



Whisper

SHORT STORIES BY
CHARLOTTE KANE

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By

Charlotte L. R. Kane



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LOST AND FOUND

The rain drops seeped through his already sodden clothes, burning as they bounced off his skin leaving red marks in their place. The figure continued walking, his feet squishing against the sidewalk, his clothes sticking to him and feeling heavy against his skin. A car beeped as it drove past him, forcing him to stumble and fall onto the road. He looked in the direction of where the car had come from before slowly getting back up to his feet. He didn't care, nothing mattered anymore. She had left him. Taken everything that he had – his life, his soul, his being. She had packed up and moved on with her life, saying that he was worthless, that he wasn't able to look after her and their daughter as he couldn't find a job. It was all true.

It wasn't that he couldn't find a job, it was the fact that he wouldn't find a job. He had been laid off from his managerial job just over a year ago and his confidence had been shot, causing him to spend his time in the pub and in front of the television. His wife, Joanna, had finally reached breaking point. She had had enough of his lounging around, of not even looking for a new job and wasting what little money they had on alcohol. So she packed up her and her daughters' bags and went to stay with her mother. She told Henry that he could see their daughter once he had gotten his act together and cleaned himself up.

It had been a month since Joanna had left with their daughter Lucy, three, and Henry was not coping well. He wore clothes that looked like they belonged in the trash, he hadn't shaved in God knows how long and he couldn't remember the last time he had eaten a proper meal. He had tried contacting Joanna but she wouldn't answer his calls and all of his letters were returned. He was a ghost of a man now. The Henry that was once loved and respected was now a good for nothing drunk, who spent all his days in the bar and would stagger home at night when the barman would kick him out.

He stopped outside the gate and looked up at the house where Joanna and Lucy were staying. The living room light was on along with a small dim light in the front bedroom. Henry staggered through the gate and knocked loudly on the front door. He heard a scuttle from inside the house and the front door opened.

“Henry, what the hell are you doing here?” Asked Joanna's mother, Susan. She was holding a cup of coffee in her hand and a look of annoyance was on her face.

“I just want to speak to Joanna.” he leaned against the wall to stop himself from falling over. It was obvious he had been drinking, the smell was rancid on his clothes and there was a slight slur to his speech.

“She made it clear that she doesn’t want anything to do with you, until you have cleaned up your act which clearly you haven’t! Now leave!” she went to close the door but he stepped up and placed his hand in the way.

“Please. Let me just speak to her. Please!”

“What’s going on? Who is it?” He heard a voice from upstairs. A figure appeared and started to descend the stairs. It was Joanna. She saw Henry at the door and told her mother to go and sit back down. She would deal with him.

“What are you doing here? I told you to stay away.” She folded her arms and looked at the state he was in. He was wearing a t-shirt that had holes under the arms, his jeans looked like they hadn’t been washed in weeks and his face was dirty. She could also smell alcohol on his breath. A lot of alcohol.

“Look, I just wanna talk to you. I need you Jo, please come back.” He staggered slightly and had to hold onto the wall to stop himself from falling.

“Look at you, you’re pathetic! Did you think that you could just come over here, drunk no less, and expect me to take you in my arms and tell you that everything was okay and move back in with you?” There was hostility in her voice and he didn’t blame her. She was right. Did he really think that she would take him back, especially in his current state?

“Jo please” he took another step forward but she put her hand on his chest to stop him, her nose wrinkled from the stench that was emanating from him.

“Henry just go please. I can’t have Lucy seeing you like this. I don’t want to see you like this. So please just go and stay away” She started to close the door but Henry interrupted.

“I still love you” Joanna felt her heart skip a beat, the way it did before things had turned bad. She still had feelings for him, they were married after all but she just couldn’t live with him when things were this way. She couldn’t keep supporting his drinking habits especially not when she had her little girl to think about. She couldn’t allow this person to be in her life – not until he could prove himself as a father once again.

“And I still love you. But I cannot keep doing this. Whilst you put the drink before me and Lucy I cannot have you in our lives. I’m sorry but you really should go” she placed a soft kiss on his cheek and closed the door.

Henry stumbled down the steps and made his way across the road. What had happened to him? Why did he let himself get into this state? It had hit him hard when he had lost his job, yes, but he never thought he would have turned to alcohol like he had. He had lost everything – his wife, his daughter, his dignity. He had nothing left. He was worthless.

He leaned against a wall and let out a sigh. He wanted to end it. To take away all the pain, to stop the suffering. His daughter would be better off without him. To not have him in her life. She deserved a father who could look after her, provide for her and to be there for her when she needed him. Not a father who was drunk and would not be able to support her or a father who would rather put a bottle of Whiskey or Brandy over spending time with her.

Yes. Ending it would be the best solution, but how would he do it? He remembered that there was a bridge over a river up the road, he could jump. They would find his body the next day but it would be too late. He got up and started to make his way in the direction of the bridge, his mind a jumble of thoughts and memories.

He remembered the first time he had met his wife. They were in a supermarket and Joanna was struggling to reach something from one of the shelves so Henry grabbed the item for her. The two shared a smile and after a couple of minutes of her thanking him and asking him his name, she had given him her phone number. He had called her as soon as he got home and the two had gone for a date that night.

Since then they had become inseparable and it wasn’t long before he had proposed and she said yes. They had a small wedding. They didn’t want anything extravagant - just a few friends and family and a couple of drinks. As long as they had each other that was all they cared about. Their honeymoon was cut short when Joanna collapsed during one of their day trips. They soon discovered that she was three months pregnant and had a slight heart condition that caused her to have a murmur and so she was told to take things slowly.

Henry did everything he could for Joanna while she was pregnant. He cooked, he cleaned, he wouldn’t let her lift a finger. Joanna was fine during the pregnancy but

doctors were constantly monitoring her and the baby to make sure that no other complications were arising.

On May 26th, Lucy came into the world weighing 7lbs 8oz. Henry had never felt happier. His family was finally complete and he was looking forward to settling into family life. Then things had taken a turn for the worst when he was laid off from work due to the recession, but instead of looking for another job, he had turned to alcohol to take away the worries and before he knew it, he had become addicted and found himself needing a drink when he woke up so that he could function.

He started using their savings for alcohol and by the time Joanna had found out he was £2,000 in debt. She had taken their daughter and moved in with her mother telling Henry that he would only be allowed to see his daughter when he had stopped the drinking and got himself a job. Although for most people that would have been a wake up call, Henry had sunk even further into depression and he was now in £8,500 debt.

He reached the bridge and looked over the side. He could hear the water rushing below the rain having increased the level by a couple of inches. He climbed up onto the ledge and looked down. Could he really do this? Did he want to leave his daughter without a dad? Even if he was a bad one? Joanna still loved him, she had admitted it so there was some hope there. If only he could sort his life out, he could have the happiness back. He could have his wife and child in his arms.

He could feel his body shaking as he stood on the ledge, he knew that he should climb back off but he also knew that if he moved he was more than likely going to slip and fall into the river. He heard the screeching of tires behind him and heard his name being shouted. He turned around and saw in the headlights of the car, Joanna running towards him.

“What are you doing? Please don’t do this” she held out her hand to him. The rain started up again, bouncing heavily onto the road. Henry took her hand and carefully climbed down from the ledge and onto the path. Joanna hugged him then slapped him as she pulled away. “What the hell were you thinking?” There was a mixture of anger and love in the way she spoke.

“I just wanted everything to be okay. I thought that maybe you and Lucy would be better off without me. That she deserved a father who could be there for her, who could provide for her. But then I realised that wasn’t the right option”

“Lucy loves you Henry, we both do. You just got lost along the way. I want to help you. Seeing you tonight made me realise how much I do still love you and how much I’ve really missed you. I do not want Lucy to be raised without a father. You are her father Henry and you are the only person I want to be her father. But you must promise me, and her, that you will come off the alcohol. You need to make us a priority from now on. Not the bottle.”

Henry could feel tears beginning to form and he bit them back. He closed his eyes and took a deep breath. He opened his eyes slowly, wondering if this was all a dream and whether or not Joanna would still be standing in front of him or not, willing to take him back. When he opened his eyes she was still there, shaking slightly from the rain. He hugged her, happy to feel her in his arms again “I promise”

Joanna leaned against his chest and lifted her head to look at him “There is a job going in Morrison’s. I know it’s not the type of job you want but you need to start paying off your debt. You will need to start providing for your family”

“I know and I’ll look into that job. At the moment, anything that gets Lucy and you back into my life I am willing to do. I don’t want to lose you two again, I couldn’t cope. I was lost without you. You two are my life. I just wish I had realised that sooner.”

Joanna leant forward and gave Henry a small kiss on his lips “We will help you find your way again. Now lets go home and get you cleaned up” Henry nodded, wrapped his arm around Joanna’s shoulder and walked to the car, ready to start a new life with the love of his life and their daughter.

TRAIN STATION

The familiar noises could be heard. The clunking of metal, the whistling of the conductors, the chatter, the voices through the speakers warning you to keep your luggage with you and that there is to be no smoking on the platforms. I looked around and couldn't help but smile. There were so many memories being here as I was growing up, each one still clear as day in my mind. It had changed over the years, dramatically, but it was still the same place that I knew and loved. I had so many memories from this train station from over the years.

1936, Aged 5

It was my first time to the train station. My mother told me that we were going to a place called London for a holiday. I asked her how we were getting there and she told me we were going on the train. Excited, I started looking at books about trains and seeing how we would be travelling. I was so excited, the pictures looked amazing to me. Long carriages of steel that could travel at speeds I didn't even believe existed. I remember asking my mother everyday if we were leaving that day and everyday I would get told that I would have to wait a few more days. Until the day finally came. I awoke early, unable to contain my excitement any longer. I sat staring at the pictures I had put onto my wall thinking that today is the day that I would finally be able to go on a train. Making sure that I had everything packed mother and I collected our bags, left the house and made our way to the station.

I didn't want to eat breakfast but mother told me I had to so I rushed it causing me to nearly choke and have hiccups. In the taxi on the way there I could barely sit still. I was fidgeting and bouncing in my seat. My mother smiled and watched the scenery as it passed us. After what seemed a lifetime we finally arrived at the station. I was amazed at the view in front of me. The building was beautiful - large and made of red brick with sculptures of flowers guarding the building. Getting out of the taxi I practically ran inside the building and mother had to stop me. She took my hand and led me onto the platform. For a five year old that was visiting a train station for the first time the place was like heaven. There were trains of all kinds scattered around the station waiting for their turn to leave and travel to their destination.

Mother and I scuttled across the platforms looking for our train. "This is ours!" Mother smiled at me. I looked up at the metal giant that was in front of us. It

was more impressive than any of the books had made out and I couldn't wait until we were able to get aboard. I tugged on my mother's arm indicating that I wanted - no needed to get on the train. "Not yet Thomas" mother said pulling me closer to her so that I wouldn't get lost in the crowds "It doesn't leave for another 20 minutes. Why don't we go get a drink and a sandwich for the journey" I nodded and followed mother to the small cafe that was situated at the back of the station. Inside the smell of freshly made coffee filled my nostrils and was slightly overpowering. We made for the shelves where the sandwiches and drinks were kept. Mother asked me what I wanted and reaching over my small hands picked up a bottle of orange juice. "Would you like something to eat?" I nodded and looked at what they had to offer. I finally decided on a cheese and pickle sandwich and mother chose apple juice and a cheese salad sandwich. We made our way to the counter and mother paid and placed the items into her handbag.

Taking my hand she took me back to platform four and I noticed that they were allowing people onto the train. "We can go on" I squealed, the excitement evident in my voice. Mother grabbed our suitcases and stepped onto the train. I followed behind, forcing myself to breathe otherwise I would have held my breath until we got to our seats. As we made our way to our seats I looked around and took in everything. The red material covering the seats making them look, I thought, elegant. Mother went to the end of the carriage and placed our bags into the storage holder and we chose our seats and sat down.

I made myself comfortable and looked out of the window. "I hope it leaves soon" I said. My mother patted my leg and smiled "It will be". After what seemed a lifetime I heard the moaning and groaning of the train as it started to move. This was it. I watched as the scenery passed us by, the countryside, the villages, all zoomed by as we made our way to London. London was great, but I will always remember it because it was my first time on a train, and the excitement I felt.

I will always remember my first time on a train, it will always be stuck in my mind. Something so small as going on a train had excited me so much back then and once aboard I loved the feeling of the train bumping along the track, watching the scenery blur and now 65 years on I still loved them. I still got a shiver down my spine when I stepped onto the platform. I had been here over the years, through all the

changes that the station had gone through. The construction work, the demolition – I had experienced it all.

1942, Aged 12

I couldn't believe what I had just read in the paper. The train station is due to be demolished and rebuilt, I discussed this with my mother. She explained that they were rebuilding it because it was very old and needed to be improved. But I stood there in horror. How could they destroy the one place that had given me so much happiness over the years? I didn't want it to be rebuilt, I liked the building as it stood now. I didn't want to think about them destroying everything inside. It was as if my memories were going to be destroyed, to be taken away from me.

I told mother that I was going to the train station so that I could spend one last day there before they knocked it down. Mother nodded and told me that she would make me some sandwiches. She understood the importance of the station to me. Ever since my first encounter there seven years ago, we had travelled on the train at least once a year to different places. It had significance to me. It meant that we were going away, leaving behind the place where I grew up for a few days.

I packed my school bag with four sandwiches, two bottles of water, a book and the old camera that I had been given for my tenth birthday. I searched for another film that I knew that I had but I could not find it. Mother remembered I had left it in the kitchen cupboard and went and got it for me. Carefully, I slid the film into the camera and placed it into my bag. Mother told me to be careful and to make sure that I didn't talk to anyone whilst I was there unless I knew them. I told her I knew what to do and that I wouldn't be late home for dinner. Mother kissed my cheek and watched me as I placed my bag onto my shoulders, grabbed my bicycle and made my way to the station.

I spent six hours there. I sat on one of the benches and just stared at the trains as they came in and out. Watched as people boarded and unboarded them, laughing and smiling. I couldn't understand how they could be so happy, did they not know that the station was going to be ripped down? I took as many pictures as I my film could hold. I wanted to remember it how it was, the style, the luxury of it. I wanted the memories to be preserved.

I finally went home. Mother was cooking dinner – turkey, my favourite – and asked me did I get the closure that I needed, I told her I had and went to my bedroom,

not feeling particularly hungry that night. I was going to get my pictures developed the following day and purchase a scrap book to put the photos into. I wanted to remember the station as it was when I first went there – the amazement, the bewilderment, the excitement. I wanted to make sure that I could feel that again whenever I looked at the pictures.

I still have that scrapbook. It is in my bedside drawer and I look at it often, remembering how the station used to look. When it was rebuilt I admit that I found it impressive but it didn't have the feeling that the old building had. There was a feeling that surrounded the place. A feeling that everything was new, which it was. It took a while for me to adjust to the new station, the new smells, the layout, but eventually I came to love it. It has changed dramatically since then, it has been rebuilt to meet the needs of the 21st Century. Electronic boards listing the trains, times and delays. Vending machines selling a variety of confectionary including chocolate, sweets and crisps. A coffee shop is still located in the corner of the station like previously but instead sells a selection of hot and cold food and about seventy types of coffee. Not to mention the fact that the station has doubled in size and now has over ten platforms whereas it previously only had four.

I look up as a train arrives on the platform and hear the chatter and laughter as people unboard the train and leave the platform. A small boy runs around his parents, his voice excited talking about the holiday that they had just come back from. His mother smiles and his father picks him up in one arm, the other carrying a large holdall. A young woman who must have been around nineteen or twenty, ran up the platform and threw her arms around a young mans neck. After a couple of seconds, they pull back, look into each other's eyes, and then embrace again. Hand in hand they leave the station. I wonder how many couples had been in the station, how many relationships had formed and been broken up on these platforms.

I myself had found love on this very platform at which I sat. I was seventeen years old and was waiting for the train to London to arrive when a girl came up to me and asked if she could sit next to me. That simple conversation led to fifty years together and forty six years being happily married.

1948, Aged 17

I placed my suitcase beside the bench and sat down with a sigh. I never remembered needing this amount of luggage when I was younger. I looked at my watch, I still had forty minutes until my train arrived. I was off to London to visit my Aunt for my eighteenth birthday, which was in five days. My mother decided that I should spend some more time with my family members and so arranged for me to spend my birthday with my Aunt and my cousins. I didn't mind I got on well with them and my Cousins were only four and seven years younger than me so they looked up to me.

I looked around the station and smiled at the memory of the fuss I had made five years earlier when the station was being demolished. I had become rather distraught at the building being torn down and rebuilt because I believed that the memories I had of being there would be removed but mother had explained to me that memories were in my mind and no matter what happened to the building I would always have those memories.

"Excuse me, do you mind if I take this seat?" I looked up to see a beautiful girl standing in front of me. She had long brunette hair and green eyes that were shining. I smiled and nodded "Not at all, feel free." I moved over slightly to make room for her. She placed her bag down underneath the seat and looked over at me.

"I'm Catherine". She looked so innocent, so delicate. It was as if she was a newly picked flower that needed to be cared for in order for it to grow. "Thomas" I replied "Where are you travelling to?" I noticed that she didn't have a particularly large bag so I didn't expect that she would be travelling very far.

