

CLAUDETTE MELANSON



RISING TIDE

D A R K I N N O C E N C E

Rising Tide:
Dark Innocence
Book 1 of the Maura DeLuca Trilogy

Claudette Melanson

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DEDICATION

This book is dedicated to my husband—the Ron who was meant to be—and five fur-bun-babies, including the one over The Rainbow Bridge. My handsome son, Jacob, and my baby sister Susie, my forever friend.

Contents

- [1. Mink](#)
- [2. Friends?](#)
- [3. Errands](#)
- [4. Sink or Swim?](#)
- [5. My Mother](#)
- [6. Noncompliance](#)
- [7. Roller Coasters and Haunted Mansions](#)
- [8. Pizza and a Movie...and a Little Bit of Blood](#)
- [9. Video Games, Guitars ...and Denial](#)
- [10. Gig Night](#)
- [11. I Think My Mother Was Bodysnatched by Aliens](#)
- [12. The Last Few Weeks](#)
- [13. Vancouver!...Well, New Westminster](#)
- [14. School Daze](#)
- [15. Darker Daze](#)
- [16. Reconnaissance](#)
- [17. All I Ever Wanted Was the Truth... Right?](#)

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1. Mink

When my mother told me we were moving to Vancouver, British Columbia—in Canada....*Canada!*—to say I was shocked was more than an understatement.

“Why, Mom?” was all I asked, though there were a ton of other questions running through my mind. Was she going to quit her job? Did she already have a new one? Where would we live? Was she going to sell our small, but familiar, house? What had made her come to such an unthinkable decision to move from our small, boring Pennsylvania town to a city as unimaginable to me as Vancouver?

She ruffled my hair with a smile, one that wasn’t present in her eyes, and answered, “Oh, come on, Mink. Don’t look at me like that. I’m hoping a change of scenery will help your...condition.”

My name wasn’t Mink, it was Maura. The embarrassing nickname was given to me by my mother because of the particular brown of my hair. Mom had told me I was born with a large shock of fuzz on my head, which had reminded her right away of a mink cap. Attractive... But my real name had been a constant source of bother to me, so much that I would cringe almost anytime I heard someone speak it aloud. I had looked its meaning up once, hoping for something generic, like “flower” or “happiness,” only to be stuck with “Sea of Bitterness” glaring back at me

from the web page. When I'd growled my discovery at my mother, her apologetic tone made me see that the dark meaning wasn't an accident.

"It was a hard time for me, Mink," she said, casting her cat-green eyes down. "But really, don't you think it's a pretty name?"

I hadn't known what to say in response. In time, I resigned myself to accepting that I was just a part of the disappointment that seemed to overwhelm her life. I knew I was a constant reminder of my father, whom she'd lost before I was born. He had been the most magical thing she'd ever experienced, she'd told me once. I guess you could say I was the consolation prize she got stuck with. I tried hard to make up for his absence but finally realized that none of my efforts could ever completely repair the fissure in her heart. The realization wasn't enough to make me stop trying, though.

My straight-A status always inspired a big smile, but one ever incomplete, hollow. Unlike other sixteen-year-olds, I kept not only my own room, but the rest of the house as well, irrationally spotless. My three parentless afternoon hours were spent cleaning so that she never had to bother.

That earned me an, "Oh, Mink, what *would* I do without you!" at least once a week. She would even use her best pretending-to-be-happy voice.

At present, I was coming, rapidly, to the end of my junior year. May was nearing its middle, and with the coming of spring, my 'condition,' as mom put it, would always worsen. Most teenagers were in love with the sun. In Indiana, Pennsylvania, springtime meant more sun, even though it did still rain a lot, which made most if our town's inhabitants jubilant. But not me. Spring meant my torture was about to begin. The excuses for staying in, the fabricated illnesses.....the further separating of myself from normal humans in general.

I had been born with fairly pale skin. Maybe 'fairly' wasn't a good word choice, since I mean, more like *extremely* pale skin. In most places, my blue veins were beyond noticeable, like sky-colored worms sliding right beneath the surface. Couple the pallor with my eyes, so dark brown they were almost black, and the deeply-brown Brunette of my hair, and you had one very strange looking human girl. My pallor was probably one of the reasons I grew my hair long, attempting to hide as much of myself as possible.

If the color of my skin hadn't been enough to drop me into the freak category, I had also been born with an extreme sensitivity to the sun. In fact, most fair-skinned people have been stricken by such an affliction, but I didn't just burn easily; the sun made me physically ill. I couldn't be out in direct sunlight for little more than a half hour without becoming violently nauseous, which was beyond embarrassing, making me feel like

a carnival attraction. I'd once ruined the interior of my mother's new car, due to the sun shining on the side of my head for too long. She'd quickly invested in the darkest window tint she could have installed.

And that day, of course, the sun was shining miserably on my head as I quickly headed for the oak-tree-shaded bus stop. In my rush to get out of the house, I'd forgotten to put on my dark sunglasses, but I dug them out of my pack then, twisting around awkwardly as I made my way into the comforting shadows. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Katie Parker coming out of her house across the street.

"Great," I muttered under my breath. Placed beside Katie's blonde, tanned perfection, I looked all the more irregular. I tried to put on a happy face anyway and be sociable, a definite struggle for me.

"Hi, Katie," I said with as much enthusiasm as I could muster. I refused to ever say 'good morning,' as I hated mornings and saw nothing good about them whatsoever. I didn't expect much in the way of a reply. Katie, annoyingly perky in her cheerleading uniform, was miles away from my end of the social spectrum. So, I was shocked when she turned her bright blue eyes on me, dazzlingly, and spoke to me in a way she never had before that day.

"Hi, Maura!" She was so chipper, her mood was stifling. "Beautiful morning, isn't it?"

I wondered briefly what she would say if I shot back: "Actually, I like the rain," like I was thinking. I thought better of it and replied, "Sure is."

"Aren't you excited about prom?" she bubbled.

Oh, so that was the reason. She was overexcited about prom and probably just needed an outlet for venting all her pent-up enthusiasm. Prom was in a few weeks, and no one had asked me, not that I really wanted to go. The thought of my pale shoulders exposed in some fancy dress made me cringe. I tugged at the edge of one of my long sleeves unconsciously in response.

"Well...er...I hadn't really planned to go." I cringed again, waiting for the sardonic giggle or the accusation that I couldn't get a date.

Instead, the corners of her mouth turned down. "Oh, that's too bad." She sounded like she really meant it, and I wondered if I actually was standing here on the sidewalk with her, instead of still lying asleep in my room. The conversation was more attention Katie had given me than in all the years we'd gone to school together, combined. Our last interaction had been a nasty pudding-to-the-hair incident in my first year of school... me on the receiving end, of course, resulting in a demand from my mother to hers that Katie stay far away from me...or else! I think I must have been looking at her with my mouth hanging open. She quickly tried to fill the silence.

“I could get Trent to set you up with one of his friends,” she offered eagerly.

My quick temper flared. “I don’t need a pity date,” I snarled. She looked hurt at that, and I was instantly ashamed of responding so venomously.

“I-I d-didn’t mean it that way...” Her eyes were wide.

I felt worse. How could she understand all the defenses I’d put into place to remind myself to keep away from others and avoid the way they treated me like the freak I was. Maybe my behavior had made the idea of the incident in my head into something worse than it really was? Kindergarten had been a long time ago... I dropped my eyes to the sun-speckled shadows falling from the leaves above.

“I’m sorry, Katie.” I made up an excuse fast. “I didn’t sleep very well last night...” My voice trailed off. How could I expect to be forgiven? It was unlikely in the first place that someone like *her* would talk to someone like *me*, and I’d already gone and messed things up. *Not that I really care,* I thought to myself; I was used to the sanctuary of solitude I’d built around myself.

To my extreme surprise, she brushed my brashness off with a wave of her hand. “It’s okay, Maura. I never meant to offend you. Of course you’re pretty enough to get your own date. I’d kill to have hair like yours.” Was she kidding?

At that moment, her twin brother emerged from the house. Trent sauntered across the street toward us. Like his sister, he was blonde perfection, except he was as huge and heavily muscled as she was sleek and slender. The hours of football practiced were evident in the rippling muscles that covered his six-foot-three frame. He still made me gape in awe. I'd had a crush on him since ninth grade...not that liking him would ever do me any good. "Morning, Maura." He did a double take. "Nice hair," he noted and looked at me as if with new eyes. Yep, I had to be dreaming.

"Thanks." My expression of gratitude came out way too soft, and I felt myself blush. I lowered my head quickly. When I looked back up, Katie and Trent were looking at each other, something unintelligible passing between them. I shrugged the moment off, chalking the whole thing up to some kind of twin thing.

"You're not driving today?" I managed to ask, trying to make conversation. It wasn't often he left the red Mustang convertible at home.

"In the shop." He grinned back at me. I realized he'd never really been much of a conversationalist. His simplicity stole away a little of his faerie glamor. I smiled to myself at that thought.

I heard the bus coming then, but I was the only one who turned around to see. Funny, the large yellow vehicle was still blocks away down the street, not nearly as close as the bus had sounded. How could I hear the

engine running from so far away? As suddenly as the sound had amplified inside my head it died away as if fading away to normal. I shook my head to clear my thoughts...weird. Katie and Trent were standing beside me, uninspired looks on both their faces. I pinched myself rather hard on the leg to see if I could wake myself up. All I ended up with was a bruise, ugly on my too-white skin.

The dreamlike feel to the day continued as the hours passed. Trent actually invited me to sit with him and the rest of the football players and cheerleaders at lunch. Besides having next to nothing in common with any of them, I felt even more flawed amid their little sea of perfection.

“Say, Maura, what’re ya doing this Saturday?” Trent asked.

I almost choked on the french fry I was attempting to swallow. I *had* been planning to study for upcoming finals. The end of school was almost a month away to the day. Of course, I would never admit I was that lame. “Nothing special,” I managed, after I got the fry down.

“We’re going swimming down by the bridge, wanna come?” His invitation was much less than eloquent, but the words still made my heart flutter. People never asked me to go anywhere. Not that I’d ever really tried to connect with anyone in high school. The teasing I’d endured during elementary and junior high had been more than enough to make

anyone avoid human contact. The solitude had turned me into a bookworm and a bit of a video-game freak.

“Sure...” I was trying to be casual, but my reply came out as a squeak. One of the idiotic cheerleaders let out a laugh at my response. Katie, of all people, reprimanded her.

“Geez, Wendy, what’s your problem? Just *shut up, okay?*” She put a menacing edge on the last three words. The day just kept getting stranger.

Katie poured sunshine into a brilliant smile she then turned on me. “You’ll come, right, Maura?

I settled for nodding my head in response. It was only Monday, so I had five whole days—almost—to change my mind.

Later that night, I stood in front of the mirror, fresh out of the shower, blow-drying my hair. I looked a bit closer, trying to see something there that would possibly cause perfect Katie Parker to wish she had *my* hair. And cause her brother to take special note of it. I realized, stunned for a moment, my hair was different, somehow. I’d always thought of my hair as ordinary. The strands were a dark, unusual kind of brown, but I’d always been disappointed with its flat, lackluster look and straight texture.

That night, even under the subdued lighting in our bathroom, my hair shone with new light. I blinked and looked back, picking up a strand for

close examination. I turned the dryer off and ran my hand down the lock, amazed at how each one *felt* glossy. Dark highlights played across the surface as I twisted my head under the scant light. And there just seemed to be more of it, as well. I ran both hands up through, along the sides of my head. My hair was so thick, thick and silky soft, like never before. Or had I just never noticed? Did Katie's unexpected comment somehow wake me up to noticing things I'd never seen in myself before? Impossible. I didn't remember my hair ever being so lush and even twisted to the side to get a glimpse of the lengths falling toward my waist in waves more like my mother's hair.

Smiling, I shrugged and turned the dryer back on, the logical part of my brain chalking the whole thing up to Caelyn purchasing some expensive, salon-brand shampoo I hadn't noticed in the shower. Satisfied with my theory, I didn't dare pull the shower curtain back to check.

2. Friends?

The rest of the week at school went much the same, surprising, but less of a shock. Katie chatted with me like I was her new best friend and invited me to eat lunch with them every day. By Wednesday, Trent had his Mustang back and drove the three of us to school. This was a different kind of feeling, fitting in with the most popular kids at school, but I soon discovered I didn't have much in common with any of them. When I asked one day at lunch what any of them were reading, one of the other girls asked, "You mean, like, for school?"

I couldn't resist. At the risk of sounding like a nerd, I answered back, "No, for fun."

They all laughed and Wendy, crinkling her bright emerald eyes, said, "Oh, Maura, you're too much!" I blushed profusely and kept quiet until lunch was over.

Katie bounded up to me after, walking with me to English.

"Hey, Maura, I hope you won't let stupid Wendy keep you from going with us Saturday." Wow, she really wanted me to go with them.

"No, I'll still go." She was making me get an uneasy feeling in my stomach, though, if I were completely honest with myself. Wanting to continue to fit in, I struggled to ignore the tiny, sprouting doubt.

“I’m so glad!” she practically squealed. I wondered again why she so desperately wanted to be my friend.

I couldn’t help but ask then, “Why?”

She seemed a bit taken aback by my question. Katie definitely hadn’t expected me to question the motives behind her and her clique’s sudden interest in befriending me.

“I guess I’m just feeling bad.” She dropped her eyes as if to reiterate her point. “All this time we’ve lived so close and gone to school together for our whole lives, and I’ve barely even said hi to you. When I saw you at the bus stop the other morning, I was thinking that soon you’ll be moving away, and I never got the chance to know you at all.”

She had obviously forgotten the pudding incident. “You know we’re moving?” I was incredulous. “How do you know that?” An interesting development, because I’d told no one. There was no one to tell.

My brain made a suggestion. Did Katie want to secure a place to visit in Vancouver? Could she really be sorry she never got to know me? How could she be intrigued by someone who so obviously shared none of her interests?

“Wendy’s sister helps out in the office.” She shrugged nonchalantly. “She told us you’re transferring to a school near Vancouver. It must be exciting to be moving to Canada. I’ve heard Vancouver is such a beautiful

city, too. I'm so jealous! There's a ton of exciting stuff to do there, not like boring, old here." She wrinkled her nose to emphasize her point.

So, that had to be the reason. She must have wanted to gain a friend she could visit in Vancouver if she thought the place was so great. I was a bit hurt, but with Katie, I supposed I shouldn't be surprised if all her friendships, well, all her relationships really, were of convenience. I didn't have time to comment, though, as she continued to gush.

"I looked up some pictures and stuff on the internet. You should see the mountains! There's skiing there at this place called Whistler; tons of people go there. And there are the beaches in White Rock...and shopping on Robson Street!!" She turned back to me. "Hey, maybe I could visit you there sometime?"

"Sure," was all I could manage. Thank god we were sliding into our desks. I was incapable of continuing the conversation at the moment. I noticed a couple of the other less popular girls in the class shooting daggers at me with their eyes, looking from me to Katie, who was practically bouncing in the seat beside me. She must have been really excited about her Vancouver plan. They whispered vehemently back and forth to each other before glaring at me one final time. *If you only knew...* I thought at them. They certainly had nothing to be jealous of.

I became absorbed in the class discussion all too soon, forgetting my wounds for the moment. We were working on *Lord of the Flies*, one of my

favorite books. I tried not to be overeager when Ms. Larson asked questions about parts of the book I liked the best. I was very conscious of Katie beside me. Even with my little discovery about her motives, I still didn't want to come across as a total nerd.

My hand shot up, almost subconsciously, when she asked about the symbolism of the conch shell. I offered my lengthy commentary before remembering myself and hurriedly wrapping up. I glanced nervously at Katie. She must have thought I was such a geek.

"Wow!" Katie looked at me with admiration in her cornflower eyes. "You are so smart, Maura!" She gave me a smile I had to admit was hard to resist.

"Thanks," I answered, blushing. Well, at least she wanted to visit me along with Vancouver. Such a wish couldn't be all bad, could it? So tired of feeling like an isolated freak, I felt any apprehension I'd had waning quickly as I returned her smile with one of my own.

At dinner that night, I knew I only had a few days to prepare Caelyn for a Saturday alone. I hoped she wouldn't feel too deserted. I couldn't remember the last time we'd spent a weekend away from each other. As a consolation, I'd made her favorite, pepper steak—Chinese style. I watched for a moment as she chewed appreciatively. "This is great, Maura," she enthused.

That was about as excited as Caelyn ever got. I thought again how strange it was that, even after all the years I'd been alive, she'd never gotten over my dad. She must have loved him more than I could imagine was possible. As of yet, I didn't have one boyfriend to speak of, a fact Caelyn was overjoyed about.

I broke out of my reverie to steel myself for her reaction to my request. It was only one Saturday, after all, and then she'd have me all to herself in a whole new city—make that country—and I'd never see my newfound friends again. Well, unless Katie really did intend to make good on her wish to visit us in British Columbia.

"Hey, Mom." I noticed my voice was a little shaky. I must have been even more nervous about telling her than I realized.

She looked slightly alarmed then. I might have been the consolation prize, but I was still the only piece of my father she had left in her life. "Maura? Is something wrong?"

Great. Freaking her out was definitely not the best way to get what I wanted. "No, Mom. Calm down. I just wanted to ask you if you mind if I go out with some friends from school on Saturday." Best to just get my request out in the open. Quick and painless, like ripping off a Band-Aid.

Well, not completely painless. "Friends?"

I guess if I'd been in her shoes, I would have had the same reaction. In all the years I'd been in school, I hadn't had anyone over. Ever.

“Yeah, I know.” I couldn’t help rolling my eyes. “I’m not the most social person alive.”

“That’s an understatement, Maura.” She looked too serious. I didn’t know if I would be going with Katie and the other, whether I’d promised her or not. “This is so out-of-the-blue,” she added.

“I know, Mom.” I was starting to get that pleading edge to my voice she rarely heard. “It’s just...me and Katie Parker have sort of been hanging out together at school. You know, eating lunch together and...”

She interrupted at the mention of our neighbor. “Katie Parker? Cheerleading snot, Katie Parker? Smash pudding into your hair, Katie Parker?” she asked in disbelief. Maybe Caelyn was more concerned about my life than I gave her credit for.

“Mom! She’s not like that anymore.” My mind went back to the conversation I’d had with Katie that day. There was a really good chance she was *exactly* like that.

Caelyn raised a perfect eyebrow speculatively. “Oh, she isn’t?” She definitely wasn’t convinced.

“Mom!” I was getting exasperated. “What do you care anyway?”

She looked a little like I’d slapped her. “I care very much, Maura. I don’t want to see you get hurt.” She looked a little guilty then. “I know I may not show it all the time, and for that, I’m very sorry, but I care about you more than anything else in my life.”

I was too stunned to speak. Caelyn and I simply didn't have those kinds of conversations. She usually strayed from any kind of deep emotion, for which I forgave her. Despite my age, I was intensely concerned over anything that might hurt her further. I sought to protect my fragile mother constantly.

"Honey, girls like Katie Parker will chew you up and spit you out. Don't forget, I was a teenager once." Some memory flickered across her eyes, and they lost the brief spark of fury they'd held a moment before. Her mouth twisted into a frown, and her eyes suddenly glistened, overfull. I wouldn't have asked her what she was remembering for anything. I knew from counting backward from my birth year that Caelyn had been very young when she'd met my dad. Her age was my own doubled. It was hard to believe she'd had a baby when she was as old as I was then.

I knew she was right about Katie, too...potentially, though. Not absolutely. I wanted to try. After all, what was the worst that could happen? For once, it was nice to think I had friends, like other normal teenagers.

"Mom!" I snapped her out of her day-mare. "Please, come on; just let me go, okay? I really want to, and it's only for a few hours. Don't you think I'm old enough to decide where I should and shouldn't go?"

I could tell from the look she gave me that she didn't think that at all. But she merely said, "What time, where are you going and for how long?"

She sighed deeply.

I didn't really want to tell my mother we were going swimming. Such a confession was sure to lead to questions of whether boys would be present. I was sure she would disapprove of the time of year and the water temperature, as well as the isolated location. The bridge Trent had mentioned was part of a deserted dirt-and-gravel road, practically in the middle of the woods. I thought fast. Too fast.

"We're just going out for pizza and to see a movie," I blurted out without benefit of adequate planning. The lying-to-your-mom-about-where-you-were-really-going-with-your-friends thing was a new experience for me. I knew I'd set myself up for questions I wasn't prepared to answer. What was even playing at the theater? I tried to think about movie trailers I'd seen on TV.

I got lucky. "Are you going to the theater at the mall, then?" She seemed to relax at the idea. The mall was full of people. Safe.

"Yes," I answered, knowing I was too overeager.

Caelyn mistook the animation in my voice. "You really are excited about going, aren't you?"

I played it safe and nodded my head, instead of risking speaking another word.

"Well...okay." Her eyes were a bit tight, so I knew she wasn't completely thrilled. "But I really would prefer you were home before it

gets too late, okay?"

I hadn't been told by Katie or any of the others how long we would be at the bridge, but surely we wouldn't even be in the water after dark, given the time of year.

"Don't worry, Mom, I won't leave you alone too long!" I blurted out, suddenly worried about her being at home all by herself the whole day, brooding. I'd jumped up and come to stand by her side.

She looked injured by my exclamation and glanced up at me through her thick, feathery lashes. "You don't have to worry about me, Maura." Her voice was heavy with guilt. "I just want you to go have a good time."

I woke up Thursday morning, still amazed by how relatively easy it had been to gain my freedom the coming Saturday from Caelyn. I still couldn't help but feel a bit guilty for leaving her alone. But I had a surprise in mind for her. Something she'd been wanting to do, probably holding back because I never left the house...without her anyway...on weekends. Something to pass the time while I continued my valiant attempt at finally fitting in. I just had to convince someone to drive me across town.

I was singing as I brushed my incredibly glossy hair that morning. Its new gleam even made a regular, old ponytail look ornate somehow. I usually didn't wear my hair up. My long mane's ability to hide me both from the sun and the eyes of others was something I took a large amount

of comfort in. But the gloss and texture my hair had seemed to take on lately inspired me to experiment...not that an ordinary ponytail was anything too extreme to anyone but me.

Caelyn was in the kitchen, pouring coffee into a travel mug to take to the office. Her eyes popped wide when she saw me bound around the corner. “Maura? Your hair is *up*?”

I rolled my eyes, but to be honest, her surprise was justified. The style was really was a first for me. I tried to smile nonchalantly and shrugged. “I wanted to try it out.”

“Weird...but okay...” She shrugged as well and turned back to the counter. I was on my way to the cabinet to dig out my favorite honey-flavored cereal when my mom’s arm came across my path to block me. In her hand was a plateful of scrambled eggs.

“Here, Maura, why don’t you eat this?” My look of disappointment caused her to use an infallible tactic—guilt. “I got up early to make them for you.”

“And...what’s wrong with cereal?” I took the plate obligingly.

She tried to sound indifferent, but I noticed the nervous tremble underlying her voice. “It’s time you put more protein into your diet.”

“Mom, I’m almost seventeen, and you pick *now* to become more concerned with my diet.”

“You’re right; I should have done that a long time ago.” She patted my head affectionately, and of course with that, the battle was over for me. I was resigned to the eggs then, my sugary morning fix lost to me.

I took a whiff. A cook Caelyn was not...another reason I’d taken on kitchen duty...but they smelled mouthwatering. “Mmmmm.” I surprised myself by scooping a wad of them up with my fingers, not bothering to grab a fork. I wolfed half the plateful down in a like manner before I noticed my mother staring at me, open-mouthed.

I laughed nervously, blushing profusely. “Hey! You’re right, protein is good.” I didn’t want to but forced myself to take the time to fetch silverware and went to sit at the dining room table.

Caelyn forcibly calmed herself and snapped right back into an air of normalcy. “I’m a better cook than you give me credit for.” She even smirked for good measure. She glanced up at the clock, as if on cue. “I gotta run, Mink! I can’t be late today.” That was funny. She couldn’t be late any day. Punctuality was a *huge* deal to my mother.

“Good luck!” I called to her as she rushed past me, patting my head once more and grabbing her bag from the hook beside the entranceway. “Thanks for the eggs, Mom!” I added at the last second.

“Welcome. See you tonight, and have a good day at school.” I heard the door to the garage open and then close in a flash.

Caelyn was head designer for a very prestigious interior-design firm in Pittsburgh. That day, some big-shot millionaire client, who wanted to redecorate his summer home, was coming in for Caelyn to charm. Because not only did Caelyn possess unparalleled finesse when it came to transforming the inside of any dwelling, but she drew people to her as well. Male clients were astonished by her startling beauty, but she also had a way of making them feel at ease, like they were right at home with her. If she'd been able to dispel that sadness of hers, Caelyn's social calendar would have been full every single night of her life.

I'd had the chance to see her in action once on a night we'd been going out to dinner for my birthday. Caelyn had sent one of her coworkers to pick me up and take me to the office, as she was busy with a client too significant—and rich—to be rescheduled.

"Ahhh, here she is!" My mother was obviously uncomfortable, as she was overly exuberant at my arrival. "Anthony, this is my daughter, Maura."

"Well, you, My Dear, are just as beautiful as your mother!" The man had been tall, with deeply tanned skin and jet-black hair. Disturbingly, his eyes were a brilliant blue...colored contacts, obviously.

"Ummm, thanks." I'd squirmed internally when he picked my hand up to kiss the back. His lips had parted to show teeth I was pretty sure were veneered. There was no doubt he was handsome, but his expression had

transformed into a cocky kind of smile, one that made me wish my mother and I were already having dinner...somewhere very far from the man.

Mom had been packing up swatches of royally-colored fabric, samples in purples, golds and reds. I'd felt a sense of relief at the signal we would soon be leaving her office. Spacious as the room was, it hadn't felt big enough to escape the aura of the man occupying space with us. His attention had turned back to my mother, and I'd found the way he was smiling at her had begun to make me feel angry.

"Are you ready to go, Honey?" Caelyn had strode over and run her hair over my hair. "It's her birthday, Sweet Sixteen!" She'd beamed at me, and her smile had become more genuine. "You can pick any place you like."

My stomach had rumbled, embarrassingly, at the mention of food, and I'd gotten a sudden craving for the Cookie Fudge Fantasy at Eat'nPark.

"Eat'nPark!" Ice cream and chocolate chip cookies, what a perfectly delicious combination.

A knowing look had spread across my mother's face. "Sure, but you're not having Cookie Fudge Fantasy for dinner. You have to eat real food before dessert."

Unbelievably, Mr. I-Think-I'm-Awesome had invited himself along. "Hey, how about I buy dinner for the birthday girl and her stunning

mother?" He'd flashed a daring smile full of perfect white at my mom.

I could tell, then, how much his words had upset Caelyn. But only I'd caught the very slight stiffening of her body, the more rigid clench of her hands, which had been nestled into the small of her back. As far as her client was concerned, she'd had no reaction at all. She'd even given the same smile back to him he'd been offering to her, without a trace of fake sentiment. Caelyn was good. Not good enough to fool the daughter who knew her best—I'd been able to see just how incensed she was.

"Oh, Anthony! What a generous offer! You are so kind," my mother had said to him, and for a minute I'd been afraid we would have to ruin the rare intimacy my birthday brought. It was one of the few days of the year I had Caelyn's undivided attention. On my special day, she would never bring one iota of work home. I'd begun to formulate multiple excuses in my head to account for the reason why Anthony couldn't join us. Then, I'd noticed my mother's very deliberate pause and wondered what she was waiting for. I hadn't waited long to find out.

"Now, Maura, you don't want to go to Eat'nPark, do you?" He'd strode over to me and bent to look into my eyes, speaking to me in a tone generally reserved for five-year-olds. "I mean, that's practically like McDonald's! You are sixteen today and so should start developing more refined tastes. How about we find a more suitable place to have your

birthday dinner? How would you like to try some caviar and foie gras?"

He'd smiled, exceedingly proud of himself.

I'd tried to be very polite like my mother had taught me to be, and also to remember he was a very important client of hers when I answered through clenched teeth, "No, thank you. I want Buffalo Chicken Mac and Cheese for my birthday dinner." My tone had grown stone cold and rang with finality.

"Well, there you have it!" My mother had laughed a strange, tinkling laugh she didn't usually emit while in my company. "I don't think Maura is quite ready for the world of fine dining!" She'd turned and winked at me. "I'm not so eager for her to grow up yet either, so Buffalo Mac and Cheese sounds good to me!"

Anthony had appeared a tad confused, which had made me sure he was quite used to getting his way. Caelyn then crossed the room and took another velvet-enfolded swipe at his ego. "I know this isn't your kind of fare, Anthony Dear! I'm so sorry and wouldn't dream of making you suffer through an evening with us that is so out of your element." She'd put an arm around his shoulder and was escorting him out of the room. "I'm sure you understand why I must cater to Maura's tastes tonight. But you have to promise me a rain check!" The last words, she'd uttered with a push of bright cheeriness and a dazzling smile. I'd looked on in mute awe.

She'd managed to get him across the threshold of the room. Her charm and the promise of a future dinner together—poor Mom!—had made poor Anthony look a bit like someone had cracked him over the head with a hard, blunt object. “Absolutely, Caelyn. I look forward to it. But tonight...”

“Tonight, you have some homework to do! You simply must make up your mind regarding the color choices. And I'll see you in the morning to go over the bathroom tile samples.” She'd given him the smile that made the edges of her eyes crinkle, coming across as feeling so genuinely happy, she nearly fooled me. He was putty in her hands. I'd bet he'd even forgotten suggesting he go to dinner with us. “Goodnight,” she'd said softly and started to close the door.

“Goodnight,” he'd answered agreeably, with no further argument. I'd felt like I should applaud her performance of pure genius.

I snapped out of the memory, realizing I was about to be late for school. After rinsing my egg plate in the sink, I ran out the door, determination in my soul. That day, I was on a mission.

3. Errands

Trent was gulping down an enormous piece of pizza. In two bites, half the slice disappeared. I chewed quietly at my own, savoring the flavor of the cheese as I worked my nerve up to ask my favor.

“Ummm, Trent?”

“Yeah, Maur?” The words were all garbled around the food he still had stuffed in his mouth. His appeal grew thinner every day. I supposed that was why he’d inherited such good looks. Fate had to give him something.

“Are you driving us home today?” I asked timidly. Everyone in our little lunch clique seemed suddenly interested, looking up from their food and turning away from previous conversations.

“Aw, sorry, Maur.” He’d taken to shortening my name like that lately, and I found the habit far less than endearing. “I have football practice.”

As usual, Wendy—ever the instigator—read more into my request than a simple ride home. Her eyes, a lighter, less-attractive green than my mother’s, flashed as she asked me, “Oh...was there somewhere you were going to ask Trent to go?”

I blushed immediately, not helpful for any denial I might try to offer. I decided the truth might be the best way out of what Wendy was trying to insinuate.

“Well,” I began, “I wanted to get a present for my mother, but I’d have to go to the other side of town near the mall.”

“You could take the bus,” Katie offered, a big helpful smile spreading across her face.

I’d thought about that already. “I don’t really have time. I have to be back to make dinner.” Transit would mean the time for the trip would be doubled, and I wanted to surprise Caelyn on Saturday morning. Her suspicious nature was easily provoked, and it was next to impossible—most of the time—to pull the wool over my mother’s eyes. She would know something was up if she walked in the door and dinner wasn’t on the table. That had never happened before. She would probably push until she pulled a confession out of me, which would give her plenty of time to talk herself out of my present.

Of course, my worries summoned a new torrent of laughter from Wendy and several other girls at the table. Once again, as she’d done several times already, Katie shot them a look which silenced their cackles almost immediately. Wendy was so evil; I wondered if it was really worth being around her to hang out with Katie and Trent. I was sure Wendy loved having me around, though, as I seemed to be a constant source of amusement for her. She thought nearly everything I did or said was comical in some way. I would be sure to keep as far away from her as possible on Saturday.

“Sorry, Maur,” Trent said, right in the middle of taking another bite. “Maybe Katie can ditch cheerleading and take you? I guess I’d let her borrow the ‘stang.”

“No, that’s okay.” I didn’t want to be a bother to anyone. “I can go some other time, really.”

“Hey, we could take you tomorrow, right, Trent?” Katie grinned at me.

“Yeah, sure.” Trent’s attention was mostly focused on nabbing the pizza from one of the other football player’s plate.

“Hey!” the other guy, half Trent’s size, shouted in protest, trying to grab his lunch back with no success. Trent already had half the slice in his mouth, chewing with a wide, amused grin on his face.

“That would be great,” I said, without much excitement, to Katie. Oh well, the delay couldn’t be helped, and I should be grateful someone would even be willing to drive me. I put more effort into smiling back at her.

The bell rang, and we all moved to take our trays to the dishwasher. I was trying to imagine whether Caelyn would be happy or not about my intended gift, so I really wasn’t paying much attention to where I was walking, my eyes focused on the half brownie I’d left uneaten in the corner of the tray. I jerked my head up as I crashed into the back of the boy in front of me, watching in horror as my opened, but untouched, milk carton tipped over to soak the back of his dark-blue shirt from the middle

of his back to his waist. It would be my luck that Wendy was right across from me in the second line. She doubled over with laughter, dropping her own tray to the ground with a resounding clatter. Every head in the lunchroom turned in our direction.

My face was so hot; I felt like my head might explode. I wanted to run away...desperately. But my feet remained frozen to the floor, my face a mask of horror, waiting for the wrath of the human in front of me to rain down on my head. He turned around slowly, his large brown eyes full of shock. I'd seen him around the school. A senior. My heart bounced out palpitations of fear.

Despite that, I couldn't help but notice how beautiful he was.

"Wow...that is cold!" Not exactly what I was expecting, but he could have said way worse.

"I-I-Oh, my god, I'm so sorry," I stammered.

He smiled...*smiled*...at me then. One of those smiles you know the person is putting their whole heart into. His brown hair fell over his forehead to one side in careless bangs; the rest was long, tied into a ponytail that fell halfway down his back. Before he'd turned around, I hadn't missed that the ends were also milksoaked, like his poor shirt. He had full lips that were the perfect shade of pink, like the inside of a seashell. They were spread wide in that cherubic smile of his. Despite my terror, I was instantly smitten.

I'd never been close enough to him before to really see him.

"Hey, aren't you Maura?"

Huh? How did he know who the heck a nobody junior like me was? Or did my freak status make me far more noticeable than I'd realized? I started to feel sick to my stomach, realizing I was staring at him, dumbfounded, mouth hanging open.

"How do you know my name?" I asked weakly.

He actually blushed and brought a hand up to nervously brush the soft wisps out of his eyes. "Oh, I've just seen you around. You really made a mess of me, didn't you?" He laughed, and it was the warmest sound.

I opened my mouth wider, horrified. "I wasn't watching where I was going. I'm really sorry about your shirt!"

He put his hand on my shoulder. "Don't worry; it's just a shirt. No harm, no foul. I can just get my t-shirt out of my gym locker and put it on." He winked at me then. "I'll forgive you, but only if you promise not to give the milk thing another thought, okay?"

"Okay," I promised. His smile and that light in his earthy eyes were leaving me completely shell-shocked.

