. Your sister told me some and so did Ethan. I just wanted you to know that if you need someone to talk to, I’m here for you.”

“Thanks,” To my relief, Mr. Hunter stood up and stepped out of the pew. I followed and we left the church, crossing the parking lot and heading towards the building on the far side. The building was built with solid red brick, weathered and worn. “This is the school that some of the kids go to, mostly on scholarships. In the summer we turn it into a camp for those parents who can’t be home and can’t leave their kids home alone. Today we are helping the children, the campers, paint a mural on the wall in the mess room.”

“The mess room?”

“The cafeteria, Amber.” I nodded and walked through the threshold of the building as Mr. Hunter held the door. I waited until he caught up and then the two of us descended the stairs, walking through yet another door. We were greeted by about two to three dozen kids, all under the age of ten, and about a dozen counselors. Ethan, of course, was one of the counselors and he waved at me when he saw me next to his father.

“What are you doing here?” Ethan asked me. He gave his

father a hug.

“Long story,” I said. I was still a little peeved at his stunt earlier that week. “So what should I do?”

“I’ll show you,” Ethan said. He hesitated and it looked like he was going to attempt to grab my hand again so I shoved my hands in my pockets. “This way.” The other counselors’ eyes followed me, watching my every move. None of them smiled and I wondered how much they knew about me. “So basically we help the kids draw what they want on the mural and then step back and watch as they paint the creation is. Really we’re just watching them to make sure they don’t do anything unsafe. There’s not much more for us to do.”

“So we’re glorified babysitters?”

“Well yes,” Ethan said. “But we don’t get paid. This is completely voluntary and most of the people here are doing it to get credit for community service.”

“Why?”

“They need the credit to make confirmation.” Right, confirmation. The thing I didn’t bother to do. What would Ethan do if he knew that I didn’t make confirmation? Better yet, what would his father do? *Why do I care? I’m sure there are many people where who haven’t made confirmation, or even got baptized. It’s not like you’re the only one. They’re not going to know if you don’t tell them so don’t open your mouth.*

“Earth to Amber,” Ethan said, waving his hand in front of my face.

“What?” I said, forgetting that I was still mad at him.

“Are you okay?” He cocked his head to the side, looking at me with concerned eyes.

“I’m fine.”

“You sure?” I nodded. “Okay then.”

“So...uh...now what?” I asked. The others were already busy with the kids and no one looked like they needed much of any help. Ethan handed me a pencil.

“Now we draw.”

* * *

Three Little Lies

Hours flew by and I found myself lost in drawing on the wall. Kids screamed, running around me with paint splattered all over them, but it didn't bother me. I kept sketching away, my pencil scratching up against the wall, designs coming to life in front of me. I only snapped out of it when the bell rang and kids started lining up. It was lunch time so, as the kids marched into the next room, I took stock of the situation. The paints were empty, most of it on drop cloths. We would need more to finish the project so, after finding him in the group of other volunteers, I walked up to Ethan.

"We're going to need more paint, sponges, and just about everything else," I said to him. "What should I do? Where can I find all the supplies?"

"There is a truck out back," Ethan said. "It will have all the supplies you need. Pick up as much as you want and I'll come get the rest."

"So where's the truck?"

"Out the back door, right there. You can't miss it."

"Do you need keys for it?"

"It should be unlocked."

"Okay. I'll be right back," I said. I went out the back door like Ethan instructed and immediately saw the truck. It was a huge box truck which, thankfully, was unlocked. I pulled open the doors and saw boxes upon boxes of supplies. I started pulling boxes off the truck and stacking them on the dolly next to the truck.

After the fifth box my arms were getting tired. I tried to pick up the next box but it slipped from my hand landed with a thud back onto the floor of the truck. A hollow sound emanated from the box. *That's strange* I thought. I crouched down only to see a very subtle knob on the top of the panel of the truck. I tugged and the panel fell down, revealing a little cubby hole. A very cold cubby hole. *An ice box? For what? Food maybe? Ice cream for the kids?* The cubby hole was empty, no wrappers left behind or anything. I made a mental note to ask Ethan about it later.

"Amber are you coming?" I heard Ethan ask behind me. I straightened up and closed the panel.

"Yep," I said and turned. He was standing there, waiting for me. "I got everything we need." Giving him a smile, I started

Melissa Wolff

pushing the dolly back into the building.

Chapter Six

I woke up in a cold sweat, my shirt damp and the sheets wrapped around my legs like a cocoon. I sat up, shivering, and looked around my room. It was dark and the shadows loomed in the corners menacingly. With shaking hands I turned on the light and pulled the blanket out from around me. I swung my leg over the bed and rested my elbows on my thighs.

It was just a dream I told myself. *A stupid nightmare, that's all. There's nothing more to it than that.* Still, I grabbed my crutches, and started hobbling to the door. Leaning on my good leg, I swung the door open and started my trek across the apartment to the kitchen. The apartment was just as dark as my room and a chill went through me. It was so quiet that you could hear a pin drop. The wind howled outside, slapping tree branches against the building.

I rested my crutches against the counter and held onto the open refrigerator door. Peering in, I took out a bottle of water and let the liquid coat my sore vocal cords. Although I didn't hear myself, I had a feeling that I was crying out in my sleep, yelling really, based on how much my throat hurt. I was surprised that Rebecca didn't come charging into my room again. *Maybe she doesn't care anymore. She's still pretty pissed at me. She probably heard and didn't bother to check up on me.*

After finishing the bottle of water and putting with the rest

of the recyclables underneath the sink, I turned around and gasped. Standing not six inches away from me was Jacob. He looked like he had just woken up himself. His hair was disheveled and the shirt he wore was backwards. I jumped and stepped back, knocking into the refrigerator. Though he was still hanging out in the living room when I went to bed, I never expected to see him in the middle of the night. He had an eerie smile on his face. *Why didn't Rebecca tell me about this?* I wondered. The answer was simple: she didn't want word to get back to our father. If he knew that Jacob was staying over, especially that he was staying in Rebecca's room, he would be down in Virginia before Rebecca could blink. Her good girl image would crumble under her feet.

"Hey there," Jacob said. "What are you doing up this late?"

"Just getting some water," I said. "What's it to you?" I tried to grab at my crutches but Jacob's arm stopped me. He rested a hand against the fridge, on either side of my body, trapping me in. "Jacob what the hell are you doing?"

"Nothing," he said. "Just trying to have a talk with my girlfriend's sister. Is that such a crime?"

"No but you're invading my personal space. I'm very touchy about my personal space. Now move." I tried to push his hands away but he wouldn't budge.

"Don't be so hostile, Amber, I'm trying to be your friend you know. I think Rebecca would like it if we were friends."

"Well it's a good thing, then, that I make it my goal not to make my sister happy." Again I tried to move away but instead of turning to the side, Jacob took his hands and wrapped them around my arms.

"You are so pretty, Amber," Jacob said. He was so close that I could feel his breath against my face. My stomach cramped and I had to swallow down a retch. "You are much prettier than Rebecca. And you got sass...I like sass."

"Take your damn hands off of me, Jacob." Jacob removed one hand only to use it to push back the hair from my face. I gritted my teeth and my eyes darted around for something, anything that I could grab. I wanted to smash something against him, stopping him from whatever he was planning on doing. There was nothing.

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“Little red riding hood is a feisty one, I see,” Jacob said. “I want you, Amber, I can’t hide it anymore.”

“Screw you,” I hissed.

“Don't bother denying it. I know you want me to. I saw it from the first day you set eyes on me. Those sexy, smoldering eyes.”

What the hell is going on with Jacob? Is he drunk? Is he crazy? I subtly tried to sniff around, seeing if I could smell any alcohol. I couldn't. Jacob was stone cold sober and still doing what he was doing. Fabulous, my sister was sleeping with a monster. It was the icing on the cake. As he inched closer, his eyes roaming down my face and his one hand playing with my collar bone, I spied a handle protruding from the sink. My fingers wrapped around the handle and I lifted it slightly; it was a metal spatula left over from dinner. Once my grip was tight, I swung the spatula forward and hit Jacob square in the cheek. His hands immediately dropped away from me and I steadied myself against the counter for half a second.

Thinking quickly, I grabbed my crutches and headed to my room. Jacob was still gripping his face but his eyes were darting around for me. I quickened my pace; tripping, stumbling, and almost falling as Jacob regained his senses. He was coming up fast so, the moment I was in my room, I closed the door and, using it for balance, pushed my desk in front of it. *Damn you, Rebecca, for taking the lock off!* A second later, Jacob pushed into the door it didn't budge. In the silence of the night I could hear him cursing. *How can she not hear this?* I wondered, thinking of my sister sleeping peacefully in her bed. *Can't she hear the commotion, people walking around?* It wasn't like the apartment was so large and spacious.

“Amber open this door,” Jacob said. His voice was strong and menacing. “Open this door now and I'll help you get back on your sister's good side. I can get her to stop making you go to community service. Come on Amber, let's be allies. We need each other and we can both benefit from this.” I rolled my eyes in disgust as I attached my prosthetic. Grabbing a jacket, and my back pack, I threw the window open and pushed one foot out.

I stepped onto the rickety fire escape, looking over the

edge. It was a long way down if the thing fell apart, like it looked like it was going to. I had no other choice, though, so gritting my teeth, I descended the steps quickly and quietly as I could. I crossed my fingers that Jacob didn't try to meet me down there.

When my feet hit the ground, I dashed off. I didn't even bother to see where I was going because I had only one thing on my mind: I had to get away from Jacob. I walked down the deserted road, keeping my eyes peeled for a familiar place. I hadn't talked to Bailey since the incident at the bar, and I didn't even know where I could find him in the early morning hours. His cell phone was off and the voicemail was full.

The whole town was sleeping; everyone was locked away in their cozy houses resting for the next day. I wondered what would happen if Rebecca woke up and found out I was gone. What story would Jacob tell her? I could already imagine Jacob telling Rebecca that I was the one who was trying to seduce **him**. He would make himself look like the victim, and it wasn't going to help that I wasn't there to defend myself. It was a chance I had to take though, to keep my distance.

I was the only one who seemed to be on the street and I had nowhere to go. Since there wasn't a place that was open, I shuffled over to a bright street light and sat down on the curb. Taking out Madison's journal from my bag, I turned to the page that I marked before.

February 28, 2012: Bill

Dear Journal,

I met with Bill today. I don't think Bill is his real name but that's what he wanted me to call him. He was very specific about the name and I couldn't call him anything else. Weird, I know, but I guess I have to get used to the weird.

He wasn't that bad looking...he had a nice smile, beautiful eyes, and his body was comfortable. He wasn't ripped like some kind of creepy body builder but he wasn't fat either. He was...cuddly. And he was nice, which was a plus. He smiled a lot at me and told me I was pretty.

It wasn't as horrible as I thought it would be and by the

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end of the night I was even enjoying myself. Bill told me that he would call for me again and soon. He said I was a great listener and he enjoyed my company.

After I left Bill I went to the mall and bought myself a new pair of boots. They are ankle boots but they are cute. They make my legs look really hot in them too. They are perfect for now...I mean for what is going on. I had a little money left over so I put it in my piggy bank. That's going to be the money I use to leave this God-forsaken house once and for all.

Who knew that the fake ID card that Amber made me would help me in so many different ways?

YOLO

Madison

My suspicions were confirmed. Whoever Bill was, he wasn't someone Madison met through one of her friends. *But do they still know about him?* I didn't know about him and I was her best friend. Would she really tell other people something she wouldn't tell me? I had a hard time believing that Madison would keep anything from me but it had to be partially true if I didn't know who he was.

Where did she meet Bill? In a bar? At a club? How old was he? *Too old for her, probably.* She went out on a date with him when she was dating Bailey. Were they friends or was this date more... intimate? *So does that mean she was cheating on Bailey? Maybe giving him a taste of his own medicine?* Anything was possible at this point. Bill was my first lead...but where was he leading me?

* * *

I was sitting on a hill in the park that Ethan showed me when we first hung out, my knees pulled up to my chest, and my eyes heavy. I rested my chin on my knees and gazed at the pink strips in the sky. The sun would be up soon and I would go back home.

I needed to have a story on hand, something to tell Rebecca if she found out I left during the night. Jacob would try to shine a light on the worst of me and I had to be ready for that. But the story had to be good....good enough to get my sister back on my good side. I was striking out left and right; this would put my sister over the edge. Who knew how Jacob would poison her even more. *I could be on a train back to New York by the end of the day.*

“You know coming to a person's spot when they aren't there with you is kind of inconsiderate.” Despite my exhaustion and mood, I smiled at the voice. I already knew Ethan was behind me before I turned around. As I stared at his approaching figure, I found myself happy at his arrival. Leaves crunched under his weight and soon he was next to me, looking down. Even in the slither of morning light I could tell that he too, had a smile on his face. Was he as happy to see me as I was to see him?

“It doesn't have your name on it,” I said. “Therefore it's not your spot and I can be here if I want to be here.” Ethan sat down on my left and I looked at his face only to be greeted with dark circles under his eyes and chalky skin. He looked worse than I felt. “What the hell happened to you? Long night?”

“You can say something like that,” Ethan said. “I'm an insomniac. Sleep doesn't exactly come easily for me. I can go days without getting some shut eye. I sometimes roam around at night if it gets really bad. My father doesn't like to hear me walking in the house.”

“Really? I've been awake and out of the house for hours now and I didn't see you once.”

“Well I don't like doing it if I don't have to. It's not exactly the safest thing to do and the last thing I need is for someone to call the cops on me. I don't want to have to explain myself...it's too complicated.” Ethan shifted his eyes down; the subject was closed.

“Ah, I see.” I looked back at the sky. The sun was peeking out from the horizon. “So why are you here now?”

“Because I saw you here and I thought you might want company.”

“Why?” I acted perturbed, but inside I was smiling. He wanted to keep me company...I never had someone want to keep

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me company, except maybe Bailey and that didn't count. Bailey was the older brother I still wasn't sure I wanted.

"Because you're cool and, despite your little temper, shutter-bug, I like seeing you." I snickered at the phrase shutter-bug. My new nick name, thanks to Ethan.

"And what if I don't like seeing you?"

"That's too bad because you are stuck with me. We're friends even if you don't want to admit it. You know you like seeing me...don't deny it." That's exactly what I was thinking about doing but I shrugged.

"I plead the fifth," I joked but I knew he was right. I did like Ethan in some weird way and in that same weird way I considered him a friend. He was different from any of the other friends I ever had and with him there wasn't drama. There wasn't my past trying to creep up on me and I felt like a new person. A better person. I was able to start from the beginning with Ethan because he didn't have any expectations for me. We took it one day at a time.

"I was wondering if you wanted to come by tonight, around five-ish, for dinner? My dad wanted to see you again because he thinks you could use a friend. He says that you look lost and lonely." I cocked an eyebrow. "My father likes to think that he's some kind of psychologist. He thinks he knows what people really need in their lives." We both laughed. I didn't want to tell Ethan that his father, in a way, was right. I **was** lonely and I **was** lost. *But how did he know?*

"There's nothing like psychoanalyzing people. It keeps life interesting."

"So what do you say?" I hesitated. I really wanted to spend the day, and night, going through more of Madison's journal entries and emails. I wanted to find out who Bill and all the other guys in her address book were. But when I looked at Ethan and saw the hope in his eyes, I broke.

"Sure," I said. "I'll get Rebecca to drop me off. I mean I'm still on restriction but she likes you and so I think she'll make an exception. She thinks you are a good influence on me."

"Yeah, she's right."

"Aren't you the cocky one!"

“Yes, I am. But rightly so,” Ethan said. I rummaged around in my backpack before pulling out a pen.

“Give me your hand.”

“Why?”

“Just give it to me.” When Ethan still hesitated, I grabbed his hand, flipped it over palm side up, and scrawled my cell phone number on it. “Now you can text me to tell me if anything changes.” I stood up, grabbing my stuff as I did. “I have to go but I’ll see you tonight, around five.”

“See you,” Ethan said. I smirked at him before sticking out my tongue and sauntering off leaving Ethan all alone. I walked back to the diner, throwing the door open. Rebecca was at the counter and looked up at me. There was no glare in her look and she kept her hands to her sides. For the first time since as long as I could remember, I couldn’t read Rebecca at all.

“Good morning,” I said tentatively.

“Good morning,” Rebecca responded. “Where were you?”

“Out for a morning run,” I lied. “They say that the more you exercise, the happier you are. Something about endorphins in your system. I thought I would try it out.”

“I see.”

“Yep,” I rocked back on my heels. “Well I guess I’ll go upstairs and change to come help you down here.” I was about to go into the back to get to the apartment when I remembered my desk against my bedroom door. The only way back up was the fire escape. “Actually I’m going to go outside...practice using that fire escape.” Rebecca cocked her eyebrow.

“The fire escape?” Rebecca asked. “Why in the world do you want to use the fire escape? You hate the damn escape. How many times did you complain that it was rickety and dangerous? Now you want to use it?”

“Yeah, so what? You keep telling me that I have to know how to get out in case this diner blows up or something. I want to practice. Practice makes perfect after all,” I said.

“Since when do you want to be perfect?”

“I don’t,” I said and shrugged.

“Amber-” I put my hands up.

“Listen, it’s not my fault that you are so paranoid. I figure

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that since I can't change you, I might as well give your way a chance. I'm trying to adapt to your way of life. See, I'm trying to change!" I gave my sister a weak smile before dashing out of the diner and to the side of the apartment. *This is going to be a long day.*

* * *

"Alright, Amber, now you be polite and show Mr. Hunter that you were brought up in a proper household, despite your need to rebel against everything our father tried to teach you," Rebecca said. I gave her a face and unbuckled my seatbelt. "Jacob and I are going to be out late so when you get home triple check that you lock everything up and that everything is turned off. Can you handle that?"

"I think so," I said dryly. "I am fifteen, not five. I think I have the cognitive abilities to take care of myself at this point."

"Watch that lip young lady." Ignoring Rebecca's tone, I got out of the car, closed the door, and stepped back. I waved as Rebecca pulled away and then turned to face the great house. The sun was still bright and I took in the landscape before me. It was like something out of a dream. I half expected to see a deer peer out of the bushes.

In the distance I noticed a little house with a white picket fence and a mailbox. The house looked small but I couldn't tell if it was because of the distance. *I'm early. I still have time.* Curious, I turned slightly and headed down the path, intent on seeing what it really was, when the front door opened.

Stopping dead in my tracks, I looked up to see Ethan and Mr. Hunter, side by side, waiting for me. They both had smiles on their faces and Mr. Hunter's arm was around Ethan's shoulders. It was the perfect picture. *Too bad I forgot my damn camera. What kind of photographer am I if I never remember to actually bring my camera?*

"Come in, come in," Mr. Hunter said. I quickly crossed the lawn and met them on the spacious porch. Mr. Hunter shook my hand while Ethan leaned over and awkwardly hugged me. I hesitated, and then tapped him lightly on the back. I wasn't really a

fan of hugs but I wasn't mean enough to push Ethan away. "I hope your sister found the place okay?"

"It's kind of hard to miss," I mused. "I mean the moment you're out of the town perimeter you can see this house. It's not exactly something that blends in with the crowd, you know what I mean? I'm surprised that you don't have a moat around here, keeping people away."

"Such a wild imagination on you," Mr. Hunter thought. "Are you sure you want to be a photographer? I think story telling would be a better future for you."

"Da-ad," Ethan said. He turned to me. "I'm sorry. My father tends to think he's funny and pathetically attempts to make jokes. He's really not that good, I know."

"Ethan," Mr. Hunter said sharply. Ethan frowned and tension was filling the air.

"So, uh, what's for dinner?" I asked.

"Lasagna Florentine," Mr. Hunter said. "My mother taught me how to make it. It's my favorite dish."

"I've never had it," I admitted. "But it sounds great. I brought pie." I lifted up the bag hanging from my fingers. "It's homemade but I didn't make it. Rebecca did."

"What kind?" Ethan asked. He pulled the edge of the bag with his fingers, trying to peer inside. I swatted at his fingers and he whimpered, pulling them back quickly.

"It's cherry," I told him. "One of Rebecca's specialties."

"I love cherry pie!" Ethan gushed. "It's like my guilty pleasure." *Guilty pleasure, really?*

"Well I guess I'm just a mind reader now. I could tell that you wanted this dish before you even came." Mr. Hunter barked out a laugh.

"Yes you have great powers," Ethan joked. "But remember, great power comes with great wisdom."

"And go figure, I'm not lacking in the wisdom department either. I'm two for two then!" I snickered as we walked to the front door. I could smell the food from the threshold and my mouth watered.

"You guys are too much," I said. "Why can't my family be like this?"

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“Because my father is super cool and he has the best attitude in life.” Ethan smiled at me and I kind of smiled back.

“And my son is one of a kind. He can put a smile on anyone's face, no matter the day they were having.” Mr. Hunter hugged Ethan and Ethan grimaced under his smile. “Oh and my son also gets very embarrassed whenever I show any affection to him when other people are around. Apparently I'm only allowed to do that in private.”

“Well I **am** a teenager dad,” Ethan said. “It's just...weird now.” Mr. Hunter nodded.

“Uh huh,” he said and he turned to me. “That's not what he says when he's sick and begging me to take care of him.”

“Thanks for embarrassing me, Dad.”

“No problem son. I'm glad I can do my job correctly.” Mr. Hunter winked at me as he clapped his son on the shoulder.

“You guys are amazing,” I said. My stomach flipped and a knot formed in my throat. *Why can't my father be like Ethan's father? Why can't he love me like Mr. Hunter loves Ethan?* I swallowed down the knot and stood up straight. *It's never going to happen, Amber. The sooner you realize that, the better.*

Chapter Seven

I was up to my elbows in soap as I washed the dishes piled up in the sink. Ethan was next to me, a towel in his hand, drying the dishes I finished rinsing. Washing dishes wasn't on my to do list but shortly after dinner Mr. Hunter disappeared to another room and that was when Ethan informed me that it was his responsibility to clean the dishes. Since I was there and had eaten there, I figured the only right thing to do was to offer to help. After the words were out of my mouth, Ethan looked relieved. I wondered how many girlfriends helped him clean up. Better yet, how many girlfriends did Ethan actually have before we met? The thought made me queasy. *Why does it matter? You're friends, that's it.*

So there I was, my hands working together under the sudsy water, looking out the kitchen window. There was land all around Ethan's house and it was all lush and green. It looked like something out of a painting. My eyes passed over something in the distance and I turned to the object, squinting to see it better. *It can't be...is it? I mean it looks like it but...really?* Yes it was; the house in the distance. Was it a cottage? Maybe someone was renting it out.

"Hey," I said to Ethan, not moving my eyes from the spot I was staring at.

"Yeah?"

Three Little Lies

“Is that a cottage in the distance? Like something that someone rented out?” I asked. “I mean, that little shed thing over there...it looks like a cottage but not quite. If I didn’t know any better, it looks like a doll house.” This time I did turn to Ethan. I could read the hesitation on his face as his eyes darted from the object to me back to the object. “You don’t have to tell me if you don’t want to,” I said. “It’s okay if it’s some type of secret. I get it.”

“No it’s not a secret,” Ethan said. “It is a doll house...it was my sister’s.”

“Was?” My curiosity was piqued.

“She and my mother died in a boating accident,” Ethan explained. “It was about five years ago, on August eighth. She and my sister went sailing because my sister loved to sail. There was a storm and they never came back. We never found the boat, either.”

“How did it happen? Did the boat flip over or did it capsize? Were they wearing life vests? Couldn’t your father call the National Guard or something?”

Ethan’s eyes jerked to the left.

“I don’t know the details,” he said. “I was too young to remember and my father doesn’t like to talk about it.”

“Wow.”

“But the doll house...my sister, Elizabeth, she had this doll house that she loved. And when I say loved I mean really loved. She tried to take it with us whenever we went out and she was forever trying to play with it herself, without using her dolls. It had to be her favorite toy. So my dad made her a life sized one like the little one she had. It was her birthday present. She only used it once or twice before it happened.”

“Oh,” I said. There was a lump in my throat. “That’s so...sad.” I paused when my hand found his under the water, and I squeezed it gently. “So that’s what you meant when you said you were everything your father had and vice versa. The rest of your family is gone. I’m...I’m so sorry.”

I wiped my hands on a towel, drying them off, and turned to Ethan. He looked back at me, an anguished expression on his face. His lips were pushed tight together and he turned away from me to look back outside to the doll house.

“I usually don’t tell anyone the story,” Ethan admitted. “It’s

not something my father or I really like anyone to know. It's easier to pretend that it's just us...like there wasn't a mother or sister in the picture." Ethan paused and then looked at me. "That's why we live here, this far away from town. Even though he's the mayor, my father likes to keep a private life. We keep away from crowds and the stares. It's just easier."

"I can imagine," I said. "My father hates controversy and stuff like that too. That's why I was shipped off here to Virginia. He figured if he got rid of me then the problem would go away too. It's bad enough that I'm a bastard child of a summer fling in God knows where. My father couldn't handle the trouble I apparently was causing."

"Well your father is an idiot and doesn't know what he's missing."

"Thanks but I don't think he misses me all too much." I shrugged and pasted a smile on my face. "Whatever. His loss, right?"

"Exactly." Ethan stepped closer and I froze, unsure of what was happening. He licked his lips and I wondered if he was going to kiss me. Then I wondered if I wanted him to kiss me. I mean I barely knew him, and he wasn't even too much of a friend, but still the thought of kissing him flittered through my mind as we stared at each other.

The only other time I had been kissed was by Bailey and, thinking back on it, I think it was out of pity. Who wanted to see their friend turn fifteen without getting kissed even once? I was 'one of the guys' and was pushed into friend lagoon. I was fine with it, too, even if it did get a little lonely. So that was why, when staring at Ethan, I was so unsure of what I was supposed to do? I didn't have to wonder for long because Ethan shook his head as if coming to his senses, and punched me lightly on the shoulder. Disappointment flooded through me.

"You are a kick ass girl and if your dad can't see it, screw him."

"Yeah," I agreed. "Screw him."

"Hey I had a thought," Ethan said with a smile.

"What's the thought?" I tried to smile back, to keep the conversation lighthearted but my stomach was knotting.

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“There’s this party,” he said. “A Fourth of July bash that the whole town has. We shoot off fireworks, have a potluck barbeque; the works. Do you want to come?” Ethan handed me another dish and I methodically ran the towel in circles on the front of the plate, wiping up the remaining water before flipping it over and repeating the same process in the back. When I was finished I joined it with the others.

“To the party?” I asked. “Like a guest?” I cocked an eyebrow, staring at him. Did he realize he was sending mixed signals? *Or maybe I just think they’re mixed signals.*

“Well I didn’t think you wanted to be a waitress or anything,” Ethan teased. “Yes a guest. My guest to be specific. I know it sounds nerdy but it really is fun.”

“I’ll think about it,” I said. Ethan pushed his bottom lip out, pouting. Really, the pout? Even I didn’t pout anymore. My heart thumped in my chest and I stared at his lips, wondering.

“Please?” he asked. “It will give you a chance to see what this town is really like. I promise, if it’s lame we can leave and wreak havoc.”

“Fine,” I said finally, flinging the towel at him. “Have it your way. I’m in.” Ethan pumped his fist in the air.

“Yes!” he said. “One point for the awkward kid!”

* * *

Dark was settling in and the lights around Ethan's house turned on one by one. There was no call from my sister, or a text message either. Jacob remained silent, much to my pleasure. I still hadn't said anything to Rebecca about the situation with Jacob and I wasn't sure how to bring it up. The last thing I needed was to bring more drama into our lives but I couldn't keep this from her. Rebecca had to know about the creep she was dating and what he tried to do.

Ethan and I were sitting on his deck, in chairs right under the kitchen window, and I couldn't help but stare at the doll house. What was it about the house that drew me in? It wasn't like it was different than any other doll house I saw. So why did I feel like something was...off? *Because no one told you about Ethan's*

sister and mother. Not Rebecca, not Jacob. Wouldn't a story that big still be talked about? I would have heard about it by now...wouldn't I have? Even if I didn't hear the whole story I would hear something.

"Do you ever go in there?" I asked as I motioned to the doll house. "Do you feel closer to your sister there?"

"No," Ethan said sharply. He crossed his arms in defiance.

"Why?" I said. I stood up and grabbed his hand. "If you don't face it, you're going to be haunted by the stupid house for the rest of your life. Come on, it might be some closure for you."

"I don't want to," Ethan said as he pulled me back. "I hate that stupid house and I want nothing to do with it."

"Stop being like that, Ethan," I said. "I think it would be good for you to do it. Come on, come with me."