"London" She must've noticed the look of surprise on my face because she laughed "I'm staying with my father so I have clothes there. This is just some food and a book for the journey" Now it made sense. "He lives there with his wife and I go every few months to stay for a week, so I have my clothes and books down there. Makes it easier than dragging them back and forth all of the time" I nodded. That did make sense. "So what about you? Going to London as well?"

"Yeah. It's my eighteenth birthday next week so I'm going to spend it with my Aunt and cousins"

"That's nice. Happy Birthday for next week. I turned 19 two weeks ago." She smiled and I felt my heart skip a beat. It was a beautiful smile, one that lit up the room.

"Thank you and happy belated birthday. Look our train still has twenty five minutes till it arrives do you want to go grab a drink?" I leaned over and grabbed my

bag and she did the same and nodded. "I'd like that". We made our way to the café and I asked her to sit down whilst I got the drinks. She wanted tea, I wanted coffee. I got the drinks and took them to the small table that she had selected in the corner of the room.

"Thanks" She picked up her cup and took a small sip of the tea. I smiled, she smiled back. I could feel that there was something between us and I was hoping that we would get to spend the journey together. We chatted over the drinks, about ourselves, where we went to school. She was a year and three weeks older than me and had attended an all girls school, which is why I hadn't seen her around before. I was sure I would have recognised her if she was in my school.

We heard the familiar whistle signalling that the train was ready to leave. Finishing our drinks we grabbed our bags and ran to the train. Whilst on board, we found empty seats together instead of sitting in our assigned seats. We spent the entire journey talking and soon became a couple.

Four years after that meeting I proposed to Catherine. She said yes and we spent forty-six years of happily married until cancer took her away from me. She died just after her sixty ninth birthday and a few days before my sixty-eight. We had planned to go to the Lake District as a joint celebration of our relationship. She was diagnosed with breast cancer at sixty-six and was told that she would be lucky to see her sixty seventh birthday but she fought the odds and survived until she was sixty nine. That was two years ago today and I'm sitting on the bench I got placed in her memory and am remembering about all the good times, and the bad that we had.

I turn seventy in three days and am thinking about the time fifty-two years ago when I looked up to see a beautiful young girl standing in front of me with a smile that could light up the room. So Catherine my love, forgive me for not being able to help you more or to ease the pain, but I promise that soon I will join you and we can continue living our lives together – as we were meant to.

I watch as the train leaves the station and look around with a small sigh. I have watched this station change through the decades for over sixty years, lived through many moments that will always be etched on my mind and found love. Yes, this station will always mean a lot to me, will always be where my best memories are but it is time to say goodbye. I get up and slowly walk out of the building, taking in everything from the large pillars that hold up the building to the litter that is scattered

over the floor, each item a part of what makes it what it is. Outside I turn around and look up – it is magnificent, but not as good as it has been when I stood in this spot sixty five and a half years ago. Yes it has changed, but then again so have I but I will always remember being that five year old boy who became amazed when I visited the train station for the first time, and the seventeen year old teenager that had found love.

Those are the moments that I would cherish forever.

NEW YEAR

Ten minutes. That was how long was left until 2010 came. Carol Jenkins sat on her couch staring at the television. She didn't care that 2010 was coming. She didn't care that it was New Year's. She didn't care that everybody else was outside celebrating and welcoming to New Year in. She was happy on her own. That was what she told the people who had invited her to their party anyway. Truth was, she wasn't happy. She did care that she was on her own but she wasn't going to show that to anyone. She wouldn't allow them to see that it mattered to her that she would not be able to see the New Year in with anyone.

She kept her focus on the television although she didn't know what she was watching. She was just staring at the screen not taking any notice of what was playing and didn't hear what was being said. Her mind kept thinking about *him*. The one she wished she could be with on this chilly night, his arms wrapped around her waist gently as they smiled and laughed with their friends at their parties. To lean in and kiss her when the clock struck twelve, to sing along badly to Auld Lang Syne. But that wasn't to happen. *He* wasn't interested in someone like her. Why would he be? She was 32, unemployed and a little on the chubby side. Of course he wouldn't be interested in her, not when he could have anyone that he wanted.

No, she was meant to be alone. She couldn't remember the last time she had a date. Her mind reeled back and she remembered it was over two years ago. The relationship only lasted a couple of months though before he decided that it wasn't working. Since then she hadn't even gotten a guys number. She had accepted it. She had accepted that she wouldn't be loved again. That she would always be alone. That was how she thought so that was how she acted. She pretended she was happy being single but of course she wasn't. She wanted a man who would be there beside her when she woke up, be there when she went to bed, to hold her when it was cold. But for her, it was never going to happen. She would go to bed alone, she would wake up alone and she would have to rely on her duvet to keep her warm.

Five minutes till midnight. She let out a small sigh. She could hear people outside giggling and shouting, getting ready to bring the New Year in, whilst she would be stuck inside on her own. Again. As she had been for the last five New Year's Eves. She turned up the television to help drown out the noise outside. She didn't want to hear people celebrating with their friends, family and loved ones when

she couldn't. *'Of course you could'* she told herself *'You just decided that you didn't want to join them. It is your own fault'*.

Four minutes. She decided to finally concentrate on what was playing on the television. It was an old movie, probably from the 1980s. She tried to understand what the movie was about but she couldn't so she turned the TV off and got up, ready to go to bed. She didn't want to see the New Year in. 2010 wasn't going to be any better, she was adamant about that. Every year she hoped that the New Year would be better than the last and every year she would be disappointed when it was just as bad, or worse, than the previous year.

Three minutes. She started to make her way up the stairs when she heard a faint knock at the door. She turned round and wondered who could be knocking on her door at 11:55pm. She decided to ignore it and continued to make her way upstairs. Knock Knock Knock. The knocking became louder and she forced herself back downstairs. It was probably one of the neighbours trying to get her to come out and see 2010 in. She opened the door ready to tell them that she was on her way to bed because she wasn't feeling well when she stopped short at who stood there.

It was *him*. He was actually standing at her door. He still looked as attractive as ever. Dark brown shaggy hair that never seemed to go flat and deep blue eyes that she felt she could spend hours staring into.

"Hi Carol" he smiled. Oh that smile. It made her feel weak at the knees. She gave a weak smile back.

"Hi Mark" her voice croaked. She held onto the door for support as she could feel her legs beginning to go weak. Was he really standing here on her doorstep?

"How come you're not out celebrating with us? It's a good night." He was still smiling at her and he was wrapping his arms around his coat trying to trap any heat there was inside.

"I-I'm not feeling well. I was on my way to bed actually" she swallowed hard, trying to breathe as her heart beat a hundred miles an hour. She needed to sit down before her knees collapsed underneath her.

Two minutes. "Well that's a shame" he took a step closer to her. "I was just thinking how nice it would be to have you around, to bring in the New Year with"

"You were?" she couldn't believe what she was hearing. Mark, the guy she had been dreaming about for months, wanted to bring in the New Year with *her? Her?* Of all people.

“Of course” he was now standing so close she could feel his warmth breath on her face. She gulped and grabbed harder onto the door frame.

One minute. “There’s not long to go now you know.” All Carol could do was shake her head as she heard people outside counting down. They stared at each other for a few seconds, their eyes locked, their mouths centimetres apart.

“Ten, Nine, Eight..” She could hear the final countdown. Mark leaned in and pressed his lips against hers gently. It took her a few milliseconds to understand what was going on and kissed him back. His hand found the back of her neck and he used it to pull her closer to him. They didn’t hear the rest of the countdown. They didn’t hear the cheers and shouts of people as they entered 2010. They didn’t hear the fireworks going off. After a couple of minutes they pulled apart and looked at each other.

“Happy New Year Carol” Mark smiled. It certainly was.

FOREVER GONE

I watched my boyfriend's lifeless body through the floods of tears that were streaming down my face, the taste of salt lingering at the back of my throat. I couldn't believe that this had happened. I couldn't believe that he had actually gone through with it. Why did he have to go and do something stupid like that? Ben, my Ben was stuck in hospital, attached to machines that dripped and beeped, fighting for his life. I didn't want to believe that this was happening. I was dreaming. This was all just a bad dream and within the next few minutes I would wake up next to Ben with his arms wrapped around me tightly. I took another quick look over at the hospital bed and realised that this wasn't a dream. I wasn't going to be waking up. I wasn't going to be in Ben's arms. Ben really was in hospital, connected to machines fighting for his life, his body pale and lifeless.

I cried hard and I didn't care who heard me. Let them hear me, my life was over anyway. "Ben!" I cried out. I just wanted him to wake up. I needed him. I couldn't imagine living my life without him. He had been my everything for the past three years. He was the person that I had planned to spend the rest of my life with – the person I wanted to grow old with.

Ben was my first proper relationship. My first proper boyfriend. I gave everything to Ben. I gave myself to him. I lost my virginity to him and he lost his to me. We were only 19 and had met when he had transferred to Kingsley High at the start of the sophomore year. We were both 15 (our birthdays just weeks apart) and there had been an instant click between us but it was only on my 16th birthday – the start of June – that Ben admitted that he had feelings for me. Luckily, I had felt the same way about him and we had become inseparable. We had even chosen the same College to attend (John Hopkins) and were currently in summer break from the first year. We had come home to see our friends and family and I didn't think that anything was wrong. But now I was here, helpless, whilst my boyfriend fought for his life.

I heard him moan softly and I looked at him "Sarah?" he said quietly. His voice was barely a whisper and I could hear him struggling to form the words. My heart tugged as I just wanted to make him better but I knew I couldn't. Even the doctors didn't think there was much they would be able to do for him.

"Ben?" I held his hand tightly. "Ben baby. Can you hear me?" I wiped away the tears that had started to re-form in my eyes and climbed onto the bed next to him "Ben please answer me" I needed him to reply. I wouldn't let him leave me. He was

my whole life. I wasn't about to let him slip through my fingers so easily. I couldn't. We had been through too much together for me to just give up on him.

"Sa-Sarah?" he coughed. I looked at him and saw that he was opening his eyes slowly. I smiled weakly and I felt my heart miss a beat when I heard him calling out my name. I hugged him softly and I could feel his weak body against mine. It felt so good to have him in my arms again even if there wasn't much of him to hold at the moment.

"Yeah baby I'm here" I kissed his forehead gently and stroked his cheek. He was in really bad shape. He was pale, completely drained of any colour and he had cuts and bruises covering his body. He had also lost a large amount of blood during the accident. I still couldn't believe that he had driven his car into a tree. I knew why he had done it, he knew that I knew and that's why he had done it. But that hadn't made things easier. We could have worked through it, we could have solved things. He didn't have to drive into that tree. Now I was going to lose him, lose the one person in my life that had been a constant.

I had gone to his house to surprise him one night whilst his parents were away and had caught him and a girl from school having sex. I couldn't even remember her name but I knew she had been in the year above me. She had been a cheerleader or something, I wasn't really into sports or the cliques at school. I stormed out of the house, the tears stinging the backs of my eyes. I couldn't believe that he had done this. We had just celebrated our third anniversary and were making plans for his 19th birthday and now he had gone and done this to me. Over the next few days Ben constantly called and text but they were all left unanswered. I didn't want to hear an explanation, didn't want to know why he would cheat on me. I didn't want to know if I was the reason he had cheated. Was I too boring for him now? Could I not provide him with the things that he needed anymore?

He waited outside my house for a few days, hoping that I would feel sorry for him and let him explain but I couldn't. Thinking about it made me feel sick again so I just ignored him. I needed time to think before I could even contemplate allowing myself to talk to him. After a week he had given up and the texts and the calls had stopped. The inevitable happened and I started to miss him – he wasn't there when I went to sleep, he wasn't there when I woke up but I also knew that I couldn't give in so easily. He had hurt me and he wouldn't be able to just walk straight back into my life and pretend that nothing had happened.

I came home from the mall one day, my mates had tried to cheer me up by taking me shopping but it wasn't working. When I got there I found an envelope pushed through the mailbox. I recognised the writing on the front. Ben. Taking the letter upstairs, I climbed onto my bed and opened it, wondering what he would have to say for himself.

Dear Sarah,

We both know what happened the other night when you came to mine so I'm not going to bother making excuses for it. Yes I slept with Lisa but I swear that was the first time that had happened. I don't even know why it happened. It just did. I didn't mean to hurt you Sarah, I truly didn't but I know that I have. I'm not even going to ask to be forgiven because I know that you wont. Not now. I screwed up Sarah. I know that you need to be alone and that is why you have been ignoring me but I cannot cope. I hate not being around you, to not hear your voice and I know that it is my fault I do not have you in my life. I am really sorry babe. I never wanted to hurt you, you know I didn't. You are everything to me, and I never want anyone else but I have messed up that chance.

Just remember Sarah baby, that in life and in death I will always love you and I will always be watching over you. Please find someone else babe, be happy and just remember that you were my first and only love and nothing could have changed that.

Love Ben

Xxxx

The thoughts that were running through my mind as I read the letter were uncountable. I re-read the letter and realised what he meant. I didn't want to allow myself to think it but I couldn't help it. Would he really do something so stupid? Reading the letter one last time I realised that he would – he was going to hurt himself so he could stop hurting me. I felt a lump in my throat and I grabbed my jacket and left the house as fast as I could. I jumped into my car and sped off in the direction of Ben's.

I called his cellphone but didn't get an answer and his parents weren't picking up either. My mind kept racing. I couldn't believe he would do that. I needed to stop him, needed to tell him that I could forgive him, that we could forget about it and move on. I needed him in my life.

However on the way there I noticed that Ben's car had been smashed into a tree. I got out of my car to see what had happened. 'Please don't let Ben have been in there, please' but my prayers were unanswered and my worst nightmare had come true when I saw Ben being lifted into an ambulance. I sped after the ambulance to get to the hospital not wanting to think about what would happen to him.

I prayed that he would be ok but there was a part of me that knew an accident that bad wasn't going to leave the person in a good state. I just hoped that the doctors would be able to do something. That all he would need would be an operation and some bed rest and then he would come back to me. Back to the life we planned and to live together.

"Sarah, I'm so sorry" he whispered. It made my heart bleed seeing him like this. Seeing that he wanted to cry just made me cry harder. I couldn't bear to see my baby in pain. All thoughts of him cheating were pushed to the back of my mind and all I wanted was for him to get better and coming back home.

Maybe if we had talked about that night then maybe this wouldn't have happened. What if I had shouted at him and made him stay. What if I hadn't gone over that night? All these 'What Ifs' were running through my mind? I knew they didn't really matter at the moment but they were the only things that were helping me to stay strong for Ben.

"Shhh Ben" I placed a finger upon his lips. They were so cold that it sent a shiver down my spine and I shuddered slightly "Save your energy you're too weak" Ben shook his head. I didn't see the point in arguing. He was strong minded and that was one of the qualities that I loved about him. I knew that I wouldn't win even with him in this state.

"I'm so sorry. I didn't mean to hurt you Sarah. I'm so so sorry"

"Ben it doesn't matter now. I forgive you"

"Yes it does Sarah. I hurt you and I deserve everything that happened to me" I couldn't believe what I was hearing. He didn't deserve it. Yeah he had hurt me but killing himself wasn't the answer. It never was. Didn't he realised he was hurting me more by leaving me? That taking his own life was going to hurt me in more ways than him cheating? I would rather live a life knowing he had slept with someone else than live a life without him in it at all.

"Ben baby please don't say that. I know that you're sorry and I forgive you. Please don't die Ben. Please don't die. I need you. I love you"

"I love you too Sarah" I replied as I leaned in and kissed him gently on the lips. He kissed back weakly and placed a hand upon my knee. But I soon felt him drift away as his hand fell from my knee and he slipped away from the kiss. His eyes began to close and I held onto his hand tightly "Please don't go Ben, please" the last words that Ben ever spoke were "Sarah" before he drifted away from me forever.

" BEEEEEEEEEEEEEP" "

I was sure I had no more tears left but hearing that beep made more appear and roll heavily down my cheeks. I took his hand and held his lifeless body in my arms "Please come back to me Ben, please. I can't live without you. I need you. Please Ben, please come back" I rocked back and fourth gently. I never wanted to leave because I knew that when I left this room I would have to start a new life. A life without Ben. And a life without Ben is a life not worth living. I knew he would want me to move on, I was sure he wouldn't want me to mourn him. I was sure it wasn't going to be easy.

"BEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEP"

God I hate that machine. I know he's dead you don't have to keep bloody reminding me of the fact. I kissed the top of his head and whispered

"I love you Ben. I never told you how much but I loved you so much. I'll see you again some day baby. I know I will. I know that you will be waiting for me when it's my time and we will be reunited"

I climbed off the bed and took one more look at his body. "I love you Ben" I whispered "Forever" I went and switched off the machine.

This was the end. Ben, my Ben was gone.

Gone Forever.

BACK FOR GOOD

Part 1

Adam sat down on his bed with a sigh. In his hand he held a picture of Hannah Smith. The love of his life. Or was. He had gone and messed it all up. He had lost the one person that had meant the world to him and was more important than sports. But now there was no Hannah. There was no one for him to hold, no one for him to kiss, no one for him to say "I love you" to and he hated it. He hated himself for doing it. He didn't mean it. It was just a simple kiss that meant nothing but to Hannah it meant everything.

He hadn't meant to kiss Taylor. It just happened. There was no passion, no love in it. It was just a kiss. But he knew that when Hannah caught them she wouldn't be able to forgive him. She could never forgive him for breaking her heart. For making her cry herself to sleep every night. For making her overdose. Adam was distraught when he learnt that Hannah had taken an overdose of sleeping pills. Luckily she was okay and Adam was able to rest a little. But Hannah couldn't. She would never understand why he had done it and he could never explain why he had done it because he couldn't understand it himself.

