

I glance around and spot Leah Becker, sitting alone at one of the tables. Her parents are in a deep conversation with another couple a few feet away. I would walk up to her, but she'd probably ignore me.

Mrs. Reynolds puts her hand on mine. "Is she a friend?"

"Used to be."

"Go talk to her."

"I wouldn't even know what to say."

Mrs. Reynolds lets out a frustrated breath. "Suit yourself, child. But when you're an old bird like me you'll be wishing you had more friends in your life. Being alone isn't fun, is it?"

"No. Being alone isn't fun."

I look over at my mom, who is now line dancing. She doesn't look alone. In fact, she hasn't looked this happy for a long time. Mom smiles at Mr. Reynolds and he smiles back.

Mr. Reynolds. Lou. My mom's boss. My boss' son. Well, whatever his name is, it's clear to me he has the hots for my mom.

I don't know if I should be embarrassed, angry, or happy for her.

NINETEEN – Caleb

My pants are too fucking tight and this shirt has so much starch in it I feel like a mannequin. But I'm here, at the Fall Festival. Once I'm done acting like the model son, I'm outta here.

I spot my parents by the food pavilion, talking with another couple. Nothing has changed since I've been back. My sister is still a zombie, but it's worse now, because since she ran out of the lunchroom Monday, she's ignored me. My parents haven't brought up the accident since I've been back. I tried to talk about it, but I've been shut down.

When I walk up to my parents, my mom smiles. "We were waiting for you, Caleb."

"Well, I'm here," I say unenthusiastically, not in the least ready to put on this show.

My dad looks tired; there are circles under his eyes and he's not walking as tall and straight as I remember. "Caleb, do you remember Dr. and Mrs. Tremont? Dr. Tremont owns a dental practice in Denton, and just opened one up in Paradise now that Dr. Kryzanowich retired."

"Really?"

Dr. Tremont points to the east. "Over by Central and Carriagedale Roads. You know, the new building next to the Paradise cinemas."

I shake my head. "I haven't seen it yet."

"Where have you been hiding out?" Dr. Tremont says, laughing. "It's the building with the big tooth out front."

My dad is turning red under his collar. "I'm starving," he says before I tell Dr. Tremont that I haven't seen his big toothed building because I've been locked up in jail for the past year. "Why don't you taste some of my wife's dish while Caleb *finds his friends*."

Mom does a really good job of directing the Tremonts to the buffet table and away from me. Do you think Mom realizes it wasn't the best idea to try and pretend like I'm a perfect son? My sister joins them, totally ignoring me.

The Fall Festival is a zoo. It's hard to believe Paradise is a small town when there are so many people around. Brian and the guys are hanging out near the parking lot.

"Wow, Caleb, who dressed you?" Brian quips, shaking his head in disbelief.

I grimace. "Would you believe it if I told you my mother did?"

Brian nods. "Yeah. Paradise wasn't the same without you, man. But those clothes *have got to go*."

Drew chuckles while he lights a cigarette. "You're right, Brian. Paradise isn't the same. I saw Mrs. Armstrong dancing with that guy from the diner. They looked pretty tight. Do you think they're... you, know? God knows Maggie's not gettin' any. That girl needs a bunch more surgeries before she'll attract any dude. Maybe she could get a prom date over the internet."

Nobody laughs, because Drew is not funny. He's been a jerk ever since I came back, trying his best to piss me off on purpose.

Tristan throws a football in the air. “We’re heading over to the field to play ball. Let’s go before our moms try to make us dance with them.”

I take off the ridiculous shirt while I play, but my balls are being strangled by the pants I’m wearing. After forty-five minutes, we head back. But when Tristan and Brian are ahead of us, I grab Drew by the shoulder and push him back into a tree. I take him completely off guard. He has no clue I’m tempted to kick his ass. One thing I learned at the DOC from the inmates... take them when they least expect it.

“Here’s the deal,” I say low and harsh as I grab his shirt and twist it up close to his throat. “You stop bringing up Maggie or jail or the accident. Got it? If you want to keep running your mouth off, that’s fine, but next time you do it you’ll find my fist in it.

Guaranteed.”

“I was just kidding,” Drew chokes out, a faint thread of hysteria in his voice. “Jeez, Caleb, lighten up.”

I let go of his shirt, but give him one last warning. “Up until two weeks ago I was living with a bunch of gang members. Don’t tell me to lighten up.”

It’s Thursday night, five days after the festival. I’m in Kendra’s bedroom while her parents are at some dinner function. We’re supposed to study; we’ve both got tests tomorrow.

Unfortunately, I realized about a half hour ago she’s not interested in studying. Kendra is strutting in front of me, modeling different outfits she bought at the mall yesterday. “Well...” she says, showing off a designer dress. “What do you think?”

I’m busy reading about the *Magna Carta*. “I can’t flunk this test, Kend.”

She puts her hands on her hips and pouts. “I swear you pay more attention to the girls at school than you do to me.”

I look up from my book. “Are you kidding me?”

“No. Samantha Hunter is, like, lusting after you during gym class and you’re falling for it. And I heard you and Emily Steinway were having a pretty intense conversation in biology.”

“I haven’t said two words to Samantha, Kend. And Emily and I are bio partners. What are you doing, spying on me? I’d be glad to tell everyone we’re back together. You’re the one who wants to keep our relationship a damn secret.”

This week we’ve met at the forest preserve, under the high school bleachers, and now I had to enter her house through the back door so none of her neighbors would see me coming in. I’m sick of sneaking around.

“I told you my father is up for election in November, Caleb. His daughter can’t be seen dating an ex-con.”

She says it so easily. There’s not a speck of apology or hesitation in her voice as she spurts out the word “ex-con.”

“I gotta go,” I say, then close my history book.

She comes toward me, placing her hand on my chest. “Don’t go. I’ll make it worth your while.”

“What are you talking about?”

She slowly pulls the spaghetti straps off her shoulder, revealing bare skin. A few seconds later she's stripped her dress off and is standing in front of me wearing only a black lace bra and matching thong.

My gaze travels over her creamy white skin. Hell, yeah, I want this. But she's not acting like a girlfriend. She doesn't have to strip to keep me here. She doesn't have to use her body to lure me.

This is so fucked up. "Kendra..."

She steps toward me, putting her finger on my lips to stop me from talking. "Shh, I hear my parents in the hallway," she whispers.

Shit.

Sure enough there's a knock on her bedroom door a second later. "Kendra, you home?" her mom says through the door.

"Uh, yeah," Kendra says loudly as she picks up her discarded dress. "Caleb, get in the closet," she whispers.

This is seriously not happening. "I'm not getting in the closet," I say. There's no way I'm going to get locked up again, even in my girlfriend's closet instead of a cell.

"Shh, they're going to hear you."

Her mom knocks again and says, "Who are you talking to? Kendra, open the door."

Kendra scurries to get her dress back on. "Nobody, Mom, I just have the radio on. I'm getting dressed. I'll be out in a minute, okay?"

"Hurry up. Senator Boyle came all the way back here to meet you," her mom says, then I hear footsteps moving away from the door.

"When are you going to tell them we're together?" I ask Kendra. "After the election?"

"Can we talk about that later?" she whispers as she quickly checks out her appearance in her mirror. I watch as she rolls massive amounts of lip gloss on her lips. Cherry flavor wafts to my nostrils and I wonder how long I can be stuck in this cherry-scented room before I pass out.

I open the window.

"Caleb, what are you doing?"

I throw my history book to the ground below, praying it'll still be intact when I retrieve it. Then I heave one foot over the ledge. "Leaving."

"It's a two-story house. You'll kill yourself."

I'm not about to hide in her room like a prisoner. Besides, if I jump hard enough and high enough, I just might be able to catch a branch on the tree a few feet away from the window.

She runs toward me. "Don't, CB."

I stare right into her blue eyes. *Why, not? Because you love me, because you don't want me to get hurt... because you want to take me downstairs and announce to your parents and their friends that no matter what happened in the past, we're together and nobody can separate us?*

"I'll get into trouble if they see you," she announces.

“See you on the other side,” I say to Kendra before standing on the window ledge, saying a quick prayer, and taking a leap.

TWENTY – Maggie

Mrs. Reynolds is waiting for me on the back swing with the muumuu in hand when I get to her house, just like she's done since my first day on the job. I tried protesting the offending garment with no success. So now I put it on and look like a complete dork as I'm working.

It's not like I need to worry about looking good, anyway. Caleb and his friends said the only way I'd even get a date for prom was to advertise on the internet. I heard them at the Fall Festival talking about me. I cried that night because I can't turn back the clock and erase what happened.

Caleb stood there with the guys as if he had nothing to do with making me this way. His non-reaction hurt more than Drew's words.

"Today we're going to clean the attic," Mrs. Reynolds announces. "Here, take this broom. I'll bring the dustpan and pail."

"What about planting bulbs?" I ask.

"I'm sick of looking at bulbs. We can continue planting tomorrow."

She leads me up the stairway to the attic. "Don't close the door, it'll lock us in."

"That's dangerous," I say. And scary, like something out of a horror movie. There's a door stopper that she puts in place before we enter. It's a small, dark place filled with boxes and pictures and... spider webs. "Mrs. Reynolds?"

"Yes, Margaret."

"I'm afraid of spiders."

"Why?"

"Because they have eight creepy legs, they bite, and they have sticky string that comes out of their butts to capture bugs before they suck their blood."

I think Mrs. Reynolds is going to laugh at me. But she doesn't. Instead she says, "Spiders control the insect population. They're a necessity and that's all there is to it."

While that might be true, I still don't like them. But that doesn't stop Mrs. Reynolds from leading me farther into the attic--pail, dustpan and all. I'm ready to go into a rendition of "It's a Hard Knock Life." I look around. This attic is definitely creepy--large trunks in one corner and moving boxes in the other.

Mrs. Reynolds finds an old chair and sits in it. "You can start by dusting the trunks first."

Thank God those are in the middle of the floor, untouched by webs. The old lady is totally prepared. She pulls a rag and a can of Endust out of the pail. I spray the top of a wooden trunk, cleaning it until it shines.

"Open it," Mrs. Reynolds says.

I look at her, unsure. Go on.

I unhook the latch, lift the top, and peer inside.

The first thing I see is a framed picture of a man and woman. “Is this you?”

“Yes, with my late husband, Albert, may he rest in peace.”

In the picture a much younger Mrs. Reynolds is wearing a knee-length tailored dress and satin gloves that go up over her elbows. Mr. Reynolds isn’t even looking into the camera, he’s gazing at Mrs. Reynolds as if she were a rare diamond. “Did you get married young?”

“I was twenty and he was twenty-four. We were very much in love.”

I hand the picture to her. “I wish my parents loved each other. They’re divorced.”

“Yes, well, life does keep going on, doesn’t it?”

“Yep.” Even after the accident, when I knew I’d never be able to walk normally again or play tennis anymore, life kept rolling on.

Whether I wanted it to or not.

Mrs. Reynolds leans over and studies more pictures. “I’ve spent a little time with your mother at Auntie Mae’s,” she says while studying a picture of a little boy. “She’s a lovely lady.”

“Thanks,” I say, proud of Mom. She’s cool, for a mom. I just wish my dad thought she was *lovely* enough to want to stay married to her.

Mrs. Reynolds hands me the picture of the little boy. “That’s my son.”

I almost laugh at the picture. Who thought this little boy would grow up and one day be my mom’s boss?

“He was married once. She died of ovarian cancer five years later.” She sighs.

“They didn’t have any kids?” I ask.

She shakes her head. “Okay, enough dawdling. I have a bunch of boxes that need to be tossed.

Why don’t we pile them in a corner so they can easily be spotted and taken to the trash.

Somewhere around here are boxes labeled ‘taxes’.” She points to one of the corners of the attic. “I think they’re over there.”

I walk over to the boxes and do the spider-scan. Eek. Webs line the ceiling corners, just waiting for an unsuspecting insect to fly by. I don’t even see the spiders. It’s like they’re undercover spies until their prey struggles, hopelessly stuck in the web.

I shudder just thinking about it. Thank God I’m not an insect.

“Margaret?”

“Yes.”

“I’m getting older every second, you know.”

I put my hands in the sleeves of the muumuu and shove boxes aside with muumuu-covered fists.

I’m trying not to think about my leg and how I’m going to maneuver around the boxes with spiders staring down at me from the ceiling.

I've made a path and head behind the stack of boxes. I check out an orange, plastic container made to look like a picnic basket. "What kind of boxes are they? Bankers boxes or moving boxes?" I ask.

"I don't remember, but I'm pretty certain they're labeled."

Okay. I start turning boxes around, hoping to find the words TAXES on the front.

I shriek when I hear something behind me.

Spinning around, I see it's only Mrs. Reynolds.

"Oh, calm yourself," she chides. "Did you find any?"

"I think so." I pick up a box marked *TAXES, 1968*. "Is this one?"

She claps her hands, like a teacher would do if a student gets an answer correct. "Yes. Put it by the door. There's so many to toss, I think this may take a few days."

As soon as I place the first box in the "toss" pile, the doorbell rings. Mrs. Reynolds doesn't hear it. "Someone's ringing the doorbell," I say.

She furrows her brows and tilts her head to listen for it. "I don't hear it, but then again these ears are about as good as my eyes. Be a doll and answer it, would you?"

"Sure." I head down the stairs. The doorbell rings two more times before I can get to the door. I open it quickly, then stumble backwards. Because the last person I expected to see standing in front of me is Caleb Becker.

And, for the second time since he's been back, he reaches out to touch me.

TWENTY-ONE – Caleb

I swear, my leg almost just gave out on me. Because the last person I expected to answer the door to Mrs. Reynolds' house was Maggie Armstrong wearing a ridiculous, oversized dress with pink and green flowers plastered all over it.

I try and grab her arm when she loses her balance, but I'm too late. Once on the floor, she refuses my outstretched hand.

"Wh... What are you doing here?"

"What *are* you doing here?" I ask.

"I work here after school," she says while trying to pretend she's content to stay sprawled on the floor.

I quickly shove my Justice Department ID in my back pocket. I double-check the address again before saying, "I'm here to see a Mrs. Reynolds. This *is* her house, isn't it?" Maggie's hatred is evident in her stare. "Listen, seeing you here is a surprise to me, too," I say. "The manager at The Trusty Nail sent me. This lady's house is the next job site on the list."

I watch as Maggie pulls herself up. It's painful, I can tell just by watching her fingers curl into a tight fist.

God, watching her struggle is making me sick to my stomach. Because I indirectly did this to her. "I'm sorry," I say.

"Tell it to the judge," she mumbles.

"I did," I respond truthfully. Not that it mattered to Judge Farkus. The guy wanted to make me an example for all delinquents who drank then got behind the wheel of a car. "What do you want from me, Maggie?"

"I want you to leave."

"I can't," I tell her.

An old lady appears from the back of the house and shuffles to the door. "You must be from the community service program," she says.

"Yes, ma'am." I introduce myself and hand her my community service ID for inspection. It's a requirement to show it before entering a house.

Mrs. Reynolds scans my ID, then hands it back. "Well, come on in. This here's Margaret, my companion. Margaret this is... what did you say your name was again?"

"Caleb."

Mrs. Reynolds tells Maggie, "Caleb is going to help us. Show him to the attic and explain our project while I check on some cookies I have baking in the oven."

I set my backpack on the ground after Mrs. Reynolds is out of sight. "Another awkward situation, huh?"

Maggie is as still as a statue.

“I wish you never came back,” she says quietly, hugging herself.

I’m tempted to leave and face Damon’s wrath for ditching community service, but I won’t. I’m stuck here with her.

“I’m not going anywhere until I finish this job for the lady.”

Maggie’s eyes widen. Her mouth opens and closes, but no words come out. She turns around and walks farther into the house.

I silently follow her up a narrow staircase on the second floor to the attic.

Maggie points to a box. “That needs to be thrown out. I’ll put boxes there and you can dispose of them.”

I nod.

We work in silence. Maggie places the boxes in the discard pile and I carry them down the stairs.

Mrs. Reynolds has me stuff the boxes in huge garbage bags and then lug them to the recycle bin at the end of the driveway.

Mrs. Reynolds comes out of the kitchen and hands me a plate of cookies. “Here, bring these up to the attic. You and Maggie can share them while you work.”

I enter the attic for what seems like the hundredth time today with the cookies in hand. Maggie throws a box in my direction, but I move out of the way to avoid it. It was intentional, no doubt about it. “Watch it, will ya?” I drop the plate on a trunk in the middle of the attic.

She turns her back to me and ignores the plate.

Maggie thinks she’s the only victim in this whole mess. But I have to keep my cool. No matter what happens, I can’t let her get under my skin and let the truth come out.

“Listen, Maggie, it was an accident. If I could take back that day, I would. If I could turn back time, I would.”

She turns to me now, her head tilted to the side. “Tell me, Caleb. Why does your apology sound so hollow to me?”

I stand, speechless, as she takes the plate of cookies and leaves the attic. Why can’t this be easy?

I pick up the next box and don’t look up until all the boxes are trashed.

Maggie leaves Mrs. Reynolds’ house first, but I stay behind. The old lady is in the backyard when I hand her the completion sheet and pen. “Thanks for letting me work here,” I say.

“My husband, Albert, may he rest in peace, felt it important to help out the less fortunate. Don’t get me started on the juvenile justice system or we’ll be here for weeks. You did a good job today.”

I flash her a smile of appreciation.

She starts to sign the form, but stops herself. “It says here you have experience in construction.

You know... I may have another job for you. That is, if you’re up to it.”

“What kind of job?”

“How good are you with your hands?”

“Better than most,” I say, then chuckle.

The old lady points to a tall pile of lumber stacked in the corner of the backyard. “Okay, Mr.

Better-Than-Most. You think you could build me a gazebo out of this pile of old wood? You *do* know what a gazebo is, don’t you?”

Yeah, I know what one is. Building a gazebo will take at least a couple of weeks, probably even fill up enough time to finish my community service.

What am I thinking? I can’t work with Maggie. No way. It would never work.

Although it’s not like I’d actually be working *with* her. I’ll be on my own, building the gazebo.

The way Mrs. Reynolds is looking at me with confidence strengthens my bruised ego. I’m not thinking about Maggie. I’m not thinking about what’s right or wrong. I blurt out, “I can do it.” I should be honest with the lady and tell her about why I was convicted. And, more importantly, who I was convicted of hitting. “Mrs. Reynolds, I have to be honest with you...”

As if on cue, the phone rings. The old lady takes her cane and hurries into the house. “Just come back tomorrow and we’ll finish our conversation then.”

So now I run to catch the bus because I’m late. When I get on, Maggie is sitting up front so I head for the rear.

The fifteen-minute bus ride seems like an hour. At our stop, we’re the only two left on the bus. We get off and I let her lead the way while I follow behind.

My sister is outside. The expression on her face when she sees Maggie and me walking up the street together is priceless.

“Did you just come home with Maggie?” Leah asks, following me into the house.

“We were on the same bus. Don’t get all hyped up about it.”

“Don’t get all hyped up about what?” my mom says, coming into the room in the middle of a conversation I don’t want her to know anything about.

“It’s nothing,” I tell Mom, then narrow my eyes at my sister and say through clenched teeth so only she can hear, “so stop making a big deal about it.”

Leah runs up to her room and slams her door shut. My mom goes back into the kitchen, totally oblivious.

The Beckers are a picture-perfect family. A picture-perfect, royally-fucked-up family.

TWENTY-TWO – Maggie

On Monday I head for the bus after school. As I step into the aisle, I catch sight of Caleb already sitting in the back. It was bad enough working side by side in that small attic last week. If I have to work with him again I'll quit.

But then I won't be going to Spain.

And if I don't go to Spain, I won't be leaving Paradise next semester.

And if I don't leave Paradise next semester, Caleb and his friends will be laughing all the way to prom while I sit home and prove them right.

Maybe he's not going to Mrs. Reynolds' house today and I'm going off on unnecessary tangents for no reason.

Maybe he's working somewhere else doing odd jobs. But as he follows me into Mrs. Reynolds' backyard, my fears are realized.

"Now come inside, both of you. Irina brought over some pie." Mrs. Reynolds walks into the house, not realizing that neither me nor Caleb has followed her.

"Took you long enough," Mrs. Reynolds says when I enter the kitchen. "Here, I cut some pie for both of you."

I sit down at the kitchen table and stare at the pie. Normally I'd dig right in, but I can't. Caleb walks in and sits across from me. I focus my attention in the opposite direction, as if the painting of the fruit bowl on the wall is the most interesting object I've ever laid eyes on.

"Margaret, remember you told me I should have that gazebo built?"

"Yeah," I answer cautiously.

Mrs. Reynolds holds her chin up. "Well, Caleb is going to help make that a reality. It may take a few weeks, but--"

A few weeks? "If he stays, I quit," I blurt out. *A few weeks?*

I hear the clink of Caleb's fork hitting the plate, then he stands and storms out of the room.

Mrs. Reynolds puts her hands on either side of her face and says, "Margaret, what is all this nonsense about you quitting? Why?"

"I can't work with him, Mrs. Reynolds. He did this to me," I cry.

"Did what, child?"

"I went to jail for hitting Maggie with my car while I was drunk," Caleb says, reappearing in the doorway.

Mrs. Reynolds makes some tscking noises, then says, "My, my, we are in a pickle, aren't we?"

I look up at Mrs. Reynolds with pleading eyes. "Just make him leave."

I can tell she's going to do it, she's going to tell Caleb to get out.

Mrs. Reynolds walks up to Caleb and says, "You have to understand that my first priority is Margaret. I'll call the senior center and have them contact your community service officer."

"Please, Mrs. Reynolds," Caleb tells her, his voice pleading. "I just want to finish the job and just... be free again."