Much to my surprise, he turned his head to look at Wendy, who was still barking loudly with amusement. He rolled his eyes, picking up the bit of brownie from my tray and quickly whipping the chunk at her. The

chocolate collided with her straight brunette hair, before falling to the floor in pieces. "I can't stand that girl," he muttered.

It was my turn to laugh. She looked so startled; I really couldn't help myself. Wendy was picking out crumbs and glaring at both of us. "Ronnie Stine, I swear I'll get you back for this!"

He was obviously unconcerned by her words, ignoring her threat and turning his back to her. He was just a few inches taller than me, but enough I had to glance up a bit to find those glorious eyes of his. He must have been about six feet to my five-foot-nine.

"Will you walk down to the gym with me?"

I was afraid I'd be late for Latin, but walking with him was the least I could do. "Sure." I probably would have skipped the rest of afternoon classes just to see that smile of his for a bit longer. Instead, I expressed worry for him. "Won't you be late for class?"

"Well, I might ditch and go to the mall. I have a birthday present to pick up."

What a coincidence. The thought I'd just had about cutting class was closer to becoming truth. I tried to work up the nerve to ask if I could ride along with him, while also nursing a small worry in the back of my mind that somehow Caelyn would find out I'd left school before I should have... and been alone in a car with a boy. I was definitely doing things more and more out of character those days.

He spoke before I could form the words. "You know, I was sitting at the table behind you and thought I heard you say you needed to go across town to get something yourself. Would you like to come along?"

Wow, he sure had made that easy. "You must be a mind reader," I murmured.

"No, I'm just an excellent eavesdropper." He grinned mischievously. We were already at the gym doors, though I couldn't really remember walking all the way there.

"I'll be right back." I watched him walk through the doors and then shook my head. I must be crazy. No boy had ever snagged my attention before. I simply wasn't interested in any romantic involvement, especially not with someone who would soon be almost 3,000 miles away from me. Not to mention the fact that Caelyn would be less than happy. She was dead set against me making the same choices she had. She might not talk about my dad often, but I'd heard over and over how childishly stupid teenage romances were. She'd even convinced me of my inability, at my age, to know whether I truly loved someone or not. No, I decided right there; I simply would not put myself through a heartbreakingly brief romance that would haunt me when I started my new life in Vancouver.

When he came back, I made a real effort of trying not to be enchanted by the boy who'd appeared out of the blue at the wrong time in my life. His shirt was plain white after, but even the simple cotton fabric looked

stunning against his olive-toned skin. I reshaped my thoughts to concentrate on Caelyn's gift.

We managed to sneak out to his car undetected. He led the way to an older, but immaculately kept, white Trans Am. I climbed in after he opened the door for me. Hmmm, a gentleman too.

Neither of us spoke on the way to the mall. He flipped through the songs on the cd in the stereo until he found one he was satisfied with and sang along as he drove. Figured; even his voice was nice—well, way better than nice. He had an easy, casual air about him that was so much more pleasant and effortless to be around than my recent choice of company.

When we got out of the car, however; he brought up a difficult subject.

"So, I hear you're moving all the way to Vancouver after school is over."

"*You* know we're moving too?!" I asked, incredulous. Had Katie told the entire student body?

"Yep, I heard Wendy telling a girl in Chemistry class."

"Oh." Katie, Wendy, whoever. I was positive then the whole school must know.

"You know what? Those girls, well, that whole group they hang out with, their biggest problem is that their lives are so boring; they have to keep tabs on everybody else." We both laughed at that.

We were walking through the double doors. "So, are you going to have to live in an igloo up in Canada?"

"I hope you know how silly you're being." I smiled up at him. "Actually, it's pretty much supposed to rain all the time in Vancouver. And my mom assures me she's rented a very comfortable apartment for us to live in. There was no mention of Eskimo neighbors or roaming polar bears either."

He laughed again as he stepped into the edge of the jewelry store at the corner. It was a really fancy place but appealed to me in the form of the Gund plushies displayed in one of the glass cases. I didn't usually go for fancy stuff, but something about those lavish stuffed animals always captivated me when I walked past the store. He noted the stray of my eyes toward them.

"Those are pretty cute, huh?"

"Pretty expensive," I added. I'd never had the heart to ask Caelyn for one. It felt too selfish to want her to spend so much on a bit of fluff.

"I could see you all curled up with one of those." He smiled that magic smile once more.

I blushed in response, speechless.

"Hey, I need to go in here, okay? Do you want to go pick up whatever it was you came to get?" His question made it clear I wasn't invited into the store while he ran *his* errand. Maybe the birthday present was meant for

a girlfriend I hadn't considered might exist before that moment. I suddenly felt so stupid, being all worked up about liking him when there probably was nothing to worry about at all. Why would someone so amazing be single? Beyond that, why should he like someone like me? I was far too different to be able to be with him, most likely.

I could feel myself flush a bit deeper, embarrassed by all the thoughts running through my head and happy he had no way of hearing them.

"Sure." I couldn't seem to help the coldness that crept into my tone. "I'll meet you back here?"

I didn't wait for him to answer but turned and walked swiftly away, deeper into the hallway lined with store after store. I thought I heard him say my name as I'd brusquely walked away, but I couldn't be sure. My agitation had been an illogical response I'd had to things that were only imagined. But every failed attempt I'd ever made at trying to get close to other people had served to make me angrier at myself for even bothering to try. I was probably feeling the frustration I kept bottling up every time I'd made a bit of progress with Trent and Katie, only to have Wendy scathingly unravel it. I was finding it hard to live on the edge like that. Wanting to believe I could find acceptance while maintaining the caution that helped ease the inevitable rejection.

I sighed, my agitation and quick temper dissipating as they always did after the brief, violent flare. All my emotions seemed to be even more

volatile those days...like they ran all over the place with no control. Part of being a teenager, I guessed.

I'd reached the doors at the entrance on the other side and walked out into the dizzying sunlight; what I was after was actually in a strip mall down the hill from the Indiana Mall. The harshness tortured my eyes until I finally reached the shadow at the storefronts. I realized I was panting.

"You suck," I shot over my shoulder at the blazing ball in the sky.

The yoga studio was pleasingly cool. They'd possessed the good sense to turn the air conditioning on, even though the temperature wasn't quite hot enough to justify its use. There was a girl with a plain, kind face behind the counter.

"Hi," I said shyly.

"Hi there." She smiled in a friendly way that I seemed to need that day. "Was there something I could help you with?"

"Umm, I wanted to get a pass for my mom. But I've never done this before... Do I have to buy her a certain amount of lessons or something?" I was suddenly uncertain. Even though Caelyn had been saying forever she wanted to give the place a try, I didn't want her to commit to something when she didn't know whether she even liked yoga yet.

"Has she ever been here before?"

The answer to that question, I knew for certain. "Nope."

“Well, actually, the first visit is free.”

Hmmm, that wasn't much of a present. And free begged no sort of binding commitment from Caelyn to actually show up. I looked around the entranceway to the studio, and my eyes fell upon the answer. “How much are those yoga mats?”

“\$39.99.”

Perfect! That was about what I'd been hoping to spend on an introductory lesson, and the mat had tangible value. I'd have actually spent money, which meant less of a chance that Caelyn would say no, despite her own lack of social skills...beyond those put to work schmoozing clients.

“I'll take one.” I chose a light green. One other possible problem crossed my mind. “Oh, and is there a beginner's class sometime Saturday?” If so, I prayed the hour wouldn't be too early, or Caelyn definitely wouldn't show. We both loved sleeping in on Saturdays.

“Sure is!” she answered cheerily. “How's one o'clock?”

“Oh, that's perfect!” I smiled in earnest then, my plan coming together beautifully.

The girl rang up the mat, and I handed over an infinitesimal amount of my generous allowance Caelyn gave me in return for all my work around the house, which I rarely ever had opportunity to spend. My mother still insisted on buying all my clothes.

The girl held up two free passes. “Will you be coming with her?”

I felt guilt over my attempt to make Caelyn’s Saturday bearable while I left her all alone. “No,” I answered as nonchalantly as I could.

The girl quickly put one of the passes under the counter, as if she’d read what I was feeling in my expression. I took the remaining one she handed over, along with a schedule of the daily classes, thanked her for her help and left quickly.

I grew aware of the sudden concern I’d kept Ron waiting too long. I raced back up the hill, through the mall doors and down the short hallways—ours was a pitiful excuse for a mall.

I collided with him as I came around a corner. In my defense, he wasn’t present around the corner where he was supposed to be waiting for me. I didn’t realize it was him until I’d caught my breath. His arm was wrapped snugly around the small of my back. Embarrassingly, his grip had been the only thing that had kept me from falling flat on my bottom.

“Oh!” I exclaimed, a bit in shock, a bit from the impact. The breath had been knocked from my lungs, and the heat of his skin burned across the bare spot right above the top of my jeans... I knew the heat in my own face meant I was blushing...again.

He seemed amused by that and grinned down at me. “You seem intent on killing me today, don’t you?”

I pursed my lips together in annoyance at his reminder of the day's earlier embarrassment and pushed against his chest with my free hand. "I'm fine; you can let go of me now."

He didn't release me. "Only if you promise not to crash into me anymore—at least for the rest of the day."

"I promise," I said through gritted teeth.

He stepped back, moving his hand to my upper arm to steady me. "Oh, come on, Maura! I'm only teasing you! Lighten up."

I made an attempt at being more normal, especially since I'd stomped off so irrationally earlier. "Okay, okay, you're right," I conceded and even made a feeble attempt to laugh at my uncharacteristic clumsiness.

"I didn't mean to make you mad." I knew he was probably referring to more than only the present moment.

I brushed the whole thing off, not wanting to divulge my irrational reasons for being so silly earlier. "Oh, you didn't! I'm just angry with myself for being such a klutz, and twice in one day even... It's really embarrassing. And you know, the whole stress of the move..." I looked away from his too-soft, too-attractive eyes then, not wishing to get pulled into anything I would regret later.

Thankfully, he changed the subject. "So, did you get what you came for?"

I held up my bag, the mat's spongy end sticking out in a tell-tale way.
"Sure did! You?" Did I really want to know?

"Yep!" He held up a much smaller bag. I was sure, whoever she was, the girl would love whatever he had picked out. I sighed despite myself.

"You okay?" he asked, those eyes crinkling at the corners with concern.

"Oh, yeah." I pulled myself away from the unreasonable thought I'd been having about the boy who wasn't even in any way close to being mine. "I just have to get home soon."

"Do you?" There was disappointment in his voice. Was he trying to make my life harder?

"Yeah, unfortunately, I'm kind of in charge of dinner. And if Mom gets home and I'm not there, she'll kind of freak out."

"Overprotective parents?"

"Parent. And something like that, yeah." I grinned sheepishly up at him. "It's sorta complicated..."

"Gotcha." He wasn't going to pry. "Okay, let's get you home then." Why did he have to be so perfect? Why couldn't I have met him *after* we'd moved?

When we pulled into my driveway, I turned to thank him. "I owe you big time," I confessed.

"Hey, friends don't let friends ride with Neanderthals!"

I knew he was referring to Trent, and with what I'd observed of the football player's personality, I couldn't help laughing. I looked at him after with apology in my eyes. "I would invite you in, but to be honest, if Mom comes home and finds me alone in the house with you... Well, let's just say I couldn't guarantee your safety."

He laughed but added, "That must be hard to deal with."

"It's not like either of us ever had to deal with it before." I realized I really hadn't wanted to admit to such a thing. I mentally kicked myself for revealing how unattractive I was to the opposite sex to the one boy I might have had a chance at being interested in—if we hadn't been moving to the other side of the continent. I recovered quickly. "Caelyn, my mom, she had me when she was really young, so she just doesn't want me to make any mistakes. That's all."

He smiled his sunshine smile. "Sounds like you two really take care of each other."

"We do." I was staring in an idiotic fashion, once again, into his chocolate-colored eyes.

"Good luck with the yoga class on Saturday?"

"Oh..." He'd caught me off guard. I pulled my gaze away from his face and looked down at my mother's gift. "That's for Mom. I wanted her to have something to do while I'm gone." Why did I end up saying more than I ever wanted to reveal to him?

“Oh? What are you doing this weekend?”

I was suddenly ashamed of admitting I was spending my Saturday with the Neanderthal, the cheerleader he couldn't stand and the rest of their little clique. “I'm going swimming on Saturday.”

He pressed, aggressively, that time. “With who?” His tone was flooded with suspicion.

I answered, despite my revulsion at the truth. “Trent and Katie...and some of their friends.” My voice was diminished from its usual volume, as if the tactic might hide the meaning of the words I spoke.

“Oh.” He rolled his eyes at that. “Have fun.”

I tried to side-step the subject. “So, what are you going to be doing?” In a way, I was challenging him to come up with something better, though pretty much anything he might have planned would have to be more interesting than my idealistic attempt at fitting in with the popular kids at school.

“Shane and I are going camping.” Yep, that sounded better. I'd seen Shane around school, and he didn't look like the type who'd laugh critically when one of his friends said the wrong thing.

“That does sound like waaaay more fun,” I admitted.

He was serious then, eyeing me quizzically. “Really, Maura, why do you hang out with *them*? I don't understand it. You aren't like them at all.”

That stung. Yet another reminder of my differences and inability to fit in.

My face must have had that look like he'd slapped me, because he added, "I mean that in a good way. I mean you aren't a snob like the rest of them."

"Oh," I said meekly. "Thanks." He looked like he was going to say something more, but I got a look at the dashboard clock out of the corner of my eye and jumped in panic. "Ack! I have to go!" I'd have to really hurry to make everything seem normal and in its place in time for Caelyn's arrival home.

"I had fun today," he said simply. He reached over to briefly squeeze my hand.

"Me too." I smiled at him genuinely. "Maybe I'll see you at school tomorrow?"

"Definitely!"

Even though I was rushed, I stood outside, waving to him as his car disappeared down the street.

It turned out that I saw Ron much sooner than I'd even thought I would. As I stood across from Trent and Katie's house the next morning, waiting for them to emerge from the garage in the Mustang, Ron's car

rolled to a stop in front of me. He leaned over toward the open passenger's side window, a big friendly grin on his face.

"Want to ride with a member of the lower class today?" he joked.

I stuck my tongue out at him, not realizing I could be that playful. "Hold on a sec," I answered.

In another minute, Trent and Katie were easing out of their garage and backing toward us. I called to them. "Hey, guys! I'm going to ride with Ron today, okay?"

"Don't ask their permission!" Ron seethed from the window.

"Shhhh," I shot back. Katie must have been unable to hear me. She looked confused, but I exaggeratedly pointed to the passenger's seat of Ron's car, opened his door and settled into the black interior. As Ron drove away, I couldn't help noting Katie's injured expression. I hoped the damage was repairable.

"Thanks." Ron grinned enormously at me.

"Umm, you're welcome...but for what?"

"For ditching on the Ne...on Trent and Katie to ride with me. There's hope for you yet!"

I looked at him with as much irritation as I could muster before the exhilaration I felt at seeing him bubbled up into my face and took over.

"Well, you *are* a senior, you know. I think you carry a higher status than them, anyway."

“You do know that means I have dibs on hanging out with you then.”

He *would* find a way to turn my being nice to his own personal advantage. I laughed and said, “I guess you do!” I wondered if that meant he was going to try to stop me from going with them on Saturday, but he never said another word about it, so his camping plans must have been firmly set.

He switched topics. “So, how did your mom like your surprise?”

I thought about that before answering. Unable to keep my secret, I’d decided to spill the beans. Caelyn had agreed to go to the lesson, but not without much reluctance. I still wasn’t sure whether she’d chicken out or not. “She liked it,” was all the answer I gave. “How about yours?”

“Oh, the birthday’s not until next month.”

I didn’t want to show any petty, imagined jealousy that day, so I joked, “Wow, you’re absurdly well-prepared for a guy!”

He shrugged and turned on the radio again. We spent the rest of the drive to school listening to the music. I found myself wishing he would sing along again, and he didn’t disappoint me.

“*Now then, tell me, Baby, do you need my love?*” He looked over at me as he sang that line.

I blushed but didn’t miss the small voice inside my head that answered, completely of its own accord and only to myself, *Yes, I do.*

4. Sink or Swim?

“Oh, come on, Maura!” Katie called from the water. “Everyone else is already swimming!”

I looked around at the boys initiating a splashing war with some of the girls. Everyone seemed to be oblivious to the fact that none of us had on swimsuits. Knowing we were going swimming, I’d brought mine...burying the garment at the bottom of my backpack so as to escape any hope of discovery by Caelyn. But once we’d arrived, Katie had informed me that everyone usually just stripped down to their undergarments. She said doing so was a kind of tradition. She’d added that even if I did go into the woods to change, one—if not all—of the boys would be sure to follow and peek. That was enough to keep me from that course of action.

Still, the thought of stripping down to my underwear, even in the rapidly-dying light, and revealing garments not usually seen against my pale skin made me a bit queasy. The time was still early enough in the year that the sun was merely fading in the late afternoon.

“It’s not even dark yet,” I offered in a weak, whiny voice. The way my voice came out made me feel even worse....if that was even possible.

Even from where I was standing on the bridge, I could see Katie roll her eyes. “It’s nearly twilight, close enough.”

My hands were shaking as I slid my jeans down, my face feverish with embarrassment. I decided to get into the water ASAP, so I ripped my t-shirt over my head and jumped in, deeply desiring its blue-green cover.

Even though the air was unseasonably warm that day, the water was icily cold... The month was only May, after all. I surfaced, gasping as my body fought to adjust to the temperature. My breaths ached up through my lungs. Katie giggled as she swam toward me.

"The cold's a total rush isn't it?" she squealed.

I couldn't find my voice to answer her. I gasped several times, unattractively, trying to adjust to the cold around me. "S-s-soooo c-cold," I finally managed.

Something flashed across her face for only a moment, too fast for me to read. Then, she shrugged and said, "You'll get used to it". She swam back toward the others, turning her back on me. My former embarrassment was at present a distinct feeling of unease. I watched as Katie swam up to Wendy, whom she'd been protecting me from, ironically enough, all week. They whispered something schemingly between themselves. I didn't like the way Wendy's eyes flashed at me before she laughed maniacally.

I, quite suddenly, didn't want to be in the water with any of them anymore. I turned back to the bridge, dog paddling numbly. My limbs

were so frozen; my arm ached when I reached up to grasp the edge of the rail, beyond ready to pull myself from the chill of the water.

“Maura!” Katie was calling to me. “Where are you going? You just got into the water; you can’t get out now.”

“The h-h-hell I can’t,” I mumbled under my breath, shivering violently. But when I turned toward the sound of her voice, I saw that everyone, all our male company included, had their eyes on me. I cursed softly and dropped back down into the water.

Too bad I wasn’t off camping with Ron instead. He was so much more fun...and genuine.

Katie came back toward me again. “Awww, are you cold, Maura?” Her tone was mocking.

My eyes narrowed. Up until that point, since she’d started talking to me in the first place, Katie’d been nothing but polite, kind even. She’d even defended me against Wendy’s maliciousness on several occasions. She was a completely different Katie then.

“What’s with you, Katie?” I asked suspiciously.

“What’s with you, freak?” She sneered at me. Both of us stammered out our words between chattering teeth. Hers struck *me* with the force of a blow.

I couldn’t say anything else. I looked at her with an expression twisted somewhere between shock and horror.

“Did you *really* think we wanted to be your friend?” It was Wendy who spoke then, moving through the darkening water to Katie’s side. The evening was turning into a scene from one of my nightmares. I thrashed away from them toward the water’s edge, desperate to escape their words. I was so confused; what was the point to it all? Why had they dragged me out there like that? I tried to think of some wrong I’d done to any of them, but nothing came to mind. I edged closer to the bank, not caring who saw my pale entirety covered only by scant undergarments.

Katie looked up toward the bridge we’d all plummeted from. “Got ‘em, Trent?”

I followed her evil gaze to find her brother leaning over the railing, holding my shirt and jeans in one hand, my runners in the other.

“Yep,” Trent quipped back, eloquent as always. I was closer to the water’s edge, but not close enough to do anything about Trent’s sudden possession of my clothing. The water came to my waist instead of my shoulders. The cold air assaulted me, making me shudder, or was my worsening situation causing me to shake so hard?

I looked up at Trent, my eyes pleading for all I was worth. “Please, Trent!” I implored him. “Please, give them back...”

“Please, Trent...” Wendy and Katie were imitating my pleading tones. I ignored them.

Trent was looking at me then, his eyes locked on mine. “Maura...” he said in a strange, faraway kind of voice, like he was down in a deep hole or something. The whole world seemed to fall away from us, like we were the only two people in existence.

“Please, give me my clothes.” I didn’t break my gaze, my eyes seeming to hold his. I ignored the splashing noises around me, focusing on weakening the resolve of the most important player in their sick game. To my great shock, he held my things out to me. Maybe Trent wasn’t as cruel as the others.

“Trent! What the hell are you doing?” Katie’s voice shrieked up at him. She sounded closer, and I realized she’d emerged from the water. Her lacy black underwear made her seem all the more malevolent. When she’d yelled at him, Trent shook his head, like he’d been asleep and someone had shaken him awake. He looked over at his twin, blinking, a confused air about his face. He must have been fantasizing about tackling someone or something.

She closed the gap between them while I watched, horrified, ripping my clothes out of his hands. I knew I was seeing the real Katie then and that there would be no swaying her. She didn’t appear to have any mercy I could appeal to. They must have been planning their cruel prank the entire time. The realization clicked in my head that they’d befriended me—elaborately—only to be cruel to me. I couldn’t exactly wrap my head

around the idea, how any human being could be so mean to another one. It wasn't even like I'd tried to steal her boyfriend or started a rumor about her; Katie was being mean to me because, and *only* because, I was different. My eyes filled with tears, and I was frozen in place, even though I knew I should be doing something, anything, besides just standing here half-naked and crying.

Most of them had piled back into their cars, and Katie was turning to leave, wrenching Trent along by his elbow. He staggered clumsily when she pulled at him.

The world around us had grown pretty dark, the last edge of the sun sinking and leaving behind a weak, rosy half-light.

"How am I supposed to get home?" I called up to them in a hoarse voice, not that I thought Katie would care about that.

"I guess you'll have to hitchhike," she said in a voice full of nonchalance. "I'm sure your outfit, or lack thereof, will attract someone interesting."

Her words played out a dangerous scenario in my head. I was more terrified than I'd been in my life. "How can you do this?" I screamed at her through my tears. The fear was laced around the edges with rage. I didn't want to add to her twisted amusement but couldn't stop myself from crying out, "Please don't leave me here!"

“Have fun getting home, Maura.” Katie remained unaffected by my desperation, the anguish in my voice. “I’m so glad we didn’t miss this opportunity before you moved so far away.” How long had they been plotting some cruel way to torture me?

I watched her disappear around the back end of the Mustang, and that put my body into motion. I knew, logically, it was too late to catch her, to somehow rip my clothes out of her harpy talons and at least be able to cover my pale, frigid skin. But I still had to try; doing anything was better than doing nothing. I fought against the cold water, scrambling across the rough rocks under my feet, trying to break away from its numbing grasp. I heard the Mustang start, then the spray of gravel as Trent initiated their escape.

“NOOOOOOOO!” I screamed out, too late to do anything to help myself. I lurched forward, slipping on the ever-shifting rocks under the water. I fell awkwardly to the side, my head connecting with something hard. The water was pulling me back then. I felt the glassy surface slide cold and smooth over my face, like the night that was advancing too fast, stealing my sight.

I was dreaming, of that I was certain. My cheek lay against something warm, and a different kind of heat was radiating against the other side of my face. I thought it’d been very cold, and there was something else—a

very terrible something—gnawing at the edges of my memory. What was the tragedy which had occurred?

I thought I heard someone's voice and felt surprised to find the sound belonged to a male. Shouldn't Caelyn's voice sound in my ears if I were just waking up?

My mind crawled farther up toward consciousness, and I realized my cheek was against someone's bare skin. I forced my eyes to open and could see I was resting against someone's chest...a boy's bare chest! What was the horrible thing I could almost remember happening to me? Didn't it involve my being in my bra and panties? I shot up, trying to struggle into a sitting position, looking down at my body. My muscles didn't want to obey the commands my mind was giving them, but I could at least see that I was more covered than my memory was telling me I had been. Although my legs, extending from the bottom of the red flannel shirt partially covering me, were glaringly bare.

My mind was all muddled, and I couldn't make sense of the shirt, my state of partial undress or the flames I was catching out of the corner of my half-opened eyes.

"I think she's coming around." The unfamiliar male voice sounded again.

I looked up to find eyes I did know.

"Ron?" I breathed. I noticed my head was throbbing.

He looked relieved. "Yeah, Maura, it's me." But that emotion was all mixed up with something else. His eyes relaxed a bit when I'd spoken, but his mouth was all wrong. He looked furious. I noticed more and more as the seconds went by. Ron was cradling me against him, and it must have been his shirt I was wearing. But the other boy standing over his shoulder, wearing an anxious expression on his face, was bare-chested too. Had I done something very bad? My mind was so cloudy... No! The bad thing had been...Trent, Katie! The memory of their deviousness came flooding back. But how was Ron here? And the other boy, wasn't his name Shane?

That's right. Ron was going camping with Shane that weekend. I tried again, without success, to sit upright, making out the shape of the tent over Ron's other shoulder. I couldn't figure out why I was here with them.

"Why...am I camping with you guys?" My confused mind couldn't put together the part that led from the awful scene at the bridge to their peaceful little campsite in the woods.

Ron rolled his eyes; he was holding onto that air of being extremely agitated. "You're not camping with us, Maura. You were with your other 'friends,' remember?" His voice had an edge that made me cringe away from the comfort of his warm, bare skin.

"They...aren't my friends." My voice cracked when I spoke. "I'm sorry... I just don't understand how I ended up here." I could hear the

inevitable crying creeping into my words.

That softened Ron right up. “You hit your head.” He subconsciously moved the hand that wasn’t cradling my back, to dab at my temple with a huge wad of white cotton. That must have been Shane’s shirt.

Since he’d mentioned it, I could sort of remember that. I started to put everything together but still didn’t understand how Ron could have been there when he was away camping.

I peered up at him. “But how did you get...how were you at the bridge?” Had I somehow missed that he’d been in the group swimming with us?

“I didn’t trust that Katie Parker or her idiot brother...or any of the rest of that group of...” His voice seethed with anger. I would never have imagined that the easygoing boy from the other day could be so enraged as he was then. “I know you’ll probably be mad, but when you told me you were going swimming with them, Shane and I decided we should camp here. I mean in the woods near the bridge.”

“How did you know we would go swimming at the bridge?” I knew enough to be sure I hadn’t told him that part.

“Maura.” He rolled his eyes once more; they glowed red in the firelight. “*Everyone* goes swimming at the bridge when the pools aren’t open yet.”

Yeah, like *I* would ever know something like that.

“But why would you think I’d be mad?” My eyes were wide in awe. He’d come to make sure I would be okay.

“Well, I mean, you guys were all in your underwear and everything,” Shane admitted.

Ron scowled at him. “Thanks, Shane!”

“It’s okay,” I piped in weakly. How could I be angry? They were the ones who’d attempted to cover me up. I was more aware of my bare legs then, though. They were so pale they glowed orange, seeming to absorb the light from the campfire.

“Nothing’s okay,” Ron muttered. I could feel the slight tremors running through him and realized he was so angry he was shaking. “What happened tonight, that was just sick.”

“It’s my fault, anyway,” I squeaked. My voice seemed to have no force behind it, and my throat hurt. I must have had water in my lungs.

Ron was appalled. “Just how the hell is this *your* fault?”

I fastened my eyes on his, wishing I could dissolve his anger. “You even said yourself I shouldn’t be hanging around with them. I should have listened to you...to my mom...my MOM! Oh my god, what time is it?” The sky was, at present, pitch-black, the moon positioned high above us.

“It’s almost ten,” Shane informed us, squinting down at his watch.

“It’s almost ten?!” I parroted back in panic. I was so horrified; I would have sprung to my feet if the dizziness hadn’t stopped me. My body’s momentum carried me halfway there, but I plunked back into Ron’s lap, awkwardly, as my vision greyed around the edges.

He let out a rush of air as I landed on him. “Ooof, hey, careful there! Don’t worry, Maura; I’ll take you home. There’s no need to make yourself pass out again.”

I knew I wasn’t light. I was tall. He made me feel even more graceless as he struggled to get up with me still in his arms. From his sitting position on the ground, even I knew standing was an impossibility. I felt even more embarrassed—if that were even possible—at his futile struggle to rise.

“I can walk, myself,” I tried to tell him.

He ignored me and flashed a look at Shane, who stoically came over to lift me from Ron’s arms. My small attempts at struggle did me no good. Shane’s frame was smaller than Ron’s, but he was taller and maintained a wiry kind of strength in his long limbs. Shane must have been Native. His eyes were black, like his hair, his skin a pleasant brown. Though dark, his eyes held a friendliness, tinged with mischievous, that was impossible to resist. He smiled down at me, and I couldn’t help but smile back...even though I was still cold, half-naked and internally wounded by the cruelty inflicted upon me almost three hours ago.

Three hours! I thought to myself. **I was out for a long time...**

Ron was probably holding me the entire duration, as he struggled to stand himself. “Ow! Hold on, Shane, both my legs are asleep.”

I crossed my arms across my chest, irrationally agitated by the entire night, and wished I could disappear from existence. I huffed out a sigh, unconsciously.

Ron tried to joke with me at that. “I didn’t mean it that way,” he teased. “Holding you was anything but a burden.”

Despite the hideous events of earlier, I couldn’t stop myself from blushing at that. I even smiled a bit, looking down at his shirt and playing with a button. I liked that boy far too much. My mind suddenly flashed a picture of Caelyn’s face at me. Her expression was furious, her eyes frightening.

I jumped in Shane’s arms. “Mom is going to kill me! I promised I wouldn’t be late!”

“Okay, okay, stop rushing me,” Ron groaned and struggled to his feet. “Here, lemme have her.” He took me from Shane’s grasp, making me feel like a large child being passed around at a family gathering. I was too tired and wounded to protest, though, and decided I’d earned the comfort I’d felt before when my head had been against his chest. I allowed myself to snuggle my cheek against his bare skin. Had he just sighed? It was hard to tell with the steady thump of his heart in my head.

Shane drove—it was his car we were riding in—and Ron sat with me in the back seat. I didn't realize I was crying, silently, the tears sliding effortlessly down my cheeks until my savior reached up and wiped one away.

"I'm going to snap that Trent's neck for him...maybe even that snotty sister of his!" He shook his head, and then looked away from me.

"No, don't," I whispered hoarsely. "Don't fight because of me." I sniffled pathetically, wishing for a box of tissues. I certainly couldn't wipe my nose on his shirt.

As if on cue, Shane handed a roll of toilet paper over the back of his seat. "Here, Maura."

"Thanks." I took it and tore a piece off. They must've brought it along for camping.

Ron looked back at me, and his expression was pained. "Please, don't cry." He reached up to smooth a hand over my still-damp hair. Ironically, his compassionate words and gesture made me cry harder.

He pulled me against his chest again, and we rode the rest of the way to my house in silence.

5. My Mother

My mother was named Caelyn, which, ironically, means “loved forever.” Something she definitely was not. I knew she’d never gotten over my father. No one had ever been good enough after she’d had a taste of what love was like with him. She was devastatingly beautiful, something *I* definitely was not. I’d always wished I’d inherited more of my looks from her, but she seemed to always be the one who, painfully enough, kept reminding me of how much I looked like the missing piece to our lives. Her jet-black hair curled effortlessly in perfect waves halfway down her back, a dark complement to her large, emerald-colored eyes. She was tall, but not lanky like me, and had far more curvaceousness to her figure than I could ever hope for.

One thing was a constant. Even though I knew my mother loved me beyond anything else in her life, there was an ever-present aura of sadness that clung to her, no matter where we were or what we were doing. I could sense her melancholy, almost as if the emotion permeated up through the pores of her smooth, olive-toned skin, failing to ever completely evaporate.

There were nights I could hear her call out his name, even from my bedroom down the hall. Her voice filled with a longing I couldn’t understand, her sleeping self caught in the embrace of a deep dream. I

hadn't dared to ask her about him during her waking hours for a few years. My curiosity was put off by the doubled misery clouding the very air around us when she was forced to call up any memory strong enough to have to put into words. I wanted desperately to know more about him, but I couldn't wound her like that. I'd decided a little while ago that my own selfish curiosity wasn't worth my mother's unavoidable pain, excepting one brief evening when I'd thought she might have been immune.

I'd cheated really. She'd had some girls from work over for an informal meeting that turned into more of a girls' night out. I had to admit that when I'd suggested margaritas, I'd been hoping the alcohol would open her up after everyone left, just enough to reveal a few details. Not asking about him was just so *hard*.

She'd had a good time for a while, joking and laughing with the rest of the women, until someone had made the mistake of broaching the taboo subject.

"So, Caelyn, are you seeing anyone these days?" a girl who had just joined the firm asked, innocent in her unknowing. The receptionist, who had worked with my mom for years, had shaken her head at the new girl threateningly, too late. I'd been observing through the open glass-sliding door, pretending to watch TV in the living room and winced as soon as the words had been spoken.

My mother's light mood had slipped back into the almost-never-waning, dark recesses of her mind. "No." Her tone had become flat and lifeless.

Ack! I'll never get anything out of her now, I'd thought, scolding myself a moment later for being so callous.

"Oh boy," I'd muttered, rising to go back to the blender, "time for some more damage control."

I'd doubled the tequila in the next batch, knowing it would be far better if Caelyn could forget the night entirely. I'd also taken a large sip from my mother's drink, but not before peeking to make sure no one was watching. I'd always been a good girl, but I had my limits. Nervously, I'd carried the tray to the patio.

"Here ya go, ladies," I'd announced cheerfully, setting the drinks down in front of them quickly before anyone had time to protest.

"What a perfect hostess you are, Maura," the receptionist, Betty, had remarked. "Caelyn, that daughter of yours is growing up into some kind of beautiful." I'd giggled dutifully.

Caelyn must have been getting sloshed. "She is, isn't she? Looks just like her father." She'd bitten her lip in regret when that slipped out.

I'd changed the subject...expediently. "So, are you guys going to be able to survive without my mom after she transfers to the Vancouver office?"

The accounting officer had answered, after emitting a deep sigh, “Honey, your mother is irreplaceable.”

“Oh, I know that.” I’d wandered to Caelyn’s side and handed off her margarita, reaching down to squeeze her other hand in a gesture I hoped she found comforting. She had peered up and smiled at me weakly before taking a long draw from her drink.

“Mmm, that’s good, Maura.” Her words had taken on a noticeable slur.

The marketing manager, a perky little blonde thing, had spoken up, perhaps in response to my mother’s incoherency. “It’s getting late, girls. We’d better get going...after we finish our drinks, of course.”

I’d turned to go back into the house, several echoes of “Thanks, Maura!” at my back.