"No."

"Fine, I'll just go by myself," I said. I danced out of his reach and hopped down the stairs of the deck. "Come with me. You won't regret it."

"I said no Amber," Ethan gritted out. "Stop being so stupid and sit down with me. It's too hot to be fighting. And anyway it's locked up tight. There is no way to get in."

"Good thing I learned how to pick a lock." I smiled mischievously.

"Amber-" Ethan said. There was warning in his tone. "I'm serious. Come back here."

"Stop being such a pansy Ethan."

Suddenly the door opened and Mr. Hunter appeared on the deck. He was breathing heavy and there was sweat on his forehead.

He wore a suit that looked like some kind of fisherman's garb. Ethan and I turned to his father and I glanced at Ethan only to see him shudder a little.

"Amber your sister just called," Mr. Hunter stated. "She's right around the corner. I think you should go and get your stuff together."

"Yes sir," I said. For some reason, in the dark with only the deck lights illuminating everything, Mr. Hunter looked menacing. I slipped past him, careful to avoid his eyes, and went

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back to the living room to pick up the stuff I left there.

When I got back to the deck, Mr. Hunter and Ethan seemed to be in a harsh, serious conversation. Though their words were too soft to hear, from the way Mr. Hunter shook Ethan's shoulder and wagged his finger in Ethan's face, I could tell that Mr. Hunter was yelling at Ethan.

Ethan said nothing. He just looked down until his father was done. Mr. Hunter finished by slapping the back of Ethan's head quite hard and disappearing around the corner of the house. I stepped out of the house and faced Ethan.

"Hey, I got my stuff ready," I said softly. "And I think my sister is here. I just heard a car pull up."

"Okay," Ethan's voice was dead pan, as if he was some kind of unfeeling robot.

"I'm sorry if I got you into trouble," I said. "I didn't mean for your dad to get angry."

"It doesn't concern you. I know how to deal with my father."

"Okay," I said. We walked around the other side of the house to the garage. Rebecca was parked in front of the driveway and she waved when she saw me. I waved back before turning to Ethan. "So...want to meet up tomorrow or something? You can show me the other cool things to do in this lame town."

"I don't know," Ethan said shortly. "I might have plans. I'll call you."

"Sure," I said, knowing that he wouldn't call. "See you around."

"Yeah, see you around." I slipped into Rebecca's car and looked back at Ethan but he was gone, disappeared. *What the hell was all of that about?*

"Did you have fun?" Rebecca asked as she pulled away from the curb. She had a stupid smile on her face and I tried not to think about what she and Jacob were up to earlier in the night.

"Yeah I had fun," I said. *Until his dad freaked out and Ethan became a robot.*

* * *

I stood outside the door of the community center finishing my cigarette before my fourth group meeting. I had been in Virginia for officially four weeks and my skin was showing it. The longer I stayed, the tanner I became and the deep red of my hair was becoming brighter and started to resemble the color of a fire truck.

I hadn't seen Bailey since the incident at the bar and I tapped my foot nervously as I waited for him. No matter how many times I called or texted, Bailey never responded. The only time I was going to see him was at the group meeting but he wasn't there the last time. I had no idea what was going on.

I also had no idea what was going on with Ethan. After the dinner at his house he was keeping his distance too. He didn't call, not that I expected him to, and I hadn't seen him around no matter where I went. Ethan wasn't even at the park that he took me to when I first arrived. It was like I was some kind of pariah and no one wanted to be near me.

"Hey stranger." I turned to see Bailey grinning; a cigarette perched between his two fingers. I picked up the camera that was hanging from my shoulder and snapped a bunch of shots of him as he walked up to me. Bailey was one of the most photogenic people I had met and he was usually the subject in all of my photos. Ethan was also photogenic in his own way and I hoped, after he finally decided to talk to me again, that he would let me take pictures of him. *Maybe I can even do a family portrait.*

"Hey to you too," I said with a grin. I only paused for a second before jumping up into Bailey's arms and wrapping my legs around his waist. "I've missed you. I didn't know where you were. I thought maybe my sister told your parents or something. I thought you were shipped somewhere else."

"I'm sorry," Bailey said. "I wanted to give your sister some time to cool off. I didn't want to make things worse for you. I worry about you, you know."

"You shouldn't worry about me," I told him. "I can take care of myself. I'm tough."

"Right, you're tough...unless of course, there is a spider crawling around. Then you're up on a chair screaming like a little girl." He laughed at the memory.

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“Exactly,” I said. I pulled away to look at Bailey's face. “Seriously, though, are you okay?”

“I'm fine,” Bailey said. “I've been getting to know myself again.” I cocked an eyebrow but Bailey didn't say anything more. “Let's go, we need to get in there before the meeting starts.” Bailey grabbed both of our cigarettes, tossed them to the ground, and stubbed them out with his toe. I slithered across his body until I was resting against his back, and he carried me into the building, both of us laughing all the way down the hall and into our meeting room.

* * *

Since Rebecca and Jacob left for some meeting about owning your own business in the town over, I had another night to myself. I tried Ethan's number but there was no answer, not like I was expecting there to be. Ethan was, if nothing else, damn good at keeping his distance. I texted Bailey, but he couldn't hang out either. He had a job, much to my surprise, and he was on duty until midnight. I was one hundred percent alone and usually I would love it. But this time I felt sad, lonely even. I wanted to be around people, to laugh again and have fun.

So, wallowing in self-pity, I sat in the living room with a bag of chips on my right and a whole two liter bottle of soda on my left, I opened Madison's email again and decided to search for any email corresponding to the day she met “Bill”. There was more to the story than what was in her journal and I wanted to know what it was. Correction, I **needed** to know what it was. It was bugging me since I read that entry.

I scrolled through the emails, scanning the dates until I found the one I was looking for.

February 28, 2012

Subject: I Think You're The One

Hello there, Mandy Reyes, or Ms. Carlita Jones as you like to be called. I found your picture and profile on Open Realizations and I believe that you are the right person to be

emailing. My name is Bill, just Bill. I am thirty years old and I am looking for a beautiful woman like yourself for some fun. On your profile you say that you like being in charge and like to call the shots. I love a woman who is in charge and I love being told what to do.

From the pictures on your profile, you seem to be what I like to call a "honey bee." You look cute and sweet but you have of a bit of a sting to you. I love that in a woman.

Meet me at The Cleric's Scripture at 67 Basshound Boulevard at ten p.m. Don't be late. I pay cash and there's a little extra in it for you if you don't mind getting tied up. I also like to be dominant.

Bill

I closed the email and reached for the garbage can on the floor next to me just in time. I heaved into the garbage, depositing my breakfast and lunch into it. Mandy Reyes was the name that I put on Madison's fake ID when I gave it to her. She liked the name because it sounded fun, flirty. I never thought I would see the name again after I put it on the ID. I didn't even know that Madison used the ID card that I made her because she never told me anything about it.

When I was finished retching, I wiped my mouth with the back of my hand, and took a swig of soda right from the bottle to wash the taste of vomit out of my mouth. *What the hell is that email about?*

I quickly opened my internet browser, typed in the website name, and searched "Carlita Jones." Madison's picture popped up...but it wasn't Madison. The woman in the picture, who claimed she was a twenty-two year old student putting herself through college, had dark brown hair, ruby red lips, and thick, smoky green eye shadow on. Madison was blond haired, blue eyed and barely used to put on eyeliner. She hated make up and yet I knew that the picture I was staring at was of Madison. What the hell kind of site was this? I read Madison's profile and I felt like vomiting again.

I'm twenty two year old putting myself through college. I

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am hoping to graduate with a degree in Mathematics and I want to become a Math teacher. I love to read and I love the beach. I'm pretty laid back, open to suggestions of things to do when we're together. Usually I like when my dates decide what to do but I also like taking control. I am a very good girl and I love doing things that people tell me to do...especially men. I love submitting to the need and wish of every man and I will do anything, and I mean anything, to make you happy. I used to be a gymnast and a ballerina, so I am flexible and I have great stamina. I can go all night if that's what you want.

I love to dress up and used to major in theatre when I first started school so I have a whole trunk of costumes that still fit and I like to dress up in. I have my very own plaid skirt; I have a cat woman suit. I can dress also like a geisha, a barmaid, a pirate's wench, anything. I try to buy new costumes as time goes on just in case I have that big break and find myself back on the stage. But the stage isn't the only place I wear the costumes.

So if you want a fun time with a girl who lives to please, contact me. Trust me, you won't be disappointed.

I closed the internet browser in disbelief, and dialed Bailey's number. If anyone knew what kind of website *Open Realizations* was, it was Bailey.

"Hey what's up?" Bailey asked. "I'm at work and can't really talk."

"Just a quick question," I said. "I stumbled across this website and I don't know what it is. Can you help me?"

"Sure," Bailey said. "Shoot."

"It's called *Open Realizations*. Any ideas?" Instead of answering, Bailey laughed. I could hear his laugh despite the fact that he tried to muffle the phone. "Bailey, what is it? What is this site?"

"I don't know what you were doing to stumble onto this website Amber," Bailey said. "But that's a website for call girls. John's go to the site to pick a girl to fuck when they want. They disguise it as a dating site to keep everyone from going to jail.

Why did you want to know?"

"Just curious," I said. "Are you sure that this website is that kind of website?"

"Completely sure."

"How sure."

"One hundred percent," Bailey said. He cleared his throat. "I, uh, have seen that website myself online so I know."

"Oh, okay," I said. I cringed thinking about why Bailey saw that website. I didn't know and I didn't want to know. "Thanks for telling me."

"Why were you asking?"

"I told you, I stumbled across it and I was curious."

"That's bull-crap but whatever," Bailey said. "I have to get back to work. Talk to you later and try to keep yourself away from websites like that."

"Talk to you later." I hung up the phone, closed my laptop, and stared at the wall without really seeing it. I was in shock, complete and utter shock. Madison was a call girl. A-go have sex with random men and get paid for it-call girl. There were a million questions in my head but only one stuck out. *Does this have anything to do with Madison's disappearance?*

Chapter Eight

How am I going to tell him? I asked myself. I can't just tell Bailey that his girlfriend was whoring herself out for a bit of money; that she was cheating on him the whole time. How could Madison do this? Was she that selfish or was this some kind of rebellious phase? Why didn't she tell me? I could have talked her out of it...found out why she wanted to do something so stupid.

In reality, that was probably exactly why Madison **didn't** tell me about it. She didn't want to be told no or to be stopped. She wanted to be able to do what she wanted, when she wanted. I sighed. *I never though Madison could be that selfish.*

"Are you okay?" Rebecca asked as she handed me a plate full of food. "Amber?"

"Hm?" I said, turning my glazed eyes over to my sister. "What's up?" She nudged the plate closer and my stomach grumbled. "Oh, thanks." I didn't even realize I was hungry until the food was right in front of me.

"No problem," she responded slowly. "Are you okay? You've been out of it for days now. Did something happened? Are you in a fight with Ethan? Bailey?"

"You told me I couldn't hang out with Bailey," I pointed out. "And I haven't. I see him in group and that's it." *Except for the times I tried to hang out with him behind your back.*

"Yeah well maybe I over reacted a little," she admitted. "Maybe it's time I rescind your restrictions. You seem... lost,

Amber.”

“I’m not lost,” I told her, trying to keep my voice even. “Confused, though. I found out stuff about Madison. . .stuff that she never told me, and I don’t understand it. She seems like a completely different person. It’s like I never knew her at all.”

“What did you find out?” I shook my head. I didn’t want to involve Rebecca in this at all.

“It’s not about what I found out,” I said. “But the fact that I found it out on my own. She didn’t want me to know; she kept this from me.”

“Maybe she forgot to tell you.” Her voice sounded hopeful.

“Rebecca, this isn’t something you forget to tell someone else, trust me.” I wrung my hands together. “I haven’t been able to sleep because of it.”

“Obviously. You have circles so dark under your eyes that you look like you got into a fight.” Rebecca pulled off the stool. “You need to get out, go have some fun. Go find Ethan, or Bailey, anyone. Stop thinking about it for a while. Maybe things will seem brighter when you get back.” Rebecca practically pushed me out of the kitchen, slamming the door behind me.

Shuffling away to a back table, I kicked some crumbs with my sneakers as I wondered what to do. I **couldn’t** hang out with Ethan and I didn’t want to face Bailey yet. How was I supposed to tell Bailey what I found out? Was I even **supposed** to tell him, or keep my mouth shut and play dumb? Neither solution seemed to be the right one so, until I figured it out, I was staying as far away from Bailey as I possibly could. *Well this is a fine mess you’ve gotten yourself into, Amber, now isn’t it?*

So there I was, staring into a strawberry and banana milk shake, totally oblivious to everyone around me. My mind was consumed with the information I acquired; the same information I never wanted to know about.

After finding out about Madison's second life, I dug through the box of belongings that Madison's mother sent me, and opened the duffel bag. Inside was a red dress, three different types of costume jewelry, black stiletto shoes, and a whole side bag filled with makeup. Underneath all of that was an auburn colored wig, a red wig, and even a black wig. It looked like Madison had

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more than one alias. Did she always go by Mandy Reyes? Or did she have other fake IDs with other names?

Did anyone know the real Madison? *How many bags like this does she have?* I wondered. *And what about her mother? Didn't she realize what was going on? Didn't this concern the damn woman?*

Disgusted, I took the bag and threw it immediately into the garbage, everything still inside of it. I wanted nothing to do with Madison's life. It was one thing to read about it, but it was a whole different scenario, seeing what she wore and imagining what had happened in it.

Finding out what Madison was doing, the big thing that she was hiding from me, opened up a whole new dimension of problems. If she was meeting up with strange men at any time, dressed and acting like someone else, the mystery of what happened to her just expanded. Any of those guys could have had anything to do with her disappearance. Any of them could have killed her by now and no one would even know.

I pulled Madison's journal out from my bag, lying it on the table in front of me, running my fingers over the tattered front of the book. Every time I opened the book I found out more and more things that I never wanted to know. Secrets were revealed and the girl I thought I knew became more and more of a stranger to me. It came to the point that I didn't even know if the Madison I knew was the person she really was. It felt like another one of her façades.

But, until she was found, the journal was the only thing I had to connect with her. It was the only way I was going to make a dent in her disappearance. If I didn't do this, no one would look for her, and soon Madison would be forgotten. I had to do it.

March 5, 2012

Dear Journal,

I am rolling in the money, seriously. I have more money than I could ever dream was possible and the best thing is that my parents haven't even noticed! They are so stuck in their own worlds, with their iPhone's and their affairs to even notice me. I

go out around nine every night, even school nights, and don't come home until almost midnight but they don't ask questions.

They say goodbye and hello like it's completely normal for me to be coming home at all hours of the night. I literally walk right past them, my duffel over my shoulder, and they think that I am just coming in from a full night of studying. Yeah, right, like I study. That's a joke and a half.

My parents are so oblivious to everything around them. I know I used to complain about it, I mean I HATED it. But now I'm starting to like it. I can do what I want, when I want, and don't have to answer to anyone. It's not like Amber, poor pathetic Amber. She never goes out and her mother is beyond protective. I swear if Mrs. Swanson thought even the tiniest thing might go wrong in Amber's life, she would lock Amber up. Mrs. Swanson is worse than a watch dog.

Amber tells me that she doesn't mind that her mother is protective, because it meant that Mrs. Swanson cared but I think Amber is just too scared to say something to her mother. That and I think Amber likes to be a hermit. I could never tell her this but the only reason that Amber has all the friends that she does is because they were my friends first and became her friends when I became her friend.

Left alone, I think Amber would just stay in her room day after day, no boyfriend, no life, and be fine. I love my best friend but she is SUCH a hermit! And she's so...plain. She has such great hair and a great body but she never does anything about it, you know? She just let's it sit there. Sometimes....sometimes I feel bad for her. She's just so pathetic that most of the time that I don't know what to do with her. I feel like she's a lost cause.

Anyway, like I was saying, I am SO glad that my parents don't notice that I go out all the time. It makes sneaking around and living this second life so much easier. It's so exciting, being the person guys call because they think you're sexy. None of the stupid boys at my school give me a second glance but when I'm with all the guys, I feel like gold. They treat me like a princess and the money isn't bad either. I have to remember to thank Amber again for this fake ID. It was the best idea she ever had!

YOLO

Madison

I slammed the book shut and threw it back on the seat, glaring at it. *I'm a hermit? I'm pathetic? I'm plain?* I looked down at my crop top and short shorts. *I am NOT plain. I am sexy...sexy and sweet. Guys like me...they want to date me but I just won't let them.*

I couldn't believe all of the hurtful things that filled Madison's journal. I had no idea that she felt the way she did and reading those words felt like a knife to the gut. It was like I was a charity case...that Madison felt bad and took me under her wing. All of these years thinking that we were friends because we clicked were all wrong. We were friends because she thought I was pathetic. I was her challenge; she wanted to try and 'fix' me, like I was her Barbie doll. *And to say that the only reason my friends are friends with me because they were friends with me is pathetic. And ugh!*

I looked up, a glare on my face, only to see Bailey sitting in front of me. He smiled at me before grabbing my melting milkshake and sucking a bunch of it through a straw. He winked at me but when my facial expression didn't change, Bailey put the cup to the side, took my free hand, and stared at me.

"Okay what's wrong?" Bailey asked. "What is going on?"

"Nothing," I bit out.

"Amber, I know you...this isn't nothing," Bailey said. "Tell me."

"Are you friends with me only because Madison was friends with me when you met her? Did you become friends with me because you wanted to be friends with her?" Bailey frowned, and his forehead wrinkled.

"What? Of course not! Why would you think that?" Bailey tried to sound flabbergasted as if it was the most preposterous thing he heard, but his eyes kept flitting back and forth. *Oh Bailey...you were never a good liar.*

"You did, didn't you? You are only friends with me because I was friends with Madison. You never wanted to be my friend at all. I was part of some weird package deal."

“Amber-”

“Just tell me, did everyone else feel the same way too?” I asked. Bailey stared at me tight lipped. “Bailey tell me. Did everyone else think so too?”

“When Madison first told us about you she told us that you were going through a hard time because you were a bastard child and your father wanted nothing to do with you. She told us that you looked like a lost bird with a broken wing,” Bailey said. I growled deeply. “She begged us to be nice to you and try to make you feel accepted, like you were part of our group.”

“Are you fucking kidding me?” My hands were shaking. I hate to be pitied, always have and always will.

“But that was only at first,” Bailey said, trying to smooth things over. “After a while we were friends with you because we liked you.”

“Yeah but you didn't want to be friends with me at first. You wanted nothing to do with me.” I stood up, grabbing Madison's journal as I went.

“Where are you going?”

“I don't know,” I told Bailey. “But it's interesting, you know?”

“What's interesting?”

“Finding out that I never had any friends to begin with,” I said. “That I was nothing more than a charity case.” I left Bailey alone in the booth and I slipped through the door to the diner into the bright sun. The humidity engulfed me like a wool blanket and within minutes I found that sweat was beading on my forehead. I was still carrying Madison's journal and, when passing the garbage can, I was tempted to throw it out and get rid of the damn thing. So far it only brought me more anguish and anger. There was nothing good that I had read from that journal. But I knew I couldn't just throw it out, so I carried it as I walked down the street.

It wasn't the first time that I felt all alone even though there were dozens of people around me, but it was the first time I felt the emptiness in the pit of my stomach threatening to tighten around me. It was bad enough when I lost one friend, when she disappeared from my life, but it was even worse losing all of my friends. There was no shoulder to cry on, no one to tell me that

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things were going to be okay. I was alone, plain and simple. *Well except...*

“Hey shutterbug.” I looked up to see Ethan sitting on a bench, a book in his lap and an iPod next to him. He was all smiles and laughs, like the situation with his father never happened. Ethan patted the bench. “Come sit down.”

“No thanks,” I said. “I mean I can't right now...too much on my mind. I need to walk it out.”

“Walk it out? That's an interesting way of looking at it.” He tilted his head to the side. “Why not sit it out and talk to me? I'm a good listener...or at least my mom used to tell me that. My dad on the other hand...he always said I had cotton in my ears. I guess that's better than in my head, right?”

“Right,” I said. I hesitated and then sat. “It's really nothing, you know.” I sat as far away from Ethan as I could. “I'm just going through a lot of shit all at once and it's a little overwhelming.”

“Like what?”

“I found out more about my friend,” I told him. “You know, the one that went missing? I found out that she had a whole other life that I didn't know about.” I cleared my throat. “And I found out that I wasn't much her friend as I was her charity case.”

“What do you mean?” I waved away Ethan's question.

“Nothing, never mind,” I said. “It's not important.” I hesitated and then looked at Ethan. “Hey...are we okay?”

“Of course we are,” Ethan said. “We are perfect, why?”

“I don't know,” I said. “I haven't heard much from you since dinner at your place. I thought that maybe your dad didn't like me or something and didn't want you to hang out with me anymore.”

“No it's nothing like that,” Ethan assured me. “I've just been busy. You know, football camp and everything.”

“Football camp? There's such a thing?”

“Yeah. It's all summer. The coaches at my school like to make sure that their players stay in tip top shape. It's a mandatory camp that we have to go to.” Ethan rolled his eyes. “Trust me, it sucks.”

“I could imagine,” I said. “I used to be a counselor at a camp with my friend Bailey. We hung out all the time that summer

at camp and ended up being not very good counselors. I think I spent more time in the camp manager's office that summer than with the actual campers."

"Interesting."

"I thought it was." Ethan put his arm over the back of the bench and motioned for me to move over. When I didn't move, Ethan grinned. "You can move over, you know. I don't bite...much."

"Funny," I said but I moved over a few inches.

"Come on, a little closer."

"No, this is good thanks." Before I knew what was happening, Ethan put his arm around me and pulled me close to him until our sides were touching. "Or you can just manhandle me until I do what you want."

"I'm not manhandling you," Ethan said. "I thought you needed a hug. You look like your whole world is falling apart around you."

Ethan wasn't completely off in his assessment so, after a minute, I put my head on his shoulder. To my horror, tears pricked in my eyes. "Whatever is going on can't be that bad. You will get through this. You're strong, fierce, and determined."

"Are you trying to psychoanalyze me now?" I said. I swiped my hand across my eyes, probably smearing my eyeliner in the process.

"No but I know you...a little bit of you at least," Ethan said. "I know that whatever is bothering you now won't bother you tomorrow because you are a warrior."

"I think it's supposed to be survivor. You're supposed to tell me that I'm a survivor."

"No I said the right word. To be a survivor would have to mean that at some point you stop fighting because you won. You can't immediately win at life, it's not like the game. You have to fight every day for what you want. Therefore, you're a warrior."

"Is that what you do?" I asked. "Do you fight with your father every day to get what you want out of your own life?"

"I try," Ethan said. "But usually it's easier to just do what he wants."

"I know," I said. "I feel the same way about my mother and

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Rebecca some times. It's easier to give in than to fight. Like my mom used to say...pick your battles. I used to pick every battle as my battle. But after thinking about it and I'll even admit, after meeting you, I started changing my perspective. Now I actually try to pick my battles carefully. I'm tired of fighting; of being angry all the time." I emptied out my pockets. "And look, I even stopped smoking. It was another thing that was wrong with me. I'm sick of having things wrong with me."

"Good for you, shutterbug," Ethan said. "But I know you still have that spark in you...you haven't lost that."

"No I haven't," I said. "And I don't plan to." Ethan chuckled then moved a piece of hair from my face.

"You know, you could do something with this hair," he mused. "It's starting to look like a bee's nest."

"Ugh," I cried as I punched him in the shoulder. "You're one to talk. You're a Brillo head!"

"And damn proud of it." I laughed and reached up to feel the coarse locks that were close to his head. "Think about it...my hair might feel like Brillo pad but it won't move around in the wind and it doesn't get knotted too often. Really, in retrospect, it's the perfect type of hair. I wake up in the morning and I don't even have to brush it."

"Well aren't you special then," I said. I took my phone out from my pocket and used the screen as a mirror, eyeing my hair.

"Maybe you're right," I said, criticizing myself. "Maybe I could benefit from a haircut. I'm starting to look a little mangled."

"I was just kidding," Ethan said. "You look great...beautiful even." I looked at Ethan, trying to push my lips together. I failed and a laugh bubbled through.

"Beautiful?" I teased. "Really? No one uses beautiful anymore."

"Well I think it's better than calling a girl 'hot' or 'sexy'," Ethan said. "Those words...they just sound...degrading. Like women are pieces of meat."

"Well I think you're the only teenager that actually thinks that," I said. "Thank you, though, for saying that."

"It's the truth." I turned my head up, looking at Ethan. He was facing forward, his eyes looking at something off in the

distance. He didn't have the chiseled features that usually attracted me to guys. His face was smooth, boyish, and his eyes sparkled. He was...cute.

As if he sensed me looking at him, Ethan looked down and smiled at me. His arm was still around me and I didn't bother to move my head from his shoulder. I was comfortable and he wasn't complaining. His fingers brushed my shoulder and I found myself shivering at the touch.

What the hell? I wondered. *What the hell is going on with me?* I didn't have much more time to think because, as if there was a greater force pushing us together, our lips met in a sweet, warm kiss. My second kiss. As soon as it started, however, it ended and Ethan looked at me with horror in his eyes. He pulled his arm away from me and moved, forcing me to pull my body straight.

"I didn't mean to do that," Ethan said. His eyes were wide and he looked pained. "I'm so sorry Amber. That wasn't supposed to happen. That **shouldn't** have happened."

"Why not?" I asked. "Ethan it was just a kiss. It's not like it's the end of the world. I get it, you don't like me like that. It's cool." I tried to sound nonchalant about it. It wasn't like I hadn't been kissed by someone who didn't have those kinds of feelings for me before. But it was the first time that I felt disappointed and vulnerable.

"No...this is bad...really bad. You don't understand."

"So explain it to me."

"I can't," Ethan said. He stood up and paced back and forth in front of the bench. *Here it goes again...Ethan acting weird...just like after dinner.* Ethan tugged at his shirt and kept looking at me as I sat there on the bench. "I like you Amber, I like you a lot, but I can't do this. I can't do anything about it." My jaw slacked slightly as I listened to his words.

"Why not?" I found myself asking. *Why does it matter? Why do you care?*

"It's against the rules."

"What rules?"

"Just the rules." Ethan looked like he was going to cry as he looked over at me. "I'm sorry, Amber. But I have to go. I just can't be with you. I'm sorry."

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“Uh...okay...” I said but Ethan was already retreating into the crowd of people. He disappeared between the shuffling bodies and I was stuck on the bench, confused. I touched my lips which were still tingling. *I don't even...oh damn.*

Chapter Nine

I was having one of those moments when I wished that I actually had a girlfriend to talk to. Someone who I could analyze things with until the wee hours of the night and still not come up with a solution. But the only girlfriend I ever had, had been Madison and not only was she gone, I wasn't sure if she was ever truly my friend.

I didn't bother to call Ethan to try and figure out what was going on with him. He made it abundantly clear that the kiss was a mistake and, although I wasn't sure I would go that far about it, I didn't think it was the best thing that ever happened. I wasn't in the market for a boyfriend anyway, especially someone with so much baggage. I didn't need the drama.

I walked through the streets, window shopping, with ear buds in my ear connected to my iPod. The music was blasting, cutting off all over sounds around me. People were talking to each other, waving their hands around animatedly. Weaving around the crowds, I kept my head down and my hands in the pockets of my shorts.

The sun was beating down on me, making me sweat, and uncomfortably suctioning my prosthetic to the stump of my thigh. I had my bathing suit on underneath my clothes and as I walked I crossed my fingers that I would find some kind of community pool. Or a path to a beach or something I didn't see anything any other

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times I walked. But I was holding out hope that today I would find some relief to the never ending heat.

With the earbuds in my ears I didn't hear anyone walking up behind me, so when I was tapped on the shoulder, I jumped, and then turned, ready to defend myself if I needed to. Expecting some creepy stranger, I was instead greeted with Bailey, a sheepish smile on his lips, and a bag in his hands. Turning off the music, I slipped my iPod into my pocket, pulling the earbuds out of my ears and hanging them off my neck.

“What do you want?” I asked him.

“I think we need to talk,” Bailey said. I paused, my finger on my cheek and my eyes looking upward.

“Uh, I don't think so,” I said as I went back to glaring at him. “It's not like we were ever friends or anything.”

“Amber, don't be like that.”

“I will be like however I want to be like.” I shot back at him. “So go shove it and leave me alone.” I turned on my heel and started walking away.