Mrs. Reynolds looks back at me, her wise eyes telling me more than words could say. *Forgive.*

I can't forgive. I've tried. If he'd innocently lost control of the car and hit me, it would have been forgivable. I don't know how innocent the accident was. God, I can't believe in my heart of hearts he deliberately hit me with the car. But too many questions have gone unanswered.

Questions I want to remain unanswered.

They said he left me lying in the street as if I were an animal. *That* is unforgivable. I don't know if I can ever get over it.

Because it reminds me too much of what my father did. He left me without looking back. And worse, Caleb destroyed the one chance I had to impress my dad. I push my way past Caleb and head to the attic, a place that's dark, secluded, and private. I'm not even thinking about black widow spiders as I open the attic door and hobble inside.

Gosh, I used to worship the ground Caleb walked on. He was tall, handsome... clearly one of the populars, where Leah's and my status teetered on the edge. As if that wasn't enough, nothing ever bothered the guy. Maybe it's because guys like him always get what they want, they never have to work hard for anything. Maybe, deep down, I'm glad he's having a hard time. And deep down I know it's selfish for me to think this way. I shouldn't thrive on someone else's unhappiness.

But as the saying goes, misery likes company. And I feel miserable, inside and out. Isn't it fair that the person who's miserable with me is the guy who made me this way?

Mrs. Reynolds followed me, I can tell by the powdery scent that travels with her.

"This is a mighty interesting place to hide out. I thought you were afraid of spiders."

"I am, but in the dark I can't see them. Is he gone?" I ask hopefully.

She shakes her head. "We need to talk."

"Do I have to?"

"Let's just put it this way. You're not leaving the attic until you hear me out."

Defeated, I sit on one of the trunks. "I'm listening."

"Good." She takes a seat on the chair, still left here from the other day. "I had one sibling," she says. "A sister named Lottie. She was younger than me, smarter than me, prettier than me, with long, slender legs and thick, black hair."

Mrs. Reynolds looks up at me and continues. "You see, I was the fat kid with bright red hair, the kid you look at and have to stop yourself from cringing. During summer break from college one year, I brought a boy to my parents' summer home. I'd lost weight, I wasn't in my sister's shadow anymore, and I finally started feeling like I was worth more than I ever thought I deserved."

I can picture it in my mind. "So you overcame your fears and fell in love?"

"I fell in love, all right, head over heels. His name was Fred." Mrs. Reynolds pauses, then sighs.

"He treated me as though I was the most amazing girl he'd ever seen. Well, he did until my sister came to the summer house for a surprise visit." She looks directly at me and shrugs. "I found him kissing her by the docks the morning after she arrived."

"Oh my God."

"I hated her, blamed her for stealing my boyfriend. So I packed up, left, and never talked to either one of them again."

"You never talked to your sister again?" I ask. "Ever?"

"I didn't even attend their wedding two years later." My mouth drops open. "She married Fred?"

"You got it. Had four kids, too."

"Where are they now?"

"I got a call from one of their kids that Lottie died a few years ago. Fred's in a nursing home with Alzheimer's. You know what the worst part is?"

I'm riveted by her story. "What?"

Mrs. Reynolds stands, then pats me on my knee. "That, my dear, is what you're going to have to figure out all by yourself."

"You think Caleb should stay and build the gazebo, don't you?" I ask when she starts walking to the door.

"I'll leave that decision up to you. He won't go back to jail if it doesn't work out, I would never let that happen. I just figure he's a boy who wants to right his wrongs, Margaret. He's waiting downstairs for your answer."

She walks out of the attic. I hear her orthopedic shoes shuffling as she takes each stair. Can I just stay here forever, living with the spiders and cobwebs and antique trunks filled with an old lady's memories?

I know the answer, even as I stand and head down the stairs to face the one person I've been dying to avoid.

He's sitting on the couch in the living room, leaning forward with his elbows resting on his knees. When he hears me enter the room, he looks up. "Well?"

I can tell he's not happy I have the control. Caleb used to always have the cards and knew which ones to play to get his way. Not this time. I'd love to tell him to leave. That's his punishment for not loving me back. But I know that would be idiotic, childish, and stupid. Besides, I don't love Caleb anymore. I don't even like him. I'm convinced he can't hurt me anymore, physically or emotionally. "You can stay."

He nods and starts to stand.

"Wait. I have two conditions."

His eyebrows raise up.

“One, you don’t tell anyone about us working together. Two, you don’t talk to me... I ignore you and you ignore me.

I think he’s going to argue because his lip curls up and his eyebrows furrow as if he thinks I’m an idiot.

But then he says, “Fine. Done deal,” and heads to the backyard.

I find Mrs. Reynolds in the kitchen, sitting at the table drinking tea.

“I told him he could stay,” I inform her.

Mrs. Reynolds gives me a small smile. “I’m proud of you.”

I’m not.

“You’ll get over it,” she says. “You ready to plant more bulbs today?”

I pull old, worn overalls out of my backpack so I can spare myself from having to wear the muumuu.

Caleb’s back is to me when I walk outside. Good. I take a bag of bulbs and slowly, carefully sit on the grass. With a small shovel in hand, I start digging.

“Don’t forget, Margaret. Six inches deep,” Mrs. Reynolds says from behind, leaning over me to inspect my work.

“Got it, six inches.”

“And make sure you place the bulbs right-side up.”

“Okay,” I say.

“And scatter them. Don’t place them in a pattern or else it looks funny.”

The old lady takes a lawn chair and places it right next to me so she can oversee my work.

“Why don’t you supervise him?” I ask, pointing to where Caleb has taken panels of wood and seems to be attempting to put them in some kind of order.

“He’s doing just fine. Besides, I don’t know the first thing about building a gazebo.”

I dig three holes, carefully make soft soil pillows for them, then place the bulbs into the holes and scoot myself down to plant more. After a while Mrs. Reynolds falls asleep in the chair. She usually does this at least once a day, and when I tell her she dozed off for an hour, she totally denies it. I’m surprised she can sleep with all the hammering Caleb’s doing, but the lady hears, as she more often than not admits, like the dead.

I glance up at Caleb. He’s a fast worker, already starting to nail planks together as if he builds gazebos every day. His shirt is soaking wet from sweat in his armpits, chest, and back. And it obviously doesn’t bother him that one of my conditions is that we ignore each other. He does an incredible job of ignoring me. I don’t think he’s even glanced in my direction once.

But now he stops hammering, his back still to me when he yells, “Would you stop staring at me?”

TWENTY-THREE – Caleb

You ignore me, and I'll ignore you. Maggie, like every X other girl in my life, is trying to control me. I'm sick of the games, I'm sick of feeling like a jerk. And most of all I'm sick of people gawking at me because I went to jail.

I know she's staring at me, I can feel her eyes on me like little pin pricks poking into my back.

Out of frustration, I pound the next nail into the two-by-four harder than I normally would and whack my forefinger with the hammer.

I glare at Maggie.

The girl is sitting on the ground wearing torn and stained overalls. "I... I wasn't staring at you," she stutters. "The hell you weren't," I bark back. I hold my arms out wide. "You want to gawk at the ex-con, you got it. Just answer one thing for me, will ya?

You like it when people stare at *you* when you limp around like you're gonna topple over any second?"

Maggie sucks in a breath, then covers her nose and mouth with her hand as she hobbles inside the house.

Oh crap.

My finger is throbbing, my head is pounding, and I insulted a crippled girl--a girl I'm responsible for crippling. I should just go to hell right now because the deal with the devil is probably signed anyway.

Mrs. Reynolds has no clue what's happening, her head is slumped in the chair and she's snoring.

I throw down the hammer and go into the house to find Maggie. I hear sniffing sounds coming from the kitchen. Maggie is standing at the counter, taking vegetables out of the refrigerator. She pulls out a cutting board and starts cutting them with a huge butcher knife.

"I'm sorry," I say. "I shouldn't have said that."

"It's fine."

"Obviously it's not or you wouldn't be crying."

"I'm not crying."

I lean my hip against the counter. "There's tears running down your face." Plain as day I can see 'em.

She picks up an onion and holds it out to me. "My eyes tear when I cut onions."

My fists clench together, because I can't shake her and make her yell at me. This time I deserve to be yelled at. "Say something."

Instead of responding, she chops the onion in two. I imagine she's pretending that onion is my head... or some other part of my body.

"Fine, have it your way," I say, then leave her. If she wants to live in silence, that's her choice.

I clench my teeth so much they hurt, and the rest of the afternoon I work outside on the gazebo.

It feels good to create something useful, something to finally make someone proud of me for a change. Because the rest of my life I've totally fucked up.

Maggie abandoned her post in the yard. She hasn't been outside since I went off on her.

At seven I inform a waking Mrs. Reynolds I'm leaving for the day and head for the bus stop.

Maggie's not far behind.

I'm standing on the corner of Jarvis and Lake Streets, backpack flung over my shoulder, when a car screeches beside me.

"What are you doing slumming on this side of town, rich boy?"

Oh, man. It's Vic Medonia. And some other guys on the Fremont High wrestling team.

"None of your fucking business," I say.

Vic laughs, bitterness dripping off the cackling sound. "Your friends in jail taught you how to stand on the street corner and pimp yourself? How much you charging for that used booty of yours, anyway?"

The other guys in the car laugh, then Vic gets out. He looks to my right and says, "Is this your new girlfriend?"

I turn to see Maggie not far away, limping toward us as she heads for the bus stop.

"Maggie, go back to the house," I warn her. I've seen enough fights to know that Vic is looking for one. Hoping to redirect Vic, I say, "This is between you and me, man. Leave her out of it."

Vic laughs, the high pitched sound making my skin crawl. "Check her out, guys. Jeez, Becker, you really are scraping the bottom of the barrel. Does it turn you on when she struts around like a retard like that?"

I drop my backpack and charge him. We both land on the ground, but one of his friends grabs me from behind and pins my hands back. Before I can free my arms, Vic clocks me right on the jaw and the ribs.

Before I know what's happening, Maggie is in the middle of us, swinging her book bag and hitting Vic. The chick has more in her than she lets on.

Through all the commotion, I break free and push the prick who'd been holding me, then I grab Maggie and act as her shield before she gets herself killed. "Run," I order her as I tackle one of the guys.

I'm punching and grasping at shirt collars as much as I can in a three-against-one fight. Odds are against me and it's not a pretty sight. All mayhem freezes when I hear a siren, attached to a cruiser with red and blue lights flashing. An officer flies out of the car and has us kneel on the ground with our hands over our heads. "What's going on here, boys?" I don't see Maggie.

"Nothing," Vic says. "We were just playing around. Right, Becker?"

I stare straight at Vic and say, "Right."

"Doesn't look like nothing to me." The cop holds his hand out to me, palm up. "Let me see some ID."

Since my driver's license was revoked, I only have my community service ID tag from the DOC.

I'm not about to pull it out and have him call Damon. I'll be locked up again before you can say "hit-and-run."

"I don't have any," I say.

"What are you doing in Hampton?"

"Visiting a friend."

The guy does a great cop stance from the movies, with his feet apart and his hands on his hips positioned right above his gun belt. "Let me give you a piece of advice. We don't take kindly to strangers coming into our town and causing trouble." He turns to Vic. "I suggest you meet your friend on his turf or I'll have to get your parents involved. Got it?"

This should be about the time I tell the cop the truth: that I'm in Hampton by the order of the Illinois Juvenile Department of Corrections. But I won't.

"Got it," Vic says.

The officer gets back in his squad car and orders Vic and his friends to move on. He follows Vic's car. I watch until both cars are out of sight.

When I look around for my backpack, I quickly realize it's gone. One of Vic's friends probably snatched it. But that's the least of my worries.

My jaw is starting to protest Vic's punch, and I put my hand up to my face to feel if it's bleeding.

When I do, Maggie reveals herself.

Our eyes lock.

The bus to Paradise comes rumbling down the street and we both get on it. I sit at my usual spot in back and she follows, sitting right next to me. I'm surprised until I notice her fingers shaking.

She's scared.

It's demented and strange after all that's happened, but she feels safe with me right now. I don't dare touch her, 'cause that would mean this is something more than it is. And I know this... this feeling of friendship is a fleeting, temporary thing. What scares me to fucking death is that some part of my brain has decided this insignificant act of Maggie sitting next to me is the first step in fixing all that's gone wrong in my life.

Which makes it all the more significant.

TWENTY-FOUR – Maggie

I saw Caleb today at school. Rumors are running rampant about the bruises on his face. None of the rumors are true.

After school I get on the bus to go to Mrs. Reynolds' house. I walk down the aisle to where Caleb is sitting. He doesn't look up. I take the seat next to him like I did yesterday.

This time he doesn't walk behind me after we're dropped off at the bus stop by Mrs. Reynolds'

house. We walk side by side, as if there's an unspoken understanding between the two of us. I'm the only one (besides Vic and his thug friends) who knows how Caleb got his bruises. The fight yesterday scared me. Did Caleb get caught up in the fight because Vic insulted me? Whatever the reasons were, it was us against them. Caleb and I were on the same team and we didn't have a chance of winning.

That's why I ran behind a tree and called 911 from my cell, to protect him/us, because he would never be able to fight off three guys by himself, and God knows my cheap book bag couldn't take much more. I've never been able to stomach a fight anyway. The fight is over, but its aftereffects have lingered.

So now it's another day at Mrs. Reynolds' house working together, but not.

Caleb still follows my conditions: he doesn't talk to me as he works on the gazebo and I plant more daffodils.

I hum songs as I work. Sometimes Mrs. Reynolds hums along with me, until she starts belting out words to the songs so loud that I stop working and blink my eyes at this old lady who doesn't care what people think about her. It's really mind-boggling.

When Mrs. Reynolds starts nodding off, I walk inside the house and pour myself a glass of water. Before I leave the kitchen, I pour one for Caleb too. Quietly, I set it down on one of the wooden planks beside him.

Heading back inside to prepare a small snack, I remember I forgot to bring the cookie plate down from the attic last week. I go up the two flights of stairs to the attic and pick up the plate.

The door closes and I shriek. Caleb is standing in the attic with me, the glass of water in his hand. "Oh my God!"

"I'm not going to hurt you, Maggie. I just wanted to say thanks for the water and... well, and I know it's not easy working together, but I do appreciate you not kicking me out."

"You can't leave," I say.

"Why not?"

"Because that door locks automatically."

Caleb eyes the door stopper he just kicked out of the way. "You're joking, right?"

I shake my head slowly. I'm trying not to panic at the reality of being stuck with Caleb Becker in an attic. *Breathe, Maggie.* In. Out. In. Out.

Caleb tries turning the knob, then tries a turn-door-knob-while-pushing-on-door action. "Shit."

He turns to me. "You and me. In the same room. This is *not* supposed to happen."

“I know,” I say.

“We could yell for Mrs. Reynolds. She’s sleeping outside, but--”

“She’ll never hear us all the way out there. Her hearing is marginal if you’re ten feet away. When she wakes up we’ll hear her and then yell our heads off.”

“So you’re saying we’re stuck here?”

I nod again.

“Shit.”

“You already said that,” I inform him. Caleb starts pacing while running his hands over his buzz cut. “Yeah, well, this sucks. Being locked up is getting to be the theme of my life,” he mumbles. “How long before she usually wakes up?”

I shrug. “It could be a half hour, but sometimes she sleeps for an hour or more, like yesterday.”

Taking a deep breath, he sits in the middle of the floor and leans against Mrs. Reynolds’ trunk.

“You might as well take a seat,” he says.

“I’m kind of afraid of spiders.”

“Still?”

“You remember that about me?”

“How could I forget? You and Leah used to make me your personal spider killer,” he says. I look at him strangely.

“Sit,” he orders. “I’m giving the old lady two hours to free us and then I’m breaking that door down.”

Neither of us say anything for a long time. The only sound is our breathing and the eerie bangs and creaks of the old house.

“Was it scary in jail?” I ask, breaking the silence.

“Sometimes.”

“Like when? What did they do to you?”

I turn and look at him. His expression is wary. “You know, you’re the first one who’s asked for details.”

“I’ll admit I’ve heard the rumors. I suspect most of them aren’t true.”

“What’d you hear?”

I curl my lip, nervous to be the one to tell him. “Let’s see... you had a boyfriend in jail... you joined a gang... you attempted to escape and got solitary confinement... you beat up a guy who afterward needed to be hospitalized... should I continue?”

“You believe any of it?”

“No. Why? Are they true?”

He leans his head back against the trunk and lets out a long breath. “I was in a fight and got thrown in solitary for it.” He puts his palms over his eyes. “I was in solitary for thirty-six hours.

God, I can’t believe I’m talking to you, of all people, about this.”

“Did they give you food and water?”

He laughs. “Yeah, you still get meals. But you’re sleeping on a slab of cement and a one-inch foam mattress on top of that. A stainless steel toilet is your only companion.”

“At least you were alone,” I say. “I had to wait for someone to bring a plastic bowl for me to go to the bathroom while I was in the hospital. Then I had to lay there while they wiped me. It was so degrading.”

“Do the doctors say you’ll ever walk without a limp?”

“They don’t know. I have to go to physical therapy twice a week until I go to Spain.”

“Spain?”

I explain why I’m working at Mrs. Reynolds’ house every day and about my dream of leaving Paradise so I can get away from the past.

“I couldn’t wait to get back home,” he admits. “Coming back here meant I was free of being locked up.”

“That’s because you’re Caleb Becker. People will always accept you. The only thing that kept me from being a loser before was tennis and Leah. Now that I’ve lost both, I have nothing except humiliating stares and comments people say but don’t think I hear.”

Caleb stands and paces the attic again. “Coming home has sucked. But leaving Paradise would be a copout.”

“To me,” I tell him, “leaving Paradise means freedom. I feel locked up just living in this town where everybody reminds me what a loser I am now.”

Caleb crouches down, his face right in front of mine. “You are *not* a loser. Hell, Maggie, you always knew what you wanted and went for it.”

I tell him the honest truth. “Not anymore. When you hit me, a part of me died.”

TWENTY-FIVE – Caleb

“Caleb, phone!” Mom yells from the kitchen.

I’ve been in my room, trying to figure out these mixed-up thoughts I’ve been having since Tuesday, when Maggie and I got locked in the attic. We sat there for maybe forty minutes. In that short amount of time I probably shared more with her than I have with Kendra. Ever.

I’m in serious trouble here.

I pick up the cordless and head to my room. “Hello?”

“Hey, CB. It’s Brian.”

“What’s up?”

“It’s Sunday,” Brian says in a way-too-cheery tone.

“And?” I say.

“Come on, dude, don’t tell me you forgot our ritual. You, me, Drew, and Tristan...”

I remember. Sunday afternoons watching football-- me, Brian, Tristan, and Drew. *No chicksallowed* was our motto.

“I’m leaving for Tristan’s in ten. Be ready,” Brian says, then the line goes dead.

I’m in my briefs. I’d sworn to myself I’d sleep all day. But if I want to get back into a normal routine, Sunday football can’t be ignored.

I take a quick shower--believe me I’m used to them. And when I’m pulling on some old sweats and a t-shirt, I hear Mom downstairs fawning over Brian.

I’m so glad you called Caleb. You’re such a good friend. Here’s some leftover Chinese food from last night. I swear she’s like an out-of-control machine.

When I get downstairs, Brian says to me, “Your mom rocks, CB. Check out all the stuff she packed for us.”

I glance into the large grocery bag. Mom must have put half of the food from our refrigerator in it. I’m about to hug her, but she picks up a dish rag and starts wiping off the kitchen table when I come close. “Go on,” she says, “and have a good time.”

At Tristan’s house we have to wait for the game to come on. It’s the Packers against the Bears.

Before I got arrested, I could have told you every date of every game and every Bears’ opponent playing in those games.

I park myself on the couch in his basement and lean back. I can hardly wait to watch. The other guys have no clue how much I missed this.

Hell, I didn’t even realize how much I missed this.

I got Kendra back, I got my friends back. I've got to forget about Maggie. I'm sure I'm just thinking about her so much because we're working together. I came back to Paradise with a mission to get my life back to normal. Sitting back and watching the game makes me realize that the status quo isn't all that bad.

Until Tristan starts tossing cans of Michelob to each of us.

"Where'd you get the brew?" Drew asks.

"From the Fourth of July. I snatched a case from my parents' party and hid it. My mom didn't even know it was missing."

"Way to go, man," Brian says. "Toss one of those puppies over here."

Brian and Drew catch theirs and open them right away. I catch the one thrown to me. Tristan holds his can up. "To a new season of Bears ball."

"To a quarterback who can actually throw the ball," Brian says.

"And a running back that can actually run the ball," Drew offers.

They all turn to me, waiting for my dumb football wisdom.

I'm holding the can, the coldness against my palm sending a chill up my arm. "And a punter who could kick the ball," I add, wondering if they realize I haven't flipped the top and opened it yet.

They all take a swig. Except me. I may have jeopardized going back to jail when I got in a fight with Vic when he insulted Maggie, but that was worth the risk. I haven't even been near alcohol since the night of the accident. I'm not about to jeopardize going back for a stupid can of beer.

"What do you think you're doing?" an adult voice from the staircase calls out.

Shit, it's Tristan's mom.

I would try to hide the beer, but that'd be pointless. We've already been busted.

She storms down the stairs and rips the Michelob out of Tristan's hand. "Not in my house, you won't," she says, then points her finger at me. "You may think you can just come back here and suck everyone into your lifestyle, Caleb, but I won't let that happen."

Tristan steps forward. "Ma, stop."

"Don't protect him, Tristan." She looks down at the beer can in my hand, then shakes her head in disgust. "Caleb, please leave my house."