Less than a half hour later, they’d meandered into the hallway to collect their shoes and coats. I’d risen, reluctantly, from the episode of *Inu-Yasha* I’d been watching and went to say my goodbyes. Everyone had drunk a bit too much, and so the four of them were sharing a cab to their various destinations. Betty had almost fallen when she’d attempted to slide her foot back into one of her shoes, all of them erupting into hysterical giggles. I couldn’t help but notice that Caelyn hadn’t joined them. She’d leaned into the wall, a morose expression weighing her features down.

I'd known she was thinking about my father, the look in her eyes very familiar, and instantly regretted the margarita idea, reminding myself too late alcohol was a depressant.

I'd helped Molly, the new girl, who'd made the unknown faux-pas about Caelyn's relationship status, into her black wool coat. She'd fallen back against me when she'd settled into the garment and laughed out a "Whoops! Sorry!" I'd chuckled edgily, still regretting the part I'd played in my mother's current mood.

After they were all out the door, and I'd seen them safely into the waiting cab, I'd slithered back into the house, footsteps dragging, to clean up the mess I'd made. Caelyn had still remained frozen in place, prompting me to catalog through our movie collection inside my head, trying to find something light. I hadn't been able to think of any that didn't contain some element of romance and wondered if she might watch one of my more violent animes with me?

"Mom..." I'd started, meekly.

"Come here, Maura; I want to talk to you." Her words had lost any hint of slur. Had she only been pretending to rid us of the other women? She'd finished every drink I'd brought her—well, half-finished the last one. I'd followed her to the couch, wincing already at the imagined things she might say to me.

She'd turned off the TV and patted the couch cushion, and I'd sat close to her so I could take her hand again. "Are you okay, Mom?" My voice had escaped in a hushed creation, not quite a whisper.

"Maura, I know you wonder about your father," she'd begun.

"Mom, you don't have to talk about him." I'd ached for her refusal to listen to me, but above all, I couldn't have watched her fall apart.

Tears had swum in her eyes, and she'd swayed a bit, unsteady, as she'd sat with me, and I'd known her words would be at least slightly alcohol induced. She'd become brave enough to speak them, numbed as she was at that moment.

"No. I've known for a long time that you deserved to hear more about him. I'm sorry, very sorry; I could never give you that."

"Mom, it's okay..." I hadn't put much force behind my words, though, feeling inextricably guilty to hunger so for the words that would tear her heart apart. At the same time, I'd felt desperate for her to continue.

"Maura, your father, he wasn't a bad person. He isn't with us for very good reasons..."

I'd interrupted. "What reasons, Mom?"

She'd looked uncomfortable when I said that and had failed to answer my question. Instead, she'd tried to explain. "When I met him, Maura, you know I was very young. He didn't realize how young. I was only fifteen that summer...younger than you are now. Of course, he never would

have touched me if he'd known that. I lied and told him I was twenty. I looked it, too. I matured faster than any of the girls at my high school, and when I went out, I could always get away with pretending to be older than I really was."

I'd gaped at her in silent awe, always curious as to why any man would leave a girl so young alone with a child. Still, even if he had thought she was twenty... There were so many things I'd wanted to learn. Everything about my beginning was enshrouded in mystery.

"I know." She'd taken in my astonished expression. "It was very wrong of me to lie to him. At the time, I couldn't know how wrong. All I knew was that he was much older than me, and I didn't want him to lose interest and think of me as a child." A tear had broken free and run away down her smooth cheek. My mother still looked like she was in her twenties. We were always being mistaken for siblings. How ironic that she could look older when she was younger, and since that she'd reached her thirties, she'd remained behind in that same youthful place she'd created for herself.

I hadn't wanted to say anything at that point to stop her from telling her story, so I'd allowed her to continue.

"I was working in my parents' restaurant that summer, since school had let out. He came in one night and sat in a back corner, alone. He was so dark and brooding. I went to wait on him, and I think I fell in love as

soon as he looked up at me with those black eyes of his. There was something soft and pleading in them, despite their darkness. And, of course, he was exceptionally good-looking.” Caelyn had smiled, but the expression had been full of sadness. She picked up a strand falling across the front of my blouse. “His hair was *just* this color.” More tears. From both of us then.

“Mom, you don’t have to...” My voice had emerged as ragged whisper, one which had broken as it escaped my lips.

“Maura, please stop saying that. I should have told you a long time ago. I just have missed him so...” Her sentence had ended in a sob, but she’d taken in a deep breath and composed herself so that she could speak again. “Just let me finish, okay?”

“Okay. Thank you, Mom.”

That seemed to give her a bit of courage to continue. She played with the strand of hair she’d lifted, unconsciously. “I remember I brought him a glass of Merlot. He never even touched it. I kept going back unnecessarily to check on him. He seemed to be so sad about something. Every minute I stood in front of him, I’d wanted to reach out to him, wanted to touch his face and chase away whatever was troubling him. At first, he’d seemed to resist any urge to talk to me. But once, he’d raised his eyes and stared into my own. He must have liked something he saw there, because he started to ask *me* questions, instead of the

other way around. I told him I was twenty, because he looked to be at least twenty-five himself, and I knew there would be no way a twenty-five-year-old guy would ever be interested in a fifteen-year-old. I must have lied convincingly, because he never questioned me. He came back the next night, too. I lingered at his table as much as I could, but I didn't want to draw my parents' attention and have them spoil my little deception."

I'd had to ask. "What did he talk to you about?"

"Books, music, art. But books, mostly. Lucky for me, I was such a good student. I was in an advanced literature class at the college, so I could keep up with him reasonably well. But he seemed to know everything about any book ever written. I was amazed by the way he could recite *entire* poems from memory or remember the most obscure details in books I'd read that I'd seemed to overlook entirely. Of course, he gave those details a whole new significance I'd never considered before. His mind amazed me and drew me in."

Ah, my bookworm status had been passed along genetically on both sides. That had explained that...and also the fact I'd never seen Caelyn touch one of the many books in our house. Reading must've been one of the things too saturated by his memory to be bearable for her anymore.

"I met him after work that night and experienced the most unforgettable summer I've ever had." She'd looked so heartbroken as the memories had flashed through her mind. Her expression had told me I

could never know the sacrifice she made in recalling them. I'd known then I probably wouldn't get any more detail than that one sentence, and I'd been right. She'd skipped all the way to October.

"By the time my birthday came, I was pregnant. I think he knew, though I hadn't told him. He became extremely protective. His hand would linger on my stomach when he would touch me. But then..." She looked down, and I'd known she'd arrived at the time in the story her fairytale had ended.

"He came to pick me up on Halloween." Funny how Caelyn hadn't said 'my birthday;' she'd chosen the darker option, though maybe my perception of the moment had been completely wrong. "I always had him pick me up at the college on the days I had lit class there because doing so kept up the illusion I was taking all of my classes there. One of my friends had given me a present right before I got into his car, and I was so excited, I ripped open the card right in front of him. Those eyes of his missed nothing so, of course, the big yellow 'Sweet 16' on the front of the card grabbed his attention immediately. He was so angry; he didn't speak to me for an hour. He just drove and drove, looking at nothing but the trees passing along the side of the road." Her words had taken on the weight of melancholy, and I'd wondered how much longer she could continue with the story without lapsing into crying.

“At first, I pleaded with him. I said I was sorry over and over and tried to justify my dishonesty by telling him how much I’d wanted him from the very moment I saw him. When he didn’t seem to hear anything at all I was saying to him, I just sat there in the car seat crying until he decided to speak to me again. I was terrified. Afraid he’d tell me he never wanted to see me again. Terrified that both of us were going to lose him.”

I’d felt confused... Wasn’t that exactly what had happened?

Caelyn had chosen to ignore my questioning expression. “When he finally spoke, he merely said, ‘It’s not you I’m angry with, Caelyn. Now, I simply need to deal with the ramifications of what I’ve done.’”

“I don’t understand...” I’d begun, but she’d rested her finger on my lips to silence me.

“Let me finish.” She’d taken on a haggard look. “I need to go to bed, Maura.”

I’d grown terrified she would say nothing more at that point, but she’d continued. “He was so calm, like he’d just settled into a decision he’d been wrestling with, and now he’d decided, there was no going back. And after, we were so happy, until about three months before you were born. Then, we had a huge fight and...” She’d hesitated as if she’d changed her mind about the words she’d originally intended to speak. “And he left.”

She'd risen, and I'd known that would be all the story I'd get to hear. I'd still been left with what seemed like hundreds of questions brewing up inside my mind. Had her parents been angry? Had my father ever even seen me? What could they have fought about to leave such devastating consequences in its wake? I'd felt the need to ask the most important question of all before she left me to ponder all of her words alone, while I lay in my little twin bed.

"Mom..." I'd been so close to solving the biggest mystery of all. I'd whispered breathlessly, "Why did he leave, Mom?"

She'd turned back to me, her expression unbelievably embittered. "Because we could only come to one agreement about the course my future should take...and yours, as well."

Broken. That was the best way to describe my poor half-hearted mother. That was the way my father had left her, so she couldn't help it. And when I came home from my doomed outing, I was afraid what was left of her just might fall to pieces. As Ron walked me up the front steps, I cringed away from the expression I knew she'd have engraved on her face when she saw my scantily covered body, the blood dried into my hair from the ugly wound in my head...the boy I was with...

"Are you sure you want to come in?" I hated the fear that had permeated my voice. I didn't know if I were more afraid of Caelyn

screaming at Ron before she knew all that had happened or her falling apart in front of him after she'd heard everything.

It was too late then... He was ringing the doorbell. He looked so much braver than I felt. I could see the anger that had crept back into him in the hard set of his lips, the flash in his dark eyes.

Caelyn had torn the door open immediately, anxiety all over her face. She looked at Ron, dumbfounded. She must have then caught sight of some part of me, because she instantly peered around his shoulder to find me standing meekly behind him, clad only in a boy's shirt that just barely cleared my hips.

"Maura?! What the..." Her eyes fairly popped with dismayed astonishment.

"Hi, Mom." What an asinine thing to say. I should have at least started with "I'm okay."

Caelyn just stood there with her mouth hanging open. I felt the fear turn over, like a living thing in my stomach. How was I going to survive our confrontation? How could I even begin to explain everything that had happened that night?

Luckily, I had Ron. "Hi, um, Ms. DeLuca." He started out sounding very shy, but as my mother's brows furrowed closer together, he put a stronger edge to his voice. "I came to bring Maura home." She was still scowling.

“Um...I’m Ron by the way.” He put his hand out to her. She ignored that entirely.

My mother’s glare was venomous. “Maura! Get in the house this instant!”

Oh boy... She thought Ron was at fault for whatever imagined atrocities were going through her brain right at the moment.

“Mom!” I was desperate to put everything right, despite how much trouble I knew I’d be in. “You have it all wrong!”

“I said GET IN THE HOUSE!” she screamed at me, absolute fury flying from her eyes. I’d never seen her so angry before, and I was terrified. “Do I need to ask you again?”

“N-n-no ma’am,” I stuttered. I hurried past Ron, but not without looking up at him with apology in my eyes. I felt horrible for his being put in the middle, just because he’d happened to save my life.

Once inside, I steeled myself for another attempt at speaking to my mother. “Mom, will you please just let me...”

“Don’t say anything, Maura.” Her voice shook. “Do you have any idea what you’ve put me through tonight?”

I was confused then. Did she want me to stay quiet or answer her question?

Ron saved me again. “I think I can explain.” He took a tentative step onto the living room carpet.

I didn't like the way Caelyn's head snapped around when she looked at him. "What was your name again?" she asked viciously.

I saw him swallow hard as he answered, "Ron."

She turned on him then. "Well, *Ron!*" It sounded like she'd chewed on his name before spitting the one syllable out. "Do you mind telling me why it is you're out with my daughter when she's supposed to be with Katie Parker? And after you've answered that, I'd *really* love to know why you would bring her home wearing only *that!!*" She pointed the index finger of her shaking hand at me, standing on the plush blue carpet next to our couch, holding onto its arm for support, my knees knocking together.

Ron went a little pale... I couldn't stand to see my hero wrongly accused.

"Mom! Listen to me! If-if it weren't for him, for Ron... Mom, I'd be *dead* right now!" I shouted all the words out quickly before she had a chance to silence me again.

"What..." She suddenly looked like she might have a fainting fit as well, reaching out to catch the doorframe for support. Ron, ever the gentleman, steadied her by stepping over to let her lean against him. I was surprised to see her reach up to grip his considerable shoulder.

She blinked her eyes heavily, and then looked at me again. "What did you just say, Maura?"

“Mom, Ron...he just happened to be camping near to where we went swimming...” I just lied a little bit.

“Swimming?!” Caelyn’s eyes burned again. “You never said anything about swimming, and at this time of year? What were you thinking?”

“I guess you didn’t tell your mom where you were really going?” Ron raised an eyebrow at me disapprovingly.

My cheeks burned at that. I noticed Caelyn look at him with a little more softness afterward. Oh well, at least one of us would be off the hook.

“I didn’t,” I admitted. “But if I can get back to defending you...”

“Continue,” he said calmly.

“Don’t you think you should go put something else on, Maura?” Caelyn interrupted sharply. Her suggestion hinted at two things. One, she didn’t want me to continue standing here half-dressed in front of our male guest. Two, she was going to pump Ron for information in case I was holding out on her about anything else. I couldn’t really blame her; Caelyn wasn’t used to having me lie to her about anything. I didn’t think it was a good time to tell her I’d merely started acting like any other normal teenager.

“Yes,” I sighed and trudged up the stairs to my room. I could hear her start before I’d even cleared the last step.

“Ron, just where were all of you tonight?”

I hoped she'd at least let him explain that he wasn't part of that horrible group who'd devastated me earlier. I was trying not to think about what they'd done, but the horror kept invading my consciousness, making me feel nauseous every time the remembrance overtook my thoughts. I'd always known I was different, but I'd never imagined that difference could make me so hated. I wiped fresh tears away as I entered the safe haven of my room.

I dug out my favorite fuzzy pajamas, not caring if Ron had to see them. My gaze fell with longing onto my PlayStation, and I couldn't wait to escape into some *Final Fantasy VIII*. But...I doubted I would get much of a reprieve from the lecture my mother was sure to deliver that night, and I wanted to take a shower. Finally get warm all the way through to my bones...and wash away the blood—thank god Caelyn hadn't noticed—that was grossly matted into my hair. I kept catching its metallic scent, and for some reason, the smell was really bothering me and kept capturing my attention like a mosquito buzzing at my ear. At least I'd managed to hide the gash up next to my temple with my hair. The water was really going to make the cut sting...

"Mom! I'm going to take a shower, okay?" I yelled down.

"You'd better hurry, because we still need to discuss a few things, Maura!" She still sounded angry, so Ron must not have gotten to the part

about my absolute humiliation. I wondered if she would grant me a small bit of absolution for suffering through that.

The water was delicious. So warm and a momentary escape from my mother's wrath. As the stream poured over my face, a rivulet ran into my mouth, tasting *delicious*. I must have been dehydrated, because I suddenly felt thirsty. Cupping my hands together, I caught the stream running over my face and drank deeply. The liquid just tasted so *good*. There was something about the flavor I couldn't quite place, like honey; copper-colored honey was the image my mind threw at me... I opened my eyes then, only to find my hands full of bloody water.

Of course! The stream from the shower was pouring over my wound, mixing with the blood caked there. To know I'd been enjoying the taste of my own blood made my stomach roll in protest. I barely managed to escape the shower and kneel in front of the toilet before I was sick. Maybe I'd done more damage to my head than I'd realized...

I went back downstairs once I was warmed and pajama-clad, tentatively taking the stairs extra slow so I could hear any bits of conversation taking place. The house was much quieter than I would have expected.

"I...still can't believe anyone would..." I heard Caelyn's voice catch with a sob. She was crying? I hesitated then, one sleep-sock clad foot

hanging in midair above the next stair.

“I know.” Ron’s voice had that same edge it’d held when I’d first awoken in his arms a couple of hours ago.

My foot came down, though I hadn’t known I was taking the next step. The stair creaked, and then the house became, abruptly, silent.

“Maura?” they both called at once.

“Who else?” I joked, but no one laughed. I tip-toed the rest of the way down the stairs, making my presence as unobtrusive as possible. I peeked cautiously around the corner to find Ron and Caelyn sitting on the couch. There was a cup on the coffee table in front of him. Shane presently sat in the easy chair off to the side, holding his own cup up and drinking from it. So, both of them were in the house...and Caelyn had made them some sort of hot, comforting beverage. I took both developments to be signs things were at least a little better.

Ron caught sight of me and smiled warmly. That definitely made *me* feel better. Until Shane’s eyes looked up, met mine and then took me in from top to bottom.

He roared with laughter. “All you need to go with those, Maura, is a big fuzzy teddy bear.”

My mouth fell open in shock, and I was suddenly self-conscious of the bunny appliqué on the front of the blue pajama top...and the same pattern covering the matching bottoms. Stupid...but I’d never really

thought of them as childish—until that moment. It wasn't like I'd had much of a choice anyway; nearly all my sleepwear had some sort of animal, star or heart-shaped pattern. I'd have to ask Caelyn to let me buy my own nightclothes from then on...well, when she was on affable speaking terms with me again.

Ron defended my honor by hurling one of the throw pillows at Shane, as soon as Caelyn got up to go into the kitchen.

"Hey!" Shane complained as it smacked into the side of his head.

"You had it coming," I said softly as I entered the room. It was dangerous to be enjoying myself too much at that point. I opted for sticking my tongue out at him, rather than running the risk of speaking anything further.

I sat down lightly beside Ron, my head brimming over with a hundred questions. I just looked up into his mocha eyes instead of speaking any of them. When Caelyn came back, I jumped lightly and moved a few inches away from him. I could tell she didn't like my reaction. But she composed herself quickly, though her eyes were red around the edges, and I knew for certain she had been crying. To my surprise, she set a cup in front of me too. Hot chocolate. With marshmallows even. Ron must have worked some kind of miracle.

I looked up at her questioningly.

“I found out what happened.” Her voice started to tremble, and I saw the tears well up in her eyes. Caelyn seemed to be taking the turn of events even harder than I was. She struggled to compose herself again. “But that still doesn’t let you off the hook completely.”

I’d been afraid of that, but punishing me was only fair. I’d been, atrociously, not myself lately. Lying, cutting class, going places I knew my mother wouldn’t approve of. I hung my head. “Yeah, I didn’t expect it to.”

I caught Ron glancing at me on my right. He looked surprised, like he’d expected me to put up more of a fight.

“Well, I hate to do this, but you’re grounded until the move.”

Ron looked a little more then like someone had punched him in the stomach. Had he been planning things to do with *me*? I still couldn’t believe the attention he’d paid me thus far. He was too beautiful to be with me. And didn’t he have a someone to give a certain expensive birthday present to? His eyes reflected my own face back to me. I saw that I looked disappointed. I wasn’t the only one.

Caelyn cleared her throat loudly. She might be Ron’s biggest fan after finding out he’d saved me, but that still wouldn’t be enough for her to approve of my having a relationship at my age. Much less, falling head over heels, only to leave him behind and make myself miserable for months...and probably calling up unpleasant memories of loss for her too.

“Maybe it’s about time you got to bed, Maura? I’d say you’ve had a pretty full day.” I knew then, that for the moment, Mom wasn’t going to say anything about what had happened earlier.

“Sure.” I wasn’t going to push my luck. Well...not too much. “Can I say goodbye to them?”

She looked at me questioningly but answered, “Sure, go ahead.”

“Mom...alone?” When she looked irritated, I added, “Please, just for a minute?” I leaned closer to her. “I really need to thank him for...what he did.”

She didn’t look happy but left us to go back into the kitchen. The three of us rose and walked to the door.

I turned to Shane first. “Thanks, Shane. It was really great of you to interrupt your camping trip and drive me home like that. Thank you so much.” My face was already burning, because I knew what I’d have to say next.

“Hey, it’s no big deal.” Shane grinned his irresistible grin. “Besides, it was worth the detour to see your bunny jammies!” He laughed loudly as he walked out the door. “See ya in the car, Ron.”

“Geez...that guy...” Ron shook his head.

“Shane’s great. Ya gotta love him,” I said, stalling. My eyes focused on the blue stripes in my fuzzy socks. “Ron...”

“Don’t worry about it. You don’t have to say anything.” That made me look up to face him. His smile was soft and full of warmth.

“Yes, I do!” I protested vehemently. “If it weren’t for you...” I thought about that for a minute. “I would have drowned.”

Even though I’d known the words to be true, I felt strange to speak such dark truth out loud. The sound of my own words made me go icy inside and out all over again.

He looked angry again for a minute but fought to control his expression, make his eyes and mouth soft again. “I couldn’t stand it if anything had happened to you, Maura. And I wasn’t spying on you; I swear! It’s just...when you told me you were going swimming with those sharks, I got this really bad feeling. I couldn’t shake it, you know? I felt like I really needed to be there to look out for you, to protect you.”

“Really? You wanted to protect me?”

“Of course, Maura, you don’t know...” He broke off there, and I could tell he changed what he was originally going to say. “You don’t know how glad I am that you’re okay.”

“Only because of you.” I timidly put my hand on his arm and leaned in to kiss his cheek. I pulled back then and, more boldly, looked into his eyes. “Thank you so much.” My voice was heavy with emotion. I knew I truly owed the boy my life.

“You’re very welcome.” His eyes held mine for a minute, making me feel like he could somehow see inside of me. Like he knew me in a way I didn’t even know existed yet.

Caelyn came back into the room then, breaking the way I was memorizing the exact hue of his irises.

“I want to thank you again too.” She shocked me by coming right over to him and, without any warning, hugging him tightly. It was Ron’s turn to blush then. He always seemed so in control; his embarrassment almost made me giggle...if there hadn’t been big tears glistening in Caelyn’s eyes. She was really taking my classmate’s cruel prank so hard. I hated to see her even more upset than she usually was and felt a cold shock of remorse for lying to her and going to do something I knew was stupid with people who I’d known deep down didn’t really like me.

I wrapped my hands around her wrist. “I’m sorry I scared you, Mom. I really am.” My voice wouldn’t rise above a whisper.

She reached around me to pull me into her side. “I’m just glad you’re okay, Maura.” She wiped at her eyes with the back of her free hand and turned back to Ron again. “I hope we see you around here again before we go.”

That took me by surprise. I couldn’t imagine Caelyn wanted me to grow any closer to any boy, whether he’d saved my life or not. She must

have felt completely indebted to the suddenly-shy hero standing before us.

“I’d like that a lot,” he admitted. “Bye, Maura. I guess I’ll see you Monday.”

I noticed Caelyn stiffen when he spoke, but I ignored her reaction for the moment. “Okay, see you then. Have fun camping. Thank you again!!”

As soon as my mother closed the front door, she said to me, “You can’t actually be thinking about going back to school on Monday? I don’t want you anywhere near those monsters!”

“Mom...I *have* to go back to school. I have to finish my junior year, and it’s only a few weeks until finals!”

“But how can you stand to see them again? I don’t know if I like you being anywhere near any of them, even if it is at school. What if they try to do something else to you...”

“Mom, I don’t want them to think they can just scare me off and besides...” I didn’t know how I was so certain of the feeling already, but I stated with complete confidence, “I have Ron to protect me. He wouldn’t let them do anything to hurt me again.”

Caelyn looked as surprised to hear the words come from my mouth as I felt to utter them.

6. Noncompliance

The next day was Sunday, so I had *all day long* to be lectured by Caelyn.

When I padded down the stairs, as late in the morning as I dared, I stopped halfway down. I could hear her on the phone.

“Well, you’ll be lucky if I don’t press charges! Your daughter almost killed mine!!” I’d never heard her voice so full of malevolence. I could only surmise it must’ve been Katie Parker’s mother at the other end of the conversation.

Mom seemed to be listening then, only answering with a clipped “Mmm-hmm,” now and then. She finished with a “You can bet we will be!” before she slammed the phone so hard against something I heard a sharp crack. Surely that hadn’t been her beloved cell.

I waited a full minute before continuing my way down to the living room. When I hit the creaky stair, she asked, “Maura, is that you finally?”

I hadn’t slept in. In fact, I’d slept very little the night before. The only thing that had gotten me through the sleepless hours was remembering all the parts that happened after I’d woken up in *his* arms—that and playing *Final Fantasy* for nearly the last seven hours.

I answered her by walking into the kitchen. “Morning,” I said meekly.

“You’d better get dressed,” she instructed, examining my still-pajama-clad body. “We’re going to have company.”

“Huh?” I started to have the first twinges of dread creep into my stomach. I prayed our visitor would have nothing to do with the phone conversation she’d just had.

She grimaced. “Katie is coming over to apologize.” She muttered something else under her breath, but I was too shell-shocked to pay attention after that first part.

“No...way...Mom! I’m not ready to see her...to see any of them! I don’t want to...”

She was furiously banging around the kitchen then; a skillet was slammed down onto the eye of the stove. Caelyn was making breakfast? I’d figured my lie would’ve earned me permanent household-chore duty... even if I already did most of them anyway. My wonder was cut short, though, when she turned back to me, furious.

“Maura, that is the least that girl can do. Let her lose some of that pride by being forced to apologize...to start. She ought to be groveling at your feet, praying I don’t have her hauled off on attempted murder charges!” Caelyn’s eyes flashed in a dangerous way.

I knew I wouldn’t dissuade her, but I had to add, “You know she won’t mean it.”

“We’ll see about that. Now, please, go get dressed. I want you to have time to eat before that little...before they show up.”

As I was turning to go up the stairs, knowing full well Caelyn was waaaaay too angry to argue with, I saw her haul eggs and a sirloin out of the fridge. Hmm, if delicious food became part of being punished, I’d have to misbehave more often.

As amazing as the breakfast tasted, that was just how uncomfortable the “apology,” if you could call it that, went. Just being in front of Katie brought the whole night back, but for Caelyn’s sake I focused my eyes on one of the knickknacks in the living room and pretended the horrible girl wasn’t in my house. It was all I could do not to bolt and race up the stairs to the sanctuary of my room, but I knew down deep that my behaving like a coward would only become another victory for the nasty cheerleader and her friends.

Katie’s mother was an older, more stern....and wrinkled....version of Katie. Well, Katie with a tightly-wound blonde knot on the back of her head, instead of the perky ponytail. The leathery texture of her skin screamed she’d seen the inside of a tanning bed a few too many times and made me feel suddenly lucky I had such a strong aversion to UVs. Katie’s own tanned skin said she was perfectly happy to follow in her mother’s damaging footsteps, even with such a useful peek at the future consequences. I could tell the woman didn’t have an ounce of remorse

over what her demon spawn had done to me. I knew she was only here out of fear inspired by Caelyn's threat to press charges.

When they left, I was released from the greatest tension I'd ever felt in my life, heading up to my room to cry out the memories Katie's face had brought back, out of sight of my well-intending mother. And the fact that Katie's face had been beet red, that her voice had caught and faltered numerous times...well, that hadn't helped me feel one tiny bit better.

As hard as it would be to believe, I still wished for Monday to come. Katie and her clan would be lost among the sea of almost eight-hundred other faces. I knew I could ignore them easily amid teachers and lessons to concentrate on. And *he* would be there. Sunday seemed very long and uninteresting without Ron around. I wondered how he could so quickly have made such an important place for himself within my inexperienced heart. Caelyn watched my restless cleaning and later, during TV time, clock watching with suspicion in her eyes. I tried to be as casual as possible, but I felt like my eyes were bugging out of my head with anticipation.

Finally, it was time to shut them and leave the world of the wakeful for a few numb, unknowing hours. Somehow, after the morning rush to get ready, I ended up at school. Caelyn must have really put a scare into Katie. Neither she nor Wendy showed up for school. Trent kept a careful

distance, literally turning and walking in the opposite direction when he saw me. All in all, not a bad day...especially the part where I ended up standing before *him* after the mandatory part of the day was over.

I was still at a loss as to how I should thank Ron for saving me the other night. I looked up at him with what I knew must be a dumbfounded expression. “D-do you want to come over?” As soon as the words were out of my mouth, I knew I’d made a mistake. If Caelyn came home and found us there alone together, she’d have kittens all over the carpet. At the same time, it was just too cruel to be grounded and lose any possible time I had left to be with him—sure, why not set myself up for unavoidable heartbreak? Stupid, stupid, stupid...

He beamed a soft, honest smile. “Sure!”

I gulped. What had I done?

We walked out toward the parking lot. Was he going to ride the bus with me? No, he kept walking past the line of them parked in front of the school. He must’ve driven to school every day. I felt so childish, even though I rationalized he was almost two years older than me, and it was only normal for him to be a step ahead of me in that respect.

He smiled that gentle smile of his over his shoulder and reached back to grab my hand. I felt my face flush. Oh god, a boy liked *me*. The fact was still so hard to comprehend. My heart was beating so fast my chest hurt. Even with my body assaulting me—and just because he held my

hand—I was still nursing that worry in a corner of my mind. The nagging thought his trip to the jewelry store had given birth to. Was he betraying someone else when he was with me? Or was my overactive imagination running away with itself and reading more into his intentions toward me than what was really there? I didn't have anything to compare those feelings to, so I wasn't quite sure if he liked me like I thought he liked me.

I tried to stop the incoherent tumble of thoughts through my head as he, once again, opened my door for me. I paused a minute to look at him. His eyes were full of light, a sparkling darkness I felt like I could fall into. The way he returned my gaze was so intense. I couldn't help it when the thought he might have someone else he looked at in the same way crept to the front of my mind.

"I don't," he seemed to suddenly whisper to me, though his lips barely moved.

I broke the gaze, then, blinking rapidly. "Did you just say something?"

He looked a little dazed himself. "I-I don't think I did..."

I got into the car quickly. My weirdness had scared off enough people. I didn't want him to become yet another one of my lost causes.

I flipped my hair around and bent my head slightly forward so that my face was hidden as he eased into the car. My cheeks burned as I wondered what he thought about what had just passed between us.

As usual—it seemed to be a talent of his—Ron had me feeling at ease very quickly. He started the engine and then reached down to dig through his CDs as if nothing out of the ordinary had happened at all. Maybe I was making too much of the whole thing...

But it really did seem like I'd just pulled an answer out of him and to an unspoken question, no less. And he didn't even realize he'd answered that question afterward.

The stress of moving had to be getting to me. I hadn't been sleeping more than four or five hours each night after Caelyn had told me about the move. After the awfulness at the bridge, that amount had dwindled to even less. I'd spent most of the previous night wandering around fighting monsters in *Final Fantasy VIII* or Googling poetic phrases, trying to find interesting music to download. Yeah, that was it. I just needed to rejuvenate my weary brain cells with a good night's sleep.

I smiled as I settled on that line of reasoning and thought I caught Ron's posture relax out of the corner of my eye. Was he that attuned to my feelings? For someone who had only caught notice of me a little more than a week ago, that seemed unrealistic.

Okay, that's it! You are going to bed early tonight, I promised myself.

"I love this game!" He reached down to pick up the jewel case. A ripple of pleasure traveled through me at finding he liked something I did.

“Is it in your PlayStation?”

“It sure is!”...then my momentary glee faded.

He bent to turn on the TV and game system.

“Do you want to see my game collection?” I asked, desperate to drag him away from the screen. I paused, half in horror, half in fascination, as the opening movie scene played. Wincing as Squall's blood was drawn, feeling a rush at the sight of Rinoa's angel wings. When the segment ended, and the game started, though, I tried to distract him again.

“Come look at this!” I commanded in a panic-laced voice.

He turned to look at me and narrowed his eyes. My eyes drifted back toward the graphics...then back to his face. He didn't miss that. He grinned slightly and started to move the character around with the controller.

“We can do something else,” I almost shrieked.

“Nah, I think I want to play this for a bit.” Dammit.

Then Rinoa spoke to Squall...only I'd gone back and started my game over, entering names of my own choosing for the main characters...so that she then spoke to 'Ron.' Of course, when video-game Ron spoke back, his words were directed to Maura, not Rinoa.

My face grew so hot; I knew my cheeks had to be glowing like a branding iron just taken from the fire. He turned, looked me over, and fought fervently to hold back laughter.

“So, you’re naming your video game characters after us?” His face broke into a huge smile. “Nice,” he purred the word in a deeper-than-usual voice that made my heart skip a beat.

He kept up the pretense of playing a few minutes more, but I could tell he was preoccupied with something else. He put the controller on the edge of my moon-and-star patterned comforter and walked over to me. The thought that I was alone...in my bedroom...with a boy who made my heart sprint in a way that felt unnatural, made me feel a bit overwhelmed. What would he expect we would be doing while my mother was still at work?

“Weren’t you going to show me the rest of your games?” He just had a way of settling things, making them comfortable, almost like he knew my worries—offering the perfect solution to push them aside.

“Sure.” I was so awestruck by him that I didn’t move, even though my games were on a rack across the room.

He put his palm up to my cheek. I felt the skin grow hot, but not because of the temperature of his skin. My lips popped apart to allow for the increase in my breathing. That seemed to make him uncomfortable. He tore his eyes away from mine and looked around my room. I thought he must be looking for the games I’d failed to show him, but his gaze lingered on my computer. I was painfully aware of the *Fate Stay Night* screensaver floating across the monitor.

“Ah, an anime fan too, huh?” Another thing in common? That was just too much to hope for.

“Y-yes.” I supposed it was also too much to hope for to sound anything near intelligent in his presence.

“I like that one too. Really a surprise about who Saber turns out to be, isn’t it?”

Okay, I *had* to be dreaming. I reached down to pinch the side of my leg. His eyes caught the movement, and he laughed when he saw what I did. Then, his expression twisted into something I couldn’t quite translate, passing over his handsome face so quickly. He sauntered easily over to my computer.

“You have any songs on here?” he asked. His love for music was hard to miss.

“You’re going to laugh at what a silly question that is,” I told him. I joined him at my little pine computer desk and rolled the mouse around until I had the My Documents folder open. I let the cursor hover on the My Music folder until the little information box popped up.

“Wow...forty-three gigs...impressive,” he admitted. He laid his hand over mine and took control of the mouse. He clicked down with my finger to open the folder, and together we scrolled through the choices. He created a small playlist in the media player and then walked over to the rack of games and DVD’s standing against the far wall. My hand was

shaking, I noticed, when I'd removed my fingers from the stability of the mouse.

I didn't know what to say to him next, but my mind was formulating phrases like, "Have you ever thought about moving to Vancouver?"

He was definitely becoming more ingrained in me. I thought of him so often. When I went to sleep at night, he wove his presence into my dreams. Even when I had nightmares about what had happened on Saturday, he always made an appearance at the end to save me, just as he had in real life. He was on my mind when I awoke, wishing he was lying beside me...but only so I could have the depths within his eyes be the first thing I became aware of. At times, over the last forty-eight hours, I'd resolved to be stronger, knowing our separation was inevitable, but that resolve never seemed to stick with me for very long. I guessed I was doomed to know a touch of Caelyn's suffering, despite the fact that I'd decided a long time ago to never let that kind of thing happen to me.

He broke through my silent, meandering thoughts. "You have some real classics here," he noted. My choices seemed to please him. He was holding my copy of *Lunar: Silver Star Story*. He knew of that game?

"Have you ever played it?" I asked, disbelieving.

"Oh yeah." He spoke as if there could be no way he hadn't. "This is one of the best games ever."