“Amber! Amber!” Bailey called out. “Amber come back here!” I ignored Bailey and continued down the block until I reached the corner, then turned right. There was a fork in the road. The right side led out of town and towards Ethan's house while the left side circled back until I was in front of the diner. Both paths would get me away from Bailey.

There was no point in trying to find Ethan. Since the kiss, I hadn't heard a single word from him. He told me he thought it was a mistake and maybe it was. Then again, he could have been scared. But there was no way to sort things out if he wasn't talking to me. There was an elephant between us now. I knew that showing up at his house would just make things worse so I turned left and, after twenty minutes of walking, I was back in front of Rebecca's diner. My shirt was soaked with sweat and I was panting.

I stumbled into the diner and went straight back into the kitchen. When I got there, I pulled a bottle of water out of the refrigerator and downed it. The water chilled me from the inside out as I sat down on a bench and tried to catch my breath. As I was resting, the kitchen door opened and Jacob was standing there.

He looked surprised at first to see me, and then his lips turned up into a creepy grin. I tried to get up; planning on going back into the apartment and locking the door behind me, but Jacob grabbed my wrist before I had a chance to flee.

“The sweaty look is sexy on you,” Jacob said. I tried to wrestle out from under him but this time Jacob was prepared. He pushed my hands behind me, locking them with his fingers, and nuzzled my neck. “You can't fight me this time,” he said, his breath hot against my neck. “And don't bother screaming because you'll scare all the customers away. You don't want to ruin business for your sister, do you?” I wanted to vomit and I dry heaved a couple of times.

“Just leave me alone,” I said. “You hate me and I hate you.”

“That's where you're wrong,” Jacob said. “I don't hate you. In fact, the moment I saw you, I loved the spark behind your words. I knew you were exactly what I needed. Rebecca might be the good sister, but I happen to like the bad girls.”

“So what is this? Some sort of fetish for you?” I rolled my eyes. “I bet you like naughty school girl porn, too.”

“Fetish? No. Fantasy...it's my fantasy.” He laughed. “And I don't need porn. I get enough, if you know what I mean. Not always from your sister, but what she doesn't know can't hurt her... Right?”

“Well, you're sick,” I said as I involuntarily shuttered. “You're a creepy, sick bastard.”

Jacob silenced me by pushing his lips onto mine. He was sweaty, wreaked of oil and grease, and his lips felt like two flopping fish. It was revolting.

“See, that wasn't so bad,” Jacob said as he pulled away. He released my hands and I immediately moved away from him. “I just wanted a kiss...an innocent little kiss.” *Yeah, I'm sure that's all you wanted*, I thought as I scuttled even further away. Jacob wasn't moving but his eyes were following me like an eagle following its prey. “Now go upstairs and shower. Rebecca is going to be home in a little bit and we have some big news for you.”

I didn't want to know what the big news was, and I didn't care what it was. If it involved Jacob, I wanted to stay as far away as possible. But I listened to Jacob, running up the stairs, taking

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them two at a time, just to get away from him. Bursting through the door to the apartment, I locked it behind me, using the deadbolt, and wiped the back of my hand over mouth. I ran into the bathroom and put the shower on to as hot as I could stand and, after stepping inside, I started scrubbing my body hard and furiously, trying to get the sick creeper's fingerprints off my skin.

I have to tell Rebecca about this. She needs to know what he's up to...what he's doing.

No matter how hard I scrubbed I could still feel Jacob's hands on my wrist, his head against my neck, and his lips on mine. *How could Madison really go, night after night, screwing around with all those men without wanting to vomit? How could she stand looking at herself every morning before school, knowing what she did?*

Two hours later I was sitting around the table with Jacob and Rebecca, staring at my plate of spaghetti and meatballs. I wasn't hungry so I pushed the food around on my plate and tried to keep quiet. Keeping my head down, I prayed that the two of them would ignore me, leaving me alone. Rebecca and Jacob were talking about the diner, what the next promotional plan was, and how they were going to go about it. Jacob tried to make conversation with me but I kept my answers short, never looking up from my plate.

"So Amber," Rebecca said. I could hear the excitement in her voice before I even looked up. "Jacob and I have some good news that we want to share."

"What's up?" I asked. I finally looked at my sister, giving her my full attention. "What's the good news?"

"We're getting married," Rebecca squealed. She held out her left hand and on her left ring finger, I saw a small, square diamond on top of a sterling silver band. It looked ridiculously tiny and I knew Rebecca deserved more but I smiled at it anyway.

"Congratulations Rebecca!" I said, gushing the way I knew I was expected to. "I'm so happy for you!" I took her hand and got a closer look at the ring, realizing nearly immediately that it wasn't even a real diamond, but a cubic zirconia. I started to say something about it, but Rebecca looked so happy I didn't want to ruin it for her.

“What about me?” Jacob said. His eyes were mocking me.

“I’m ecstatic for you,” I told Jacob. “You won’t get anyone better than Rebecca. I know that for a fact.” I turned back to my sister, effectively cutting off all other conversation with Jacob. “So tell me all about the proposal. I want to hear *everything!*”

* * *

“Hey, Dad,” I said into the phone a couple of nights later. “How are you?”

“Fine dear, how are you?” my father asked. His deep voice vibrated through the phone. “Are you still giving Rebecca trouble?”

“No,” I said. “I promise. I’ve been doing the best I can.”

“Good,” my father said. “You better. I don’t want to hear that you are causing Rebecca any more trouble. She was gracious enough to take you in, you better show some gratitude.” *Right. It’s all about Rebecca. It’s always about Rebecca. It’s always been about Rebecca. Don’t worry about me or anything. I could be dying and you would still want to make sure that Rebecca is okay.*

“I will,” I said as I rolled my eyes. I hated the weekly conversations with my father; it was the same conversation time after time. “I have to go, talk to you soon.”

“Talk to you soon,” he said. “Give the phone to your sister.” I handed the phone to Rebecca who was eagerly waiting to talk to our father. She wanted to tell him about the engagement. She already called her own mother but our father wasn’t around when Cheryl took the phone call, so he still didn’t know. Rebecca was walking around the apartment, telling our father about how Jacob proposed, which was in a horse and buggy ride, and how they planned to get married a year later. The last thing I wanted to do was to listen to Rebecca again so I signaled to my sister that I was going for a walk and, grabbing the camera, left the apartment.

Out on the street, I grabbed my sister’s bike and headed towards the edge of town. I wanted to be away from the people, away from the crowds. I wanted to be alone with nothing but the wind blowing my hair back. I pedaled hard up the hills and through the dirt paths that I found myself memorizing the longer that I rode

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on them. I brought my bike to the left, then the right, taking the unbeaten paths, making the trip longer. Grass tickled my ankles and dandelions blew apart, their seeds floating around in the air. Clouds rolled in, blocking the harshest of sun rays from my back. I rode through a stream, splashing water around me, and tree branches pulled at my hair. The water was slimy and warm, leaving an algae residue behind.

The mosquitoes were buzzing around me and I swatted them away with one hand while the other hand guided the bike through a field. Cows were grazing, watching me ride through, lazily chewing at their food. I bent over the bike, going faster, and the wind whipped around me. My heart was racing and I was puffing up a hill. My adrenaline soared. I loved the rush.

Ending up at Ethan's house was pure coincidence, I swear.

I should have known all other roads led here. I stood behind a tree, hoping that Ethan hadn't seen me already, and stared at the building. It was dark inside and there were no cars in the driveway. The van was gone too. *Maybe Ethan went with his father back to the church. Maybe they have a full day planned.* Or Ethan could have been home the whole time, only his father was gone. There was only one way to find out. Resting the bike against the tree, I marched to the front door and rang the bell. There was no answer.

I descended the steps and walked around the back of the house. Ethan could have been in the pool and didn't hear the doorbell ring. *What if he's there with a girl?* I didn't know why but the thought disturbed me, dropping like a rock in my stomach. If he didn't want to kiss me, that was one thing. If he didn't want to kiss me because he had another girl this whole time...that was a whole different situation. *Don't be ridiculous. He told you he didn't have time for you. What makes you think that he has time for anyone else?*

To my relief, there wasn't another girl in the pool with Ethan. He wasn't even in the pool. I snuck a peek through the back door and still saw the same emptiness as in the front. Ethan was nowhere to be found.

Oh well. I guess it's back to town.

I started back to my bike when my eye fell on the doll

house. My curiosity piqued and I started on the path leading to the doll house. It was a dirt path, just like the other paths I took, but this path had deep grooves in the center of it.

As I got closer to the dollhouse I could tell that it was just a miniature version of the actual house: It was painted pink, with a deep bay window perfect for reading, and a wide, wraparound porch, perfect for watching sunsets and sunrises. There were flowerbed holders under the windows, which were furnished by thick, white curtains. The dollhouse looked immaculate despite it not being used in years.

I wonder if they keep it preserved. Maybe they can't get rid of it because of the memories. Ethan did say that it was the only thing he had left of his sister.

Except I still hadn't heard any stories of the mother, or the sister. Did they even live together before the accident? Did the sister have her own room in the house? *Maybe it was one of the rooms with the closed doors. I didn't look in all of them, after all.*

When I was near the miniature mailbox, which looked like Mr. Hunter had made by hand, I heard the distinct sound of a branch cracking under the weight of a foot. I spun around to see Mr. Hunter standing twenty feet from me. The sun was at his back, making him look taller and mysterious; I was unable to read his expression from where I was standing.

"Amber, what a surprise to see you here," Mr. Hunter said.

"I-I'm sorry," I stuttered. "I was just looking for Ethan. He and I had a...disagreement and I came to make up with him. I thought maybe he was taking a walk." Against my better judgment, I started walking away from the dollhouse and towards Mr. Hunter.

"Nope," Mr. Hunter said. His eyes were still shadowed but I would still see the grim line of his mouth. "He and I just ran out to get some stuff for desert. We are going out for dinner tonight, to spend some quality time together. He is in his room if you want to go see him."

"Thanks," I said. "I'll just go find him there." I skirted around Mr. Hunter and practically ran back to the main house. I found Ethan in his room, just like his father said. He was taking something off and placed it on his dresser, next his hair brush, cologne, and deodorant, but I was too far away to see what it was.

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“Hey,” I said as I leaned up against the door frame. Ethan jumped and then turned to me. He stared at me, almost like he didn't know me, before turning to his dresser and putting his wallet down. He put the wallet down right over something else, blocking it from my view. Whatever it was, Ethan wanted to keep it a secret. I inched closer, craning my neck in hopes of seeing something but whatever he had was completely covered by his wallet. I frowned, dejected.

“What's up?” I asked, trying again. Ethan shrugged before flopping down on his bed. “Your dad said you guys are going to have dinner soon. Do you want to go for a walk before then? Maybe talk?” Ethan shrugged again. “Are you going to say anything or are you just going to shrug this whole time?”

“Well I have nothing to say,” Ethan said. “I don't know what to say. I don't know what you want me to say.”

“I don't *want* you to say anything!” I exclaimed, exasperated and, frankly, pissed off. What was with this guy? “Ethan it was a kiss! A silly little kiss! I don't know why you are freaking out over this. Seriously.”

“Because it was a kiss, Amber.”

“Kisses don't have to mean anything, Ethan. A kiss can be just a kiss, no strings attached. Many people do it... half of my friends do it - it can mean absolutely nothing. Hell, most of my friends have done a lot more than just kiss.” My mind went to Madison for a split second, but I forced that thought out of my head. Not now, I told myself. Not now.

“No they can't just not mean something.”

“Why not?” I demanded to know. I crossed the room and sat next to him on the bed. “Why can't a kiss just be a kiss?”

“Because kisses always mean something. Always.”

“Not always,” I argued. “Watch.” I turned Ethan's body to me and ignored the panicked expression on his face. Cradling his neck in my hand, I leaned forward and placed my lips on his. They were cold this time, and stiff, like the lips on a dead person, and a chill ran down my spine. Still, I didn't move my lips and instead I pulled him closer. Ethan put his hand on the bed next to me and I felt him tilt his head. We sat there, massaging each other's lips; an innocent set of kisses, before pulling apart. I smiled at him. “See?

Just a kiss.”

“Not just a kiss,” Ethan stated and I didn't have the strength to argue with him. I turned away, facing the wall, rubbing my chest. I didn't like the back flips that my heart was performing. “But I don't care anymore,” Ethan said. “I don't care because you are beautiful, and I like you, and I don't want to play by the damn rules anymore.”

“Oh,” I said. I didn't know what to make of Ethan's announcement, let alone what to say to him or how to feel about it. “So...what do you want?”

“I want to go out on a date. With you.” His voice sounded much more confident than it had before our mini make-out session.

“Well you can't.” Ethan and I both jumped and I could see that all the color was draining out of his face. I turned and Mr. Hunter was standing in the doorway, a towel over his shoulder and a carving knife in his hand. *What was the big deal? What kind of creepy rules does Mr. Hunter have for Ethan? Is he not supposed to date until college or something?*

“Mr. Hunter,” I said quickly. “Ethan didn't mean like a real date.” I was trying to diffuse the situation. “I think Ethan meant a date...like between friends. Like a movie or something. Nothing romantic anything. Maybe *Spiderman*.”

“No, Amber, my son did not mean a date between friends,” Mr. Hunter said. “I know what my son meant and he knows that he is not allowed to. It's against the rules.” Again with these rules.

What are these damn rules? Why are they so strict and why does Ethan seem so panicked about breaking them? “Ethan, remember what you and I talked about. I told you that I trust you...don't make me start questioning that. You know what happens if I have to question my trust in you.”

“Yes dad,” Ethan mumbled. Ethan was visibly shaking and I wondered if Mr. Hunter could see it too. “You can trust me, I promise.”

“Good,” Mr. Hunter said. He turned to me. “My son and I are going out to eat soon, Amber. I think you should be heading home. I don't want your sister to worry.”

“Yes sir,” I said. I squeezed Ethan's hand and smiled at him. “See you tomorrow or something?”

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“See you tomorrow,” Ethan said. I glanced at Mr. Hunter one last time before leaving Ethan's room and descending the stairs. I could hear the two talking upstairs but I couldn't hear what they were saying. I wasn't sure I wanted to know what they were saying. *They're probably talking about me.* Every time I saw Ethan, I managed to get him deeper into trouble. *Good job, Amber.*

I left the house and walked to my bike. Pulling it off of the tree, I was about to mount it and ride away when I came up with a better plan. I circled the house, the bike next to me, and, after settling the bike behind the bushes, I crouched down and waited. Minutes later I heard doors open and close, and then the start of an engine. From my hiding place I watched Ethan and his father leave the house and drive down the road.

When I couldn't see them anymore, I slipped out of my hiding place and ran up to the porch. I looked to my left and then my right even though I knew there was no one to see me, and then I turned the knob of the door. It was locked.

I didn't know how long I really had until the two came back so I started searching around the porch for a spare key. I looked under the doormat and under every potted plant I could see, but they turned up nothing. After thinking for a moment, I stood on the tip toes of my one leg and reached up, running my hand along the upper edge of the door frame. My fingers hit dust and dead bugs before feeling warm metal.

I slid the key off the edge, clutching it in my hand, and inserted it into the door. The door unlocked and I slipped in. Wasting no time, I ran back up to Ethan's room and peered in. His wallet was gone but what he had on his neck earlier wasn't. I grabbed the skeleton key off of his dresser, pocketed it, and then left the house. I put the house key back where I found it, grabbed my bike, and started pedaling as fast as I could back to the apartment.

Chapter Ten

Why does Ethan have a set of skeleton keys? And why is he carrying it around with him? The chain dangled from my fingers over the counter as I studied the keys in my palm. It was unusual, that was for sure, and it gleamed against the kitchen lights. There weren't many places to use the keys like the one I was holding and I couldn't help but wonder what it went to. *Is it another piece of memorabilia from his mother? Did she have a secret safe that only opened with these keys?*

Whatever the keys were used for, it was obviously a secret or Ethan wouldn't have tried to hide them. He wasn't going to tell me the secret, no matter what I did to try to convince him to. *I wonder how long it's going to take until he notices that they're missing.* I needed to get the keys back into his room but it didn't look like I was going to be going over there any time soon. Not if his father had any say in it. *Why does he have so much control over you, Ethan? What are the two of you hiding?*

Frustrated with Ethan and his father, I turned my attention back to the treasure in my hand. The keys were heavy too, not like any other keys that anyone else had. I could actually feel the weight of it as it lay in my palm. From what it looked like, Ethan carried it around with him everywhere which, in the Virginia heat, couldn't be comfortable. How did he keep the metal from burning his skin?

Three Little Lies

“Whatcha got there?” Rebecca asked as she came into the kitchen. She was huffing and her arms were full of groceries.

“Where's your prince charming?” I asked instead answering her question. “Shouldn't he be here, helping you carry all this crap into the kitchen?”

“I could ask the same thing about my little sister,” Rebecca replied as she gave me 'the look'. “Why don't you like Jacob, Amber? Ethan definitely likes him and Jacob hasn't been anything but nice to you since you got here. He's bent over backwards to try to make you happy and he tells me that every time he tries you just scoff at him. What's the deal?”

“I like him fine,” I lied. “Jacob is just over sensitive. You know that I'm sort of standoffish; I always have been. It's nothing against him; it's just how I am.” I couldn't tell my sister about the situation with Jacob. No matter how many times I tried, I chickened out at the last second. She was happy with him... happier than I saw her in a while. I didn't want to ruin that happiness and after the summer, I didn't have to see much of Jacob. It was better to keep my mouth shut.

“But it's not how you are with Ethan.” Rebecca started pawing through the bags, organizing the groceries on the counter top. “From what I hear you're little Miss Chatty Patty.” My cheeks burned. “What's happened to Ethan anyway? Usually he's around a lot more often.”

“He's just busy,” I said. “With his own family drama.” I didn't want to tell Rebecca anything about the kiss or the confrontation with his father. “But tell Jacob that he needs to get a thicker skin. I don't treat him any differently then I treat you, or Cheryl, or Dad. I hate everyone equally.” Rebecca rolled her eyes.

“Oh thanks,” Rebecca said. “I'm just so glad that you think so highly of us. It just makes me just want to melt inside. I'm so moved knowing how much you care about me. I think I might cry a little.”

“I'm glad I move you to tears.” I hopped off the chair, pocketing the key and chain. “I see that my work here is done.”

“Oh, you are oh so funny, Amber. So very, very funny.”

“And that's why you love me!” I called back to Rebecca as I danced into my room. Sitting on the bed, I pulled out Madison's

journal, and just stared at it. After reading the harsh words the last time I opened the book I wasn't sure if I wanted to do it again.

Was I really up for hearing about how pathetic Madison thought I was? Could I really handle learning about all these dirt bags she played around with just for some extra money? Did I have the strength to accept that my friend wasn't who she said she was? *But if I don't read this book, I may never find out what happened to her. For all I know, one of her Johns killed her and he would be in this book. I may not get his real name but a name, any name, would be helpful. It could be the guy named Bill for all I know.*

Giving in, I flipped through the pages until I got to the very last page written on. I don't know why but I had a feeling about the page; I knew something important was written on those lines.

May 25, 2012
Dear Journal,

I thought that I would get sick of Open Realizations by now because of the long nights but I'm not. I love working for them. It is so exciting and I meet so many different, interesting people. I also get a lot of new clothes and money. I love the money the best, hands down. This money is mine...I don't have to ask my parents to give me money and then explain why I need it.

Today I am meeting with a guy named Lenny. From his picture I can tell that Lenny is tall dark and handsome...literally. I don't think that I've met any other guy with such perfect caramel colored skin like I see in Lenny's picture. I can't wait to meet him tonight.

From his profile, he says that he's a doctor or a lawyer or something. He says he makes a lot of money so he can pay a lot. Lenny is the type of person, I can tell, that doesn't mind bragging about his money. He has it, a lot of it, and he wants to spend it. On me.

In an email, Lenny told me that he wanted to spoil me and take me on a shopping spree. He says that I deserve nice things and he promised me that tomorrow we will go shopping. Lenny says I'm too pretty to be wearing plain clothes. He wants me to shine.

Three Little Lies

I have to meet up with Lenny in a few hours so I can't write too much more. I have to shave and get ready for tonight. I have butterflies in my stomach but in such a good way. Who knew that this could be so liberating. Who knew that this is exactly what I needed?

Maybe I will finally confess to Amber about what I am doing. She's been asking me what was going on with me, what I was doing every night, but I managed to avoid answering her. I'll admit; I don't want to tell her because I don't want her judging me. Or at least I didn't.

But now I don't care. I want to tell Amber exactly what I'm doing and how much fun it is. Maybe I can convince her to do it with me and we can go into it together. We can be like a twin rate or something...it would be fun. I can't wait to talk to her about it. Finally something good is happening.

YOLO

Madison

So she could be somewhere with Lenny. He could have taken her...kidnapped her or something, and no one knew. How could the police miss something like this? I have to find out who this Lenny guy is.

Putting the book away, I lay back on my bed and stared up into the ceiling. I couldn't believe that Madison was planning on trying to get me to join her. I could never have done what she did for money. It was too...skeevy and it left a bad taste in my mouth. But for some reason Madison liked the lifestyle. *If only I could ask her why. If only I could get into her head somehow.*

But it wasn't just about understanding Madison now. Now I had a name, even if it was fake, a name to look for, to find. Lenny, whoever he may be, could have the information I so desperately needed. He could be her abductor...and if by a slim he wasn't her abductor...he could be helpful. If only I could find him.

Well you could I told myself. You probably could easily find Lenny. You know what you would have to do to find him. If I wanted to find out who Lenny was, and where he was, I would have to follow in Madison's footsteps. I would have to sign up on

Open Realizations, create a fake profile, and pretend that I wanted to give my body up for money. Then, after all of that, I could find Lenny. If and after I found him, then I would take the next step. I would offer to meet him. *But is that what you really want to do? It's a risk...a big one. Is this risk worth it?* I couldn't answer the question.

* * *

There was officially one thrift store that I could find as I walked the streets. The longer I walked, the more I exercised. Week after week I found myself thinning out, my skin becoming taut with muscle. I was even getting more comfortable with my prosthetic. It didn't bother me half as much as it did when I first started to use it.

The thrift store, called *Shabby Chic Head Quarters*, was open and people shuffled in and out regularly. I stood in front of the store, contemplating what type of outfit and costume jewelry I was looking for, and people pushed around me just to get inside. *Wow, rude* I thought as I glared at the pre-teens around me. *Even I know better than to just hit into people. It's called common courtesy.* I moved over as one of the giggling girls elbowed me in the ribs as she tried to walk next to her friends. *Bitch.*

I leaned up against a tree; my arms crossed over my chest, and looked through the window of the store. There were racks upon racks of clothing and they were so packed together that I could only see colors on the racks, and the signs above them.

"Hey," a familiar voice next to me said. Bailey was standing there, staring at me. "Uh...what's up?"

"Nothing," I said. "Going to go buy some stuff in the thrift store." I was still annoyed at Bailey, and hurt by what he said so I didn't really want anything to do with him. "Do you mind? I have a lot to do and you popping up around me is starting to get creepy."

"I think we need to talk," Bailey said. "You haven't talked to me since I told you what I did."

"Well I don't want to talk," I said. "I thought that would be obvious."

"It is but that doesn't mean I stop trying."

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“No, see, that's exactly what it's supposed to mean. Leave me alone. Stop trying to get me to talk to you if you know I'm annoyed. Don't you know me at all?” I rolled my eyes. “Just let it go, Bailey. I'll come talk to you if I want to talk to you. Stop being so pushy.”

“Amber-” I ignored Bailey, pushed off of the tree, and slipped into the thrift shop with the most recent crowd. The floor was carpeted, but barely visible. There were more racks in the store than I imagined there would be and I have to suck in whatever stomach I had to get through the people. The racks started in the front and didn't end until the back wall. Even the walls were covered in clothes, shelves of toys, and books. There wasn't more than an inch uncovered in any spot.

How is anyone supposed to find anything in here? There's no order to anything! I flipped through the packed circles of clothes, grimacing at the hideous pieces of clothing that I found. *People actually wear these things? What in the world were they thinking?*

I moved from rack to rack, getting pushed and prodded from the other customers, and felt like screaming. I was having no luck finding an outfit, and there was no room to move. It was chaos. I didn't even know what I was really looking for, only that I knew I didn't see it yet.

Finally, at the very last rack, the one with a clearance of eighty percent, something caught my eye. I pulled the dress off the rack and admired the good sequined number hanging on the hanger. It was short sleeved and had a boat neck.

These can be altered. I can add some cleavage to this. I put the dress up against me and looked at my reflection in the mirror. The dress fell to my knees but I knew it would be easy to hem it up until it was mid-thigh. *This might actually work* I thought and hung the dress over my arm.

It was smooth sailing from there. I found the gold purse that matched the dress and, under a pile of boxes containing black strappy sandals, I found one lone pair of knee length black boots. I found some costume jewelry that matched the outfit and carried it all to the register. At the register, I waited in line behind a mother with four children and her husband who was holding all the

clothes. *Poor guy. Sucks to be him.*

* * *

When I got back to the diner, bags from my shopping trip in my hands, I was greeted by Ethan sitting at a table, two milkshakes in front of him. He had his head on his hands and when he saw me he gave me a tentative smile. I smiled back, confused as to why he was waiting for me. It was obvious that his father wanted him to have nothing to do with me and up until now, Ethan was kind of following what his father wanted.

But there he was, waiting for me, and I couldn't help the butterflies in my stomach. If I was a sap, I would have found the situation romantic. I walked into the diner, waved at Rebecca, and made my way over to Ethan. As I sat across from him in the booth Ethan pushed one of the milkshakes at me. I took it gratefully and sucked the cold beverage through the straw, letting it splash at the back of my throat

"Rebecca said you were going to be here soon so I got these and just waited," Ethan said. "I hope it's not too melted."

"No, it's perfect," I said. I gave him a smile. "This is exactly what I needed after my day."

"What happened?" I filled Ethan in on my trip of *Shaggy Chic Head Quarters*. I told him about the crowds, the pushing, and how cramped everything was.

"I'm telling you I was about to have a full blown panic attack. The people were just...everywhere and there was no room to even rest and breathe!"

"That sounds like normal for that store," Ethan told me. "They are always busy, no matter what the season, because they have such a wide array of clothes. Everyone always manages to find what they want and even some things that they don't want." Ethan motioned to the bags. "What did you end up getting?"

"Nothing much," I said. "Just a dress and such...for my Halloween costume." I wasn't planning on telling Ethan my grand plan of finding Madison. He wouldn't understand. And who knew if he would tell Jacob, or worse, Rebecca. I couldn't take that chance. "I know Halloween is far away but I want to get it started.

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To pass the time, too, until I get to go back home.”

“You hate it here that much?” Ethan mused. “I thought you were finally warming up to Virginia...and to me.”

“I like it here,” I admitted, “but I just want to be home. With my mom...and my own bed. With my stuff. I feel like I’m an alien on a different planet. I want to go back to normal.”

“Me too,” Ethan said. I looked at him, my eyebrow raised. “I mean I have a normal life...I guess I just want it to go back to before my mom and sister died. When I didn’t have to be perfect for my dad. Do you understand what I mean?”

“I understand more than you know,” I said. “I feel like that all the time when I’m with my father and his wife, Cheryl. I don’t feel like I fit in with that family, not even with Rebecca. There’s always something different about me, something that pushes me apart from them. I always wished for my dad to get back together with my mom and have a normal childhood. I wished I wasn’t a bastard child.”

“I thought your parents were married when they had you?”

“No, sweetie,” I told him. “They got married **because** they had me.”

“Oh,” he said.

“Yeah.” I shrugged nonchalantly. “Such is life.”

“Well you might not have two parents that are married but you are far from being a bastard.”

“Funny, Ethan,” I said. “You should become a stand-up comedian.”

“I know, right?” I didn’t know if Ethan really believed me or if he was teasing me as much as I was teasing him so I just shook my head and smirked. “But really, I wish I didn’t have this need to be perfect for my dad. It’s so tiring and I’m sick of it. He never lets me just be myself. I have to be a cut out copy of him.”

“Why don’t you just put your foot down and go your own way?” I asked. “It’s not that hard.”

“For you maybe. For me it’s almost impossible. I’ve been trying, trust me.”

“I believe you,” I said. “But there has to be a way. No offense, but your father doesn’t seem particularly approachable. If you really want your own life you’re going to have to stand up to

him.”

“I will,” Ethan said. “Eventually.” Ethan looked desperate and confused. “It’s just that I-”

“I know, I know, you are the only person he has and you want to please him.” I pushed forward until I was leaning on my elbows. “But there’s only so much a parent can expect from his child. It’s about time that **he** listens to **you**.” Hit with an idea, I stood up and grabbed Ethan with me.