He had tried to explain her. To explain that it was only a kiss that meant nothing. A kiss that wasn't meant to happen. That Taylor had leaned in to kiss him first and although he shouldn't have kissed back he found himself doing so. But Hannah wouldn't listen, she refused to believe anything he said. How could she? He had broken her heart after promising never to hurt her. How was she supposed to forgive him after that? Adam sighed and got up. He placed the picture back on his desk sat back on his bed.

He was nothing without her. Sports, the one thing that had defined him since freshman year wasn't even enough to fix him. He was in his final year of high school, having just turned 17, and was in for a chance of gaining a scholarship to Boston University but he had given up since Hannah had left. He was ruining his chance of getting into a college and for once he didn't care.

He needed her back. He needed her to yell at him for not doing his homework, he needed her to try and comb his hair out before they went to class, he needed her there to hold and cherish and make him happy. Adam was lonely and unhappy without Hannah. He never realised how much he cherished her until she had gone. He just wished that she would come back but he knew it was going to take a lot for her to forgive him. To make her realise that she is the only one that he wants – that no one else will ever matter. Not even Taylor.

Part 2

Hannah laid on her bed crying. She couldn't believe that Adam would do that to her. She couldn't believe that he would kiss someone else. Of all the people he was going to cheat on her with, it had to be Taylor Morgan. The one person in the school she truly hated.

She felt her heart break in two when she turned the corner and saw her boyfriend pushed up against Taylor and his lips pressed against hers. She could see the passion and the love that wasn't in the kisses that he gave her and she hated it. She believed all the times that he said he loved her but she knew now that it was all a lie. They had been together since the start of Junior year, and a year later, she thought that things were going great. They were planning on college and they had even light heartedly discussed having children and now that was all gone. He had thrown it all away in a quick moment of passion.

She ran home as fast she could. The tears rolling down her cheeks, her vision becoming clouded from the tears. She didn't care about anything right now. Her heart felt like it had been smashed with a hammer – that it would never be repaired. She just wanted to curl up in bed and never have to come out again.

She didn't care that her mother was shouting after her when she ran straight to her room. She didn't care that her brother was calling her childish names outside her room. All she cared about was finding her mobile. She finally found it and with a shaky hand dialled Adam's number "I saw you kissing her. We're over!" she screamed down the phone before dropping to the floor and crying until there were no more tears.

She knew what she had to do. She had to make all the pain and hurt go away so she got up and went to the bathroom. She locked the door and began to search through the medicine cabinet. She knew what she was looking for but she couldn't find it. Eventually she found the bottle that she wanted and she looked down at it. Sleeping Pills. She slowly and shakily opened the lid and poured some pills into her hand. She grabbed a glass and filled it with water. She closed her eyes, thought of the pain that Adam had caused her and lifted the glass to her mouth. She took a mouthful of water and lifted the pills into her mouth. She swallowed them. She began to feel weak and drowsy. Maybe this wasn't such a good idea she thought as she began to

collapse, her body shutting down and becoming unable to support the rest of her anymore. She dropped the glass and collapsed to the floor.

She woke up in hospital the next day surrounded by her mother and a couple of doctors – one was young and Hannah guessed that he was an intern. After the expected telling off from her mother she hugged her and sobbing, said that she was thankful she had found her in time and not to ever do that again. Hannah explained what Adam had done and that she had to get rid of the pain and her mother told her that wasn't the way to go. Hannah began to cry at the thought that she could have died. She realised there and then that Adam wasn't worth her losing her life. There were more important things in her life to live for. She was off to college in seven months, her 18th birthday was coming up next month and she had a family that loved her no matter what – even her annoying 11 year old brother meant the world to her. Although she would never admit that to him as she would never live it down.

Adam visited her in the hospital. He was hoping that he would be able to explain what happened and try and win her back. But, unfortunately, Hannah wouldn't listen, she didn't even want him to be in the room let alone to hear any explanation he had. She shouted at him whenever he opened his mouth to say sorry. She slapped him for hurting her and she wished that she was dead because then she wouldn't have the pain of seeing him and remembering what had happened. Adam continued to grovel but Hannah didn't want to know. She couldn't forgive him for what he had done. She just couldn't, she couldn't risk being hurt again. She didn't want to allow him back into her life just for him to hurt her again.

A few days later, after monitoring her to make sure she was ok, she was allowed back home. She had been offered help to see someone about the suicide attempt but she had refused and promised that she knew it was wrong and that she wouldn't do it again.

The problem she had was getting over Adam. She loved him with all her heart. She gave everything to him and this was how he treated her. She knew that she needed to move on but she couldn't bring herself to think of a life without Adam. Adam always made her smile and laugh when she needed it, and when she didn't, he always comforted her, wasn't ashamed to show his feelings for her, wasn't afraid to say those three important words "I love you".

Hannah needed Adam. She needed him more than ever. She needed to be back in his arms. The only place where she felt safe. The only place that made her calm and

relaxed when she was stressed. She needed to go back to Adam. After all it was only a kiss, she had to believe that and she could forgive a kiss. But she knew that if he even so much as looked at another woman again it would be over for good and there would be no second chances.

Part 3

Adam stood up and took a deep breath. He was going to try and get Hannah to listen and understand even if it killed him. He needed to get Hannah to forgive him. He was a mess without her. He grabbed his jacket and his cell phone and left the house. He decided to walk to Hannah's house. It would help him to clear his head and think about what he was going to say to her.

Hannah stood up and put a jacket on. She had to go over to Adam's and tell him she was sorry. Sorry for not listening. Sorry for being mean. To tell him that she forgave him. That she still loved him. That she wanted to spend the rest of her life with him. To have a family with him. To grow old with him. She made her way out of the house and started to walk down the street to Adam's.

Both Adam and Hannah looked straight ahead as they walked down the street. Aiming to go to the other's houses. To explain things. To win the other back. At first they didn't spot the other walking down the street but as they edged closer Adam noticed the familiar flow of black hair and Hannah noticed the shaggy flop of Adam's hair. They stopped and looked at each other. Not knowing who should talk first. Minutes passed and there was still silence until they decided to be the one that broke the ice.

"I'm sorry" Hannah said

"It was a mistake" Said Adam at the same time. Both laughed slightly. "Can we go get a coffee?" Adam asked. Hannah nodded and followed Adam into a local café. They sat opposite each other at the table and Adam took a deep breath.

"Look I'm sorry Hannah. I didn't mean for it to happen. I don't know what happened. One minute we were discussing the game and the points needed to win and the next she was forcing herself onto me and I couldn't help it. I didn't want to. All I kept thinking about was you. And when I heard that you seen us, it broke my heart"

"You hurt me Adam" Hannah replied quietly looking down at the table. She remembered the hurt and the pain she had felt when she saw that Adam was kissing the blonde.

"I know I did baby and for that I am truly sorry. When I learned that you had overdosed I thought I had lost you and that was the one thing that hurt me the most. I thought I would never be able to see your beauty. I love everything about you Hannah and I really would like another chance"

"Adam, when I saw you and Taylor I thought my whole world had come crashing down. I didn't want to carry on without you in my life. But as I lay in the hospital I knew that I couldn't let my life go. I had too much ahead of me to waste my life over you. I didn't ever want you back in my life but I realised that I am nothing without you. That you are the one that makes me whole"

Hannah looked at Adam and smiled weakly. Adam once again saw the beauty and the honesty in Hannah. But he also saw the hurt and the pain in her eyes and he hated that. He knew it was his fault. And he knew that he could never let himself hurt something so pure again.

"I won't ever hurt you again Hannah. I promise" "You better not Adam because if you do I *will* leave you" Adam couldn't help but smile slightly. He knew that he wouldn't hurt Hannah again. He loved her too much and he was about to prove that. He reached into his pocket and pulled out the velvet box. He opened it up, got up from the table and got down on one knee.

"Hannah Smith. You are the most special person in my life and I love you with all my heart. Would you please make the happiest man alive by becoming my wife?" Hannah couldn't believe it. She never expected Adam to propose to her. Especially in front of all these people. She couldn't help but smile and nod "Yes Adam I will" Adam placed the ring on her finger then stood up and kissed her, listening to the claps and the cheers from the customers in the café.

"I love you Hannah Smith" Adam whispered calmly

"I love you too Adam Johnson" Hannah replied grinning.

WASTED

He placed the bottle of Vodka on the bedside cabinet and the bottle of painkillers beside it. He took a picture off the wall, smiled at it and placed it beside the Vodka and painkillers. He looked at the picture and sighed. He was about to hurt the one person who truly mattered to him. The one person who had never hurt him and had never judged him but this had to be done. He needed some control in his life and this was the one thing he knew he could control.

He couldn't believe that had come to this. He promised himself he would never go this low. No matter how things had got, he always swore that he would never go down this road. But here he was. Taking that road. He had finally hit rock bottom and his life wasn't worth living anymore. This is what he had to do. He knew it was going to hurt his sister and he hated that but he hated the fact that he was alive even more. He had messed up his life, had lost the people who were most important in his life and he couldn't forgive himself for that. He had an addiction, he knew that, but it was like a drug – he couldn't escape it and no matter how many times he tried he couldn't stop. He needed it. He had to have it to feel whole.

Gary had a gambling addiction. It had started a few years back when he started playing poker with a couple of his colleagues on a Friday night but he soon became addicted and found himself playing online games. The more he won the more he would bet. He didn't always win but that never stopped him. He then started betting on the horses and sports and within a year he had gambled away his daughter's college fund and the house had to be re-mortgaged in order to pay the debts that he had run up.

His wife had left him because he was unable to control his addiction and spending their daughter's college fund had been the last straw for Alison. She had packed up her bags and left him. She said he would have no contact with his daughter until he proved that he had stopped and that he would be able to provide for them. That had been a year ago and all he had succeeded in doing was getting himself into more debt and throwing away any future he had with his family.

His daughter was now six and he hadn't seen her since his wife had taken her away from him. He had heard that his wife was in a relationship with another guy and although he knew he couldn't say anything (the divorce was going to be final any day now) it still pissed him off that some other guy was raising his daughter. The daughter that he had not provided for over the past two years and knew was better off without him in her life.

That was when he had hit rock bottom. He had lost his house and had found himself stealing money from his family to fund his habit. His mother had discovered that some of her jewellery had gone missing and soon learnt that Gary had pawned it in order to put money on the horses. She had confronted him and he finally realised that he needed help and he had an addiction that was gripping his life. He could not live his life unless he was able to gain control once again.

He had joined Gambler's Anonymous and although he had gone to meetings for a month he found that the habit was hard to get away from and had stolen his mother's diamond necklace to use as payment in a poker game. His mother had called the police. He was arrested and jailed for a week until his family had him bailed. He had to promise the authorities he would continue going to the Gambling meetings. The police put a block on the sites he used to gamble on and made sure that he would not be allowed into any of the betting agencies within a fifteen mile radius.

But Gary had had enough by this time. He realised that he couldn't keep going the way that he was. He decided to go to Turkey and move back in with his parents and sister for support. It wasn't the best thing but he had no other choice, he had to stop gambling.

He struggled to cope. Everyday his mind would wander to gambling and he'd feel the urge to go to a betting store. He could hear the ringing of the tills, the noise from the TV and the shouts or grunts as people won or lost. It plagued his mind. He couldn't escape. He tried everything to keep himself occupied but the lure of gambling became too strong for him.

So here he was, locked in the bedroom, a tub of painkillers and a bottle of Vodka on the cabinet beside him. Gary nervously opened the bottle of painkillers and poured half of the bottle into his hand. He threw the bottle onto the bed and stared at the small white tablets that were resting in the palm of his hand. He picked up the bottle of Vodka. This is what it had all come down to. Gary was now holding a bottle of Vodka in one hand and painkillers in the other. He didn't think his life would come to this but it had and now this was the only solution to putting a stop to everything.

He took a large swig from the Vodka bottle and shuddered slightly. It was too strong for him. It burned as he swallowed and it slid down his throat. He coughed slightly from the aftertaste. How pathetic was that? He couldn't even handle a drink. He searched for a piece of paper and a pen and eventually found one. He quickly

scribbled a note for the one person who understood him. The one person who truly loved him for him. The one person that meant the most to him in his life. His sister.

Dear Louise,

I don't know how to say sorry for what I have done. I know I told you that I would never get to this stage but I have and for that I am truly sorry. I know I have hurt you in ways I never wished. I promised that I would never leave you but I have. Please understand that I never meant to hurt you. I just couldn't handle all the taunting anymore.

You were not only my sister but you were my best friend. You were there for me when nobody else was. You didn't judge me no matter what I did or who I became and we both know I became someone neither of us liked. You were truly the only person I could count on. I told you everything. There was nothing that you didn't know about me and you just sat and listened as I told you all my feelings, all my emotions and you didn't laugh or judge. You were always there for me.

You made me smile when I was down. You left me alone when you knew I didn't want to be bothered and you stuck up for me when I was being bullied. I just wish I could have done more. I wish I could have been the big brother that you deserved. I wish I could have been there for you when you needed it, and wish I could have comforted you when you were upset but I couldn't. I found myself unable to care and comfort you like you deserved.

I love you Louise, more than you will ever know. Thank you for everything you have done for me and the support that you have given me. You were there when no one else was and for that I will always be grateful.

Love your brother

Gary

x

He signed the letter so elegantly. He placed a soft kiss on the letter and carefully slid it inside an envelope, trying not to cry as he did so. He wrote 'Louise' nicely on the front of the envelope, underlined it with a kiss and propped it up against his pillow. He made sure that his sister would be able to see the letter when she entered the room.

He took another swig of the Vodka and swallowed a few of the painkillers. He could feel himself becoming a little bit dizzy as he took a few more of the painkillers and another swig of the Vodka. He sat down on the bed carefully and thought about his life. What had he really done with his life? He had graduated College, he had become a manager in a large firm and had a daughter that any father would be proud of and yet he had thrown all of that away for gambling. He had become an embarrassment to his family and turned into someone he told himself he would never become. And now he was going to end. He was going to end the pain and suffering he had put everyone through. They would be better off without him in their lives.

He wished that he could have kept the life he had back then but that wasn't going to happen. Back then he had no worries, no pressure, no stress. But now everything was different.

He took the rest of the painkillers and drank some more of the Vodka. He picked up the picture of Louise from the bedside cabinet and held it tightly. He kissed the picture and smiled weakly. Louise was his life. Louise had helped him through all the bad times. She was always there no matter what the problem and she never judged him. She offered comfort and support with everything. She was his life, his rock, his best friend. Next to his daughter she was the person that he was going to miss the most but she had sacrificed a lot to help him and he couldn't keep putting her through that.

He felt himself becoming dizzy and could feel himself slipping in and out of consciousness. He began to regret what he was doing. It was a stupid idea. He couldn't leave Louise. He promised he wouldn't. He wished that he hadn't done this. He needed to try and stop it. He weakly placed a hand upon the end of the bed and lifted himself up. He slowly started to make his way to the bathroom but he couldn't hold on any longer.

He collapsed to the floor and started to shake slightly. This was it - he was dying. He could feel himself being surrounded by darkness. The darkness that would take him out of this life forever. The life he had grown to hate. He would finally be free from the hurt and the pain.

He closed his eyes as he became weaker. His breathing started to slow down and he couldn't make out the shape of his room. He had enough energy to call out her name. "Louise" came a weak whispered voice.

And that was it.

Gary Evans was dead.

FALLEN

Her body began to shake and she could feel the sweat running down her forehead. It was cold, so very cold. She felt her fingers start to go numb, then her legs, then her toes. Suddenly her entire body had gone numb, she felt frozen although she was sweating. The convulsions throughout her body became stronger; her body began to shake violently. Darkness appeared and she could feel it consuming her. Her eyes started to close and she began to give into the darkness, allowing her body to be taken by the night, by the cold. She was slipping away. The darkness was consuming her, the coldness taking over. She could feel her body begin to give up, shutting down organ by organ. *'This is death'* she thought to herself as she became colder, her body convulsing harder. Then suddenly the darkness seemed to fade. She could hear a gentle voice in the distance. She recognised it but she couldn't place it. It grew louder, closer. She felt something move around her. Warmth. The chill was slowly leaving her body, the heat slowly beginning to fill her from the inside.

"Leah" There it was again. That voice. So sweet, so loving. Why couldn't she remember who it belonged to? She knew that she had heard the voice before. It was so familiar. She tried to concentrate, tried to make herself remember the voice but she couldn't bring it to memory. Her eyes flickered open, the light burning as they adjusted to the sudden brightness that was in the room.

"Leah? Leah?" She looked up to see where the voice was coming from. A figure sat beside her, his arm wrapped gently around her. Her lips formed a faint smile as she recognised the figure sitting beside her. That was who the voice belonged to. She knew it had been familiar. She had heard the voice enough to know who it belonged to.

"Dane?" her voice was weak. Her throat was dry. She looked at her boyfriend or ex-boyfriend to be precise. He was tall, dark and handsome. Every woman's dream. His usually deep blue eyes looked grey and sullen today. They didn't have their typical sparkle. His usually preened floppy brunette hair was scraggly and looked like it hadn't been washed in days and there were a few grey hairs she could see glistening in the sunlight. He looked tired, exhausted even. She could see where the tears had stained his cheeks and felt a pang in her heart as she realised that he was like this because of her.