"It's my second favorite," I said.

“Oh...then I guess your first is?” He inclined his head toward my PlayStation.

I blushed again and nodded. I still couldn't believe how boneheaded I'd been to forget about renaming my characters like that...and actually allowing him to get anywhere near the controller.

He did grin again, at my embarrassment I surmised, but he switched gears and asked, “What do you think about *VII*?”

“Oh! I love Sephiroth!”

“You like the bad guy?” His eyebrows shot up in surprise.

“There's just something...sad about him...and his hair is really cool,” I added sheepishly.

“So, you like guys with long hair, huh?” He'd put the game back on the shelf and was walking back toward me. I couldn't hear the song playing on the computer speakers anymore. There was an electric kind of buzzing inside my head.

“Mm-hmm,” was all I managed.

He kept walking until he stood right in front of me. “Do you like me?”

He was very direct, but the manner suited him. I still gulped. “Of course.” I'd gone and done it. What good could come out of such a proclamation?

He moved on, almost like I hadn't said anything. He didn't visibly react in any way to my confession. “How strict do you think your mother is

going to be with this grounding thing?”

“Very,” I admitted. In the moment that knowledge bothered me...a lot.

The corners of his smile turned down. He took my hand into one of his and my heart sped. “That’s too bad; I was going to ask you to prom.”

Ugh. Being around all those phonies at school, clad in a ridiculously overdone dress. Any kind of formal dance definitely wasn’t my idea of a good time.

“I really didn’t want to go anyway.” I could see him search my face to determine whether that was the truth, or if I was just trying to let him down easy.

I continued quickly, so he wouldn’t get the wrong idea. “Besides, that is a nighttime activity. If we want to...get around Mom’s restrictions, we’ll have to find things to do while she’s at work.”

“So, you want to cut more classes?” He grinned at me. Relief had flooded his features when I’d mentioned that I wanted to do other things—besides prom—with him.

Hmmm, I’d actually been thinking of making the most of the three hours we’d have after school...but as long as I was in trouble anyway... “Sure.” I grinned back conspiratorially.

“What should we do first?” he asked eagerly.

“Well...I have to get started on dinner. Now is definitely not the time to make her suspicious at all.”

He pulled at me then, towing me toward the kitchen. “Great! I’ll help.”

7. Roller Coasters and Haunted Mansions

The next morning, Caelyn was out the door before me—as usual—but on that day her punctuality was an especially good thing. I actually peeked out the window to make sure she drove away. Sneaking around was really making me paranoid. But that day was the first time I'd ever cut an entire day of school before. I'd hardly ever missed a day during the entire three years I'd been attending high school. I didn't doubt that my forged excuse would escape any scrutiny by the school secretary.

At present, I considered a more important worry. What to wear? I was determined that Ron wouldn't see any more of my childish-patterned pajamas. Funny how I'd never seen them in that light until that night...

I threw open the doors to my little closet and combed through the shirt options. Jeans would be a necessity for an amusement park, but since dresses made up the larger part of my wardrobe, my choices for what went over them was a bit limited. I thought of raiding Caelyn's closet for a moment but came across my favorite shirt just in time—a long-sleeved light sweater. The sleeves and top half were smooth, but below the empire waist, accented by a black ribbon that tied around the back, the sweater had a slightly raised texture like a basket-weave. The garment was an unusual cherry-red color with three golden, star-shaped buttons

in a line at the topmost part of the shirt. There was an almost medieval look to the top that I loved.

I threw on a pair of black jeans—to accentuate the ribbon in the middle—socks and my sneakers and ran to the bathroom to put my face and hair in order. My lashes received a light coating of mascara to make my eyes pop just a bit, and I added a bit of cherry-colored lip gloss to my heart-shaped mouth to match the sweater. I was just finishing a light coating of hairspray to tame my oddly-thickening curls into place when the doorbell rang. I squealed softly in anticipation, surprising myself, and ran downstairs, pausing a moment to make it seem as though I was opening the door calmly.

He probably didn't miss my sharp intake of breath, though, as I took in his image, my eyes widening. The sun was behind his head, a halo of light. That placed his face in shadow; his eyes appeared darker, more mysterious. They sparkled as if he was just as excited about our outing as I felt.

"Hi," I finally managed in a breathy voice.

"Hi!" The boisterous tone didn't come from my brown-eyed angel. I finally noticed that Shane stood off to his right, something I'd been completely unaware of until he'd spoken.

"Shane?"

"The one and only! Surprise!"

I was surprised. And a bit disappointed. Maybe Ron had brought his friend along because he didn't want to be alone with me...or give me the wrong idea.

Though I tried to hide my displeasure, the distress must have broken through in some part of my expression.

"Is it a problem if I come along?" Shane asked, suddenly less enthusiastic.

"Well...it's not only him," Ron admitted, looking a bit guilty then. "He brought Merina along too."

Oh! A double date. That was much better than just Shane coming alone. Ron and I were a couple again instead of a part of an unbalanced threesome. Not that I would have really minded. Shane was too much fun to be around. I'd really only been worried about the fact that Ron might not have wanted me to think of the day as a date...which I realized I'd already been doing.

"Of course not, Shane." I perked right up, smiling at both of them. "The day wouldn't be the same without you!"

He grinned back at me, his eyes alight, but Ron still looked a bit troubled. I couldn't explain my former reluctance without revealing just how terrified I was of him rejecting me. I'd dealt with ridicule and avoidance for so long that I came to expect such treatment as an unavoidable eventuality.

But would he think I was being a snob to his friend? “I was just afraid you’d sit with Ron on the big coasters and leave me to be terrified all alone,” I added, hopeful it would be explanation enough. Realization dawned in Ron’s eyes then, filling me with a strange happiness to know he understood me so easily.

“Don’t worry, I’ll make sure we get plenty of alone time,” he promised, making my heart race at the implications. He captured one of my hands; his own feeling almost too warm around my own.

“Wow! Maura, your skin is like ice today!” I tried to reclaim my hand then, but he refused to let me go. “It’s okay.” He picked up the other one. “It feels good. It’s already getting hot this morning.”

His words reminded me of what would happen if I stood out in the sun too much. I glanced up at the sky, hoping for even a trace of cloud, but my gaze came up empty. The sky was nothing but blue and yellow. Nothing to hide the glare floated there at all. I hadn’t thought about such a possible complication until that moment.

That time, I kept the worry to myself, burying my misgivings beneath a smile borne of looking at the softness emanating from Ron’s stare. Somehow, I would avoid getting sick. I couldn’t let any of them find out about that facet of my weirdness.

As I ran to get my tiny black purse—at the park, lighter would definitely be better—I thought of all the shady places that existed at Kennywood.

I'd been there nearly every summer of my existence, and Caelyn was a master at keeping me out of the sun.

As we walked to his car, he noted, "I love that sweater on you, but don't you think it's a tad too warm outside for it?"

I was used to covering up. "Oh, it's thin, really. And I'll just make sure to keep out of the sun." Perfect.

Merina was a quiet girl. Her heart-shaped, pixyish face was pale and framed by shoulder-length, straight black-brown hair. Her eyes were a peculiar shade of hazel-green of an impenetrable depth. They were wide and round, giving her the appearance of exaggerated innocence. I noticed in the rear view mirror that they flicked often to the boy in the backseat beside her. She was obviously enamored with Shane completely.

Her shyness had him teasing and joking the whole ride to the park, trying to draw her out of her shell. Clearly, he liked her very much too.

Ron and Shane bought the tickets, so strongly opposed to either me or Merina paying that they wouldn't even let us accompany them to the ticket booths—like they thought we might try something sneaky.

Once inside, Ron and I asked at the same time, "So, what do you guys wanna do first?" We looked at each other and grinned.

“Two words... Roller. Coaster,” Shane replied, his eyes shining in anticipation.

I was hoping he would say that. “Which one?” I asked.

“Well...that depends...wooden or steel? Indoor or outdoor? Single coaster or racing coasters?”

“Too many choices,” Ron shot back at him. “Let’s just ride the one we come to first.”

Shane shrugged. “Works for me.” He took off at an animated pace, dragging Merina behind. He started to sing “*Roller coaster...of love...roller coaster...*” He swung her hand in rhythm to the Red Hot Chili Pepper’s words.

I laughed as we started after them, Ron taking my hand as well.

I noticed that Shane took a route around the park which would lead us to the Phantom’s Revenge coaster first. Oh well, we might as well start big. The huge looping coaster’s second hill dropped more than 200 feet, the coaster reaching a speed of 85 mph. That first drop always made me feel like my stomach had leapt into my throat...but I loved every minute. I just hoped we wouldn’t have to stand out in the sun too long while waiting in line.

Luck was not with me in that regard. The line was long, and not very much of it was under cover. I nervously licked my lips as I looked at the snaking rows of people waiting to ride. Of course, Ron instantly picked up

on my trepidation. He seemed so 'aware' of me at times; I found his acuity mind-boggling.

"Everything okay?" He whispered the words, using the opportunity to brush his lips against my ear in a way I didn't believe to be accidental. Goosebumps scurried over me everywhere.

"Sure." My tone wasn't completely confident, and I could tell by his uneasy expression that he'd caught the sound in my voice.

At the moment, there was nothing I wanted more than to *not* get sick in front of my sweet, extremely-good-looking companion. We stood in the line for fifteen minutes, the sun relentlessly beating down on me. I was envious of all the people around me who looked like they were soaking the rays up, enjoying every fragment of light the massive star poured down upon us.

I was beginning to feel the first tinge of nausea. Slight, like being spun around too fast, but a definite warning of unpleasant things to come. I wrestled over which was worse, running off to stand under a nearby tree—but retaining the breakfast digesting in my stomach—or puking—quite possibly *on* Ron in the tightly packed line—and making a complete spectacle of myself. I chose the less embarrassing...but embarrassing, still, nonetheless...option and pulled my hand free of Ron's. Mine was still so chilly; his palm was left unsweaty, even in the summer-like heat.

"Maura?" he questioned.

“I think I’m going to go stand under that tree...if you don’t mind.” I could feel the heat creep into my cheeks. “The sun is just so strong today.”

“Are you okay? I knew you weren’t feeling good. Your skin is so cold; are you coming down with something? Do you want to go home?” His words were escaping in a worried rush.

“No, no!” I saw the panic in Shane’s eyes. “I just...don’t do well in the sun,” I admitted, dropping my head and the volume of my voice.

He seemed to catch on quickly to the humiliation I was feeling. He immediately let the subject drop. But he insisted on going with me, explaining to the people behind us in line that I didn’t feel well so that we could reclaim our place behind Shane and Merina once they reached the covered rows at the station. We moved over into the shade and down along the line of trees off to the side, as our friends moved along inside the metal dividers, advancing their progress at a turtle’s pace.

“Thank you,” I whispered to Ron, once we were out of the sun. I was overjoyed he hadn’t pressed the issue. The only questions he asked while we were waiting were of the safe variety. What was my favorite food, color, anime...those types of things. And of course, I had plenty of questions for him too. I’d never had time waiting for something wonderful go so fast...or become filled with so much fun.

“What’s your favorite color?” I asked.

“Green...I like trees. Hey, do you like hiking?”

“Sure,” I lied, then corrected. “Well, I’m sure I would like it if I went.” He laughed his easy laugh.

“I’ll have to take you before you go.” He looked away for a minute. I heard him take in a sharp breath, and then he turned back to me. “But let’s not talk about that anymore today.”

“Okay,” I agreed, feeling as melancholy as he looked.

“When’s your birthday?” I asked to distract him. I hated to see sadness in his face.

“September ninth. And let’s see; yours is June twenty-fourth?”

How did he know? All I could do was stare at him open-mouthed in shock.

“Hey! You two had better get over here!” Shane yelled to us.

Shane and his girl had reached the boarding station—which was gloriously covered. Quickly, we slipped back in line behind them, given that the others waiting in line around us were so forgiving. I was still pondering the mystery behind how he’d known my birthdate. We’d only been speaking to each other a few weeks, and I was sure I’d never revealed that bit of information to him.

“Are you ready for this?” Ron asked, excitement in his eyes. Then, he looked worried again. “Are you sure you’re up to it? You feeling okay?”

I rolled my eyes at him, trying to distract him from his worry. “Are you going to ask me that before we get on every ride today?”

“Just making sure.” He took my hand again. He must have thought I still felt cold, because he rubbed mine between both of his like he was trying to warm mine up. I smiled at his caring gesture. Just standing beside him made me feel warm.

Shane was fairly bouncing with excitement when we were next to be loaded into the coaster cars. I thought he was going to drag Merina off her feet before they crossed the short distance to their seats. Ron led me over, considerably more gently, holding my hand while I stepped down into the car. I felt the first twinges of nervous elation when our shoulder bars were clicked into place.

“You nervous at all?” I wondered if he had some uncanny ability to read my mind that he was keeping from me.

“Nope,” I lied. “You?”

“In a good way,” he responded, laughing a little. I decided right there his laugh was my favorite sound in the world. “But despite what you say, I think you are a little scared. So, I’ll just hold your hand for you.”

“You’re my white knight,” I responded, loving the way it felt when his fingers intertwined with mine.

It had been a couple of years since Caelyn had brought me, so the second drop—the big one—seemed to make my heart stop for a few

seconds. Ron and I were both laughing wildly as our coaster shot up from under the tracks of the wooden coaster beside it—a great effect. When we’d dropped down the biggest hill, the path under the other coaster gave the illusion, for a moment, that riders were doomed to crash into the interlacing wooden support struts.

“That was *GREAT*,” Shane exploded when we were climbing back onto the platform back at the station. Merina looked a little pale. Her legs shook once she was upright again. Shane snickered and hugged her close. Watching their easy intimacy made me hug Ron to me, almost unconsciously. I didn’t even realize I’d put my arm about his waist until I was squeezing him against my side. He beamed at me... Of course, I blushed in response.

We seemed to be getting closer, whether I wanted that to happen or not.

The rest of the day was just as much fun...mostly. I did end up getting sick somewhere between our ‘drive’ on the Turnpike and the walk through Noah’s Ark. At that point, I didn’t know if the culprit had been the rides or all the junk food we’d consumed. As much as I didn’t want to admit it, the culprit was probably the sun. Ron and I were munching on a funnel cake—after the cotton candy and gravy-covered fries we’d eaten earlier—sitting on a bench out in the open. I’d felt hot and queasy, but

had told myself the twinge was nothing and tried to ignore its assault, desperately wishing to be normal if only for one day. Once it was too late, I realized the mistake I'd made. I ran, humiliated, for the nearest bathroom.

When I'd finally emerged, even paler than usual and sweating, Ron was waiting worriedly right outside. "Are you okay?"

"I'll be fine," I promised.

"You really get sick when you're out in the sun?" He raised an eyebrow questioningly.

"Yeah, make me feel worse about it!" was what I felt like shouting at him but settled for just, "Yeah." I bit my tongue to keep from saying any more. I felt irrationally angry but fought to control my temper.

He took me into his arms in a rush, surprising me and melting away my irritation. "It's okay, Maura. It must be really hard to put up with that."

I'd been expecting him to treat me like the freak I knew I was or make fun of me, and *that* was his reaction? He was just too sweet...too understanding. And I was leaving him behind in less than a month.

"I think we should get you home," he said softly. He was running a hand over my back, comfortingly, atop of my hair.

I didn't want the day to be over. I wanted to have a fun day, like any other normal teenage girl. "No!" I blurted out, with more violence than I'd wished to leak into my voice. "I don't want to go yet." I knew how excited

Shane was, too, and would've really hated to ruin the day for him and Merina. Though she might actually thank me—he'd dragged her off to the Phantom's Revenge again.

Ron pulled back to look at me disapprovingly. But I was formulating a plan. "I know! I just need to get inside and cool down for a while. We can go on the haunted house ride, and then the Exterminator!" I didn't wait for an answer, boldly snatching up his hand to drag him toward my goal, robbing him of the opportunity to dissuade me from my brilliant plan.

"Maura...you want to go on more rides after being sick?"

I put my brightest smile in place before turning back to him. "You worry too much! I'm fine, feel much better now. I mean, what do you expect when you mix gravy and cotton candy?"

He really had no argument for that.

I added for good measure, "Come on! I'm so excited to try the new ride. I've never been on Ghostwood Estate before."

Shane must have caught up to us in time to hear where we were going. "Yeah, Bro, when the girls get scared, they can grab onto us for protection!" he boomed behind us.

Yes! I had an ally. Ron must've warmed to the picture his friend was formulating. "Hmmm, that is true." I didn't have to drag him after that.

The time inside the haunted house turned out to be just what I'd needed. The ride was cool and velvety-dark inside, and my stomach

settled almost immediately. Shane was bubbling over with excitement because the ride involved the use of ghost guns, the premise being that the spirit-filled mansion had grown overpopulated, needing the help of riders to help clear out some of its more troublesome inhabitants.

Shane morphed into Rambo mode, shooting every target in sight, causing spooks to pop out at us from the darkness, Merina squealing with fright every time.

I jumped a little, now and then, but it took a lot more to frighten me than such typical, tame measures. Katie Parker was much more macabre than any of the ghouls on the ride.

“Aren’t you scared?” Ron asked at my ear, trying to be heard over Shane’s enthusiastic battle cries. He sounded a little disappointed.

A grisly-looking skeleton erupted from one of the walls. I feigned being frightened and smashed myself against Ron’s shoulder, burying my face in his shirt. I squealed loudly for effect...before grinning up at him a few moments later. “Is that better?”

Even in the gloom, I saw him roll his eyes, but he molded his arm into my side to crush me even closer to him. The cuddling throughout the remainder of the ride seriously interfered with his shooting ability, so it was no surprise Shane’s shooting score was almost double what Ron ended up with.

“Ha! I kicked your butt!” Shane danced around us elated, nearly shoving his condemning finger right into Ron’s face.

Ron shrugged slightly and hugged me against his side. “Eh... I’ll take the tradeoff.” Nothing could have wiped the dizzied smile from my face.

Ron made us ride again twice—Shane ecstatic, because he had the highest score every time except the last go around—determined to keep me out of the sun for as long as possible. We walked to The Exterminator next, Ron quietly smug after beating Shane by quite a large margin on our last ride. Shane made him swear to a rematch right after we disembarked, which meant Ron could keep me in the dark a little longer. Poor Merina.

But when I looked back at them, she wore a dreamy look on her face, and I realized she didn’t care at all what we were doing as long as Shane was with her.

Ron kept us to the shadows as much as he could as we made our way to the indoor coaster. The set-up was perfect; even the line formed indoors...where the air was deliciously air-conditioned. The waiting area was part of the ride’s effect, transforming the waiting area into part of the underground utility sewer where monstrous rats were rumored to lurk.

“You’re feeling better now.” It wasn’t really a question Ron spoke casually into my ear, escaping our companions’ notice.

“Oh, yeah. This is great. I’ve never had so much fun!” I allowed myself to hug him. Mine wasn’t such a forbidden move. He was already standing so close to me, and it wasn’t like there hadn’t been contact between us all day. It seemed like once you moved past that first touch, all the ones that followed occurred naturally. Especially with him. Ron seemed to draw me to him, pulling me, as if by some gravitational force. The more I was close to him, the more I touched him, the stronger the pull seemed to become. Moving or not, I was disappointed in myself to discover I was far past the point of being able to resist any longer.

But as I held him here, oblivious to Shane, Merina and all the strangers around us, there was that nagging question I needed to discover the answer to. I knew I couldn’t put the asking off any longer...if I wanted to retain my sanity.

We were almost the same height; he only had those three inches on me, so it wasn’t a stretch for me to turn my head to whisper into his ear, “Can I ask you something?”

“Of course.”

I took a deep breath and felt my heart rate increase. I shifted my feet, nervousness coursing through my body.

He inclined his head back to peer at me. “Is it that bad?”

Maybe... I flushed and tried again—unsuccessfully—to force the question from my mind into my mouth.

The warm smile again. “You can ask me *anything*, Maura.”

I took another deep breath and asked in a rush, “Is there anyone else that you’re, you know...like this with?”

He seemed confused by my question.

I knew I would have to make myself more clear. “Do you...” I gulped before continuing. “...have anyone else you like in the same way you like me?” I looked down after finishing, half horrified, half relieved to have finally spoken the words.

When he didn’t answer, I forced myself to look up at him again. He still seemed to be confused but appeared to be mulling something over in his head. I hoped I wouldn’t have to say anything further...because I didn’t think I’d be capable of speaking again, my throat was so tightly constricted by anxiety.

In a moment, I understood where his thoughts had been treading. “Did I do something to make you think that?” he asked, scrutinizing my eyes.

“No!” I answered, I knew, too quickly.

“Well, you might think I’m being silly,” he replied, his face very serious, “but I just have this feeling that you—and only you—could ever be the one for me.”

“Oh.” My chest was tight. The feeling was a convoluted mixture of pure joy and crippling despair. How could you remain someone’s one and only if you were thousands of miles away from them?

“That’s good,” I breathed a second later. But I could tell he saw the sadness in my expression, because his eyes mirrored their own back to me.

Luckily, at that moment, we came up to the cars, our turn to board. I turned away to wipe at the moisture in my eyes, not wanting to add to the gloomy emotion I’d seen reflected back in his stare.

That ride was not as calm as the haunted mansion’s had been. The coaster was of the wild mouse variety. Although there weren’t any huge hills ending in steep drops, the cars moved in a crazed, winding way with a lot of jerks and sudden turns, making Merina shriek in protest. I was still dwelling on the conversation Ron and I had just had, so I wasn’t properly enjoying the twists and turns of the ride. I glanced sideways to find him absorbed in thought as well. I nudged him in the ribs to lighten the mood, and he smiled, but his response seemed too automatic.

We rode the coaster twice more, and by the end of the third ride, we were both smiling and laughing again. The ride’s craziness of the coaster’s motion made maintaining a solemn attitude nearly impossible.

Afterward, of course, Ron dragged me back to Ghostwood Estate. By the time we’d ridden three more times—Shane becoming less enthusiastic with the shooting competition, given the growing monotony of the ride—I’d remained, mostly, indoors for almost two hours.

As we came off the last ride, I gave a big sigh of relief. Pittsburgh was ringed by the Appalachian Mountains, and the scant cloud cover that had begun to converge when we were coming back from the Exterminator currently formed a thick, dark mass covering the sky.

“Awww, man.” Shane scowled up at the sky. “Looks like it’s gonna rain.”

But I smiled. No more getting sick for me. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Ron studying me, a look on his face like he was trying to figure out a math problem. He touched his hand to the top of mine, not exactly taking it. I started to feel very uncomfortable under his scrutiny.

I looked at Shane. “Hey, if you want to take in the rest of the coasters, we’d better hurry.” I looked at Ron and faked nonchalance. “What time is it anyway?” I asked.

“Almost two.” He looked as surprised as I felt. Time really did fly when you were having fun.

“Ack! I’ll have to go in about an hour if I’m going to have dinner ready when Mom gets home!”

Ron bargained, “How about we make it two, and I’ll ‘come over’ with pizza.”

“But I’m grounded...or I’m supposed to be.”

“Well, I’m not taking you anywhere. And your mom can’t blame you if I just show up.” He looked very impressed with himself.

“Hmmm, that’s true.” I didn’t mull his plan over very long. “Okay, deal! Now, let’s go.” I slipped my hand around his and dragged him along to follow Shane, who was already several feet ahead of us.

First, we were lead to the Jack Rabbit, and then the Thunderbolt, both wooden coasters, both enormously fun. Next, we moved on to The Racer. I had no trouble standing in line-ups then and even chatted—nervously at first—with Merina. She was a sweet girl, very shy and practical. The way she spoke to me reminded me of the way I interacted with others, very tentative at first, gradually building confidence as the conversation progressed. I looked her over but could see nothing about her that would invite ridicule from others. I wondered why she was so timid. I knew my own reasons too well.

She and Shane were in the same geometry class, and she’d met him when he’d offered to tutor her after they’d gotten back their last test.

“I failed so badly!” She blushed when she admitted that and even more so when Shane teased her.

“It’s only because you had other things to concentrate on.” He indicated himself.

“Yeah, you’re ugly enough to distract anyone,” Ron remarked.

“Hey!” The pair moved away from me and Merina so they could grapple with each other as much as was possible in the cramped space allotted to us in line.

“Oh boy...” I sighed, grinning and rolling my eyes. Merina laughed, and I then had someone else to miss.

We ended up riding the racing coasters three times, as Ron was sufficiently humiliated by Shane’s bragging to call for a rematch, and the second ride had resulted in a tie. Our team came in first the third try, but when Shane started to demand another try, Merina was the one who came to my defense.

“Come on now, Shane, it’s time to go! You don’t want to get Maura in any trouble do you?”

He appraised me with narrowed eyes. “I have borne witness to your mother’s wrath and do not wish to call that down upon you...I guess.”

“Thank you,” I answered, laughing. Shane was just too funny. “I’m really sorry I have to be the one to make everyone leave early, though.”

Ron’s arm came around my shoulders. “I’m starting to get sick, myself. I’ve had enough of being tossed around for today.”

I smiled up at him but knew mine was no match for the warmth he held.

8. Pizza and a Movie...and a Little Bit of Blood

Ron dropped me off at the house with a promise to be back in an hour with the pizza. I flew through the rooms, picking up anything that had been left out of place. I barely remembered to change my sweater before hearing Caelyn pull into the driveway. She knew I was of the opinion the garment was too special to wear to school.

I ran into the kitchen to greet her, hoping my face wasn't too flushed from all my efforts. I'd changed into my least childishly-patterned pajamas, deciding it was too dangerous to act like I'd been to school when the risk of discovery was too high. Such casual attire would also make it seem like I wasn't expecting Ron to come over at all.

She entered bearing a bag of groceries cradled in one arm.

"Oh, Mom! I could've helped you with those." I ran to take the bag from her.

"It's okay, Maura. I guess you were sick today?" The school must have called her at work! Good thing I didn't try to act like I'd been there all day.

"Yeah, stomach flu. But I feel a lot better now."

She seemed to grow overly concerned when I said that. "Did you throw up?" She put the bag down on the counter, ignoring my attempts to relieve her of her burden, and put a hand to my forehead.

“Yes, Mom.” At least that part wasn’t complete untruth. “But I’m fine. I said I feel better. I even kept some food down.” I didn’t like the way she was overreacting. She seemed to be doing a lot of that lately.

“Your face is all red.” The back of her hand was pressed against a cheek.

“Mom...” I heard his car. Stupidly, I stiffened in response.

“Are you expecting someone?”

“No. You?” I asked innocently. She threw me an annoyed look and strolled over to the front door. I heard her gasp in surprise. To busy myself—and keep my hands from shaking—I started unpacking the groceries so I could put them away.

I stared at the pile of meat I’d been stacking on the counter. My mother had purchased ten double packs of New York strip steaks. Maybe she was planning a cookout before we moved next month? I stared down at the blood-red meat.

Like a distant echo, I could hear Caelyn greeting Ron at the door. I should’ve been anxious for her reaction to his uninvited presence, but for some weird reason, I couldn’t take my eyes off the raw meat. Almost like I was standing outside myself watching, I was disgusted to find I was licking my lips as I poked at the cool thickness with a finger to make blood seep out into the white Styrofoam tray.

Ridiculously, my mouth watered, and a fierce hunger pang gripped at my stomach, causing my abdomen to growl in protest. The voices in the living room were white noise, almost indiscernible. I slit the plastic open with the nail of my index finger. Holding the tray to my face, I inhaled, taking the raw, bloody scent into my head. I didn't consciously make the small sound of desire that slipped out.

When Ron and my mother came into the kitchen, I had one of the worst moments of my life.

I saw Ron's mouth drop open in shock as he observed the girl he had spent a mostly typical, pleasant day with at the amusement park greedily chomping into a raw hunk of beef. Caelyn, strangely, didn't look as surprised, but I could tell she didn't like what she'd found me doing. My conscious mind was suddenly back in control as my eyes widened at the looks on their faces. I froze, not knowing honestly what I was going to say or do next. The moment felt unsalvageable.

Caelyn moved first. She turned to Ron, effectively blocking his view of me by stepping in between us and taking the pizza out of his hands. She was probably as afraid as I was that he would drop the box onto the linoleum. I took full advantage of her strategic move and transported myself and the mangled piece of meat over to the sink. I dropped the steak there and turned on the water to wash my face and hands. Some instinct inside me forced me to lick the blood from my fingers before

thrusting them under the stream coming from the tap. Part of me noticed Caelyn catching sight of that from where she stood at the countertop as she placed the pizza box there. She didn't seem to be nearly as disgusted with me as I was myself.

I was incredulous at the part of me fighting against grabbing the steak up again and chewing at the rubbery meat until that delicious flavor was once again running over my tongue, flowing down my throat...

Caelyn cleared *her* throat and casually wiped at her chin. I realized the signal she was giving and splashed water over the lower half of my face. I grabbed a paper towel to dry myself, ghastly afraid of turning around to face Ron.

Caelyn seemed determined to bring about a return to normalcy.

"Maura." Her voice belied nothing unusual. She lifted a smaller package from the top of the pizza box. "Ron brought over a movie. Wasn't that nice of him?"

I looked at her; my eyes felt all buggy. I couldn't speak, so I nodded my head, feeling like the moment was playing out in slow motion, like the air around me had congealed into something viscous. The inside of my head was trying to preserve my sanity by offering up suggestions like, *Maybe he didn't notice the steak was raw.*

"Since your friend is here, don't you think you should go upstairs and comb your hair?" She'd moved closer to me and smoothed a comforting

hand over the back of my head. I nodded numbly again and walked very quickly to the stairs, not daring to meet his eyes when I walked past him.

I heard Caelyn say the word “anemic” before I slammed the bathroom door shut behind me.

It took me quite a little while to compose myself before I could even summon the will to climb to my feet. As soon as I was safely hidden in the bathroom, I’d slid to the floor and curled up tightly, hugging my knees. Absolute horror overtook me.

Why? Why had I just done that?! The scariest part was that I’d known he was in my house, but I still couldn’t help myself from gnawing at the bloody steak. And why did I even feel a compulsion to put something so gross in my mouth—only the raw meat hadn’t been gross. It was *good*. Really good. My mouth watered as I remembered the taste, even as I sat on the cold floor, castigating myself for what had just happened.

I wanted to cry but was too mortified to form any tears. What could possible fix could there be for what I’d done?

A soft knock sounded at the door.

“I’ll be down later, Mom.” My voice trembled.

“Can I come in?” It was *him*. I didn’t say anything. “Please, Maura? Please?”

I still couldn’t say anything.

The door eased open. My eyes grew large, afraid of what his expression might say to me.

He was smiling...a real smile, like I hadn't just consumed raw meat and licked blood off my hands, right before his eyes, in my kitchen. My expression must have been something to behold, because he rushed over to me and knelt on the floor beside me.

"Are you okay?" When I wouldn't meet his gaze, he lifted my chin with his hand. "Speak, please? Say something...anything."

How could he treat me in such a way, as if nothing weird to the extreme had just happened? Maybe there was far more wrong with me than my mother was willing to admit. I could feel my eyes getting glassy, but I couldn't even blink.

"Come on." He shifted around to kneel in front of me and clasped both my hands so he could pull me to my feet. "Your pizza is going to get cold." Avoidance. I liked that tactic.

"Okay." He heaved a sigh that I hoped was relief when I spoke.

More avoidance. "I like those pajamas, way cuter than the rabbit ones." Those were pink with multicolored hearts all over the top and bottoms. I was suddenly self-conscious that he might have thought I was trying to say something with the pattern I'd chosen...but remembered half a second later that I had way more to be worried about than my choice of wardrobe for the evening.

I let him lead me, one arm curled around my waist and the other extended to grasp my hand in his, as I stumbled along, blindly, beside him. I wondered how he could stand to touch me after witnessing my repulsive behavior.

He leaned in to whisper, before we started down the stairs, "Oh, and by the way, your mom told me about your 'stomach flu' this morning. Nice cover." I looked at him, and he winked at me. I was stunned he could be so casual.

Maybe I'd come home and fallen asleep after the park. Maybe I was having a nightmare, and the whole catastrophic night had never happened. That must be the case. No one could possibly be so calm after... I cringed at the memory.

"It's okay," he whispered. We were taking the stairs, one at a time, then. Was he serious? How could anything ever be okay again?

Caelyn was kneeling in front of the DVD player, putting in a disc. "Hey, Maura, I brought you a plate." I could see avoidance had become the agenda for the evening. That suited me just fine.

I gave the tactic a shot. "Um, what movie did you bring?" I was surprised by the smoothness of my voice.

"Serendipity. Seen it?"

"Nope."

“I knew it would be something you like. It’s very cute.” He made sure Caelyn was busy with the player and touched the tip of my nose. “Just like you,” he soundlessly mouthed the words.

I smiled, but the expression felt weak. I was busy trying to push the bad memory away every time the humiliation tried to intrude on me.

“What’s this one about?” I managed to ask.

“Destiny.”

I didn’t miss the sour look Caelyn shot him when he said that.

Quickly, I pulled him over to the couch, hoping to avoid anything that might serve as a reminder of the earlier events that night or topics of a brand that would upset my mother. I was already hoping the movie wouldn’t be too romantic. That would put her in a funk for a good week.

The movie turned out to be crazy romantic. After she’d finished her two slices of pizza, Caelyn had bowed out of the rest of the movie, claiming to have brought a mountain of work home. She left us, giving me a brief look of warning, the corners of her perfectly-shaped mouth turning down as she walked toward her office off the living room. She hadn’t needed to warn me; I knew she would check on us—often.

I watched the movie, entranced. The basic message of the film was that if two people were meant to be, fate would ensure they wound up together, no matter the obstacles. Ron held me lightly in lots of little ways

that were easily untangled when we heard the squeak of Caelyn's chair, alerting us she was about to intrude on our semi-privacy.

Of course, I cried at the end when the couple found each other, despite situations that seemed impossible to overcome. I tried to hide my tears, embarrassed, but Ron saw right through my lame excuse that I had something in my eye, telling me he found my crying "endearing." I stuck my tongue out at him, and he wiped away a tear I'd missed.

We were silent for a moment. Before Caelyn could come back into the room, I had to ask. "Ron." I dug my nails into my palms, painfully, as I spoke. "Are we going to even talk about..."

"Nope," he cut me off, and then asked me, "and are we sneaking off again tomorrow?"

"I think I feel the stomach flu coming on again."

He grinned at me conspiratorially.

I thought he might have kissed me when we said goodnight after Mom had left us to be alone for a minute on the front step. Well, he did...sort of. He leaned in toward me... I closed my eyes... He planted his lips...on the top of my head.

"Sleep tight, okay? Have sweet dreams."

My head was all foggy from watching the movie and his touching me all evening. "Only if they're of you," I sighed at him.

I clamped my eyes shut, feeling the heat crawl up my face as I thought, *Why did I say that out loud?*

He seemed to enjoy my reaction immensely. I got one last look at his one-of-a-kind smile before he vanished into the moonless night.

I was still trying to shove away the disturbing images of what had happened in the kitchen earlier. I'd decided, though, if he wanted to ignore the whole mess, I certainly wasn't going to argue with him. But...I had to wonder what he and Caelyn had said to one another before he'd come upstairs. She'd been smart to send him up. I would've never come down to face him by myself.