“What are we doing?”

“Going back to your house,” I told Ethan as I walked to the counter and stored my purchases beneath the register. I threw the milkshake glasses into the sink in the kitchen, Ethan following closely behind.

“My dad isn’t there. I can’t talk to him yet,” Ethan said.

“You’re not going to talk to him yet,” I told him. “But we still need to go to your house.”

“Then what are we going to do there?” Ethan asked, concern written all over his face.

“Enjoy some liquid courage,” I said, a mischievous grin on my face.

Chapter Eleven

"Amber, I really don't think this is a good idea," Ethan said as he sat on the couch in his living room. I was shuffling through his father's liquor cabinet trying to decide which bottle to use. "If my dad finds out, he's going to flip, like completely. He'll get crazy. He keeps telling me that the cabinet is off limits. He said if he ever caught me in there, he would whip me."

"First of all, no parent wants their child to drink," I told Ethan. "And every parent says that they are going to whip their kid if they find out that this kid is drinking. I know my parents did."

"And have they ever caught you drinking?"

"More than once but all they did was yell at me and ground me. Nothing else," I said. I was about to pull out a bottle of *Gentleman Jack's Whiskey* when I turned to look at Ethan. He was wringing his hands around each other and looking at me desperately. Changing my mind, I closed the liquor cabinet and joined Ethan on the couch. "Okay if you really don't want to drink we won't drink. It's no big deal and honestly it was getting kind of old for me. Kind of lame, you know." Ethan nodded and I could see him visibly relax. He leaned back against the couch and closed his eyes.

"I'm sorry," he said after a moment. "You must think I'm lame and pathetic. I know I do."

"Nah," I said. "I'm not really into drinking anymore either. It helped when my friend Madison disappeared, kind of numbed me up so I wasn't hurting so much. But now it seems a little pathetic and useless, you know? And I'm wondering if worrying about my friend was even worth it."

"Why?"

"It turns out that she had this whole secret life that she kept from me. She also kind of dissed me as a person...I read it all in her journal. It was a slap in the face."

"It usually is," Ethan agreed. "That's why I try not to get too close to people. You never know who they really are until it's too late." Ethan lifted his head up to look at me. "But that was before I met you. Now...now I don't know what to do about anything." Ethan smiled at me and I blushed. I wasn't the type of girl that usually got flustered by compliments but I found myself speechless. My brain turned to mush. So, instead, I leaned over and gave Ethan a peck on the cheek. It was an innocent kiss with no expectations.

"You are sweet, do you know that?" I asked. "Does your dad ever tell you how special you are or anything?"

"Probably not as much as he should," Ethan said. "Or as much as I want to hear. My dad loves me, I know that he does, but being a single parent makes him a little tough. He wants to make sure I grow up well but he isn't used to being a single parent. My mom did all the disciplining and when she died...well, he didn't know what to do. The only thing he knows is how to be strict."

"Well at least your dad cares," I said. "You know what it's like with my father, I've told you that." I curled my feet under me and put my head against Ethan's chest. "He's more like a paycheck than a father. If I hadn't gotten into trouble...I probably wouldn't have seen him until my high school graduation." I sighed "But my mother cares and that's enough for me. She's always been enough for me."

* * *

I wasn't sure when I fell asleep or for how long I was

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sleeping but when I opened my eyes, my neck was tucked into the space between Ethan's shoulder and his head. Ethan's arm was around me and his head was resting against the back of the couch. I looked outside to see the sun was low in the horizon. The clock on the mantle revealed that it was almost eight; Ethan's father would be home in an hour.

I carefully moved Ethan's arm away from me and slid up until I was at the edge of the couch. Uncurling my legs from under me, I stretched and tried not to wince at the stiffness in my joints. Ethan grunted and curled his body up, closing the space I left behind.

I stood up, took a moment to watch Ethan sleep, and then left the room. It was the perfect time to look for Ethan's sister's room. I wanted to see what she was like, who she looked like. *Or if she even existed.* There wasn't a single picture of her, or Ethan's mother, in any of the rooms Ethan showed me. It was like, once they died, they were cut off from the family. Yet there was a dollhouse in the back. *Maybe the dollhouse is where they keep all the pictures and mementos. I could be wasting my time here.*

I walked down the hallway, peeking my head inside. There was a game room packed to the brim with arcade games; a gym with dumbbells, a treadmill, and other machines that I glared at. The only exercise I ever did was in gym class and that wasn't by choice. I closed the door and continued down the hall.

At the end of the hall there was one other door. I turned the knob and, like the others, it turned with ease. I peeked my head in, just like I did with all of the other rooms, and realized that the room I was looking in was Mr. Hunter's study. I pushed the door open some more and walked in.

Mr. Hunter had bookcases along all of the walls. They were a deep redwood color and held only classics, encyclopedias, and autobiographies. I didn't see any contemporary works or any sleazy novels like the kind my mother liked. The bookcases looked a little boring to me and I wondered what Ethan thought of it all. *Does Ethan read these books too?* There was no bookcase in Ethan's room but that didn't mean that Ethan didn't have a secret stash of comics

somewhere.

Mr. Hunter had a large desk in the far corner of the room, with the window right behind it. The desk was thick, with the same colored wood as the bookcases, and had clawed feet at the bottom. The top of the desk was covered in leather and a thin piece of Plexiglas over it for extra support and protection.

I ran my fingers over the desk that probably cost more than all of furniture in my room together. It was obvious that Mr. Hunter had more money than he knew what to do with. *So why is Ethan so upset about living here? What are the rules and why does Ethan seem to think of his father as nothing but a burden?*

I walked around the desk, standing in between it and the leather chair that accompanied it. I sat down on the chair gingerly, and my eyes scanned the whole desk. It was large, and it had three thick cabinets on each side. I turned my head to the side, pausing to see if there was any noise from the living room where I left Ethan. When I couldn't hear anything, I turned my attention back to the desk and opened the first drawer on the left. It was filled with hanging files, all filled to the brim. I scanned the files but they were filled with information about the town. The next two drawers following were the same thing. *Well this is rather disappointing.*

I was about to go to the right side, to see if I could find anything interesting in those, when heard the jingle of a door handle. *Oh shit! Mr. Hunter must be home early!* I jumped from the chair, sliding it up against the window, and rushed out from behind it. I had seconds to get back to the living room before the door opened completely.

I ran across the room but stopped suddenly when I saw a wooden box with a key hole cut out of it. A key hole that would fit the skeleton keys I swiped earlier. Without hesitating, I grabbed the box, and ran down the hall. Ethan was still asleep and I was running out of time. I flopped down on the couch and stuffed the box into my bag on the floor in front of me. My jerky movements startled Ethan and his eyes flew open as the door opened. A minute later Mr. Hunter appeared in the doorway.

"Hey kiddo," Mr. Hunter said. He smiled at Ethan but his face was stone when he looked at me. "I didn't expect you to be

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here, Amber,” he said. I could hear Ethan’s shallow breath next to me. *He’s not planning on talking to his father. He’s chickening out.*

“I know, Mr. Hunter and I’m sorry,” I said. “I...well Ethan and I aren’t hanging out anymore and I thought I should bring him back a CD he lent me.” Both Ethan and I knew it was a lie, but he nodded in agreement. “I wanted a proper goodbye.” I stood up, grabbing my bag in the process. “I’m sorry to disturb you. I’ll be going now. Goodbye, sir.”

“Goodbye,” Mr. Hunter said, his words tight and clipped. I could hear him shifting on the couch. “How was your day, son?” As Ethan launched into a story of our day, giving his father a play by play of everything he did, I slipped out the back door, bringing the spare house key with me.

* * *

It was dark out...dark, muggy and damp. My skin felt clammy against my clothes and I shuffled around to find some relief. The fan that Jacob placed in my room, at the request of Rebecca, was blowing right on me. It was circulating the air, but the air was hot, so it actually made it worse.

I slid off the bed and turned off the fan before wiping my brow with the back of my hand. Sweat trickled down my neck and I tried to mop it up with the edge of my tank top before pulling the tank top off and tossing it across the room. Flicking the switch over, I turned on a lamp and illuminated the room.

The box I took from Mr. Hunter’s house was still in my bag so I pulled it out and put it on the desk. Sitting down on the wooden chair, I took out the two skeleton keys and stared at them side by side, comparing them to the hole in the box. Then, after a moment, I slipped the key into the hole. The key turned smoothly; it was obviously the right key. Instead of opening the box, though, I locked the key and took it out of the hole. I wasn’t sure that I was ready to find out the secrets.

“Those are cool keys.” I jumped at the sound of a voice. Looking up, I saw Rebecca standing behind me, studying the two keys like I was.

"What are you doing up?" I asked. "Don't you have to work in a few hours?"

"I couldn't sleep," she said. "My stomach isn't settling. I feel a queasy."

"Oh," I said. "Stomach bug?"

"Probably," she said. "Lord knows what I could have picked up from customers. Could be malaria, for all I know. So the keys...what are they for? Where did you get them?"

"I found them at a thrift store," I lied. "They came with this box."

"Anything in the box?"

"I don't know, I haven't been able to unlock it." Another lie. I couldn't very well tell Rebecca where the box was really from. "I'm not sure what I'm going to do with them, you know? They seem kind of useless now." I tried to sound nonchalant and crossed my fingers that my sister fell for it. She did.

"You can use them to take photographs," Rebecca suggested. "A nice black and white picture, highlighting the keys or something...or both the keys and the box if you can get the box open."

"Yeah, that's an idea."

"Actually, I was looking through some of the photos on your memory card and-

"Wait, you looked at my photos?" I said interrupting Rebecca. "Why are you looking through my stuff?"

She was in my room. Madison's stuff is in my room! What if she found Madison's journal? What other stuff did she look through?

"I just wanted to see what kind of pictures you took."

"So you just looked, just like that?"

"Yeah."

"Without asking?" Rebecca groaned and moved to sit on my bed. I put the two keys down on my desk, swiveled in the chair, and stared at her.

"I'm sorry that I looked, okay? I didn't think it was such a big deal," Rebecca said. "Now do you want to keep being mad at me or would you like to hear an idea that I had?" Continuing to be mad at Rebecca sounded like a pretty solid idea but I knew

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that wasn't the answer she wanted.

"Fine, what's the idea?" I asked. "Tell me."

"Why don't you start your own website?" Rebecca suggested. "Start selling some of your prints? I have some money saved up so I could pick you up a copy of Photoshop, we could get mat board, and we can make everything look professional. I think the prints would really sell."

"Really?" I asked with surprise. "Do you really think that they are that good?"

"Yeah, definitely," Rebecca said. "They are a lot better than others I've seen hanging in my friends' houses. I was thinking that I could even take a couple of them and put them in the diner. Replace the God-awful ones I have hanging now with yours. What do you think?"

"I don't know," I told her honestly. "I think I would have to think about it. It's kind of a big thing...a big change. I never thought of selling my pictures before." Rebecca stood up and squeezed my shoulder.

"Well think about it and get back to me. Your birthday is coming up and I could buy you some stuff for a present. Let me know."

"I will Rebecca...thanks." Rebecca smiled at me, waiting for a reaction. I sat there, staring at my camera, mulling over the words that Rebecca said. "But if I'm going to do that I'm going to need Bailey's help." Rebecca stiffened as she turned to me. "Come on Rebecca, it's been weeks."

"I know but you screwed up, Amber, and you screwed up with him," she argued. "He was supposed to take care of you and yet you both ended up drunk."

"It was just a mistake," I whined. "People make mistakes. Bailey and I are best friends and you refuse to let me see him. It's not fair. He's a great guy." *You know, if he's not lying to you.*

"He's just been going through a rough time."

"What about what you did?" she asked. "How was that fair?"

"I'm sorry," I said. "But nothing like that has happened since. Don't you think it's time you eased up?" Rebecca sighed, her resolve wearing.

"Fine," she said finally. "You can see him again but not a lot. And if I catch you doing anything wrong again, that's it. That's the end of Bailey for the rest of the summer."

"I promise I won't do anything stupid," I assured her.

"Thank you." Rebecca grunted in response.

"You better hope you don't screw up again," she muttered and I grinned.

Could I really sell my prints? Do I want to? Photography wasn't something I started doing to make money. I took pictures mostly to remember times that I knew I would forget when I got too old to count on my own memory. I started taking pictures at the beginning of freshman year to record my life in high school. Two years later I couldn't leave my house without a camera of some sort

I never wanted to miss an opportunity to record a special event. But selling them? That was something that I didn't think of. It never even passed as a fleeting thought.

"Well that's just another thing on my list to think about," I said as I turned back to the key. "And the list just keeps getting longer and longer."

* * *

I entered the room where my group meeting was, feeling like I was returning to a second home. Skipping the previous meeting, I felt like I had missed out on a lot. After sitting down on one of the folding plastic chair, I pulled out a book and waited for the meeting to start. As like every other time, I arrived early to the community center. Since the center was close to the apartment and the diner, it only took a few minutes to walk there. But I usually left with ample time. So I passed the time sitting and waiting by reading.

As I was about to open the book to the page I left off on I heard someone clear their throat. Looking up, I saw Bailey standing in front of me, a box in his hand, and a smile on his face. He put the box on my lap and sat down next to me. I looked at the box and then cocked my eye at Bailey.

"What is this for?" I asked. It was a pretty small box and,

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as I tried to pick it up, I realized that it light as a feather. I shook it around and something jingled. Bailey put his hand on top of mine, stopping me. He shook his head.

"Don't shake it," he said.

"Okay. So why are you giving this to me?"

"This is an 'I'm sorry' gift. I want you to know that I consider you one of my best friends. Yes, I became friends with you only because you were friends with Madison but that changed," Bailey said. "It changed last summer when we were both camp counselors. I liked being around you and you made me laugh. I was finally able to see you for who you were and not just as Madison's friend. So I bought this for you in hopes of showing you how sorry I am and how much I appreciate your friendship." Bailey eyed me nervously. "Go ahead, open it."

I pulled the satin ribbon off the box, carefully winding it around my hand to keep it from getting knotted, and pulled the top of the box off. Moving the tissue paper out of the way, I looked down and gasped. Inside was a camera the size of my palm.

"Is this what I think it is?" I asked Bailey as I took the camera out and cradled it in my hand. It was lightweight and small enough that I could wrap my hand around it and it would completely disappear.

"Yes," Bailey said "It's the AM628...it's the smallest camera that I could find. I know how sometimes you like to take those candid pictures but you can't with your big camera. I thought that this might help."

"But this costs a fortune!" I explained. I stared at Bailey. "How could you afford this?"

"I have a job, you know. I saved up for it," Bailey said. I put the camera back in the box and leaned over to give Bailey a hug. "Do you like it?"

"Of course I do, it's amazing."

"Do you forgive me?"

"I would have forgiven you without the gift but yes, I forgive you." Bailey kissed my cheek and I squealed before pulling away. The clock on the wall read three minutes to one and people were starting to filter in. "This is amazing, really. I

love it."

"I'm glad," Bailey said. "And I better see some results." Bailey winked at me as Marci finally entered the room and took her seat.

"Good afternoon everyone. I think we should get started."

* * *

An hour later I was back at the apartment, in the living room, going through the stacks of pictures that I saved on my external hard drive. There had to be a thousand pictures saved and waiting to be chosen. *How the hell am I going to be able to make a choice? This is too hard!* I didn't think that any of them looked good enough to be sold despite the fact that Rebecca assured me that it wasn't true.

I poured through the pictures, one by one, until my eyes burned and I had a migraine. When I was finally finished, I cracked my neck and rubbed my eyes with the palms of my hands. I transferred fifty of my pictures onto the memory card that I was using, putting them all in one file. There were so many more pictures to go through but my eyes felt like they were going to fall out of my head. I would have to go back to them later.

The pictures weren't anything unique but they were some of the best I took. Some of the pictures were of Madison, and my other friends, while the others were pictures I had taken here, of strangers, when they weren't paying attention. After making sure all of the pictures were saved in the file, I closed the laptop and put it on the table in front of me. As I sat on the couch with my eyes closed and my hands rubbing the temples of my head, I heard the door open.

"Hey there," Rebecca said. I opened my eyes and saw her shuffling in with groceries that would be cooked into tonight's dinner. "How was the meeting?"

"Fine," I told her. "It's almost over so the group director, Marci, is struggling to find things to do. We don't even have that much to talk about anymore so that makes it even harder."

"Well that sucks," Rebecca said. "Hey I got you something while I was out."

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"What?"

"This. Catch." Rebecca tossed a plastic wrapped box to me and I caught it with ease. It was the newest version of Photoshop. "I thought that even if you don't want to try to sell your pictures you could touch them up and mount them." Rebecca walked over with bag in her hand. "Here's the mat board and stuff. The guy at the photo store said it was the right one. If it's not, though, let me know. We can return it and get whatever you need."

"Thanks so much Rebecca," I gushed. "But you really didn't have to do this. I know that this is really expensive."

"Well, it wasn't just her idea. I helped out too." Coming through the door was Jacob and I cringed when I saw him. "I would do anything to help my soon to be sister in law out. Do you like it?" *Not as much now that I know you had a part in it* I thought but I smiled and nodded.

"I love it, thank you." I turned to my sister. "I did decide to start selling my stuff. I picked out fifty pictures to start." I got up and pulled the memory card out of the computer.

"That's wonderful!"

"Yeah I was just about to go print out the raw copies...see how much work they really need. I'll be back in a bit, okay?"

"Sure, no problem," Rebecca said. "Jacob can help me cook. Dinner will be in an hour."

"I'll be back by then," I said and, without acknowledging Jacob at all, I left the apartment. I had work to do.

Chapter Twelve

As I wiped down the counters around the diner I stared out through the window onto the street. Rain was pouring down with such force that it bounced off the pavement, jumping back onto the hems of the passerby's. Cars were sliding on the road, honking every chance they got. People were running from buildings to cars, covering their heads with newspapers and their own coats.

I grinned and shook my head in disbelief as I watched them. *It's rain, people, a little bit of rain. It's not going to kill you.* The rain was a nice change from the scorching sun that came out almost every day. Not even the days when there was overcast shifted the amount of heat in the air. If anything, on those days, the temperature was hotter and humidity was the queen.

But the rain had been falling steadily since midnight and I could feel the heat dwindle down. I didn't feel like I was suffocating when I stepped outside. The only downside of the weather, though, was that the diner was empty...completely desolate. No one wanted to go out to the diner to eat soup and drink coffee when they could do the same thing at home.

I dropped my rag on one of the empty booths and slid into the chair to rest. Rebecca and Jacob were in the back, prepping for the next day, and Bailey was in the back with them helping them carry boxes. With nothing better to do, Rebecca decided to rearrange the kitchen. She was bored, and hated feeling cooped up.

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She needed something to keep her from getting too bored. This time she dragged Bailey and Jacob into it. *Poor schmucks.*

As I looked out the window I spied a girl with a chin length bob cut running across the street to the diner. Rain bounced off her caramel colored skin as she hopped over the puddles and side stepped cars splashing mud and water everywhere. Not a drop landed on her. In her hand was a blue umbrella with yellow ducks all around. Across her body was a leather messenger bag.

I wondered if she was coming in for something to eat after finishing a class at the local college.

After successfully crossing the street, the girl stopped in front of the diner, closed her umbrella, and then shook herself like a dog trying to shake off after a bath. She peered through the window, her hands cupped around her eyes, before opening the door and walking in. Her shoes squeaked against the floor and I got up from my spot in the corner.

"Sit wherever you would like," I told her. "I'll be with you in just a minute." The girl smiled at me as she situated herself at a table. She hung up her umbrella on the back of the chair she was sitting in and then started to rummage through her bag. I grabbed my apron and tied it around my waist. Reaching into the pocket I pulled out my ordering pad and a pencil. "What can I get for you?" I asked when I finally reached her table. She was studying the menu; her teeth were gnawing at her lower lip and her eyes were furrowed in concentration.

"I'm not sure," she said with an apologetic tone. "I haven't been in town for a while and this place is new to me. What do you suggest?" She looked at me and waited. I looked at the menu and then back out to the disgusting weather.

"Soup," I said. "Definitely soup. We have an amazing broccoli and cheese soup with about half a loaf of bread for dipping. It is delicious."

"Well then, I guess I'll take your word on it. I'll have the largest serving of the soup that I can order. Also I'll have two servings of the same thing to go later on. I'm not sure if I had to tell you that now or later." The girl smiled at me. "If that's not too much trouble, of course. I don't want to put anyone out."

Put anyone out? Hello lady, this is a restaurant. We're

supposed to serve you. That's kind of our job.

"No trouble at all," I said, pasting a smile on my face. "It will be out in a little bit. Can I get you a drink while you wait?"

"A root beer please," the girl said. "Thanks." She tucked the menu back with the condiments and I watched as she pulled out a book and her cell phone. Putting the order sheet on the revolving rack, I rang the bell and greeted my sister at the counter. She looked at the girl and then read the order.

"It will be done in fifteen, maybe less," Rebecca told me. I followed her back to the kitchen and filled a large cup with root beer.

After bringing the cup to the girl, along with a straw, I slipped behind the counter and studied her. There was something about her, something that looked familiar, but I couldn't put my finger on it. I pondered over where I knew her from. She wasn't a regular, I was almost sure of that. Rebecca lived in a small town, so I knew nearly everyone who stopped by. I never noticed her in group, or around the town.

So why do I feel so drawn to her? What was it about her that made me stop and think? I nibbled on my lip as I worked the possibilities through my mind.

"Here, here is her order," Rebecca said. I noticed that Rebecca gave the girl a larger helping of bread than usual. I cocked my eyebrow at my sister. "She looks a little worse for wear. She could use some sustenance."

"If you say so," I said. I grabbed the tray and made my way to the table being cautious with every step I took. The floor was a damp thanks to a leak under the door, and it was easy to slip. *I have to do something about that after I deliver this.*

"Here you go," I said to the girl as I transferred the bowl of soup and the bread from the tray onto the table. The girl moved over her book to make room for the food and smiled. "Enjoy." I went to turn, to leave the girl in peace, but then hesitated, spinning back to her. The question was out of my mouth before I could stop it. "Can I ask you a question?"

"Okay," the girl said.

"Do I know you?" I asked. "The only reason I ask is because you look really familiar...almost as if I have met you

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before. I can't put my finger on it, though."

"No I don't think I've ever met you. I'm not from around here, just passing through. This place is like a second home to me. It's a place where I spent nearly half of my childhood. It killed me when I stopped coming. I thought it was high time that I brought my tail back here and visited my home away from home."

"Oh," I said confused. "Okay." I really thought I knew her.

"Yeah. I remember the lazy summer nights catching fireflies with my cousin, crickets chirping in the back ground. We would laugh and run until we were too tired to do anything else."

"Your cousin?" I questioned. So she had family here.

"What's your cousin like?"

"He's the quiet type," she said. "Likes to keep to himself. Ethan...well he loves to make people laugh and he's one of the good ones. You could always count on Ethan to do the right thing. Family is everything to him."

"Ethan? Ethan who?"

"Ethan Hunter," the girl said. My eyes bulged in my head.

"Ethan's your cousin?"

"Yeah," she said. "Do you know him?"

"A bit," I said, faltering. "We've been hanging out." I shot out my hand. "My name is Amber. Nice to meet you."

"Kelly," the girl said. She held out her hand and I shook it. "It's nice to meet some of Ethan's friends...he doesn't seem to introduce me to them that often. Granted, I'm only around every once in a while but still. I get worried about him sometimes. I don't think he should be hanging out alone so much."

"Honestly, I've never met anyone else he hangs out with," I told Kelly. "He doesn't talk about many people either. We kind of fell together. But I think that's the way he likes it."

"That's Ethan for you," Kelly said. "Mister loner himself."

"I think it's because of everything that happened to him...you know," I said softly.

"What do you mean?" Kelly asked. "What happened to my cousin?" *Seriously?*

"With his sister and mother dying and all. It screws with a kid's head. I'm surprised he's taking it as well as he is."

"His mother didn't die," Kelly said, obviously confused.

"She up and left Ethan and his father when Ethan was ten. One day she went out for groceries and then, poof, she never came back. Like some sick magic act."

"And his sister?" I asked even though I already had a feeling about what she was going to tell me.

"I don't know where you get your information from Amber," Kelly said. "But Ethan doesn't have a sister. He doesn't even have a brother. Ethan is an only child."

* * *

The rain was still pouring down when I finished my shift at the diner and climbed the stairs to the apartment. In my room, I opened the window and listened to the rain beat against the side of the house as I lay, face up, on my bed with my hands behind my head. My computer laid, forgotten, on the floor next to me.

My brow furrowed as I went over everything in my head. There was no record for any death in the Hunter family. Though I rifled through page after page on the internet, I couldn't find an article relating to the death of Ethan's mother and sister, and the pictures I found of the Hunter family were only of Ethan and his father. It was like the mother and sister didn't even exist, let alone die in some horrible crash. It looked like what Kelly told me was the truth, which meant only one thing.

Ethan lied to me. He lied right to my face about his family situation and I believed it. I even opened up to him about my own family thinking we sort of had a connection, but it was pack of lies, all if it. I had no idea if anything Ethan told me since I met him was the truth.

But why? I asked myself. Why did he lie to me? Why not tell me the truth? Did he think it would make us closer to one another? Give us some common ground?

He liked me...but would he really lie to me to get close to me? I wanted to confront Ethan about it...to call him out, but he wasn't answering his cell phone and I didn't have the number for his house. Until and unless I saw him, I wouldn't be able to say anything.

After mulling over everything I found out that day,

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something stuck out, and I sat straight up in my bed. The doll house! If Ethan didn't have a sister, then what was going on with the doll house? What was it doing there and what were they doing with it? I had to know.

Rebecca and Jacob went to a showing of a movie, by the little argument that they had right before they left I assumed it was Rebecca's choice, and they were going to go out to dinner afterwards. They would be gone for hours; I was in the clear.

The rain was still steadily coming down, although it stopped looking like a monsoon, and outside was miserable. I was planning on spending the night pouring over my pictures and trying to fix them up, but now something more important came up. The pictures would wait; they had to. If I didn't find out what was going on, it was going to haunt me.

I grabbed the new camera Bailey bought me and stuck it in the back pocket of my jeans. After putting on two shirts and pulling my hair against my head into a ponytail, I put on my rain boots and left the apartment.

I walked through the puddles, climbed over the exposed rock, and ducked under the tree branches weighed down by the water. I was soaked to the bone and a chill swept over me. I marched on. I wanted to know what was going on with that doll house. If he didn't have a sister, what did Ethan and his father use it for? Why was it on the property?

Finally, after my rain boots were covered in mud and my hair was clinging to the back of my neck, I reached Ethan's house. There were lights on in on the rooms of the second story but the first story was dark. I crept around the side and, being careful not to slip on the wet grass, I started to cross the field to the doll house.

It was dark and I was using the flashlight on my phone to help guide the way. Every once in a while I would turn back, sure that I would see Mr. Hunter, or Ethan himself, following my steps. The main house was beautiful and inviting during the day but tonight, with the rain, it looked ominous and scary.

Lightning flashed and I jumped. *Maybe this wasn't such a good idea. I should have just stayed home and waited until I saw Ethan.* Lightning flashed again and I found myself running the rest of the way to the doll house. I reached the doll house and tried the

knob on the door. It wouldn't turn; the door was locked. Crouching down, I shined the flashlight onto the knob and noticed that the knob did not use a regular key. It used the skeleton key. *The key from Ethan's room, maybe?* The one which was squirreled away in my underwear drawer I took out my camera and shot a quick picture of the lock.

Holding my camera tightly in one hand and my phone in the other, I stood up and started to circle the doll house. I put my face against the window but couldn't see anything but shadows. I heard the low rumble of thunder and lightning lit up the sky. As the lightning flashed, I could see the outline of bodies through the doll house windows. *What the hell?* I was about to look in more, and take a picture, but almost immediately the lightning stopped and I was surrounded by the darkness. My chance had passed.

So the doll house is locked and Ethan doesn't have a sister. What is going on with this family?

With nothing more that I could do, I stepped away from the doll house and walked back to the road that would lead me to the apartment. I knew I would have to go back to the doll house, and soon, with the key that I took from Ethan's room. I would have to see for certain what was in there.

As I walked back down the path, heading back towards the apartment, I heard a door open behind me. I took shelter behind a tree and peeked my head out in time to see Ethan outside with a flashlight. He was hunched over and even though it was dark I could tell that he was looking for something. Mr. Hunter was standing in the doorway, his arms crossed in front of him, staring at Ethan.