“Yeah it’s me”. He wrapped his arms around her more and she could feel her body temperature increasing as he pressed his body close to hers. She tried to sit up but her head became dizzy from the sudden movement and the brightness of the room. The room slowly started to spin, the paintings on the walls becoming blurs as they sped past and Dane was a blur. She closed her eyes and reopened them, the room refocusing.

“Be careful. Try to rest” His voice was strained and there was a hint of annoyance too. She didn’t blame him. This wasn’t the first time he had seen her like this. This hadn’t been the first time he had held her close to bring her back from certain death. Leah noticed that his eyes were now swollen, red from the tears. She felt guilty that he had to come and see her like this, again. She knew what he was thinking and she hated that she made him feel this way, hated that he could never move on because he would always be worried about her.

“I never thought I would see you again” her throat began to burn from dryness. She looked around the room for something to drink but she couldn’t spot anything.

“I wasn’t going to” he pulled away from her slightly and looked at the floor. “I didn’t need to be put through this again but Sean had sounded so worried, I thought I would check on you for him”

Sean was Leah’s older brother, but unlike his sister, Sean had taken the correct route in life – job, marriage, three year old daughter with another child on the way. He didn’t keep in touch much with Leah anymore. He said he couldn’t have a drug addict around his children. He didn’t want anyone around them who could be a bad influence. Although this hurt Leah, she knew it was right. She wouldn’t want her niece wanting to take the same route as she was. But Sean did still love her, he wouldn’t be much of a brother if he didn’t, which is why he had asked Dane to check on her. Leah just nodded. She was just glad that he had come back, that she was in his arms again. But it wasn’t to last. She knew that. He couldn’t handle her Heroin addiction anymore. She had changed. She had mood swings (bad ones) shaking, sweating and she had lost so much weight in the years of taking the drug that her bones were now visible through her skin.

It wasn’t fair to put Dane through all of that. Not again. She had tried to stop the drug but found herself too addicted. Even rehab hadn’t helped her. She had left early and gone onto taking a double dose after denying she had needed help in the

first place. That was the first mistake. The second mistake was losing Dane and that would always be with her. Dane knew she was taking Heroin when they had first started dating, but it was only occasionally. Soon found herself needing a dose every day, then twice a day, and now she was using it at least four times a day to keep herself going.

“I need a drink” her voice was barely above a whisper now. The dryness was consuming her throat. She could feel a burning sensation in the back of her throat every time she swallowed. This was a familiar after-effect and one that she had never got used to. It was like she had been eating razor blades and her throat felt like it was on fire.

“Wait here” Dane got up and made his way to the kitchen. Leah wrapped the blanket around herself further and noticed a small drop of dried blood on her arm. It was where the needle had been. Dane must have removed it when he had found her. She heard footsteps and looked up to see Dane approaching her with a glass of water. She took it and sipped it slowly. “Thank you”

“Why Leah?” She knew that the questions would start. Again. It was understandable. But the truth was she didn’t know why. She couldn’t explain the urges she had for the drug. It was like it controlled her. Like it was the reason for her existence. She was nothing without it. Couldn’t breathe without it. It was as if it was a part of her and needed to be there constantly otherwise she was nothing.

“I don’t know” She had another sip of the water. The feeling was coming back to her body, the cold was gone and the darkness that had once consumed her was overcome by the light that was now surrounding her.

“I can’t stay Leah. I can’t do this again. I was finally moving on with my life” His voice had a hint of harshness but she couldn’t blame him. He had left over a month ago because he couldn’t cope with her lifestyle anymore. And now here he was, back in her apartment, pulling needles out of her arm and bringing her back to consciousness.

She didn’t deserve him. He was kind, funny, sweet and loving and she was a Heroin addict who couldn’t even give up the drug when she had discovered that she was pregnant. She hadn’t told Dane; she knew how he would have reacted. She hadn’t meant to lose the baby; she just couldn’t bring herself to stop taking the drugs. So she went through a miscarriage and had kept the truth from Dane. It would have killed

him to know that she had lost their baby because she couldn't deal with her drug addiction.

Dane got up and looked at her, a glint of love expressed on his face "Are you going to be okay?"

Leah nodded "I will be. Thank you. I mean that" Dane leaned down and placed a soft kiss on her lips. It felt like a bolt of electricity had shot through him. He had missed this. He placed his hand at her nape and deepened the kiss by gently biting her bottom lip, asking for entry. She complied and placed a hand on his arm. For a few brief seconds it was as if nothing had changed, it was Dane and Leah. The happy-ish couple once again. But as soon as it seemed to start, Dane pulled back and got up.

"I really do have to go now. Are you sure you're going to be okay?"

Leah looked over to him and nodded weakly. "Sure. Aren't I always?" She looked away from Dane. It hurt to look at him knowing what she had done to them. What she had done to herself. To their baby.

"Take care of yourself Leah. Please" The last word was said with a care in his voice. He cared about her, of course he did. He just couldn't put himself through this anymore. With one final look, he made his way out of the apartment, pulling his coat tightly around him to fight against the cold night air.

Leah looked at the space where he had been stood and let out a small sigh. How could she let him slip through her fingers again? Though did she really expect him to stay after he had just pulled a needle out of her arm? She got up and went to her closet. She rummaged around inside until she came across what she was looking for. A full length mirror. She took it out and put it up against the wall to take a look at herself.

Her bones were jutting out beneath her pale skin that was dry and scarred due to the effects of the drug. Her face looked like a skeleton, pale, dry, dark circles forming around her eyes. She looked down at her arms. The blood was still there. She noticed that small purple marks were appearing from where she had been using earlier in the day.

She took another look at her reflection. What was she turning into? She was barely skin and bones anymore. No wonder Dane had left her and that people looked at her on the streets. She was a mess. How did things turn out like this? She was frail and weak. She was only 26 but she looked in her late 40's, maybe early 50's. She thought back to the first time she had been introduced to Heroin.

It was a friend's birthday so they had decided to go to a local bar for a couple of drinks before going out to a nightclub. She had got talking to a guy named Michael who, after a few drinks and flirtatious dances, had taken her outside and asked her would she like to have an escape. To take something that would remove her from the world and that could remove any hurt and pain she had.

She had agreed, so she followed Michael down an alleyway. Leah's heart started to beat a little faster as she realised what was coming next. Michael brought out a strap and told her to hold out her arm. She obeyed and as he wrapped the strap tightly around her arm she could feel the pressure build causing her hand to pulsate sending tingles down her fingers. She watched as Michael produced a needle, unwrapped it and handed it to her.

She shook a little as her hand reached out to take the needle. "You've never done this before have you?" Michael leaned against the wall, his face calm and collected. Leah shook her head. Part of her was screaming to go back inside the club, to go away before she even started, but another part of her was screaming go ahead, telling her to do it. Telling her that this would take away all the shit that had been happening lately.

"Its easy" Michaels voice sounded gentle kind, even reassuring. "Just find a vein in your arm, there are plenty showing now, and insert the needle. It will hurt for a couple of seconds as all needles do but then the drug takes that pain away and you begin to feel a lot better".

Leah wasn't sure. She had never taken drugs before. Sure she had smoked but she had never thought about taking drugs. She knew what could happen and she didn't want that. But with Michael holding out the needle to her she found herself thinking that she would only try it once and then she wouldn't have to do it again.

She took the needle from him, looked at her arm and found a vein. Wincing slightly she inserted the needle into her arm and injected the Heroine. At first all she felt was pain but then after a couple of seconds, just as Michael had said, the pain had disappeared and was replaced with a higher feeling. A feeling of happiness, calmness. She felt her body relaxing as the drug entered her system. She removed the needle and Michael took it back from her, placing it back into the tissue and the bag

he had taken it out of. He looked at her and smiled and she felt different. Not like her normal self. She felt carefree. Like nothing could harm her. She smiled back.

“Good huh?” he asked

“Very” she moved closer to him and placed her hand on his arm

“That’s how it feels each time. It’s an amazing sensation” He placed a hand on her waist and pulled her closer. She looked up at him. She wasn’t sure if it was the drug that was causing her to act this way or if it was the fact that she’d been so attracted to him whilst on the dancefloor but she didn’t care. Leah leaned in and kissed him. He returned the kiss and pulled her closer.

After that night she couldn’t help but need more. At first the urge wasn’t that bad, it was controllable and she only needed a fix every couple of days but as it started to take control of her she needed it more. Soon she needed two or three hits a day to function and she would get it in any way possible. There had been many ways she had found in obtaining the money to purchase the drug, or even getting straight to the source itself.

Dane had once come home early from work to find her having sex with a dealer just so that she could get a hit. That was the last straw, that was when he left her. He could barely handle the fact that she was taking Heroin but catching her have sex with men just so she could get the drug was the final blow. He packed his bags and left. Told her that he didn’t want to see her again until she had cleaned herself up. That he couldn’t keep being in this state of mind, worrying about her, wondering if he would come to find her dead.

She begged him to stay, promising that she would get clean and stop using drugs, but he didn’t believe her. Deep down they both knew the hold it had on her and that she couldn’t get clean. Not easily anyway, and they both knew that she wasn’t ready – she wouldn’t be willing to stop even if she wanted to. She had proved that before – it had too strong a hold on her. She loved the feeling it gave her too much. As much as it hurt him to have to let her go he had to do what was best for him. They both knew she wouldn’t be able to give it up. She had become worse. Dane leaving her had made her go into a shell and close up. She wouldn’t talk to people barely ate. In fact she barely did anything, she just sat there staring at the walls only getting up to answer the door or go to the bathroom. And this caused her to need the drug more, to

take away the pain of losing Dane. She knew it wasn't right, she knew she needed help so that she could get her life back but it had taken a hold of her. A hold that she knew she couldn't let go of anytime soon. She hated it. She knew what she was becoming but she couldn't stop. She wasn't able to. She sat down and let out a sigh. Once again Dane had come to find her in a state, once again he had the look of disgust on his face when he saw her and once again she knew that his heart had broken having to leave.

She got up and made her way to the bathroom and slowly stripping off her clothes, climbed into the shower. She leaned against the wall and let the water roam over her body. She closed her eyes and felt herself still shaking even though the water was extremely hot. Tears to rolled down her cheeks and she slid to the shower floor, her body easily crumpling as if she had just shed her skin.

She had to give this up. She couldn't keep living her life like this. If she continued like this she knew she wouldn't have much of a life left. She wrapped her arms around what was left of her body and cried. Hard. She wanted to be out of this. She wanted Dane back. She needed Dane back. She slowly climbed out of the shower and wrapped a towel around herself, she made her way into her bedroom and got dressed. She needed to go to the library to use the internet – she couldn't afford to have it at home, all of her money had been used to buy drugs. She barely had enough money to pay the rent or the electricity let alone anything else. She couldn't remember the last time she had gone grocery shopping, she didn't need food anymore.

Once at the library she sat down and typed in what she was looking for. She scrolled down the results until she found the page she wanted. Pulling out her address book she noted the address and the times for the local Drug Addicts Anonymous meeting. Closing the webpage, she paid her bill at the counter, and tried to ignore the look from the librarian behind the counter who looked at her as if she belonged in a horror movie, not in a library. She walked home feeling proud of herself as she had taken the first step and admitted to herself that she had an addiction and that she needed help; something she had not been able to admit before, even though she had become unrecognisable to herself. A small smile graced her lips, this was it, this time she was going to get the help that she needed and wanted and she would make something of her life again. She was determined.

Entering her flat again, she took off her jacket and contemplated calling Dane. Would he be interested that she was going to be attending meetings to help her

overcome her habit? Would he want to help her fight this battle? Would he ever think about getting back together with her? She decided she would call him after she had joined the program so that she could say that she was in the program instead of telling him she was just thinking about joining. She felt drained so went to bed and lay down. Staring at the ceiling, she thought about what her life would be like when she was off the drugs – she would be able to hold down a job, a relationship, she would be able to go out and buy things that she could never afford now.

Leah came out of her first meeting feeling slightly refreshed and feeling better about herself. She had had the courage to stand up in front of a group of people and admit that she had a Heroin addiction. That she was powerless to it and that it had become unmanageable. That had been the first step in the twelve step program. Next was to believe that there is a higher power that can help them restore their sanity.

They had been given a booklet that contained all twelve steps of the program – each step to be taken when the person felt ready. Number nine – make amends to those people who had been hurt. That was going to be difficult. She wasn't sure that those she had hurt would want to listen to her excuses and apologies, but she had a while before that step would arise.

She also knew she was going to have to stop taking Heroin. That was going to be the hardest part. Even making amends wasn't going to be that hard. She knew the symptoms of going cold turkey but she had to go through with it, and now she had the support of the rest of the group. One person, Ben, had offered to be her sponsor meaning that anytime she felt like a fix or needed someone to talk to, he would be there for her. And she had agreed to do the same for him.

She made her way slowly into town, wrapping herself up tightly with her warm jumper. With thoughts about the future rushing through her head she wasn't taking much notice of where she was going or anyone around her until she bumped into someone.

“Sorry” she mumbled. She looked up at the person to apologise again. It was Dane.

“Leah!”

She noticed that he still wasn't looking so good. There were still dark patches around his eyes and he still hadn't shaved since the last time she had seen him. He had even

more grey hairs and there was a smell lingering that suggested he hadn't showered in days.

"Dane. Hi. How are you?" What a stupid question to ask she thought to herself. Of course he wasn't OK. She had caused him so much hurt and so much pain over the past year. She knew it was going to take a long time for him to recover from what she had put him through. She wanted him to move on. She wanted him to be happy, to be with someone who wouldn't cause him the anguish and the worry that he always had with her.

"I've been better. How about you?"

She nodded slowly "I'm feeling a lot better. I just came from a Drug Addict Anonymous meeting. It was my first" she looked at him to see if there would be a reaction to this news. His eyes widened a little.

"That's great Leah, that's really great" Again she nodded.

"So is it a weekly thing?"

"Twice a week until we begin to get a handle on our addictions, but I can call my sponsor Ben at anytime. He will be there to help me if I have any problems or feel like I need a fix. I can feel myself calling him often" she let out a weak laugh.

Dane placed a hand on her arm "I'm always here for you Leah, you know that right? You can call me if you need some help or you just want to talk" Dane was pleased to hear that Leah had the courage to put herself into rehabilitation – that she had finally come to terms with her problem and was willing to accept the help that was out there for her.

Leah couldn't help but feel tears forming. After everything she had put him through he was still willing to help her. That meant a lot to her. "Look, I have some spare time. Would you like to join me for dinner?" It had been a long time since she and Dane had gone for a meal together. In fact it had been a long time since Leah had had a proper meal. She gave a nod of approval "I would like that".

He placed an arm around her carefully and lead her to their favourite café. She didn't know what would happen in the future or even if she would be able to come off the drugs straight away but she knew that as long as she had Dane in her life she knew she was going to be OK.

WITHOUT YOU

The waves crashed against the rocks, sending spray high into the air. A plastic bottle floated on the top of the sea and bounced back and forth with the waves, its body glistening in the afternoon sun. Sarah sat staring at the sea, her mind not focusing on what was happening around her, not taking in her surroundings. Her fingers wrapped around the piece of paper that she held in her hand. She wiped the lone tear that was rolling down her cheek.

In the distance she could hear the laughter of a family playing on the beach and the echo of a dog barking. ‘*There’s nothing to be happy about*’ she thought to herself as her fingers wrapped tighter around the letter. Her eyes darted down to the crumpled piece of paper in her hands and she read the words that had haunted her since she opened the letter six days ago.

Dear Miss Henderson

It is with my deepest regrets that I write to inform you that Cadet Gaines was tragically killed in an accident when the enemy attacked their helicopter during a rescue operation.

Cadet Gaines was an asset to the Army and one of the bravest men we have had the pleasure of working with. I pass on my condolences to you for the loss you have suffered.

Cadet Gaines will be awarded the Purple Heart Medal for his services to us and will always be remembered

Sergeant Johnson

Sarah still thought the words were not real – they could not be real. She wanted to wake up, to wake up in John’s arms and to realise that this had all been a horrible nightmare. It had been six days since she had started this dream and she knew she wasn’t going to wake up from it. He really was gone. Never again would she hear his laugh, see his smile, be wrapped in his arms as she slept. Tears dropped down onto the paper, smudging some of the words on the page.

She hated that he had joined the army – hated him for knowing the risks and yet still signing up. But that was John all over. He would do whatever he could to help others even if there was a risk to himself. He had always been the kind of person who

would help an older person cross the road or rescue a cat stuck in a tree. It had been one of the reasons that she had fallen in love with him. He was passionate and understood that everybody deserved the same chances in life. He had participated in a lot of volunteer work, he would spend his weekends at the animal shelter, would do evenings at the homeless shelter and make sure that people on the streets had blankets and clothes.

It was just his nature. He would not stand by and watch as other people lived a lesser life than he was and that was why he had enlisted. He wanted to be able to help those who had been injured during the war – to give back to those who were not able to help themselves.

She remembered the day he told her that he had enlisted into the army. It had been on his 18th birthday, their birthdays just 13 days apart. They were about to graduate High School and John wanted to do something that would be beneficial – something that would help a lot of people at once. So he had signed up to be a part of the medical and rescue team in the army. He had spent a year going through the physical and mental tests and the vigorous training they put him through. She didn't think he would stick with it, that he would find the training difficult but to her dismay he stuck with it.