Luckily, I *could* discuss what had happened with Mom. And I needed to, wanted some kind of answer for my wildly irrational behavior.

But it just wasn't my night.

"Sorry, Mink." She had an armload of papers and was already making her way up the stairs. "It'll have to be tomorrow. I still have all this to finish, and I have a very early meeting in the morning with an important client."

"But, Mom..." I knew I sounded whiny and also knew how much Caelyn hated that.

"I said tomorrow, Maura Maxine." Her tone—and use of my middle name—closed the subject for the night.

Dejected, I slunk to my room, my head swimming with mysteries I couldn't even begin to figure out by myself.

As I became a part of my private space...I knew immediately Ron had left his own stamp on my room earlier. There were several things which alluded to that fact.

First of all, my bed had been turned down. Caelyn had stopped doing so when I'd turned five. Not only had he pulled the comforter aside, but he'd also tucked under the blanket, in my place, a stuffed bunny. I could only see its ears and eyes, as my comforter was pulled up to his nose.

Secondly, there was music playing. I hadn't even touched my computer that day, so I knew I hadn't left the music on, myself. There was also a song playing I didn't recognize, so I knew I hadn't added that one to my playlist.

I walked over, smiling to myself despite everything, and interrupted the screensaver with my mouse. There in the media player was a playlist named, 'Maura's peaceful sleep mix by Ron.' Even though he wasn't there to see, my cheeks flushed with the emotion his gesture had aroused. I perused his choices, most of them lullabies by different artists, all of them quiet, serene tunes. There was a band called Muse I didn't recognize. The name of their song was "Endlessly." I double-clicked on that one, settling in front of the computer to Google the lyrics as I listened.

I was shocked by the deep meaning conveyed by the song's lyrics. Was he trying to tell me he felt *that* way about me?

When the music ended, I clicked to replay that same song over again and stumbled over to my bed, left clumsy by the mistiness the song had brought to my eyes.

I plunked down on my side and picked up the rabbit. He was brown and white...mostly white...but with brown suede sewn inside his ears and on the bottoms of his big back feet. His nose was a mass of brown thread which perfectly matched the suede. A little tag still hung from one of his ears.

He was a Gund! One of the expensive, luxurious plushies from the jewelry store in the mall! That was all it took to make the tears spill over.

Ron had even written that the special stuffed animal was from him to me on the tag. I tried not to read too much into the fact he'd written, 'Love, Ron,' without much success. I also saw that the little guy's name was Timothy.

Well, that explained the extra-long bathroom trip earlier. I'd been worried he might be sick...or worse, looking for a way to escape the house after my little stunt in the kitchen. He must've had help from Caelyn getting Timothy upstairs unnoticed. I hadn't seen him carry that in....not that I'd been overly observant when he'd arrived.

I sighed. He was obviously far too good for *me*. But I decided to enjoy the moment anyway. I hugged the bunny close and settled in under the covers. I managed to listen to every song once...and make my way back to "Endlessly." I drifted off to the crooning of the lead singer, promising me Ron was mine for keeps.

9. Video Games, Guitars...and Denial

In the morning, I awoke determined to catch Caelyn and discuss my bizarre behavior of the night before. But...of course, she'd slipped out of the house before I'd even opened my eyes. Either she wasn't lying about the early morning meeting, or she was trying very hard to avoid me.

I quickly forgave her abandonment, though, when I saw what was waiting for me under the warmer—a big plate of scrambled eggs and a *very rare* steak. I was eating as I walked over to the table.

After I'd gulped down the delicious meat—Caelyn was right; protein was good—I realized I didn't exactly know what time Ron was coming to pick me up. In my haste, I went screaming up the stairs, almost breaking my legs when I tripped near the top.

The shower was probably the most hurried of my life. I skipped drying my hair in favor of looking for something to wear, skimming through the dresses hurriedly. Caelyn hadn't even put a pair of pants on me until I'd nearly turned twelve, which most likely explained my preference. There was just something about the way a skirt swirled, unconfining, about your legs. I very much preferred the way they felt than jeans hugging tightly against my skin. Like my mother, I chose simple, classy, but casual designs in dark colors.

The day's choice was a dark grey, plain except for the ribbon trimming the edges of the long sleeves and bottom of the full skirt. Of course, all my dresses were paired with tights thick enough to hide the pallor of my long legs. Light brown Mary Janes completed the ensemble.

Some light make-up followed, but I still hadn't dried my hair when the doorbell rang. I smoothed its unruliness down as best I could before nearly injuring myself, yet again, in my rush to get the door.

I took a deep breath to calm myself and undid the chain, turned the doorknob, my shaking hands ruining my attempt to be casual.

He was...breathtaking. Mine was stolen right away. I had no air with which to say hello.

He smiled *that* smile, his smile. I was awestruck.

Memories of the night before intruded on the moment. A tremor of worry at how the night had begun...the amazing movie and...

"Thank you for the Timothy!" I leapt at him, and he caught me up in a hug. "And the songs," I added at his ear.

"You liked the surprises?"

"More than you can imagine."

He pulled away to look at me. "I don't know... I can imagine quite a bit."

"I loved them." My voice was heavy, all weighted down with emotion. "I just wish you hadn't spent so much on the..."

He put his finger on top of my lips, silencing them. “Did you sleep good last night?” he asked. His finger moved away so I could answer.

“Oh, yes!”

“Worth every penny, so not another word about that, okay?” He smiled a sly smile.

“Okay.” That smile could have made me agree to gnaw my own hand off at the wrist.

“So what do you wanna be up to today?”

“Hmmm, I guess I kind of thought you’d decide that... I’ve got nothin’...” I started to think really hard, though.

He started to speak, but I suddenly erupted with “I know! I want to see your room! Your house!”

“Sure, okay. You ready to go right now?”

I guess my hair would have to drip dry. “Yeah, let’s go!”

I was fairly bouncing with excitement when we were in the car. He, of course, was totally at ease, singing along with The Spill Canvas on the CD player. It turned out that he only lived two streets behind mine, so ours was a short drive.

His house was much like any other on the street, two stories with a garage and a little yard. We went in the front hallway and up a short set of stairs into the kitchen. The room was decorated in cream and brown, copper cookware hanging on the wall, giving the space a very homey

feel. Ron dropped his car keys on the small round table and pulled me into the living room by the hand.

I was very surprised, to say the least, to see his mother sitting on the couch. I suppose I'd just assumed she would be at work, like my own mother, so early in the morning. I felt uneasy about how she might react to our skipping school.

I managed a startled "Oh! Hello!"

Ron chuckled—the traitor—obviously unrepentant for the lack of warning on his part. My cheeks started to burn.

She didn't seem surprised to see me, though. "You must be Maura." She got up from the couch and extended her hand. "I'm Debbie."

I took her hand gently in mine, saying, "Nice to meet you." She was warm, just like him.

I would've expected her to have the same dark-brown hair and eyes as Ron, but she was a blue-eyed blonde. Her skin was the same deep brown as his, though, and she donned the same dazzling smile. He must have gotten his hair and eye coloring from his father.

"You too. Ron has had quite a lot to say about you." She gave me that kind of smile that usually holds a secret. I felt my already-red cheeks deepen with heat and color.

"Mom." He rolled his eyes. "You're embarrassing Maura!"

“What?” She feigned innocence. “Well, you do talk about her all the time, do you not? I’m only saying what’s true.”

It was his turn to redden a little. Debbie gave me a wink, and I knew she was allying with me against him to make me feel more comfortable. She was very likable.

Ron had had enough of our camaraderie, though, and put an arm around me to steer me toward the stairs at the back of the room. “Come on, Maura, and I’ll show you my room.” I didn’t miss the teasing look of warning he shot at his mother.

I couldn’t resist; once we were on the stairs, I asked, “So, you talk about me a lot?” I grinned up at him, feeling only a touch evil.

He rolled his eyes. “Females...this is what I get for putting you in a room together!” We were at the door to what must have been his room, then, and he led me inside without hesitation.

I wasn’t surprised to find his room was a lot like my own. Computer desk with monitor, small TV—but he sported an Xbox 360 connected to his—my mouth began to water—on his dresser, a rack of video games and DVDs. His comforter was also a midnight blue, but with a spray of stars, no moons. I was envious of his matching curtains. Mine were the color of my comforter but plain and unpatterned.

My eyes darted back longingly to the 360. “Wow, you have Xbox,” I noted, wondering if he could tell how envious I was. Caelyn refused to let

me have anything other than my little PSOne. She thought the more modern games too violent for me to play.

“Yeah.” He grinned. “Wanna play something?”

When he asked, my eyes immediately started cataloging his game collection. “You have *Gears of War*??” I’d been agonizing over my desire to play that game since I’d seen the very cool commercials on TV.

“Let’s give it a go.” He pulled the jewel case from the rack and popped the CD out so he could slide it into the waiting console.

I took the controller he held out to me as I eased onto the edge of his bed beside him. It didn’t take too long to see what a handicap Caelyn had saddled me with by restricting my gaming to the much older system. I spent several minutes just to get the hang of walking my character around inside the elaborate graphics which made up his world. Since my older *Final Fantasy* games were a million miles away from a modern, first-person shooter, my kill ratio was excruciatingly humiliating. But seriously, if my mother thought the monsters in the game were going to scar my young mind or something, she was thoroughly mistaken!

“Far cry from *Final Fantasy*, huh?” Ron asked after the round came to an end.

“Wow, I’ll say.” My mouth still twisted in frustration. As I looked up to face him, my gaze fell across his shoulder to the far corner of the room.

“No way...”

He followed my eyes. “Oh, that?” he uttered with complete nonchalance.

“*Oh, that?*” I mimicked back at him, sarcastically. “I didn’t know you played.” My eyes flicked back to the pair of guitars, one acoustic and one electric, standing side by side. I wondered how I’d missed seeing them before. “Wow, I guess you’re just great at everything?”

He rolled his eyes. “Hardly!”

“Play something for me?”

“Awww, c’mon.... I haven’t been playing that long. Wouldn’t you rather shoot some more monsters?” He grinned hopefully.

“Nope.” I crossed my arms and pulled out my most stubborn pout. I was fully prepared to sit frozen like that all day.

“Wow, that’s impressive...okay, okay.” He rolled his large, dark eyes. “But it’ll have to be the acoustic. There’s no way Mom will be cool with the amp this early in the morning.”

He rose and moved to pick up the light-colored guitar, settling after back into place at the foot of the bed, only facing me then. After the first few chords, I recognized the song. He even sang the words to “Hey There Delilah” as he played. When he got the part about the thousand miles, though, I suddenly became very sad. So much so, that tears welled up in my eyes. He seemed to catch my mood and stopped

playing. I hoped it wasn't some kind of sign he hadn't reached the optimistic portion of the lyrics.

"I guess we have to face it." I couldn't stand to see such sadness in his eyes.

"We can't keep avoiding the fact I'm moving a country away in a few weeks, huh?" I was embarrassed by the break in my voice. I never even allowed myself to cry in front of my mother.

"I don't want you to go."

"I don't want to leave." It was the first time I'd said such thoughts out loud. As sad as I was, it felt kind of good to voice the sorrow that had been welling up inside me.

"Maybe you could stay here!" His eyes lit up with revelation. "I'm sure Mom wouldn't mind. We have an extra bedroom." He'd taken up both my hands in his excitement. You'd have thought he'd just won the lottery, the way he was grinning.

I, however, did not share his enthusiasm. "You obviously don't know my mother like I do."

"But you're old enough to make your own decisions..."

"But—not old enough to do so legally," I reminded him. "Even if I could leave Caelyn—er, Mom—alone, and I just can't do that. She...well, she's been through a lot, and I'm all she has. Even if I could, trust me; she would *never* let me go."

His mood visibly deflated. "Oh..."

"Can I talk to you about something?" I asked. I wasn't just trying to divert his attention to alleviate his sadness, but my last comment had also reminded me of the recent weirdness infecting my life lately.

"Sure." He made an honest attempt at a real smile. My hands were still captured within his own, and I was very aware of their warmth. Ron started running his thumbs over the tops of my still-very-cool skin, almost derailing my train of thought completely.

I refocused and firmed up my resolve

"Have you ever felt like...well, like something weird is going on? Like things about you are changing for no good reason, and you're not sure why?"

"Hey, I'm a teenage guy. Are you kidding?" The last word came out as a chuckle.

I rolled my eyes. "Okay, I'll give you that one, but I'm being serious." I lowered my head because I was afraid of what my expression might look like to him. "Sometimes I wonder what's happening to me."

When I brought my eyes back to his face, he wore a very serious expression. I felt his hands tighten around my own.

"Just what exactly do you mean, Maura? Is something wrong? Is there something you've been keeping from me?" His words all came out in a rush so that I didn't really have time to answer the first two questions. I

pondered a moment over the last, because the answer to that one was a definitive “yes.”

My hesitation only agitated him further. “Maura!!”

I suddenly wished I hadn’t broached that topic of conversation.

“You know what? I think it’s just like you said and is all normal, teenager type stuff.” I brightened my tone in order to sound more convincing.

“If it were about normal stuff, I don’t think you’d look half as worried as you did half a minute ago.” He eyed me with suspicion.

I laughed, hoping to throw him off. “Well, it’s just changes in things. Like my hair...and cravings...normal stuff, really.” And completely whacked stuff like thinking my own blood tastes awesome! I kept that part to myself.

He was quiet for a long moment and then resigned himself to acceptance. “Well, you know...if there’s ever *anything* you want to talk about, I’m here. And I’d hope, if anything was wrong, you’d let me know—that you trust me at least that much.” His eyes were all soft and faintly misty. I felt like I might fall into them, like a fish racing down, down into the safe blackness of the ocean depths.

“Oh, Ron, I do trust you!” I just don’t want you to run screaming away.

“Good,” was all he said. Then, he took me by surprise as he pulled me into his arms. We sat like that for what seemed like a very long time. I

pushed the side of my head into his chest as hard as I could to better hear the steady, comforting sound of his heartbeat.

Finally, he said, "Do you want to give the monster hunt one more chance?"

"You bet!"

When I woke up, Ron was still asleep. Before starting the game again, we'd crawled up to the top of the bed so we could rest our backs against the headboard. When his beefed-up soldier had started trying to walk through a wall, I'd looked over to find him sleeping. Watching his peace-filled features, I memorized them for the time when I wouldn't be able to see him every day...every week...every month... How long would it be until I could see him again after we'd moved so far away? Would I even get to see him again at all? No! I pushed that thought from my mind and promised myself that, of course, we would find a way to see one another someday soon. I would hold onto that. The last thought running through my head, before succumbing to sleep myself, was the observation that his lower lip was just a bit fuller than the upper one...

I rose up on one elbow to look at the clock. Whew...only 10:23 AM. We still had loads of time before I had to be home. Some thought was nagging at me, though. That awful feeling you get when you've forgotten something was pervading my gut. What day was it again? Wednesday.

Wednesday! I was surprised Caelyn hadn't reminded me about my dentist appointment after school that day. Very unlike my mother... The school bus had usually dropped me off there on my way home, so I could meet my mother, for past appointments. I hoped Ron wouldn't mind taking me. It was too late to call and cancel. Besides, a dental checkup was probably another thing Caelyn would want taken care of before all the upheaval moving would cause. I was in no mood for the lecture she'd give me for 'forgetting.'

I looked around the room while Ron slept on, trying to unravel the mystery he still was to me. I only wished I could have more time to get to know him.

On the walls were two silkscreened banners. Nailed to the far wall, straight across from the bed, a skeletal figure with crazy hair brandished an axe under the full moon. "Killers," in bloody red script, stood out against the background of angry looking clouds. To the left hung another with a simpler design. The silky square merely displayed the words 'Black Sabbath' with no other embellishment.

Iron Maiden, Black Sabbath, cool, I thought to myself. *Ron is a classic-rock fan.*

A little to the left of the second banner stood a battered dresser with a small round mirror. There were pictures taped around its edges. I eased slowly, carefully, off the bed to go examine them. Maybe I'd find the

mystery birthday girl there. At the top right was one of his mother, only she looked much younger. I guessed the child in her arms had to be Ron? He had a head full of dark hair even as a small baby. There were a couple of other pictures of him with her in various stages of his childhood. He must have been very close to her to allow those out for any passing eye to gaze upon.

On the opposite side were three photos of him with Shane. One had a couple of other guys included. Shane was on drums, and both a bass player and lead singer stood with them.

So, Ron was in a band? I felt funny he'd never mentioned that detail. Well, never in the two weeks I'd been getting to know him. Drumming, Shane looked very serious, a sharp contrast to the other two photos. In those, he wore his usual comically-manic expression, always trying to get a laugh from those around him. An admirable trait in my opinion. It never felt bad to laugh.

I jumped when I turned back to face the bed because Ron was propped up on one elbow looking at me. "Oh! You're awake," I fairly gasped in surprise.

He just grinned at me. I really loved that grin.

"I was just...your pictures..." I wondered if my expression looked as lame as my voice sounded, like a thief caught red-handed.

“Now, no teasing me about my baby fat or bowl haircut.” He was mockingly stern.

“Oh! I wouldn’t.” I was sure my eyes were as huge as they felt. They ached slightly with strain.

“Relax, Maura. It’s okay. I don’t mind at all. I mean we’re running out of chances to get to know each other.” He regretted reminding us, by the look on his face.

I quickly changed the topic. “Hey, I just remembered a minute ago I have a dentist appointment this afternoon. Would you mind taking me?” I realized that would be totally boring and quickly added, “Sorry, I know it’s not really exciting, but...”

“I’d love to!” My most favorite smile on Earth was still in place. “See, you can even make the dentist’s office sound exciting.” We both laughed at that.

“Well...I doubt that, but thanks!” I thought back to the pictures. “So, you’re in a band?”

I thought he may have been blushing...just a little. “Yeah, we’re just getting started, but it’s a lot of fun. We haven’t had any gigs yet, though.”

“I’m sure you will!” I imagined myself with groupie status for a moment. “Shane plays the drums?”

“Yep! He’s got GREAT rhythm. Hey! You should come to a practice sometime and hear us play.”

"I would love that!" I played out the scenario for a second inside my head and realized, "But it's probably after school hours or on the weekend. Maybe we could convince Mom..."

He rolled his eyes. "Awww, c'mon...believe me; it's not that hard to convince any of those guys to lay out of school."

"Geez, I feel like such a horrible influence." I put my head down a bit because I really did. "And we really do have to go back to school tomorrow. We don't want to fail our finals."

"I guess so." He didn't look at all like he wanted to. "It's just so hard to think about any of that with you leaving. I know it sounds stupid, but you just seem like the only really important thing going on right now." He lowered his eyes.

"I know what you mean," I agreed. I couldn't say that being at the forefront of his mind didn't make me feel really happy, though. I snapped back into responsible mode. "But...if you failed your senior year, I could never forgive myself. If I fail junior year...well, I may not be breathing for much longer..."

"Yes, and breathing is good." He nodded his head knowingly, and I laughed again. "Okay, well, I guess two days is doable this week?"

"Definitely!" That nagging worry Caelyn was going to find out about my skipping school subsided a bit.

We spent the rest of the day playing games, besides the few songs I begged Ron into playing and the fabulous lunch his mother made for us. We stopped briefly back at my house, so I could scrub the garlic bread and spaghetti off my teeth before my dental appointment, and then we were off.

“Oh...Maura...but...” The receptionist scanned her computer screen for some detail she was missing, obviously confused by my arrival. “Yes! Your mother *did* call to cancel your hygiene appointment last week.” So, she really wasn’t coming to meet me.

I felt utterly confused. “She did?” I asked, unconvinced. My mother was big on regular checkup appointments, dentist included.

“Sure did, see?” The receptionist turned the screen around so I could see her notation.

I turned to Ron, embarrassed. “She never said anything to me about canceling. This is so not like her...”

The perky blonde behind the counter scanned the monitor further. “Oh! But we did have a cancellation. Would you like to take the spot?”

I couldn’t imagine Caelyn canceling my yearly cleaning. There must be some mistake, so I said, “Yes. Definitely will take that. We’re moving to a new city...well, country soon, and I’d much rather have Dr. Aurora.”

“No problem! I’ll just put you right in. That’ll be a just a few minutes.”

Ron and I went to sit in the small waiting room, each pretending to read some lame magazine from the array spread across the glass-topped table in the middle of the floor.

“I really hate the dentist,” he confessed with a mischievous smile. “Better you than me!”

I elbowed him playfully. “Well, you know, I can see if they have a spot open for you too.”

“No way! I hate the taste of that stuff they polish your teeth with!”

“Ugghh, but the fluoride is waaaaay worse!” Suddenly, I dreaded the appointment a bit more than I had before.

“Maura.” A smiling dental assistant was calling my name, her sneakered foot propping the door to the operatory open.

“Too late to back out now.” Ron gave me a wink.

“You wanna come back with me?” I was sorry as soon as the words were out of my mouth.

But he rose, to my surprise. “Need me to hold your hand?” That earned him a hard, pointy elbow to the ribs.

The smiling brunette—no wonder she was smiling; she was on the delivering end of those dental instruments—lead us to the last room. I settled as much as I could into the leather chair, considering my heightened anxiety. I wondered briefly if anyone liked going to the dentist,

then pondered over how strange it was to see my handsome love interest seated in the spot my mother had so often occupied.

“Okay then, Sweetie, let’s get your bitewings done.” I was willing to bet the dental assistant wouldn’t have been as cheerful if she were having hard-edged little x-ray films shoved down into her gums—and in front of an infallibly cute boy. I noticed her nametag read ‘Charlotte.’ She had a heavy southern accent. A Confederate transplant.

There was more waiting before Dr. Aurora finally came in and started poking around my mouth with that sharp little hook-shaped instrument. She stopped as she came around to my right canine, poking around and tapping on the tooth, giving that one considerably much more attention than she had the other teeth.

“Charlotte!” She called the dental assistant back in. “I want x-rays of the canines, 1-3 and 2-3 here.” She called out the tooth numbers to the girl. There was more jabbing of film and me feeling self-conscious in front of Ron.

When the digital film was developed and came up on the computer screen, Dr. Aurora studied the image for a long time without saying anything. She looked more like a model, or possibly a Barbie doll than a dentist. Her hands were just as delicate as her facial features, and she had an innate gentleness which made her a very desirable choice for a coward like me. In ten years as my dentist, she’d never caused me pain.

“Where is your mother today?” she asked in her still-heavy Romanian accent.

“I think she forgot about my appointment,” I answered sheepishly. “I just happened to remember.”

“There is something wrong here.” She indicated my canines on the screen. “See these teeth?”

I nodded, my brain still hung up on the phrase “something wrong here.”

She must have read something akin to horror in my expression. Dr. Aurora spoke more softly. “Well, I don’t know what is going on here, yet, but these two teeth look almost hollow. See?” She indicated the dark spaces running through my upper canines. “And when we compare with past x-rays here...” She brought another set of x-rays up on the screen—my full-mouth survey from two years ago. “See...these teeth?” Pointing again to my top canines. “They have grown. This is very unusual. Look.” She used a probing instrument to make her point. “They are at least a millimeter and a half longer than when these older x-rays were taken. It’s as if the roots are extending upward...see...here and here.” She indicated with the point of a pen on the screen.

I looked at her blankly.

“That is *very* unusual. For the teeth to keep growing like this...and they appear to be deteriorating from the inside... I don’t know.” Her brow

furrowed in a way that was scary to me.

“Deteriorating??” was all I seemed able to parrot back. I felt Ron take my hand.

She looked at me, and her expression told me she was at a loss. “I’m sorry.” She shrugged then. “I’ve never seen anything like this. It’s like there’s tooth missing from the inside outward. Usually, decay comes from the outer wall like here.” She pointed at another intact, dense tooth. “Into the middle the cavity comes. It’s like bacteria started eating from inside the tooth. But just for these two... I can’t explain this.” She shook her head and looked down at the floor.

I instinctively wiggled the pair in question with the tip of my tongue. Neither moved... They felt pretty solid to me. I snuck a look at Ron. He appeared as steady and unmoving as usual; the look on his face spoke to mine being any normal, everyday dental appointment. If there was any doubt or fear he was feeling, he was hiding their presence very well.

I must have looked pretty scared, because she suddenly brushed the whole thing off with a, “You know what; this could just be a shadow on the film. Why don’t we finish the exam, and you have your mom call me, okay? We’ll bring you back in and redo them. Don’t you worry about anything.” I could see she was sorry she’d even mentioned the possibility of something being wrong. Her attempt at making me feel better did nothing to take the fear out of her eyes.

I lay there through the rest of the exam and polishing, trying to convince myself nothing was wrong. At one point, I couldn't help but picture myself canineless, wondering if they would eventually fall out. Did I have some kind of weird disease? And speaking of weird, I began to think about how Caelyn *had* been avoiding me lately. Did she know something she wasn't telling me?? I wanted very badly, in that moment of revelation, to be able to get up out of the chair and go home. I needed to confront my mother and find out the truth. My anxiety must have transferred to Ron, who was still holding my hand. He squeezed my fingers harder, and my nerves calmed in response, remembering he was here with me.

I still raced around the house, cleaning up as I would have if I'd come home from school on time. Well...after my dentist appointment. By the time I had dinner done, I was beyond agitated. Distraught by thoughts of my mother keeping something important from me, they played heavily through my mind. Ron was playing *Final Fantasy* in my room. My insistence that he be here was fueled by the imagining of a betrayal by my mother, prominent in my mind.

I was glad I'd put a roast in the crockpot that morning and set my mind to the preparation of mashed potatoes, gravy and honey-glazed carrots. But I still felt the weight of my distractions.

When Caelyn came home, I was all over her. I found myself yelling, “Mom!” before she was even in the door from the garage. “MOM!” I yelled again, as she was walking into the kitchen.

“I hear you, Maura.” She sounded agitated, too. “What is the big emergency?”

Her heels clicked across the kitchen floor, reminding me of her adult status...looming far above my teenage one.

Some of my angst dissipated.

“Did you forget about my dental appointment today?” I asked more quietly.

“Maura, I called and canceled that.” She looked at me quizzically.

So she had. “That’s what they said. But why didn’t you tell me?”

“You went??” Her eyes were so wide.

I remained very calm. “Mom, like I said, you never told me.”

“I didn’t think you’d remember, much less go without my dragging you there.” It took her a minute to return normalcy to her face. “You went, then?” she asked again.

“Yes, Mom, I went.” I couldn’t keep the tension I felt out of my voice.

Her forced calm vanished, considerably. “So, how did it go?” She was hiding something from me!

“Well, the x-rays showed something wrong with some of my teeth.”

Caelyn went as white as her olive-toned skin allowed.

Definitely something wrong here. “Mom, what’s going on? I know there’s something you’re not telling me.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about, Maura.” Caelyn put a very sharp edge to her tone. “I’ve had a very hard day, and I’m in no mood for any foolishness.”

Denial.

“Foolishness? I’m trying to tell you there’s something wrong with me, and you’re calling it foolishness?!!” That was the first time I’d ever raised my voice to my mother. She looked appropriately shocked.

“Maura Maxine.” Her whisper came out very controlled—with a huge helping of underlying menace. Uh oh.

“She’s not kidding.” The soft male voice coming from the staircase landing made me cringe. It was written all over my mother’s face she hadn’t known Ron was here. I could see a dangerous level of fury building in her eyes.

“Please, Ms. DeLuca, don’t be angry.” Ron had his perfect hands up in a placating gesture. “I took Maura to the dentist, and she said something like two of her top teeth are decaying from the inside out. They might even be falling out, because she said they’re growing lower or something like that.”

She’d listened to him quietly, and I knew her well enough to see she was trying to get her emotions under control. Caelyn took a deep breath,

her cat-green eyes still flashing excitedly. “Is this true, Maura? Is this what the dentist said?”

I nodded my head emphatically, grateful that my mother’s temper had cooled so easily. “Yes!” I put the tip of my index fingers onto the sharp points of each canine. “These two teeth! She said it’s like the middles are missing, but she doesn’t know how the bacteria got in there, ‘cause there’s no decay from the outside. Mom, I don’t want my teeth to fall out...” I felt my lower lip tremble a bit and fought to keep tears from my eyes. All that effort caused my voice to come out as no more than a whisper. “Mom, I afraid I’m really sick. What if I have one of those weird types of cancer or something?”

Both Caelyn and Ron looked frightened when I finished that last sentence. And like they both wanted to hug me all better. But...Mom was closer.

“Oh, Maura.” She embraced me tightly, and then stood back so she could look into my eyes, placing her overly-warm hands on either side of my face. “It’s going to be okay; I promise you.”

How could she know? Was it only wishful thinking on her part? “I don’t know...” My voice had a humiliating shake to it, and the fact Ron was in the room made me painfully aware I was turning into a sniveling, scared toddler in front of him at my mother’s touch.

“Now, now,” she crooned; her anger of two minutes ago had completely vanished. “Don’t worry, Maura. There are a ton of specialists in Vancouver. I’m sure we can find someone there who can explain exactly what is going on with your teeth.”

The way she said that last part, with a kind of dreamy, faraway look on her face, made me feel funny. She ran the tip of a finger under my left canine and then drew her hand back sharply, a pained look on her face.

“Ooow! Maura, I think your teeth are in viciously-fine shape.” She sucked a large bead of bright-red blood from her fingertip, and I licked my lips in a response, completely driven by instinct. I didn’t miss the split second of eye-widening from my mother, though I admired her lightning-quick recovery.

I flicked my eyes in Ron’s direction, and his gaze wandered up to the uninteresting ceiling. Non-committal in his observances, as always. I knew he could feel the weight of my stare.

His eyes closed, and he inhaled deeply. “Wow! Maura, something smells good!”

Caelyn joined him. “Is that beef roast?” She beamed at me then. “And do I smell dinner rolls? You’ve really outdone yourself, My Dear!” She sniffed the air again. “Maybe those are done, though? I think you’d better go check them.” She moved away from me to make her way to the stairs. “I’m going to go change.”

Well, that was the end of that conversation...but at least it looked like I wouldn't have to argue with her about Ron staying for dinner.

10. Gig Night

I knew Caelyn would never let me go to the gig Ron had invited me to, so I needed a major school-related excuse. Only studying with a friend for finals would offer me reprieve from my grounding. I tried not to feel too guilty about my deception, promising myself I would study vigorously after seeing Ron play for one magical night. I would go have my fun, and then seriously put my nose to the proverbial grindstone. I knew I was seriously breaking the rules...and lying...but I also knew that in about two weeks I would go away, left unable to see the boy I was falling in love with—there I'd said the word—for who knew how many months? I refused to believe the separation might even last a year. Yes, I was definitely due that one indulgence.

So I worked up the courage to ask, intent on going, even if I had to sneak out of my room.

But it turned out such extreme measures would be unnecessary.

“Just so long as it isn't one of the girls in on that swimming prank, okay?” she'd merely said when I'd asked her. “Junior year is important, and I want you to do well. It'll make a difference when you're applying to colleges.”

I felt a pang of guilt. College was not only a dream for me of my mother's. Furthering my education had been a planned part of my future

for myself for as long as I could remember. I really would have to get back to studying after my night of fun.

“I won’t be with any of them, Mom; believe me!” At least there was a little bit of truth I could offer.

Ron’s band had landed a gig when another band had canceled at the last minute. Granted, the venue was far from glamorous—they were playing a fraternity party at the university. Shane was friends with one of the brothers at Delta Tau Delta, who’d just happened to come to some of their rehearsals in Shane’s garage. Ron had been hesitant to take the gig, feeling they were nowhere near ready to play outside the confines of the makeshift rehearsal space, but Shane’s unsquashable enthusiasm had won out in the end.

“You’ll see!! It’ll be great!” He’d wrenched an arm around Ron’s neck excitedly, almost pulling him to the school’s cafeteria floor when he gave him the news. Ron still looked worried, but I’d begun to see the overcautious perfectionist in him. Shane was probably right, and Ron was worrying for nothing.

I’d been standing nearby, taking the whole moment in, excited for their chance to play in front an audience consisting of more than a handful of friends. I hadn’t been lucky enough to catch a rehearsal yet, but I knew they would be amazing—despite Ron’s worries.

Ron's dark eyes grew alight with excitement then. "Maura! You have to come!"

"Of course!" I exclaimed, feeling so good to be included and wanted. So much so, it took almost twenty full seconds before I could feel my face fall and utter a small, disappointed, "Oh..."

Ron understood immediately. "Oh...your mom."

"Yeah, my mom." Drat it all.

Merina piped up and saved the day...well, the night. "Just tell your mom you're studying with me." She had that impish grin on her face that was starting to break my heart. Because soon, I wouldn't see her smile again. I had to fight hard to hold the tears back, so we could appropriately celebrate her revelation of genius proportion.

"I think that just might work! Mom can't say no to studious activities!" I grinned back at her. "Good thinking, Merina!"

"That's why I love you, Baby!" Shane was exploding with excitement. "Beauty *and* brains." He kissed her fervently, his eyes radiating happiness, and she blushed in response.

Ron reached over and pulled me close into a clumsy hug. And so it'd been settled.

Saturday night, Merina showed up on my doorstep to walk me over to her house. Of course, Caelyn had emerged from her office to meet my

new friend. She grilled her a bit, asking about her family, what she liked to study, what she did in her spare time.

I finally interrupted. “Mom! Stop giving her the third degree.” Although I could understand her reasons, I could see that my new friend was growing uncomfortable. “We’d better go get some studying done. There’s too much to go over!”

My eagerness must have set off some mom alarm in Caelyn. She eyed me suspiciously, as only she could. Those eyes of hers weren’t only catlike in their color. I was ready to be out from under her scrutiny before I cracked and said or did something really stupid.

I picked up my black and red backpack, laden with books and a change of outfit more suited for a frat party than the totally boring study costume I had on at present—some of my more-tattered jeans and a Gorillaz t-shirt.

“It was nice to meet you, Merina,” Caelyn said in earnest. She must’ve been as impressed with the girl’s shy sweetness as I. “See you in the morning, Maura.” She kissed the top of my head. Only I could recognize the panic at the back of her eyes. Was her worry more for me, sleeping in a strange place, or for her, rattling around the house by herself for an entire night without me to fret over?

“Don’t worry, Mom; it’ll be okay.” I kissed her smooth cheek. “I’ll be back to annoy and pester before you know it.” I smiled at her, and she

ruffled my hair like she always did. Then, Merina and I escaped out into the night.

The frat house was within walking distance from my own, as were Shane and Merina's. So ironically sad it was that since I'd made new friends I could hang out with at any time, I was leaving them very far behind. It was my life, so yeah, that figured.

We were stopping by Merina's place first to change and, as she put it, "get pretty." I hoped she didn't have too much prep in mind. I was eager to get to the party and see Ron. We'd both been in school yesterday, so with no classes together, the day had been both long and boring. He'd insisted we follow my advice of the day before and spend the afternoon hours, before my mom came home, studying. Caelyn had insisted she and I go out to dinner, probably to prevent any chance of Ron joining us again. So, after the day's equally-tedious, mostly-Ronless school day I felt like I was having withdrawal.