He wasn't offering to help and it looked like he wasn't planning on it either. He just watched as his son knelt down on his hands and knees on the cold, wet earth, searching for an unknown object. After what seemed like forever, Ethan stood up, turned to his father, and shook his head. He trudged back to where Mr. Hunter was standing and I gasped as Mr. Hunter slapped Ethan in the back of the head. Then the two disappeared back into the house and the door closed. Soon all the lights in the house were shut off and the house was thrown into darkness.

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* * *

I cradled a tissue in my hand, covering my mouth, as I hacked up a lung. My chest hurt, along with my stomach, from all the coughing and sneezing that I had done in the past two days. Ever since my little adventure to Ethan's house in the pouring rain, I felt sicker and sicker, by the second day, forty-eight hours later, my throat was red and sore, my head pounded and felt like a lead weight, and I could barely move without shivering. I was hoping that I could fight off the cold, let my immune system do its job, but it didn't so I was forced to tell Rebecca how crappy I was really feeling.

"Yep, you have a fever of 101.5. You are definitely sick, little sister," Rebecca said as she put the thermometer on my nightstand. "It must have been all that rain. There is no way that you can work in the diner today. Or go out at all. I'm ordering bed rest for you."

"I'll take some aspirin and I'll be fine," I said even though the room was spinning around me. "I don't want to be a burden, I want to help you. Let me help." I tried to sit up but Rebecca nudged me back into my pillow. "Rebecca!"

"No, Amber, you are not getting out of this bed. I don't need to call dad and tell him that you came down with the flu or something because you wouldn't rest when you should have." *Seriously, the dad card again? Isn't that getting old?* Rebecca handed me two aspirin and a glass of water. "Take these and I'll be back around lunch time with some soup for you. Do not do anything but rest, you hear me? Not one single thing."

"Yes ma'am," I muttered as I downed the two aspirin, chasing them with the water. "Thank you for taking care of me."

"That's my job," Rebecca said. "And as I told you before, I'm the good daughter. I get things done." I stuck my tongue out at her and then grimaced at the pain in my throat. "Aw poor baby. Go back to sleep and when you wake up I'll make sure someone is here keeping you company." I nodded and watched her leave. She swayed a little, cupped her mouth, and then reached for my garbage just in time. I winced as vomit spewed everywhere.

"Are you okay?" I asked, sitting up. "Maybe you're getting

sick? Did you eat something nasty? Food poisoning is the pits.”

“No, I’m not sick and I don’t have food poisoning,” she muttered.

“So then what’s wrong?” My sister looked at me, her eyes wide and glazed with tears.

“Promise you won’t tell?” she asked. I nodded. *This has to be good if she’s asking me to keep a secret for her.*

“I promise,” I said for good measure.

“I’m pregnant,” Rebecca admitted. “I found out today.” Pregnant? Rebecca was pregnant? *And Jacob’s the father.*

“Oh wow,” I muttered.

“We can talk about it later,” she said. “You need to sleep. I’ll be back this afternoon, okay?”

“Sure,” I said in a daze. Rebecca came over and squeezed my hand. My head felt heavy, my whole body hurt, and I could barely swallow with the swollenness of my throat. She patted my cheek and left the room. I heard her footsteps retreat to the front door and then, in seconds, she was gone. I was alone. *Finally some peace and quiet.* With that thought in my head I drifted off into an uneasy sleep.

When I woke up, I was still alone in my room. I sat up, my head still heavy, and pulled the laptop out from under my bed. There was still no word from Ethan despite the numerous text messages and voicemails I left him. He was avoiding me, and doing a great job of it. But what I didn’t understand was the why. I didn’t tell him that I knew that he lied. I didn’t tell him that I knew the real story about his mother. I didn’t have a chance to do any of that and yet Ethan was still missing in action.

But he was only part of my concerns. I had a whole plateful of situations to attend to, Rebecca’s pregnancy the most recent. Fighting the wave of nausea as I shifted around the bed, I logged onto Madison’s laptop and opened her internet browser to the website for *Open Realizations*.

Moving as quickly as I could, which I found wasn’t quick at all with my runny nose and stiff joints, I signed up for an account with the site. I typed in all of my basic information, and a fake name before moving onto the profile picture.

I uploaded a picture I took a few days ago of me dressed in

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the gold number from the thrift store and the matching pumps. I wore a blond, curly-q wig, and dressed my eyes in white eye shadow and black mascara. Scrolling down, I finally found the box where Madison wrote about herself, her personal profile box, and I now had to make one of my own.

My name is Geneva Carpenter. I'm a 21 year old journalist with an eye for news...and big buff boys that can treat me like a princess. I love to eat, and spend money. I especially like going to the beach and sticking my feet in the sand. I'm, what you could call a beginner so I would need someone who knows how to treat a lady and show her a good time. I'm innocent but ready to change that, I just want to find the guy who will bring out the bad girl in me. If you want me, you know where to find me. XOXO

After checking everything for spelling and grammar mistakes, I saved my profile and then closed my computer. I was exhausted and my nose was stuffed up so badly that I couldn't breathe unless my mouth was open. In short, I was a wreck.

I put the laptop back on the floor, curled up on my side, and closed my eyes once more. All I wanted to do was sleep.

Chapter Thirteen

"Why would someone lie about having a sister? What's the point?" I asked Bailey. The two of us were sprawled out on one of the couches in Bailey's aunt's house, stuffing our faces with Tostitos and salsa. My nose was still stuffed up and my throat hurt but the worst of my cold was over. The fever broke and I felt like I could move again.

"What do you mean he lied to you about it?" *Really Bailey? I thought it was pretty much self-explanatory.*

"Isn't it obvious? Ethan told me he had a sister, right? He told me he had a sister and that's why he had a doll house on his property. The story he told me was that his sister and mother died in an accident."

"And how do you know that's not true?" Bailey asked me as he chugged soda out of a can.

"Because I met his cousin and she told me that he's an only child and his mother left him and his father five years ago," I tried to explain.

"Oh." Bailey paused. "What makes you think that this cousin was telling the truth?" I glared at Bailey.

"Because I did research," I told him. "There isn't one article that mentions the death of the mayor's wife and daughter. Nothing, zilch. There aren't even pictures of Ethan's mother...only ones of him and his father."

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"Weird," he mumbled.

"That's not even the weirdest part," I told him. "The weirdest part is, is that we kissed. It was a pretty okay kiss but he freaked out about it and told me it was against the rules."

"What rules?"

"That's the thing, I don't know. Ethan wouldn't tell me what the rules are," I said. "Then he told me he liked me but he couldn't date me...not that I want a boyfriend or anything...but still it's weird."

"That does sound a little sketchy," Bailey said. "I'm not sure it's a good idea to hang out with him, Amber. I don't like the sound of this. You don't know what he's really up to...or what he's capable of." Bailey flipped through the channels on the television as I stared out the window. I knew Bailey might have thought that Ethan could be dangerous, but I just couldn't see it. Ethan didn't seem like he was dangerous...like he was about to snap. He was just very, very secretive. But why? What was he hiding and who was he was hiding it for?

"But I know he lied...should I call him out on it? Should I find out why?"

"Are you crazy?" Bailey asked as he whipped his head back to me. "Who knows what he'll do once he knows you know. Do you have a death wish?" Was Bailey correct? Would he snap at any moment? Was I better off pretending I didn't know anything and just keep my head low?

"I don't know," I said honestly. "I don't know what to do." I took a handful of Tostitos and started munching on them absentmindedly. It wasn't supposed to be like this. The trip down to Virginia wasn't supposed to be so complicated and it was turning into a big mess.

Why did I have to talk to Kelly? Why did I have to know what was in that doll house? When did I become so nosy?

"So," Bailey said after a while. "You two kissed?"

"Yeah," I said shyly. "A few times."

"Did he kiss better than I did?" Bailey asked. Bailey tried to look casual and nonchalant but I could see that not knowing was killing him. His ego was on the line, waiting to hear he was better.

"It was...different," I said slowly. "It was sweet and it just...happened. It was a surprise...unexpected."

"And mine wasn't."

"And yours wasn't," I confirmed. "But yours was great...especially for a first kiss," I said. It was an easy task, smoothing over Bailey's ego, and soon he flashed me a goofy grin.

"Good," Bailey said. Another pause. "Do you like him?"

"I don't know how I feel about him," I said honestly. "It's like, we're friends, and my heart beat a lot when we kissed, but he's so secretive that I can't trust him enough to like him. He has the *Great Wall of China* around him and I can't get through. How can I like someone like that? I'm not sure if I really know who the true Ethan is?"

"Oh," Bailey said. "If you don't like him, why are you so worried about what's going on? Why not wash your hands of the whole thing?"

"Because...because I let him in. I let him see the real me and I feel vulnerable," I said. "He has the upper hand and I don't like it."

"Most people don't like that." To my relief, he didn't ask me anymore questions about Ethan, our kiss, or anything else about the strange situation. Instead, Bailey handed me an open can of soda and I took it greedily. The bubbles sizzled as they traveled down my throat and hit my stomach. It mixed with the Tostitos and I had to keep myself from gagging.

"Can I tell you what I honestly think about this whole Ethan thing?" Bailey asked after a while.

"Do you ever **not** tell me what you honestly think about anything?"

"Good point." Bailey sat up and put his arms on his knees as he stared at me. "I think you're making too much of this...worrying too much about it."

"Why do you say that?"

"Because in two weeks you and I will be back home in New York, far away from here. We will go back to our old lives and Ethan will be just a memory. It's not like he's going to have a real impact after this summer, so why dwell on the stuff he says

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and does?"

"I guess you have a point," I said. "But it's just *so weird*." "You have been hanging out with guys for two years at this point...don't you realize that everything we do is weird? This is no different." I laughed as Bailey punched me but I couldn't take his words to heart. As much as Bailey was right when he said that guys were weird...this was a different type of weird. It was a suspicious type of weird and I didn't like it.

* * *

I logged onto the laptop that I was using and pulled up my profile page on *Open Realizations*. I had already gotten four hits from men who wanted to acquire my services. They ranged from a skinny kid, fresh out of high school and determined to lose his virginity, to an old man, married for thirty years, whose wife cut him off ten years prior. Apparently he was desperate because he 'didn't usually do this.'

Yeah that's probably what he said to all of the girls, I thought as I deleted his post.

Though there were many boys and men blowing up my profile page, none of them was Lenny. Lenny, who I messaged a personal invitation to, hadn't responded yet. I didn't know if he was biding his time, if he wasn't involved in the site anymore, or if he just didn't find me attractive. All I knew was that he was not answering and I couldn't move forward without his answer. I was stuck.

And I thought this was a brilliant plan. How stupid am I? But none of it made sense. From what I found in Madison's profile, after I finally managed to hack in, was that she personally messaged Lenny, too. She was the one to make first move and he responded. I read what she wrote, then copied and pasted it into my own message. I changed, maybe, five words but the rest was Madison. Still there was no response. *What am I doing wrong?*

Aggravated, I closed the computer and looked around the library. I didn't like working at the library, it was too quiet for my taste, but I had no choice this time. Rebecca's friends were

throwing her and Jacob a surprise engagement party. I left just as they were setting up the balloons and picking out the music. Their plan was to close the diner for the day and party but I had a feeling that wasn't going to work as well as they hoped. I didn't want to stick around and find out.

I was about to get up and search for something to read when I felt a pair of cold, clammy hands covering my eyes. My heart leaped into my throat and I bit down a scream. Then I smelled the cologne. *So we meet again, Ethan. Finally.*

"Hey there," I said as Ethan sat down. Despite the turmoil rolling around in my stomach, I was still happy to see Ethan. "What are you doing here?"

"Just hanging out. My dad is away again on one of his cross country trips so I'm alone."

"And you thought the library would be a good place to hang out?"

"Yeah," Ethan said. "What can I say? I'm a nerd."

"So you are," I muttered.

"I heard you met my cousin, Kelly...isn't she great?" Ethan asked, his voice full of excitement.

"Totally great," I said, agreeing. I searched his face for a sign; maybe a look of guilt or a twitch to show me that he was lying, but I saw nothing. There wasn't a single clue that I could go on. "She was telling me how much fun you two had together when you were little."

"Yeah. Kelly, my sister and I used to play all the time. We would run around all day, not stopping for anything, until we were too exhausted to run." Again Ethan mentioned his sister. The sister that Kelly swore he never had.

Why do you keep lying? I wondered, staring at Ethan. *Why keep this charade going when it's doing nothing for you? Just give it up and tell me the damn truth!*

"The three of us were inseparable and everything was perfect. Well until..you know."

"I know," I said. "But let's not talk about that. Let's talk about something different." I flashed him a smile. "At the moment my sister's apartment and her diner are being invaded so I don't

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plan on going home. Did you want to catch dinner with me? Maybe then a movie?"

"Are you asking me out?" Ethan asked. There was an amused grin on his face. "Because it sounds like you're asking me out."

"I'm really just trying to stay away from my sister, her creepy fiancé and her weird ass friends. But if you really want to think of this as a date then, yeah, sure, it's a date," I said. "So are you in?"

"I have a better idea," Ethan said. "Why don't you come to my house, with me, and we can have dinner there. Then we can watch a movie in our movie theater."

"You have a movie theater?"

"Yeah." My mouth dropped open and I knew my eyes bugged out a little. "So do you want to?"

"Hell yeah I want to," I said. "Why didn't you tell me about this movie theater before?"

"Because you didn't ask."

* * *

It was literally a miniature movie theater. There were four rows of the red, plush theater seats with arms rests that held soda. The chairs faced a screen as wide as the ones found in real movie theaters and in the back corner stood a popcorn machine as well as a little display case of a dozen different types of candy.

"You weren't kidding when you said you had a movie theater at home," I said. I was astonished. "How much, exactly, does your father make that you can afford all of this stuff?"

"Enough," Ethan said with a laugh. "I don't usually tell people about this stuff, though."

"Why not?"

"Because don't you think that this makes me look a little stuck up?" Ethan asked. "Unlike my father, I don't like to illustrate just how wealthy I am. I would rather people like me for me instead of for my money."

"Hell, if I had the amount of money you had, I'm not sure if

I would care why they liked me, to be perfectly honest."

"Go take a seat and I'll get us some popcorn," Ethan said, "What movie did you want to see?"

"Anything is fine with me," I told him. I went into the front and sat down smack dab in the middle of the row. I sat down on the chair and stretched my legs out, crossing them at the ankle. I could hear Ethan shuffling around behind me.

"Here you go," Ethan said as he handed me my own bag of popcorn, a cup of ice cold soda, and a box of candy. It was a dream come true.

"Thanks," I said as I took the stuff. "What movie did you pick?"

"Something that I thought you might like."

"Which is?"

"A surprise." Ethan sat down next to me and that's when I realized there was a remote in his lap.

"What's the remote for?" I motioned to his hand.

"It's wired to this room so I can turn off the lights, turn on the movie, and adjust the volume without having to get up." As if to prove what he said was true, Ethan dimmed the lights and second's later music boomed from the speaker as the screen turned on. "Alright, let's get this show on the road." Ethan and I started munching on our snacks as the movie began. I smiled as the title of the film flashed on the screen; *When Harry Met Sally*. "You can find out a lot about a person when reading their Facebook page. I bought this online last week just for you."

"So you were assuming I would say yes to come here?"

"More like hoping you would," Ethan said. "I had to be prepared, just in case."

"Good job," I said and shoved more of my popcorn in my mouth. We sat side by side, watching the movie, but I had trouble concentrating. Every time Ethan and I went for our popcorn bags, our elbows clashed. It was a slight touch and yet, it was beyond distracting. It was almost as distracting as Ethan muttering 'sorry' every time it happened.

"Do you want to just switch seats? Obviously this isn't working."

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"Yeah, sure," Ethan said. Without pausing the movie, Ethan and I stood up and he turned to face me. We both started shuffling at the same time, trying to get around one another. "Sorry, sorry. I'm in the way."

"No you're not, just stop moving." Ethan and I moved around a little more before the two of us could finally sit back down and enjoy our snacks in peace. "Better?"

"Much, thank you," I turned back to the movie, expecting Ethan to do the same, but to my surprise he leaned over and kissed me on the cheek. *Um...okay.* "What was that for?"

"Because I wanted to," Ethan said. I reached over, grabbed the remote off of his leg, and paused the movie before turning to him.

"What about the damn rules?" I asked. "What about your father obviously not wanting us to date?"

"My father isn't here right now so I don't have to worry about him. Or the rules." *What are the damn rules?!*

"What if I didn't want you to do that then?"

"Then I'm sorry," Ethan said. "I didn't mean to upset you."

"Then why the hell did you lie?" Once the words were out of my mouth I couldn't take them back. Ethan looked at me, confused, and I knew I had no choice but to tell him about my conversation with Kelly. "When I met Kelly the other day, when she came to the diner, we made some small talk. We talked about you and your father and I mentioned that you must have been having a hard time with everything that happened to you."

"Okay..."

"Kelly told me that your mother left you and that you never had a sister," I told Ethan. "So why did you lie to me?"

"Who says that I'm the one that's lying?" Ethan asked.

"Because I looked it up," I shot back at him. "I did a little research and there's nothing on their deaths. No articles, no obituaries. I can't even find any damn pictures of your whole family. If what you're saying is true, why can't I find anything?" Ethan's face reddened and his fists clenched. I remembered what Bailey said.

"So that automatically means I'm lying?" he hissed.

"There's no other explanation for it?"

"Can you give me another explanation?" I waited but Ethan kept his lips tight. "And it doesn't help any that you're so secretive. You have these rules, ones that you can't tell me, your father doesn't want us together for some reason, and you disappear for days at a time! What **am** I supposed to think?"

"Have you ever heard of trust?"

"Yeah."

"Well maybe you should start trusting me. I can't be your friend if you don't."

"Okay, okay," I said. I felt miserable. Ethan was right; I had no reason not to trust him. Yet I still didn't and that's what bothered me the most. "I'm sorry, I should have trusted you. I guess I'm naturally suspicious. Ever since my friend Madison-

"Enough about Madison!" Ethan exploded. "All summer all I've been hearing is 'Madison this' and 'Madison that'. I know that you can't wrap your head around the fact that she ran away but what if it was honestly just that?"

"But it's not."

"How do you know?"

"I just do," I said. I couldn't tell Ethan about the emails, about Lenny, or about the website. I couldn't tell him any of that.

"Well it's obvious that you don't trust me enough to tell me what's really going on. Do you really blame me for doing the same?" He was right and we both knew it. I was just as closed off as Ethan and the only reason he never caught me in a lie was because I never told him enough to lie about anything.

"You're right, I'm sorry," I said. I felt like a broken record. "If you want, I'll tell you why I'm so intent on Madison's disappearance."

"No, you don't have to tell me, it's your business."

"But you said I didn't trust you."

"That doesn't mean you have to tell me something you don't want to tell me just because you think it would make me feel better. It doesn't work like that." *Then how is this whole thing supposed to work?* "Listen, let's just forget about this whole fight and finish watching the movie. It's your favorite."

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"Okay," I said. Ethan resumed the movie and we both stared forward, our eyes glued to the screen. It was only when the movie was half over when I realized that Ethan never actually answered my question. I still had no idea why he was lying to me.

Chapter Fourteen

"For she's a jolly good fellow! For she's a jolly good fellow! For she's a jolly good fellow...that nobody can deny!"

I looked around the room at the community center that I was usually in for meetings. It was decorated with streamers, balloons, and a banner. There was even a piñata in the center of the room hanging from an exposed wooden beam.

I walked deeper into the room and accepted hugs from almost everyone around me. In the corner, I spied a table filled with chips, sodas, and boxes of pizza. There was another table next to it and the table was filled with presents.

Presents for me I thought, getting excited. I couldn't remember the last time I had a party to celebrate my birthday. Walking over to the table filled with drinks, I grabbed myself a cup and filled it with Pepsi, watching the people around me.

Everyone from group was there, smiling and bouncing up and down. They broke up into groups of two or three, talking amongst themselves. Bailey was in the corner talking to Rebecca and Jacob. Ethan was standing with them but he didn't seem to be involved in their conversation. Instead he stood quietly; drinking from a solo cup filled with God knows what. His eyes were glazed and unfocused; he looked like he was lost in his own world.

Bailey broke away from my sister and Jacob and walked over to the huge boom box in the corner. He pressed a few buttons

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and soon music filled the room. Everyone cheered and started swaying. Bailey walked up to me and held out his hand.

"A dance for the birthday girl?" Bailey asked me and I nodded as I put my hand in his. He pulled me into the center of a circle that was made, and then pulled me close, putting his arms around my waist. "Your face was priceless," he told me as we danced together. The music was slow and the woman's voice was sultry. "I don't think I've ever seen you so surprised."

"That's because I've never been this surprised," I said to him. "You honestly tricked me. I thought that this was a regular meeting...I never expected...this." I used my one hand to gesture around me. "It's too much, Bailey."

"Not for you," he said. "Not to celebrate your sixteenth birthday. This is a big one, Amber, and it shouldn't be ignored." I shrugged and then grinned when Bailey twirled me around. I fell back into his arms, dizzy, as everyone around us clapped. "You've been through a lot...I wanted to do something special for you."

"Thanks," I said, "But you've been through a lot too...when is someone going to do something for you?"

"I don't need anything," Bailey told me. "I'm strong, I'll trudge on." I knew that Bailey was telling me the truth. He almost never let anything bother him, ever. Nothing slowed him down, not even when Madison disappeared. Some of our friends saw that as him being a douche, but I saw it for what it really was – his way of coping. Bailey had the uncanny ability to grieve and move on at the same time without anyone noticing. "So, do you like the party?"

"I love it," I admitted. "I didn't expect anyone to remember that it was my birthday, let alone celebrate it." The song ended and Bailey moved his hands from my waist.

"Give her a birthday kiss!" Someone from the crowd cried out. No one except Rebecca and Jacob knew that Bailey and I had a history. They all thought we met in group and just became really close. Though I tried not to listen, I heard whispers from people wondering whether the two of us were dating. So it was no surprise that they wanted to see a kiss. "Come on, plant one on her!"

"You heard the masses," Bailey said, his mouth close to my

ear. "Care to indulge them?" I glanced around until my eyes met Ethan's. He was still holding the cup but his knuckles were white and the cup was folding under his grip. His eyes were burning through me.

I hadn't spoken to Ethan since the day that we watched the movie. I didn't ask him again about the lying and he didn't admit to it. When we saw each other we were polite, as if we were strangers again, and kept the conversation superficial. But now he stared at me waiting to see what I would do; what Bailey would do.

"Uh," I said as Bailey nudged me. He used his one hand to turn my face to him and gave me a crooked smile.

"Are you okay?" Bailey asked me. He glanced over to where I was standing. "Oh, I see," he said as he pulled me close again. His hand went to the small of my back and he ran his knuckled over my spine. "We better not give anyone any ideas." I glanced over at Ethan again and I felt myself filling with anger. *How dare he look at me like that, judging me, when he's hot and cold all the time? He wants to date me, but can't. He kisses me and then says it's against the rules. What is this crap?*

"Screw him," I said to Bailey. "Give me a big, fat, birthday kiss." Bailey looked at me, cocking his head to the side.

"Are you sure?"

"More than sure," I said. "Do it." Bailey's one hand moved from my back to my neck, cupping my head. I tilted my head against his hand and watched as he brushed a stray strand of hair away from my face. Everyone was watching us now and there was a quiet anticipation sizzling in the room. I could practically feel the daggers coming from Ethan.

"Happy birthday Amber," Bailey murmured before his lips found mine. My eyes fluttered closed and I hooked my fingers through the belt loops of his pants, pulling him towards me. Bailey wrapped his arms around my waist anchoring me to my spot. He kissed my nose, my cheek, and my forehead before returning to my lips. He smelled of aftershave and mint and I felt myself shivering at the closeness of him. It wasn't as awkward as the first kiss, but my heart still pounded against my ribcage. *What about Madison?* The thought was sudden and fleeting as the aroma of Bailey's cologne invaded my nostrils.

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Back then I was clumsy and shy, completely unsure of everything. Bailey was patient and understanding. Now I met him kiss for kiss, our breaths mingling in a minty, electric charge. Everyone around us disappeared and, for a split second, I realized why Madison had been so attracted to Bailey.

When we finally pulled apart, we were flushed and out of breath. I pressed my forehead to his and fought the urge to let out a giggle. "Was it as good as before?" Bailey asked and I nodded because it was. "Better than his?" I know that Bailey was kidding but I still didn't want to answer, it was bad enough that told Bailey about the kiss with Ethan the first time, but I wasn't going to compare the two again.

The ear splitting sound of applause caused me to jump and I dropped my hands from around Bailey. Everyone was staring at us, smiling and whispering behind cupped hands. Even Rebecca was grinning and playing with her engagement ring. Jacob pulled my sister closer and kissed her forehead, his free hand over her stomach. It looked like she told him about the baby; his baby. As I looked around at everyone I noticed that Ethan was nowhere to be found. He wasn't in the corner anymore and after a sweep of the room I realized he wasn't there. *Where did he go?*

"Ethan had to take a phone call," someone to my right said. I recognized her from group and I nodded.

"Thanks," I said. I turned to Bailey and pecked him on the cheek. "I'll be right back," I told him. His eyes scanned the room and then nodded.

"Let me know what happens," Bailey said. He squeezed my hand and then walked to where Rebecca and Jacob were. I watched Bailey take a cup that Rebecca offered him and then slipped through the doors and into the hall. Ethan was on the far side, a cell phone pressed up to his ear, pacing back and forth. I walked up to him cautiously and waved a little when he saw me. Ethan said a few more things that I couldn't hear, and then snapped the phone closed, ending the call.

"Hey," I said.

"Hey." His words were clipped.

"What's up?"

"Nothing." It was like pulling teeth try to get him to talk.

"Is something wrong?" I motioned to the phone. "What's going on?"

"Nothing," Ethan said again. "Everything is fine."

"It didn't look fine."

"Well it is," Ethan snapped. "What are you doing out here? Shouldn't you be sucking face with your buddy?" I rolled my eyes as I leaned against the windowsill next to me.

"We weren't sucking face," I told him. "It was just a simple birthday kiss. A sweet, simple, birthday kiss."

"Do you kiss all of your friends like that for your birthday or is it a special treat for the punks and rifferaff?" Ethan kicked a piece of crumpled paper across the hallway and it bounced off the wall before rolling away. "Damn it, Amber."

"What?" I said. "What is your damage? You're acting like a jealous boyfriend...it's ridiculous."

"You know I like you."

"Yeah, and you told me that you can't go out with me because of 'the rules' whatever the hell those are. You won't even tell me that much." I rolled my eyes as I watched Ethan paced back and forth. "What am I supposed to do about all of that? Huh? Am I supposed to wait for you to be able to be my boyfriend? Because, news flash, that's never going to happen. Even I know that."

"Damn it, Amber," Ethan said again. "You know what? Forget it...forget everything."

I watched as Ethan stalked away down the hall. He swung the door open with so much force that it slammed behind him after he stomped away. I watched his body retreat until he was nothing more than a speck and then I rubbed my face with my hands. *What did I get myself into?* Ethan was like a firecracker getting ready to explode and, by the way he talked to me, it looked like I was the one who lit the fuse.

"Everything okay?" I turned to see Bailey standing in the door frame, staring at me. Just the sight of him had my heart beating and my face flaming. His kiss still made my insides melt. *Get a hold of yourself! It's just Bailey!* I stared at Bailey and couldn't say a word. "Amber? What happened to Ethan?" Bailey snapped his fingers in front of me and I blinked, surprised. "Amber, Ethan?"

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"He had to go somewhere. Something for his father, I think," I said. I didn't want to tell Bailey about the weird way that Ethan was acting or what he said. Bailey didn't need to know any of it.

"Are you sure that was all? You look a little flushed...did you two fight?"

"Nope," I lied. "No fighting...he was just busy."

"If you say so," Bailey said. He held out his hand to me. "Come on, let's get you back to your party. You don't want everyone celebrating without you, do you?"

"Of course not," I said and gave Bailey my hand. "Let's go dance!"

* * *

It was half past eleven when I finally crawled into bed. I was exhausted and I already knew that I would be in pain when I woke up. It was all the dancing...I wasn't used to it and I did more than my fair share at my party. Lying in bed, I rubbed my leg right where it met my prosthetic. It was rough and sore, another result from too much dancing. *But it was all worth it* I thought with a smile. Thanks to Rebecca, Jacob, and Bailey, I had one of the best birthdays since I was a kid. It was an unexpected, yet welcomed surprise, especially after how the summer started. Rebecca and I were slowly becoming what I used to dream we would be. Whatever animosity that was between us was dwindling down.