She was proud, of course she was but she couldn't help but feel scared of what could happen. She knew it was dangerous territory. She had seen enough on the news to know that a lot of people had been killed and that a lot more were going to be killed before the war ended. She didn't want anything to happen to him, she wanted him to be safe but all she could do was support him and be there for him when he needed her.

He passed his tests within a year and three weeks after his 19th birthday he received a letter stating that he would be getting shipped out on May 2nd. It was at this exact spot that he told her - she knew it was the same spot because the stone they carved their names onto was still in exactly the same place. She couldn't help but smile slightly at the memory of him trying to carve their names into that stone.

John looked nervous as he took Sarah's hand and walked her to a spot on the beach and sat her down gently. Sarah felt her heart skipping beats - John had been quiet since he had arrived at her house to pick her up and had barely said a word in the car. She began worrying that something was wrong, that she had done or said something to upset him.

She stared at him hoping that he would say something soon. Hoping he would break the awful silence that was between them. That was something they had not had before and was one of the reasons that Sarah was panicking. Maybe he had found someone else? Maybe the three years they had spent together had been enough and now he wanted something more? He took her hand. "Sarah" he sighed. He was struggling to find the correct words. "I get shipped off to Iraq next week" his eyes weren't focused on her as he spoke.

"Oh" was all she could say. What else was there to say? That she wanted him to stay? That she needed him? That would be selfish especially since all the people in Iraq needed him as well. Needed the compassion and love that he gave everyone. John finally made eye contact with her "Its only for six months I will be back by the beginning of December – I'll be home for Christmas"

Sarah found herself sobbing heavily. John wrapped his arms around her and pulled her close allowing her body to convulse against his. "Its OK baby. Its OK. I promise it will be OK" Sarah looked up her eyes red and puffy. She sniffed and wiped the tears away. "I'm sorry" her voice was quiet. She couldn't seem to find the ability to speak.

"There's nothing to be sorry about Sarah" he kept his arms wrapped around her. She could smell the aftershave he used and found herself missing it already. She loved that smell – loved having it around her. But like John, it would be gone. "I don't want you to go but I don't want to be selfish and make you stay here"

"If you wanted me to stay I would you know that" Sarah did know that. All she had to do was say those words and John would inform the military that he did not wish to take up the position. But she wasn't sure if she could allow that to happen either, not when he would be able to save many lives.

"That's the problem. I can't be selfish and take you away from all the people that need you over there, no matter how much I need you here" John kissed her softly "You are everything to me. I want to save you before anyone else" Sarah shook her head.

"No go. But promise you will come back to me"

"I promise more than that" he pulled out a small box out of his pocket and opened it. Inside was a ring with a small ruby. Sarah's heart beat at double speed. "I promise to come back safely to you and I promise to love you with everything I have so will you marry me?"

Sarah couldn't bring the words to her lips so instead she leaned in and kissed him - her reply evident.

That had been eight weeks ago. A week ago the letter had arrived. Apparently they were on an emergency mission to rescue some wounded troops in the desert when the enemy secretly boarded their plane and planted explosives so when they took off the explosives detonated and killed everyone inside. John had only been there for six weeks and a day. Still, six days after getting the letter, she still hadn't come to terms that she had lost her true love. Because that's what he was. They had met in their first year of college when they were both fresh faced sixteen year olds eager to learn and three years later they were still going strong. They had plans. They were going to marry, going to go to university and study for degrees then build a family together. That had now been ripped apart. Torn viciously away from her.

She would never get to tell John that she was pregnant. She did a test a couple of days ago after she found herself vomiting frequently. They had put it down to grief but after a few days she went to the doctors and confirmed that she was approximately nine weeks pregnant, meaning that she had conceived at the beach the night John proposed.

Her hand fluttered to her stomach and clutched it protectively. She knew that John would have made a great dad. He was so warm and kind and loving. He would have loved his child with all his heart but now he would never have the chance. He would never get to hold his newborn baby, would never get the chance to see his child grow up, would not get to teach them how to ride a bicycle or see them off to their first day of school.

She promised herself that her child would grow up knowing that their father was a hero that their father was the sweetest most caring person that the world had known. And that no matter where they are, their father will always be watching them and protecting them.

ALWAYS

Her hands shook as she held the pregnancy test tightly in her grasp. She was too scared to look down at the results, scared to see what colour would appear in the window. She didn't want to think about the possibility that her body was carrying another human being. Another pair of eyes that could see, another mouth that could talk another nose that could smell. She didn't want to think about the stupid mistake that she and Leon had made that night. The night of the prom. She didn't want to think that she and Leon had created another life – a life that neither of them would be prepared to care for. They were young. They would not be able to look after a child. They had plans, they were both going to college in the Fall, they could not do that with a child on the way.

She wasn't ready for the sleepless nights, the dirty diapers, the hours of screaming, all the things people told her happened as soon as a child was brought into a family. She was also not ready to give up her size eight figure. It had taken her years to get into shape and she wasn't about to give it up. She knew it was selfish to say that but no one knew the old Hayley. The Hayley that was overweight, unpopular and geeky who had been bullied her entire freshman year.

Before Hayley moved to Albuquerque, at the start of Junior year, she had been a dorky, overweight child with big glasses. She was bullied when she was at school because of the way she used to look and dress. This caused her to comfort eat which led to her becoming more overweight. In the end she decided to do something about the way she looked. She was sick of the taunts and the abuse she was getting, so she threw away the junk food and signed up to the local gym. It took her a year and a half to lose the weight but she managed to get from a chunky size sixteen to a slim size eight figure by the end of her sophomore year and she wasn't ready to become the person that she used to be.

No one ever knew the truth about Hayley. She didn't have the confidence to tell anybody, so she hid all her old photographs in a box in the attic and told people that they had been left behind in the move. She was afraid that they would mock her. Laugh at her because of the way she used to be. So she kept her old life a secret. She didn't want people to know that before she had become head cheerleader she had been a chubby fourteen year old with an acne problem.

She slowly opened her eyes and looked down at the piece of plastic she was still clutching in her hands. The piece of plastic that could change her life forever. Change Leon's life forever. She saw the results. Blue. That meant she was pregnant. She, Hayley Carter, was pregnant. She continued to stare at the test, hoping that the result would change – that it had been a glitch and she wasn't pregnant. This couldn't be happening. This could *not* be happening to her. She had her whole life ahead of her. She was going to go to Princeton. She was going to study maths, chemistry and biology. She was planning to have a huge 18th birthday and graduation party and she didn't want to have to avoid having a few drinks to celebrate.

She was going to become a professor in a high school. She couldn't possibly be pregnant. *'I must have read the results wrong'* she thought to herself as she picked up the box once again reading the instructions over and over again. *Blue means that you are pregnant, Red means you are not pregnant.* She took another look at the test 'Please be red' she kept mumbling to herself.

The result was as clear as day. The blue stood out. She was pregnant. Hayley threw the test onto the floor, wrapped her arms around herself and began to cry. She couldn't believe she had been stupid enough to allow herself to get pregnant. She knew that she should have stopped Leon from going all the way with her but that night she couldn't resist him. Her mind started replaying what had happened that night and what had caused her to be in the position she was now in.

Leon and Hayley rushed up to one of the rooms in the large house. It was the after prom party and the Evan's house and Leon and Hayley had been making out for most of it. And now, one glass of punch too many and the two were beginning to feel hot and steamy. Leon closed the bedroom door and pressed his lips harder against Hayley's. She walked towards the bed and allowed Leon to lightly push her down onto the soft velvet sheets.

Leon's hands began to grope Hayley's body as she began to pull off Leon's shirt, savouring each touch that was between them. Leon placed his hand under Hayley's top and unclipped her bra. He placed soft butterfly kisses on her shoulders and neck as he continued to take off her shirt. He kissed her on the lips once again and began to slide his hand up her skirt.

Hayley pulled vigorously at Leon's belt trying to pull it out, it got stuck and the two laughed as Leon pulled it out and threw it onto the floor. She then began to

pull Leon's jeans down with a little help from Leon as he threw them beside his belt and his shirt.

Leon was breathing heavily as he lay above a naked Hayley. They both knew what was coming but Leon still needed to know that Hayley wanted it. They had discussed sex before and they decided that they would wait until they were both eighteen and then they would lose their virginity to each other.

But Hayley had different thoughts. She needed Leon. And she needed him now. She didn't care about the whole 'We will wait until we are eighteen' thing, besides Leon was now eighteen and she was going to turn eighteen three days before graduation, which was next month. She wanted to feel Leon inside her now. She looked up at Leon, a huge smile gracing her face.

"Are you sure you want this?" Leon asked calmly. He received a nod from Hayley. Once he knew that his girlfriend was ready to go the whole way he pushed his way into her gently. Hayley winced in pain and bit her lip. Leon looked at her with concern "Are you okay baby?" she nodded and looked at him, the pain slowly subsiding each time Leon entered her. After a few minutes the pain had disappeared and had been replaced by pleasure.

"Oh Leon" Hayley moaned, wrapping her legs around Leon and pushing him deeper inside of her. She didn't think about the consequences, all she knew was that she had finally given her full self to the person she loved. They had started dating the Christmas of Junior year and fifteen months later they were still going strong.

She hadn't thought of the consequences back then. But now, six weeks later, she was definitely thinking about the consequences. She was pregnant – true it was only the early stages, six weeks wasn't long but she was still pregnant. That was all that kept running through Hayley's mind as she began to realise that she was going to have a baby at eighteen. *'Damn it!'* she cursed looking at herself in the mirror. This is what she had become. She had become the irresponsible person she promised she would never become. She vowed never to have kids until she was in a solid relationship and married. And right now she wasn't in either. Well she did have a solid relationship with Leon but they weren't married and she wasn't sure how long they were going to last – college would be difficult to keep a relationship. She loved him, of course she did, but she wanted to have a career and would let nothing stop her from reaching her dreams.

Leon. That was all she could think about. How would he react? Would he be mad? Would he be happy? Would he want her to have the baby? Would he want her to have an abortion? She didn't want to think about it. She couldn't make her mind up either. Part of her didn't want to keep the baby whilst another part of her didn't want to have an abortion. She didn't believe in abortions as this would mean taking another life. It was another pair of eyes that wouldn't see, another mouth that wouldn't smile, another nose that wouldn't smell. No her religious beliefs wouldn't allow her to take a life which meant there was only one option. She would have to keep the baby and hope that Leon and her family would support her in her decision.

She would be a good mother, she knew that. She had helped to raise her younger brother Aaron so she had knowledge of how to raise a child. But was she really ready to handle this? Would she really be able to cope with having to feed another person, to clean them, to cuddle them, to hold them, to comfort them? Hayley wasn't so sure. Looking after her brother was easy as her mother was around at times to help and Hayley wasn't responsible for bathing him and getting up with him during the night. But having a baby of her own would be different. She would have to bathe them, would have to get up during the night, would have to be there 24/7 for the life she had created. She wondered if she was ever going to be prepared to be a mother. But she knew that she would find out soon enough.

Another thought popped into her head. How would she tell her mother? How would her mother react? Would she be disappointed? Angry? Mad? Sad? Would she think any less of her daughter because she had fallen pregnant at seventeen and had ruined the chance to make something of her life? Would she want Hayley to give the baby up for adoption? Would she help her to raise it? Hayley was now becoming afraid. She was pregnant and didn't know what to do. The thought of her carrying a child made Hayley sick. She leaned her head over the toilet seat just in time. She didn't know if that was morning sickness or because she had just found out she was pregnant. Either way her stomach was still churning and she knew the feeling wasn't going anytime soon.

She needed to talk to someone but who? Her mother was at work until seven and her father wasn't around anymore. He had left when Hayley was just eight and Aaron was three. He left because he said he didn't love their mother anymore and they couldn't be together. He told them he would be moving out but he would keep in touch with them, but he never did. He never called to check up on her and Aaron and

didn't bother to send them birthday and Christmas cards. He just left their life completely, walked out on them and never turned back.

She needed to talk things through with Leon. She needed to know how he felt about the situation. She needed someone to tell her that she was okay, that everything was going to be okay. She went out into the hallway and picked up the phone. She dialled Leon's number and waited for an answer.

"Hey Leon. It's Hayley. Yeah I'm OK. Could you please come round. I really need to talk to you....OK.....See you then" she hung up and went downstairs thinking about what she was going to say to him.

Five minutes later there was a knock at the door and Hayley began to shake slightly as she opened it. She couldn't help but smile when she saw Leon standing there, in his Wildcats uniform, out of breath from running. Leon was part of the school Basketball team and was going to California University on a Basketball Scholarship. Or he was meant to be going, she thought to herself. A child would not allow him the opportunity to do so.

"Hey baby" he smiled at her placing a soft kiss upon her cheek. Hayley stepped aside and allowed Leon in. She watched as he went and sat down on the couch stretching and yawning heavily. "What do you want to talk about?" he asked her.

Hayley took a deep breath. *'This is it'* she thought to herself *'It's now or never'*. She turned to Leon. She kept her focus on what she was going to say "I'm pregnant" she blurted out. She looked away. She couldn't face Leon, she could feel the tears already threatening to escape. She couldn't allow herself to hear his response, didn't want to think about the future he wouldn't have because of her. She was afraid that he would leave her that he would not want anything to do with their baby.

Leon got up and wrapped his arms around Hayley. "I want the baby" he told her placing his head on her shoulders. Hayley just basked in his essence before pulling away and looking at Leon. Her face must have shown her shock because Leon laughed. The sides of his mouth curled up and the dimple in his chin protruded.

"Are you sure?" She let out a small sigh, pleased that he hadn't walked away, hadn't blamed her for allowing it to happen, that she had planned for this, that she had wanted a baby. Her body collapsed against his and she felt his grip tighten around her. She was safe here, safe from all the hurt and pain because Leon would not allow anything to happen to her and the baby.

"I promise Hayles. I am not going to walk away from you or the baby. I am going to be here for you. I am not your father, I am not going to be leaving " Hayley couldn't stop herself as the tears rolled down her cheeks. All her fears were washed away the instant he said he wanted the child. She wasn't scare anymore, wasn't afraid of the life that was growing inside of her. Her child, their child.

As long as she had Leon beside her she knew that everything was going to be okay. That they were going to be okay no matter what life threw at them.

BETRAYAL

The sun shone brightly through the curtains waking Steve. Sitting up he stretched out his arms and yawned slightly. He looked over at the sleeping figure beside him and smiled contently. Helen looked so cute when she was sleeping. Her hair was curled around her shoulders and her left cheek was red from where she had rested it on her arm during the night. Steve pulled the covers over his girlfriend carefully, but not before he had taken a look at her exposed body. He kissed her softly on the cheek, wrapped a sheet around her waist and made his way to the bathroom. He and Helen had been together for just under a year, since the start of their freshman year at college. They had met at an induction meeting when they were both scared eighteen year olds unsure of what to expect from college. A group of new starters had been brought together to help them get acquainted with the college and to make friends.

That had been ten months ago. It was now the middle of June and they were on summer break. They had decided to stay at home with their families and find a job so they were able to fund their second year. So far they had not had any luck finding any vacancies; everyone had seemed to have the same idea.

"Babe?" Helen moaned groggily. Steve turned around and saw Helen sitting up, allowing the sheet to slip from her body. Steve couldn't help but smile. Even though Helen was skinny she looked really good topless, actually she looked really good unclothed in general. "Hey you" he replied climbing back onto the bed and wrapping his arms around Helen.

"You Okay?" Helen asked grinning and placing her hands upon her boyfriend's waist.

"I am now you're awake" Steve replied placing a soft kiss upon her. Helen couldn't stop the urges so she kissed back, running her tongue across Steve's bottom lip begging for entrance. Steve allowed her entry and he ran his hands across Helen's chest. This caused her to let out a soft yet intense moan of delight.

"Oh God Steve" Helen moaned loudly, as Steve placed her hand into his boxer shorts. Excitement built as she started to play with Steve's now hardened member.

Steve rolled off Helen, his breath heavy, his body sweaty.. He looked at Helen and smiled. "That was great" Helen returned the smile cuddling herself into him, her arm thrown over his chest.

"Yeah it was" Steve leaned over to kiss Helen again but he was interrupted by a knock on the door. Steve groaned and wrapped the sheet around their bodies quickly "Who is it?" the door opened and a small blonde walked in. Louise, Helen's best friend since freshman year of high school. Louise and Steve got on, with much delight from Helen. Louise had been a lost 14 year old wandering the halls when she had bumped into Helen causing them both to drop the books they had been carrying. Helen had offered to show Louise around and found that they had a lot in common and had been inseparable since.

"Hey guys. Your mom told me you were up here, I hope it's ok" she blushed as she noticed the state of undress that they were in. She couldn't help but stare at Steve though as the sheet gently slipped from around his shoulders.

"Er sure. Could you wait downstairs whilst we get dressed please?" Helen asked, holding the sheet around her body tighter. Louise nodded and left the room rather quickly, her eyes focused on the floor as she made her way out.

Helen giggled as the door closed shut. "I bet she wasn't expecting that" she softly kissed Steve and got up to collect her clothes. "Hmm" Steve replied. He had never told anyone but he had a crush on Louise. He had done since he met her but by then he had fallen in love with Helen so he tried, unsuccessfully, to stop the feelings that he was developing for her.