Merina was quiet as we walked, probably wrapped up in thoughts of Shane, herself. But she became animated once again when we arrived, beaming brightly as she indicated the cute cottage-like house before us.

"Here we are! That's my room up there." She pointed to a small balcony outside a pink-curtained window. Attached to the railing was a

trellis with yellow roses winding their way throughout. I could imagine Shane climbing that.

“Wow, that’s like something out of *Romeo and Juliet*.”

She nodded, and I could see a deep blush blooming in her cheeks by the light reaching from the front porch. Then, I was fairly certain Shane had climbed that trellis and had to let a giggle escape. We both put on more appropriately serious expressions as we went through the front door to face her parents.

“Hey, Mom and Dad, this is Maura,” Merina addressed them simply. They both rose to greet me, but what stood out for me about them was their relaxed state. Neither seemed plagued by the anxious demeanor Caelyn carried around constantly. Both put their hands out to take mine and we exchanged “nice to meet yous.”

Merina looked a lot like her mother, but her big hazel eyes came from her dad. They all had the same black-brown hair, but Merina’s was straight like her dad’s, while her mother’s hung in tight curls that touched her shoulders.

“Shane must be so excited?” her mom asked. I envied the fact Merina didn’t have to lie to her parents.

Merina grabbed her mother’s hands in her own excitement. “Excited is a gross understatement!”

Again, I felt a pang of envy. If my mother knew where I was going that night, excitement would not be one of the emotions anyone would be feeling...well unless you counted the excitement brought on by fear.

"Come on, Maura!" Merina grabbed my hand and tugged enthusiastically. The mention of Shane had gotten her moving. I was awash with emotion at Merina's casual grasp at my hand, like we'd been friends forever. She didn't even comment on the strange iciness my skin had seemed to take on as of late. Caelyn had dismissed the chill as a need for more iron in my diet.

"Are you girls going to eat dinner?" Merina's mom called after us, as we were flying up the stairs, Merina in a panic to get ready then.

"We'll get something at the party, Mom!"

"Okay, Sweetie." Wow. Caelyn would never let me get away with that.

Merina's bedroom was very different from mine. Far more girly. Stuffed animals—gifts from Shane? He was wickedly skilled at amusement park games—half-covered a lacy pink bedspread which matched the curtains. I had a shelf of collectible figurines from video games and anime; she had one populated by elaborately-dressed dolls. I was kind of surprised to see Merina's wardrobe had a slight Goth flair I was afraid I could never pull off. There were three clothes dressers in the room, and one of the sliding closet doors was open to reveal its bursting-at-the-seams status. Given the variety of clothes Merina wore to school, I'd already figured out

she had far more clothes than I did. I'd never seen her wear the same thing twice. I just didn't have as much imagination when it came to my own wardrobe...plus, I was picky. Most of my clothes came from eBay since I could never find my particular style displayed along the racks with the other cookie-cutter items at the mall.

Merina was following my eyes. "I want you to wear something of mine tonight, okay?"

I looked at her with a doubt-filled expression. I had to be a full three inches taller. But then she produced a pair of one-size-fits-most leggings from one of the dresser drawers. I was intrigued. The outer sides had a full two-inch strip of black lace from ankle to hip. I had time to wonder briefly if Ron would like them before she went to the closet and produced a shirt to go with them. It was a long, red, tunic-styled shirt with a black skull-and-crossbones stenciled across the front. I almost protested the garment wasn't really my style...but we *were* going to a rock concert of sorts, so I figured I should probably break out of my shell and try something besides babydoll dresses and Mary Janes. Well, the babydoll dresses anyway. Turned out Merina and I were not the same shoe size.

I slipped into the clothes and assessed my reflection in Merina's full-length mirror. I was pleasantly surprised to find I liked the look on me. The dark leggings made my legs look even more long and slender, but the loose top, flowing almost halfway down the thigh, made me feel

adequately, safely, hidden. I wasn't one to offer my body up for ogling eyes... Baring my skin made me vastly uncomfortable.

"I love this!" I exclaimed, the anticipation of the night claiming me as well. "Thanks, Merina!"

"No worries." She smiled approvingly. "Ron will love it; this is such a great look for you!" She went back to the closet to claim her own outfit. In a few moments, she was clothed similarly. But her leggings were white, overlain by a similar black and white top, sporting an ornate gothic cross.

Next was make-up, and Merina framed my already-dark eyes in heavy black liner and murky eye shadows. She finished my look with deep-red lipstick before teasing and fluffing my long hair into nearly double its volume. I almost didn't recognize my reflection once she was done.

"Wow, Maura, you look amazing! I am a genius. Hehe." I agreed. I could almost pass for one of the college girls at the moment.

"I *love* it. Thank you!"

Merina finished her own hair and makeup, since I wasn't equally talented in that department, and we were ready to go. To my surprise, Merina's mom didn't blink an eye at the way we looked as we left. I was relatively sure Caelyn wouldn't have allowed me out of the house.

I felt a strong pang of hunger, almost painful, as we waved goodbye and exited. I hoped we really would get to eat at the party. Suddenly, I was starving.

There were people packed in from wall to wall of the frat house basement. I immediately felt uncomfortable. So many people and so much heat... I wasn't completely confident with my new outfit... Where was Ron... *I'm so hungry!* my stomach roared to my brain. I felt slightly nauseous and swayed slightly on my feet.

Strangely, Merina picked up on that. She put a steadying hand on my shoulder. "Hey! You okay?" Her brow furrowed the way Caelyn's did when I was sick.

I blinked and tried to focus on keeping to my feet. My skin felt clammy and slick, but very cool on the surface, and I wondered briefly if I might be coming down with something. "I think so." I tried to flash a very convincing smile at her. "Just too much excitement, probably. Remember; I don't get out much." I was immediately embarrassed at the unexpected revelation and put my head down.

But she seemed to understand and patted me gently. "Yeah, I know what you mean. I feel a little dizzy myself! I've never been to a frat party before!!" She whispered that last part, conspiratorially, and I felt better. It was a wonder what real friends could do for your self-confidence.

I resigned myself to Merina's wisdom. It must be the overexcitement, probably coupled with the fact we hadn't eaten, the hour rapidly approaching 8:00 PM. We'd been there almost an hour waiting for the

guys to get their gear set up so we could talk to them before they went on.

Merina grabbed my hand again and pulled me toward the stage area. She reminded me of a playful, eager puppy when she went into motion, wanting to be somewhere else. I loved it. Her enthusiasm was absolutely contagious. I had another rush of regret, tinged with the desire to stay put in the town I'd lived in all my life, but only recently begun to enjoy. I wondered if there was any way to talk Caelyn out of the move? I set myself the goal of at least one valiant attempt when I got home the next day.

"Hi, Shane." Her whole being lit up as he turned toward her. "Maura isn't feeling so good, so we're going to go scout some chow, okay?"

Ron was standing beside Shane, plugging his guitar into his amp, but his ears pricked up at Merina's words. He immediately turned and grabbed both my hands. "You okay, Maura?" His eyes grew deep with the concern flooding them.

I felt all warm and melty inside from his attentions. "Oh yeah. I'm just kinda hungry; that's all." That was a gross understatement. I was starving, my stomach growling in werewolf proportions. "And it's really hot in here."

"It's definitely not an ideal Maura environment." He winked in a knowing way. "I really appreciate the effort."

“It’s nothing! I’m dying to hear you guys play.”

“By the way,” he added, eyeing me up and down so my cheeks grew hot, “I love the new outfit.” He winked at me, making my blush deepen.

“It’s Merina’s,” I admitted, looking down at the toes of my black Mary Janes.

“Well, Merina’s good taste looks great on you.” He grinned and squeezed my hands.

I felt Merina tug at my hand again. “Come on, Maura. Let’s get some food in you so you don’t pass out before the first set!”

“Okay,” I said, still unable to tear my eyes away from Ron’s. My mind flashed a brief image of red, raw meat at me, and my stomach growled aggressively in response. I didn’t know quite how to feel about that, but I turned away, somewhat reluctantly, and let myself be dragged up the staircase, through the living room and into the small kitchen of the house. There was pizza on the table, along with several bowls of chips and dips. My stomach flip-flopped with joy as I inhaled the scent of cheese and pepperoni deeply. I’d had always been a hearty eater and refused to apologize for my appetite.

I was wolfing down my fourth slice before I even looked up at Merina again. She was staring at me a little wide-eyed. “Wow...you *are* hungry.”

I looked at her sheepishly, unflinchingly tearing away at the slice. “Sorry; when I get nervous, I get hungry.”

She laughed my strange behavior off and picked up her second slice of vegetarian. "I'm just envious; that's all. If I ate that much, I'd gain a zillion pounds!"

I took it easy after that, casually picking at the chips, though I felt like burying my head in the bowl. I used the distraction of the guys coming upstairs to wolf down another two meat-laden slices. Merina was busy, lock-lipped to Shane, and, as far as Ron was concerned, that was the first pizza I may have eaten. An image of me with snout and curly tail flashed in my brain, making me smile up at Ron a bit more feverishly.

"Wow, you're really happy tonight...and somehow different," Ron remarked.

"Too much excitement!" I was going to play that one for all it was worth.

There were two others standing with Ron. I'd noticed the lead singer and bass player putting all their equipment into place, but I'd never met either. Ron noticed them, following my stare.

"Maura," he indicated the first of the two moving up toward the spread of food, "this is our lead singer, Chad."

Chad wasn't as tall as Ron, but he had a huge smile and mischievous green eyes. His dirty-blond hair was long, hanging far past his shoulders. "Hey!" was all he got out before shoving pizza in his mouth.

"And our bass player, Mike."

Mike was tall and very quiet. He merely nodded in response to Ron's introduction. He had a vicious look about him, and his profile somehow reminded me of the velociraptors from *Jurassic Park*. I felt glad, while I was shaking his hand, he couldn't read my thoughts. His short-cropped black hair and small, darting blue eyes had a somewhat dangerous feel about them.

A tall, lanky frat boy—Greek letters displayed across his chest—approached us and tapped Ron on the shoulder. “Hey, guys, it's time for you to go on.”

“Showtime!” Shane declared loudly. Ron sighed and pressed his full lips together, tightly. I guessed he was committing himself to the performance, ready or not.

His hand clamped over mine and pulled me along. The part of me wanting to stay and wolf down more protein-covered pizza warred with the other eager to see Ron's band in action for the first time. I honestly couldn't believe how hungry I still was. My stomach growled again as if attempting to convince me to stay put.

The sound was loud enough for anyone around to hear. Ron laughed lightly and said, “Don't worry, Maura. We'll come get some more food after the first set. And if your stomach roars like that again, I'll even take us all out after the show's over.” He grinned and poked at my belly

through the roughed-up cotton texture of the shirt. I rolled my eyes in mock annoyance in response.

Once down the stairs and in the basement, the guys took the makeshift stage. I felt little flutterings of butterfly excitement in my gut...or was that too much pizza? No, definitely the band. In an instant, the small, overcrowded space came to life with the music. When Ron started strumming his electric guitar, I felt myself go weak in the knees. He almost seemed like a different person. There was no self-doubt in those moments, only unshakeable confidence and undeniable skill.

Most of the songs were familiar. It was clear that Death Moon was predominantly a cover band. They also played three original songs, impressing me, and everyone else in the room it seemed, with their talent. Their first song was a Muse cover—one of my favorites, in fact. I felt lost in the music, noticing that Ron really opened up when he played.

They all put on a good show. Chad's voice was perfectly suited for the music they chose. He sang high and strong, pushing the crowd into a near frenzy. Shane kept perfect time, and Ron played up his role to epic proportions, causing the girls in the crowd eye him in a way I couldn't help but feel uneasy about. But who could blame them? So, I focused on being the lucky one he would walk over to after all the rock star stuff had come to an end.

Merina was squealing excitedly beside me throughout the set. She was obviously enjoying watching Shane play as much as I was Ron. I couldn't fathom what he'd been worried about. They were truly amazing. And the crowd at the frat house party thought so too. After every song, raucous applause and shouting filled the room. After a couple of songs, I happily noticed Ron really start to relax and become completely overtaken by his role as lead guitarist.

I felt someone bump me from behind. I half-turned and did a face plant into the chest of a boy I didn't know.

I looked up...way up... He must have been at least six-foot-seven. His lips parted in a drunken, silly sort of way, and his words slurred out a "Hey, want a beer?" His arm extended too far to offer the beverage, and amber liquid sloshed over the lip of the clear plastic cup making a large, alcohol-soaked spot on Merina's borrowed shirt. I was horrified. I hoped she wouldn't get in trouble because of me.

"You're soooo pretty. Wanna beer?" he slurred again.

I had no intention of adding underage drinking to my list of crimes that night. "No, thanks." I took a step back from him.

"Awww, c'mon." He slung a big, heavy arm across my shoulders and pulled me to him. I could see Ron stiffen on stage as my eyes darted to his position instinctively.

“No!” I pushed with all my might, but he was bigger and much stronger. He dragged me along with him as he shuffled toward the stairs. Merina seemed to be frozen in place, her face a mask of panic.

“Stop it!” He’d moved his arm down around my waist so he could haul me up the stairs. My brain started to become as panicked as the expression I’d seen on my new friend’s face.

“Let’s get some air.”

That’s what I thought he said as he dragged me across the kitchen. Even in my state of fright, I could smell the pizza, distinctly picking out fragrances of bacon, ham, pepperoni and beef as we moved past. *How can you possibly be concerned with food right now??* I thought to myself, incredulously.

Once out the back door, I began to grow genuinely afraid. We were out of sight of all my friends, and even if we hadn’t been, Ron was trapped playing a set. Not that I would want to wreck that for him. His first gig... I gathered my resolve to handle the situation as expediently as possible, by myself, so I could get back inside and save the moment. *He’s obviously drunk; how hard can this be?* a voice inside my head asked.

That was about the time I comprehended the guy was completely harmless. Other than practically kidnapping me from the party, he really didn’t mean any harm. His blue eyes widened innocently as he released

me, offering his beer again. "Wan' some?" He smiled in a hopeful manner.

"Ummm, no, thanks. I'm really not old enough to drink."

"You sure?"

"Quite." I watched him shrug his shoulders and chug half the beer. I took a couple of steps back, and he didn't try to stop me. I was pretty certain he'd gotten caught up in the moment, wishing for someone of the female persuasion to drink with.

"Hey, my boyfriend's playing in the band. And...he looked pretty worried when you hauled me up the stairs just now," I explained.

"Oh, wow...sorry." He lifted the cup to his lips again but lowered his eyes repentantly.

"Sooooo, I'm just going to go back downstairs again, okay?"

"Sure." He kept drinking, and I turned to go.

"Wait!" He reached out to grab my wrist as I walked away. He probably just wanted to put in a last ditch effort to keep me there, but after being forcibly taken up the stairs, some instinct in my body took over.

"Let me go!!" I didn't speak but, instead, roared at him. I slid my arm forward through his grasp to push his chest and throw him backward. In that moment, I was infuriated. Angry beyond reason. Even though I knew down deep he hadn't meant any harm, I was incensed he'd brought me outside against my will, worrying Ron and Merina. Some part of me, as if

looking at the moment from outside my body, was horrified that I wanted to actually hurt him. But that part of me was small and powerless to stop what happened next.

I gnashed my teeth together, so hard they hurt, with the force of my rage. I realized a second later, the pain stemmed from my lower lip, into which I'd sunk my left canine. The rich taste of blood flowed over my tongue, doubling the anger exploding through my head and branching down into my chest.

The coppery scent of blood hung thick in the air, as well. I realized I'd shoved the boy so hard that he'd cracked his skull against the stone walkway at the back of the house. The right side of his head bore an ugly gash, at least three inches long. Typical of most head wounds, the cut bled profusely, the boy left unconscious. Instead of reacting with horror, as I should have, my stomach cramped sharply with insatiable hunger once again.

I felt horrified then, but only with myself. I wanted to consume...to consume *him*! I'd never wanted to eat so badly before....ever. My thoughts, not borne of my own will, turned from the food in the kitchen. My mind rejected the normal offerings, driven by some auto-pilot impulse. I found my eyes pulled, by animal instinct, to the boy lying on the ground. My stomach flip-flopped with desire when I watched the blood slide onto the ground beneath his head.

If anyone had asked me to explain what I felt I'd ask them to imagine being hungry. As hungry as they've ever been in their life. As if they hadn't eaten for days. As if their favorite dish was laid out before their starving body, tempting every sense, uncontrollably.

That was how I felt as my eyes fixated on his seeping wound. My brain pulsed, flexing like a muscle and sending a memory burning through my head. The picture was from that night in the shower when my own blood had flowed into my mouth from an injury hauntingly similar to his. I recalled the perfectly satisfying flavor, the ravenous way the taste had twisted my stomach before the shock of what I'd been doing had taken over.

There was no shock strong enough to stop me then. Just a greedy, driving impulse pounding through every cell. I was hungry, and I wanted beyond all wants, to eat. A red film pervaded my eyes, turning the world crimson. My pulse screamed inside my head, exiling all other sound. And the boy's blood called to me, drawing me down to my knees on the ground beside him.

"Maura!" From somewhere very far away, part of me acknowledged Ron's voice. The reverberation was enough to draw me up, up, up from where I was, at present, drowning in gluttony at the taste of blood. Not quite enough though; I continued to lap at the side of the nameless boy's head.

“MAURA!!” Ron’s voice was much more forceful then—a force to be reckoned with—and rife with shock. But he didn’t settle for shouting at me. I felt him behind me, hooking his hands under my shoulders and jerking me to my feet in an instant.

He whirled me around, roughly, and I found myself staring blankly into his face, trying to focus. “My god! What are you doing?!!” He was shouting at me, his face not an inch from mine, but I still couldn’t come around from my bloodhaze completely. I wanted to shove him away... violently...and reattach my mouth to the bloody wound at my feet.

“Stop! Leave me alone!” I fought against him until I saw Shane coming through the door after us. He stopped short and stared at me, his mouth gaping open with shock, fear in his eyes. Ron pushed him back inside, slamming the door in his face.

He turned his attention back to me and shook me forcefully. “Maura.” My name came out a rough whisper. “What’s wrong with you?!!”

He wiped the back of his right hand across my mouth. The left came up after to cover my mouth and nose, attempting to sweep away the bloody mess with his fingers. I heard from that small, not-in-control part of my mind again. A tiny voice wondering exactly what was happening. The part in control didn’t care about anything except his exquisite scent. He smelled better than the pizza, better than the boy’s blood... I struck at

him, precipitously, like a viper. He narrowly avoided the sink of my teeth into his skin.

I had to give Ron credit; he only looked frightened for a moment. In the slice of an instant, he composed the look on his face, bravely took another spit-laden swipe at the corner of my mouth and jerked the door back open.

He hauled Shane out by the front of his shirt and then slammed the door shut—that time in Merina’s astonished face—once again.

Shane’s eyes slid toward me, then flicked quickly back to Ron’s face. They stayed there.

“Shane.” Ron said his name with calm and quiet. “This guy fell and hit his head.” He inclined his own toward the figure sprawling before us. “Maura was trying to help him by cleaning up the wound.” He said those words with such weight, as if he were burning them into Shane’s head with a branding iron. “You got that? She was helping him.” When Shane didn’t respond he shook him firmly, as he had me before. “Do you understand?”

Shane snapped out of the trance he’d seemed trapped in. He looked from Ron’s face to my own, blinked a couple of times and then nodded his head. He licked his lips before he spoke. “Yeah. Yeah, I’ve got it.” He shook his head to clear it, and Ron released his grip on Shane’s shirtfront.

At that moment, my head snapped around to the left corner of the house at the sound of approaching footsteps. Caelyn glided into my view, as smooth as silk in her tight black-leather jacket. The expression on her face was enough to render my knees incapable of supporting my weight. I slid toward the ground, but Ron hauled me back up immediately. I tried to form words, but my vocal cords didn't seem to be working. My head was starting to clear to the fact that Caelyn was going to kill me, slowly, painfully... I looked up to Ron, fully mindful he had no power to save me.

11. I Think My Mother Was Bodysnatched by Aliens

“Shane! Ron!” Merina had pushed her way out to us. “What *is* going on?!! Is Maura okay?! I thought I saw blood!! Where’s that guy that took her...oh!” Her eyes had found the unmoving figure on the ground.

I was still half-hanging, limply, from Ron’s grasp. My ears pricked up at Merina’s frantic questions. Answering her was impossibility, though. My head was a chaotic jumble—remembering my horrific behavior, wondering what Ron and Shane could be thinking of me and gauging the monstrous shock of my mother’s ability to somehow finding her way to where I was that night. Was there any way to slink away and hide somewhere?

Merina took a couple of steps backward. “Oh, crap...Maura’s mom!!”

Oh crap, yes, my mom.

“Come on, Maura Honey, on your feet.” Ron struggled with me again. Even with the sheer horror of my mother’s presence looming, I took a millisecond to enjoy the first time Ron had called me Honey.

I forced myself to obey him and met Caelyn’s gaze at eye level. I realized I hadn’t noticed growing that extra inch which placed my height on par with hers. The look in her eyes was very calm, but that could be deceptive, because Caelyn could be the razor’s edge when she was

angry. Very sharp, very clean. And I was still reeling at the fact she knew my whereabouts! How? How *possibly*? Had someone ratted me out?

I think the whole group of us nearly fainted when she reached her hand out to lay her palm against my cheek and asked softly, "Mink, are you okay?"

Well, despite the supreme annoyance of having my irritating nickname spoken in front of my friends, I thought I might be dying from shock at the lack of screams thrown in my face for lying, escaping the conditions of my grounding, being at a college party where alcohol was being consumed...oh yeah, and trying to make a meal of some mystery boy's head wound. I felt my jaw drop and my eyes stretch to saucer proportions. Perhaps I should be asking her the same question. Or maybe, "Who are you and what have you done with my mother?"

I looked at her more closely and noticed a *very* strange look in her eyes. They were muted and misty. My head started to question whether she'd been drinking? Was she depressed and lonely in my absence? I started to worry less about myself and feel heavy guilt for leaving her alone.

"Y-y-yeah, Mom," I managed to stammer. I turned to look at Ron, and he appeared just as astonished. I think we were all expecting to take fire from both barrels. Both he and Shane had experienced her ire firsthand.

“I think I’d better take you home.” Her voice even sounded like it was coming from someplace far away, like under water. “I don’t want you to worry. Just go and sit on the porch steps, okay? I want to talk to Ron for a minute, and we need to get this young man some help. Merina, do you want to go sit with her for a minute?”

Oh, so that was it. She was going to yell at Ron and blame him for everything. All her quiet was the calm before her storm. I started to protest. “Mom! This isn’t Ron’s fault; I’m the one...”

She cut me off immediately, and the mist in her eyes cleared just enough. The razor blade slipped out slightly, too. “Maura. I thought I told you to go sit and wait for me, didn’t I?”

I could see there would be no arguing. “Yes, Mom.” I sighed and took the hand Merina offered so we could skulk off to the front porch together. Shane didn’t wait to be dismissed, disappearing back inside the kitchen.

“Is she going to let Ron have it?” Merina queried.

“I’m not exactly sure,” I replied. “I have to hear this, though.” When we rounded the corner of the house, I stopped to flatten myself against the side and crept as near to the edge as I dared. “If it gets too bad, I’ll have to run rescue.” I gave her a small smile, hoping my maniacal terror over the last ten minutes, wasn’t leaking into my expression.

The acoustics must have been perfect in that position, because, although Merina shrugged her shoulders in frustration, I could hear my

mother speaking to Ron just as if I were standing next to them. I put my finger to my lips, signaling Merina to stay silent, and she nodded in response.

"I heard what you said to Shane," my mother was saying. "I really appreciate that. I appreciate you trying to protect my daughter." She hesitated a moment, then added, "She really needs that right now."

"Ms. DeLuca, believe me; it's no problem. I care about Maura a lot. But I have to ask, why *does* she really need that right now?"

"I'm sorry; I can't explain that, not tonight. You'll just have to trust me that she does. To be honest, I didn't want Maura to get involved with anyone, especially now." He started to interject at that, but she kept going, dismissing whatever he was going to say. "Maura *is* going to be okay; I do want you to know that. But she's going to need a lot of support. I thought an outsider would only make things worse, but I can see that you are the kind of...friend she needs. You don't ask too many questions, you're very accepting and...open-minded. I am, however, worried about what the distance of our move is going to do to her now. My daughter," she sighed heavily. "She would pick the worst time to decide to get close to someone. But despite my best efforts, you two used every day since you've met to get closer, and it's too late to undo what's been done."

"I'm sorry." His voice was full of pain. "But not for meeting and getting close to Maura. I couldn't help myself. I am very sorry to have made

things harder for her. I should've thought about that before being so selfish." That almost made me bolt around the corner to protest, but thankfully, Merina had a death grip on my hand.

"No!!" she whispered urgently.

"Now, see. It's just your saying something like that. That makes me wish Maura had met you in Vancouver. Because there is no undoing this move. Believe me when I say it's completely necessary and is the best thing in the world for her. But I've been thinking, and I was hoping you would consider going to college there? I would like to help out with the tuition, of course."

Merina and I jerked our heads around to look at each other in fresh astonishment. Frankly, I hadn't known my mother had that much money lying around. But that train of thought passed quickly, and I bent my head toward the conversation once again, so I could hear Ron's response.

Their voices sounded farther away. They must have switched positions, or maybe the wind was carrying them differently.

Ron was making a choking kind of sound, like he was *trying* to say something.

Caelyn cut the noise off with, "Now, now, I won't take no for an answer. It's nothing, really. And I look at your education as an investment in Maura's future, too."

Ron finally managed words. “Wow! That is incredible, but even if I could let you do that, I can’t leave. My mom...she’s sick. I can’t leave her.”

Oh...I hadn’t known that. I guess that explained the reason she’d been home the other day. I wondered why Ron had never said anything, but he definitely was the suffer-in-silence type.

“I see.” Caelyn sounded genuinely disappointed. “Well, I guess we’ll just have to see what the future brings.” Her voice had that far-away-sounding quality to it again, and I barely caught the words.

They swirled a whirlwind of worry inside my head. I’d somehow known there was something wrong with me. Mom telling me the weather in Vancouver would help my ‘condition...’ I should’ve realized it was something far beyond a sun sensitivity. I was craving strange, raw things, and I wasn’t about to chalk that up to the anemia she’d invented as an excuse. I seemed to be growing even paler those days, an outward sign of bad health. But my hair was lustrous with shine...more a sign of good health, but not enough to nullify the negative changes. And there was that thing about my teeth possibly rotting from the inside out—definitely *not* a good sign.

I was so confused. Happy my mother seemed to be far more accepting of Ron, but a little angry she would confide in him rather than in her own daughter. She’d practically told him something bad was

happening to me, but wouldn't admit the same to her own child. Didn't I have the right to know what was happening to my own body? Was the illness so horrible she couldn't bear to say the name to my face? Or did she just want to keep me from losing hope?

"Maura!" Merina's harsh whisper and frantic pull broke me out of my reverie. "They're coming, Maura! We have to get over to the porch."

I followed behind her, numbly, allowing myself to be dragged along.

I'd had to go home after that, walking wordlessly beside Caelyn down the two blocks back to our house. There were a million questions swarming within my head, but the only one I asked as we stepped up onto our front porch was, "Mom, how did you know where I was tonight?" I decided not to push my luck with inquiries as to how she'd arrived at precisely the right moment.

She pulled me into her side in a clumsy hug. "Maura, Sweetie, family is a special thing. There are times when we can really feel each other, when we know one of us is in trouble."

It was creeping me out the way she kept saying 'we,' instead of answering my question with any real tangibility.

I tried to focus on the fact Ron got to come over later. Of course, he couldn't leave in the middle of their first real gig. He'd wanted to, but I'd insisted he stay. I refused to be responsible for ruining their reputation

and any chances at booking future opportunities presented by the possible word-of-mouth referrals garnered by the current gig. Besides, someone had to wait until the ambulance got there to help the boy I'd inadvertently hurt. I'd wanted to do that, but Ron was insistent I go home, promising to come over as soon as the show was over. I had to wonder briefly if he'd been embarrassed by my behavior that night. If he wondered what was wrong with me as much as I.

We went into the living room, and I sat beside my mother on the couch. Since we were away from all other eyes, I could feel the vibrating resounding throughout my body. I finally had to ask the hardest question of all.

"Mom, why do I like the taste of blood?" My question came out barely above the volume of a whisper. "Why did I do what I did tonight?"

"Maura..." She took both of my hands into her own. "...you were only trying to help that boy. You were out there all alone and didn't have anything to press against his head to make the bleeding stop, did you?"

"No," I answered weakly.

"See there? Panic took over, and you were trying to stop the bleeding any way you knew how. Okay?"

I wanted to believe her, wanted to just give in to her words, but I wasn't quite there yet. "But, Mom, I remember being so...so hungry. I wanted to eat that..."

She cut me off, not allowing me to follow that line of thought any further. “You didn’t have dinner before you left, did you?” She had that scolding-mother tone to her voice.

“Well, no, but I did have some pizza at the party.” Oh! The party. Surely some reprimand and more grounding was coming in penance for that. Great. I was going to start my Vancouver life grounded.

Caelyn snapped me back to the previous point of conversation. “See, you were hungry, in a strange place and had an unexpected accident happen. You just panicked, Maura. That’s all.” There was a definite finality to her tone.

“I guess I’m in a lot more trouble.” I decided to accept her explanation for the moment since I wished for her words to be true. And I had to find out just how much trouble I was really in. My last few weeks with Ron were on the line. He might not even be allowed to come over at all.

I looked more closely at Caelyn, meeting her eyes, and couldn’t help but notice the strange, wistful look to them. Their green had a brightness I couldn’t remember ever seeing before.

“Well, as much as I’m very disappointed in you for lying to me...” She shot me a stern but fleeting look. “...I have to wonder if this isn’t partially my fault.”

Okay. I *had* to be dreaming. All I could do was wait for her to continue...until I possibly woke up in my bed.

“Now that I’ve had time to think about it, I realize that keeping you away from a boy you obviously like very much, when you’re about to move a country away from him, is pretty unfair. Don’t get me wrong; I expect this kind of behavior will never happen again, right?” Her expression was dangerous.

I promptly agreed by vigorously nodding my head and proclaiming, “Never!”

She continued. “So, for the rest of our time here, I’m going to suspend the grounding. And you will let me know exactly where you’re going and when you will be home at all times.”

I was ecstatic. “Thanks, Mom!” I sprung past the extra few inches between us to hug her.

She pulled back to look at me. “I *do* remember what it’s like to be your age and love someone.” She flinched at her own remark, as if she felt as surprised as I that she’d broach such a topic of conversation. Strangely, that soft dreaminess returned to her eyes. She sighed and picked up the remote. “Let’s watch a movie until Ron gets here, huh?”

“Sure!” I wasn’t going to say anything further, afraid that the wrong word would make her somehow change her mind.

“I’ll make the popcorn!” I rose to go into the kitchen while Caelyn flipped through the action and horror choices on Netflix.

12. The Last Few Weeks

The hour was very late by the time the third set had ended and Ron showed up at our house. Caelyn had retreated to bed, allowing me to wait up for him without argument. It was as if she'd let go of me a little, which felt nice. My mother had always bordered on psychotic overprotection. I understood her worry, what with my lack of social skills and peculiar ailments, but since I was getting older, I was enjoying such newfound freedom. I didn't know what had brought on her change of heart. Maybe she could see I was growing up, and finally realized I'd grown more capable of making decisions for myself. Or she could've just been feeling extremely sorry for me after everything she'd gone through herself with my father.

I guessed I would be going through some of that in the months to come, but for the moment, I wanted to focus on the last few weeks I had left with Ron.

He was just as happy as I was about the being ungrounded thing. We'd both been kind of worried about skipping so much school to be together, especially so close to finals—me more so than Ron. We could stay caught up while still being able to see each other every night, if we wanted. I wanted that...a lot.

Once we'd settled in on the couch, I kept waiting for him to run screaming away, at first. I had tried to bite him earlier after all. As usual, Ron was acting as though nothing strange had happened. I tried to relax, and he made it very easy to do so. We made a few tentative plans and then curled up to watch a creepy vampire movie together. I feigned being scared so I could cuddle into Ron's warm chest more closely, but vampires didn't really scare me. I thought they were beautiful and fascinating.

I made sure I didn't fall asleep with him out on the living room couch. I didn't want to push my luck with Caelyn's generosity. And I wanted to keep her trust, show her I could act like the adult she was beginning to see in me. I did, however, linger to kiss him goodnight, tilting my face up to his, trembling with anticipation, as it would be the first I'd receive that wasn't from my mother.

Turned out, Ron felt even more nervous about Caelyn than I.

"Not now, Maura, okay?" His eyes flicked to the hallway.

I knew why he was hesitant, but I couldn't help feeling a little rejected. My face must have betrayed some of the turmoil I was feeling, because, in the next instant he lifted my lowered chin with a finger.

"Hey, it's not that I don't think you are simply the most kissable person on Earth." His eyes bore into mine to drive the point home. "This is our

first kiss. I don't want to do it with one eye open, waiting for your mother to come down the hall and murder us both!"

"Yeah," I agreed reluctantly, "I guess you're right." Caelyn might have a coronary if she came out to the kitchen for a glass of water and saw her sixteen-year-old daughter making out on the couch with a boy at 3:00 AM. "Wow, it *is* really late! I'd better get to bed before she knows we're up together."

"I already know!" Caelyn's voice resounded from upstairs.

"Oh, crap!!! Goodnight!" I struggled to get up from the couch like my pajamas had caught fire.

Ron made me pause, taking my head into his hands. He leaned forward and planted a soft kiss on my forehead with those perfect, brown-pink lips. My skin burned, I was guessing with embarrassment, as much as I could put thought together in the moment. I somehow managed to get to my feet and mumbled, "Goodnight," feebly, as I stumbled to my room. I tripped over my own steps as I mounted the staircase. "I'm okay!" I called out before anyone could ask me the question.

I went to my bed and lay down, the dizziness almost consuming me. The silence was so heavy, it felt like it was crushing me against the little twin mattress. I had to get up to turn on my sleeping playlist. Ron's kiss still burned on my forehead, and I felt, suddenly, lethargic. But I couldn't take the stillness of the room. I staggered over to my computer and

pulled up iTunes, wishing Ron were here to share the music with me. My forehead was still burning. Wow...what would a real kiss from him do?

I always chose the shuffle option, and that time, Muse's "Endlessly" came up first. I considered that one, secretly, to be mine and Ron's song. At the moment, it served to confirm my belief we were meant to be. I felt a momentary lapse in my continual sadness, reveling in the conviction that, somehow, some way, we were. I had to have faith. I had to hold on to that. The kissmark burned fervently, as if in response.

I rose and went to lie on my bed. I cuddled my Timothy rabbit close and tried to sleep, but the thought of Ron downstairs was like caffeine, keeping me awake and restless. The sheets and blanket broke free from their tuck at the bottom of the bed after a couple of hours. My forehead still burned where he had kissed me, disturbing me, but I wrote it off as a figment of my imagination. As much as I tried to dismiss it, the spot burned on, as if someone were holding a lighted match to my skin.