I put the unopened can down on the table. Mrs. Norris doesn't even look at the can. She's too busy staring at me and sneering. "Stay away from my son," she orders as I head out.

There's no use even defending myself. Mrs. Norris already has her mind made up about me.

Verdict: Guilty.

Besides, if I explain the truth she won't believe me. The way she glared at me says more than words ever will.

"That was a buzz kill," Brian says when we're back in his car. "Where are we gonna watch the game now? It's probably close to halftime."

“We can go back to my place,” I offer.

Ten minutes later we settle ourselves in my basement and watch the game. The Bears are up by three, but the Packers have the ball and it’s the fourth quarter.

I’m totally into the game when Brian says, “I need to tell you something.”

“Shoot,” I say, taking a handful of potato chips and shoving them into my mouth. My attention is still on the game, but I chance a small glance at my friend.

Brian is leaning forward, the expression on his face totally serious. “She’ll kill me for telling you.”

I glance back at the TV. The Packers just fumbled and it’s the Bears’ ball. This could clinch a victory for them. “Who?” I say, only partially listening to Brian.

“Kendra.”

Kendra was recently in my arms and a willing partner in my bed. It wasn’t the most romantic reunion; I guess I expected it to be like old times. It’s been anything but.

“Did you see that?” I ask Brian, getting totally riled about the Bears game. You can’t blame me for being excited when I’d been restricted from watching football for the past year. I missed a whole season. “They just sacked Edmonton!”

“We’re together, CB. I just thought you should know.” I look at him, confused. “What the hell are you talking about?”

“Me... and Kendra.”

It hits me like a brick smacked into my head at lightning speed. “*You* and Kendra?”

“Yeah.”

Jeez. The word comes out of my mouth faster than my brain can comprehend it. “When?”

“You don’t want to know.”

That means it was before I was arrested. Maggie wasn’t lying to me that night I freaked out on her.

Maggie had told me the truth while Kendra looked me right in the eye, feeding me lies. Kendra was the manipulative one and I fell for it.

But it all makes sense now, why Kendra is desperate to keep our relationship a secret. Perfect time to fuck with my head once again.

Brian is watching me, gauging my reaction. There’s no way in hell I’m going to tell him I’ve been messing around with Kendra.

In a matter of seconds, I lose my demented perception of reality. There is no getting back together with Kendra, there is no hanging out with the guys like before. My life now has no resemblance to before. How could I ever have thought it had?

I have to ask. “Are you guys, you know...”

“Yeah.”

I close my eyes and lean back into the cushions of the couch. Wow. My girlfriend was screwing both of us and I was oblivious. But Maggie knew and tried to warn me. As a thank-you, I insulted her and then the night spun out of control, ending up with Maggie in the hospital.

The Bears game forgotten, I shake my head and stare at the ceiling.

“At first it was just a hook-up, a mistake,” Brian continues. “We both didn’t mean for it to happen.”

I wish Brian would just shut up. Now I know what Damon means about taking the blame. “You were probably so stoked I was convicted, you could finally have my girlfriend all to yourself,” I say.

“It’s not like that.” Brian pauses. “I love her, Caleb. Jesus, I’d marry her right now if I could.”

“Damn,” I mumble. I wonder who’s going to be there when Brian comes back from la-la land and falls flat on his face. Kendra told me there were no guys that mattered. Or was that all bullshit, too?

“She made me promise not to tell you about us. But I think it’s cool if we’re all up front about it, don’t you? Then we can be a couple at school again, instead of pretending we’re not together.”

I stand, needing some distance. This is my best friend from when I was in kindergarten. I remember when Drew took a crayon away from Brian in first grade and I pinched Drew on the arm in retaliation.

And when I had chicken pox in sixth grade and had to stay home for over a week from school, Brian secretly came over and played Dungeons & Dragons with me. And we never told our parents, even when Brian got stuck with the pox two weeks later.

Id never thought Brian would betray our friendship.

“You’re a prick,” I blurt out.

Brian stands and grabs his car keys. “I knew you wouldn’t understand. That’s why I didn’t tell you.”

“Dude, you were screwing my girl behind my back. How’d you think I’d react?” A shiver just ran up and down my spine when I actually put the truth into words.

“I thought you’d listen. And try to understand without wanting to rip my head off. This is real, Caleb.”

I give a cynical laugh. “I’ll tell you what’s real. Real is that I was in jail for the past year, rooming with drug dealers and eating crap food your dog wouldn’t touch. Real is not being able to wear your own frickin underwear and showering with twenty-five other dicks every day while guards watch. Real is my next-door neighbor who walks like she’s balancing on stilts because her leg is so fucked up from the accident. Brian, your perception of reality is totally off.”

Brian heads for the stairs, his back stiff. He stops when he’s halfway up. “When you want to forgive me and move on, you know where I am.”

My fists are clenched so tight they’re getting numb.

That’s when Mom walks down the stairs. She smiles wide and says in a cheery voice, “Did you have fun with your friends?”

TWENTY-SIX – Maggie

I wish my mom didn't insist on going to my physical therapy appointment. "You can just drop me off," I say. "Just come back and get me in an hour."

Mom shakes her head. "Dr. Gerrard wants to talk with both of us."

Oh, no. "Mom, I'm fine. Robert expects his patients to do the impossible, that's all."

"I know it's not easy, Maggie," she says. "Don't worry, you don't have to do what feels uncomfortable. Just do your best."

When we enter the hospital, sure enough Robert is waiting for us. "Hi, Maggie, how we doing today?"

We? "Fine."

"Been doing those strengthening exercises I taught you?"

Uh... "Yeah. Well, sometimes."

Robert shakes my mom's hand. "Nice to see you again, Mrs. Armstrong."

"You too," she responds, then takes a seat while Robert leads me to the workout mat.

"Let's start with stretching," Robert says. "And warm up those muscles to help them work hard."

Put your legs in a V."

I do, but my legs resemble an "I" more than a "V" because my left leg doesn't want to warm up right now. It's not me, it's the leg.

"That's the best you can do?"

"I think so."

Robert kneels beside me and says, "Touch your left foot with your left hand."

I try, but I only get as far as my knee.

"Come on, Maggie. A couple more inches."

I reach about another half inch, which doesn't impress my physical therapist.

"She can't," my mom interjects. "Can't you see she's in pain?"

"Mrs. Armstrong," Robert says. "Maggie has to push herself in order to retrain those muscles."

Mom is about to respond when Dr. Gerrard walks in. "Hello ladies. Robert."

My mom stands and hugs my surgeon. After the accident, he was the one who always gave us hope and had the hands to reconstruct the inside of my leg. I remember the first time I met him in the hospital. He came in with a big white coat, a big smile, and big fingers that were going to cut my leg open and fix it.

Dr. Gerrard kneels next to me. “How’s it going, Maggie? Run any marathons lately?” I raise my eyebrows.

“I’m just kidding,” he admits. “Bad surgeon joke.”

“Dr. Gerrard, you need new material,” I mumble.

“That’s what my interns say, too.” Dr. Gerrard has me sit on the examining table and inspects my scars. “Looks good,” he says, then looks up. “Robert tells me you’re a little timid in physical therapy.”

Robert stands there with his clipboard in his hands, the traitor.

I shrug. “I can’t put a lot of pressure on my foot.”

“It hurts her,” Mom chimes in.

My doctor steps back and takes a deep breath. “Okay, walk to the door and back for me, Maggie.”

He helps me off the table while I limp to the door. “Can you put more pressure on your left foot?”

“Not really.”

“Okay, come back and sit down.” I limp back to the table and sit on it. Mom comes up to me and rubs my back.

“I’m going to give it to you straight,” Dr. Gerrard says.

“You’ve got to start pushing yourself and stop favoring your left side.”

“I’m doing my best,” I say.

Dr. Gerrard doesn’t accuse me of lying, but I can tell he’s not convinced by the way he’s pursing his lips together.

“Maybe we should let up on the physical therapy,” my mom says.

Dr. Gerrard sucks air into his clenched teeth, the hissing sound clearly a no-go to Mom’s suggestion. “I’d hate to see her stop physical therapy.”

“I have a suggestion,” Robert pipes in. “What if Maggie starts playing tennis again?”

My heart pumps faster, the beats within my body thumping in my chest like an Indian tribal dance.

“Are you okay?” Mom asks.

I can’t answer. My esophagus feels like it’s constricting. “I need to get some air,” I say, then get off the table. Robert comes up to me. “Maggie, we’re just trying to help you.”

“I know. But I can’t do this anymore. I just can’t.” I pull on my sweats, limp past my mom, and head for the exit. I’m passing people in wheelchairs, doctors, and nurses. Do they think I’m as crazy as I feel?

When the doors open I suck in fresh air and try to breathe deeply.

Breathe. In. Out. In. Out.

Isn't breathing supposed to be something you do unconsciously? Right now I'm hyperconscious about it. So conscious, in fact, that I think if I stop concentrating, I might just forget to do it. I close my eyes.

Breathe. In. Out. In. Out.

I felt this way the day my dad left the last time, when I realized it might be his last visit. I wasn't strong then, either.

I blink back tears as I try hard to forget. Because it hurts too much knowing his love for me wasn't strong enough to make him stay. I wasn't worth being loved enough.

Tennis was my saving grace, but even that didn't work. I deserved to be admired on the court, because I was worth something when I played. Not only was I part of the team, I was the one my teammates looked up to.

The more that other dads showed up to matches, the harder I would play. It was as if I wanted those dads to regret I wasn't their kid. No matter if my dad loved me or not, there would be other dads that would do anything to have me be their daughter. Having other dads congratulate me was worth more to me than the varsity trophy I earned my sophomore year. I might not be worthy of my dad's love, but I was worthy of that trophy.

A pain in my leg shoots up into my spine, a mocking reminder that I'll never be a champion again.

"Maggie?"

I turn toward my mom, who's now officially freaked out.

"I can't play tennis," I tell her.

"Dr. Gerrard wants you to try. You will try, won't you?" *But I won't be good, and then my dad won't have anything to be proud of me for. He'll never want me to be part of his new family.* "Can we go home? I want to go home."

Mom sighs. I hate feeling like I'm disappointing her. I know she tries so hard to support us emotionally, physically, and financially. She's like the little cheerleader of our family.

When we get in the car, I calm down. I look at my mom, driving the car with a sad look on her face. "Mom, what do you want out of life?"

She gives a little laugh. "Right now, money."

"Besides money."

She cocks her head to the side, thinking. When we reach a red light, she turns to me. "I guess I'd like a partner to share my life with."

"Do you miss Dad?"

"Sometimes. I miss the companionship, I miss going out as a couple. I don't miss the fights."

The light turns green and we accelerate, our car passing a woman and man holding hands with their daughter. "Will he ever want me to visit him?"

"One day," she says, but I can tell she's not so sure.

"Do you want to date Mr. Reynolds?" I ask.

Her eyes go wide. “Why would you ask such a thing?”

“Because you were dancing with him at the Fall Festival. He doesn’t have kids. I think he came to be with you.”

Mom laughs, this big laugh that fills the car, and the people in the next car could probably hear her, too.

“Auntie Mae’s Diner was a sponsor of the event, Maggie. That’s why Lou was there.”

“Well,” I say defensively, “you two were looking pretty chummy.”

“He was just being nice.”

I shake my head. “I don’t think so.”

“Hmm...”

“What does that mean?”

“Nothing. Just go back to being a kid, will ya?”

We sit in silence the rest of the way home. When we walk inside the house, I ignore the lump in my throat as I say, “For the record... if you want to invite Mr. Reynolds over for dinner one night, I wouldn’t mind,” and head upstairs to my room.

In my room, I want to take my words back. I only said them because I know how miserable Mom has been lately.

But the truth is I miss my dad every day, too. More than anything. And I know he has another wife and another life. What if Mom and Mr. Reynolds start dating or, even worse, get married.

Will they want to start a new life without me, too?

I lock my door and open my closet. In the back, in the darkest shadows, is my racquet. I know it’s there although it’s hidden behind clothes. I feel its presence when I’m in my room, kind of like kryptonite for Superman. Desperation washes over me.

I reach out and grab the handle, the weight of the racquet foreign but, at the same time, familiar.

“Maggie, open the door.” Panic. “Just a second.”

I toss the racquet in the closet and unlock my door. Mom is staring at me strangely.

I brush the hair from my face, hoping she can’t see right through me and realize I’ve always known where my lost racquet is. “Mom, what’s up?”

“I was thinking. About Lou, my boss. Were you serious when you said I should invite him for dinner?”

TWENTY-SEVEN – Caleb

I asked Brian to meet me at the park for some one-on-one. I'm practicing free throws when he drives up in his Yukon.

"You look like a middle-aged man in that thing," I say. He gives a fake-insulted huff. "It's better than the car you drive."

"I don't drive one."

"Exactly."

We stand facing each other. I say what needs to be said. "Listen, about you and Kendra. How about we call a truce."

"Fair enough."

I pass him the ball. He dribbles the ball too far away from his body, so I knock it and grab it away from him.

"B-ball's still not your game, is it?" I say as I dribble down the court.

Brian's shuffling backwards, following my every move. When I stop, his hands are up and ready to block my shot. "Get me on a wrestling mat and I'll kick your ass."

I take a shot. It bounces off the rim and Brian gets the rebound.

Brian is an anxious player. He runs down the court and shoots too quickly, missing the basket by a mile. The ball lands in the grass. I take the ball inbounds. "You're a lightweight, Bri," I say. "I'd pin you in less than ten seconds."

"Put your money where your mouth is, big guy, tomorrow after school."

I move around Brian and make an easy lay-up. "I have to work."

He holds the ball. "You say that, but you never say where. Rumor has it you're a homo and meet up with your lover after school. Is he the one who gave you the bruise on your face?"

My muscles start to tense up. "Don't give me shit."

Brian starts dribbling down the court, his eye on the basket. "Why? You gonna threaten me like you threatened Drew?"

Brian shoots and the ball goes right in. This time I hold the ball under my arm, stopping the game. "He was trying to piss me off and you know it." My old friend crosses his arms on his chest. "You've changed, Caleb. I don't even know you anymore. And this has nothing to do with Kendra."

"Bullshit. I'm the same person."

He laughs. "You've got a chip on your shoulder. Everybody knows it but you. That's the scary part."

No, the scary part is that people don't realize how much *they've* changed. "So everyone else is the same except me?"

“No, dude. *Everybody’s* changed, nobody is the same. You’re the only one who can’t accept it.

You’re not a sophomore anymore, you’re not dating Kendra, you’re not the wrestling stud. You’re a bad-ass, brooding ex-con.”

I’ll show him a brooding ex-con. I dribble the ball down the court, and when Brian gets in my face I push him down before I take the shot.

“Foul!” Brian calls out.

“You said to accept my bad-ass ex-con self. I’m only taking your suggestion.”

I hold out a hand. He looks at me suspiciously, then grabs my wrist as I pull him up. I get three more baskets and recover two of Brian’s rebounds.

“You know what you need?” Brian says as he wipes sweat from his brow.

“A new best friend?” I suggest.

“No. You need a girlfriend. Name a chick you think is hot. Just throw out a name.”

“Maggie Armstrong.”

“No, seriously. Name a chick.”

“I am serious.”

“Dude, that’s sick. You went to jail because of her.”

“I’m well aware of that.”

“You’re telling me you have the hots for *the* Maggie Armstrong? Your next-door neighbor? The girl who walks weird because you ran over her leg with your car?”

“Brian, you’re starting to act like Drew.”

Brian looks confused as he’s trying to comprehend what I just admitted to him. Then he bursts out laughing. He can’t stop and falls to the ground in hysterics, holding his stomach. “That’s...

hilarious!” he yells when he can catch his breath. “Oh my God, it *can’t be* true...” he says, then goes back to laughing hysterically again.

I’m seriously considering kicking his ass right now. But this isn’t Vic or Drew, this is Brian. I take the ball and head back home, but not before telling Brian to go to hell.

Nobody is home; I have the house all to myself. I want to yell at the top of my lungs, but just as I’m about to do it the doorbell rings. Brian is an idiot if he’s stupid enough to come here to laugh in my face again. Maybe, after all, I will use his head as my punching bag.

But I open the door and my ex-best friend isn’t standing in front of me. It’s Kendra, my ex-girlfriend. Shiny lips and all. “Hi,” she says.

“Hi.”

“Are your parents home?”

“Nope.” She already knew they weren’t.

“Can I come in?”

I open the door wider. She heads straight upstairs to my room. I watch her back and my eyes focus on her thong underwear sticking out of the top of her shorts before I follow.

Closing my door like I always do when we’re about to fool around, I lean back against the door and watch her. But this time we’re not going to fool around. I know it. She doesn’t, obviously, I can tell by what she’s wearing. A ridiculously low-cut shirt, I swear her nipples are millimeters below the ruffled collar. And her shorts reveal way more than I’d ever want any girlfriend of mine to reveal. But she’s not my girlfriend, she’s Brian’s.

Kendra wanders around my bedroom, fingering my desk, my dresser, and my bookshelves.

When she picks up my lightsaber and turns it on, I’m tempted to tell her not to touch it.

“When are you going to get rid of these toys?” she asks, waving it in the air. I don’t answer.

Sighing, she says, “I know Brian told you about him and me. But I still love you, you know.” She closes the distance between us, close enough that I can smell her cherry lips. She licks them and leans in for a kiss.

I turn my head away. “What? One boyfriend isn’t enough for you?”

“I want you both.”

“It’s over, Kend. Way over.”

“It’s not and you know it. Because--and I know this sounds selfish, but it’s true--I don’t want anyone else to have you.”

“Break up with Brian. The guy wants to marry you.”

She chuckles. “My parents think he’s good for me, so I’m playing along. Besides, I need a boyfriend I can hang with in public. But you can be my private boyfriend, CB.”

“Never gonna happen.”

“Wanna bet?” She steps back, points the tip of the saber at me, and pushes the blunt tip against my throat. A wicked grin crosses her mouth. “You can be my little secret. You like keeping secrets, don’t you Caleb?”

My pulse quickens, and the mood in the room changes instantly. One thought burns in my brain... *she knows.*

“What do you want?” I say evenly.

“CB, don’t look so sad. I just want you,” she says, then lowers the saber and goes in for another kiss.

This time I don’t turn away.

TWENTY-EIGHT – Maggie

It took a week for Mom to invite Mr. Reynolds over for dinner. She asked me about twenty more times if it was okay with me. I didn't have the heart to say no.

Mr. Reynolds comes in the house wearing a grey three-piece suit and red tie, as if he's going to court for a traffic violation. In his hands are a dozen purple tulips for my mom and a box of Frango chocolates for me.

"Thanks," I say awkwardly as he hands me the box. Do I open it now, or wait until later... or tomorrow?

"Why don't you have a seat and make yourself comfortable, Lou," Mom says nervously, her hands fidgeting with the black, sophisticated dress she decided to wear. "Would you like a drink?"

Wine... brandy... soft drink?"

Mr. Reynolds smiles, a warm smile that I can tell is sincere. "Surprise me."

Mom laughs, a sweet, soft laugh I haven't heard in years.

When Mom is in the kitchen, Mr. Reynolds turns to me. "How is it back at school after being away for a year?"

I shrug. "It's okay, I guess."

He stares out the window. Where's my mom? The clock on the fireplace mantle is ticking, each second a reminder of how time is passing so slowly.

Tick. Tick. Tick.

Mr. Reynolds rubs his hands together. I can tell he's as eager as I am for my mom to come back.

Tick. Tick. Tick.

I want to excuse myself and hide in my room. I don't think I can handle watching my mom on a date with someone other than my dad.

Just as I'm about to stand up and excuse myself, she comes in with three drinks and a big smile.

"Martinis for us, Sprite for Maggie."

Mr. Reynolds takes the glass from my mom. Their hands touch slightly when she hands it to him.

I know I encouraged her to invite Mr. Reynolds over, but he's too big, too blonde, and... and he's not my dad.

I stand up.

Mom looks at me, her expression wary. "Where are you going, sweetheart?"

"To my room. I forgot to call Danielle."

Mom has this puppy dog look on her face; I think she knows I'm lying.

In my room I open the top drawer of my desk. In an envelope I keep my dad's phone number.

My hands are shaking as I dial his number.

It rings three times before he answers. "Jerry Armstrong here."

"Urn... Dad?"

"Maggie, is that you?"

"Yeah."

"How's my little girl holding up?"

"Fine."

"And your leg? The last time we talked you were having a bit of trouble."

"It's better, I guess."

It feels good to talk to my dad. Hearing his familiar voice takes away the black cloud that always seems to hover over me. I don't want to tell him the truth about my leg because I only want to share good news. If I'm positive, then maybe he won't want to forget I'm his daughter.

"Great. And school?"

I swallow the reality and say as cheerfully as I can, "Perfect. I'm getting all As," I lie. "Wow."

There's silence, but I don't want him to hang up. I feel desperate. He sounds enthusiastic, but I'm not sure.

"How's your mother doing?" he finally says, breaking the silence.

She's currently having a date with her boss in our living room. She's fine. "

"Glad to hear it. I miss you, sweetheart."

"I miss you, too. When can I see you?"

No matter how many times I promise myself I won't beg him, I fail. It's like something inside me snaps when I think he's going to end the conversation. I want to yell, *Aren't I good enough?* but I don't.

"Sometime soon, when business settles down."

The black cloud returns--I've heard those exact words before. Too many times.

"Maggie, can you do me a favor?"

I'm holding back tears as I say, "What?"

"Tell your mother I sent her a check last week. And to have her lawyer stop calling mine. It's costing me a fortune every time he calls, like a hundred and fifty an hour."

"I'll tell her."