Well most of it was amazing, anyway. I sighed and stared at the ceiling. The image of Ethan, so angry and resentful, continued to float in my mind. He didn't want to talk to me about what was bothering him, but he was so angry about it. Then he used me as an excuse, which made no sense. If he was that angry about seeing me kiss Bailey, why not step up to the plate? Why not ignore whatever rules he thought he had to follow and date me anyway?

He's so pig-headed and annoying! He never does anything for himself and then gets mad when things don't go his way! How ridiculous is that? Then, when I tried to talk to him, he walked away. He was running from his problems and, apparently, I was one of them. *But why? I didn't do anything!* My face contorted into

a grimace and I flipped over to my side.

"Damn Ethan," I said into the darkness. "Damn him and the way he makes me angry." I punched the pillow and then tucked it under my head. I closed my eyes and forced my mind to stop thinking all together. I soon felt my muscles relax and before I knew it, I was drifting off into a deep sleep.

* * *

When I woke up the next morning and went into the kitchen I saw that the table was decorated and balloons hung off the chair I usually sat in. Rebecca was at the stove cooking and Jacob was organizing presents in the corner. He looked up, saw me, and smiled before setting out the glasses and dishes.

"What is all of this?" I asked Rebecca. "I thought we celebrated my birthday yesterday. You know, the party and all."

"Yes but you're sixteen...you don't just have a day to celebrate your birthday, you have a weekend," Rebecca said. "Now come sit down and have some breakfast. I made it special for you." I saw down and Rebecca came over with a pan and spatula. She scooped something out of the pan and placed it on my plate. I looked down and laughed. Rebecca made pancakes for me and somehow managed to shape them into a sad, tailless Eeyore from *Winnie-The-Pooh*. "Because, really, who **doesn't** love Eeyore?"

"This is amazing, Rebecca!" I gushed. "How did you manage to do something like this?"

"A lot of practice," Rebecca said. "A lot of trial and error." "Yeah and I had to eat all of her errors," Jacob joked. I sat back and stared at Jacob. He hadn't tried to touch me since the night that I hit him after he tried to make a move. He kept his distance and ever since he proposed to Rebecca, he seemed to have eyes only for her. He never leered at the sexy customers that came into the diner, nor did he try to flirt to get more tips. It was like once he put a ring on Rebecca's finger, he morphed into some kind of perfect fiancé. It was strange and I still wasn't sure that I could trust the sudden change.

"This is amazing, Rebecca," I said. "Really. This is one of the best birthdays I've had in a while."

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"Well you've been through a lot and you've changed a lot. I thought that in itself was something to celebrate and so did Jacob."

"Thanks Jacob," I said to him and smiled.

"No problem. You're going to be my sister-in-law soon, after all." He cleared his throat. "And I hope the godmother of our baby."

"Really?!" I exclaimed. "You want **me** to be the godmother?" *The surprises keep coming.*

"Yeah," she said. "I know that I wasn't there for most of your life. I wish I could change it, but I can't. This summer though... I don't know, I guess I was hoping that we can try again. I don't want to go years without seeing you, Amber."

"Me either," I admitted. "And I would love to be the godmother. Who's going to be the godfather?"

"I was thinking Ethan," Jacob told me. "He's as close to a brother as I'm going to get." *Good luck with that,* I said to myself.

"Sounds good," I said out loud, digging into my pancakes.

Rebecca dished out some more pancakes for us and then sat at the table. Using the remote next to her, Rebecca turned on the little television in the kitchen that she had Jacob install. Rebecca switched to the news as I jammed some pancake slathered in syrup into my mouth. She flipped through the channels, wrinkling her nose at every show that she didn't like, which was everyone. She didn't watch more than a few seconds before changing, and then changing again. It was the never ending cycle of television shows.

"Rebecca would you pick a channel already! Please!" I exclaimed when my head started to hurt. Jacob chuckled before taking another bite and Rebecca whipped around to glare at me. "You're making me dizzy!"

"Fine, here," Rebecca said as she slid the remote to me. "You pick something then." The remote hit into my glass, nearly knocking it over. *Real mature, Rebecca.* Picking up the remote, I changed the channel one last time to the news. It wasn't the best morning show but it was better than the white trash, who's my baby daddy shows.

The screen was filled with video footage of a car wrapped around a tree, totaled, and a body lying on the floor, covered by a

blanket. Police walked around the scene, taking pictures and making notes. The screen turned to a news reporter.

"Forensic evidence concludes that the body found inside a Hyundai Accent in a ditch early this morning was the body of Kelly Hunter, niece to Mayor Hunter. Hunter was found in the driver's seat of the Accent with multiple knife wounds to her chest and abdomen. The Accent was driven into a tree, totaling the car." There was silence in the room as both my sister and Jacob turned to look at me.

"What?" I said as I dropped my fork onto my plate. "Kelly is dead?" I tuned out the rest of what Madeline was saying. "This can't be true. I just saw her the other day."

"Amber," Rebecca said softly. "Amber calm down. Just breathe." *Easy for her to say...just breathe, just breathe...as if this isn't a complete shock to me. I'll just pick up and move along.*

"I have to go," I said. I stood up so fast that the chair I was sitting on tumbled backwards onto the floor. "I have to go see Ethan."

"Wait, Amber," Jacob said. "Slow down and I'll take you." I couldn't slow down. I couldn't stand there, idle, waiting for someone to drive me to Ethan's house when I had no idea how he was holding up. Kelly was his cousin, the closest thing he had to a sibling. They were close, according to Kelly. I couldn't leave him to deal with this alone. He wasn't strong enough, I knew that, and I knew that he would need me. Even if he didn't say anything.

"I can't wait," I said. "I'm sorry, I have to go." I looked back one last time at my sister and Jacob and then fled from the apartment.

Chapter Fifteen

Cars lined the street, bumper to bumper, from the corner all the way up to Ethan's house. It was like the whole town came to send their condolences to the Hunter family. *Either that or they're nosy and want to get all the nitty gritty details of Kelly's murder.* I slipped into the house unnoticed and craned my neck around in hopes to finding Ethan.

"I heard it was gang related." One of the older woman said to the man that was standing next to her. "Rumor has it that it was an initiation gone wrong."

"I heard that she was a victim of a mugging," the man said. "If you ask me, it's the most deplorable thing that has happened in this town. Kelly was a bright shining girl with such a life ahead of her. She used to hang around here, playing with Ethan. She was like the family's adopted kid. Who would kill her?"

"And to top it off, she was the mayor's niece!" The woman exclaimed. I tried to get closer, to hear more of their conversation, but the man grabbed the woman's hand and guided her off into the crowd. They disappeared before I had the chance to follow either of them.

I slithered through the throng of people, keeping my head down. I didn't want to talk to anyone and I didn't want anyone to try and talk to me. I had to find Ethan and see how he was doing. It didn't matter what happened with us, or what would happen. I

needed to be there for him now...when he really needed it.

A *gang*? I thought as I left the living room and found the stairs leading up to the second floor. *They really think that Kelly had something to do with a gang?* I didn't even know that there were gangs in Virginia and even if there were, I couldn't believe that someone like Kelly would be a part of one. She looked like the last person to get involved in something like that.

As if I knew her that well. I talked to her for what...ten minutes?

When I got to the second landing, I turned and headed straight to Ethan's room. The door was closed, but at one touch of the knob I knew it wasn't locked. I pressed my ear against the door, listening. I couldn't hear anything. Taking a breath, I turned the knob and the door swung open. Ethan was sitting on his bed, his back against the wall, and a bottle of whiskey in his hand. The bottle was three quarters empty and by the way Ethan's eyes were drooping, I had an idea where those three quarters went.

"Amber!" Ethan exclaimed. He tried lifting himself off the bed but his one foot tripped over the other and he landed with a thud back against the mattress. "Amber," he said again. I crossed the room, took the bottle out of his hand, and then turned Ethan on his side. Using my legs as a brace, I lifted Ethan back up into a sitting position.

"Yeah it's me," I said as I smoothed down his hair. "I'm here for you." Ethan's eyes were bloodshot and spit was dribbling from the corner of his mouth. I took a shirt off the chair next to his bed and wiped at his mouth. When I finished Ethan grinned at me and wrapped his arms around my waist.

"I knew you would come," Ethan said. "You're like that." *Like that? What does that even mean? What's 'that' anyway?* I shrugged it off my shoulder. Ethan probably wasn't even going to remember this conversation come the following day, he was too wasted for that. "I'm sorry I hurt you," Ethan mumbled. "I'm sorry that I ruined your party...your pretty, pretty party."

"You didn't ruin anything," I assured him. "Everything was fine. You were upset with me, I understand that." I had no idea why I was even assuring him that everything was okay. It was obvious that Ethan was just babbling...the words were nonsense.

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"He killed her, you know." I froze, my heart stuttering, and turned to Ethan, staring at him. *Is he talking about Madison?* I wondered. *No, that's not possible. He didn't know about Madison before I met him. He can't be talking about Madison.* "Kelly...my poor, poor cousin Kelly. She had no chance, that cousin of mine. Not against him."

"Who?" I asked before I could stop myself.

"My father." Ethan spit out the words as if they left a bad taste in his mouth. "The all mighty mayor of this pathetic little town." I said nothing as I pulled Ethan up and repositioned him on the bed. His shirt was soaked and his breath smelled putrid. "My father thinks that he's above the law...like some vigilante. He's nothing more than a murderer. And a rule breaker. He makes all these rules for me but not for him. "

"I know, Ethan, I know," I murmured as I shucked his shirt off of his body.

"No you don't know," Ethan said. "He says I can't have a girlfriend because I always hurt them. He says that he's trying to make sure I stay a good boy and don't hurt the pretty things. But he hurts them instead. See, he's a rule breaker. But I can't break the rules because if I do then I'm a bad boy." I wanted to throw up. *He's just drunk* I told myself. *He's drunk and angry and that's why he's saying these things. He's just being ridiculous. Maybe he thinks his father killed Kelly because his father didn't protect Kelly from the gang. Maybe Ethan thinks his father could have done more to keep her alive.*

"Amber I want you to kiss me," Ethan said. "I want you to kiss me like you kissed Bailey. I want you to love me like you love him."

"I don't love him like anything more than a friend," I told Ethan. "And you're drunk. You don't know what you're saying."

"I am **not** drunk," Ethan argued. "I am not drunk and I know exactly what I'm saying. I, Ethan Hunter, want you, Amber Swanson, to kiss me and like me as much as I like you. I love you, Amber."

Shock ran through me and I dropped the shirt that I was holding. I tried to move back, give myself some distance from Ethan. I hit into the table behind me and the whiskey bottle tipped

over, whiskey pouring out onto the table and dropping onto the carpeted floor.

"Oh shit," I said and righted the bottle. The room started to smell awful and I started to gag. I had to get out of there, fast.

"Listen, Ethan, I'm going to get you some water, and maybe some food to soak up the alcohol in your system. I'll be right back, okay?"

"Don't leave me," Ethan begged. "I don't want to be alone. I'm always alone." My heart shattered at the words and I knew I couldn't just disappear, no matter how much I wanted to.

"I'll be right back. I promise." As Ethan looked at me, his eyes filled with sadness. "I swear Ethan. I will be back."

"Okay," Ethan said. "I'll miss you." Ethan slouched back against the wall and closed his eyes. I slipped out of the room and went back downstairs. Ethan's father was in the living room, in the center of a circle, talking. He had a tissue in his hand and every few seconds he would shake his head and wipe at his eyes. I stood on the staircase and watched him.

Though he was crying, his face was particularly blank. There were no creases on his forehead or around his eyes to show any emotion what so ever. Even when the tears trickled out of his eyes and down his cheeks his face was stone.

Suddenly Mr. Hunter looked up and caught my eye. I froze, shocked, as he stared at me. It felt more like he was staring *through* me. After a few seconds I pulled my eyes away and hurried down the rest of the stairs. He wouldn't be able to see me in the crowd so I felt safer as I slipped around people. I found the kitchen with ease and pushed the swinging door forward, letting myself in.

The kitchen was gloriously empty and I hurried to the sink. Pulling a cup from the drying rack, I poured Ethan a large glass of ice water and then proceeded to search in the fridge for something quick to eat. My eyes finally settled on a piece of what once was a foot long sub. I was about to grab it when the refrigerator door was forcibly shut. I barely had time to move my hand out of the way. I looked up angrily at whoever was on the other side of the door but my anger turned to shock when I saw Mr. Hunter standing there, his hip resting against the front of the refrigerator. He tilted his

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head to the side, watching me. *Like a bird watches its prey.* The hairs on the back of my neck stood straight up.

"Hello Mr. Hunter," I murmured. "I am so sorry for your loss. I met Kelly in the diner and we talked for a few minutes. She was a lovely girl."

"Thank you, it's been hard," he said. "How is my son doing? How is Ethan?" I thought of Ethan, drunk and sleeping in his room which reeked. His face wasn't washed and his clothes had dirt caked into them.

"He's trying to cope," I said. "It's really hitting him hard...I think they were close."

"They were very close. Almost attached at the hip." One side of Mr. Hunter's mouth pulled up into a half smile. It looked more like a sneer and his eyes burned holes into me. He stepped closer and I stumbled back. "I'm very glad you're here for Ethan. I know he was upset yesterday and he told me that you two had a fight. I hope it was nothing serious."

"Not really a fight," I said. "Just a different view on things."

"Well I'm glad you two made up." *Sure you are,* I thought as I tried to shift my weight.

"Me too," I said. Mr. Hunter moved away from the fridge, allowing me to open it again.

"I'll see you around, Amber," he said and left the kitchen. Once he was gone, I shuddered. My mouth was dry and my heart was lodged in my throat. *That's one creepy man.*

When I got back to the room, not only was Ethan completely naked except for his boxers, he was sound asleep on top of the sheets on his bed. His snoring was soft against the pillow and I grinned. He looked like a little child, laying there and sleeping. His hands were curled into fists under his chin and his legs were pulled up to his chest.

I put the stuff I held down onto the table and then walked over to his bed. There was a light blanket at the foot of his bed and I unfolded it, bringing it up to Ethan's chest. I was about to turn back, go sit on his desk chair and wait for him to wake up, when his arm shot out and his hand grabbed my wrist.

"Don't go," he mumbled. "Don't leave me. Stay with me." I

tried to pry his fingers off but he was strong, even in his sleep
"Lay down with me."

"It's not a good idea, Ethan," I said.

"Please. I want you to hold you." *Hold me? What the he'll is this 'hold me' crap?* "Pretty please."

Ethan opened his eyes long enough to stick out his bottom lip. He pouted better than a lot of the girls I've seen pouting and I found myself lying next to him. I let him wrap his arm around me and put my head on top of his awaiting hand.

Ethan's breath began to slow down and deepen as he fell back to sleep. I shifted over slightly on the bed, holding my breath, waiting for Ethan to react. When he didn't, I moved over a little more, waited, and then moved again. I repeated this process until I was on the edge of the king sized bed. Still, Ethan didn't move or wake up. It looked like I was in the clear.

I stood up, adjusted my clothes, and then fixed the blanket that was over Ethan. Even in his sleep he looked troubled with his forehead wrinkled and a frown on his face. *What could possibly be poisoning his mind that much?* I didn't think it was solely from the death of his cousin. Something else was going on and he wasn't hiding it as well as he hoped.

With Ethan asleep and Mr. Hunter leering somewhere in the house I didn't feel comfortable staying around. I would go back home and wait for Ethan's call. If he wanted to see me after he woke up, that was fine, but I wasn't sticking around in a house full of people I didn't know. Scanning the room, I spied a piece of plain paper and grabbed it along with a pen.

Ethan,

Had to go home and help out Rebecca. Call me when you wake up and we can meet up if you want. If not, I'll call you tomorrow. I'm here if you need me, don't forget that.

Your Friend, Amber

I tucked the paper right on the corner of his nightstand so Ethan would see it right when he woke up. With one last glance at

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Ethan, I slipped out of the room and descending the steps. There were still people lingering about, talking in hushed tones, but I didn't see Mr. Hunter anywhere. Breathing a sigh of relief, I stepped out the door and left the house without looking back.

* * *

The rest of the day passed and my cell phone hadn't rang once. Either Ethan hadn't gotten the note or he really didn't want to speak to me. *Maybe he's still mad about the birthday party, I mused. Or maybe he's embarrassed about what he said when he was drunk...assuming that he even remembers what he said.* There were thousands of reasons why Ethan wasn't calling, or texting, but I couldn't shake off the thought that he was mad at me. Like somehow I did something wrong. *He did say his father killed Kelly and that Mr. Hunter was a murderer. Who knows what else is going through his mind right now.*

Sitting up on the bed, I took my cell phone and typed a quick message to Ethan, sending it before I could talk myself out of doing so. I had never had this many problems with a guy that I was friends with. It was always the girls who had the drama and the baggage...that's why I tried to stay away from them. But the guys...the guys were supposed to be the simple ones.

Obviously not, I thought as I checked my cell phone. There was still no response and I wasn't going to bother to call him. *He would probably ignore my phone call anyway.* Throwing my phone onto the bed, I plopped down onto the chair in front of my desk and opened the laptop.

Running my finger across the mouse area, the laptop hummed to life and began to load everything up. When it was finished loading, I immediately logged onto my *Open Realizations* account and scrolled through my new messages. I scanned my account weekly, and every week there were at least a double amount of responses than the last week. It was like a friend would tell a friend who would tell another friend in a sick chain letter. But none of the guys was the one I was looking for - I hadn't had a reply from Lenny.

Maybe Lenny isn't even real, I told myself. *Maybe Madison*

mixed up a name or you just assumed that Lenny was from this site. Maybe he's from a completely different site. Or he could have deleted his profile after Madison disappeared. You could be on a wild goose chase and not even know it. This could be a complete waste of time.

I wanted to just give up and log out of my account, since I wasn't getting the results I wanted and every time I logged on I just became more and more frustrated. Deep down I had a feeling that everyone was right...that Madison **was** just a runaway who left on her own accord.

But why wouldn't she tell me if she was leaving? We were best friends. But were we really best friends? Based on what I read, I wasn't so sure that we were in her mind. It was more like I was a convenient project for her.

Near tears, I was about to close my computer and try to call Ethan again, when I heard the distinctive ding of a new message. Curious, I scrolled back to the top of the website to check it out. What I saw caused my jaw to drop along with my stomach. In the subject line there were three words: **It's me, Lenny.**

Scrambling to an upright position, I moved the mouse so it was hovering over the message. But when I went to go click on it, to finally find out who it was that could possibly be Madison's murderer, I found that I couldn't do it. I was too scared to do it. No matter how many times I commanded my hand to click on the letters my hand wouldn't comply. *Seriously? This happens now? Come on!*

I tried to click on it again but it still wouldn't happen. It didn't matter how long I waited for this information or how much I wanted to find out more about Madison's secret life, now I was too scared. Aggravated, I closed the laptop but promised myself that first thing tomorrow morning I would open it up, no matter how difficult it was.

I pulled the drawer to the desk open, planning on putting the laptop away, when I spied the box and key that I took from Ethan's father's study. *I can't believe I forgot about this!* The key shone against the fluorescent light, teasing me. I bit my lip, wondering if I was ready to see what was in the mysterious box.

After a few minutes, I pulled the box out with care,

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cradling it in my hands like a baby, and put it on the desk with the laptop.

Taking the key from the drawer, I put it into the key hole and then turned. I heard the lock open and slowly I lifted the lid. The box was filled with different pieces of jewelry, all gold. I shifted through the jewelry, running my fingers over the necklaces, bracelets, and rings.

One ring stood out from the others. It was a medium sized gold band, encrusted with diamonds, and there was a spot for another ring to fit within it, although they weren't together. I pulled the ring out of the box and brought it closer to my eyes. On the underside of the ring, there were engraved words.

"Julia, I will love you until the end of time. Elliot," I read aloud. I put the ring back and looked inside the box. *This is nothing more than Ethan's mother's old jewelry box. There's nothing special about this.* Disappointed, I closed the box, locked it, and put it back into the drawer.

I wasn't sure what I was expecting to find in the box, or what it would have meant, but I was still disappointed. Not only did I find nothing in the box, I now had to bring the box back without getting caught. *Great job, Amber. You're just a present day freaking Nancy Drew...NOT!*

* * *

I sat up, covered in a cold sweat, my breath ragged and labored. Madison's face still floated in my head from the dream I was waking up from. Although it was Madison's face, it didn't look like her at all. It was bloody and beaten, with bruises everywhere.

"Help me," Madison said as she struggled to lift herself from the grave. In the dream, Madison was dead. "Help find out who did this to me. Please, Amber, help me. You're my best friend, I need you." In the dream I tried to grab at Madison, tried to pull her out and clean her up but she was slippery. Every time I got my hand around her wrist, it slipped out and she fell back into the muddy earth. "Amber!" she called in a panic. "Amber I'm sinking! They're getting me!"

I scrambled to Madison, tugging and digging my hands into

the earth to try to pull Madison out. The more I dug, though, the deeper Madison fell until I couldn't see her anymore. I was left alone, in the cemetery, with nothing but the shadows and trees surrounding me. Then I woke up.

Swinging my leg off the table, I grabbed the crutches and hobbled to the desk. The laptop was there, waiting for me, and I quickly signed on. I logged onto the *Open Realizations* website and opened my messages. I had to find out who Lenny was. If I didn't I knew Madison would continue to haunt me.

My hands were still shaking as I hovered over the message link but this time I was able to click on it. In the dark, with only the light from the screen illuminating the room, I started to read.

Dear Geneva,

Thanks for the message. I have seen your profile but I couldn't bring myself to contact you. You're just so pretty. I'm so glad you contacted me, though, because I would really like to meet. I'm going to be at The Elated Angel Hotel in Richmond, Virginia on Thursday. I will be there all day for business meetings so I thought we could meet for a couple of drinks and a fun time.

I attached my picture so you can see who I am. I'll be at the bar between five and eight so you can come any time. Use my picture to recognize me.

I can't wait to meet you, Geneva.

Talk to you soon.

Lenny

I scrolled back to the top of the message and clicked open the attachment. My leg shook as I waited for the picture to load. Once it did, I gasped. *No it can't be...it just can't be!*

Chapter Sixteen

The cigarette shook in my hand as I tried to light it, cupping the flame in my hands. My eyes teared up from the lack of sleep and my heart felt like a ten pound weight was resting on it. I looked around, darting my eyes every which way, making sure that no one was watching me. Then, I let out a harsh laugh.

Paranoid, Amber? No one knows that you know. There is no one following you, watching your every move. Just breathe. I shifted, the papers crinkling in my pocket, and I smoothed my hand over the pocket, making sure they weren't slipping out.

"Hey." I jumped at the voice and then wondered how Bailey was able to sneak up behind me. "What's up? You look like you've seen a ghost."

"Nothing," I murmured, lying. "Haven't been getting much sleep lately, that's all." The two of us stood there, side by side, leaning up against the community center building. The warm brick felt nice against my chilled body. Clouds hovered on the edges of sky, bringing chilly air and thick fog.

The perfect weather to murder someone. I didn't know where the thought came from but it sent another set of chills through my body. I felt the weight of Bailey's arm as he pulled me close to his body.

"Are you sure that you're okay?" he asked. "You're acting weird...not yourself. Did something happen?" *If only I could tell*

you.

“I’m fine,” I snapped, pulling myself away. “I told you I’m just tired.” I snubbed out my barely smoked cigarette and pulled the heavy glass door open. “Come on, I don’t want to miss the meeting.”

“Whatever.” He followed me into the room and we took two empty seats next to one another. The rest of the group was trickling in and waving to us as they sat. *Where’s Marci?* I wondered. Usually she was here before us, drinking coffee and setting up the desert table. But the desert table was empty and she was nowhere to be found. Instead, a plump woman with salt and pepper hair waddled in, taking Marci’s seat. Her mouth was set in a grim line and she glared at the group over the edge of her square glasses.

“Good morning everyone,” she said. Her voice was brisk and cold, nothing like Marci’s sweet, concerning tone. “My name is Greta and I’ll be filling in for Marci.”

“Where is she?” I asked, interrupting her. “Is she sick? Hurt?”

“I’m not sure,” Greta snapped. “I just got a call and was told to come and take over the group. Now, can one of you tell me where Marci left off? She didn’t leave any notes or outlines.”
Notes? Outlines?

“That’s because she didn’t have any of that,” I told Greta. “Marci sat with us, talked with us. She would let us choose if and what we would want to say. She never kept us on any schedule.”
Greta shook her head, tsking under her breath.

“Well this is a mess,” she muttered. “No sort of organization, no names for me to check off. What did this girl think she was doing? This isn’t protocol. I can’t do this.” She stood up and crossed her arms over her ample bosom. “I’m cutting this meeting short. Marci should be back by next week and you will be able to resume then. I’m not comfortable with this group. I’m sorry. Goodbye.”

Everyone in the group, myself included, stared at Greta, dumbfounded, as she stalked from the room. *Well that was a waste* I thought. *Not comfortable with the group? What did we do?*

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Shaking my head in disbelief, I stood up and followed everyone else out into the street.

"Want to grab a bite?" Bailey asked and I shook my head. Just the thought of food made my stomach churn. I went to turn, to go my own way, when Bailey grabbed my arm. His fingers dug into my skin. "What's going on with you? You're acting all squirrely. Did something happen? Did you get hurt or something?"

"Do I look hurt?" I asked. "I'm **not** hurt. I just have a lot on my mind." I sighed and kicked rocks with my shoes. The two of us began to walk down the block, heading towards his place. I wrung my hands around each other as my heart palpitated underneath my ribs.

"Like?" Bailey pressed.

"Like it's nothing you need to worry about," I told him. To my horror, tears escaped from the corners of my eyes.

"Amber?" Bailey questioned. "What's going on? Talk to me."

"It's about Madison," I whispered. "I...I found out something."

"Something?" he asked. "Something like what?" Bailey whipped his head around, staring at me. We kept walking, passing two houses until we got to his aunt's house. Bailey stripped off his shirt and turned on the hose. "Is there a new development? Did they find her? Is she alive? Does she still have her memory? Does she remember what happened to her?" Bailey was firing question after so fast that all I could do was stop and stare at him. My head was spinning. I sat down on a rock, shaded by the tree, and pulled my knees to my chest. "Amber, answer me."

"I don't have answers to any of those questions," I needed to tell him, though, about Madison's profile on *Open Realizations*. He had to know who she really was and what she really did. "But there is something I need to tell you."

"What?" Bailey asked. "If there are no new developments, then what do you need to tell me?"

"Something you don't know about. Something about Madison."

"There's nothing I don't know about when it comes to

Madison," Bailey said. "I mean, not only were we dating but we were best friends. I know more about her and she knew more about me than anyone else." *Not this.*

I wrung my hands together, rocking back and forth on my heels. How was I supposed to tell him this big secret? He trusted Madison... loved her. *But he doesn't even know the real her. She was putting up a front with him...and everyone else.*

"Bailey, do you remember when I asked you about that website, *Open Realizations*?" I asked.

"Sure," Bailey said.

"And do you remember asking me why I wanted to know about it?"

"Of course."

"Well, I kind of lied to you about my reason," I told him, my words slow and deliberate. "I wanted to know about the website because, well, Mrs. Porter sent me a bunch of Madison's things including her journal."

"Okay, and?"

"And in her journal she wrote about the website, *Open Realizations*," I said. "She...she had an account on the site and she...well she was a part of the site. Do you know what I mean?"

"What are you getting at Amber?" Bailey asked. I could hear his voice harden. "Are you trying to tell me that Madison, my Madison, was a part of this website? Part of that company?"

"Yeah," I said. "That's what I'm trying to tell you." Bailey sat next to me, eerily still, staring at nothing. I tried to nudge him, tried to turn his head to me so we could talk, but he wouldn't move. He refused to.

"You know, you're something else," Bailey finally said. "You are a piece of work, Amber, do you understand that? I can't believe that you would lie to me like this."

"Lie to you? I'm not lying to you, Bailey. It's true! I saw her account!"

"You know, I knew you were jealous, that the kiss we shared meant more to you than to me but God Amber, I didn't think you were that petty. Especially about Madison."

"I'm not jealous or petty! And I'm not lying!" Bailey stood

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up and tucked a rag into his back pocket.

"I don't know what you thought you could accomplish here, trying to cause some sort of scandal, but it's not working and you're pathetic," Bailey said. "Get out of here Amber, just get out of here."