The burning seemed to find its way into my blood as the night wore on, and I kicked the blankets free. The heat coursed through me, and when I finally found sleep, infected my dreams. The first thing I noticed was the heat, like flames licking at my skin, climbing higher and higher. My dream awareness sharpened, and I realized where the fire was coming from. I was kissing Ron, and it wasn't my forehead his sweet lips were pressed against. His mouth was on mine, building a fire within me that radiated

out onto every surface of my skin. The heat was so intense; I could feel each bead of sweat swell up in the small of my back and tickle as they slid downward.

Ron broke the kiss to murmur my name. "Maura..." Even the sound of his voice was heated.

But then there was cold, a cold so intense it burned my skin as well... just in a much different way. I felt it in my wrist... My right wrist captured by the sharp contrast of something icy wrapped around it. I didn't want to pull myself away from Ron, from the intense, all-consuming kiss, but I had to. The iciness was painful and made me want to escape.

I wrenched my mouth free to look up. There was a pale man gripping my arm. His eyes were an impossible shade of grey, bringing to mind midnight clouds stretched across a full moon....mercury threading its way up a thermometer. His light brown hair was just a shade darker than blonde and shot through with silver, as well. He was beautiful.

Ron's hand came up to my cheek to burn me again. He was so warm... I closed my eyes and pressed my face to his hand. The ice around my wrist intensified until the cold was unbearable. My eyes flew open yet again, and the young man's face was closer. His eyes bore into mine.

"What do you want from me?" I shrieked at him. I was angry he was trying to steal my attention away from Ron, but at the same time, felt

drawn to him.

The strange boy smiled at me, parting his slender but perfectly-shaped lips. They were blood-red and behind them emerged teeth as shiny as pearl. The canines were sharp, like deadly little daggers. And as I watched, they grew, becoming a lethal set of full-fledged fangs.

“Come with me, Maura,” he purred like a large, dangerous cat.

I awoke with a sharp start, sitting upright in my bed and stifling a short burst of scream with my Timothy rabbit I’d been holding in my arms. His body wasn’t substantial enough to keep Caelyn, and then Ron, from bursting into the room.

“Maura??” Overprotectiveness at its finest and in tandem.

“I’m fine,” I half sighed. “Just a nightmare.” I was trying very hard to resist the urge to roll my eyes. I smiled at Ron. “Guess we shouldn’t have watched that vampire movie last night.”

We were down to the last week of school. A week after was the move. But it was Saturday, and I was determined to push all other thought aside and enjoy the day. I decided to try and forget we were moving away, completely.

“You know, we really should study,” Ron said, behaving as the responsible one for once. His suggestion felt like a buzzkill after the stunningly-large breakfast we’d enjoyed. Caelyn had outdone herself.

Waffles, eggs, bacon...but she'd escaped to her home office toting a protein shake. I was proving to Ron I could annihilate him in any bacon eating contest he might ever initiate. He proved the opposite in the waffle department. I was finding more and more carbs just weren't my thing.

"That's a good idea," my mother called in response. "Don't you think so, Maura?"

"Sure," I answered, begrudgingly. I grimaced and rose from the table to put the plates in the dishwasher.

"After all the school you've been skipping, I'd think you need to play a little catch-up today." I couldn't miss the menace in her voice. Ron and I looked at each other, both wearing the same expression of disbelief.

"How did she..." Ron started to whisper.

"Oh, Caelyn knows all," I answered. I thought I heard a smug chuckle come from the living room area. My mother, way smarter than I gave her credit for even.

"Well, let's hit the books," I said as I closed the dishwasher door.

"I just have to run home and grab mine." I must have made a face. "Don't worry, Maura; I won't be gone long." Ron chuckled himself and ruffled my hair, much the way Caelyn did when I was upset or sad.

I did use the time he was gone to my advantage. My puffed up hair from the night before needed to be tamed, not to mention the lingering dark eyeliner and heavy mascara. After my shower, I put on

appropriately-boring jeans to protest the activities of the day—albeit spent studying with Ron—but chose a vibrant red top that screamed to me with its appeal when I saw it while rifling through my closet.

By the time I descended the stairs, Ron was already on our living-room couch, book in hand. But...he was talking to Caelyn. They both became mysteriously quiet as I cleared the stair landing. I had to fight the urge to accuse them of conspiring against me. I had a replay of that weird feeling there was something my mother wasn't telling me.

I brushed it off and asked, "Do you want to sit at the dining room table?"

"Sure!" Ron was agreeable about pretty much everything. "I guess that'll make it more businesslike. We do need to be serious." He adopted a very stoic expression, and I had to laugh.

Ron pulled my kitchen-table chair out for me, and I sat down with as much grace as I could muster. "Ow!"

"Maura?" he queried.

"I sat on my hair!" I noticed Caelyn was in the room immediately, hovering, expectantly.

How could it be so long? The last time I'd examined it in the mirror, about a week ago, it had fallen only to the middle of my waist. I was absolutely sure it hadn't touched the top of my jeans' waistband.

More weirdness. At that point, though, the oddity was more than I could bear. My voice was shaky as I mused aloud, "Hair can't grow that fast. It just can't." I eyeballed both of them. "How fast does hair grow? Like a quarter to a half inch a month right?" They both just stared at me like I had purple horns growing out of my forehead. "Mom! Ron! My hair is..." I reached down to verify. "...more than three inches longer than it was last week!"

Caelyn came over to me, and I received my second hair ruffle of the day. "Now, Mink, I think you're imagining things." I didn't miss the nervous twitch in her mouth and eyes.

Ron was, however, narrowing his eyes and looking at the hair that disappeared under my body. He looked suspiciously, to my surprise, at Caelyn, then back to my face. His expression was unreadable.

"Mom!" I exploded. "What is going on?!! My teeth, the hair, the cravings!!" I was close to the point of tears.

I could tell Mom was determined to calm me down. She looked at Ron and spoke to him in the same way he had to Shane the night before when insisting I'd been trying to help the boy who'd hit his head. "Ron, you haven't noticed anything strange about Maura, right?" She was pleading with her eyes.

"There's nothing strange about Maura." He spoke the words with utter sincerity.

I started to whimper and rock back and forth in my chair, pulling my knees up into my chest. They were lying to me, and something horrible was going to happen. I'd wake up one day in the hospital...or worse, one day I wouldn't wake up at all. Didn't they respect or love me enough to tell me the truth?

"Maura!" My mother came over to put her arms around me. "You're completely overreacting. You've been eating so much meat lately and growing so much! It's normal. Teenagers have growth spurts, and your diet's been better... Ron, don't you think she's overreacting?"

Ron looked down at me. It was almost like he was examining me. He pushed my hair out of my eyes and looked deep into them....and started a bit. He couldn't cover that up. He'd seen something which prompted him to react. Something in my eyes? But his lips said, "You look fine, Maura. Better than fine."

I must not have appeared convinced. He asked my mother, "Ms. DeLuca, can I borrow your laptop?"

She wordlessly went to retrieve it. I eyed him with suspicion. I still thought my mom was sharing something with him she was failing to reveal to me.

He sat down with the MacBook and typed in a Google search. A few seconds later, he called me over. "Come here and look at this, Maura, Ms. DeLuca." He had a very confident air about him as he clicked on

links from the two browser windows open on the computer. "See. The effect of hormones on the body. They can do all kinds of strange things." He showed me an article about how a flux of hormones could cause strange cravings. The next web page was about a girl who'd experienced very fast hair and nail growth by adding extra protein into her diet. As I read, I started to relax. As it turned out, hormones could cause extreme changes in the body. And as Ron pointed out with another site he'd found, one of the most volatile times for hormone production was during the teen years when the body became flooded with them.

"Being a teenager is *very* overwhelming," Caelyn said softly. She was looking at Ron with gratitude. "Don't think I'm so old I don't remember being one myself." She patted my hair comfortingly.

"Mom, you're not old..." I noticed she was going back to the oven. Caelyn liked to cook bacon in the oven. She definitely wasn't a fan of grease splatter. More bacon? Yum.

"Here you go." She set a plate piled high between us. *Way to distract me Mom.* Her diversion totally worked. I grabbed up a couple of pieces, burning my fingers but not caring, and then scorching the roof of my mouth.

Caelyn laughed. "Well, there you go! Maura's healthy appetite is still intact!" I noticed Ron didn't laugh, though. He looked lost in thought.

He was creeping me out, so I nudged him, hard, with my elbow. "Hey, snap out of it! We have studying to do, remember?" I shot him an evil look since our sentence of boredom had been his idea.

"Oh yeah." He shook his head as if to clear it and opened his Trig book. Ughhhh.

Within a half hour, though, I found myself wrapping my head around the problems, so I actually ended up helping him study. "Wow, you must be really great at math." Caelyn choked on laughter that she tried to pass off as a cough. I shot her an unimpressed look.

"No," I admitted, feeling myself blush, "actually, I'm pretty terrible at it."

"It's her worse subject," my mother interjected.

"Thanks, Mom!" I shot daggers at her with my eyes. "Didn't you have work to do in your office?" She left the room, smirk intact.

"Well, you *are* still taking algebra...maybe you just have a thing for Trig." Ron shrugged his shoulders and went back to the book.

After we'd finished up with that subject, we moved on to my English final, which would include essay questions on Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*. I tried to voice what I planned to write on paper, but it was so hard to concentrate, looking into Ron's dark hazel eyes. I wasn't mesmerized enough to miss his changing expression, though. His mouth fell open, but I couldn't tell if he was impressed by my argument or horrified at my lack of coherent thought.

“Wow...Maura!” His eyebrows shot up in astonishment. “Just how many times did you read this?”

My detail must have been lacking, even though I thought I'd been careful to cite enough passages from the play. “Oh, I don't refer back to the text enough?” My brain went back over my words, trying to figure out where I'd gone wrong.

Ron was shaking his head, vehemently. “No! Maura, you practically quoted, word for word, every scene you referenced! Wow!! I wish I had a photographic memory like that.”

“Are you sure?” I knew I'd never been much good at memorizing before. I'd failed my French vocab test, miserably, a few weeks ago. He nodded his head, looking at me like I was being ridiculous. I mulled that idea over. Oh well, I'd always loved English. It was my best subject, and *Romeo and Juliet* was a long-time favorite.

The rest of the afternoon went much the same way. I caught on fast to the subjects Ron was taking in his senior-year classes and, even with the time away from class, remembered all the important stuff from my own. A break must've really done my brain good! Maybe getting a sneak peek at Ron's course material would help me with my own senior year.

“Wow, Maura, you're a brainiac!” Ron marveled. “If you keep this up, maybe we can go back to having some fun this week.”

“Please wait until finals are over!” Caelyn’s hearing was far too sensitive.

But she was definitely forgiven when she ordered us a Meat Lover’s Pizza for lunch. I was so hungry, just like in the weeks past. *Completely normal,* I reminded myself. *Growing takes so much energy!* I wolfed down my sixth piece without any further worry, laughing at Ron for trying in vain to catch up.

“Here.” Ron pushed his English textbook at me. The page was open to Poe’s poem, “The Raven.” “Let’s try a little experiment.”

“What do you mean?” I queried, looking down at the text.

“You read over the poem just once. Then close the book and repeat back as much as you can remember.”

“Don’t be silly.” I felt uneasy about his little test and slid the book back in his direction.

“Come on, please! I’m completely envious of your memory.” He smiled, and my heart softened a bit. “For me?”

I sighed heavily and pulled the book back. “Oh, alright. I still think it’s silly.” I lowered my eyes and read over the text slowly, trying to commit each word to memory. After I was done, I handed the large textbook back to him.

“Okay, no peeking!” He hunched over the book, covering the top edges with his hands, so I couldn’t see.

I quoted back as much as I could remember but felt pretty sure I'd missed a large chunk from the middle. But when I was finished reciting, Ron's mouth was agape.

"Perfect," he breathed, clearly astonished.

"No way," I shot back. "I know I missed some of the middle."

"But you didn't, Maura. You got every word." His voice held a slight tremor. "That's crazy. It's almost supernatural."

I started in my seat as if his words had struck me like physical objects.

As if on cue, Caelyn came bustling into the room, slamming a stack of folders onto the dining-room table, making both Ron and I jump in our seats.

"Okay, I think that's enough studying." There was a very strained smile on her face. "You kids have been at it for hours! I think it definitely *is* time for some fun."

A reprieve from my mother was enough to break me out of my reverie. "Yay! What do you have in mind, Mom?"

I just wished Ron looked as happy about the break as I felt. He seemed miles away again, and I couldn't help but curse my own DNA. Maybe the reason Caelyn never spoke of my father was because of the freaky characteristics she wished I hadn't inherited.

Later that night, as I got ready for bed, something jumped out at me from the mirror. I was brushing my teeth but stopped abruptly when I noticed the difference in my eyes. Was the sight before me the thing which had startled Ron earlier? There was a black ring around the outside of the dark-brown irises. I knew it hadn't been there before, and the difference screamed out at me then. But that wasn't all. There was an eerie ring of color around the ebony pupil, as well, small and thin—so much so the slight change was barely perceptible—but colored a frightening tinge of faint crimson.

I felt my knees buckle as I fixated on the extreme change in my eyes. True, I had been closely examining my face when I'd noticed it, but for anyone familiar, the difference was impossible to miss. I was positive my eyes had been their normal black-brown yesterday. The rosiness ringing the area around my pupil wavered in my sight as I gripped the edge of the porcelain washbasin, trying desperately to hold on to consciousness.

Somehow, despite our spotty attendance record of the last couple of weeks, Ron and I both managed to pass our finals with flying colors. Caelyn took us to Olive Garden in Monroeville to celebrate. Ron was vanquished by me in a pasta-eating contest, shaking his head and looking me over, saying he couldn't figure out where I put it all. We fed each other Zeppoli for dessert, Caelyn trying to look anywhere but at the

two of us. I couldn't help but feel guilty for being so happy near Ron but soberly remembered our fast-approaching departure and didn't feel quite so bad. Very soon, I would become acquainted with the same loneliness as my mother. I found it strangely comforting to think we could at least suffer together in our new Canadian existence.

I'd kept waiting for Ron to kiss me, but somehow it'd never happened. That night was no different. Caelyn ended up hanging out with us the rest of the night. We were watching another horror movie, her brand of entertainment. After I'd fallen asleep, Ron must've carried me to my bed, because that's where I woke up, my last memory snuggling into Ron on the couch. My mother had squeezed in close on my other side, making the night so cozy and warm. It was one of those rare, perfect moments that happen too infrequently, causing you to wish they could last forever.

The comfort also made waking alone in my bed feel extra lonely. I ripped away the covers and stormed down the stairs, hoping, somehow, Ron would be sleeping on the couch. I wasn't disappointed. Caelyn had been unbelievably lax about his sleeping over—always on the couch, of course—and Ron seemed to be grasping at every possible moment we had left, just like me. I felt our time together roaring away like a riptide.

I thought about how strange the passage of time could be. The moments you wanted to hold on to the most always ended up slipping away, like the tide pulling away from the shore...constant, unstoppable.

Like the fluid waves of the ocean, there could be no holding life back, no gripping of time in your mortal hands. I could feel the only life I'd known, and Ron along with it, slipping away while I stood on shifting, ever-drifting sand. Tears stung my eyes...but there was the beautiful smell of bacon coming from the kitchen...

She may not have been happy about my dating, but Caelyn liked Ron. Of course she did. If not for him, I'd have been a corpse on the bottom of the river, instead of the pale-as-death, living girl standing before her then.

"You have two hours," my mother said on our last day in Indiana, Pennsylvania. She turned but did flash Ron a smile over her shoulder before going back into the house to supervise the movers packing our U-Haul.

The desperate need to cry had closed my throat, so I was thankful when Ron said, "You wanna go for a hike?"

I managed to squeak out a "Sure!"

We drove to a trailhead we'd meant to explore before, but much of the last week had been spent with Caelyn. She was anxious, needy and had been acting very peculiar. Every time the phone rang she jumped. As the move crept closer, she'd fidgeted and craved constant companionship. My mother had behaved very unlike her usual self.

One positive side effect of her nervous new mood was constant cooking. I'd always been the one on kitchen duty, but Caelyn had taken over with a vengeance. She must have read that Atkins Diet book or something, because we had protein, and not much else, at every meal. She did try to throw in the occasional salad, but those were highly unappetizing. The smell of the green leaves made me nauseous, and I found the taste to be unbearable.

I was contemplating the past days so hard, barely noticing when Ron shut the car off. Mechanically, I got out and climbed behind him up the steep grade leading into the woods, snapping out of my daze when he grabbed for my hand. His grasp was warm and tight, overly warm, telling me my own skin had adopted the all-too-familiar wintery chill. But leaving Ron behind was more than enough to chill the blood in my veins. Leaving him behind felt like a part of me was dying. I let him drag my numb body along until we reached the top of the trail.

Since the moment had arrived that we really had to say goodbye, I found I couldn't bear it. I sat beside him in the grass thinking of all the possible could-have-beens. I looked over at him, and he was staring straight ahead, his long ponytail trailing halfway down his back. Brown silk against the white of his shirt. I didn't want any regrets. On that day, I would do what I wanted and create remembrances, instead of always holding back. Reaching up, I slipped my finger under the band restraining

his hair to pull the strands free. They fanned out over his shoulders straight and shimmering, hair any girl would envy. He turned to me with undeniable surprise in his eyes. It was uncharacteristic for me to do such a bold thing.

I shrugged. "I like your hair like that." I refused to apologize for anything in those last moments.

He didn't smile. "It's too bad you won't be here for your birthday," he said sadly. I suddenly felt guilty I'd told my mother two months ago we could go ahead and leave before the date. But I'd had no way of knowing I could've made special plans.

He had something in his hand, a something he placed in mine. He left behind a small purple box tied with a gold bow. "Happy Birthday early," he said.

I felt tears welling in my eyes. "You didn't have to," I breathed. The box was from the jewelry store in the mall. *I* was the mystery birthday girl!

"Of course I did. Open it."

My hand was shaking as I untied the shiny ribbon. I gently removed the glossy paper, wanting to save it, intact, for my scrapbook. When I finally managed to open the small box, I found a locket. The charm was small and heart-shaped. On the front was etched a black sliver of moon. It was ideal—beautiful and conventional, with a touch of dark mystery. I loved it. "It's perfect."

“I know how much you love the moon.”

Then, I remembered the necklace’s purpose, pushed on the release to pry the heart open. It was empty inside. I was disappointed he hadn’t included a picture. I looked to him with confusion, holding the locket open. “Did you forget something?”

“Nope. We’ll put our pictures in there the next time we see each other.” He promised with assurance in his tone. “And I know we will.” He locked his near-brown eyes on mine. “And we won’t have to say goodbye again.”

Had we really only been aware of each other for little more than a month? Suddenly, it felt like he’d been with me a much more significant amount of time. “I—I hope you’re right.” I closed my eyes and concentrated on holding back the sobs threatening to escape. I felt his breath on my lips.

I opened my eyes in shock, just as he softly leaned forward to press his mouth to mine. I’d always wondered what my first kiss would be like, and here it was, all softness and warmth. But there was more. It was as if my blood started to burn, threatening to sear through my flesh. The feeling was on the edge of being painful. I tried to tell myself the heated rush must be embarrassment, extremely annoyed the discomfort was stupidly distracting me from the gentle way Ron parted my lips with his own. The strange burning ran in curling, circular patterns as if irons were branding intricate designs on my insides. A moment later the intense heat

faded away, and I felt calm settle over me. Ron twitched in my arms as if he were feeling what I had a moment before. The kiss became more peaceful. But that didn't last.

I was turning over and over the strange idea that someone so new to me had become so essential. I *belonged* right here. I wished I could never leave his arms, my calm turning to desperation. I never wanted to let him go. I raised my arms and pulled him closer with one, the hand of the other memorizing the texture of his hair as I ran my fingers over the silken strands again and again. His arms reached out for me too, pulling me into his lap.

My thoughts cried out, *This is so unfair! I don't *want* to go!* I'd been disappointed to leave him, yes, but at the moment found the thought unbearable. Was that what it was to kiss someone?

Our kiss was growing into something else, so he pulled back. I knew he'd be like that. I was beginning to cry, my head exploding with my then-desolate thoughts. The tears hovered at the edge of my lower lashes, and I knew they would spill over and give away the depth of what I was feeling at any second. He was staring at me in disbelief.

"Maura!" He pushed me from his lap to my great shock. "Are you hurt? Did that tree branch hit you in the eyes?" He brought his hands up to my face, his thumbs pressing under my eyes. He was scrutinizing them in a way that began to frighten me.

“Wh—what?” was all I could manage.

“Here, let me see.” He pulled back and tore his shirt over his head. I felt a thrill run through my stomach, looking at his bare chest, despite the fact that his words were freaking me out. He balled the shirt up and dabbed at my eyes.

“What’s wrong,” I spat out, unsettled by his troubled expression.

“Please, tell me!” I turned what I was sure was a frantic look on him. He kept dabbing gently, looking very serious...and unnervingly wide-eyed.

Surprisingly calm, he said, “Your eyes are bleeding.”

I gasped in horror. “What?!” I squealed. I pushed his shirt-filled hands back to find garish streaks crisscrossing the white cotton.

I tried to calm myself, nausea rising from the pit of my stomach, and was, in the next instant, terrified of throwing up in front of him—or on him. I blinked heavily, trying to concentrate on my eyes instead. There wasn’t any pain.

“They don’t hurt...” I allowed the logical part of my brain to take over, swallowing the panic. “Look closer, are they cut or something?” My hands belied my rational thought, shaking intolerably.

He bent and pulled my eyelids up and down, instructing me to look in different directions as he peered closely. “Weird.” He still looked startled. “There’s nothing.”

I was suddenly glad there was only a short walk back to the car ahead of us. I felt faint. First the kissing, and I'd somehow injured myself? Pure emotional overload.

He was gazing at me with fright in his eyes. I reached out to cover one of his hands with my own. "Hey, I'm fine. Nothing hurts, okay?" I pressed the fingers of my other hand against my closed eyes to test my own statement. Still, I felt no pain.

He didn't look convinced, so I promised profusely I would have Caelyn take me to the emerg as soon as I got home if the bleeding continued. He blotted at my eyes with a fresh patch of the shirt again. The fabric came away spotless. He seemed to relax a little.

"Whew, that really scared me," he admitted, eyeing me up suspiciously. "It really was weird. Were you crying?"

I turned as red as my shirt. "I—I..." Could I tell him how much the impending separation was, abruptly, hurting me? Should I?

"Actually," he said, since the emergency seemed to have passed, "I'm finding this really hard to accept." He turned away as if he were struggling with the grief as much as I. He looked back at me, though, before continuing. "I know you think we just found each other, Maura, but you have no idea how long I've wanted to be with you. Ever since we've gone to school together, I've watched you. Watched you go to class, eat lunch,

read your books in the library. And I wished I could just have the chance to talk to you.”

I felt my mouth drop open in shock. How had I never noticed?

“I guess I just always thought you were too pretty. I could never find the courage to even say hi to you. Not in all those years.” He gave me that heartfelt smile of his. “It’s just like me to wait until you’re moving a whole country away to be able to talk to you.”

I didn’t know which I found more shocking. The miracle that he found me pretty instead of strange looking or the fact I’d been so clueless. How had I never noticed a boy’s eyes following my every move for all my school life?

The moment was too heartbreaking. What kind of magic was his kiss, leaving my heart and mind full of him? My brain called up images to torture me as I pictured how different those years could have been. They filled in the loneliest gaps of my high school years with illusory hand-in-hand strolls, gentle kisses and cuddling into his shoulder while watching a movie on my living-room couch. I could picture us lying on my bed reading one of my favorite novels, opening presents together at Christmas... Ron taking my hand and twirling me as we danced in the rain.

“We could’ve done so many things together....” His voice trailed off. The way he spoke made me wonder if he might’ve been playing the

same sad movie in his own mind.

I tried to choke back fresh tears, but what I'd been imagining had them running freely down my cheeks. I wondered how Caelyn would take it if I demanded to stay here, even though I knew remaining behind was impossible.

His expression shifted while I was gazing into his eyes, hiding an emotion that had started to creep in and alter his expression. His eyes had broadcast shock—or had that been fear—when I'd begun to cry. In the next instant, he smiled warmly and used his shirt to clear away the latest round of tears.

The locket was lying in my lap, and he fished the chain out. His fingers nimbly undid the clasp in one try, and he stepped behind me so he could fasten it around my neck. He kissed my forehead, the tip of my nose, and finally my lips, very softly.

I'd closed my eyes, and when I opened them, his held my gaze. His eyes were soft, just like his heart. Their darkness was full of promise. "I know how you see yourself, Maura. But I'll take you just the way you are. Everything you are."

I crushed my face into his shoulder then to hide. Hide from all the things too late to say, all the missed opportunities that were just too much to take. "Thank you," was all I could say without breaking down. Wasn't that what every human wished for—unconditional acceptance?

A bit later, after one last hug and sweet kiss at the car, my eyes fell upon the shirt he'd carelessly tossed into the backseat. The cotton was far more streaked with red than I'd remembered.

He observed my scrutiny and put his hand under my chin so he could turn my face back to his, then opened his mouth to speak.

"You know, no matter what you say, it's going to start the waterworks again," I said in a hoarse whisper. The agony over leaving him was a feeling I didn't like at all. I knew all the months stretched out before me would be wrought with pain. I fought to turn my thoughts to something more pleasant. "Why don't you come visit?" I brightened a bit. "Very soon!!"

"Yeah!" he said and smiled then too. "I'll be working over the summer to save up for a plane ticket." I tried to imagine what a flight to Vancouver might cost.

"But..." he began again, and that time he spoke hesitantly. "I'm going to ask again." He looked down at the ground for a moment, but then his eyes bore into mine, shining with a fierceness I'd never seen in them before. "Why don't you stay?"

My eyes popped wide at his question, even though that was the second time he'd suggested such a thing. "Stay?!"

"I can take care of you," he persisted. "We can just run away together."

As violently as I wanted to stay with him, I knew I just couldn't do that to Caelyn. And...I couldn't believe he was really suggesting something so rash... It just wasn't like *him* to be so emotional and irrational. My eyes narrowed as I peered at him. He looked a little like he was half asleep; there was a glazed look to his eyes. I laid my hand on his shoulder and shook him softly.

"Hey, are you okay?"

He shook his head slightly and took my hands in his. "I'm fine," he muttered, but his voice sounded distant.

"Hey," I said more gently, wrapping my hand around his arm in a gesture of comfort and solidity. "You know we can't do that, right?"

He didn't answer, dropping his eyes to the ground. I had no idea what he was thinking...

"I know about your mom," I added quietly.

That got his attention. The haze cleared from his eyes, and he looked at me with surprise. "How do you..."

"That's not important," I said, and it felt like my words further ripped my heart from my chest as I spoke them, "but I know. And you can't run away from that. And I can't run away from Caelyn. Or Vancouver." I was steadfast in my resolve, suddenly. As devastating as the situation was, I knew absolutely that the present wasn't the time for Ron and me to be together. I didn't know how I knew, because I was just a stupid teenager.

And he was my first love...but I knew. "Your mom needs you. And mine needs me." The steadfast, responsible Maura had returned.

I thought he was going to cry, even as hard as he was fighting against the urge. But the depth of his response also gave me hope. I knew I wasn't alone in the grief of temporarily losing one another. I knew he was taking the separation just as hard as I was, and in that there was strength. That would bring us back to each other. "We'll be together again, and when that happens, it will be forever."

I said that to Ron with complete conviction, because I knew, above all else, my revelation was true. Everything else became a blur. The drive back to the house. Leaving with Caelyn in the U-Haul, his perfect face in the rearview mirror. The forty-four-hour drive, with intermittent stops at hotels I couldn't recall the next day. I think I ate, but I don't remember any appetite after telling him goodbye. The only things that stood out about our journey to our new home in Canada were the tears that wouldn't stop coming and the slow, painful fracture of my heart into an infinite number of broken pieces.

13. Vancouver!...Well, New Westminster

My mother's decision to move had been brought on abruptly, so we were moving into an apartment for a while, affording us the luxury of taking our time to find a more permanent option. As well, the house back in Pennsylvania hadn't sold yet, leaving Caelyn a bit short on down-payment funds, despite her higher-than-average salary.

The apartment turned out to be perfect. It was a spacious two-bedroom corner suite, smaller than our little house in Pennsylvania, but just enough to have a cozy feel. Caelyn even let me have the bigger bedroom, though I'd protested vehemently.

After we'd arrived and everything started to be a little less about leaving Ron behind, I tried to find purpose—I was hungry for distraction. It was still early June, with more than two months remaining until I could find myself lost in the world of a new classroom with an ocean of assignments to drown in.

For the moment, my mission became ensuring the internet was up and running as soon as possible. Our new carrier was a company called TELUS, and they had an internet-based TV service Caelyn wanted to try. That meant new wiring, which ultimately meant a delay in service...or in my world, a delay in emailing Ron. Caelyn's company was snail-mailing her a new cell phone with a Vancouver number, which meant we didn't

need a home phone. I could've called Ron, but I knew that would be expensive. I'd attempted to once, at one of the few remaining pay phones in North America—the 7-11 around the corner. I'd desperately fed the slot change so that I could continue to hear the sound of his voice, but that hadn't lasted anywhere near long enough. Oh well, at least he knew we'd arrived safely. And after the operator had come on to ask me for the last lingering coins in my palm he'd stammered, "I-I-I love you, Maura."

I hadn't even had time to answer him, and that was eating away at my very soul.

Which was probably why I followed the TELUS guy around our apartment, asking not once, but twice, how much longer he would be. Caelyn had obviously picked up on my obsession and ushered me, quite unwillingly, out of the house. I followed her sullenly around the local mall, positive I could have been emailing Ron at that moment if we'd just stayed home.

I hadn't even noticed we'd gone into a TELUS store until Caelyn slapped an iPhone into my palm.

I looked up at her in shock, and she rolled her eyes. "Here, Maura." She added quickly, "On one condition! You stop moping around once you can talk to him again."

I was gaping at her, unable to speak.

She stood behind me and started tapping the screen. I'd never had a cell phone before. I tried to follow the movements of her nimble, practiced fingertips.

"He has one too," she said softly. I felt my eyes mist over. "See, I already put his number into your phone."

I felt my eyes light up.

"For texting! International calls are expensive, so we'll discuss any of those before you make them. Am I clear?"

I nodded like a bobble-headed idiot. The generosity of my mother was breaking my heart all over again, but in a warm way. I clumsily managed to compose a short message and hit send. I felt a tear escape, right there in the middle of the crowded store, when Ron texted back.

I 'm glad you feel that way too! :)

The rest of the summer was pretty uneventful. Caelyn and I fell back into our normal old routine. Me, hanging around the house cleaning, watching anime and video gaming, and my mother working away most of her waking hours. The seasonal temperatures were quite noticeably milder close to the ocean in British Columbia, but I still preferred staying indoors.

I took over the kitchen again, once my mother saw that I was adopting her protein-packed menu. I enjoyed walking up to the Safeway, which was about two blocks from our house and bringing home a bag full of

bloody beef. I'd taken to sneaking raw steaks, drinking the blood from the Styrofoam trays when the meat was all gone, like a child finishing the milk from an upturned cereal bowl. Of course, I was the only one home when I consumed my treat. I felt horrified by my actions each and every time, but the taste was so heavenly I couldn't stop. I thought maybe I understood how a drug addict might feel because it seemed impossible for me to go more than a week without one of my fixes.

Caelyn was adjusting well to the new office and clientele. She must have been a little stressed, though, as evidenced by the bundle of energy she'd become. She was always on edge, pushing herself even harder, working far into the night and running on very little sleep. It was a good thing she'd picked up an addiction of her own—Starbucks. But only high-test, not the fattening, fancy lattes. Caelyn had always been careful about her weight, not that I'd ever noticed an ounce of weight gain during our time together.

The major difference in *my* life came in the form of missing someone. Of course, I'd always felt the emptiness brought about by my father's absence, but there wasn't a clear picture in my head of the someone I had to do without. With Ron, the situation had played out entirely different, getting to know him, and *then* having him disappear from my daily routine, which made learning about email, instant messenger and texting—things I'd never really had a need for before—necessary parts of

my survival. When my mother introduced me to Skype, I thought I might just be able to survive the summer.

We always called our Skype conversations 'date night.' And I was as fussy with my hair and choice of clothes as if the chat were a real, live date. I would've loved to be able to see his face and languish in those deep, green-brown eyes every night of the week. But after a five-night run, Caelyn had stated I was becoming obsessed, so we committed to a three-night schedule...with lots of texting in between.

As much as I looked forward to Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday nights when I could see his face again, saying goodbye at the end of an hour—a time restriction also in place to appease my mother—left me feeling hollowed out inside. I was sure I knew just how jack o'lanterns must feel.

Caelyn kept saying life would get easier, but my melancholy only seemed to grow worse. If I went too long without speaking to him, the image of his face burned in my mind like a hot iron, pushing through my brain and demanding my full attention. He made an appearance in my dreams every single night.

When August was drawing to a close, I had to face the fact that my hermit-style existence, with which I'd grown quite comfortable, was coming to an end. I dreaded the new school, the sea of unfamiliar faces. Ron noticed the change in me.

“You aren’t saying much tonight,” he pointed out. It was the last Saturday before school started. Usually, I felt jubilant when summer was finally coming to an end.

“Sorry!” I tried to perk up. “Hey, how’s your mom?”

He lost his smile, and I wished I hadn’t brought the subject up. “It’s not good,” was all he would say. Over the course of our summer conversations, I’d found out his mother had cancer. He wouldn’t talk much about her illness, but I got the idea the disease had been caught much too late.

“Sorry,” I said again, scarcely above a whisper, casting my eyes down into my lap.

“It’s okay, Maura. It’s very sweet of you to think of her.” He changed the subject quickly. “But, hey, have you seen your new school yet?”

“No.” I couldn’t help the sullenness tainting my tone. I didn’t dare look up.

“Ah, so that’s it!”

My eyes shot up to screen level. “What’s it?” I widened my eyes in false innocence.

“The reason you aren’t yourself. You’re worried about the new school.”

“Not really,” I tried to lie, averting my eyes.

“Nice try.” He smirked. “I know you too well now for that to work. It won’t be that bad. You’ve got to at least give it a chance.”

“Easy for you to say. You don’t even have to go back to stupid high school.” I pouted. “You get to start college.” I wished he’d been able to take my mother up on her offer and start at the University of British Columbia. Then, I might be a little happier about attending a new school. With a whole slew of strangers, in a new country. Okay, probably not.

“I’ve heard that Canadians are very friendly people, so I’m sure you’ll love it.” He offered me a smile tinged with sadness. “And my course load is really heavy, so you shouldn’t envy me at all!” He ruffled his hair back out of his eyes with one hand and chuckled a little, but it sounded tense. I wished, for the millionth time, we were back in Pennsylvania so I could be there—and not just on a computer screen—to help him with all he was going through.

“Hey,” I realized, “you never told me what your major’s going to be.” The hour was quickly coming to an end. I wanted him to focus on something positive before we had to say goodnight.

His smile became genuine. “I decided to go for Music Ed.”