Someone else is talking in the background and I can tell I'm losing his attention. "I have to take another call, sweetheart. I'm sorry, it's important. I'll call you soon."

“Okay. I love you, Dad.”

“Love you too, Mags.”

Click.

I swallow hard and lean my head back against the wall. As much as I tell myself not to, I’m crying. I’d love to throw myself onto my bed and sob into my pillow, but Mom’ll probably hear me.

The phone rings, startling me. I’m still holding the cordless in my hand. Could it be my dad calling back so soon? He always says he’ll call but never does. Maybe he’s changed. Maybe he realizes after hearing my voice he misses me so much he can’t stand it anymore. “Hello?” I say excitedly.

There’s a hesitation on the line, then a female voice recording says, “This is High Spring Water Company reminding you that there’s a special on our five-gallon water bottles for the month of October. If you’d like to order--”

I hang up the phone in the middle of the recording. God, I feel so alone. There’s nobody in my life who remotely understands what I’ve been going through.

Except one person.

My fingers dial the Becker’s number automatically before my brain can comprehend what I’m doing. “Hello.”

It’s him--Caleb. I don’t even know what to say. “Maggie? I know it’s you, we have caller ID.” I forgot about that. “Hi,” I mumble. “What’s up?”

Tears come to my eyes. “I just... wanted to talk to you.”

“Why are you crying? Are you hurt? Did you fall?”

I can’t talk because I don’t want him to know how weak I am... how much I need his friendship right now. God, all those years I thought I would die if he didn’t love me as much as I loved him.

But now I realize how stupid I was.

“If you don’t answer me, I’m coming over whether your mom’s there or not.” His voice is hard and commanding, and I know he means it.

“No, don’t come over. Can you meet me at Paradise Park in ten minutes?”

“I’ll be there,” he promises.

I take the sleeve of my shirt and wipe at my eyes. “Caleb?”

“Yeah.”

“Thanks.”

I splash water on my eyes in the bathroom, tell my mom that I’m going over to Danielle’s, and head for the park.

Caleb walks up a minute later wearing jeans and a t-shirt with a plain button-down shirt over it.

He slows his stride when he sees me and, without a word, pulls me into an embrace.

Now I'm losing it, right into his shirt. I clutch onto him as the sobs start and don't stop. I let it all out--my mom's date, my dad's conversation, my confusion about it all. Caleb doesn't laugh, he doesn't pull away, he doesn't talk... he just lets me be me.

When I settle down, I lean back and witness the mess I've made on his shirt. "I made your shirt all gross," I say between snuffles.

"Forget the shirt. What's going on? I couldn't understand a word you mumbled into my chest."

Now I'm half laughing and half crying. He looks down at my hand. I do, too. He slowly reaches out and takes my fingers in his. God, how I dreamed of us holding hands all those years ago. He'd take my hand in his and we'd walk down the street together. I look up at his eyes. Usually they're dark and brooding, but now I see a warmth there I'd never noticed before.

He leads me to the old oak. We both sit down, then he leans back against the tree right next to me and lets go of my hand. "Okay, now talk."

It's easy because I don't have to look at him, I can just spurt out all the stuff that's going wrong in my life. I take a deep breath. I'm going to attempt to say it all without going into hysterics again.

"My mom has a date over, her boss and Mrs. Reynolds' son. I think my mom likes him, but I don't know if I'm ready for her to start dating. I know it's selfish, but my dad has practically ignored me ever since the divorce. He's re-married, you know. And I think his wife wants a kid, as if he doesn't already have one. To top it off, my doctor said I should play tennis again, and every time I think about it my throat starts constricting and I have to remember to breathe... and then I call you because you're the only one I feel I can talk to. Which is ridiculous because *itsyou*."

Caleb plays with a piece of grass he's plucked from the ground. "Do you think your mom would be happy with this boss guy?" he asks.

I think back to the way Mom laughed at the Fall Festival and how nervous she was tonight.

"Yeah, I do. But that's the part that scares me. It's like ending a chapter in your life and starting over. A single mom, boyfriends... so much has changed."

"You're stressing too much about what might be. Do something to take your mind off thinking about what might never happen."

"Like what?"

"Pick up a racquet."

"That's not funny," I say, already stressing and wanting to flee.

"I'm not trying to be funny, Maggie." I hear him sigh, a low breath that comes out slow. "Can I see your scars?"

Oh my God. "No." I shake my head feverishly while still staring at the ground. And I'm aware that my breathing just got heavier.

"Please don't freak out on me." I'm not.

"You are. I went to jail for doing something to you and I have no clue what it looks like."

I turn my head and I'm staring into his eyes, darker and more intense than I've ever seen them.

"Why are you looking at me like that?"

“Do you remember the accident?” he asks, totally focused on my answer.

I shake my head.

“You remember nothing? Our conversation before the accident, me hitting you with the car?

Nothing at all?”

“No. It’s a big blank. I only know what people told me.” He blinks, then looks away. “We fought, you and I.”

“About what?”

He gives a short, cynical laugh. “Kendra.”

I’m trying to breathe evenly so I don’t give him a hint that I do remember. Every word he spat at me when I told him I loved him. It’s the only part of that night that’s crystal clear to me. The rest is stuck in a foggy haze. “I don’t remember,” I lie.

“You said she was cheating on me, that you saw her with some other guy but you wouldn’t tell me who. You were right, you know,” he says. “She was with Brian before I got put in jail.” He’s staring at me again, and this time I can’t look away. “You also said you loved me.”

I swallow, still mesmerized by his eyes. Those eyes that never gave me more than a glance a year ago are burning into mine. “I don’t remember,” I whisper.

“Maggie--” He takes my hand in his and places my palm against his cheek roughened with a day’s worth of stubble. He turns his head and kisses the inner, sensitive part of my palm, his eyes holding my gaze. “I should have done this a year ago.”

My heart flips over as he leans in and touches his lips to mine.

TWENTY-NINE – Caleb

I couldn't sleep last night, which is nothing new because every night is filled with restlessness.

But last night it wasn't nightmares of jail keeping me awake, or the night of the accident and what I could have done differently. I was reliving what happened a few hours ago. Kissing Maggie was the stupidest thing I've ever done. But, looking into her sad eyes and vulnerable face made me want her more than I've ever wanted anything in my life.

Last night real emotions were flying. Last night honesty was flying. It felt so raw.

As I'm getting ready for school, I think about our conversation after the kiss. She was nervous, I could tell by the shaking of those lips against mine. She'd closed her eyes and clutched at me as our lips met. I swear I've never been more turned on. When I leaned back, she had a worried look on her face as if I was going to give her a flunking grade on her kissing skills.

I can't believe that happened, she'd said.

I don't even know how I responded. All I remember is this feeling of stupidity washing over me, and wondering what the hell made me kiss a girl I should avoid getting close to at all costs. But being close to her felt so damn right, I couldn't resist her. We've been through so much, our lives are meshed and we're stuck in this web together. The sick thing is, I don't want to get out of it.

Maggie is frustrating, she's confused, she's angry... and she hums these ridiculous tunes when she's working at Mrs. Reynolds' house. You'd think I'd go nuts from it. I can't help that I like it when she blows her hair off of her face when she's working, or when she looks at Mrs. Reynolds sideways when she's insisting Maggie's planting her stupid bulbs wrong... and when she's not humming, I resist the urge to tell her to continue.

Get a grip, Caleb. After you kissed her she ran home as fast as she could.

Okay, so after I kissed her she left me at the tree wondering how I got myself into this mess. As much as I want Maggie, I can't have her. Maybe I should write a letter and slip it into her locker, apologizing for last night.

I sit down at my desk and pull out a sheet of paper.

Maggie, Sorry about last night.

Caleb

I read it back to myself and it sounds idiotic. I crumple it up and start again.

Maggie, If I scared you last night, I'm sorry. It was a harmless kiss that didn't mean anything.

Caleb

I crumple it up almost as soon as I sign my name. Because it did mean something. Kendra's kisses are more hollow to me than a flute. And, dammit, I'm not sorry I slipped up and got close to Maggie. I wanted to kiss her and I still want to kiss her. Okay, so I'd rather have her say something like *Let's try that again*, but I'd settle for her not running away. Getting a grip, I head to school early and try to forget Maggie and last night.

I trudge through my day until I get to computer class. Maggie is sitting in front, her eyes fixated on the screen in front of her. She doesn't even notice when I walk in. I expected to get some sign from her that everything is cool between us, but I get zilch.

Oh, yeah. I do get something--Kendra. She's been giving me her best seduction smiles all day, promising to fulfill all my fantasies. Little does she know my fantasies are consumed with a girl who refuses to look in my direction.

Lucky for me I manage to ditch Kendra and her overexposed cleavage all day.

I head to the bus after school, trying without much success not to be surprised if Maggie sits up front instead of next to me. I plunk myself down in back and catch sight of her pink t-shirt and faded jeans coming up the aisle. Her long hair covers the side of her face, as if shielding it from my gaze. She passes the front seats and heads to the rear, never looking up at me.

When she slides in beside me and the bus heads away from the school, I let out a breath. Being at school is stressing me out. The teachers stare, the kids stare... everybody stares at me except Maggie these days.

I look down at our knees, slightly touching. Jeans against jeans. Does she notice the heat transferring from her body to mine? Does she even realize what she's doing to me? I know, I know, I'm not a virgin and the slightest touch of a girl's knee is driving me insane. I don't even know what I'm feeling for Maggie, I just know that I'm *feeling*. It's something I've tried to avoid and deny until yesterday, when I held her in my arms while her tears spilled onto my shirt.

God, our knees touching isn't enough. I need more.

She's knotting her fingers together on her lap as if she doesn't know what to do with them. I want to touch her, but what if she pulls away like before? I've never been such a wuss with a girl in my life.

I bite my bottom lip as I slide my hand about a millionth of a millimeter closer to her hand.

She doesn't seem fazed so I move it closer. And closer.

When the tips of my fingers touch her wrist, she freezes. But she doesn't jerk her hand away.

God, her skin is so soft, I think as my fingers trail a path from her wrist to her knuckles to her smooth, manicured nails.

I swear touching her like this is driving me nuts. It's more erotic, more intense than any other time with Kendra. I feel as awkward and inexperienced as a freshman again. I look up. Everyone else is oblivious to the intensity of emotions running rampant in the back of the public bus.

When I look back down at my hand covering hers, I'm grateful she hasn't come to her senses and pulled away. As if she knows my thoughts, we both turn our hands at the same time so our hands are palm against palm... finger against finger. Her hand is dwarfed against mine. It makes her seem more delicate and petite than I'd realized. I feel a need to protect her and be her champion should she ever need one.

With a slight shift of my hand, I lace my fingers through hers.

I'm holding hands. With Maggie Armstrong.

I'm not even going to think about how wrong it is because it feels so right. She's avoided looking right at me, but now she turns her head and our eyes lock. God, how come I never noticed before how long her eyelashes were and how her brown eyes have specks of gold that sparkle when the sun shines on them?

The bus stops suddenly and I look out the window. It's our stop. She must have realized this because she pulls her hand away from mine and stands. I follow behind her, still reeling.

We get to Mrs. Reynolds' house. I can smell the scent of cookies invading us as we walk inside.

"Oh, I'm so glad you both are here," Mrs. Reynolds chants. "Come in the kitchen. I have..." The old lady cocks her head to the side, eyeing Maggie and me in her living room. "Is it hot outside?"

she asks.

Maggie shakes her head while I say, "Not particularly."

"Then why are you both so flushed?" she asks, raising her eyebrows.

Oh, crap. While Maggie shrugs and heads to the kitchen, I inform the old lady, "I'm a guy. I don't flush."

"Uh huh," she says.

After eating the cookies, which she insists are her own secret Snickerdoodle recipe, I head outside. As I'm working, I steal glances at Maggie as she kneels on the ground and plants the bulbs with Mrs. Reynolds' verbal instructions never far behind.

When the old lady takes her nap, I listen to Maggie hum while I work on the gazebo. It's soothing. Her voice floats through the air as I work. But when the humming stops, I look around and Maggie isn't here. I head into the house.

I find her taking lemons out of the refrigerator. I watch as she cuts and squeezes them into a pitcher.

"Are you following me?" she asks, but doesn't meet my gaze.

"Yeah," I say.

"Why?"

"Honestly?"

She looks at me, her eyebrows raised. I give her the only honest and true answer I have. "You're where I want to be."

THIRTY – Maggie

“Maggie!” Mrs. Reynolds’ voice bellows through the house.

Caleb pulls back and gives me a helpless look. Then he says, “I guess that’s my cue to get back to work,” and walks out of the kitchen.

I’m standing here, holding a half a lemon in my hand. I’m speechless, I’m excited... I’m a wreck.

Caleb wants to be where I am.

This is not some minor guy. This is CALEB BECKER, the boy who I’d dreamed about for what seems like my entire life. The boy who I used to watch from my window just to tide me over until the next time I’d be in the same room with him.

This is the boy who hit me with his car and left me in the street.

But when I look into his eyes, I can tell he’s not the same Caleb Becker I used to know. The old Caleb only cared about himself. I never thought he observed or cared about the world around him. Has my heart started to forgive him?

I ran away last night because our kiss was perfect. Like I’d always dreamed our first kiss would be. Afraid that he wouldn’t want to ever kiss me again, or laugh, or... something would change it from perfect to something less, I left.

When the bus drops us off on the corner by our houses, I ask Caleb if he wants to come over.

“Is your mom home?” he asks.

“Not for another hour.”

He shrugs and says, “Sure.”

I lead him into my house and up to my room. “My mom would freak if she knew you were here, in my room... alone.”

“Yeah, mine too,” he says. “You want me to go?”

I smile. “No.” It’s about making our own choices, not ones our parents have made for us.

He studies the yellow and pink decor of my room, walking around the perimeter. He picks up a pair of red and white boxing gloves I have hanging above my bed. “Yours?”

“I got them when I was in the hospital,” I tell him. “You know, to remind me to keep fighting.”

He smiles wistfully at the boxing gloves. “I’m tired of fighting. I’m tired of reliving the accident.”

He says it almost to himself, like it’s a private thought he’s sharing with me.

I take the gloves from his hand. “Me, too.” And for the first time since that fateful night, I mean it. When his eyes bore into mine I ask, “Why are you here? Really.”

He shakes his head. "I don't know." He runs his hand over his head, frustrated. "And, God, I know this is crazy and I should stay as far away from you as I can possibly get, but... and this part is driving me nuts... when I'm close to you I can finally *feel* things again. I laid awake last night thinking about holding you until all the hurt and numbness goes away. Like I need you in order to be sane. I thought it was Kendra, that she'd make me forget. But it's you. *You*. Isn't that fucked up, Maggie? Because maybe if you tell me it's fucked I'll believe it."

"It's not crazy, not by a long shot," I sputter, then go up to him and hug him as tightly as possible.

He puts his arms around me and holds me just as tight. "Could you ever forgive me?" he asks, his voice shaking.

A single tear runs down my cheek. I feel its hot wetness on my skin. I don't know the exact moment it happened, but something has changed. I've changed. And I think it's because I've finally let go of the past. I'm ready to live my life again. "I already have forgiven you, Caleb." I tell him.

We stay that way for a long time. I don't know how much time has passed. It's as if I'm taking away his pain and he's taking away mine. Before, I was confused... how I feel about him, how I feel about the accident. But when he's holding me, I let go of the feelings of betrayal I've held onto for the past year. When he pulls back, I hear him sniff, and watch as he wipes his eyes with the back of his hand. "I got something in my eye."

"It's okay to cry, Caleb. I won't tell anybody." I look at my closet, where my racquet is hiding. "I cry a lot."

"Yeah? Well I'm gonna change that."

He's already changed it.

"My mom is going to be home any minute," I say as I stare into mesmerizing clear blue eyes. "I better go, then." I nod. "Okay."

He steps closer, so close I can feel his heart beating against mine. I hold my breath when he leans back and puts his palm on my cheek. He lightly brushes my lips with his thumb, tracing my top lip and bottom lip as he moves his thumb across them.

"You have soft lips," he says.

"You already know I'm, uh, not really experienced with kissing," I say shyly, then look down and break our contact. I can't look at him while I say this. "I mean, I'm not really like Kendra in that department. You're probably used to girls who know what they're doing, and I'm new at this and *really, really* embarrassed that I'm doing it badly or wrong or... oh, I'm really making a fool out of myself right now."

"I wasn't going to kiss you."

"You weren't?" I look up at him. *Well, of course he wasn't, stupid. Why would he hook up with me when he can be with someone who actually knew what they were doing, someone who isn't responsible for sending him to jail,* my brain tells me.

"Nope. The next time I kiss you I'm gonna take my time, and you said your mom's coming home any minute."

I check the clock on my nightstand and nod.

He bites his bottom lip, deep in thought. "No, the next time I kiss you it'll last a long, long time."

And when we're done you're gonna realize being turned on is not about experience."

While I'm still awestruck, Caleb heads out of the house.

THIRTY-ONE – Caleb

It's Sunday. Football Sunday. I'm hanging at Dusty's Sports Bar & Grill with the guys, since we can sit in the dining area and watch the game from the three large screens plastered throughout the restaurant.

The place is run-down--even the dark, wooden tables and chairs wobble because they're so old.

But their TV screens are big and new, which brings guys from the closest three towns on Sunday afternoons.

I wonder what Maggie's doing today. She works for Mrs. Reynolds in the mornings, but she'll probably head home early. Is she home now, sitting in her bedroom? Or is she at physical therapy?

"Did you see that, Becker?" Tristan asks as the crowd in the bar groans.

"Sorry, man, I missed it." *I was thinking about someone I have no right thinking about.*

Shaking his head, Tristan points to the screen. "I swear, Guerrero needs some glue on his hands in order to keep the ball in his grip. That's his third fumble."

"Fourth," Drew corrects him.

I'm not into the game today.

I catch Brian looking at the doorway and signaling over whoever just came into the restaurant. I turn around. It's Kendra. Followed by Hannah, Brienne, Danielle, and Sabrina. I don't think their wrestling cheer will go over too well at this place. But then again, maybe it will.

"What are the girls doing here?" a balking Tristan asks Brian, who obviously invited them.

"Can't we change the rules just this once? Kendra really wanted to come."

"Ugh, I'm gonna be sick," Drew says, then fake gags. "She's got you by the balls, man. When are you gonna see it?"

Drew, the self-proclaimed asshole of our group, for the first time in his life is right on. Just as I'm about to proclaim Drew an insightful genius, the girls reach the table. Kendra is wearing tight jeans and a Bears jersey. Brian's jersey, the same one I remember him wearing every Sunday.

Brian is staring at his trophy girl, and it's making me sick too. Because if that's what I looked like when I was dating her, all grateful that a girl like her chose to gift me with being her boyfriend. Someone shoot me right now.

"Can we join you guys?" Kendra asks, but as the words spew out of her mouth she's already pulling up a chair next to Brian and motioning for the girls to find some chairs, too.

Seriously, this is a huge violation of the "no girls allowed for Sunday ball games" code. I can tell Tristan and Drew are not happy about the invasion of chicks. The reason the rule was created in the first place was that we all agreed girls (at least the ones in our group, a.k.a. the ones sitting down at our table right now) are not interested in watching the game. They're interested in breaking our concentration. It's like a challenge, to see if they can distract us from football.

"Hey, Caleb," Danielle says as she parks her chair next to me. "Whatcha been up to?"

Before I can answer, the waitress comes over to our table to slap down our food and ask the girls what they'd like to order.

"What kind of salads do you have?" Brianne asks.

The waitress stifles a laugh. "No salads. We got burgers, chicken sandwiches, wings, and fries.

Take your pick."

Brianne is stunned by the choices. I can tell by the way she looks at the waitress in horror. This place is all about the beer/alcohol for the over-twenty-one crowd. Food is the afterthought. "I'll just have a Diet Coke," she finally says.

All of the girls order Diet Cokes. Nothing else. Tristan rolls his eyes.

"Wait!" Sabrina says, calling the waitress back. "I'll have a burger. No cheese, just plain."

"One plain burger, five Diet Cokes," the waitress repeats before retreating.

"I'll have a burger, too," Danielle says, piping in. "Plain, like hers."

"Two burgers, five Diet Cokes."

Brianne raises her eyebrows.

Danielle shrugs. "What? I didn't have lunch and I'm starving. Besides, I'm off the no-carb thing, Brianne."

Drew stands abruptly and puts his hands up. "Okay, if you girls want to join us, there's got to be a few rules. No talking about salads, and I don't even want to hear the word 'carb.' If you didn't come here to talk about the Bears or football, or to reminisce about the year 1985, be silent. And for God's sake, if you don't know which side to root for, I expect no cheering or comments. Got it?"

Kendra's eyebrows are furrowed. "What happened in 1985? Drew, I hate to tell you but we weren't even born yet."

While Drew slaps his forehead in frustration, an embarrassed Brian covers Kendra's mouth.

"That was the last year the Bears won the Super Bowl," Brian informs her.

He removes his hand from Kendra's mouth.

"You do know what the Super Bowl is, don't you?" Drew asks, sitting down at last.

"Of course she does," Brian comments, then pulls Kendra close and keeps his arm draped over her shoulders.

The rest of the quarter is met with silence from the girls and hoots and hollers from the rest of the people in the restaurant. When I happen to glance at Kendra and Brian during a commercial break, her gaze is directed at me as she whispers something in Brian's ear to make him smile mischievously.

I swear I just caught her licking his lobe, too.

Disgusted, I get up and head to the can. After I pee, I wash my hands and lean over the sink while I check out my reflection in the mirror. I'm a fucking mess, unable to just chill and hang out with my friends. Especially not with the girls here. Especially not with Kendra here. She puts my nerves on edge, reminding me of the past. The accident. Maggie.