Months past quickly and after spending a great deal of time together his feelings and hormones were growing increasingly for Louise. Yes, he loved Helen, how could he not but he also couldn't help the way he was feeling towards her best friend. He wondered what it would be like if he was with her instead of Helen. But then he wouldn't have known Louise if it hadn't been for Helen. Louise attended her local community college so she wasn't at the same university.

Helen came back from the bathroom dressed and threw open the curtains. She noticed that Steve was still in the same place, still undressed. "Come on lazy get dressed. I'll meet you downstairs" she patted the bed and went downstairs. Steve sighed and slowly made the effort to get dressed. He was confused, very confused. He didn't want to have the feelings he did for Louise but he also wanted to be with her very much. He couldn't hurt Helen, but he couldn't stay away from Louise. The two

had been emailing back and forth and Helen was happy that the two had been getting on but if she had known the truth she would have stopped them corresponding months ago. He didn't even know if Louise felt the same towards him. He hoped that she didn't because then it would make things easier, but if she did...he sighed again. He went downstairs and hoped that his confusion, and lust, wasn't written on his face.

"Steve" Louise moaned, feeling Steve's hardened member press against her thigh. Steve pulled down Louise's knickers and rammed himself inside her. She moaned with pain the first couple of times but then those moans of pain soon turned into moans of pleasure the more that Steve thrust himself inside her.

His hands roamed her body and he trailed kisses over her neck and shoulders. He wrapped her legs around his waist more and pushed himself deeper inside her. He let out a grunt. God he needed this. All these months of frustration, tension and the confusion about his feelings for Louise were finally gone.

He hadn't meant for this to happen. It had been a week since the incident involving Louise catching them post coitus had occurred, and although she had been around a couple of times to see Helen she had tried to avoid him. Helen had gone grocery shopping with her mother so Steve had gone back home to catch up with his friends from college and wait until Helen got back. He planned to take her out for a meal and then maybe a walk along the canal.

When a knock came at the door he wasn't expecting it to be Louise so he was shocked to find her standing there. "Hey. What are you doing here?" he didn't mean to sound accusing but it was a surprise, she usually only came over when she knew that Helen was going to be there.

"I hope it's ok to come by?" she stood in the doorway looking embarrassed to be there. He couldn't help but notice that the jeans and the top she was wearing was clinging to all the right parts of her body.

Steve stepped aside and Louise walked past him, her hair brushing against his bare arms "Sure, it is. You know Helen's not here right?" He shut the door behind her and the two walked into the living room.

"I know. It's you I wanted to see. It's about last week"

"What about it?" he sat down and motioned for Louise to take a seat. He didn't think there was anything to discuss about what had happened last week.

“When I walked in” she folded her arms on her lap and looked around the room. The walls were covered in photographs of Steve – of him through the ages, playing sports, at graduation. His family were proud of him, and they had reason to.

“We discussed that. It’s ok”

“No I mean, I was happy that I interrupted. I hated seeing you two together” she was rushing, her words becoming a jumble and she blushed profusely. “God I don’t know what I’m saying. I don’t even know why I am saying it. I should go” she stood up and started hurrying out of the door.

“Louise wait” he got up after her and placed his hand on her shoulder. She didn’t turn.

“What?” she snapped. She could feel the tears starting to build. She didn’t know why she had come here. She didn’t know why she just admitted what she had. She had ruined everything. If Steve told Helen what she had told him their friendship would be over and that was something she couldn’t deal with. Helen meant everything to her and she couldn’t bear to lose her. Yes, she was in love with Steve but she also respected Helen more. She hadn’t meant to fall for him but she couldn’t stop listening to what her heart was telling her.

She became weak whilst she was around him, felt herself blushing when he looked at her and she sometimes struggled to find the correct thing to say around him. She got excited when she saw his name appear in her mail box and no matter what she was doing would always find the time to reply to him. Worst of all, she hated seeing Helen and Steve together, couldn’t stand the way they held onto each other and finished each other sentences. She wanted to be the person who curled up into his arms, who laughed at the faces he made, the person he would kiss every morning and every night and say that he loves her.

“I feel the same for you” his voice was quiet. He turned her around gently so that they were facing each other “I’ve had feelings for you since I met you, I thought they would go because of the love I have for Helen but they wont go. I need you Louise. God I hate myself for saying that”

Louise took his hand and held it tightly “Helen’s my best friend Steve, I couldn’t do that to her, no matter how much I love you”. It pained her to say it but she wouldn’t allow anything to happen between them, not at the expense of losing her best friend.

He nodded. "Yeah, you're right. We couldn't do that to Helen" he realised that neither of them have moved. They were still pressed close to each other. Louise looked up at him, her fingers still intertwined with his. He swallowed hard and brushed his thumb over the top of her hand.

Leaning in closer she could feel his hot breath against her. She pressed her lips against his gently. He kissed back and pushed her against the wall gently. She tugged at his hair and ran her fingers through it. She was glad he didn't cut it, she liked it shaggy, it suited him.

Pulling apart, he held out his hand to her and took her to his room. Words were not exchanged as they pushed open the door and collapsed on the bed. A mess of arms and legs.

As Helen approached Steve's room she could hear the moans that were coming from behind the closed door. They were sexual moans. "What is going on?" she thought to herself. There had to be some explanation as to why those noises were emanating from his room. Maybe he was accessing something he shouldn't be on his computer because she had gone away. Of course that had to be it, it couldn't be anything else. Could it?

She shook the thought away but it wouldn't go. She had to find out what was going on. She pushed open the door and was greeted with the image of her boyfriend and her best friend entangled between the sheets, their arms and legs groping each other.

"OMG " she stood in the doorway unsure of what to do. Steve pulled himself off Louise and wrapped the sheet around himself.

"How could you Steve? I thought that you loved me". Tears stung as she fought them back. She looked over at her best friend who was scrambling to find her clothes and ran out of the room.

"I do Hel, this was just..."

"I don't want to hear it. And with HER? My best friend of all people. How dare you!"

She left the room, the tears blurring her vision as she ran down the stairs and past Louise who was doing up her t-shirt

“Helen, wait please”

Helen stopped and turned to Louise, the person she trusted most in the world and realised that it had all been a lie. She slapped her friend hard and ran out of the house. She couldn't believe that Steve had cheated on her. And with Louise, of all people. Steve had promised that he would never cheat on her. He'd promised that he would always be there for her. He'd promised that he would never hurt her. But he had. He had broken all the promises he had made. 'Maybe Steve doesn't love me after all' she thought to herself. If he could do that to her so easily, he can't have loved her

She drove home, her eyes still blurred from the tears. She past her house and kept driving. She didn't know where she was going. She didn't care where she was headed she just needed to get away from them. Away from the people who caused her hurt. She wouldn't allow them to destroy her, they wouldn't take her self respect. She could never forgive them, never forget what they done, never erase the image from her head.

Before she could take in what had happened she found the car spinning as she lost control. She span the wheel trying to gain control back, to slow it down but it wouldn't. It veered off the road, heading down the embankment into the river. She tried to open the door, but it wouldn't open, it had jammed on the way down. All she could do was watch as the car crashed into the river and felt her head hitting the dashboard.

Darkness overcome her as she collapsed into the seat as the car began to slowly fill with the ice water from the river.

THE LIBRARY

It was dark outside. All she could see was her reflection as she looked out of the window. She let out a small sigh as she turned her attention to the room. It was quite a large room. There were computers set in rows and two printers standing in the middle of it, one colour, and one black and white. She noticed that not many people were there tonight, which was strange. It was usually full with people trying to finish off their deadlines for the following day, busy cramming in last minute study for an important exam, cursing that they should have started earlier.

Somewhere from the corner she could hear someone laughing. Her mouth formed into a small smile. It was nice to know that someone was able to laugh, to have friends to laugh with, instead of being alone, trying to finish an essay that was due the following week. She picked up one of the books that she had brought and opened it. She started flicking through it but within the first few pages realised that the book was not one she wanted and she would have been better off leaving on the shelf. With another sigh, she placed the book down and put her head in her hands. She wasn't sure why she was still there, why she was putting herself through it, but she knew what her parents would say if she had left. This was a big thing for them. They had plans for her and she didn't want to ruin them. She was going to be a good daughter. The kind of daughter that would do anything for her parents, even if it didn't meet with her plans. She couldn't disappoint them. It wasn't allowed.

The laughter continued and she turned around and saw a couple smiling at each other, they both seemed to be her age. His eyes seemed to glisten as he stared at his girlfriend. The girl stopped laughing and the guy leaned in and placed a soft kiss upon his girlfriends lips, his hand finding its way to the back of her neck. A sudden shiver down her spine made her reach to the back of the chair to grab her jacket, which caused the chair to squeak. A quiet laugh escaped her lips. That was typical. She would always be the one who had the squeaky chair, the one who always created the attention as it broke through the silence that, although rare, existed. She just wished that she was the one who caught attention, the person who people would come up to and ask how she was and if she wanted to join them on a night out, rather than the person who people avoided and the one who always had an empty seat next to her.

With a deep breath she picked up another book from the pile and prayed that this would be one of the books she needed. She didn't want another trip downstairs,

spending hours looking for books that she would only use two or three lines from. As she flicked through the book she played with her pen. In the background she could hear the furious tapping of keyboards and the clanking of the printers. She tried to focus on the text in front of her but she found her mind wandering. She had no interest in the subject, she didn't want to be there, but she didn't have a choice. She was just thankful that the year was nearly over and she would have three months to herself, to do what she enjoyed, if that was even possible anymore. She tried to think back to the last time she had felt happy to have been doing something that she had wanted to do, not doing something that they wanted to do.

It was over two years ago. She and her best friend Helen, who had sadly passed away before she started university, had taken a holiday to Cornwall. To most people that wasn't something to be excited about but to her it was the best time of her life. She had freedom, even if it was just for a weekend, but it was her weekend. Time to enjoy herself. They had spent the entire weekend shopping and giggling as they tried on outfits they knew they could never afford, eating and drinking stuff that she wasn't allowed to eat at home. She had been sad when it had ended, knowing that she wouldn't be allowed to do something like that again for a while.

Definitely not now. Not since Helen had passed away eighteen months ago. She would always remember the day she received the phone call from Helen's parent telling her that Helen had been involved in a hit and run accident and had died on the scene. She remembered feeling like the world had opened up and swallowed her whole. She had no one. The one person that she could talk to, the only person to understand her had been brutally taken from her. She had retracted since then, became a hollow shell. She wouldn't talk to anyone, not even her parents. She barely left her room, wouldn't touch her food. Her parents had eventually forced her into counselling and she found it had helped. She slowly began to rebuild her life, but it would never be the same. How could it? The only person she could trust, could love, had been taken from her. But she had to move on. Her parents would make sure of it.

She slammed the book shut and forced back the tears that were forming. She decided to go and buy a drink from the vending machines situated downstairs. She got out of her seat and made her way to the door. She could hear the comments. 'I heard that her friend was killed and then she went all weird', 'She doesn't talk to anybody. She's like a total loner'. She swallowed the lump in her throat and continued down the steps. She was used to it, but it still hurt. She was thankful that she only had one year

left and then she would be able to leave. She wasn't sure what was planned next. It was whatever her parents decided.

As she approached the vending machines, she noticed a group of girls crowded around the drinks machine discussing their plans for the weekend.

"Well I was thinking that we could go try out that new club. I heard it's supposed to be good" a slim brunette told her friends as she purchased a bag of Cheese and Onion crisps. "I'm up for that" another girl said and her friends agreed.

She reached the drinks machine and apologised as she gently made her way through the group. She knew they were looking at her. Everybody always did. She inserted the money into the machine and made her selection. Diet Coke. As always. She wasn't allowed anything else. She quickly grabbed the drink from the bottom of the machine and ran back up the stairs. She let a small tear roll down her cheek and hated herself for being weak. She was not allowed to be weak. She was taught that being weak meant that you would never amount to anything, that she would be always doing stuff for others because she couldn't stand up for herself. No, being weak was not allowed.

She slumped back into her seat, determined to at least get the essay started. Her mother would want to check her progress when she called the following morning and she would not be pleased if she hadn't at least started. She pulled the ring pull of the can and waited for the whoosh sound that meant it was ready to be drunk. She lifted the can to her lips and took a small swig. The liquid was cold and with a satisfied sigh she placed the can down and turned her attention to the book.

"Excuse me" the voice caught her off guard. She looked up from the book to see a tall, handsome guy standing beside her computer. His hair was blonde and shaggy and his fringe flopped over his eyes. He had a warm friendly smile and she found herself smiling back. Genuinely. For the first time in God knows how many months.

"Is this seat taken?" the guy pointed to the seat beside her and she shook her head, unable to make the words forming in her head to come out of her mouth. He sat down, the smile not fading, and placed his books onto the table. He was studying History.

"I'm Greg. Greg Harrison." He held out his hand for her to shake. She didn't respond. Greg stared at her for a moment and let out a small laugh. "You're shy? That's fine. I can wait"

She opened her mouth and then closed it again. Open. Close. She must have looked like a goldfish. ‘Oh God’ she thought to herself. ‘He must think I’m retarded’ She closed her eyes and thought about what she wanted to say. “I’m Jane. Jane Olsen” she held out her hand and Greg took it. “Well nice to meet you Jane” he smiled.

“Nice to meet you also Greg” she smiled back. “So you’re studying History. Any particular area?”

“General, but I am specialising in Medieval studies. It’s my favourite subject”

“So you get to dress up in chain mail and play with maces?” another grin.

“Not legally no” he laughed. Jane also laughed and they got a few “shhh’s” from people around them. She blushed. She hadn’t laughed like that for a while. Had never had the chance to laugh. Greg kept all his attention firmly on her.

“So you do psychology huh?” he picked up her book and read the title *‘Developmental Psychology’*.

Jane shrugged. “It’s a degree” she smiled and took the book from him, closing it and placing it on top of the other books. She didn’t want to have to explain that the reason she was studying psychology was because it was expected of her. It always had been. When she was 16, she was made to study it at college. Now at the age of 19 (20 next month) she was in her second year of university and would be graduating next year.

“I don’t understand it all I’m afraid. Like there’s a reason for every thought and action we do. Sorry I don’t mean to be saying bad things about your course”

She shrugged “It’s OK I don’t really like it. But family and all you know...”

“Yeah I do. I played cello for six years until I found the courage to tell my mum that it was the guitar I wanted to play”

“How did she react? Bet she loved that” Okay so it wasn’t the same situation that she was in, but she also knew that a lot of people wouldn’t understand her situation.

“She was mad at first but more so that she had wasted six years worth of tuition” he laughed. God she really did love his laugh. “But she was happy that I was honest. Maybe you should tell your parents that you don’t want to do it anymore. I’m sure they would understand”

She shook her head “They wouldn’t” it was not a conversation that she was ready to have with a guy she had only just met. He obviously understood that she wasn’t ready as he moved the topic on.

“So Jane. What are you doing Friday night?” she noticed that he had moved his chair closer to hers. She found that her hands had become clammy and her grip on the book she was holding was loosening rather rapidly.

“Probably studying” *Why is he asking me what I’m doing?* She put her book down before it slipped from her grip and made a bigger fool of herself than she currently was doing.

He shrugged with one shoulder, a smile once again playing on his lips. “Well maybe you could put the books down for a couple of hours and let me take you out” he said it so calmly that she wondered if she had heard him right. He was asking her out? *Her?*

He stared at her, wondering if he had said something that had offended her. Jane nodded. “Sorry, I’m just not...” she was going to say not used to being asked out but she didn’t want him to think that she was a socialite – although he had most likely heard that anyway. “not used to not studying” she laughed. So did he.

“Well Jane, I’m afraid that from seven o’clock this Friday you will have to get used to not studying because those books aren’t going to be joining us”

Again she laughed, she wasn’t used to laughing so much. It hadn’t happened since Helen. It was nice and it was all because of Greg. He didn’t treat her any differently, didn’t know that she was the campus loser that no one wanted to talk to. She was just her and that was what he wanted.

“Okay I’ll make sure they have a babysitter”

“Good” he looked at his watch and cursed under his breath “Look I gotta get to class, the teacher hates me” he rolled his eyes before pulling out a piece of paper and a pen from his pocket. She watched him scribble something down and hold it out to her. “Give me a text later so I have your number. I’ll call you about Friday” She took the paper and popped it inside the book.

“Catch you late Jane” he gave her another one of his smiles, grabbed his bag and raced down the stairs. She pulled the number out of the book just to make sure that she had not imagined what had just happened. Nope! The paper was definitely there and it definitely had his phone number on it.

She held the paper for a few more minutes before placing it back into the book and continuing her work. After all she had to make sure that her work was finished before her date Friday.

She smiled to herself as she thought about it. Her, On a date, With a guy! With that in mind she focussed on the problem that was in front of her.

What to wear?

CHRISTMAS GHOSTS

The icy wind gently brushed her cheek as she made her way down Rhode Island Avenue. Pulling her coat closer round her body Kathy Harrison let out a soft sigh, the breath leaving a small wave of mist in the air. She let her eyes take in her surroundings. Even with the cars and the pollution they emitted; the city was beautiful. Windows, which ignorant workers slaved behind, were encrusted with a thin layer of ice; the unsuspecting people behind it were huddled in the warmth of their offices. She was careful not to slip on the icy patches that covered the road as she made her way to her apartment.