"Bailey-"

"I said LEAVE!" At the boom of his voice I actually stumbled back. I had never seen Bailey react to anything as bad as he was reacting to this. He was...scary. "Get the hell out of here."

"Whatever, Bailey," I said. "I tried to come to you about something important. I thought we were friends."

"Yeah well friends don't make up ridiculous stories about their friends' girlfriends," Bailey hissed. "Maybe you should brush up on the definition of being a friend because you obviously have no idea how to do that."

"Go to hell, Bailey," I growled. I took a large pebble, large enough to fit in my hand, and hurled it at the newly clean jeep. It bounced off the metal and I heard Bailey yelp; it had left a dent. "Try to clean that away." I stomped away from Bailey's aunt's house and didn't stop until I was around the block, at the community park, and far away from Bailey. My eye was twitching and I curled my hands into fists, digging my nails against the palms.

*How could he? I fumed. How could Bailey not believe me and call me a liar? How could he think I'm jealous? Jealous of what?! He **knows** that I've been trying to find out the real reason behind Madison's disappearance. Would I be doing that if I was really, truly jealous of her? God he's such a damn idiot. I just want to sock him, or take a baseball bat to his stupid car. That would teach him.*

Jumping slightly, I grabbed onto the hanging rings and started swinging back and forth. The heat made my hands burn and my grip loosened. My legs were dangling and I could feel sweat trickling down my back.

"Hey there." Ethan stood in front of me in a pair of cargo shorts and an oversized t-shirt. My throat closed and I began to cough, my eyes watering in the harsh light. Ethan went to pat me on the back but I dodged his hand, pounding on my own chest.

“Are you okay?”

“Fine,” I said. “I’m fine.” *No I’m not. I’m freaking out here!* “W-What’s up?”

“Not much,” he said. “Just hanging out, waiting for my dad to get back.” *Get back from where? Picking up another girl through **Open Realizations**? Fucking around?* I stared at Ethan but all I could see was his father’s picture on Lenny’s website.

“Sounds like fun.” I tried to keep my voice light as my hands shook inside my pockets. “Alright I guess I better-”

“I have a question for you,” he said, cutting me off. He shifted on his feet, digging his toe into the ground.

“What is it?” I could feel the corner of the paper digging into my thigh, reminding me of what Ethan was part of. “I have things to do, Ethan.”

“I was wondering... I mean only if you want to...” His ears reddened and he wiped his brow with his hand.

“Ethan?”

“Would you like to go out on a date with me?” The words stopped me in my tracks.

“What?”

“Uh...do you want to go out with me? Like on a date?”

“A date,” I mumbled dumbly.

“You know...dinner...maybe a movie or something else you might like better?” He looked at me then, his eyes wide and hopeful.

“I can’t,” I said. “I’m sorry.” Ethan frowned and shuffled back. “I don’t think it’s a good idea that we go out on a date. It’s not a good time to get...involved.”

“Is it because of my dad? Because I don’t care what he says. I like you, Amber.”

“I like you too,” I admitted.

“So then-”

“But we can’t.” I stood straight, steeling my body. I blinked back tears as I pulled the paper out of my pocket, curling it in my fist. “We just can’t.”

“Amber-”

“I have to go, Ethan,” I said. “I’m sorry.”

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“Where are you going?” he asked. I couldn’t tell him the truth so I just shook my head.

“I have to go talk to the police.”

“The police? Why, what happened? Are you okay?”

“I have a lead on Madison,” I told him. “I’m going to tell the police about it.” I searched Ethan’s face for some twitch, some clue as to whether or not he knew what I was talking about. His face became ashen and his eyes flittered about. He rocked on his heels.

“Oh...” Ethan smiled but the smile was forced.

“That’s...great. I guess I’ll leave you alone then.”

“See you around, Ethan.” Ethan turned around, heading in the direction of his house. His steps were quick, so quick that he was stumbling over himself. *No doubt going to tell Daddy dearest.* Disgusted, I shook my head and headed the opposite way.

* * *

I slipped through the doors of the precinct, assaulted with cold air. I shivered involuntarily.

Phones were ringing and groups of police officers stood around a desk, drinking coffee and discussing something in low voices. To the left was a holding cell and I glanced at it only for a moment and then turned away.

I moved deeper into the station, taking in everything around me. The walls were gray, concrete, and didn’t look very inviting. Wrapping my arms around my body, I walked over to the group of police officers.

“Can we help you?” The officer was twenty-something, cradling a cup of coffee in his hands.

“I need to speak to someone about a missing person’s case.” I squinted, reading the name on the badge. Officer Beasley.

“A missing person?” Officer Beasley asked. “What’s your name, Miss?”

“Amber,” I said. “Amber Swanson.”

“Alright, Miss Swanson-”

“Amber,” I interrupted. “Call me Amber.”

“Alright, Amber,” he said. “Now, what type of missing person are we talking about?” The other officers dispersed, going to their own desks, leaving Officer Beasley and me alone. He ushered me to sit down and pulled out a legal pad.

“My friend went missing in New York and I think I might know who she saw last.” I uncurled some of the papers from my hands and handed it to him. “She was part of some escort business. She used a fake name and a fake age. She made a whole other life for herself.” Officer Beasley jotted notes down as I spoke, his pen rolling easily over the paper. He looked through the papers.

“So how did you find all of this out?” Officer Beasley asked. I proceeded to explain the box of belongings and the journal, pulling the journal from my bag. I handed that over to him. “And who do you think did it?” Suddenly I felt small and shy in a room full of officers. I swallowed a lump in my throat and tried to stand straight.

“He goes by the name of Lenny,” I said, my voice shaking. “But that’s not his real name.”

“It isn’t?” Officer Beasley asked. His pen never stopped moving. I shook my head.

“No,” I told him. “It’s not.”

“How do you know?” Officer Beasley stared at me, waiting.

“Here, look,” I said and gave the officer the other papers. His brow furrowed and his mouth opened just slightly. “It’s Mr. Hunter. Mayor Hunter.” Officer Beasley stopped writing and tore the paper off the pad. He tucked it behind the pile of papers I gave him and put them all in the corner of his desk. “Aren’t you going to do something? Say something?”

“This is a big accusation,” Officer Beasley said. He leaned over, staring at me eye to eye. “And about an important person.”

“Yeah? So?” I asked. I eyed the papers in the corner as a knot formed in my stomach. “Can’t you look into it?”

“Aside from who is on these papers, your friend’s disappearance isn’t in this jurisdiction.”

“And that means?”

“That means that I can’t do anything about it,” Officer

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Beasley said. "I'm sorry."

"So what am I supposed to do now?"

"You would have to tell the officers in New York about it. They're the only ones able to do anything."

"But I'm not going to be home for another few weeks. She's been missing for months and if I don't do something now, she could die."

"Honestly, Amber, if she's been missing for this long, I would be surprised if she's still alive." I glared at Officer Beasley before standing up. I grabbed the papers from his desk and threw them back into my pocket.

"Thanks for nothing," I muttered before stalking out of the precinct. *So much for help from the police.*

* * *

Once back at the diner, I sat down hard on the steps and pulled my phone out of my pocket. Dialing my father's number and listened as it rang once, twice, and a third time before the voicemail kicked in. Frustrated, I ended the call and threw my phone back into my pocket.

Useless, as usual, I thought. What's the point of having a damn phone, dad, if you don't even answer it? The one time I actually need your help and you're not around. You have no problem calling me when you need me but apparently you can't answer your own damn phone.

My stomach growled and the aroma of food made my mouth water. Taking the papers out one again, I stared at the picture of Mr. Hunter and his profile information. He contacted Madison, planned to meet her. He was the last one that she saw; he would be the one who would know where she was. *So why aren't they going to talk to him?* It had to more than a legislation issue.

Police couldn't ignore the report and yet Officer Beasley was doing just that. *They're protecting him!* I realized suddenly. *The cops want to keep Mr. Hunter's hands clean and his image perfect...but at what cost?* I knew that they were protecting him, they had to be, but I couldn't prove it. A blast of cold air hit my

back as the front door to the diner opened. Dirt encrusted Keds stopped next to me, stepped down one, and my sister sat next to me. She was showing, finally, and rubbed her hand over her round stomach.

“What’s going on?” she asked. “You’ve been sitting here for twenty minutes.” Above us, clouds rumbled. “It’s going to start raining soon. Are you going to sit here and get soaked or come inside where it’s dry and a little bit cooler?”

“I’ll be in there in a little bit,” I murmured.

“What’s wrong?” she asked.

“Nothing,” I said. She brushed her fingers over the curled corners of the papers.

“Does this nothing have to do with these papers? Or maybe why Jacob saw you going into the police station?”

“I have a lead on Madison’s disappearance,” I told her. “But the police won’t even look into it. They claim it’s not in their jurisdiction.” Rebecca tried to look over my shoulder, to glance at the papers, but I curled them under. “I’m trying to call Dad to tell him about it, ask him to go to the police, but he didn’t answer.”

“That sucks,” she said.

“Yeah, it does,” I said. I waited for Rebecca to say something. Finally she opened her mouth.

“I love you, Amber, but I think you need to put this Madison thing to rest,” Rebecca said softly. “I know you said you might have a lead but I don’t want this to consume you any more than it already has. I don’t want you to fall back into that cycle.” Fall back into the cycle? I never got out of the cycle, but I didn’t tell Rebecca that.

“I’ll stop,” I told her, “once I get the police to check out this lead.” With a shake of her head, Rebecca lifted herself up and disappeared back into the safety of the diner just as the sky opened.

Chapter Seventeen

The police weren't going to do anything. I still couldn't believe that they weren't going to look into it, or at least question Ethan's father. I lay on the grass, my legs stretched out behind me and my arms tucked under my head. Wind was blowing the clouds, big pillow-like clouds, away from the sun, letting its rays shine on my face, penetrating my skin. Tears trickled down my cheeks, getting sucked into the soil under me.

"Are you going to lay here all day?" Rebecca asked as she sat down next to me. Her stomach protruded ever so slightly under her t-shirt as she pulled her knees up to her chest.

"Why not?" I asked. "There's nothing else I **can** do." Pulling myself up, I stared at my sister. "The police aren't even the slightest bit concerned."

"But you talked to Dad, didn't you?" she asked. "You emailed him the pages and he said he would talk to the police back there. That's something, isn't it?" I shrugged. It was something, sure, but what were the cops in New York going to do about the mayor in Virginia? *By the time they do anything it's going to be too late. It's probably too late anyway.*

"Come on, you're here for another week. Let's do something fun. The next time I'm going to see you, I'm going to look like I swallowed a basketball. No fun then."

"Maybe later," I murmured. "I'm not in the mood right

now. I'm sorry.”

“It's okay.” Using my arm as an anchor, Rebecca lifted herself up. “I'm going to go back into the diner. Want something to eat?”

“If you're cooking, sure,” I said and, only because I felt I had to, I added. “Want some help?”

“Jacob is here to help,” she said. “I'll be fine.” I watched my sister skip back into the house, humming a nursery rhyme. Pulling myself up to a sitting position, I dug my hand into my pocket and pulled out the skeleton keys. The keys I stole from Ethan's room.

They key that fits into the doll house. My heart pounded as I ran my fingers over the warm metal. *The doll house that Ethan wants to me to stay far, far away from.* There was something in that doll house...and I was going to find out what. Jumping up, I ran inside the house, taking the steps two at a time and barging through the door.

Rebecca was standing over the counter, chopping up tomatoes and Jacob was standing behind her, his hands on her hips, his face nuzzling her neck. He whispered something in her ear and she giggled, the apples of her cheeks turning red. I hung back in the shadows, not wanting to interrupt the private moment. Rebecca looked up and jumped, finally noticing that I was standing there.

“Hey, is everything okay? You snuck up on us.”

“I didn't mean to,” I told her. “I wanted to tell you that I'm not going to be having dinner right now. I have a few things to take care of. Is that okay?”

“Where are you going?” she asked immediately.

“Going to visit Ethan.” Rebecca nodded as Jacob kissed her hair. “I have my phone on me. I shouldn't be long.”

“Be careful,” she said. “It's getting dark and I don't want anything to happen to you.”

“Sounding like a mother already,” I teased. “I'll be fine. I'll be home tonight.”

“See you later,” she said.

“Call me if you want a ride,” Jacob added. I glanced at my sister one last time, gnawing on my bottom lip, and then slipped

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through the door.

* * *

The old, scuffed up wooden floorboards squeaked under my weight as I stepped through the threshold and into the hallway. Immediately I shivered against the frigid air. The aroma of roses and dish washing soap assaulted my nostrils almost immediately. There was an underlying smell, too, but I couldn't figure out what the smell was or where it was coming from.

I took a tentative step, and then another, down the hall. My ears stayed pricked for any sounds from the outside. I had to get in and out before anyone came home which was hard since I had no idea when that would be.

Sunlight flooded into the hall from the left and I turned, only to realize that I was looking into the living room...the living room which was filled with female bodies. Mannequins. My mouth dropped as I took in the scene in. *Well this is...odd.* From where I stood, the women looked so life like with the clothes draped on their bodies and the make-up expertly applied onto their faces. I was almost expecting one of them to start talking to me.

This is why Ethan and his father didn't want me to come in here? What are they doing, hiding Mr. Hunter's fetishes from me or something? I moved further down the hall, glancing into the other rooms as I passed them. Each and every room held three or four other mannequins, none of them looking even remotely the same. Yet the faces looked vaguely familiar, I just couldn't put my finger on it.

Somebody took great time and effort to give each woman her own personality and look. *And there are even names on them,* I mused as I spied the name tag. *Okay so this is pretty damn creepy. But why? Why the fetish? And when did it start when Ethan's mother left or before? Maybe this is why she left?* I had so many questions and no one to answer them for me.

At that point I knew I should have turned back. I should have left and went back to the house, pretending that I still didn't know anything. Instead, though, my hand grasped the banister at

the end of the hallway and I cautiously climbed up on the first stair of the staircase. When the stair didn't break under my weight, I climbed another and another until I was on top and looking down.

There was a long, narrow hallway in the middle of the second floor leading to five rooms, all with the doors shut tight. I reached out and clasped the knob of the nearest door. It turned easily in my hand. *Closed, but not locked.*

Since it would be easier working from the inside out, I let go of the knob I was holding and shuffled down the hall to the farthest room. Before going in, I paused, my head tilted, listening. I couldn't hear anything but the sound of my own labored breathing. *Good, no one has caught on yet. I'm still home free.*

Anticipation ran through my veins as I turned the knob and let the door swing open. The room was pink, almost as pink as the room I was staying in. There was a white rocking chair in the corner with an ottoman in front. In the other room, under a canopy, was a bed and the bed was occupied. *He even has someone staying in the bed? This is ridiculous! He's so creepy.*

I inched over to the bed, disgusted by and yet drawn to the body under the covers.

With shaking hands and a racing heart, I pulled the blanket down, off the mannequin's face and part of her body. A scream died in my throat as shock took over. I fell to my knees and covered my mouth with my hands. My stomach churned and I looked wildly around for something to vomit in. There was nothing, though, so I had to force down the urge to regurgitate.

"Oh. My. God" I whispered.

In front of me, with her face inches from mine and her eyes dead and open, was the Pre-Law student that had been on the news. Hannah something. The one with the baby...the one who was missing. *And now she's dead.* I reached out, touching the ice cold skin of the dead girl and felt bile rise in my throat. I swallowed it down, wincing. As I stared at Hannah's body, it hit me.

These bodies aren't mannequins at all! These are bodies, real dead bodies! Ethan's father is harboring dead bodies in here and Ethan knows about it. I mean he has to know about it. Right? How could he not know what was going on in his own house? His

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father probably told him...it would be hard to keep a secret this big. Then another thought dawned on me. What if Ethan was a part of all of it? What if he was his father's side kick and helped hide the bodies? The thought was almost unbearable.

I stood up, holding onto the bed for support, and was about to force myself to leave, leave Ethan and the house and go to the police station without turning back, when the sound of footsteps froze me. Someone was in the house...coming upstairs. Was it Mr. Hunter? A burglar who thought he hit the big time? I didn't know who it was but I did know one thing. Whoever it was would not be too happy finding me here. They would probably be livid and who knew what would happen after that.

Thinking quickly, I slid to the other side of the bed, the one closest to the wall, and lay down. Slithering like a snake, I slid under the bed and tucked my legs as close to me as possible. The footsteps were getting louder and I could feel the floor sag under the weight of the body. Looking around from my hiding spot, I saw a pair of beat up old Timberland boots, steel toe, inches away from my nose.

"I guess dad was wrong." I gasped and then covered my mouth. The owner of the steel-toed shoes was none other than Ethan himself. My worst fears were confirmed...Ethan knew all about the doll house and the bodies! He was an accomplice to someone. But who?

His father, obviously. His father is some sick psychopath who is going around killing women in his spare time and Ethan is covering up for him. I wanted to throw up right then and there under the bed. *How could he do something like this? How could Ethan go day by day knowing that he had dead bodies in this house?* Then I thought of the rules Ethan babbled about when he was drunk; the rules his father broke time and time again. *What else did he say about them, though?* I wracked my brain but nothing was coming to me. All I could remember is that little bit.

I waited, frozen, as Ethan walked around the room, stopping periodically to look in something. As I waited I thought of all the other clues I could have missed. The way Ethan told me that his father wanted him to have nothing to do with me, the way

he acted every time we started getting close.

Finally, after ten minutes, Ethan retreated from the room and I listened as his footsteps became distant. Then, when I was sure I was alone, I slid out from under the bed and pushed myself up into an upright position. Tears streaked my face and my head pounded. *I have to get out of here*, I thought as I stumbled from the room.

Running out the door, I slid over the dew covered grass, stumbling to the main road. The truck was there too, its doors swinging on its hinges. It wasn't latched correctly, leaving it wide open. With my breath hitched in my throat, I inched over to the truck and peeked in. The truck was scrubbed clean, sparkling, and the stench of bleach assaulted my nostrils. There was nothing there.

Did I really expect there to be, though?

Disappointed, I started to close the door and get back home before I was caught. As I turned, my pants got caught on something and I tugged. My pants pulled free, ripping in the process, and a thump sounded at the same time. Part of the truck, right under the two doors where the freezer was located, fell off and landed in the dirt below.

"What the hell?" I fished out my phone from my pocket and turned on the flashlight application that I downloaded. I shone the flashlight onto the floor where the door rested, and then to the opening left behind. "Stupid damn thing."

Crouching down, I moved the flashlight from the floor to the freezer, making sure there was no left over food that would spoil thanks to my carelessness. *And someone will know I was here*. Instead, the beam from the flashlight found a blue woolen blanket. *Oh this can't be good*. Using my sleeve as a make shift glove, I moved the blanket and screamed.

Wrapped in the blue woolen blanket was a woman. A bloodied, dead woman with her eyes wide and her mouth frozen in a silent scream. It wasn't any woman, though. I knew her...I knew her very well. It was Marci, the leader of my meetings at the community center. She was dead at the hands of Ethan's father.

But how could he? She never did anything to him! She

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never did anything to anyone! She was nice and caring and didn't deserve this. She didn't deserve any of this.

Pulling the camera Bailey gave me out of my pocket, I snapped a bunch of pictures, saving them on my memory card, before turning the camera off and slipping it back in my pocket. I put the door back over the freezer and stood up.

A light turned on in the kitchen and I could see someone's silhouette in the window. I had to get out of there. Ducking behind the bushes, I hovered in the shadows as I made it back to the house.

* * *

As I sat in an empty corner of the library, farthest from any tables, I went through everything in my head. Old newspapers printouts were lying scattered around me. After hours of research this was what I knew:

1. There were bodies in the doll house at Ethan's house.
2. The bodies were now taxidermied.
3. Ethan knew about the bodies and he went to go check up on them.
4. Some, if not all of the bodies looked like the missing women featured in newspapers.
5. Ethan or his father killed Marci.
6. Ethan's father was a murderer.

"So what now?" I wondered out loud.

"I don't know, you tell me." I swiveled around to come face to face with Bailey. He was grinning mischievously as he sauntered over to my side. He glanced down at the print outs as I tried to stack them neatly into a pile and away from his prying eyes.

"What's going on?"

"What's it to you?" I hissed. "Last time I checked, I was jealous and pathetic, right? I lie to you because I couldn't stand seeing you and Madison happy together, right?" Bailey pulled a chair out and sat down next to me, resting his elbows on his thighs.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I was out of line and screwed up."

"Screwed up? That's what you call it?"

"Okay, I did more than screw up. But, Amber, you bombarded me, threw me out of whack. How did you expect me to react?"

"Well I sure as hell didn't expect you to call me a liar, to say the least," I told him. "Or to think I was so jealous that I would try to mess things up between you two."

"I'm sorry," he said. "I'm really sorry. Can we just forget about it?"

"Whatever," I muttered. I would never forgive Bailey for what he said. It hurt too much, cut too deep, to ever go away.

"Amber--"

"Whatever, Bailey," I said again. "Let's just forget about it. Move on. You **do** know how to do that, right?"

"I think so," he said with a smirk. "So what are you doing?"

"Not much," I said as I slid the papers in a folder and put the folder in my bag. "Just hanging out, you know, shooting the breeze."

"With some light reading material?" Bailey motioned to my bag. "Pretty gruesome if you ask me."

"I was just reading, that's all," I lied. I had no intention of telling Bailey what I found. It was bad enough that I was now a liability, even if Ethan didn't know I knew, I didn't want to drag Bailey into it too.

"So why aren't you playing huggie bear sucky face with your boy toy?"

"You mean Ethan?"

"Yeah. Didn't you finally tell him how you feel and all that crap? Shouldn't it be sunshine and puppy dogs between you two?"

"It should," I agreed. "Except it's not."

"Why not?" he asked. I shrugged and tried not to look fazed.

"Things just didn't work out, that's all." Bailey frowned but didn't push it. *Good, don't pry in this time Bailey. It's for your own good.*

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"Do I need to go beat someone up for you? Because I will, you know. I definitely will." When I didn't say anything, Bailey nudged my shoulder and used both of his pointer fingers to push my lips up into a smile. "Come on grumpy gills, tell your best friend Bailey what's wrong." *Where do I start?* Despite my vow not to say anything, my resolve was dissolving. "Seriously, Amber, what's going on? You look like you've seen a ghost...or a bunch of ghosts."

"More like dead people," I said before I could stop myself.

"What?" Bailey said. *Good job, genius. Now what are you going to do?*

"If I tell you something, do you promise not to say anything about it? To keep it a secret, from everyone, until I can figure out exactly what I'm going to do about it?"

"Okay, sure," Bailey said. "You know I can keep a secret." Bailey looked insulted and I rubbed his shoulder, giving him a sad smile.

Of course, Bailey could keep a secret, he always could, ever since I met him. But this secret was more than just a 'oh I kissed this boy and he has a girlfriend' type secret. This was the mother of all secrets. What if he couldn't, or didn't want to, keep a secret? **I** didn't even want to keep this secret.

"Fine, here it is," I said. I filled him in on the morning events and as I went through it all, Bailey's eyes narrowed and he began to grind his jaw. His hands gripped the back of the seat so hard that I was sure he was going to rip the back right off of the base. "And that's it," I said

"Amber you have to go to the police. You have to tell them what you told me."

"No, I can't," I said. "Not yet at least."

"What are you waiting for?" Bailey demanded to know. What **was** I waiting for? That was a good question and I realized that I didn't have an answer for it. "These are **dead women** Amber. They have families; people are looking for them. You can't just sit on this information and twiddle your thumbs. Don't you feel bad?"

"Of course I feel bad!" I said. "How could you think that I don't feel bad? Don't you think that I know there are people

looking for these poor dead women? Don't you think it's eating me up inside? I just don't want to make any rash decisions before I have all the answers! I tried that before and I screwed up. I don't want to do that again."

"At the cost of what? Or should I say who?"

"Let me at least talk to Ethan first, okay?" I asked. "Let me talk to Ethan and see what he says. Please? Let me get his side of the story?" When Bailey didn't answer me, I kicked his ankle with my foot. "Okay?"

"You're not ally giving me a choice now, are you?"

"Not really," I said. Bailey threw up his hands.

"Fine, then go do what you want," he said. "But I'm going with you."

"With me?" I repeated. Bailey nodded.

"Yes, with you. There's no way I'm letting you get anywhere near that psychopathic freak."

Chapter Eighteen

The doll house loomed in front of me, dark, dreary and ominous. The blind blew around me with such force that it nearly knocked me off my feet and caused my hair to hit my face in a whip like fashion, stinging me in the process.

After jiggling the knob, the door opened, hitting the wall behind it, and the wind ushered me into the house. I took a cautious step deeper into the house, my eyes peeled for anyone. A shiver ran up my spine and the hairs on the back of my neck stood straight up.

"What are you doing here?" The voice was low and raspy. I turned to see Madison, my Madison, starting down at me from her perch in the middle of the staircase. "We don't want you here." Madison's perfect blond hair was chopped up in harsh angles and caked with blood that was dripping from a wound on her forehead. "I don't want you here."

"What happened to you?" I whispered. "Why are bleeding Madison? What did they do to you?"

"They didn't do anything to me," Madison said. Every time she opened her mouth blood trickled out and fell on her dirt encrusted nightgown. "You did this to me! How could you leave me at that party? How could you turn away and not worry about me at all? What kind of friend are you? I hate you!" The angrier she got, the more the blood poured out. Streams of blood were

flowing out of her ears, her nose, her mouth, and her head, pooling on the stair she was sitting on. When the stair was covered the blood started to slink down to the next step, and the next, getting closer and closer to my feet. "You are a horrible friend, Amber and I wish you would have died instead of me!" Madison shouted. The blood was now like a wave, splashing up on every surface it hit "You are worthless, pathetic, and no one even really likes you! I hope you rot in hell!"

I jumped up with a start and tumbled out of bed, taking the sheets with me. They were wrapped around me like some kind of cocoon. I was shaking and I looked up to see the window wide open. It was three in the morning.

I don't remember opening the window before I went to sleep, I thought. Shaken up, I used my good leg and boosted myself back onto the bed. I was rearranging my clothes when my door flew open and my sister bolted in.

"Are you okay?" she cried as I shielded my eyes from the harsh light of the living room. Rebecca kept blinking and checking me over, looking for any cuts or bruises. "What happened? Did you slip?"

"I'm fine," I said. "I had a bad dream, that's all." A bad dream was an understatement, I realized as my hands shook and my head pounded. Licking my dry lips, I climbed into bed with the help of Rebecca. "I'm sorry I woke you up. I'll be fine."

"Are you sure?" she asked as she pulled the covers up to my chin. "I can stay in here if you want."

"No," I said. "I'm okay. You're knocked up and you need your sleep."

"You sure?" Rebecca asked, gnawing on her lower lip.

"Positive." Rebecca kissed my forehead, like a mother would kiss her child, and went to close the door. She was going to make an excellent mom.

"Can you turn on the lamp?" I asked before she left. "I don't want to be in the dark right now." Rebecca flicked the switch on and the room was lit by a warm glow. "Thanks."

"See you tomorrow." Once my sister left, I sat in bed and

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looked around the room. Rebecca closed the window, thankfully, and locked it shut. I forced the air out of my lungs and stared around my room.

There's no way I'm going to go back to sleep now, I thought. It's going to be a long night.

* * *

Seven hours later, I stood on the stoop at Ethan's house, knees shaking, and rang the bell. I heard footsteps echoing behind the door and then Ethan appeared, a smile on his face.

"Amber!" he said, sounding surprised.

"Ethan," I said. "We need to talk."

"Talk? About what?"

"About the dead bodies in the doll house and in the truck." Blood drained from Ethan's face and he grabbed the door jamb for support.

"How do you know about that?" Ethan finally asked. I pulled the key out of my pocket and threw it at him. It skidded across the dirt and stopped right in front of his toes. Ethan picked up the key, juggled it in his hands, and then put it in his own pocket. "So I didn't lose it."

"No, you didn't," I spat. "I took it because it was cool and I wanted it. I sure as hell didn't know the secrets it kept hidden."

"Amber, I can explain if you just let me," Ethan said. I threw my head back and let out a sharp laugh.

"You can explain? Explain **what** exactly?" I asked. "How your father is some sick serial killer with a fetish for women? How you didn't know anything about it? It's bull crap, Ethan. I heard you talking in the doll house."

"You were the one who went in there."

"Yeah I did," I said. "I was hiding under the bed in the pink room while you made your rounds. You knew what your father was doing all along!" I was near hysterics and my voice crescendoed until I was almost screaming. Ethan looked nervously behind him and back to his house. His father was in there waiting for him, no doubt.