The door to the men's room opens and sure enough Kendra walks in. I'm not surprised.

"Your boyfriend'll follow you in here," I tell her.

She saunters close to me, close enough I can smell her strong perfume mixed with cherry lip gloss. Total overkill.

"He won't. He thinks you're upset, so I told him I'd talk to you. He trusts us both."

"He's an idiot."

"He also thinks you're jealous. Are you?"

"Oh, yeah," I tell her. She wants to hear it, so I give her what she wants. It's a game she likes to play. I'm tired of playing games, but it's the only way to deal with her.

"You've been elusive, CB." try busy.

"I thought we had an understanding."

The only relationship I want is the one I already have, with Maggie. It might not be public, but it's genuine.

The nagging thing is, I don't know what Kendra knows. Every time we're together, she hints she knows more about the accident than everyone else. But what if she doesn't, what if she's yanking my chain? We were both so plastered that night, and she's a lightweight. Maybe my ex has been playing me this whole time and I'm a sucker just like Brian.

No matter how much I want to, I can't risk alienating her.

She creeps her fiery-red fingertips up my shirt like a spider, stopping when she gets to my shoulder. Then she leans in. "You're like a drug, Caleb. I can't quit."

She's thriving on the chase. Not me. It probably turns her on that someone can walk in any minute and catch us this close together. It's the risk factor giving her the rush. "So why are you suckin on another guy's ear?" I don't know why I asked. It's not that I even care. I put my hand on her waist, ready to push her away if she comes closer. I'm so done with being her pawn.

"I just wanted to get a reaction out of you. It worked. For the past couple of weeks you've given me nothing, no emotion or encouragement. Brian thinks you're into Maggie Armstrong. Isn't that ridiculous?"

Just when I'm about to answer, the door opens. Drew comes in, seeing Kendra and me standing close, touching each other in what might look like an embrace. It's not what it seems, but it looks bad.

"I'm not even gonna ask," Drew says, then heads to the urinals. Before he slides his zipper down, he turns his head to Kendra. "Do you mind taking this somewhere else?"

"It's nothing I haven't seen before," Kendra says to Drew as she steps away from me, breaking all contact.

Drew gives a short laugh. "Yeah, well you may have made the rounds with my friends, but you ain't getting your hands on mine."

"From what I've heard, one hand would be enough," Kendra shoots back.

"Enough," I say. "Kendra, go back to Brian. Drew, take a leak already."

Hurt that I haven't defended her, she storms out of the men's bathroom, but not before murmuring, "asshole" to Drew on her way out, to which Drew responds, "slut."

Drew finishes, then as he washes his hands he says, "Caleb, you think hooking up with Kendra is the answer? Listen, let Brian have the bitch and move onto someone else."

"It's a little more complicated than that." Drew makes a tsking noise, just like Mrs. Reynolds.

"You're making it complicated." Then it hits me.

For the second time today, Drew is right on. I'm letting Kendra manipulate me instead of the other way around. I don't need to appease her. I can just let her keep the chase going without giving her a chance to go in for the kill. Wow, I've been going about this whole situation all wrong, I can't believe the solution is so simple. I take out my wallet and hand Drew a twenty. "Here, pay my bill. I'm outta here."

"You don't have to leave. I'm not gonna tell Brian what you and Kendra were doing."

"At this point, I don't even care," I say, then leave the men's room and head out the back door.

THIRTY-TWO – Maggie

Caleb comes over in the afternoon, totally unexpected. I open the door to answer it and here he is, standing in front of me with a determined look on his face.

“I wanted to see you,” is all the explanation I get. “Is your mom home?”

“No. She just left for work five minutes ago.” Caleb and I are friends. Okay, we’re more than friends. It’s strange and complicated, but it’s the only unstrained friendship I have.

I lead him to my room and have him wait there while I bring up some drinks and chips. We sit on the floor and munch on the chips. We talk about school and wrestling, and laugh about the times when we were kids in preschool and the stupid things we did. Then we play gin with the playing cards my mother got me when I was in the hospital. He doesn’t talk about kissing at all. He doesn’t even look at me with that hot, wanting look I’ve seen before. He’s got something on his mind. I don’t know what it is, but it’s distracting him.

After a while he puts down the cards and says, “I want to help you, Maggie.”

“With what?”

“Playing tennis again. I always see you looking into the closet like there’s a monster in there, so I checked it out while you were in the kitchen. I found your racquet.”

I stand up. My heart starts racing as I hobble away from him. “I’m never playing again.”

He stands, too. “I’m not trying to hurt you, Maggie. I’m trying to help.”

I turn my back to him. “I can’t play.”

“Just try, Maggie. What’ll it hurt?”

“I’m not going to be good.”

“Who says you have to be good?”

He doesn’t know being good at tennis has always meant more than being good at tennis. It’s so much deeper than that.

When I look at Caleb, I want to make him proud of me. He’s trying to fix whatever pain he’s caused me. I want to help him, too. “Okay, I’ll try,” I say. “But don’t expect much.”

“I won’t.

Fifteen minutes later, we’re behind Paradise High looking out across the tennis courts. It brings back memories of me trying to prove myself. Taking a deep breath, I follow Caleb onto the hard, green surface.

When Caleb retrieved my racquet, I froze. I didn’t even want to hold it. So after he fetched his own racquet and some tennis balls from his garage, he carried everything without complaint as we walked to the school.

Now he’s holding out my racquet to me.

I hesitate.

Taking my hand in his, he wraps my fingers around the racquet handle “I’m scared,” I admit to him.

“Me, too.”

I raise an eyebrow.

“Yeah,” he says. “If you beat me. I have to keep up my tough-guy image, you know.”

That makes me laugh. “You don’t need me to make you look tough, Caleb.”

With that, he takes the tennis balls and heads to the opposite side of the court. “Be easy on me,” he jokes.

He hits the ball right to me, nice and slow. Instincts take over and I hit it back. It feels good, I have to admit, but it also feels strange. My body moves differently now, like I’m stiff and can’t loosen up. My legs, my stance, are both awkward and wrong. I can’t balance on the balls of my feet and pivot when the ball comes at me. I can’t lean over in the ready position, ready to strike at the ball when it flies by.

When Caleb hits the ball back to me, I don’t swing.

He stands up and shakes his head. “You could have gotten that.”

“I didn’t want to. Can we go now?”

“No. Hit this back to me ten times, then we’ll go.”

He hits the next ball right at me. I hit it lightly.

“Nine,” he says, counting down.

Three more balls come within arms length and I gently hit them, so they easily fly over the net right to him. My feet still haven’t moved from this spot.

“Six.”

Five more gentle balls fly over the net and bounce right in front of me. I send them flying back slowly.

“One more, Maggie. Then we’re out of here.”

Great. Only one more and the humiliation can end.

He sails one hard and fast over the net. It bounces five feet away from me. I don’t even try to get it. He does it again... and again. I put my racquet at my side and stare at him. “Are you trying to humiliate me?”

“Stop acting like a baby and go for the ball already,” he says, shaking his head. “*Come on.*”

How dare he!

This time, as the ball shoots over the net, my anger and nothing else drives me as I take three steps and whack the ball back at Caleb with all the pent-up power and frustration inside me.

It hits him squarely on his arm. “Ow!” I don’t ask him if he’s okay, because he has this arrogant look on his face and the corners of his mouth turn up in victory. “Did that feel as good to you as it did to me?” he asks.

I throw the racquet at him and head off the court.

I won't give him the satisfaction of knowing it felt exhilarating and awesome.

He steps beside me and pulls me to him. "I'm gonna have a bruise, you know," he says. "But watching you whack that thing was damn hot."

I look over at the welt growing on his arm. "It was?"

In a swift motion, he moves forward and pins me against the fence with his body. "I'm going to kiss you."

My stomach does a little flip; I forget about being mad. My nerves take over all emotions.

"Here?"

"Oh, yeah. Right here, right now. You gonna run away this time?"

"I don't think so, but I'm not sure."

He smiles, amused at my answer.

I look up into his eyes that give me a glimpse into his private world, then lick my lips in anticipation.

And that is the beginning of our kissing marathon. All I have to say is that I don't feel inexperienced after an hour of lips and tongues and innocent and not-so-innocent caresses on both sides. I don't feel insecure about kissing anymore.

We moved from the courts to the park and back to my bedroom. On my bed Caleb leans back and moans. "We have to stop this or my body is going to suffer aftershocks for days."

Relaxing, I lay my head on his chest. "That was nice."

"Yeah, too nice."

He's breathing heavily. We both are. I take a deep, slow breath and bask in the moment. I could stay here forever, just like this. Gazing. Feeling wanted. Feeling protected. Feeling normal.

"I should hate you for making me play tennis."

"Yeah. But you can't, can you? Besides, we've had a makeout session you'll be thinking about for weeks."

"You've got an ego problem."

"Only with you." He chuckles, then yawns.

"Do I bore you?" I ask.

"Not at all," he says, stroking my hair. "It's just... I don't sleep too well. And I'm so relaxed and content my body is ready to crash."

I lean up on my elbows. "So sleep."

"Here?"

“Sure. My mom won’t be home until late.” I start to get up, to leave him my whole bed so he could sleep in peace.

“Don’t leave me,” he says. “Lie next to me.” He pulls me down with him. “You’re so different,” he says almost to himself.

“Don’t say that,” I tell him, looking away. I want to keep the false fantasy that I’m the same as other girls, at least for a little while.

“Different in a good way.” His brows furrow. “A really good way.”

Then he pulls me tight against him. We’re spooned together as if we’ve been dating for years.

We’re even sharing the pillow I’ve slept on since I was ten. The last thing I remember before waking up is Caleb’s slow, rhythmic breathing behind me as he falls into slumber.

But now I hear the front door open and I’m fully awake. “Caleb, wake up. My mom’s home.”

It takes him a second to get his bearings, we’ve been sleeping for over five hours.

“Wait here and don’t make a sound,” I say, then kiss him on his sleepy lips.

Sliding out from beneath his arm pinning me to him, I close my bedroom door and head downstairs. “Hey, Mom,” I say, my voice groggy from sleep.

“I didn’t mean to wake you, sweetheart. I hate these late Sunday nights, but I’d rather have them and be able to spend the mornings with you. It seems we spend much too little time together lately.” She puts down her purse and starts climbing the stairs. I pray she doesn’t want to hang out in my room and have one of those mother/daughter talks. Not now. But I guess if she does, the truth will come out. Maybe it would be a blessing in disguise, but I’d rather not chance it.

“It’s fine, Mom. You always worry about the small stuff.”

She doesn’t hear the creak of my bed behind my door. But I do.

Mom’s eyebrows furrow. “Why are you sleeping in your clothes?”

Oops. “I was in my room and must have dozed.”

“Well, I’m beat, too. Go back to bed. You have school in the morning. And change out of those clothes.”

“Okay. Good night.” I hope she doesn’t realize I’m anticipating with bated breath the moment she closes the door to her room.

When she closes her bedroom door, I hurry back to my room. Caleb is sitting on my bed, startled. “I’m so sorry,” he whispers, still looking as dangerous and cool as ever even half-asleep.

“I lost track of time.”

“Me, too.”

He walks over to the window.

“Caleb, what are you doing?” I whisper.

“Finding a way out.”

I put my hand on his arm and tug on it. “You’re not jumping out my window. Just wait fifteen minutes and I’ll lead you to the front door. My mom sleeps like the dead and she falls asleep really fast. Besides, if we get caught we’re in this together. Right?”

It takes him a while to respond. It’s almost as if he doesn’t believe what I just said. “Yeah. Right,” he finally murmurs.

THIRTY-THREE – Caleb

I met with Damon this morning, after convincing my parents I stayed out late because I was at Brian's and we lost track of time. They bought it. Damon came for some sort of evaluation for the State of Illinois. He interviewed my family, even Leah, then we hung out in my room while he grilled me with questions.

I told Damon I asked Maggie to see her leg, leaving out the part that we work together every weekday after school, or the fact that she's the only person who makes me forget the past year even happened. God forbid I should tell him I slept with her last night, in the literal sense of the word.

Damon shakes his head. "It's forbidden to confront your victim, Caleb."

"I didn't confront her."

Damon crosses my room and puts his hand to his head as if he has a headache. "You sweet on her?"

"Who?"

"Maggie."

"No. No way," I lie.

"You small town kids are a breed apart. Okay, here's the deal: stay away from her."

"Do I have a choice?"

"No." Damon opens his folder and clicks his pen. "You're almost done with your community-service requirements. A gazebo for Mrs. Dorothy Reynolds. I see you've been on that job for three weeks."

"If all goes well I should be done by the end of next week."

Damon seems impressed. "Good work, Caleb. You started out rocky, but you're a decent kid.

Let's meet again next week and talk about what's going to happen after your release."

I'm feeling energized after Damon's visit, knowing the jail threat is almost behind me. I just have to keep the fact that I'm with Maggie a secret.

I knock on my sister's door. She's in there. Her room is her cave. My sister hibernates except for school and meals.

She doesn't answer, so I knock louder. "Leah, open up."

"What do you want?" she says through the door.

I sigh. This is harder than I thought. "Just open the fucking door."

She opens it a crack. I push it the rest of the way open and walk inside. It's too dark in here so I pull the shade up.

"Keep it down."

"Yeah, well, we have to talk and I can't see a damn thing."

“I don’t want to talk.”

“Too bad,” I say, my hands crossed in front of my chest.

Leah’s gripping the handle of the door, like she’s ready to flee.

“Are Mom and Dad home?” she asks nervously.

“They’re out.”

She lets out a small breath.

I don’t even know where to start. I just know I’m ready to say it out loud. It’s been pent up inside of me for over a year. The demon’s got to get loose. Life is not about covering up for crap and living in a fantasy world.

I take a deep breath and tell my sister, “You hit Maggie with the car and I took the fall for it. It sucked, but it’s over. I wouldn’t have done it if I knew you’d act like a fucking corpse the rest of your life.”

Her eyes are wide as if her brain is registering the truth for the first time.

“Talk, Leah,” I order. “Say something... *anything!*”

“I can’t deal with it!” she cries out, then hurls herself onto her bed face-first.

I grab a box of tissues off her nightstand and toss it to her. I stand over her as she cries hysterically.

“I’m sorry, Caleb. I’m so sorry,” she says between sobs. “I could have killed her, Caleb.”

“But you didn’t.”

“I stood there and watched as they handcuffed you. I let them take you away.”

I was so used to being the troublemaker, used to being the one who screwed up. Leah had been the squeaky-clean twin; I was the rebel. Even drunk, I didn’t hesitate taking the fall for the accident. Leah wasn’t going to be handcuffed, arrested, and convicted. She couldn’t handle it. I could.

The cops didn’t question it when I confessed right there. Hell, my own parents never questioned my guilt.

To think, it was all because Leah swerved to avoid hitting a fucking squirrel in the road.

“It’s over.” I tell her.

“No, Caleb, it’s not. It’ll never be over. I’m going to carry this guilt around with me the rest of my life. I can’t even look at Maggie. Hell, Caleb, I can’t even look at you. It’s so hard for me, you can’t imagine what it’s like.”

She’s right, I can’t.

Turning to me, she sucks in a frightened breath. “You’re not going to tell anyone, are you?”

Promise me you’ll never tell *anyone*.”

I look down at my twin, the girl who I shared my mom's womb with, shared birthdays with, and grew up side by side with. She should know me like I know her, feel my pain as much as I feel hers. She knows this secret is tearing me up inside. I can feel it just as much as I know how twisted her rationale has become. But she ignores me and focuses only on herself. She really is, after all, a stranger to me.

THIRTY-FOUR – Maggie

I'm humming an old song my mom used to sing to me when she put me to bed, back when I was scared of the dark and refused to go to sleep. Life was less complicated back then. My dad lived at home and Mom's only job was, well, to just be a mom.

Now she's working as a waitress and dating. Okay, that last part is my fault. I can't even blame my mom for her date tonight. Thanks to Caleb, I'm finally coming to terms with it.

That first night he kissed me was magical. I was all ready to just be friends with him, cherish our platonic relationship, when it suddenly turned into something more. When I'm with him I don't think about my limp. All I think about is how good it feels to be able to talk and share and kiss.

Am I falling in love with Caleb Becker again? I don't know. I'm so nervous and scared to be hurt again, I'm keeping a wall up so my heart is protected.

Little by little he's been chipping away at that wall.

After work we've been getting off the bus two blocks away so we could steal an extra few minutes together. Unfortunately, today he had a meeting with some counselor from the Department of Corrections. He said it was important, so I hope it goes well.

I've forgiven him for the accident. Two days ago he tried to bring it up, saying he had something important to tell me about it. I cut him off with a kiss and promises of forgiveness.

The wind is blowing, and the leaves are starting to fall. It's the end of summer. The trees and grass and flowers are getting ready for dormancy. As I plant the last of the daffodil bulbs for Mrs. Reynolds, I think of the winter they'll have to survive before thawing and being ready for their first peek of the sun.

I look up from daydreaming about songs and trees and Caleb to find Mrs. Reynolds standing over me. I stop humming.

"You sure are cheery today."

"I only have five more bulbs before I'm all done," I tell her.

"That's a good thing, too," she says, looking up at the darkening sky. "The weather is changing. I already feel a winter chill in the air."

"Me too." After I finish the last bulb, we sit down and eat dinner.

"I'd like to invite you and your mother over for dinner one night. But only if it's okay with you."

"Why wouldn't it be?"

"Because my son has been on more dates with your mother than he's been on in the past three years. I've been coaching him, you know."

"You have?"

"Did Lou bring you chocolates the first time he came to your house?" I nod.

"That was my advice. I told him to bring yellow roses to your mom because they're the best way to start--"

“They weren’t yellow roses.” She raises an eyebrow. “They weren’t?”

“No. Tulips.”

“Yellow?”

“Purple.”

“Hmm. And the chocolates, they were caramels?”

“Frango mints. Very tasty.”

“Tasty, huh? So much for mother’s advice.” I laugh.

My boss waves her arms in the air. “Enough lollygagging, Margaret.”

When we’re putting the dishes away, Mrs. Reynolds sways and holds the edge of the counter for support.

“Are you okay?” I ask, taking the plate from her and leading her to the sofa.

“These new medications are just wreaking havoc with these old bones, that’s all. Nothing to worry about.”

I do worry. Before I leave her house, I call Auntie Mae’s Diner and tell Mr. Reynolds to check on her.

I head to the bus stop after I’m convinced she’s okay. A car screeches by me as I walk. I recognize it as the same car with the guys who got in a fight with Caleb.

“Hey, it’s Caleb Becker’s retarded girlfriend,” someone yells out the window.

I bite the inside of my lip and keep walking.

“I think she wants you, Vic. Why don’t you show her a good time,” someone else says. Then they all laugh.

The car is driving slowly beside me. I just hope they don’t step out of the car. If I stop walking, will they get out?

Will they hurt me?

Deep fear, so intense I’m shaking inside, keeps me from stopping.

I can’t go back to Mrs. Reynolds’ house. It’s too far and I can’t outrun these guys. There are houses lining the street. I could try ringing a doorbell and ask someone to call the police.

A plan forms in my head. I turn around and head in the opposite direction, the direction I just came from. But in the process I fall down. My hands are stinging and I feel sticky wetness dripping down my knee from the cut I’ve just gotten from the fall.

“Did you have a nice trip?” one of them yells out the window.

I get up and hobble faster, praying they won’t turn the car around and follow me. Because if they do, I don’t know how I’m going to handle it. I listen for the sound of the car turning around. I don’t dare look back and give them another reason to come after me. But I can hardly hear anything besides the furious panting of my own breath.

Relief sweeps over me as the bus roars down the street. I hurry to the curb and wave the bus down, then glance to see if the car is still there.

“You okay?” the bus driver asks.

“I’m fine,” I say, then scurry to the back to sit.

Nothing can cure me, no amount of physical therapy or surgeries. The old Maggie, the tennis star without a debilitating limp, the old Maggie, who could run away from danger, doesn’t even exist.

Caleb is outside mowing his lawn as I limp down the street. He stops the motor and rushes over to me as soon as he glances my way.

“What happened? Tell me what happened.”

I’m trying to hold back tears. “I’m fine.”

He looks around to make sure people aren’t looking, then cradles my face in his hands. “You’re not fine. Damn it, talk to me.”

I gaze at him in despair. “It was that Vic guy.”

“I’ll kill him if he touched you,” he growls, eyeing my ripped pants stained with blood.

“He didn’t. He and his friends just scared me, that’s all.”

“I’ll make sure that never happens again, Maggie.”

I smile warmly at him. “You’re not going to always be able to protect me. What are you going to do when I’m in Spain, fly over and beat up all the bad guys who make fun of me?”

THIRTY-FIVE – Caleb

I said Vic was going to pay, but I didn't know how to do it... legally. That is, until I was talking to the guys at lunch yesterday who told me Vic is competing for his school at our wrestling invitational today.

I am officially a Paradise Panther wrestler now. And I only have to beat out four guys until I come face to face on the mat with Medonia. As I suspected, we're still in the same weight class. I think the guy's using steroids to bulk up.

I'm in the locker room with the rest of the team, getting ready for the match.

"Caleb, you look like you're about to kill someone," Brian says as I jump rope to warm up.

"He's in *the zone*," Drew says. "Ain't that right?"

I don't answer. Coach Wenner stops me and pats me on the back. "You haven't been to practice, Becker. You sure you're ready?"

I put my mouth guard in. "Yeah, Coach."

I win my first two matches with a pin within the first minute. The third match took me a little longer. I think I pinned him in ninety seconds.

"CB's on fire!" Tristan yells as he's plugging up a nosebleed from his previous match.