The street glistened from the melted snow that had fallen the night before, and car tyre tracks indented into the cold sludge on the sides of the kerbs. It was a breathtaking sight, especially since the sun was glistening on the snow. There was a romantic element to it, the way the frost clung to everything, like it needed it to survive. She smiled as she thought of the hundreds of people who weren't taking the time to just stop and look at the white city, too consumed by their own thoughts and their own lives to enjoy the winter wonderland that was surrounding them. The way that everything shimmered as the sun hit the ice, the soft mist that consumed the air and the buildings, the sharp pain that stabbed at your body as you walked through it.

She turned left and made her way up the steps to her apartment building. She took the stairs carefully making sure not to slip. She entered the main door of the apartment and pushed the button to the elevator. She shivered slightly as she waited thinking about what Christmas would be like this year. She hadn't cared much for Christmas since her parents had left on Christmas Eve in 1992. She was ten and her brother was fourteen. Even now, at 29 it pained her to think about the meaning of Christmas. The lights, the tree, the presents. It was meaningless to her. To her it was just another day where people got drunk and exchanged gifts whilst listening to music and watching rubbish movies on the television. Christmas didn't mean anything to Kathy, not anymore.

She could still remember the day as if it was only yesterday and not nineteen years ago. It was Christmas Eve and their parents had told them to go to bed early so that Santa would be able to deliver their presents. They had both laughed, neither of them believed in Santa and asked if they could stop up for another hour "Another two for me as I'm older" Lewis had shouted. But their parents were persistent and made

them go to bed. She was awoken a few hours later by Lewis running into her room screaming 'they gone!' He shook her until she woke and explained that their parents were gone. They couldn't be found. Kathy didn't think it was possible and that maybe they had just gone to the neighbours to wish them a Merry Xmas but after a long search they realised that their parents had in fact left them. At Christmas.

She entered the elevator and pressed the button that corresponded to her floor. She carefully leaned against the back of the elevator and closed her eyes. She wasn't looking forward to the work's party. Her colleague Samantha made her promise she would go – even if it was just for an hour. After a long discussion as to why Kathy didn't want to attend and Samantha pushing her, Kathy had agreed to go, for an hour and that was it.

She heard the familiar ding, opened her eyes and left the elevator. She started making her way to her apartment when she was stopped by her neighbour calling out to her from the apartment behind.

"Merry Christmas Kathy."

Kathy turned around and noticed a teenager standing in the doorway. The teenager was roughly eighteen (Kathy wasn't really sure) and looked like she had just finished High School. Maybe she was in College, she had never really asked, she didn't want to take the time to learn who her neighbours were. She was wearing a black tank top that was clinging slightly to her chest and the tight cropped jeans that she wore made the dips and curves of her body more pronounced. She had to be cold, but like most teenagers, she dressed more to gain attention than for comfort and warmth. Her long brown hair rested gently on the top of her shoulders, the gold highlights glistened in the lights in the corridor.

"Merry Christmas Anna."

"So, you doing anything nice this year?" Anna moved slightly and leaned against the wall with her arms folded, slowly chewing gum. 'General adolescent behaviour' Kathy thought to herself as she searched through her bag for her keys hoping to get away as quickly as possible.

"No. I'm just going to be relaxing and writing."

"Oh yeah. I read your first one. It was all about death and that woman, what's her name? Kathleen? Discovered who done it and how just from looking at the remains of the bones"

"It's Katie." Kathy corrected the young teen. Kathy had written and published a book in the little spare time she had. She had based it around the job that she was doing and therefore a lot of the cases were accurate – and the details were immaculate. She would never allow herself to make a mistake. She was a bit of a perfectionist. The book had turned out to be popular, really popular, and there was a demand for a second book to be produced the following year.

"I was nearly right. So you're one of those aren't you? That can tell how someone has died from looking at their bones?"

"I'm a Forensic Pathologist. I study corpses to find out how people died. Its a similar situation." Kathy once again corrected Anna. She was getting a little annoyed. She didn't have time for this.

"Yeah. That's just depressing. Hey, I like your top. Looks warm" Anna tilted her head and gave Kathy a small smile. Kathy looked at her top, she was wearing a red jumper. It was nothing special. She eventually found her keys, the one she needed and inserted it into the lock.

"So is that cutie coming over for Christmas?" Anna blew a small bubble with her gum before again taking up that incessant chewing.

"No. He's seeing his son."

"Aw that's sweet. So is there anything going on between you two?" Anna was referring to Kathy's colleague Ben, who was cute but had no interest in Kathy. Not that she was aware of anyway. Even if he was interested she didn't have time for a boyfriend, what with work and writing. Although she didn't deny he was cute.

"Look Anna. I really do have to go." She stepped over the threshold

"Anna?" A deep voice could be heard from down the corridor. Both Anna and Kathy turned to look at the approaching figure. A smile on Anna's face told Kathy it was obviously someone that Anna knew. The figure drew closer and Kathy could see that he was very attractive. He was in his early 20's, had short brown hair that had been spiked up and was wearing jeans and a white shirt. He placed a soft kiss on Anna's cheek.

"Hey babe"

"Hey" Anna smiled. "Kathy this is Matt. Matt this is Kathy"

"The Bones lady?" Kathy just gave a small nod. She wasn't going to waste more time explaining her job especially to people who wouldn't even understand what her job entailed.

"I have things to do. Merry Christmas Anna." she gave Anna a small smile before turning to Matt "Pleased to meet you."

"You too Bones" Anna laughed and Matt grinned. He thought he was being clever but Kathy knew better. Only Ben could get away with calling her Bones. Although she didn't like it, he rarely called her anything else. It was a nickname he came up with when he started two years ago and it had just stuck. She turned around and made her way into her apartment.

"She's hot" she heard Matt say as she opened her door and looked back long enough to see Anna hit him before she made her way into her apartment. She closed the door and could still hear Anna and Matt giggling in the corridor. She took off her jacket and hung it up on the hook behind the door.

She made her way into the livingroom and lit the fire. In a couple of minutes the room would be warm and basking in a soft glow. In the meantime, she decided to make herself a large cup of hot chocolate, just what she needed to warm her entire body though. She went into the kitchen and put the kettle on then grabbed a large mug and reached into the cupboard for the jar of chocolate. She placed three heaped spoons of the chocolate powder into the mug and replaced the jar in the cupboard. She waited patiently until the familiar click indicated that the kettle had boiled. She put the water into the mug and gently stirred the chocolate and the water together before picking up the mug and making her way back into the livingroom, which was now warm and was indeed, basking in a soft glow.

She sat down on the couch and held the mug tightly trying to warm her hands up. Kathy paused, the warmth and the smell of the chocolate that was drifting through the air made her mouth water. This, was what made her nights alone worth it. Her, hot chocolate and a good book was all she needed.

She thought about what Ben was up to right now. Probably sitting at home, playing computer games. He was twenty seven but admitted to her that he still acted like a child when he was at home and that he was a complete computer geek. His favourite game is Call Of Duty, which meant nothing to her. She pursed her lips, blew across the hot liquid and had just tilted the cup to her mouth when she heard the familiar noise of someone knocking on her door. She sighed, placed the cup on her table and got up to answer the door. She hoped it wasn't Anna wanting to chat to her. She really wasn't in the mood. She had had a long day at work and the nights were the only time that she could have what she called "me time".

She opened the door not knowing what to expect but ready to dismiss who ever was stopping her from enjoying her 'comfy night'. She was struck with the biggest shock of her life. There standing in the corridor, was her brother Lewis, holding what looked like a rucksack although it looked a bit tattered. He was thirty three now but still looked like the same fourteen year old boy who had tried his hardest to keep them together after their parents had left. Although that hadn't lasted as long as they both hoped. They were cared for by foster carers. Sadly no one could care for them both and they were placed with separate carers. They were separated from the one person they loved, the one person that had stayed constant when everything else was falling apart around them.

"Lewis what are you doing here?" She hadn't seen him for over three years. They had talked often but they hadn't seen each other since her twenty sixth birthday. It was coming upto the anniversary of their parents leaving. She hoped he didn't want to talk about that - she had got over the painful memories many years ago and there was nothing they could do now that would bring them back.

"Merry Christmas Kath. Can I come in?" Kathy stepped aside so that her brother could enter. She was still in shock to see him on her doorstep.

"I knew you would be spending Christmas alone Kath, so I thought I would come and keep you company." Kathy closed the door behind her and hugged her brother.

Lewis dropped the rucksack and hugged his sister back before gently pulling away. "You look great Kath"

"So do you. Come and sit down." Kathy and Lewis went into the livingroom and she sat back on the couch whilst Lewis sat on the chair opposite her.

"So how are Amy and the kids?"

"They're good thanks. Happy."

"That's good" Kathy took a sip of her hot chocolate and placed the mug back onto the table. She hadn't met them yet, but she knew how her brother felt about them. He had taken on her two children and helped to raise them like his own. Helen, who was six, and Joshua who was four. She was proud of her brother for taking on someone else's children and knew he would do anything to make sure that those children would never have to go through the same thing.

Lewis retrieved the rucksack from the hallway and sat back on the seat. He opened the rucksack and handed Kathy two packages, both small but wrapped beautifully.

"What are these?" Kathy took the packages and looked at them. She noticed the gift tags and took a look at them.

"Kath, have a good Christmas. Love mum and dad xx"

"Lewis is this some kind of joke?" Kathy couldn't believe what she was looking at. I had to be some kind of joke.

"These are the presents that mum and dad bought for you the Christmas they left. You refused to open them then, I thought that maybe you could open them now"

"What makes you think that I want to open them?" Why, after nineteen years, would she want to relive the worst time of her life? And why had he kept them for all this time?

"Well we've found out what happened to mum and dad, and I wanted to apologise for leaving you. I shouldn't have. I don't want you to forget Christmas because of what happened"

"Lewis..."

"No Kath. I owe you"

"You kept them?"

"Of course I did. All these years. I didn't know how to bring it up or even if it was appropriate but I thought that now we are both grown up enough to deal with this. I've had them hidden in my drawer since that Christmas.

Kathy looked at the presents again. She wanted to open them but when she touched the ribbon she felt like that ten year old again. The little girl who had refused when Lewis had tried to make her open them back then. She looked up at Lewis, took a deep breath and slowly untied the ribbon.

She gently unwrapped the paper like she did when she was younger. She didn't like to waste wrapping paper and had kept it all in a box that she had thrown away when she was being taken into foster care. That wrapping paper had many memories. Memories that she had wanted to forget.

She pulled out the first present and laughed slightly. It was R.E.M's "Automatic For The People". She remembered constantly nagging her parents for it telling them how much the album meant to her, and without it she could never be whole. She laughed as she thought about how silly she must have seemed.

She placed the album onto the couch and picked up the other present. It was smaller than the other one and felt lighter.

She carefully unwrapped it like she did with the other present. She took the wrapping off and noticed the word 'Tiffany's' that was embossed in gold lettering on the front of a small red box inside. She opened up the box and inside resting on the black foam was a small tiger necklace. She picked up the necklace from the box. It was beautiful. She knew it would have been her mother's idea. Her mother loved tigers – Kathy never understood why until she was an adult and learned to appreciate the beauty and sleekness of the creatures. She remembered that she and her mother used to spend time drawing and painting pictures of tigers – their spare bedroom was dedicated to anything that involved tigers – photos, ornaments, statues, rugs, clothes, toys. Her mother had been obsessed.

A little tear rolled down her cheek as she ran her thumb over the tiger and placed it gently back into the box. Lewis got up, walked to the couch and put an arm around his sister. Neither of them said anything, they didn't have to. Lewis had given Kathy the best Christmas present she could have wanted. Faith.

BROKEN

Susan,

It's exactly two years since you were taken away from me. Two years since my life became worthless. Two years since I've loved. I can imagine you shouting at me telling me that it's time to move on and allow myself to love again. But the problem is Susan – I can't and I don't want to. The thing is, you were the one who took my heart and you are the only one who can give it back. I am incapable of letting anyone else in, to allow myself to feel for them what I felt for you.

I can still remember the day I helped you get that tin of Tomato Soup from the top shelf in the supermarket and how you flashed me that perfect smile when you thanked me. I will never forget the scent of coconut in your hair or those ultra hugging jeans that you were wearing on that day. You put the soup in your basket and walked off before I had the chance to talk to you. So I followed you around the store, hoping to bump into you and make it seem like a coincidence. When I finally did I asked for your number and arranged a date. You have no idea what it meant to me when you agreed - you had me mesmerised and I needed to get to know you better.

I was smitten with you from that first day. It sounds corny but I knew from that instant that you were the girl I wanted to spend the rest of my life with. I was captivated by you. Everything you said had my attention and I found that I wanted to know everything about you.

You told me you had just turned twenty seven and that you were a financial consultant. I told you I was 30 in September and that I was a manager of a large retail store. You laughed when I told you which one. I loved that laugh. So sweet, so innocent; it was one of the things that attracted me to you.

That night was a fantastic night. I am not afraid to admit that. The entire night I had butterflies in my stomach. It was a perfect date, I was so disappointed when it had to end. I hoped you would want to see me again and that you felt the same way for me.

Standing on your porch I wanted so bad to kiss you but I also wanted to be a gentleman. You thanked me for a great night and leaned in close, the smell of coconut lingering. Your lips brushed mine gently and I waited a few seconds before I heated up the kiss. After we finally pulled apart we were both flushed from the intensity of the kiss. I wished you a goodnight and watched as you made your way into the building. I made my way back to the car my heart pounding inside my chest.

We became inseparable from then. We were always together and when we weren't we were always phoning and texting. There was never a time when more than a few hours went by without talking to each other. It didn't take me long to fall in love with you - there was so much to love.

After a few months I asked you to move in. I never thought that it was too soon because it felt so right. I was both excited and nervous when you said yes. I had lived with someone before but it had turned out horribly and I was terrified that something bad would happen again and I didn't want to lose you. I helped you pack and was surprised by how much stuff you owned. I wasn't even sure if my place would be able to store it all but I didn't say anything. Like I never commented that those elephant statues you kept were the most hideous things I'd never seen because I loved you and you loved them I didn't say anything and allowed you to keep them in our bedroom.

We had our ups and downs like all couples do but nothing was too serious that we broke up. Though I will never forget the times you made me sleep on the couch. The few times that we did argue I always got so scared that you would walk out, that you would leave me. That I would lose you. But you never left, you told me you loved me and that we would make it work.

Before we knew it we were celebrating our first year together, then our second and our third. On our third anniversary I proposed. I think I wanted to propose from the moment I met you – you had stolen my heart away that first smile but I wanted to make sure that you were the one. I wanted to make sure that you knew me completely before I took things further. I was a nervous wreck when I got down on one knee in that restaurant. My heart felt like it was going to beat out of my chest. My mouth was dry and I put all my strength into not falling over. But there was nothing for me to worry about – you said yes.

We didn't decide on a date, we didn't want to rush things. We wanted to save up and make sure that we would be able to afford a day we would never forget – to make it special. I knew you had dreams, I saw you looking through bridal magazines when you thought I wasn't looking. I knew you wanted the fairytale dream wedding that you'd probably dreamed about when you were younger and I wanted to give you that. It didn't matter if it took 5, 10 or 15 years I would make it happen.

I wish I had chosen to marry you sooner because now I will never have the chance to see you walk down the aisle, to see you in your beautiful dress. I will not be

able to declare my love for you in front of our friends and family or show you how much I loved you after the wedding.

I'll never get that phone call out of my head. Will never forget the words they said. No matter how sympathetic they tried to sound, they still told me that you were gone. That you were no longer with me.

"Is this Mr Carnes"

"It is yes"

"Good evening Mr Carnes. I'm Dr Harvard from Chelsea Hospital. I'm afraid I have some bad news" My body suddenly went stiff. I didn't even know what the news was but it obviously wasn't good.

"What is it?"

"I'm afraid Susan Henderson was involved in a car accident. She was badly injured and I'm afraid she passed away at the scene" That was the moment that my entire life fell apart. They explained that a drunk driver had crashed into you. The impact had been so great that he died on impact and you suffered severe head trauma and internal bleeding. They were surprised that you stayed alive as long as you did.

I came to see you at the hospital. They tried to talk me out of seeing your body, telling me it would be best if I remembered you as you were but I needed to see you, I needed to have closure. They walked me to the morgue, you were taken straight there. I didn't know what to expect when they showed me your body but I was nearly sick when I got a glimpse of you. Your body was completely bruised and was covered in cuts. They had tried their best to clean you up but I could still see the stains from the blood. Your blood. I could barely recognise you, the beautiful girl that I had fallen in love with was nothing more than a battered body lying in a morgue.

God Susan, I really wish you were here with me. I wish I could hold you once again in my arms. Smell that coconut shampoo that you loved so much and to kiss you once more. But that will never happen again because you were torn away from me. I will never forgive the drunken guy that took you away from me. I wish he was made to suffer like he has made me suffer.

I am never going to forget you babe. I'll never forget that smile, or the way your cheeks crumpled when you laughed. The way you still made me weak when you were near me even after seven years. You were my world. You were my soul mate. My life was complete once I met you and now that has been taken away. I am nothing more than an empty shell, going about my daily chores robotically.

I need you. I need you to piece me back together, to make me whole again. I am not able to do this anymore without you Susan. I know you will want me to love again but my heart will always belong to you. I hope your happy Susan, wherever you are and I hope you know how much I still love you.

Till we meet again babe.

My love always.