"It's complicated."

"Is your mother in that house too?" I asked. "Did your father kill her too? What about your supposed sister? Do you even have one? Oh, that's right! You don't! You know, you filled my head with so many lies I don't know what to believe anymore."

"Believe that I care about you and this is why I didn't mention any of it. This is why I kept trying to keep you at a distance, to keep you safe and away from all of this." Ethan swept his hand to the house. "My own personal hell."

"You're honestly going to tell me that you aren't a part of this? That you know nothing about this?"

"No," Ethan said. "I know everything about it and I **am** a part of it but that doesn't mean I want to be. Because I don't. I've been trying to get out but there's no way. There's. No. Damn. Way." Every word was accentuated with Ethan's foot meeting the ground. "Damn it, Amber, I've been trying so hard to get out but every time I try, every time that I think that I can go to the cops on my father and it will be over, I freeze. I can't go through with it."

"Why do you freeze?" I demanded to know. "Ethan your father is a murderer. He kills innocent women to get himself off. He deserves to rot in jail. Why do you freeze?" Ethan's eyes flicker to the left and he didn't say anything at first. I had a sinking feeling in the pit of my stomach. I was filled with unease. "Your father is the one that's doing this, right?" After a moment, Ethan nodded. "So what are you waiting for?"

"Because he's my damn father! He's the only freaking family I have anymore! Don't you understand that?" Ethan sighed and put his fingertips to the bridge of his nose. "I can't just turn him in...It would kill me inside."

"But it's okay that your father kills innocent people? That doesn't bother you? As long as you have your father everything else is hunky dory, is that what you're telling me?" Ethan shook his head.

"You don't understand."

"You're damn right I don't understand."

"Please, Amber, just don't say anything okay? You can't go to the cops or anyone about this, okay? Promise me you won't?"

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Ethan begged, his eyes watering.

"Are you kidding me?" I asked appalled. Ethan really expected me to just forget about everything, put blinders on, and go on with my life? I'm supposed to play ignorant when I knew what was going on? Every time his father took the truck... who knew how many lives he's changed for the worse? Who knew how many parents cried themselves to sleep wondering where their children were.

"Ethan I'm not going to forget about this...I can't and you can't expect me to. I'm not going to play blind when horrible things are happening all because of your father. I can't. I won't."

"But you don't understand," Ethan said. "If my father finds out that people might know...that he, we, might get caught...who knows what drastic measures he would take. You could be in danger, Amber, you probably already are. If he knows that you know..." Ethan shuddered. "He can't know that you know. It's better if no one knows that you know. Please."

"After all of this, you're still defending him," I said. "I can't believe you. You are brainwashed, Ethan, completely brainwashed. I don't even know what to say to you anymore."

"Tell me you won't say anything to anyone. Promise me," Ethan repeated.

"No." I steeled my shoulders and stared at him. "You're not going to scare me into doing what you want me to do. It doesn't work like that."

"Amber-"

"Screw you Ethan."

* * *

"You went without me?" Bailey said and I rubbed my temples with my fingers. He paced back and forth, a cigarette shaking in his hand. "You promised me, Amber. You promised me that you weren't going to do anything without me there. What happened to that?"

"I had a chance and I took it," I said. "Nothing happened, Bailey, and as you can see I'm perfectly fine. Nothing's wrong." I

twirled around a little to prove my point. "Now can you stop screaming? I didn't sleep last night."

"Here, take this," Bailey said, shoving a cup of iced coffee in my hand. "And drink it quickly because we need to go to the police."

"The police?"

"Yes Amber," he said. "We're going to the police and this time you have no say. You put yourself in enough danger. I don't want to take any other chances. Either we go together or I'll go by myself."

"Fine," I said, giving up. "I'll go. I'll go talk to the damn cops." Bailey grabbed my upper arm.

"Good," he said, his voice tight. "Now."

"As if you're giving me a choice," I muttered, rolling my eyes.

"You know that you're doing the right thing," Bailey said as he squeezed my hand. I weaved around people, skirting around the crowd and trying, desperately, to get away from Bailey. I needed time alone; time to think. But he wouldn't let go of my arm so, there we were, the two of us hand in hand, walking up the concrete steps of the precinct.

"Madison would be proud to call you her friend." I shuddered and avoided Bailey's eye. The dream was still on the outskirts of my brain and hearing her name caused my skin to crawl.

We entered the building together and I searched for Officer Beasley, craning my neck around. I saw his silhouette in the back of the room, a coffee cup in his hand, laughing with two men and a woman.

"Hey Officer Beasley," I called out. The group stopped talking and turned to me along with the rest of the people in the room. "I think I know where all the missing women talked about in the news are." My voice was strong and my eyes steady despite the fact that I felt like jelly inside. Officer Beasley hustled over to me leaving his group slack jawed behind him.

"Come with me," he said between tight lips. I stumbled against his quick pace and would have fallen if it wasn't for Bailey.

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We went to the far side of the building and Officer Beasley let us into a room. He followed behind, closing the door.

"What do you think you're doing, yelling something like that across the office? Are you looking for trouble?" he hissed.

"No, I'm not," I hissed back. "I'm trying to **stop** the trouble from happening. Do you want to hear what I have to say or not?" Bailey smirked next to me and shook his head. He was used to the wrath of Amber. Officer Beasley, on the other hand, was not. "I could just leave this office right now, keep you in the dark, and let you figure out the murders on your own. You can't hold me here, I'm a free citizen who hasn't made any trouble. You got nothing to hold me."

"You want to see about that?"

"Yeah, go ahead," I challenged. Officer Beasley hesitated and I had to keep my smirk hidden. I had him by his man parts and he knew it. "So, are you ready to listen to me?"

"Fine, fine," Officer Beasley said. "But you better have proof this time. Another time calling wolf and you **will** be in trouble, you can count on that."

* * *

"They were right here," I said as I motioned around the now empty doll house. There wasn't a single body in the house at all. All the bodies, clothes, and props disappeared and the doll house looked like a play area, nothing different. "Right here, damn it. I saw them with my own two eyes."

"Well obviously they aren't here now so what are you playing at?" Officer Beasley asked.

"I'm not playing at anything," I snapped. "I told you that there were bodies here and there were. Somebody must have moved them or got rid of the evidence or something." Anxiety was bubbling in my body as I moved away from Officer Beasley and started down the narrow hallway. I looked through the empty house one last time. Bailey was next to me, his hand in mine the whole time.

"Bailey there were bodies here, I swear it. Ethan must have

moved them," I whispered to him. "You believe me right?"

"Of course I do," Bailey said but he hesitated slightly.

Bailey was behind me almost all the time and I knew now that he was questioning everything; questioning me. "Come on; let's go back to the police station...we're going to have to leave soon."

"You go," I told him. "I'll be there in a minute." I pulled my hand from Bailey's and climbed the stairs slowly. Bypassing all the other rooms, I walked into the back room, the too pink room that Heather was in, and threw open the door. Heather's body was gone and the bed was made perfectly. The room was so pristine that it looked like it should have been the cover of *Home and Garden* magazine.

I met Bailey in front of the house and avoided Mr. Hunter's angry glare. Ethan was standing behind his father, stone faced and silent, not looking at me as I passed him to go back to the cop car. He dug the toe of his shoe into the ground and moved only when his father shoved him out of the way.

"This is illegal and completely inappropriate. You **cannot** come to my house, rifle through my belongings, just because of a comment from some little brat who knows how to lie," Mr. Hunter said. "I have rights, you know, and I'm sure you violated them. You'll be lucky if I don't sue your asses. I'm the mayor for crying out loud and you are treating me like a common criminal!"

"I'm sorry," Officer Beasley said. "We had to follow this lead. We would have done it with anyone, Mr. Mayor. I am very sorry that we had to put you and your son through this, I can guarantee you that. This will not, under any circumstances, ever happen again."

"It better not," Mr. Hunter said. "Or I **will** sue and then I will get your ass fired. I will not have mine or my son's rights violated again, especially after everything we've done for this community. It's preposterous."

"I agree," Officer Beasley said. "And you have my word that Ms. Swanson will have a stern talking to. She will understand the consequences of her actions."

Consequences for my actions? What the hell does that mean? I didn't do anything wrong! There were bodies there! I

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screamed all of this in my head but that was the only thing that I could do. I couldn't confront the police, not in front of Ethan or his father. I couldn't tell the police that Ethan's father was lying again, and even if I did, they wouldn't believe me.

The camera. Show them the pictures on the camera! They have to believe the pictures! I slapped my palm against my forehead. I couldn't believe that I forgot about the pictures! Bailey and I stood there quietly as Officer Beasley said a few more things to Mr. Hunter and then we climbed back into his car and he sped off.

"What did I tell you about lying?" Officer Beasley said through clenched teeth. "I told you that you better not be lying to me. I told you that this better not have been one of your little jokes. You swore to me that it wasn't and, look at that, you lied."

"I didn't lie!" I exclaimed. I slid my camera out of my pocket and opened up the picture gallery. I ruffled through the pictures at a top speed, looking for the photos I took of the truck.

*They're not here! How can they **not** be here? I know I took pictures so where are they?! The pictures, like the bodies, were nowhere to be found. How is this even possible? I had my camera on me the whole time!*

"You better hope that Mr. Mayor doesn't sue the police department or you'll be in even bigger trouble than you are right now."

"Yeah?" I challenged. "What are you going to do to me?" Bailey jammed his elbow into my ribs. "Hey, that hurt, what the hell?"

"Can't you shut up for a little bit?" Bailey asked. "Can't you just accept that you were wrong and stop trying to challenge everyone like you're better than everyone else or something?"

"But Bailey-" I started but he nudged me again.

"No! I don't want to hear it anymore. Just. Shut. Up." Glaring at my friend, I dropped back against the seat of the cop car, crossing my arms, and stared out the window. Bailey didn't believe me, the cop didn't believe me...no one believed me. They all thought that I was just some kind of liar looking for attention. I wasn't, though. *But then where did the bodies go? What could he*

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have done with them? And the pictures? What about the pictures?

Chapter Nineteen

Once we were released from the police station, Bailey left me and hurried off to do God knew what. He still wasn't talking to me because he thought I was just out for some trouble. I wasn't talking to him because he thought I was a liar and I wasn't. I knew I wasn't. I didn't understand how Bailey didn't believe me.

Whatever, I thought, I don't need him. I don't need anyone who doesn't believe me.

I crossed the street, focused on getting back to Rebecca's diner. Officer Beasley promised not to tell Rebecca or Bailey's family about what happened but I didn't really trust him. I needed to cut him off before he delivered the news so I had at least a tiny possibility of explaining to Rebecca what was really going on. If she heard it from me, heard everything, she might not be as mad. *Yeah, right. If a cop comes to her to talk about you she's going to be mad either way. You're in a lose-lose situation.*

My hand reached the handle of the door, ready to pull the door open and enter the diner, when there was a tap on my shoulder. I turned to see Ethan standing there, his face grim and his hands behind his back. Hairs on the back of my neck stood up and sweat beaded on my brow.

"Ethan, what are you doing here?" I asked as I subtly stepped to the side. "What do you want?"

"Why couldn't you just let it go?" Ethan asked. It sounded

more like a plea than a question. "Why couldn't you just pretend that you didn't see anything and let it go? Would it have been that hard for you to do?"

"I couldn't do it, I'm sorry," I lied. "Your father is killing women, Ethan, and I can't just forget I know that. I can't forget that I saw those bodies in that house. It doesn't work like that."

"Yeah, the bodies," Ethan said. "My father flipped out, you know, when I told him that you knew about the bodies. He slapped me around a little and then demanded that I get rid of them." Ethan's eyes were wild and for the first time since I knew him I realized the potential Ethan had to become just like his father.

"So how did you get rid of the bodies anyway?" "Liquid nitrogen," Ethan said. "You dump something in that for long enough and they get nice and frozen. Then you break them down to dust and, poof, the problem is gone."

He's right, I thought, it must have been so easy for him to do.

"But now we have a problem." He almost chuckled to himself. Who in the hell was this monster?

"And what's that?" I hated the way my voice quivered as I talked to him. I couldn't afford to show him any weakness...I had no idea what he was capable of doing at this point. He wasn't the Ethan that I met in the beginning of the summer. He was some kind of rabid person, unpredictable and unstable.

"You. You are the problem," Ethan said. "You're a liability."

"I'm not though," I said. I looked around frantically but there wasn't anyone on the street. In the middle of a Wednesday everyone was holed up in offices, away from the street. We were alone. "I have to go."

"Oh no you don't," Ethan said. He grabbed my arm with such force that I stumbled and my grip on the door faltered. "You are not going anywhere. You are a liability."

"No I'm not!" I cried. I tried to pull away from him, but Ethan held on tight.

"Liabilities have to be taken care of." From behind his back came Ethan's other hand, cradling a wet cloth. I didn't have a chance to question the cloth before it was shoved up against my

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nose and mouth. I struggled, gasping for air, and felt myself slipping out of consciousness.

What is happening to me? I asked myself. Then the blackness came.

* * *

When I regained consciousness I was sitting in a dark, damp room with a little window and a solid steel door. I didn't know how far away from the diner I was or where I was. I only knew one thing: Ethan had drugged me and brought me here. *But why? Is he planning on killing me? Disposing of my body like all the others?* I shuddered at the thought.

I tried to move my hands, readjust how I was sitting but I was stuck. Looking down, I noticed that my hands were tied behind my back with thick rope and my prosthetic leg was off, gone to who knew where. *You have got to be kidding me. My leg? Really? The bastards took my leg?*

I was about to scream, cry out in hopes of someone hearing me, when a switch was flicked and the room was engulfed in a large, blinding white light. I squinted and flinched at the same time.

"Well good morning, sleeping beauty." I opened my eyes, blinking rapidly to get them used to the light, and finally saw Ethan's father looming over me. "I thought you would never wake up."

"What the hell are you planning on doing to me?" I asked. "People know about you. I have friends who know that I know your son...friends who would see that I'm missing. You would be the first suspect, you know."

"Listen to me," he whispered. His voice was frantic. "You need to listen and do everything that's asked of you, okay?"

"Why should I?" I spat.

"Because if you don't, he's going to have some fun with *her*." Mr. Hunter pointed to a space behind me and moved so I could see better. On a metal table lay Rebecca, tied and gagged. The table was adjusted so that I could see her and I bit my lip when I realized my sister's eyes were filled with tears.

"Leave her alone," I hissed. "She had nothing to do with this. She knew nothing about anything so just let her go."

"I can't do that," Ethan's father frowned. "It's going to make him mad. I have to keep him calm. If I let her go there is no way that you will listen to and do what I say. Let's just call your sister collateral." Mr. Hunter looked in my eyes, boring into them. "Do you understand? He's on the edge as it is. Anything could push him over it. Do you understand?"

Then it dawned on me. It wasn't Mr. Hunter who killed the girls. It was Ethan. Ethan...the guy who kissed me; who told me that I was beautiful. It was Ethan who took me to his secret spot and comforted me about Madison. It was Ethan all along. I felt like such a sucker.

"Fuck you," I screamed, pushing against my restraints. "Fuck you and your fucking son. You are nothing but a fat bastard who is so pathetic that he couldn't keep his own son from killing his wife. You talk the big talk but you're really just a scared little shit who is helping his own son be a serial killer! What, you couldn't stop him so you decided to help him? Or are you going to tell me that you were hoping you could change him and help him? What is it, Mr. Hunter? What excuse did you give yourself about helping your son commit murder?" Something flashed against the light and I saw Ethan advance towards me. His eyes were dull and his voice monotone. It was as if he checked out on everything.

"It's my knife versus your skin. Whose guts are going to spill if you don't tell me what I want to hear?" snarled Ethan. For the first time, I kept my mouth shut and just stared at the boy in front of me. It was Jekyll and Hyde. He wasn't the relaxed, live in the moment boy I first met. Gone was his easy smile and his sense of humor. He looked like a crazed maniac with nothing else to live for and I was scared for me and Rebecca and her baby I wanted that baby to have a chance to be born, to have a good life and I wanted us both to live – Rebecca deserved to be a mother and I wanted to be an aunt.

"Fine, what do you want to hear?" I asked. "I'll tell you anything."

"Did you really think that you could get away with finding out about me? Did you actually think that I wouldn't do anything?"

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It was a rhetorical question and I shrugged. "You really underestimate me, don't you?"

"And if I did?" I challenged. "What are you going to do about it?" Ethan laughed, a harsh laugh.

"What am I going to do about it?" he said. "What am I going to do about it? I'll tell you what the fuck I'm going to do about it. I'm going to show you why you should have **never** underestimated me." The maniacal smile returned to his face. "Since you are oh so interested in me and my father's personal life, I'll let you sit in on our next job." He paused and my eye widened. "Your sister." The words rang in my ears as I struggled even harder against my restraints.

"Don't you fucking touch her," I screamed. "Don't touch one hair on her head or I swear I will find you and kill you."

"Oh Amber, sweet, sweet Amber," Ethan said in a sing, song voice. "You assume that I'm going to let you live your pathetic existence. Again with the underestimation. You're not leaving this room." He didn't have to explain himself for me to understand his meaning. He was going to kill Rebecca and then finish me off. "Dad, why don't you come here and help me out with this. I can't do this on my own." Mr. Hunter moved forward, a bag in his hands. Determination shone in his eyes.

"Ethan," I begged. I never felt as helpless as I did at that very moment. "Ethan please don't do this. Talk some sense into your son, Mr. Hunter." Mr. Hunter threw his head back and let out a loud bark.

"You think that I can talk sense into him? I've tried. I've done everything that I could do to get him help! I kept him locked away as much as I could to keep girls safe but it never worked. He always found a way. I can't stop him. Finally I had to bring in the girls myself just to please him. No one ever misses an escort."

Ethan's father frowned at me as I stared up at him, my eyes filling with tears. He looked away as he passed and, as Mr. Hunter went to give his son the bag, something dropped onto the concrete floor. With my free foot, I stepped on it and slid it closer to me. It was a six inch pocket knife, already opened.

The blade stuck out and I shifted it more so Ethan didn't see it. I looked up at Ethan's father, astonished. He dropped it on

purpose, I was sure of it. *So he really is trying to save me.*

"Bastard," I said, making my first move. "You are nothing but a bastard, Ethan. You made me believe that you cared about me, that you liked me. It was all a lie, wasn't it? You knew you were going to kill me when I met you, didn't you?" Ethan twitched. "You lousy son of a bitch." Like I expected, Ethan whirled around, slapping me so hard that I tipped over in the chair. I fell to the floor, on top of the knife. When Ethan turned his back to me, I slid the blade to my hands and pushed at it until I could feel the blade with my fingertips. Darting my eyes between my sister, Ethan, and Mr. Hunter, I grabbed the handle of the knife and pressed it into the rope.

"Hello there sweet Rebecca," Ethan said. His voice was soft, almost soothing as he talked to my sister. Rebecca lifted her head, her eyes taking everything in over her rounded stomach, and then she screamed. Her scream echoed off the walls and pierced my ears, making me flinch.

"Calm down, calm down." Mr. Hunter touched her hand with his but that only caused Rebecca to scream even louder. "If you don't quiet down I'm going to have to make you quiet down."

I watched the scene in front of me, my eyes not blinking, as I ran the blade up and down against the rope. "Leave me alone," Rebecca pleaded. "Please just leave me and my sister alone. We won't go after you, we won't do anything. Don't hurt my sister. We didn't do anything, we're innocent. Please, please just let us go."

"Can't do that, darling," Ethan drawled. "I'm so sorry. I wish there was something I could do about this." Ethan's father looked back at me and then his head jerked. I followed the motion and turned my head to see my prosthetic leg just out of reach. If I got the rope completely off, I was sure that I could slide across the floor and grab the leg before Ethan could figure it out. I nodded and Mr. Hunter turned back, focusing on Rebecca.

"Now this is going to hurt, Rebecca, but only for a little bit. Then your eyes will close and you won't feel anything else." I worked the knife even faster against the rope and felt the other two pieces break, freeing my wrists. Wasting no time, I scrambled over to my leg and grabbed it. Ethan was only two feet away. I could

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get up and hop just far enough to reach him before I fell.

If I could just give him a swift hit in the head and bring him down then I can help Rebecca. I just need a little distraction. Grabbing the metal pipe that the leg was resting on, I lifted myself up.

"Be brave now, no screaming. If you scream and flail it's just going to get worse, I promise," Mr. Hunter said. He stroked her head as Ethan ran the knife, gently, over her baby. Rebecca whimpered.

"Please," she begged. "Please don't do this." Gripping the prosthetic with more strength than I thought I had, I pounced, waiting to strike.

"I have no choice. Say goodbye, Rebecca."

"Over my dead fucking body," I screamed and launched myself at Ethan. The prosthetic hit Ethan square in the back of the head and he fell to the floor, moaning. I only had seconds to move.

"Put your leg on, I'll unstrap her," Mr. Hunter said suddenly. He squeezed my shoulder before running around the table and releasing my sister. "Go! Hurry!" I locked my leg in place and turned just in time to see Ethan pull himself up.

"You little bitch," he hissed. "You stupid whore." He grabbed at me, pulling me to the floor. "How dare you cross me!" I clawed at him, scratching his face and leaving trails of blood.

"Get off of me!" I cried. "Let go of me!" I managed to pull myself out of his grasp and scrambled across the room. Ethan's father ushered Rebecca through a door, shutting it behind her. He didn't leave, though, and instead came to get me.

"Are you okay?" He asked, his voice soft. He grabbed me under the armpits, lifting me up.

"Yeah," I said shakily. Behind Mr. Hunter, I could see Ethan standing up. He glared at his father, then at me, and I saw him reaching into his back pocket. What he took out made my breath hitch.

"Ethan, don't do it!" Mr. Hunter whirled around and saw what I saw. Ethan was holding a twenty-two caliber gun and it was pointed straight at me.

"Ethan, just stop," Mr. Hunter said. "Just stop. It's over."

"It's not over, dad," Ethan said. "Once we get rid of the two

sluts we'll be home free. Help me! Grab her and kill her, Dad! Do it for me."

"No," Mr. Hunter said. "Not anymore."

"But I'm your son." Ethan waved the gun around. "Do it for me."

"No!" Mr. Hunter said again.

"Then I'll do it myself." The sound of the gun going off was deafening and I closed my eyes, waiting for the bullet to hit me. *This is how it's going to end* I thought. *After everything I've been through, this is it.*

* * *

The bullet never hit me, though, and I opened my eyes to see both Ethan and his father on the floor. Both Ethan and his father were lying in pools of blood, neither of them were moving or breathing.

"Oh God, no," I whispered. "No, no, no." I rushed over to Mr. Hunter and put my fingers to his neck. There was no pulse. I did the same to Ethan but my fingers slipped and I couldn't tell whether he was alive or not. With shaking hands, I took my phone out of my pocket and dialed 9-1-1.

"Emergency operator, how can I help you?" I jumped at the voice. Tearing my eyes from Ethan's face, I focused on the phone call.

"My friend and his father were both shot. They shot each other," I said into the phone. "There's so much blood... everywhere. I know one is dead and the other one might be too."

"Okay, ma'am," the operator said. "Where is your location?" My location? I didn't know where the location was.

"I don't know," I mumbled into the phone.

"Stay on the phone," the operator said. "I'll trace your phone. Someone will be there in a little bit."

Five minutes later sirens from police cars broke the silence. I was still sitting on the floor, next to Ethan, staring at his pale, lifeless face.

How could he do this to me? To Rebecca? My stomach churned. *Rebecca.*

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I rushed towards the door, yanking it open, and saw my sister sitting on the floor. Her arms were around her knees and her head was bowed down. She was crying. Without thinking about my bloodied hands, I wrapped my arms around Rebecca and rocked us both back and forth.

"It's okay," I told her. "We're okay. It's over."

"Are they-"

"Yes," I said, cutting her off. "I'm so sorry, Rebecca. So, so sorry. This is all my fault." Rebecca held her stomach, rubbing her hand over it, murmuring softly. "Are you okay? Is the baby okay? Maybe we should get you to the hospital. Come on, let's get out of here." I pulled my sister up, guiding her through the door, keeping her back towards the dead bodies.

"Jesus Christ," Officer Beasley said, interrupting the two of us. He surveyed the scene. Another officer ushered us towards the outside, keeping us away from the crime scene.

"I told you that I wasn't lying," I said, speaking the first words since the attack. "You should have believed me." A paramedic took Rebecca outside to examine her and her baby. Another tried to lead me out but I pulled my arm away. I stayed in the threshold, my eyes darting everywhere. I was frozen, unable to understand everything. He lied to me, targeted me.

Was anything that happened real to him? Or was this all part of his plan?

"Come on, Amber, come outside." It wasn't the paramedic's voice, but the voice of Bailey. *How did he know what happened? Why is he here? He's mad at me.* He squeezed my shoulder and I looked at him. "Come on, sweet Amber. Let's get out of here." When I didn't move, Bailey kneeled next to me.

"How could I be so stupid, Bailey?" I asked. "How did I not see this all along? I almost got killed. I almost got my sister killed! God, this is so fucked up!"

"I know," he muttered. "But let's get you out of here; away from this." With Bailey's arm around my waist I left the room as the police barged in. "Everything's going to be okay."

* * *

"Hey how are you feeling?" Rebecca asked me as I sat down at the dinner table. It was the same thing she asked me every day since the incident. "Did you sleep okay?"

"Yeah," I said even though we both knew I didn't. I had been waking up every night with nightmares and cold sweats. "But at least you don't have to deal with that anymore. I'm all packed and ready. You can bring me to the bus stop any time you want."

"Actually," Rebecca said as Jacob slid around the table next to her. "I know that you hate Virginia and you might not have had the best experience here but Jacob and I were talking."

"Okay, and?"

"And we're going to be moving into a new place this weekend," Rebecca said slowly. She smiled and her hand rested on her stomach. "Something a bit bigger for the family."

"Like today and tomorrow, this weekend?"

"Yeah," Rebecca said. "It's a three bedroom house with a completely finished basement with its own entrance."

"Okay?" I looked at the two of them. "What are you getting at? Do you want a congratulations or something?" Rebecca winced and her chin trembled. Damn pregnancy hormones. I knew I was being snarky and I frowned. "Sorry," I mumbled. "Do you need help moving in or something? I can help and then go back home."

"Actually we were wondering if you wanted to make the basement your home," Rebecca said.

"Excuse me?" I said, not sure if I heard her right. "The basement? Like the basement of your new house?"

"Yeah," Rebecca said. "I mean I know that you love staying with your mom but I thought... Well, since we're both older and just starting to get to know each other again...I didn't want to lose you again. Especially since you're going to be the baby's Godmother."

"Seriously?" I asked. "You two really want to take me in? Let me live with you?"

"Yes," Jacob said. "We've been talking about it ever since you saved Rebecca's life."

"We talked to your mom and dad...they both think it's a good idea too," Rebecca added.

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"But I'm trouble," I argued. "Rebecca, you said it yourself that I'm trouble and more than you can handle. Why would you want me to stay here?"

"Because I love you and you're my sister," Rebecca said. "And I think you deserve some sort of real family, something stable. You earned that."

"So what do you think?" Jacob said.

"What about you two getting married? I don't want to be the problem in your new marriage."

"That's why we thought we could give you the basement. You'll have your space and we'll have ours. That way we won't be stepping on each other's feet." I looked at my sister and Jacob trying to determine if they were just screwing around with me. Both of them were smiling and looking at me expectantly. "So?"

"Okay."

"Okay?" Rebecca repeated. "Really? You mean it?"

"Yeah," I said. "It's better than going back home." It would be difficult to tell Bailey the news but I liked the idea. Rebecca squeezed Jacob's hand as she squealed like a child.

"Good because I already made you an appointment at the DMV. Somebody has earned their license, don't you think?"

"Yes!" I cried. "Yes! Yes! Yes!" I ran around the counter and plowed myself into my sister and Jacob. "Thank you, thank you, thank you!"

"You're welcome," Rebecca said with a laugh. "Now pack up the car. We have a house to move in to!"

Also by Melissa Wolff

Sharpie Messages: The Writing on the Wall

Fated

On the Shattered Path



A graduate of C.W. Post, Melissa Wolff is the author of *Sharpie Messages: The Writing on the Wall*, *Fated*, and *On the Shattered Path*. She has been reading romance books since she was ten and has been writing them since she was fifteen. She is currently working on the sequel to *Three Little Lies*. She lives on Long Island with her family and plans to travel to Europe one day. For now, Melissa is content with taking people from her actual life and weaving them into her own stories.

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