I focus as they call me and Medonia up to the mat. I can't wait to wipe that smirk off his face.

"How's your girlfriend?" he asks.

"Better than yours, any day."

"She's a cripple, Becker."

"You'll be the cripple after this match."

The ref puts his hands between us. "Keep it clean, guys."

When the match starts, I push him with all my might until he falls. Unfortunately, he rolls off the mat and the ref blows his whistle. "Caution, Panthers. Point for Fremont."

The next time we start, Medonia starts low. I move off the mat when the match starts and Medonia flies past me. The ref blows his whistle.

When the match starts up again, I get one more caution for an illegal hold which ends up with my elbow in Medonia's face.

One more caution and I'll be disqualified.

The whistle blows, and the ref calls out, "We've got a bleeder for Fremont. Two minute break."

Coach Wenner stalks over to me, eyes blazing. "What are you doing? My team doesn't play dirty, Becker. Now either you go out there and try to win that match, or I'm forfeiting it for you. Which is it?"

THIRTY-SIX – Maggie

Mrs. Reynolds is going to be the death of me. She's determined to make me get behind the wheel of her black monstrosity sitting in the garage.

"It's a classic," Mrs. Reynolds says, her chin held high as the garage door opens and reveals the Cadillac.

"I'm... I'm really not ready to drive yet," I say. "But you can drive it and I'll ride on the passenger side."

Mrs. Reynolds opens the passenger door and slides into the seat. "Honey, my eyes can hardly see two feet in front of me. Come on, now. Time's a-wastin'."

She hangs her hand out the window, the keys dangling from her fingers. She shakes them, the keys on the ring clinking against each other.

I'm huffing and puffing as I slip the keys from her hand, hoping she'll get the hint. She doesn't. I open the driver's side door and slide into the front seat. Wow. The white leather is soft, and the back of the seat is as big as an old Lay-Z-Boy recliner. I look out the front window. The hood is wide and has that shiny Cadillac symbol.

I turn to Mrs. Reynolds, who has her small purse neatly clutched in her lap, ready to go. Making the old lady proud of me would be so great. But... I'm not ready. I think.

"I can't do this," I explain, hoping she'll understand. She's having none of it. Just by the stern look on her face, I know. "Margaret, put the key in the ignition." I do it.

"Now turn the key and start the car." I turn the key.

"What are you afraid of, dear?"

"Hitting someone. Getting into an accident." I gulp.

"This part of you has to change, you know. Being afraid to take chances is scarier than actually doing things that challenge you."

"I haven't driven since the accident."

"It's about time you did, then."

I shake my head.

"Back up slowly so you don't hit the fence." Mrs. Reynolds faces forward and buckles her seat belt.

I buckle mine, too. I have no clue why the lady can make me do things I don't want to do. It's like she has this power over me.

I take a deep breath, press my foot on the brake, and put the car into reverse. Slowly releasing the brake, I turn back and make sure I'm all clear to back out of the driveway.

"Watch out for the mailbox," Mrs. Reynolds advises.

We're safe at the bottom of the driveway and I back out into the street. I'm trying to convince myself not to have a panic attack, but I don't think I'm being too successful. Part of me is excited to drive again and get that fear out of my life, but the other, stronger part of me, wants to put the car in park and limp home. I hear Caleb's voice inside my head, pushing me to do it.

Mrs. Reynolds pats me on the knee. "Well done, Margaret."

With that vote of confidence, I put the car into drive and slowly head down the street.

My feet aren't used to the pedals and I'm stopping too hard and accelerating too fast. "Sorry," I say after we come to a stop sign and Mrs. Reynolds jerks forward.

She clears her throat. "No problem. Let's take it a little easy on the accelerator and brake, shall we?"

"Uh, sure." But when it's my turn to cross the intersection, I take my foot off the brake and gently put pressure on the accelerator. I pump it a bit because I don't want to jerk Mrs. Reynolds forward again.

But now I'm making it worse. Oops. "You'd probably be a better driver, even with your vision problems," I say seriously.

"I might have to agree with you, dear. Next time we try this, remind me to take some Dramamine."

I give her a sideways glance. "You look like you're going to be sick."

"Just look at the road, not at me," she orders. "My looking sick has nothing to do with your driving."

She directs me to a place called Monique's. It has cute dresses in the window. By the time we get there my nerves have gone from overdrive to idle. I follow Mrs. Reynolds into the store. Dresses in all colors and patterns are positioned on racks throughout the store.

Mrs. Reynolds runs her fingers over a short, light blue silk dress. "Do you know how to spot quality material?"

I take my hand and run the soft cloth through my fingers. "I've never really paid attention to fabrics."

"Every fabric has its own personality, just like my daffodils. For some, the softness and weight matters. For others, it's the way the fabric moves... and you can't discount color vibrancy."

"How do you know so much?"

"Honey, when you're as old as I am, you know more than you want to know."

A woman who works at the store comes up to us, wearing a plum pant suit and blonde hair that's neatly combed and curled at the ends. "Can I help you ladies?"

"We're looking for a dress," Mrs. Reynolds says, then points to me. "For this young lady."

"For me?" I say, following behind as the lady leads us through the store.

Mrs. Reynolds stops and turns to me. "You need a little something to spice up your wardrobe, Margaret. All you wear are solids and, to be completely honest, your clothes are a bit too big and casual."

I look down at my black cotton pants and grey t-shirt. "They're comfortable."

“And totally appropriate for lounging around the house. But, we’re having dinner tonight and I want you to dress up. Consider it an early Christmas gift.”

The saleswoman leads us to a rack of short cocktail dresses. “These just came in from Europe.

It’s a new silk/ washable blend.”

Mrs. Reynolds slides the silky, teal-colored dress between her fingers. “Too stiff. She’s used to cotton, so I’d like a softer fabric.”

“I don’t wear short dresses,” I tell them.

The lady leads us to another corner of the store. “How about a cotton/wool blend?”

Mrs. Reynolds shakes her head. “Too hot.”

“Rayon?” loo clingy.

I’d expect the lady to get frustrated, but she just puts her hand to her chin in thought. “I may have something that you’d like in the back. Wait here.” She goes to the back of the store and comes out a minute later with a yellow dress hanging off her arm. Holding it out to Mrs. Reynolds, she says, “Its from Sweden. A new supplier sent it to us for evaluation.”

Mrs. Reynolds eyes the dress, then rubs the edge of the fabric between her thumb and forefinger.

“Love the fabric, but the color is atrocious. She’d look like a sour lemon in this.”

“It came in a light plum color, too. I’ll go get it.”

“It’s a beautiful shade,” I say when she brings out the plum-colored dress. I try it on in the dressing room. It has spaghetti straps and a scooped neckline. The middle is cinched at the waist before waves of the material flow down and stop just above my ankle. When I walk in front of the mirror you can hardly tell I have a limp.

The sales woman smiles when I model it for them. “I think we have a winner here.”

Mrs. Reynolds smacks her lips together. “It’s perfect. We’ll take it.”

“You have a very generous grandmother,” the saleswoman says to me.

I look over at Mrs. Reynolds, who is across the store looking at another dress. “I know. I couldn’t have picked a better one myself.”

When I go back to the dressing room to take the dress off, Mrs. Reynolds stops me. “Keep it on, Margaret. We’ll be going to dinner from here and you won’t have time to change.”

“Which dress are you trying on?”

“Old ladies don’t need new dresses. Now stop the chatter and let’s move on.”

I put my hands on my cinched, plum-covered hips. “I’m not leaving this store until you buy a new dress, too.”

Mrs. Reynolds’ mouth opens in shock.

“Don’t look so startled, *Grandma*,” I say, copying her famous saying to me. “It doesn’t suit your face.”

Her mouth snaps shut. Then she throws her head back and howls with unabashed laughter.

A half hour later we're back in the Cadillac. I might also add that Mrs. Reynolds is wearing a new silk and rayon, powder-blue dress with a matching jacket.

"I want you to deduct money out of my paycheck for the dress. I insist," I say.

Mrs. Reynolds just smiles without responding.

"I'm serious, Mrs. Reynolds."

"I know you are, dear, and I appreciate it. But I'm still buying it with my own funds."

I shake my head in frustration. "Where to now?" A pie run. "Huh?"

"Just head for Auntie Mae's Diner and you'll see."

I steer the car around and drive to the diner.

Mrs. Reynolds ducks down. "Go to the back, where the dumpster is," she whispers. "And don't let anyone see you."

The woman is serious. I slide down in the seat and creep the car toward the back of the restaurant as if we're here to rob the place. I stop near the dumpsters. "What are we doing here?" I whisper, then wonder why I'm whispering. Her son owns the restaurant.

"Keep the car running, just get out and knock on the back door three times. Then you pause for two seconds and then knock another three times." Mrs. Reynolds sinks lower into her seat.

"When someone answers, say, *The red hen has flown the coop.*"

"I don't get it."

"You will if you follow my directions. Now go!"

This is comical. I almost pee in my dress as I creep up to the back door and knock. Knock, knock, knock. Pause. Knock, knock, knock.

Juan, one of the bus boys, opens the door a crack.

I burst out laughing as I say, "The red bird has flown the coop."

"Don't you mean *hen*?"

"Oh, yeah. Sorry, sorry, sorry. I mean *The red hen has flown the coop.*"

I think Juan is laughing as he says, "Wait here," and closes the door. When the door opens, Irina hands me two boxes.

"What's inside?" I say.

"Don't ask me, Moggie. A surprise for you and Mrs. Reynolds."

When she closes the door, I bring the boxes to the car and slide into the driver's seat. "We got the goods."

"Great, now head back to my house."

Mrs. Reynolds is smirking as I drive up to her house. When I pull up to the garage, I finally figure out what this is all about.

The gazebo is finished, and Caleb has hung white lights all around it. White candles are lit inside, making the whole gazebo light up. Caleb is standing beside it, wearing khaki pants and a white dress shirt and tie.

When he winks at me and flashes his smile, I feel another piece of armor chipping away.

THIRTY-SEVEN – Caleb

I hurry to the car and open the door for Mrs. Reynolds. I hold out my hand and help her out of the car. “You look hot,” I tell her.

She pats me on the cheek and says, “If I was only sixty years younger, sonny boy.”

“Did you do what I said?” I say close to her ear. She snorts. “I had Margaret saying that ridiculous sentence we came up with.”

Mrs. Reynolds and I are partners in crime tonight. The gazebo is finished. My job here is done. I had the old lady make Maggie drive around town until six o’clock. I’ve been putting this night together in my head for a week already. A perfect night.

When I turn and catch sight of Maggie, I’m doomed. And speechless.

Mrs. Reynolds says, “Don’t look so startled, Caleb. It doesn’t suit your face.”

Maggie walks up to me, the dress showing off curves I only recently dreamed she had.

“The gazebo looks great,” she says.

I don’t look away from her. Hell, I can’t take my eyes off of her. These two unlikely women are my saving grace.

Maggie blushes, then glides away to join Mrs. Reynolds in the gazebo.

I’ve set a table inside the gazebo, complete with a three-course meal, compliments of my saved-up lawn mowing allowance and Little Italy Restaurant. I added a little spot heater to keep the gazebo warm, and have a portable radio with music playing softly in the background.

After pulling out a chair for Maggie, I hold my hand out to Mrs. Reynolds. “Would you care to dance, milady?”

She laughs, but I take her hand and pull her into a spin and into my arms. She shrieks. “Caleb, please. I’m an old lady. Where’s my cane?”

“I thought old ladies like younger men,” I tease, and dance slowly until the song is over.

I lead her to her chair and pull it out. “You better watch out for him, Margaret. He’s dangerous.”

I wince as I bend down to sit.

“What’s wrong?” Maggie asks.

“Nothing,” I say after everyone has been served. I take a spoonful of the minestrone and look up.

Maggie’s not buying it. Neither is Mrs. Reynolds. “Okay, okay. I competed in a wrestling invitational today. No big deal.”

“I didn’t know you joined the team.”

“It was a one-time thing. I think.”

Mrs. Reynolds finishes her soup and waves the spoon at me. “You might have a broken rib.”

“I’m sure it’s just bruised,” I say, trying to reassure her as much as myself. Right before I pinned Vic in the second round, he knocked me to the ground and took a five-pointer.

I won the match, but the coach still gave me hell for playing dirty the first round.

“I can’t wait until the daffodils bloom,” Maggie says, her eyes sparkling with the candles shining on them. My hands are clammy from nervousness, I have no clue why. “You’re going to have to take a picture for me and send it to Spain.”

I still can’t believe she’s leaving. Just when I fell for her.

“Speaking of Spain...” Mrs. Reynolds hands her an envelope. “Enjoy your journey, but always remember where you came from.”

Maggie raises a glass with water filled in it. “Who can forget Paradise?”

We clink our glasses together.

After we eat, I open the boxes from Irina, the chef from Auntie Mae’s. As I set samples of pies in front of Maggie and Mrs. Armstrong, you’d swear they were related by the elated expressions on their faces. We all take a fork and dig in.

“This has been the most magnificent day of my life since Albert died, may he rest in peace.

Thank you both. But these weary bones need a rest.”

“Are you okay?” Maggie asks, concern lacing her voice. We both get up to help her.

“No, you two sit down and enjoy. I just need to rest a bit.”

Regardless to what the old lady is claiming, Maggie helps her upstairs while I clear the dishes.

“She okay?” I ask when Maggie comes back outside.

“I think so. She went to the doctor yesterday. He wants to run some tests on her, but she’s too stubborn to go.”

I watch Maggie. God, anyone who’s with her is infected by her humility and honesty. “Care to dance?”

“I can’t,” she says. “Not with my leg...”

I take her hand in mine and lead her back into the gazebo. “Dance with me, Maggie,” I urge as I put one arm around her back and pull her close.

We sway to the music. Slowly she relaxes into my arms. “I never imagined it would be like this,” she says into my chest.

When her leg starts to hurt, I clear a place on the floor and we lie side by side next to each other.

“What did you ever see in Kendra?” she asks.

Hell, I don’t know. “She was popular and pretty. Someone who all the guys wished they could date. She used to look at me as if I was the only guy who could ever make her happy.” She sits up. “Okay, now you sound like a jerk.” I was one.

She lies next to me, my arm as her pillow.

We watch the candles burn down one by one. When there's only one candle left, I kiss her soft lips and trace her curves with my hands until she's breathless and weak.

"Let me see your scars," I say when we're both panting and coming up for air from making out. I take the hem of her dress in my fist and slowly slide the material up.

She stills my hand with her own and smooths the material back down. "No."

"Trust me."

"I... I can't," she murmurs. "Not with my scars."

Her words hit me like a cell door slamming closed. Because even if she thinks she forgave me, even if she made promises of forgiveness, even if she kisses me like I'm her hero, I finally realize she can't get over her anger inside. And never will fully trust me.

I lie back, totally frustrated, and lay my arm over my eyes. "This isn't going to work, is it?"

Maggie sits up. "I'm trying," she says, her voice full of regret.

I want to tell Maggie I wasn't responsible for hurting her leg, but I can't. What if Leah was right?

I can't let my sister go to jail when I've already paid for her mistake. I'm committed to living with that blame forever.

The night of the accident, I was supposed to drive Leah home. But I was too drunk and enraged from Maggie's accusations. Staying with Kendra and making sure she didn't go home with any other guy was more important than anything else. My fucking ego. I had no idea Leah took my keys until she came back to the party ranting like a lunatic about an accident.

The rest, as they say, is history.

THIRTY-EIGHT – Maggie

I had everything I wanted and I screwed it up. Caleb loved me, all I had to do was show him my scars to prove to him how much I trust and love him back.

But I couldn't. Something was pulling me back into my protective shell.

I told my mom I was too sick to go to school today, so I'm lying in bed. The dress Mrs. Reynolds bought me is hanging in my closet, a cruel reminder of the most romantic evening of my life. I won Caleb and lost him just as quick.

When he took me home and we parted, he gave me a small smile and said we've always been friends, and we'd remain friends.

That's the most important thing. Right?

So why have I been crying the entire morning? I call Mrs. Reynolds' house to see how she's doing after last night.

Mr. Reynolds answers the phone. "Hello?" he says, his voice shaken.

"Hi, it's Maggie... Margaret. Is Mrs. Reynolds there?"

Mr. Reynolds doesn't say anything for a long time, and my throat gets a huge lump in it.

"My mom died this morning, Maggie."

"No," I whisper as my life comes crashing down on me. "It can't be true. We were together. Last night she was dancing and laughing and--"

"She was grateful to have you in her life," he says. "She loved you as a granddaughter. More than that, she loved you as a friend."

"Where is she? Was she alone when she died?"

Mr. Reynolds snuffles. "They just took her away in an ambulance. She died in her sleep, no pain.

Her heart has been bad for years, Maggie. It was only a matter of time."

Tears roll down my cheeks as I remember the times we spent in the past few months. She taught me so much about life. "The daffodils... she'll never see the daffodils come up," I say, stifling my emotions.

"Mama loved those daffodils, didn't she?"

I don't know what else to say to him. Mrs. Reynolds may have been up in years, but there was so much she still had planned. Having my mom and me over for dinner, watching the daffodils bloom in the spring. Eating Irina's pies.

"I'll miss her."

"I know you will. She never wanted a funeral. She said they're just an excuse for depressed people to make senseless chatter."

I smile wistfully. "That sounds like her." She just accused me of it yesterday, which reminds me... "A dress. She bought a dress."

“The blue one slung over the chair in her bedroom?”

“Yeah. If she’s going to be buried...” I can’t even get out the words.

“I’ll make sure of it. Listen, if you want to come over and take something from the house before we sell it, you can.”

“You can’t sell the house.” The daffodils, the gazebo... everything she cared about in the last two months are for nothing.

In the evening, my mom drives me over to Mrs. Reynolds house for the last time. She’s holding my hand as Lou greets us. “Take anything you want, Maggie.”

In the laundry room, all clean and folded, is the muumuu.

I pick it up and clutch it to my chest. It was Mrs. Reynolds’ way of protecting me, covering my clothes so I wouldn’t get dirty. “Can I have this?” I ask.

Mr. Reynolds seems surprised I’d want it, but says, “I was serious when I said *anything*.”

There’s two more things I want. I head to the kitchen and open cabinets until I find it. My mom is shrugging to Mr. Reynolds, who is as baffled as her. “It’s got to be around here somewhere. Aha.” I open one of the top drawers and on a piece of old, stained and ripped linen paper is her favorite Snickerdoodle cookie recipe.

“Anything else?”

“One more thing.”

Mom and Mr. Reynolds follow me up to the attic. I head for the trunk and open it up. Holding up a picture frame, I say “This is the last thing.”

Mr. Reynolds says, “It’s yours.”

I stare at the picture of two people madly in love on their wedding day.

May they both rest in peace.

THIRTY-NINE – Caleb

Maggie wasn't at school yesterday, and I haven't seen her all morning. Twice today I've passed by her locker, but she's been as elusive as a ghost.

During third period I can't focus. So I take the bathroom pass and head out the door. But I don't head straight to the bathroom. I turn the corner and go down the hall where I know her locker is.

I've turned into a stalker.

"Looking for someone, Caleb?" It's Kendra, with a hall pass of her own dangling from her fingers. "Maggie Armstrong, perhaps?"

"Stop playing games with me, Kend." She flashes a wicked smile. "No, seriously. I just don't get what you see in her."

"Nothing," I say just to get my ex off my back. "I see nothing in Maggie Armstrong. If anything she's been a distraction because I can't have you." The bullshit is flying because I need to protect Maggie and Leah at all costs.

The sound of someone behind me makes me turn around. It's Maggie. She's heard every lying word out of my mouth.

Kendra slinks toward her. "Caleb, did you tell Maggie the truth about the accident?"

"Kendra. Don't," I say in a warning tone. "Or I'll clue Brian in about what's been going on between you and me. Isn't your dad's election next week?"

If Kendra had claws, they'd be out and she'd be murderous.

Maggie hobbles toward me. "What's been going on between you and Kendra, Caleb?"

Kendra puts her hands on her hips, ready for this battle to begin. "Yeah, Caleb. Tell her how many times we've been together since you came back."

What can I say? I want to tell Maggie the truth, I'm going to tell her the truth. About everything.

But not here, not in front of Kendra. She's got nothing to do with me and Maggie.

"Say something," Maggie orders, her eyes on fire. When I don't, she slaps me and limps away.

I hate pep rallies. So I find it insane that I'm stuck in the middle of one today, of all days. But here I am, in the center of the crowd of athletes while the cheerleaders lead the rest of the school in peppering the entire student body.

As if a bunch of wrestlers want to be "peppy." But the guys'll take any excuse to ditch class for an hour.

Meyer stands at the podium as if he's the president of the United States instead of principal of a small-town school. "Settle down, everyone. Settle down." The place is still noisy, but it's the best he's going to get and he knows it. "This is a time to celebrate the students who represent the Paradise Panthers in athletics."

The crowd starts getting restless, the gymnasium floor vibrating from the noise.

“Settle down. Settle down. We’re going to honor our athletes this afternoon. Each coach is going to come up and announce the members of their teams. Let’s start with our largest team...

football!”

This sets the cheerleaders into a frenzy, kicking and cartwheeling all over the gym.

“Put your hand up when I call your name,” the football coach says. “Adam Albers, Nate Atkins, Max Ballinski, Ty Edmonds...” The list goes on and on for what seems like forever.

I’m standing next to Brian. “This is torture, man.”

“Tell me about it,” he says.

But when Coach Wenner gets up to the podium, the guys on the Paradise wrestling team are never ones to take a back seat. A roar goes up behind me. “Wee-ner! Wee-ner! Wee-ner!”