Jack x

BETRAYED

As soon as she opened the front door she knew something was wrong. There was a strong smell of coffee coming from the kitchen and there were two cups on the counter. She started to walk to the counter but stopped when she heard a soft giggle coming from the bedroom. That was definitely not right. She walked quietly to the closed bedroom door and continued to listen. There was more giggling and then a moan - a moan that she knew all too well. She felt the tears beginning to well up and she swallowed them back. She didn't want to hear this. She didn't want to think that her husband could be in there with another woman.

They were both forty three and had been together ten years, married for seven. They had met on her thirty third birthday at a club her friends dragged her to. He had offered to buy her a drink and that was that. She found out his name was Martin he had turned thirty three a few months previous (and was hating) it and he worked in a consulting agency as an administrative assistant.

From then on they had been together. They got married on her thirty sixth birthday to honour the day that had brought them together. The day had been beautiful. August 18th. The sun had been shining and the castle they had the wedding at looked like something out of a fairytale. She had decided to go with a simple but formal gown, something that would be elegant but show off her curves.

Martin had looked so handsome in his tuxedo. He had decided on a pale yellow shirt underneath to add some colour to the outfit. He also wore a yellow tie and a small yellow rose on the pocket of his tux. He stood next to Matt, his best friend since third grade. He smiled as she walked down the aisle and stood beside him. The ceremony was intimate and afterwards a reception was held in another one of the rooms in the castle. She had never felt happier. She had married the guy of her dreams and was surrounded by the people she loved the most.

But now that was being taken away from her as her husband was in their marital bed making love to another woman. The tears stung her eyes as she pushed open the door. There, amongst the pile of bed sheets, was her husband wrapped around a petite blonde. "Lowri" Martin scrambled around pulling the duvet and sheets around himself and the woman beside him. Lowri didn't say anything, she just stood there and watched. The woman looked over at Martin "I should go" she wrapped the

sheet around her and grabbed her clothes from the heap on the floor. Running out of the room she gave Lowri an apologetic look as she passed. She continued to stand in the doorway and stare as her husband put on his boxer shorts. "Lowri. What just happened?" He started to make his way towards her but stopped when Lowri turned around and walked out of the room.

Lowri could taste salt on the tip of her tongue. She hadn't realised how quickly the tears were flowing. She started to make her way out of the flat. Martin put his hand on her shoulder to stop her from leaving.

"Lowri please. Let me explain" Lowri didn't want to hear it. Instead she turned around and slapped him, her hand stung as it connected with his cheek but she didn't care. Leaving him with a shocked expression on his face, she left the flat with what little pride she had left.

Martin stood behind the door clutching his cheek where his wife had slapped him. He deserved it though, he knew he had but he was surprised at the strength she had in her. He leaned against the wall and sighed. He had been such an idiot. He had thrown away the one thing that had meant the most to him. He put his head in his hands and wondered how he had allowed himself to give in so easily.

The woman's name is Carla and she was a colleague from work. She had been hinting for a while that she was interested in him but because he was married, he had ignored her advances and kept his distance. But one night, when the both of them were staying late to complete some important documentation, he didn't stop her as she came onto him. His mind was screaming at him that it was wrong, that he shouldn't do it but he couldn't bring himself to stop.

Martin and Lowri had been together coming up ten years. Things were still great between them and he loved her more than anything but there was a part of him that wanted to see if there was anything that he was missing. Part of him wondered what it would be like to be with someone else for just a few minutes. He didn't want to cheat, didn't want to hurt Lowri but he couldn't bring himself to stop, to push Carla away.

He allowed himself to be intimate with her and this was the consequence of his actions. Did he really think he would be able to get away with it? That he could

bring her back to his marital home and not get caught? But he didn't expect Lowri to be home so early, although he knew that was not an excuse. He should never have allowed anything to start – and now a month later, he had finally got what he deserved.

She knocked loudly on the door, her knuckles hurting as they rapped against the wood. Her eyes were red and puffy from the tears. She had tried to wipe her eyes before turning up here but it was no use, there was no way to escape what she had just witnessed. She needed to speak to Michael.

The door opened and Michael looked at the dishevelled person in front of him “Lowri, what the hell has happened?”

Lowri sniffled and wiped her nose on the bottom of her sleeve “Martin. He – he cheated on me” the tears started again, Michael stepped aside to let her in then closed the door behind them both.

“Do you want some tea? You can then tell me what happened?” Lowri nodded and sat down. Michael, her brother, was just over three years older than her. As sister and brother they looked very similar, both had dark brown hair and green eyes and both had the same shaped face with a cute button nose.

Michael kissed her cheek and made his way to the kitchen. She leaned against the back of the couch and continued to cry. She couldn't believe that he would, or could, do that to her. She thought he loved her. Had the last ten years been a lie? A few minutes later her brother returned and placed a tea tray on the table, sat down and pulled her into his arms.

“He-he cheated” Lowri sobbed again, her voice muffled by the jumper her brother was wearing. Michael rubbed her back, not wanting to force her to say anything more than she wanted to say. Lowri pulled back gently and once again wiped her eyes.

“I left my purse at home so I went to pick it up at lunch time and he was there. He was with another woman, and in our bed”. The thought made her feel sick and she had to stop herself from throwing up. She swallowed hard, the taste of vomit lingering at the back of her throat.

“That bastard!” Michael wrapped his arms tighter around his sister, not believing what she was telling him. He had liked Martin. He thought that he was good for his sister. He had helped pull her out of the shell she’d retreated into after being hurt too many times before. But now he was the one causing her to hurt, and that was something that he would not deal with.

Lowri sipped her tea trying to take the taste of vomit and salt away from the back of her throat. “Why Mike? Why would he do that to me? He knows that I have been hurt in the past. Why would he want to hurt me?” Her hand was shaking so Michael took the cup from her and placed it once again onto the tea tray.

“Because he is an idiot Low” He remembered the last time she had been on his couch crying because the guy she thought she loved had been caught cheating on her with her so called best friend. It had taken months for Lowri to even consider going on another date, let alone allowing herself to let another guy into her life – and into her heart.

“I thought he loved me”

Michael didn’t know how to respond without saying the wrong thing so he kissed her forehead and held her close. “Baby, I hate seeing you like this” he pushed her hair behind her ear and kissed her forehead once again. He had always been protective of his sister and hated to see that people would walk over her. Even worse he hated the fact that she always allowed herself to be walked over. He had told her too many times that she needed to start standing up for herself.

“God Mike, how could I have been so stupid? I really thought that this time around it was going to be different. I thought that I had finally found the right guy. But now..” her body shook violently as the tears continued to roll. She hated that Martin had caused her to feel like this, that he had made her lose all trust for him after the ten years they had been together.

“Sweetie. You know I’m not good at these things, never have been so I’m not even going to bother trying to tell you what to do. All I can say is follow what your heart is telling you. I’ll be by your side no matter what”.

Lowri smiled weakly at her brother. That was the one thing she loved the most about him, that no matter what she did he would always be by her side, ready to pick up the pieces or to comfort her when she needed him. He had always been the doting big brother, even in school, he made sure that everyone knew he was her brother and if they messed with her, then they messed with him.

In some cases this was a good thing, but it also meant that getting a date was difficult because he would always interrogate them first.

“See, there’s the girl I love so much. Now drink your tea and take a shower. You can stay here tonight and we will figure out what to do in the morning, okay?”

“Okay” Lowri was thankful that Michael was taking charge because otherwise she would probably go back home to Martin just because she would have had no where else to stay. Getting up slowly she made her way to the spare bedroom and closed the door. She was tired and needed to sleep, so taking off her shoes, she lay on the bed and closed her eyes, the tears beginning to slow down.

Michael stayed in the living room watching the closed door, wishing he could do more to help his sister, to help take the pain away. He thought he could speak to Martin so that Lowri would not have to face to him – to find out why he would think of hurting his sister. Not that he was interested in any explanation offered. He would prefer to inflict pain on Martin, retribution for the pain he caused his sister.

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A couple of weeks had passed since Lowri had discovered that her husband had been cheating on her and she was slowly becoming the person that she’d been before. She had pulled herself back together after realising that she could not allow Martin to ruin her life. She was stronger than that, she still had people around who loved her and she needed to make sure that she got on with her life.

Martin had stopped calling her. For the first week he would constantly call and text her – asking her to allow him to explain what had happened and that he loved her. Part of her wanted to listen to what he had to say and how he would explain his actions but her brother advised her against this. He warned her that Martin would just suck her back into his life, right where he wanted her.

She knew Michael was right but it was also difficult for her. She had been together with Martin for so long she wasn’t sure how well she could cope without him. She got Michael to delete any texts and remove any voice mails Martin left so that she would not be tempted to access them. The texts and calls eventually stopped once he realised that Lowri was not going to reply.

She finally came to terms with the fact she was alone again, that she wouldn’t have anyone to curl up with at nights and watch cheesy television programmes with.

Her nights were spent curled up in bed alone clutching the sheets thinking about the nights she and Martin had spent watching old time movies in each others arms.

She made her way into the kitchen and saw her brother was already up and tucking in to a bowl of cereal. Michael looked at her and then at the clock “Wow!” She lives before noon”, she hit him gently. It was true though. She hadn’t been getting out of bed before noon and when she did it was as if she was running on auto pilot mode-she was there physically but not mentally. Today she had finally made an effort to get dressed and it looked like she had put a comb through her hair.

She sat down on the couch and reached for the television remote. “I think I’ll go to town today. I have spent too much time cooped up here. It’s time I got out”

Michael swallowed his cereal and smiled at his sister “That’s great. Do you want me to come with you?” Lowri shook her head. She knew there was a chance she would bump into Martin and she didn’t want Michael to see him.

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Walking around the shops made her feel a lot better. She had finally come out of her room and left the house and the fresh air was doing some good. She couldn’t afford to buy anything, she hadn’t been to work since she had discovered Martin with that woman but it felt good to get out of the house.

She thought about what she would do if she saw Martin. Part of her hoped she would see him as she wanted to see how he looking and how he was coping. Had he already moved on with that woman? Was he struggling to cope without her? The other part of her was terrified in case she did see him. She wouldn’t know what to say to him, was unsure she wanted him to see the person that she had become. Weak and pale. Michael had commented that she had lost a lot of weight, but she found it hard to eat food. Whatever she tried to eat tasted like glue so her weight had dropped and her skin had turned pale and thin.

She decided that she would deal with Martin as and when she needed to. She found herself a quiet coffee shop and sat in the corner of the room sipping a latte. She didn’t notice when Martin walked past the café, looking down at the pavement, his hands buried deep in his pockets.

**

Martin wasn't coping. He was lost without Lowri around. It wasn't that he couldn't do things for himself but for the past ten years he had been with someone, had someone there who would support him and comfort him. Someone who he could come home to, talk about his day and curl up on the couch with. That special person to watch old black and white movies with.

But he had lost that. Thrown it all away for a month of passion that was nothing more than a bit of fun. When he and Lowri had celebrated her forty third birthday, ten years together and their seventh wedding anniversary, he should have realised that Lowri was the person he was meant to be with. Instead he had continued with the affair and was now dealing with the consequences.

. He had lost his wife. Work was also difficult, his colleagues gave him looks of disgust whenever they passed him. They thought he was to blame and that he had lured Carla into bed. She had handed in her resignation, saying that she couldn't work there anymore. She couldn't bare to look at Martin let alone be in the same room as him. So she quit the company and now his colleagues were treating him as if it was his fault – No he didn't push her away, but she was the one who had come onto him.

**

Lowri got herself into a routine as the weeks past. She started to put her life back together. She went back to work, saw her friends again and she looked like he person she was before all of this happened. Michael was proud of who his sister had become – she was stronger and more confident.

She planned on moving out soon. As much as she loved being with Michael she needed to find her own place, she needed to get used to being on her own. The calls and texts from Martin had stopped from Martin and she was beginning to get used to life without him around. That didn't mean she didn't miss him though, she missed him terribly.

**

Days turned to weeks and weeks turned to months and before she realised, two months had passed since she and Martin had split up. She couldn't believe she had

been strong enough to be without him that long that she had managed to move on and carry on with her life. She was laying in bed reading when her mobile phone rang from across the room and Lowri made her way to the table to pick it up. She read the name on the screen. It was Martin. She made a quick decision that she would answer the call. Pressing the accept button, she put the phone to her ear and was silent.

“Lowri. Is that you? I hope it is. Look its been two months will you please talk to me? I know you're hurt but please just say something even if its to yell. I will be at Tracy's tomorrow at three please be there” She kept silent throughout the entire call, scared of what she would say if she opened her mouth. When he finished talking she just hung up. Lowri placed the phone back onto the desk. She didn't know what to think. She had to decide if she wanted to see him or not. She knew she had to discuss her situation with Michael although she could predict his answer, but she needed to hear what Martin had to say. She felt that she was strong enough to deal with seeing him.

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“Are you crazy? All this time and now you want to see him?” Michael screamed. Lowri had just informed him that she was going to be meeting up with Martin and he wasn't taking the news well.

“It's my life Michael. If I want to see him I will see him”

“Then what have I been doing over the past two goddamn months if it wasn't helping you get over that bastard? Don't come running back to me next time” Michael stormed out of the apartment slamming the door shut.

Lowri sighed and fell back into the couch. She expected Michael to be angry with her because he had a point. For the last two months he had picked up the pieces of her often broken heart and put her back together. He had held her as she cried and pulled her through and now here she was going to risk it all again.

She knew she was being selfish but he was her husband after all and even though he had cheated she wanted to see him. She knew it was a work colleague that he'd had an affair with and that it had lasted approximately a month but it wasn't love.

Martin had called to Michael's place one night and tried to talk to Lowri but Michael had intervened saying she didn't want to see him. Martin tried explaining the situation

to Michael hoping he would pass it onto Lowri. Instead Michael punched Martin and told him to say the hell away from his sister.

Lowri had heard everything that Martin had said and heard how the affair had begun. It had sickened her to think that he was working with her everyday and she thought there was a high chance he could still be sleeping with her – made easier by the fact that his wife had left him.

She had every right to see her husband though and she didn't care if her brother did feel pissed off. She was thankful for everything he had done for her but she also needed to start being more independent.

**

Tracy's diner was situated on the outskirts of London. It was a small and intimate cafe and had been run by Tracy for twenty years. She was now in her mid sixties but she refused to sell it and retire *'I'm going to be here until I'm on my death bed'* she would reply to anyone who approached her about selling.

Martin sat in their regular booth and waited to see if Lowri would show. Tracy's had been a regular location for the couple - going there at least once a week. Tracy had heard about what had happened between them and decided to leave him alone for a few minutes. 3:10 came and Martin was beginning to think she wasn't going to show up. He drank the last of the coffee that Tracy had brought him and stood up. He turned to grab his coat when a voice interrupted him.

“You're not going are you?”

Martin turned to the familiar voice. “I didn't think you were coming” Martin sat back down and motioned for Lowri to sit. She sat beside him and noticed the empty coffee cup.

“I wasn't going to. I stood outside for ten minutes trying to decide if I really wanted to do this or not” She motioned to Tracy to bring her a cup of coffee, Tracy knew how she liked it, they had been there so many times.

There was a short silence as neither of them knew what to say. So Lowri decided that she would be the one to break the silence.

“Martin, you hurt me in a way I never thought was possible” Tracy placed the coffee down in front of her and walked off quickly before she could hear any more.

“I know” Said Martin.

“I’m not done” she knew she was getting snappy with him but she needed him to know that she wasn’t the walk over she used to be. He had forced her to become stronger, forced her to see that she had to gain some confidence and become a stronger person. All her life she had allowed people to tell her what to do and she would do it. That was how she had been hurt so many times in the past. But she wouldn’t allow that to happen again. She had become a different person over the past couple of months and it was because of Martin.

“Sorry”

“You hurt me more than I thought you could or would, hurt me. But I have also grown because of you. Without having you around has made me stronger. I am not the same woman I was before I left and I will not allow you to hurt me again. I deserve better than that. I am better than that”

Martin nodded. “God Lowri I am so sorry. I don’t know why I did it. I really don’t. There was a part of me that wanted to see what it would be like to be with another woman. I know that sounds bad. You know I love you but I am an idiot. You know I am not good at explaining myself and there is no explanation for why I did what I did. But you need to know that I am never going to do it again. I have experienced what its like to not have you around and I hated every moment of it”

Lowri looked Martin in the eyes and knew he was being genuine. His eyes were glazed as he fought back the tears, he didn’t want Lowri to know he was weaker than her. Lowri sighed softly, her eyes looking around the room.

He knew that she had been cheated on before and he had promised he would never do that to her. He said he hated anyone who would think it was right to cheat on their partner and yet he had done exactly that to her.

“But the thing is I love you and you are the man that I want to be with. You have to promise me that you will never do that to me again”

Martin took her hand and squeezed it gently “I promise you Lowri. I will never hurt you again. Being away from you made me realise what I had and what I could have lost. I swear I will never do that to you again”

Lowri squeezed his hand back. Even though she was taking him back she wouldn’t be able to forgive him so easily. He had to make her trust him again so that she could be touched by him without her skin squirming, knowing that he had touched another woman like that. It would take time.

They had a lot of talking to do and many issues that needed to be worked through before their relationship could be like it was before the infidelity. But as long as both of them were willing and they wanted to be together then they could and would make it work.

Because after all, once you've found the person that you are meant to be with, you are with them, through thick and thin, no matter what.

The End