The guys are pronouncing the coach’s name wrong on purpose. I bet Wenner is already planning how many extra push-ups he’ll make the team do in practice to make up for it.

The rest of the school gets into it, even as the teachers are trying to put a kabash on the latest chant.

“Wee-ner! Wee-ner.”

“Okay, ha ha, very funny. You had your laugh, now let’s get to it,” Coach says. “Andy Abrams, Caleb Becker, Adrian Cho, David Grant...”

Even though our school is small, it takes a while to get through all the names.

Finally, after more than an hour stuck in this hot gym, Meyer gets back on the mic and dismisses us to our sixth period classes. Trying to get out is like a mob scene. Everyone is as restless as I am to escape. But I’m hanging back.

I scan the bleachers. My sister is looking down, oblivious to anything except the stairs. Maggie is standing with the rest of the mob pushing through to get out. She looks so fragile standing there, like a bird surrounded by an elephant stampede.

There’s some pushing and shoving. Two junior guys are fighting. And it’s right where Maggie is.

“Maggie, watch out!” I yell, but she can’t hear me. She doesn’t notice the commotion behind her, but I’m too late and it’s too noisy. The guy is pushed into Maggie, who trips over two steps and lands flat on her knee.

“Maggie!” I yell, pushing people out of the way to get to her. I finally reach her and kneel next to her. “Maggie, you okay?”

She blinks, looks like she’s going to be sick, and sits up.

“Mag-ie, Mag-ie, Mag-ie,” the crowd starts chanting.

I look up at the crowd and yell, “Shut the fuck up!” but nobody is listening. I grab Maggie’s elbow. She tries to pull away but I hang on tight. “Are you okay?” I ask once she’s standing.

Most of the kids have stopped chanting her name, but a few assholes still have nothing better to do.

Drew grabs my shoulder and pulls me back. “Caleb, what are you helping her for? The bitch was responsible for putting you in jail.”

I take my fist and slam it right into Drew's face. He charges me and we're at each other's throats, fists flying, until Wenner and another coach break us up.

"Where's Maggie?" I ask.

Wenner looks at me like I've lost it. "At the nurse."

"I've got to see her."

"The only thing you're seeing is the principal's office, Becker. What's *wrong with* you?"

I'm escorted to Meyer's office. I have no choice since Wenner has my wrists pinned behind my back. "Wait here for Mr. Meyer," the coach orders.

But as soon as he leaves the office, I hop over the front desk and open the nurse's door. Maggie's pants are rolled up just above her knees.

My gaze immediately focuses on her scars.

The angry lines from where the doctors must have sewed her up are pink and look like her leg has been clawed by a fierce animal.

By her knee, where the biggest sets of marks are, I think is a skin graft, because it's a darker shade and doesn't match the rest of her soft, ivory skin.

Tearing my gaze away from her leg, I look up at her. "I'm so sorry, Maggie," I say.

Her expression is hard, her eyes shuttered. "Go away, Caleb. Or do you want to take a picture so you could show Kendra? Then you'd both have something else to laugh about."

FORTY – Maggie

Caleb doesn't even know Mrs. Reynolds died. When I saw him in the hall this morning, I was going to tell him. But then I caught Caleb and Kendra together. Before our relationship started, I could understand. But I thought he liked me enough not to need someone else. I thought what we had was real. Ugh. I don't want to think about Kendra Greene and her perfect blonde hair and her perfect, perky boobs or the perfect way she walks. But I can't help it. Because I'm not perfect.

I'm sitting in the nurse's office to prove it. Ever since Caleb stood there frozen, gawking at the scars on my leg, I've been dying to get out of here. "Can I go back to class now?"

The school nurse is bent over my leg with rubber gloves, examining it. She looks up. "Does it hurt?"

You mean my heart? "No. It's fine," I say. "Really."

"There's a little blood here. I'm concerned there might be internal damage."

"It's just a little scratch," I say as the woman is putting antiseptic on a cotton ball and rubbing blood off my knee. "A big deal was made for nothing."

I know why Caleb came running over to me and acted all concerned. It's because he feels guilty that I overheard details about his relationship with Kendra. Drew was only telling the truth, that I was responsible for putting him in jail. Caleb and I should never have started talking. We should have kept ignoring each other at Mrs. Reynolds' house.

Because if we didn't talk, I wouldn't be so connected to him.

If we didn't talk, I wouldn't have kissed him and wanted more. I wouldn't have let him manipulate me.

Nurse Sandusky doesn't look happy as I get down off of the examining table and carefully lower my pant leg. But I'm not going to sit here and sulk all day. I'm going to get up and stand tall--to Caleb, to Drew, to Kendra... and whoever else decides to get in my way.

When I'm dressed, I breathe a sigh of relief. My scars are covered. So why do I feel so exposed?

Because Caleb has seen the scars from the injuries he put on my body.

The forever scars that will make me think of him and the accident every day of my life.

Unfortunately I have to pass Meyers office on my way out. Caleb is sitting in front of the secretary's desk, his head slumped in his hands.

As if he knows I'm watching him, he lifts his head up. His eyes bore into me as if they're seeking warmth or connection. Does he think I'm a fool who wants to be humiliated? I look away, wait for the nurse to write me a pass, and leave the office as fast as I can.

As if the day couldn't get worse, Kendra and Hannah are walking down the hall. They haven't seen me yet. I duck into the girls' bathroom... I've had enough for one day.

I look at myself in the bathroom mirror. Dull hazel eyes, hair that hasn't decided if it wants to be dark or light, and a nose that's too big for my face. On top of all those flaws, I have a limp.

How could I ever have thought I could compete with perfect Kendra Greene?

The bathroom door creaks open. I hide in one of the stalls and soon enough I hear Kendra say, "I can't imagine the two of them kissing. Can you?"

"Puh-leaze, Kend, don't gross me out. Caleb is, like, Hollywood tough guy and Maggie is, like, a total dork. She probably kisses with her lips all pursed and her hands at her sides."

"*Exactly*. You should have seen her this morning. I thought she was going to cry right in the middle of the hall."

The two of them laugh.

I want to die. Forget standing tall, deep down I really am a dork and a coward.

I peek through the door opening. Hannah is putting on her lipstick while Kendra is playing with her big, blonde hair.

"He's always going to love you. You two have a bond that can't be broken," Hannah says.

Kendra stops playing with her hair and leans against one of the sinks. "Caleb told Brian he was interested in Maggie to throw him off."

"Why Maggie? Isn't she the least likely person to snag him? He *did* hit her with his car, you know. And she milks it for all it's worth."

Kendra hesitates.

"What?" Hannah asks.

"Did you check under the stalls?"

Oops. I'm dead meat. Balancing on top of the toilet seat with a bum leg is not an option.

The door to one of the stalls creaks open. Oh, no. I'm trying to peek through the door, but I don't want to stumble or make any sounds to alert them I'm spying.

"You two are so pathetic. You should have looked before you started babbling about your pathetic lives."

It's Sabrina, my cousin.

"What did you hear?" Kendra says.

"What do you think? I heard all of it."

"And you'll keep it to yourself, won't you Sabrina?"

Sabrina puts her hands on her hips. "I don't know. Why don't you stop spreading rumors about my cousin? She may limp, but she's got more to admire than both of you put together."

The other girls stare at Sabrina as if she sprouted wings, totally shocked that the follower finally proved she has a mind of her own.

"Get a grip, Sabrina. Don't forget, you were a loser and Maggie was in your spot a year ago. Just because you're friends with Brianne and Danielle now doesn't mean you're suddenly hot shit."

She's right. I wasn't nice to Sabrina when I was on top and she was struggling to keep friends that didn't hide in the library during lunch. I think Kendra's words are going to bring Sabrina down a notch, but my cousin doesn't miss a beat.

"Kendra, I used to worship the ground you walked on because you were pretty and popular and had a boyfriend the rest of the girls only dreamed they could get. I wanted to be popular, to be like you. Now I just think you're pathetic."

"You'd better watch yourself, Sabrina, or you might just find yourself a loser again so quick your head will spin." Kendra's eyes are wide and wild, and I think if she had superpowers they'd melt Sabrina with that one stare. But she doesn't have superpowers. Hannah is standing behind Kendra with her thumb and forefinger in an "L" on her forehead, directing it toward Sabrina.

While Sabrina is sticking up for me and being threatened, I'm hiding out like a coward. My palms are sweaty. I realize it's my own fear holding me back. I watch my cousin sticking up for me knowing the end result is not going to be pretty. I feel Mrs. Reynolds' spirit giving me courage.

I push the stall door open wide, the loud creak alerting all three to my presence.

Sabrina's face is as shocked as Kendra's and Hannah's.

Kendra gives a nervous laugh, but recovers quickly. "Is this, like, the designated loser bathroom and I never got the memo?"

"You're just like your cousin," Hannah says to me. "One who'll always follow in the footsteps of girls like me and Kendra."

I hobble next to my cousin. "Hannah, you and Kendra have it all. And yet... you're *both* empty shells, nothing worthwhile on the inside. I wouldn't follow you even if it meant healing my legs."

"I think the accident damaged your brain." Kendra spits out the words like a dragon would spit fire at its enemy.

Sabrina is watching me in shock. I know I haven't been strong since the accident. I never stick up for myself and I focus on my flaws instead of my assets. Spending time with a strong woman like Mrs. Reynolds must have rubbed off on me. And spending time with Caleb the past few months has made me feel attractive and beautiful. I just... deep down I can't believe he was lying to me. Admiration shined through the depths of his eyes. His fingers trembled when he traced my lips or touched my face. A guy like Caleb, who hides his emotions, couldn't fake those intense reactions even if he wanted to.

Kendra shakes her head and sneers at me. "If Caleb gave you any attention, he just felt sorry for you."

I'm sure he did... but what we shared went way beyond that. "I wouldn't sneer if I were you," I say to Kendra. "It doesn't suit your face."

My cousin turns to me. "Caleb? No, it can't be true. Can it?"

I nod.

"*The* Caleb Becker? Leah Becker's brother, Caleb Becker?"

I cock my head to the side and nod some more.

Sabrina's mouth drops open and her eyes bug out.

Like a shock wave, I realize Caleb had been right all along. Going to Spain was just a copout, a way to escape people and a way for me to forget the accident for a little while. But the accident happened. There is no way to forget it. And I limp. I have to face the fact I will never be the same as before.

It's okay. I'm okay. Taking a deep breath, I realize something...

I feel stronger and more alive than I did before the accident.

The door to the bathroom opens. Mrs. Gibbons walks into the bathroom. Her eyebrows go up when she witnesses our little confrontation. "Aren't you all supposed to be in class?"

None of us answer. Kendra is staring at me, Hannah keeps looking from Kendra to me and back to Kendra, Sabrina still has her mouth open in shock, and I'm not revealing anything.

"Okay, then. Let's all take a little trip to Mr. Meyer's office so he can get to the bottom of this."

"Fine with me," I say.

"Me, too," Sabrina says, backing me up. I owe a big apology to her for being such a jerk before the accident. Sometimes you have to steer away from the crowd in order to be a better person.

It's not always easy, that's for sure. But it's right. And sometimes doing the right thing feels so good. Even if it does end up in a trip to the principal's office.

Kendra's eyes are still spitting fire. "Whatever."

"Yeah, *whatever*," Hannah says, doing an embarrassing imitation of her best friend. I almost feel sorry for her.

We all follow Mrs. Gibbons to the front office. Sabrina is looking at me, wide-eyed. "No way!

Caleb Becker?" she mouths silently.

It's not Kendra's fault she's beautiful and pretty. It's not even Caleb's fault for being attracted to her. It doesn't even matter.

What matters is that I'm not carrying around feelings of hatred and betrayal. It's been too exhausting. Mrs. Reynolds was right.

I don't hate Kendra.

I don't hate Leah.

I don't hate Caleb.

I'm feeling stronger than I have in... well, I can't even remember when. All I know is that I feel good. No, better than that. I feel strong.

FORTY-ONE – Caleb

Meyer points to me and jabs his finger into the air with each word as he says, “Okay, Becker. In my office.” I follow him into his office, then he closes the door once I’m sitting in the chair opposite his desk. He’s pissed off. I can tell by the way his neck muscles twitch and the colors of his face and bald head turn a deep shade of red. He doesn’t even sit in his chair. He sits on the edge of his desk right over me. He’s trying to be intimidating, to scare me into being a good kid.

But he’s never roomed with a guy like Julio. And if Julio didn’t intimidate me, Meyer doesn’t stand a chance.

“Why did you start a fight with Drew Rudolph?”

I can’t tell him the truth. If the whole thing comes out, Leah could be dragged into this, too. And Kendra. And Maggie. Leah has been acting creepy. I don’t know what she’ll end up saying. Will she blurt out the truth, that she was the one who hit Maggie? “I don’t know,” I say dumbly.

Meyer’s anger deflates while frustration takes its place. “What *am* I going to do with you, Becker? I’ve had a parent call and say you were responsible for coercing a peer into consuming alcohol. Another complaint was filed by the wrestling coach from Fremont... something about you bullying one of his top wrestlers. You’re on thin ice here, on the fast track to being a delinquent forever. Don’t you understand the only person your behavior ultimately hurts is you?

Unless you can explain yourself, I have no choice but to give you a suspension.”

Suspension? Oh, shit. I would defend myself, but it’s no use. The guy wouldn’t believe me, anyway. I stay silent.

“You have nothing to say about these accusations?”

“Nope.”

“Caleb, have a seat outside while I figure out how to proceed with this.”

So now I’m stuck in another metal chair outside Meyer’s office. Closed doors and metal chairs are the recurring themes in my life.

I look up when the door to the front office opens.

Maggie walks in the office, just feet from where I’m sitting. Only able to check her out from the side, I study her face. She has high cheekbones and a straight nose. It’s not small; it has a little bump in the middle, almost as if God wanted to put it there so her nose wouldn’t be perfect. She wouldn’t be Maggie without that imperfection. She’s not in-your-face pretty like Kendra, but there’s something about her... that mix of insecurity and regal features that don’t fit. Every one of her features reflects who she is.

Except her scars.

Those I wish I could take away with a touch of my fingers and transfer them to my own body.

Maggie is focused on the counter, reading something intently. Her hair falls like a curtain shielding her face from me. I’m barely aware of Sabrina, Kendra, and Hannah in the room, too.

This place is getting crowded.

Mrs. Gibbons, the art teacher, knocks on Meyer's door. She peeks her head inside when he barks for her to enter his sacred domain. "We've had a situation with some of the senior girls."

The girls head single file into his office. Kendra looks defiant, Hannah looks scared, Sabrina looks indifferent, and Maggie is... she seems resolved to handle whatever comes flying at her.

The girls come out a few minutes later. Maggie doesn't look at me. She files out of the office with the rest of the girls.

Meyer reappears at the door. "Okay, Becker. Your turn."

I go into his office and am directed to yet another chair. This one is padded. I rest my elbows on my knees and think of what Meyer said: I'm on the fast track for being a delinquent forever.

Maggie was probably right: if you disappear, then you don't have to always be reminded of the past wherever you turn.

I did my community service, but haven't gotten my final release papers. Damon is seriously going to kill me when he finds out I got in a fight. What the hell is going to happen when I go back to the DOC? I hope Mom and Leah don't go over the edge.

I hear the clicking of shoes and look up. My mother is standing in the doorway of Meyer's office.

Her lips are tight. I can sense she has a loose rein on control because I see her wobbling slightly from side to side.

"Ah, Mrs. Becker," Meyer says. "Thanks for coming so quickly."

Mom nods and holds onto the door frame. "So... should I take him home?"

Meyer walks up to my mom and puts his hand on her shoulder to steady her. "The boy whom Caleb assaulted has not filed any charges as yet, but policy forces me to keep him off school grounds until this is resolved. You'll get a call from me after I've consulted the district superintendent to inform you of the length of Caleb's suspension."

Mom nods, then focuses on me. She looks tired. The deep lines under her eyes and at the corners of her mouth look deeper than I've ever seen them. I put those lines there. Without meaning to, I've broken my mother's spirit.

In the car, I've got nothing to say. And when silent tears start dripping out of her tired eyes, all I want to do is escape. Because I can't tell her anything to make her feel better, I can't fight this snowball of bullshit that has become my life.

I sit in my room until darkness falls, when someone knocks on my door. "Caleb, open up," a familiar transition counselor's voice rings out.

Great, now I get to be reamed out by Damon.

"Let me have it," I say dryly as I let him in.

If you've never seen a black guy's face get red with anger, you've never seen Damon Manning pissed off. "What the hell is going on? I got a call from your principal this afternoon telling me you're suspended for two weeks. You want to go back to the DOC?"

"Sure. You got cuffs ready?" I say, holding my arms out in front of me.

Damon gets in my face, real close. “Listen, punk, I have no problem slapping cuffs on you and hauling your ass back to prison. But I don’t think you realize your eighteenth birthday is just around the corner. And you know what kind of eighteenth birthday present you get from the State of Illinois? You get transferred to the big boy jail. That’s right, the adult place where the inmates rule, and not one day will go by that you won’t be threatened or forced to do shit you’ve only heard about. I don’t want you in there, Caleb, because you’ll go in a confused smartass boy and come out a hardened bastard. They’ll eat you alive there and nobody can save your ass. You hear me? Now tell me why the hell you’ve been getting into fights.”

I’m so used to pleading guilty, I forget sometimes to tell the truth. I look Damon straight on, no playing around this time. “I was protecting Maggie.

Drew insulted her.”

Damon takes my desk chair and sits in it. He puts his hand on his forehead and starts rubbing it, kind of like Meyer did this afternoon. “Caleb, what’re you doing? She’s your *victim*. You hit her with your car.”

“I didn’t do it.”

“What?” he snaps.

“I said I didn’t mean to do it.”

Damon takes his hand off his forehead and leans forward. “I don’t know what you’re trying to pull here, but it’s not good. If you can’t pretend Maggie doesn’t exist, then leave town. She called my boss this morning expressing concern about her safety. She said you’ve been sexual with her, and now that it’s over you’ve harassed her.”

“What?”

Damon looks straight at me. “Maggie Armstrong says she’s filing a complaint. Oh, don’t look so shocked, Caleb. What did you expect? When you don’t follow the rules you pay the consequences. It’s simple.”

Nothing is that simple. I swallow. My throat feels constricted. Maggie hates me enough to send me back to the DOC?

“I need to know,” Damon continues. “Did you have a sexual encounter with her?”

I sit on my bed and rest my head in my hands. Jeez, this cannot be happening. “That depends on what you mean by a sexual encounter.”

“Don’t fuck with me, Becker.”

“I *didn’t* have sex with her.”

“Did you harass her?”

I shake my head. “We had a relationship, a *mutual* relationship. It was no big deal. It’s over.

Done.”

“How did it end?”

“Abruptly.”

Damon blows out a breath in frustration, then pulls out a stack of papers from his briefcase. "I got your release papers signed. You finished your community service."

I stare at the papers as if they have angels' wings on them, but my head is still reeling. I thought what Maggie and I shared was... well, it was a hell of a lot more than I ever had with Kendra. If Maggie hooked up with me just for revenge... oh, hell.

"You're released, but we have a bit of a problem. You can't go back to school. Caleb?"

"Yeah."

"Everybody isn't against you, you know."

I nod. Right now, I can't agree. I was so pumped to fix everything when I returned home. But all I've been doing is fighting instead of fixing. I'm at a loss here.

After Damon leaves, I head to the kitchen. Mom is leaning against the sink. She's shaking as she takes a bunch of pills and swallows them with a gulp of water.

"Mom, what are you doing?"

"Taking medication for tension and stress."

I snatch the bottle of pills off the counter.

"Give me that back," she orders.

Taking a closer look at the drug's name on the bottle. Diazepam. Valium. "How long have you been taking these?"

"Give them back," she says, pulling the bottle from my hand and clutching them as if they hold her sanity.

"You can overdose on that shit, Mom. It's dangerous."

My mom laughs, a throaty laugh so strong it makes her cough.

"Is that why you've been avoiding getting close to me. You've become a closet pill popper?"

Damn, why didn't I see this before?

"It's not in the closet anymore, is it?"

"Does Dad know?"

"What do you think? It's the only way I can keep a smile on my face all day. He doesn't like to think about the bad stuff. He's too busy. I've been a failure, haven't I? A terrible wife, a terrible mother... it's no wonder I was kicked out of the Ladies' Auxiliary."

"Stop caring what everyone thinks!" I yell. "You're killing the entire family."

"Did you think about *the entire family* when you hit Maggie?" she whispers, then huffs out a disgusted breath.

"This isn't about me, Mom." I don't tell her it never was about me.

She shakes her head. “You don’t get it, Caleb, do you? There’s four people living in this house and we’re all strangers. It is about you. It’s about all of us.”

I don’t even know who I am anymore. I thought I did, but with Maggie’s betrayal I’m back where I started.

My mom turns to face the sink, her body shaking and wrought with despair. As I walk over and put my arms around her, I want to tell her I’ll help her. I need help, too. But she stiffens as soon as I make contact. “Don’t touch me.”

I take my hands off her and back away. Everything around me is crashing into a million pieces.

There’s no way I can mend them no matter how hard I try. “Don’t wait up,” I grind out before leaving the kitchen and taking the stairs two steps at a time. I bang on Leah’s bedroom door.

“Open up.”

“What do you want?” Leah says through the door.

I pound harder. “Leah, open this door or I’ll break it down.”

She opens it right before I’m about to kick it open. “What?”

“How long has Mom been abusing prescription drugs?”

She shrugs. “After you got sentenced. She stopped for a while, but started up again when you got released.”

“How can you just stand there like it’s no big deal?”

Leah stares at me and cocks her head to the side, her black makeup in stark contrast to her white skin, making her look like a mime. “When she’s numb she doesn’t ask questions.”

Huh? I stare at my sister as if she’s a ghost, a shell of a person I once knew. “Do you even have a conscience anymore?”

Leah shrugs.

I grab her shoulders and yell, “Leah, grow up and finally take responsibility for something...

anything!”

Tears start streaming down her cheeks. I shouldn’t be satisfied that I’m making my sister cry, but I swear any emotion from her pleases me. I feel her emotions, too. But they’re so conflicted with mine I can’t be close to her. Not now. A part of Leah has always been a part of me. Her misery has become mine, and right now I want nothing to do with it.

She’s sobbing while I leave the house and head down the street.

I walk ten houses away before I realize where I’m headed: Mrs. Reynolds’ house. The lady is the only one who’s tough enough to help. Maybe she’ll let me live with her, in that little room above the garage.

Waiting twenty minutes for a bus to come to take me to Hampton seems like forever. When it comes and I take one look at the old lady’s house, I feel like I’m home.

I ring the doorbell, hoping she can hear it. Maybe I'll install one of those bulbs that light up every time the doorbell rings, so if her hearing really goes she'll be all set.

The second time I ring, the door opens. But it's not Mrs. Reynolds, it's the guy who owns Auntie Mae's Diner. "Is Mrs. Reynolds home?"

"Aren't you Caleb Becker?"

"Yeah. I--"

"How do you know my mother?" he demands. I put my hands in my pockets. "I worked for her."

He hesitates, confused, then his mouth goes wide. "*You* built the gazebo?"

"Yeah."

"While Maggie Armstrong worked here? The both of you, together?"

"With Mrs. Reynolds," I assure him.

"Did she know you were the one that hit Maggie? Forget it, from the look on your face I assume my mother knew. She probably tried to patch everything up, didn't she?"

"Yes, sir. I need to talk to Mrs. Reynolds." She's the only one I have left now.

"She passed away yesterday morning."

No. No, this can't happen. A hole forms in my chest and spreads through my veins. "You're lying."

"My mother had a heart attack in her sleep. Now I don't know what's been going on here, but I know Maggie's mother doesn't want you hanging around her daughter. Respect the family and leave her be."

"No problem. No problem at all," I say.

FORTY-TWO – Maggie

Mom told me Mr. Reynolds had a surprise for me. I went to Auntie Mae's Diner after school and Mr. Reynolds gave me the keys to his mom's Cadillac. I protested, but Mom assured me Mrs.

Reynolds would want me to have it.

So now Mom is driving me to Mrs. Reynolds' house on her break. She helps me open the garage.

I smile when I see the car, remembering the time Mrs. Reynolds helped me get over my fear of driving.

"You sure you're ready to do this?" Mom asks.

"Yeah, I'm sure. Now get back to work. I'll be fine."

"Maggie, you've been so strong lately, but I don't know if you're ready for this."

It's time I tell her how I'm feeling. I've been trying to hold it in so I don't hurt her, when all along I think I'll hurt her more if I don't say anything. "Mom, I need some space," I say, then gauge her reaction. She's looking at me skeptically, but I can tell by the way her lips are together in concentration that she's listening and attempting to understand.

I take a deep breath and say, "I know it's hard for you. It's been unbelievably difficult for me..."

but I'm finally ready to accept my body and my limitations. I'm me... the new me. It might not be a perfect me, but I'm okay with that. It's about time I stopped trying to escape my life, don't you think?"

A tear runs down my mom's cheek. She smiles at me, this warm smile that reaches her eyes.

"The accident... it took a part of you away."

"Only because I let it."

Now we're both crying. I give her a long hug.

After a few minutes she gets in her car and drives away from the house, giving me the space I need. Taking a deep breath, I scan the yard. And swallow hard. The gazebo is standing like a castle in the middle of the grass, outlined by the flower beds. The bulbs are patiently waiting in hibernation until it's their time to poke their heads out of the ground for the first time and vibrantly come to life.

After yesterday, I feel like I've bloomed. It took a romance and an old lady to coax me out of hibernation, but it happened.

As I'm carefully driving home, I see Caleb at Paradise Park at the basketball courts. I stop to let him know I'm not upset he betrayed me. I'll get over him. It might take a while, but I'm going to be just fine. I'll have other boyfriends and adventures in life, other times I'll be able to feel confident and carefree and happy. I'm a survivor. Even with my limp. Getting out of the car and gathering all my courage, I walk over to him.

He sees me, but doesn't stop dribbling the ball.

"Caleb," I call out.

"Why didn't you tell me about Mrs. Reynolds?"

“I didn’t have a chance. I wanted to,” I say, then step toward him.

“You better stay back or I might start harassing you.”

Okay, I deserve that. I did slap him and refuse his help yesterday. But that was before I straightened everything out in my head. “I heard you got in trouble.”

“You come here to rub it in or you want to challenge me to a one-on-one?” he says.

“You know I can’t play.”

He looks me up and down suggestively. “Oh, you play, Maggie. Maybe not basketball, your games are more complicated than that.”

“What are you talking about?”

He takes the basketball and holds it at his side, then gives a short laugh. “I can’t believe you’re afraid of me.”

I move forward, stepping closer to him and putting my chin in the air with confidence. “I’m not afraid of you.”

He stands before me with as much confidence as I’m showing him. “Prove it.”

“How?”

He tosses the basketball to the side of the court and steps toward me, closing the distance between us. “Figure it out.”

My breath catches and I panic. “I... I don’t know what you mean.”

“I think you do,” he says, coming so close I can almost feel his emotions as my own.

“You want me to kiss you?” I ask breathlessly.

“You’ve ruined me, you do know that don’t you?” he says right before I stand on my tiptoes and touch my lips to his.

He grabs my waist and pulls me close so I can feel the full strength and length of his body against mine. My fingers wrap around his biceps at the same time. I’m lost in the protection of his embrace and the smell and taste that’s uniquely Caleb Becker. Uniquely... us.

As our kiss turns more intense, I sense a change in him. He’s kissing harder, fuller. Angry.

I stumble backwards and push him away from me. “What are you doing?”

He wipes his mouth with the back of his hand. “Making sure I scare you. It’s what you want, isn’t it? So you can claim being the victim.”

We’re standing here staring at each other. Controller and controlled. Perpetrator and victim. Boy and girl.

He picks up his basketball. “Go home, Maggie. You got what you came for.”

Movement out of the corner of my eye catches my attention, breaking the connection. It’s Leah.

“Caleb, Mom and Dad want you home. Now,” she says.

I smooth down my hair, pat dirt off my pants, clear my throat, and do everything but look at the two of them.

Then I run back to the car as fast as I can.

FORTY-THREE – Caleb

“You didn’t tell her that I hit her, did you?” Leah asks J. as she watches Maggie run away from the park. I shake my head.

“But you and Maggie. I saw how you looked at her and I knew...”

“What?” I say quickly, then look my sister straight in the eye.

I start walking back home and my sister steps in beside me. “Getting mixed up with Maggie can ruin our family, Caleb.”

“Lay off, Leah. I mean it.” I turn to her. “I’ve just about had it.”

When I get home, my parents are waiting for me by the front door. My dad is standing rigid, a stern look on his face. My mom is beside him. I can tell she’s totally out of it.

“Where were you last night?” Dad orders in such a stern voice you’d think I was out committing murder. “Visiting an old friend. What’s the big deal?” My mom looks at my dad. I hold my arms wide. “What?”

“I saw Maggie coming from the direction of the park,” Dad says.

“So? It’s a free country, Dad. People can walk where they want to.”

My mom clutches her arms tight, grabbing on to her sweater. “We just don’t want to see you get into trouble. People talk...”

“About what?”

“I don’t want to discuss it,” Mom says, then starts to walk woodenly back into the house, no doubt to numb herself again.

“Let’s hash it out. Right here, right now.”

“Caleb, please, not so loud.” My mom glances nervously at the neighbors’ houses, making sure they don’t witness the scene I’m about to make. God, I wish she’d stop worrying about appearances and see that her family is falling apart.

“What are people saying?”

“Nothing, Caleb. Everything’s fine. Now stop this nonsense.”

I step into the middle of the front yard and say as loud as I can, “Are they saying I’ve been starting fights at school? Are they saying I’m harassing Maggie? Making my friends drink alcohol? You think it’s true, don’t you? Come on, hit me with the fucking gossip already!”

“Now you’ve crossed the line,” Dad says, stepping between us. “Go inside the house and calm down. You can apologize to your mother before supper.”

I snap, like a rubber band that’d been pulled so tight for so long it just breaks apart violently.

Kissing Maggie, school suspension, Kendra’s manipulations, my sister’s warning, my parents’

inability to face reality, my mom’s addiction problem, the false gossip... all of it is driving me nuts.

"I'm not leaving this spot until we have it all out on the table," I say. I look at my sister.

"Caleb!" Leah cries. "Please stop."

My dad's posture stiffens even more, his lips purse and the expression in his eyes is hard. "This is my home," he says. "And as long as you live here you'll abide by my rules. Now go inside the house, leave your mother in peace, and... calm... down!"

I swallow, hard. It's not easy for me to say the next words coming from my mouth, but I can't hold it in any longer. My family is screwed up, each and every one of us. They want to stay ignorant, to forget reality and live in a made-up world they've created. It's fake, it's sick... and I can't do it. I think the only way they'll heal is if I'm not here. I'm the root of their problems. If I take the root away, I'll remove the problem. "I'm leaving," I say.

My thoughts turn to Maggie, the one girl who I used to think wasn't worth a second glance. But when it comes right down to it, she's the strongest girl I know. She confronted me about Kendra before the accident, she goes to school even though people laugh at the way she moves, and she worked her ass off for Mrs. Reynolds in order to achieve her dream of going to Spain. The accident made her a stronger person. Hell, she made *me* a stronger person.

"Where do you think you're going?" Dad demands.

"Inside to pack, then I'm out of here. I can't live with shame and denial around me. And you shouldn't, either."

"This is who we are now, son. The accident changed us... all of us. We were fine until you messed it all up."

I shake my head. "Don't you want to go back to the way it was before? I would do anything to make this family normal again."

"Shouldn't you have thought of that before you hit Maggie? I would have never thought I'd say this to my own son, but you... Caleb Becker... are a selfish bastard."

I walk past my parents and Leah, heading to my room. Pulling a duffle bag out of my closet, I stuff it without really thinking. I'm ready in five minutes, then look back at my room one last time.

My lightsaber is still on my shelf, waiting for me until I return. But I'm not coming back.

Hopefully, after I leave, my mom won't have to drug her life to make it bearable and Leah can live her life the way she wants--with or without the truth. And Dad... well, one day he'll have to face reality. When he's ready.

It's up to me now to pave the way for myself and to stop trying to make sure life is back to normal. Screw normal. Normal doesn't exist. Caleb Becker's family doesn't exist. I'm on my own now.

With a sigh of determination I step back in the room, snatch the lightsaber, shove it in the duffle, and head out. Leah is at the front door, blocking it. "Don't leave," she begs.

"Get out of my way."

"Mom and Dad need you, Caleb. I need you."

I give a short laugh. "Mom and Dad'll be just fine. They like living in denial. As for you..." I take in her black attire. "You've got to get past the accident. Face the facts before people like Kendra make you face them. I can't protect you anymore. It's time to protect yourself."

I move around her and walk outside. I have no clue where I'm going or what to do, but I feel free. Tossing my duffle over my shoulder, I start walking. When I reach Maggie's house, I don't see her but I know she's inside.

I give her a goodbye salute and keep walking.

Mrs. Reynolds' gazebo is where I spend the cold, lonely night. When a shooting star flies above me as I stare up at the sky, I wonder if it's the old lady giving me a sign.

FORTY-FOUR – Maggie

Caleb kissed me last night at the basketball courts.

kissed him back. I still can't believe either of those things happened. I thought I was okay without needing him so much. I should have wiped off my lips and washed them with soap before I'd gone to bed, but instead I kept looking in the mirror. My lips are still puffy, a reminder of how Caleb's own lips were hot and demanding.

For years I'd imagined what kissing Caleb would feel like and taste like. To be honest, I wanted to push him away, to make him want me like I wanted him and to reject him like he rejected me.

But I couldn't.

All those feelings from my childhood came back, from the time Caleb urged me down from the tree in front of my house to the time he took the blame for that broken statue. I can't even forget the times he patted my back while I was crying to Leah about my parents' divorce. For the past year, the accident ruled my life and molded me into who I've become.

I've taken back my life.

Sitting on my bed, I pull up my pant leg. I notice that my heart is racing a little less as I scan the scars with my eyes. I used to think of them as angry scars, but now I don't see them as angry.

They aren't even scary. I trace the lines with my fingers, and I don't even wish they'd disappear.

They're a part of me.

I close my eyes, remembering the accident. It's so strange to think about that night without massive emotions running rampant through my veins. Through the darkness behind my lids, the image of Caleb driving the car that hit me is outlined in my head. But something doesn't feel right.

Chills run up and down my spine.

Because, as I shut my eyes tight, the image of the driver becomes clearer and the foggy haze dissipates.

It's Leah. A look of horror and fear in her eyes as she loses control of the car.

Leah was the one who hit me that night.

Not Caleb.

Why would he... why would they... ?

The doorbell rings while I'm still trying to sort it all out. My stomach is queasy. I want to throw up. But I can't, because my mother is calling me downstairs. I almost fall down as I greet a man and a woman wearing matching dark navy suits.

"Maggie, we're from the Illinois Juvenile Department of Corrections. We're here to investigate your complaint about Caleb Becker."

"I didn't file a complaint," I tell them.

The woman opens her briefcase and pulls out a folder. "We have documentation you called the 1-800 juvenile justice number complaining to the operator that Caleb Becker was harassing you."

Oh my God. I shake my head and look to my mom. "I didn't call. Mom, I swear I didn't call."

"Are you sure?" the man asks. "You don't have to be afraid, Maggie. We're here to make sure you're protected."

I stand up. "I'm not afraid of Caleb. We're friends."

My mom says, "Please excuse my daughter. She doesn't know what she's talking about. She's been instructed not to have any contact with that boy. Right, Maggie?"

I bite down on my bottom lip. "Mom..."

"Maggie?"

Last night at the park makes sense now, why he was testing me. Oh, how he must hate me, thinking I'd call and complain when I would never do anything to hurt him. Kendra would hurt him. I wouldn't. "I have to go see him."

"Maggie, come back here!"

I hobble over to the Beckers' house before anyone can stop me. Mrs. Becker answers the door.

"Is Caleb home?" I ask frantically. "I really, really need to talk to him. I know you probably hate me for being the reason he went to jail, but I think it was all a mistake and--"

"Caleb is gone," she says, totally unfazed by the words coming from her mouth. She even has a strange smile on her face. "He left."

By now my mom has followed me over to the Beckers' house with the investigators in tow.

Mom regards Mrs. Becker strangely. "Penny, what's wrong with you?"

As soon as my mom says it, Mrs. Becker slips and falls right into my mom's arms. After Mom shrieks, the two investigators help her carry Mrs. Becker into the house. "She's passed out," one of them says.

As they're taking care of Mrs. Becker, I step back. What did Mrs. Becker mean when she said Caleb *has gone*? I rush home, grab my keys and drive to Mrs. Reynolds' house. I check the garage, gazebo... he's not here.

All along, I blamed Caleb for hitting me, without questioning his guilt. He pleaded guilty, but deep down I detected something strange in him. I thought it was a lack of remorse for hitting me, when all along it was a lack of guilt.

My heart sinks lower with each passing moment as I drive around Paradise. I'm looking for Caleb, or some sign he's still here. Before I know it, I'm at the place where my life changed.

The scene of the accident.

The skid marks from the car are still on the curb, a dark reminder of that day. I haven't come here since the accident. I wouldn't have had the strength before to relive it up close. I step out of the car and walk over to the fading skid marks, staring at them for what seems like forever. Will they eventually disappear altogether, so the only physical reminders of the accident will be the ones I carry with me?

I know the truth, though. That the visible scars aren't as deep as the emotional ones Leah and Caleb have been struggling with. I have a burning desire to help them, just as Caleb helped me.

The most important thing I've learned the past few months is that friends are invaluable. People you love can get you through the toughest of times. They need me just as I need them. I miss Leah as my confidante, my best friend. And the love I have for Caleb is the forever kind that will never go away, no matter how hard I try to deny it.

"Maggie."

I turn around. Caleb is riding in a black Toyota, a guy I don't recognize at the wheel. Caleb tells the guy to stop the car, then he walks up to me. He looks sad and lonely and worried.

"How did we get here?" I ask.

"Here's where it all started."

"I didn't call and complain about you," I say hurriedly.

"You see, these investigators came to my house this morning and said they were following up on a complaint I made and I insisted I never made it and then I realized you must have thought I did and then--"

Caleb puts a finger to my lips, stopping my babble. "It doesn't matter."

"But it does. And I trust you. Isn't that what we're all about? Trust and honesty."

I need to prove it to him, a sign that I trust him without any reservations. I pull up my left pant leg with one hand, revealing all my scars up to my knee.

His brows knit together in pain, as if he was the one who put them on my leg. I take his hand in mine and together we trace the swollen lines with our fingers. "You see, there's nothing I want to hide from you anymore. Do you feel the same, Caleb? No secrets, no lies?" I need him to tell me the truth about what happened that night. I need to hear it from his own lips, his own words. *Tell me you didn't hit me*, I want to say. *Tell me the truth*.

"Yo, *amigo*, you ready to *vamónos*?' a guy yells from the car.

"Who is that?"

"Rio."

I'm worried. "I mean, who *is* he?"

"You don't want to know, Maggie," Caleb says. "Listen, I gotta go."

I look up into his beautiful, intense face. At the same time I know he's never going to give away the secret he's been holding inside. That fierce, protective spirit is a part of him, a bond he can't break.

"Where are you going? When will you be back?"

"I'm not coming back."

Looking into his serious, sad eyes, I know he means what he's saying. My eyes start to water and tears roll down my cheeks. "You can't leave me. Not now." I want to beg and plead and cry and grab him until he changes his mind. I want to play tennis with him today, and tomorrow, and the next day.

He gently swipes my tears with his fingers. "Then come with me."

The tables have cruelly turned. I tell him, "I realized you were right. It's a copout to leave. I'm going to stay in Paradise until I graduate, and save the money Mrs. Reynolds gave me for college."

"Becker, you comin or not?" the guy in the car calls out.

Caleb nods and says, "Yeah, I'm coming."

I lean in and touch his forehead to mine. "Tell me what we had was real," I whisper. "Please."

Caleb's hands lightly clasp my head on both sides, enclosing us into our own private world. "As real as it gets. Don't ever question that, no matter what. Okay?"

"Right now I'm questioning everything. Why did I even come here?"

"Because you're ready to start a new life, Maggie. You're free of the past now. It can't hurt you.

For me, being free means leaving Paradise." Leaning in, he kisses me. So soft and full of warmth and longing and remorse.

I want to grab him and keep him safe. "Does that mean we're both free?"

He nods, unable to put it into words.

I know he'll never write or call. He's going to cut all ties with his family and this little town that's caused him so much grief. Including me. God, how I wish Caleb never pled guilty to hitting me.

Although if the accident had never happened, if he'd never gone to jail and been stuck doing community service, Caleb and I might never have been together.

I wouldn't have changed that for anything.

He steps back and winks at me. "Bye."

"I'm not going to say it back to you, you know," I tell him.

He gives a short laugh and keeps retreating backwards. "Then tell me something I can remember as your last words to me. Tell me you love me. Tell me you'll think of me every night before you sleep. Tell me--"

"The red hen has flown the coop" I say.

He laughs. "I'll always remember Mrs. Reynolds, the gazebo, the daffodils, you and me in the gazebo..." Caleb winks at me one more time and turns around, his back to me as he walks to the Toyota. I want to scream at him for leaving me. I want to run up to him and forget being sane.

Let us live in the streets together. As long as we're a team, nothing can bring us lower than we were apart.

But he never did tell me it was Leah who hit me. He's the one who, in the end, didn't trust me...
or himself.

I'm sobbing now, more than I did after the accident. And my heart hurts, more pain oozing from it than my leg ever had.

“Caleb!” I yell right before he slides into the passenger seat and closes the car door. I hold my breath, waiting for him to come back to me. To turn around. But he doesn’t.

The car screeches away, its red lights a blur through my watery eyes.

I head back home and some time during the ride I stop crying. There’s strength within me that I didn’t know existed before. It’s as if Mrs. Reynolds is nudging me to stay strong. Life is too short, she’d once said. She was right. As I pull into my driveway and get out of my car, I notice Leah. She’s standing in the front doorway of her house, her eyes puffy.

I walk over to her. “Is your mom okay?”

She shrugs. “I guess. Your mom’s with her.”

Well, it’s a step in the right direction. It’s about time we mended that invisible fence. I look up at my old best friend.

“You saw him, didn’t you?” she asks me.

“Yeah.”

She holds her arm over her eyes and starts to sob. “I need to tell you something really, really important. But I can’t look at you while I do it.”

I take her arm and lower it. “You don’t have to tell me right now,” I say. “When you’re ready, we can talk.”

“You’re going to hate me, Maggie. For the rest of your life you’re going to hate me.”

“I’m not going to hate you. I know, Leah. I know what it is.”

“You do?” she says, all glassy-eyed. “Yeah. But it’s okay.”

“It is?”

“Let’s just say our friendship means more to me than holding a grudge or living in the past. You know what always helps me forget?”

“What?”

“A pie run.”

Leah gives me a small smile behind her tears. “You’re kidding, right?”

“Nope. Come with me for a drive to Auntie Mae’s. Let’s get our moms... I think they need some pie, too.”

THE END