“Wow, a music teacher! Very cool.” I offered my best smile in return.

“Yeah, you know, in case the whole band thing doesn’t work out.” His grin spread.

“And miss out on all those groupies?” I raised an eyebrow.

His eyes softened. “Maura, you’re the only groupie I want.”

“Maura!” Caelyn called from the kitchen.

"I know; time's up!" I shouted back.

"Actually..." She stuck her head in the room. "...I was going to see if you want to order pizza. But you are right; time's up." She grinned at me mischievously. "Hi, Ron." She waved at the computer screen.

I stuck my tongue out at her while they exchanged pleasantries. "Pizza sounds great! With lots of meat," I added.

"No problem." She mussed my hair, and I made a small sound of protest. "We can celebrate your last bit of freedom before school starts."

I made a sour face, and Caelyn made a hasty exit.

"Awww, come on, Maura, cheer up. I want my girl to be happy."

I would've been happier if he'd been bringing the pizza over himself, but the claim of ownership made me smile in spite of everything else.

"That's better. Now, come here and kiss me goodnight."

We both leaned in to kiss our computer screens. Nowhere near as good as the real thing...but far, far better than nothing at all.

14. School Daze

Monday morning came with the unstoppable eventuality of all dreaded things. Funny, when we'd first moved here, I'd have paid good money for the distraction of assignments...lots of them...but my sheltered, safe, almost dreamlike summer had brought on the realization those assignments would be paired with countless unfamiliar faces. More people to treat me like I didn't belong? Or would Canada somehow, magically differ from my past school-year experiences? For that outcome, I didn't hold much hope and found the prospect of getting out of bed to be quite the hefty challenge.

"Come on now, Mink." Caelyn was finally reduced to physically rousing me from my bed, coming into my room and ripping the blankets away from my pajama-clad body. "I cleared the first part of my morning, so I'll drive you." I didn't move and eyed her with disinterest. "I'll even walk in with you if you like?"

I mulled over her suggestion for a moment and mulled over the thought not much could make me less popular than I'd already been all of my life to date. I figured I was entitled to a little comfort. "Okay," I agreed and skulked off to the bathroom to get ready.

After a quick shower, I dressed in a black-velvet dress with matching leggings and went in search of eggs and meat. After, I returned to the

bathroom to add a bit of powder I really didn't need to my alabaster-pale cheeks, calling forth my lashes with a bit of black mascara and brushing out my long, dark hair. Caelyn had trimmed the ends up a few inches at the beginning of the summer, but at present it was long enough for me to sit on again. It had continued to gain luster and shone darkly under the bathroom lights, falling into meandering waves. I was amazed. My hair had never been so luxuriously beautiful before. My reflection made me smile as I pinned the front-most locks out of my eyes with Hello Kitty clips Caelyn had found at the mall for me. A moment later, I remembered the throng of strangers I'd have to face and quickly pulled them free, letting the thick strands fall forward to better hide my face.

It turned out, though, high school in Canada offered experiences completely unlike my past years in Pennsylvania. The classes were made up of a mix of kids from all over the world. The faces didn't all blend together, and it seemed almost everyone was different in his or her own way. Of course, I got the usual 'new-girl' stares, but I reassured myself with the reminder I was someone they weren't used to yet. I had several people approach and introduce themselves, but no one stood out. Ron weighed too heavily on my mind all day.

I wondered how his first day of classes was going. Then, deliberated whether or not Caelyn would let me change our Skype night so I wouldn't have to find out bit-by-bit over the course of many texts. Strategizing a

way to bend my mother to my will filled up the last couple of hours of school, although I did manage to scrawl down my list of assignments... My new Canadian teachers weren't wasting any time. I couldn't even get all the books I needed into my backpack.

The school was only about a half hour walk from our apartment building, so I decided to ditch the bus and get some fresh air. The weather was perfect—one of those mild September days announcing the arrival of fall. Ron had an evening class, so I had time to kill. I sent him a text on my way home, letting him know I'd try to convince Caelyn to let us 'see' each other that night. He immediately sent back a little smiley face. I felt the urge to text again, to ask if he was having a break from class, but managed to restrain myself.

Once home, I busied myself with housework and the preparation of spaghetti, with huge meatballs, and a pan of garlic bread, trying to fill in the hours until my mother arrived home from work and Ron from university.

At times, I was distracted by the noises in the building. The walls must have been thin in places, because I could hear voices and other household sounds emanating from the other units. The sounds echoed on top of each other, coming from the apartments next door, across the hall, overhead...very strange acoustics indeed. At one point, I would've sworn our next door neighbor was in the same room with me, singing her

hushed lullaby to her infant daughter. The remainder of the hour was spent with the volume cranked on the latest *Final Fantasy* game—I'd acquired a PlayStation pity upgrade from my mother—shutting out all the overwhelmingly-close sounds bearing down on me.

As soon as Caelyn sauntered through the door, I pounced, begging with unrivaled conviction that finding out about Ron's first day—and recounting my own—was of vital importance. My mother's mood had drastically improved since we'd moved to Vancouver. She was actually beaming down at me...clearly amused by my frantic attempt to sway her decision...during my whole argument, leaving me hanging in silence when I'd finally finished. I was certain she was doing so on purpose. I widened my eyes to emphasize I was awaiting a response.

"Sure, go ahead, why not." She waved a hand carelessly in the air.

I was immediately suspicious. "Are you okay?"

"Yes, of course. Just a very productive day at work. We got the contract for that fancy new hotel." She looked extremely proud of herself—she'd been schmoozing that client all summer. That explained her upgraded mood. Lucky me for wanting something on exactly the right day!

"Congrats!" I gave her an enthusiastic hug before running off to my beloved laptop. "Oh, do you mind to turn the sauce down in five?"

“No problem!” Was that a giggle? From Caelyn? Oh well, strange behavior aside, at least she was happy.

Once settled at my computer desk, I logged into Skype...to find a surprise. I had a new friend request...from Merina! I clicked to accept and saw she was online. Perfect timing, because Ron was not, and I hadn't talked to her, excepting one email, since we'd moved.

As I slid the mouse to place a call to her, one from her came through first. I answered, and my screen was filled with her radiant, pixie-like features. “Hi, Maura!” she squealed.

“Merina! It's so great to see you! How's everything there?”

She rolled her eyes. “Oh, just as boring as ever. My parents finally got me a laptop for my birthday, so now we can talk to each other! But who cares about tiny Indiana; how is *Vancouver*?” She breathed the last word as if I lived in some fairytale forest or something.

“Well, it's not horrible...okay, except for the missing-all-of-you part.”

“You mean missing Ron!” She gave me a knowing look, and I nodded.

“Yeah, you've got me there. That part is very, very hard.”

“I don't know how you do it.” Her expression was solemnly empathetic. “I don't know how I could stand to be apart from Shane.”

“So, you two are still doing great I take it?” I grinned, relishing in her good fortune.

“Yep! Hey, they’ve got another gig this Saturday. One of the other frat houses.”

I was momentarily troubled. Saturday was ‘date’ night. But I quickly brushed the disappointment aside, happy for the band’s success. “That’s great!” I hoped she hadn’t caught my initial reaction.

“I know, right?” She was all smiles, so obviously she hadn’t.

We chatted for half an hour about the first day of school, what she and Shane had done over the summer and a few details from my chats with Ron. Caelyn came in then and was surprised to see Merina instead of Ron on my screen.

“Oh, hi, Merina!” Merina waved at my mother.

“I haven’t talked to Ron yet!” I interjected in a panic.

She rolled her eyes. “Don’t worry, Maura, I was just coming to tell you to take your time tonight. I’ve got the spaghetti sauce on simmer, and the oven is preheated; we can just pop in the garlic bread once you’re done.”

“Oh, okay...” I didn’t know what else to say. Her state of lax was completely new to me...and unusual.

When she’d closed the door, Merina commented, “Wow, she’s really relaxed a lot about you and Ron, huh?”

“She’s in an unusually good mood tonight,” I answered, still following her retreat with my eyes, absorbing the shock. “Oh! Ron just came

online. I'm sorry, but do you mind if I go talk to him? I promise we'll Skype again soon." I felt guilty for running out on her.

"No worries! Shane will actually be here any minute. We're going out to celebrate my senior status and his first day at college."

"Oh yeah, he started with Ron today too. You'll have to tell me how his day went next time for sure."

"I will. Okay, I gotta go get ready. Tell Ron I said 'Hi!'" Then, she was gone...and Ron's call was coming through.

I took a deep breath before answering...which didn't matter. The sight of his face took that deep breath right away. I managed a small, squeaky, "Hi!"

"Hello there." There was something bothering him. He failed to produce his typical, exuberant greeting. "I have something to tell you." Yes, he was definitely worried.

"Let me guess." I turned my eyes heavenward like I was concentrating on algebra. "I've got it! Saturday date night is canceled."

The shock in his expression made me giggle. "H-how did you..."

I burst into laughter. "I just talked to Merina."

"Ah, now that explains it!" He relaxed a bit. "And you're not upset?"

"What kind of girlfriend would I be if the good fortune of another gig made me angry?"

He looked completely happy then. "Thanks, Maura!"

“Besides, that is an excellent argument for having date night a day early.” I winked at him playfully.

“Sound reasoning, Miss DeLuca. We do have rehearsal that night, but I’ll have to squeeze it in.” He put his hand up on the screen, and I placed my fingers on top of his, trying to touch him across all the miles between us.

Time seemed to crawl every day until Friday arrived. Since our Skype schedule had changed, Thursday date night wasn’t happening. It was like no one told my body. I was restless and twitchy all night. Caelyn told me more than once to stop fidgeting during the movie we were watching. I couldn’t comply, so she finally banished me to my room.

“Sorry, Maura, but you’re driving me crazy!” She gave me her most penitent look.

Finally, Friday arrived. Fully aware I’d failed my geometry quiz, given my complete inability to concentrate, I’d stumbled through the day in a daze. All I could focus on was 6:00 PM and video access to Ron. We’d have less than an hour—his last class went until 5:45, and rehearsal was at 7:00. After classes that dragged at snail’s pace, I was finally run-walking across the school parking lot, anxious to get home. Video games would make time fly much faster than lectures about the area of triangles

or the deconstruction of *Wuthering Heights*...not that I didn't love that novel... I just wasn't in the proper frame of mind to enjoy classic fiction.

"Maura!"

There was a dark-haired boy sprinting toward me, a sheepish grin on his face. Uh oh. The boy had been sneaking peeks at me in the three classes we had together all week. I tried to remember his name—something like Darren or David.

He came to a standstill in front of me, entrenching himself too far inside my personal space for comfort. At that moment, a sharp pain drilled down through my skull like someone had driven an ice pick into my head. It was like taking a too-big slurp of slushie through a straw—a cold, sharp pain. The unpleasantness was accompanied by a very solid flash of Ron's face in my head. Like someone had imprinted his image physically on my brain tissue. During that brief flash, I was able to take in every little detail...the warmth of his eyes, the exact color of his lips...like the moment was frozen on pause in front of me. I gasped in shock and pain.

"Are you okay?" He placed a hand on my shoulder, worry leaking into his expression. The pain intensified.

I managed a response, though. "Ow! Sorry, Darren; my head just started pounding." I took a step back from him, and his hand fell away

from my shoulder. The pain subsided a bit, but I was still wincing in remembrance.

“Ummm, it’s Damien,” he corrected. “Sorry about your head. Are you okay?”

I took another step back from him. “Oh! Damien! So sorry about that. It’s hard being the new girl, you know.” I could feel myself blush in reaction to my blunder.

“I’m sure.” He had ice-blue eyes—a major contrast to his nearly black hair. “I wanted to see if you’d go to a movie this weekend. With me.” His finish came out soft, weak, nervous.

A shock of violent pain tore through my head. I raised my hands to my temples in response, and my pack bit into my shoulder. “Oooow! Sorry, Dar—Damien. I can’t. I have a boyfriend. Ow! So-so-sorry I have to get home!” I wondered if my eyes would start bleeding, the pain was so intense.

“Oh...” He looked hurt, and I felt bad about that but was in too much pain to do anything other than turn my back on him and stumble toward home. The agony began to diminish to a dull throb.

“Maura!”

Was everyone at the school trying to keep me from my home and the soft comfort of my PlayStation? At least I didn’t have another guy to fend off. The new voice was barely audible and decidedly female.

Although I just wanted to get home and, perhaps, skip the video games in favor of a nap, I turned back to her.

She approached slowly, shyly. I recognized her from English. Susie?

“Hi, sorry to bother you.” The girl had huge eyes—green like my mother’s. Her hair was a shade too dark for dirty-blond and hung just below her chin in a straight bob. I noticed a very few, light freckles scattered solely across her nose. Like someone had sprinkled her once with a cinnamon shaker.

“Susie?” I chanced it. So far, I had one strike against me.

“Yes!” She beamed, happy I remembered her name. She put out her hand. “Nice to finally, officially, meet you.” I took her hand, taken in by her genuine smile and sweet nature.

“Nice to meet you too. I’m not trying to be rude, but I really need to get home. I have this horrible headache coming...” I stopped in mid-sentence, realizing the throbbing behind my eyes had vanished. “Oh wow. It’s gone.” It was my turn to smile happily. Then a current of worry moved through my thoughts. I pushed it into a drawer of my consciousness to be opened later, at home.

Susie was looking up at my face curiously, with concern.

“Sorry, Susie.” I tried desperately to not seem weird. That girl wasn’t wearing a cheerleader uniform, so she had true friend potential. “I was

feeling bad before, but I think my headache's clearing up. Did you need something?" I offered up what I hoped was a friendly, normal smile.

"I just wanted to invite you to sit with us...me and a few friends...at lunch on Monday. I've been watching you sit alone all week and...sorry! I should have invited you earlier." She looked horrified with herself, so I quickly interjected.

"No! Please don't feel bad. I needed some time alone. You know, trying to get over all the stuff I left behind. From the move!" I finished in explanation. "But wow...thanks. I'd love that." It felt good to talk to someone right in front of me, other than my mother. I thought about how nice it would be to have a friend in our new home. A welcome distraction from miserably obsessing over Ron's absence, if just for a little while.

"Yeah, it's hard to move. My family came here from Ontario a few years ago, so I know what you mean. I have to go." She shot a look back over her shoulder. "My dad's waiting. But I'll see you at lunch Monday, okay? We can walk together from English." She gave me a huge smile and a wave before disappearing into the throng of weekend-ready students.

15. Darker Daze

The good feeling I'd garnered from that last exchange at school didn't last all evening, sadly. At 6:00 PM...well 5:50 to be honest...I was dutifully seated in front of my laptop, logged into Skype eagerly awaiting Ron's appearance. At 6:15 I started to grow frantic and bored, so I searched eBay for some new dresses to add to my watch list. I checked my Skype screen every few seconds to make sure I wasn't missing Ron's call—even though my speakers were turned up all the way.

By 6:30, I was panic-stricken. Someone had surely abducted him as he'd walked the three blocks home from class...or he'd slipped and hit his head on a rock beside the sidewalk...or somehow, way worse, he'd forgotten me entirely. Was it possible he'd gotten the nights mixed up? I went to get my phone so I could check our texts from the night before and see if we'd mentioned the date.

There was a text from Ron and one from Caelyn too.

Sorry, Maura, can't make it tonight. Will explain later, was all Ron had said.

Caelyn's informed me she'd be having dinner with a client, advising me to go ahead and eat without her. I felt completely abandoned...until I heard my Skype alert. He'd made it!

Quickly, hands shaking, I managed to minimize the eBay window. It was Merina calling. I couldn't help it; my heart fell, and I was wracked by bitter disappointment. But I pulled myself together and put a strained smile on my face before clicking on the answer button.

"Hi." Merina looked and sounded just as dejected as I felt.

"Hey, Merina." I put enormous effort into keeping the smile on my face.

"You don't have to fake it, Maura. Remember, you told me you were supposed to be talking to Ron tonight? I know you should be talking to him right now." She sighed heavily and that, combined with the mournful expression on her face, made my stomach turn a fearful somersault.

My tongue felt thickened by fright, brought on by the fear of what she might say next, but I forced it to form words anyway. "What are you saying, Merina? What's wrong?"

"Well," she started weakly, "I didn't want to say anything to you."

I started to feel a little sick. Dread balled itself up in the pit of my stomach, poisoning me. "You have to tell me, Merina. No matter what it is. I have to know."

"Okay." She looked down, took a deep breath and continued. "Shane told me that on Tuesday he saw Ron walking some girl to class. We both just blew the whole thing off and said it had to be innocent, but Shane said she was walking home with him the next day. And just now, my family went to get pizza at Tom's, and Ron was there...with her..."

“When he’s supposed to be Skyping with me,” I finished for her, dejectedly. “Are you sure it was the same girl?”

“Yeah, Shane went with us.” She looked down again. “I’m sorry, Maura. I hate to tell you. I didn’t...”

“No, it’s okay.” I could feel the tears start to burn in my eyes. “I’m glad you told me. Thanks, Merina.” I didn’t want to cry in front of her. “Hey, I need to go.” I could barely get the words out. I felt as though I were choking on them.

“Okay, I understand. I’m really sorry, Maura.” She’d started to cry herself.

I quickly hit the red End Call button.

Caelyn didn’t get home until almost 9:00.

“Sorry, Maura!” I heard her call, from my bedroom, as she came into the apartment. “I didn’t mean to be so late.” I heard her steps crush against the carpet...which was strange...and it distracted me from my melancholy for a moment. In the next one, she opened the door to my room, bringing me back to harsh reality.

I’d already made up my mind to keep my troubles to myself. My reason was twofold. For one thing, Caelyn had been so happy, so different, after moving here. I knew she was finding more success with the clientele here in Vancouver, and I didn’t want to spoil that for her, not

one tiny bit. Also, if I brought up my own heartache, doing so would surely recall for her the loss of my father. I didn't want her remembering that at all, since she finally, somehow, had let go of the pain a little.

Secondly, I wanted to, literally, sleep on it. Every time I tried to picture Ron with some other girl, my mind responded with a memory flash from our time together. I could only see him with me. Besides, I was getting the story from a third party. There could've been some kind of gross misunderstanding. There had to be, but that still didn't mean I was happy with being put off, and with no real explanation.

"Maura! I asked you why you didn't eat." Caelyn's voice snapped me out of my meandering thoughts. Standing with her hands on her hips and a very agitated look on her face, I realized she must have asked more than once.

"Oh, sorry... I fell asleep reading homework." I'd laid an open textbook on the bed beside me, completely prepared to execute my cover story.

Her expression told me she was suspicious, and I wondered if my brief crying jag had left my eyes with telltale red or puffiness. I could see her contemplating, but she must've decided to abandon her concerns. "Must be exciting stuff. Come on then; you have to eat something before I'm going to let you go back to sleep."

I hadn't thought I could choke anything down until Caelyn carved off some of the very rare roast beef I'd stuffed into the crock pot that

afternoon. After the first bite, I wolfed down half of the plateful, surprised at my sudden, ferocious appetite. The comfort delivered by a full tummy made all the excitement from the day wash over me, and I was drowsy to the point of agony. I allowed Caelyn to tuck me into bed, reasoning I'd certainly earned such a childish luxury.

As she ran her hand lovingly over my hair, I struggled with some memory from earlier in the day. Some vitally important thing I'd meant to ask her. But my brain wouldn't bring whatever it was to its forefront before I succumbed to sleep. The worry waited, lurking, until my consciousness faded.

In my dreams, I was sick. Morbidly ill, as I'd feared I might be for some time then. The quality of the dream was cinematic—it felt so real. Looking around me, taking in the bleeping machines and clear tubing running from the IV bag, I knew I was in the hospital. My tongue automatically ran over the places where my canines were missing. The beep from the monitor grew louder until the sound was deafening. I moved my arm up so I could cover my ear to muffle the sound. The rustle the movement of the blanket made blasted through my ears, and I cried out in pain. Something warm tightened around my other wrist, and I understood why I'd only moved one up in response to the too-loud noises. Someone was holding it, someone very warm.

My vision was blurred, and the light in the room was intensely bright. The same headache I'd been plagued with that afternoon pulsed through my skull. I made every effort to shut out the pain and focus on that face. The long dark hair told me my visitor was Ron before I could fully make out his features in the haziness that was my sight. When my vision sharpened, he smiled at me, but the softness in his eyes held the hard edge of worry.

"How are you feeling?" He kept his voice barely above a whisper, which meant he knew how sensitive my hearing was. Maybe he knew what was wrong with me. I was hurting all over...my throat burned like a bonfire, and the rest of me was so cold; I was sure they must be transfusing me with ice water.

I tried to speak to him, to demand a diagnosis, but I was too weak to utter a single word. Caelyn appeared then, cooing over me protectively and imploring me to save my strength and keep quiet.

My eyes were drawn to a shape in the doorway of my hospital room. There was someone there, a tall, hulking human filling up the space. He—it had to be a man given the size—was shrouded in darkness. I could make out no discerning features whatsoever. A nurse pushed past him, only because he moved to allow her entrance. Funny, even when she was right behind him, I could make out every detail about her. It was as if

all the darkness in the room were reserved, solely, for the unknown stranger.

The nurse brought in a blood bag. Although I couldn't remember any accident or see any bandaged wound, my brain tried to ferret out a reason for a blood transfusion while she was hooking up the bag.

While watching her, my eyes switched focus, glancing over at the liquid in the bag. Deep, dark crimson. I couldn't tear my eyes away. My mouth was like dry desert sand, my throat the merciless sun burning over that desert at high noon.

A rattling gasp tore up through my chest, and my body convulsed. I was sure I was dying. My blood must've had some horrible disease tainting it, and the transfusion's purpose was to dilute the infection.

Ron put his hand on my chest to hold me down. He seemed troubled, but other than that, much too calm for the gravity of the situation. "Relax," he said to me with that same softness to his voice, "you just need blood, Maura."

He reached out and nodded to the nurse. She stopped what she was doing and took the bag down, placing it in Ron's hand. He tore open the bottom, in a practiced manner, and held the plastic spout to my lips.

"Drink, Maura. It'll help you faster this way."

As shocked as I was by such a turn of events, I complied. In all my waking hours, nothing had ever tasted better. And even though I knew

what was happening was not what was supposed to be happening, in my dream I tore the bag from his grasp so I could gulp its contents down even faster.

I woke from the nightmare with a startled jump. The first thing I did was run my tongue along my teeth to ensure every tooth was still in place. All accounted for, whew!

Next, I called out to my mother, remembering too late I hadn't checked to see what time it was on a day that was reserved for sleeping in. I grabbed clumsily for my phone. When I hit the home button, I didn't even register what the clock said, because there was a text from Ron. I only had time to read a few words before Caelyn burst into the room.

"Maura! What on Earth is wrong?" Oh well, Ron would just have to wait... After all, he *had* kept me waiting all of the night before. At least he'd had the decency to show up in my dreams.

I looked up at her morosely. "Oh, did you have a bad dream?"

"Yes," I peeped out, weakly. But then I remembered why I'd called for her, and it hadn't been to cry on her motherly shoulder.

"Mom, did you find a dentist here yet?" I got right to the point. She looked surprised and didn't answer right away, so I pressed harder.

"Mom, you promised to find out what's wrong with me. Did you find a dentist?"

“Maura, I don’t think there’s anything wrong with you...” She put her hand up to the side of my head.

I pushed her away. “Mom! I think there is. I think I need to go to the doctor!”

She stifled a bit of laughter. “You. Maura, *you* want to go to the doctor? The world’s biggest medi-phobe on the planet? The child who hid in the dryer to avoid a checkup?” Diversion tactics.

I crossed my arms and knitted my brow into stubborn furrows. “Yes!”

Caelyn creased her own brow and regarded me as if I were a little green man who’d landed in her daughter’s bedroom. “What did you dream about? Come on, out with it.”

“It doesn’t matter.” I latched on to my resolve with a death grip. “Mom! Are you going to take me to the doctor, or do I have to go by myself?”

When she saw how serious I was, my mother backed off the sarcasm and teasing. “Okay, Maura.” She put her hand back up on my face, wanting to comfort me with her touch. I was a bit penitent for raising my voice to her and leaned into her palm. “But you know the medical system is different here. We need to have our health cards. We can’t just go to the doctor here without them unless it’s a true emergency.”

I eyed her suspiciously, wondering if her statement held any truth. I’d have to Google some info on Health Canada later.

“They’re on the way, Maura. My company got that all set up for us. As soon as they come in the mail, I’ll take you to the best doctor in the province, okay? I promise.” She moved to hug me close. “You’re my daughter; don’t you trust that I’d take perfect care of you? Haven’t I always?”

She had me there. “Yes, you have.”

“Okay then. You check the mailbox every day and let me know when they come. In the meantime, I’ll ask around at work and get a recommendation for a dentist. Does that make you happy?”

Even though I still felt as though she were diverting me somehow, I nodded.

“How about some breakfast? I’ll cook!” Caelyn and her well-played diversions. My stomach grumbled loudly in response.

I’d actually forgotten about Ron’s text for a little while. The smell of breakfast sirloin and eggs took over the other half of my brain that wasn’t consumed by the fear of what was happening to my body. I only got halfway through breakfast, though, before thoughts of his face pulsed in my head. I ran for my phone, hoping Caelyn would forgive my having it at the breakfast table.

“Ron texted last night, and I never got to read it,” I said in explanation as I slid back into my chair.

She looked at me with disbelief, as if it were impossible for such a thing to happen. I ignored her and punched in the number code to unlock my phone.

Sorry again Maura. Had some stuff I had to take care of. Was late for rehearsal. We played til late. Hope you sleep good! :)

He'd sent the text at midnight, so at least that part appeared to be true. I hated being suspicious. But still, I had to keep turning it all around in my head. If the girl wasn't important to him, why did he fail to mention her? Was Shane sure it'd been Ron in the pizza place with some other girl? But how could he mistake his best friend from childhood, especially in a town as small as Indiana, Pennsylvania? Did Ron know Shane and Merina had seen him with the other girl? Or was he insulting me by outright refusing to care whether he'd been caught? Most importantly, who was she??

He hadn't said anything about when we would talk again. Did that mean our next regular date night was the coming Tuesday, as usual? The fuse of my quick temper was suddenly lit. My pride was hurt, since I seemed to be the only one who'd been left in the dark, and I still would be even then if not for Merina. That wounded pride decided that, until he could offer more of an explanation, I'd refuse to text him back. I felt another sharp spike of pain in my head as I committed to my plan. That only served to make me angrier, so I took my phone and threw it into a

dresser drawer, burying the small rectangle beneath a thick pile of clothes. I forbade myself from looking at the screen until it was time for Ron to be playing at his gig that night. That would prevent me from being weak and looking like a fool by avoiding the temptation to send some whiny, needy text.

I actually found it easy to keep busy. I cleaned house like a whirlwind, getting everything done in record time while Caelyn worked in the corner of her room which served as a temporary office. There was the matter of a boss battle I'd been having a hard time with to be resolved. I crossed that off the list...with a few helpful suggestions from the internet. Caelyn had picked up the final DVD of *Vampire Knight*—an anime I'd fallen in love with—so I finished watching that. Later in the afternoon, I even managed to talk Caelyn into a game of Monopoly. I'd only had one moment of weakness when I'd opened the drawer to put away laundry, but I hadn't reached in to retrieve the phone. I couldn't help but be impressed by my strength of will, because Ron had been in my thoughts all day.

When 8:00 PM came around, and Caelyn was popping corn for our movie night, I finally allowed myself a peek at the phone. Ron hadn't texted once... There were six texts spread over various parts of the day.

Maura did u get my text?

Are you mad at me?

Is something wrong, why aren't you answering?

Hey I wanted to ask you if you want to do date night tomorrow night? I don't want to wait til Tuesday.

Maura, are you getting these???

Okay, it's almost gig time. I don't know if something is wrong with your phone. I hope you're not ignoring me. I need to know if you got the text about tomorrow night. If you get this let me know. Wish us luck! I love you.

I immediately felt wicked for not answering. I reasoned that if Ron said he loved me there couldn't possibly be another girl he was going out with. Before going to join my mother, I texted him back.

Sorry too! Busy cleaning, gaming and watching anime. Trying to get mom to take care of some stuff. I'll tell you about it tomorrow, it's a date! Love you too & hope the gig is going great!

My giddiness after receiving his last text persisted all evening, causing me to miss much of the movie and inspiring Ron-filled dreams—of the non-scary variety that time—all night. The next day, I made myself get caught up on homework, which I found to be a weak, unsatisfying attempt at distraction. But I buckled down and completed every assignment. I still wanted to get into college and was hoping to go back to Pennsylvania and take classes with Ron if he didn't get to transfer to Vancouver.

We'd agreed to 'meet' at 3:00, allowing my late-night rock star plenty of time to sleep in. Caelyn ignored me completely when I started bouncing off the walls, changing clothes and doing my makeup in preparation. After finally learning we'd missed each other Friday night—I'd blamed a long-running rehearsal—she wasn't about to deny me. She felt no desire to suffer my waiting until Tuesday to see Ron.

He did show that time...but he didn't get to stay.

For fifteen minutes, I bit back the question about who the girl at Tom's Pizza had been. We talked mostly about the gig. It'd gone very well. Everyone had loved the music, and the frat was even interested in recruiting Ron. That seemed to make him excited, so despite the stories I'd heard about hazing and out-of-control parties, I trusted Ron to make the right choices and expressed happiness for him.

I was gathering the nerve to casually ask him what he'd been doing Friday night when he'd postponed our date.

He must've read my mind, because he said, "I wanted to talk to you about Friday."

Before he could explain, a loud crash sounded from somewhere in his house. "Mom?!" he called out, alarmed.

"Ron, what's wrong?" I could feel a flurry of wings inside my stomach, like my body knew something wasn't right before my mind could receive confirmation.

“Hold on, Maura!” Ron jumped up so fast; his chair fell over. I could hear his footsteps pound down the stairs at a run. Then, I heard shouting, but I couldn’t make out the words.

The next couple of minutes stretched and dragged, lasting much longer than they should have. Ron came tearing into the room. He leaned over to put his face too close to his laptop’s webcam. “Maura, it’s Mom! She collapsed! I have to get her to the hospital!” The mix of panic and fear on his face broke my heart.

“Go, Ron!” When he didn’t move, I screamed, “Go!” He didn’t bother to turn off the Skype connection. I watched him disappear, not even aware of the tears streaming down my cheeks.

When I could again, I walked numbly to the bathroom to wash my face. I tried to stifle my sobs, but Caelyn must have heard me yell because she stopped me in my tracks.

“Maura! What’s wrong? What’s happened?” She had both hands on my shoulders, trying gently to shake an answer out of me. She did a double-take when she looked at my face.

“Ron’s mom. He had to take her to the hospital. She’s really sick.” I looked into her concerned eyes, her troubled face. I knew how I would feel if the same thing were happening to Caelyn. It doubled the pain I was feeling for Ron, but at the same time, I was selfishly happy it wasn’t my

mother who was ill. I wrapped my arms around her and pulled her close. My sobbing intensified.

“Oh, Maura, it’s okay. I’m sure she’ll be okay. Ron will take good care of her; you know that. Come here and let me clean your face off.”

“I can do it, Mom.” I pulled back, but she wrapped her hand tightly around my wrist and dragged me toward the linen closet. “I have a washcloth in the bathroom,” I protested.

“Just come here,” she cooed at me in her most soothing tone. I watched her dig through the shelf, bypassing the stack of white cloths, until she came to a black one folded up near the bottom.

“Mom...”

“Shhhh, just come here.” She pulled me toward the bathroom door but stood right in front of me, blocking my entrance. I felt dizzy, and the world seemed tinged in red. I worried momentarily about that, but thoughts for myself passed as Ron and his mother filled my head again. We could take care of me later.

Caelyn ran the water until it was warm, so the cloth felt good... comforting...on my cheeks. She dabbed and rubbed down my face and under my chin. I wondered briefly why she was rubbing at my shirt too but was too worried to think very much of it.

“Let’s get you into some comfy pajamas, okay?” She was already pulling my shirt up over my head. She tossed the garment into the

hamper and guided me into my room. “Try to stop crying, okay? It won’t help anyone, and you’re thinking the worst before you need to, don’t you think?” She pulled out a fleecy top with matching bottoms and laid them on the bed.

“Yes, I guess so. But she has cancer; what if...” I almost started crying anew.

“Don’t assume the worst, Maura. The best thing you can do is think positive thoughts and send them their way. Do you think Ron would want you crying like this?”

“No, I guess not...” I pulled on the top, leaving my bra on since Caelyn was in the room. I stood waiting with the pants in my hands, letting her know I needed my privacy.

“Are you okay now?” she asked, retreating.

“I think so.” I almost told her about the bad things I’d been thinking about Ron and how horrible I felt about them all then. But I didn’t. When she was out of the room, I picked up my phone and texted.

Please let me know how she is as soon as you can!

I didn’t hear anything the rest of Sunday. I slept very little, and the small amount I managed to get was beleaguered by tossing, turning and plenty of blanket kicking. Going to school didn’t even seem like a possibility—how could I possibly concentrate on anything? But I labored

through the mechanical motions of getting ready, knowing Caelyn wouldn't approve of my staying home until I could hear word from Ron about his mom. I texted before I went to school, asking how she was, hoping I wasn't being too much of a pain while he had so much going on. I wondered if he would go to class.

I didn't dare pull my phone out to check for texts during class. Caelyn had threatened service cancellation if I were caught using the device during class time. Between periods, though, my eyes were glued to its screen, as if I could magically make words from him light up the glassy surface.

Finally, between second and third periods, a text came through.

Sorry, was up almost all night. Mom is okay, but she is too weak to go home. Going for a shower now, but staying at the hospital this afternoon. Talk later.

She was so ill that he was skipping class. I wished, for the thousandth time, I could fly to Pennsylvania to help him through all the grief. It was a horrible day. I was miserable, being apart from Ron and, because I let my misery distract me, I was forced to confess I didn't know the answer to my history teacher's question...a first for me. I blushed as at least half the class laughed at my blunder. I wished the floor would open up and swallow me, banishing me to some dark, quiet place away from everyone, so I could wallow in my troubles without interruption.

I slithered off to lunch, dragging my feet while imagining Ron all alone if his mother didn't pull through. Would Caelyn let me fly back to at least help him through the funeral?

"Maura!" I was yanked, violently, out of the construction of an elaborate and desperate argument for my mother by the far-too-cheerful greeting.

"Oh! Susie!" I'd completely forgotten I had someone to eat lunch with that day.

"Did you forget?" She looked a little hurt when she asked, so I quickly lied to spare her feelings.

"Oh no, you just caught me in a moment of deep thought." At least part of that was true. I forced a smile for my first—possible—Canadian friend. I was overly cautious of people after the swimming-hole incident, which had only occurred four months ago.

There was something inviting about Susie, though. Her oversized eyes had an innocuous openness to them. Her smile was sincere in a way Katie's had never been.

"Are you okay?" Concern. Real concern. I could see the difference, since someone authentic stood before me at present.

"I guess, just worried and distracted... I might not be great company." I said, although I might have gotten down on my knees and begged for a distraction from my disquiet at that point.

"Come on," she persuaded. "I guess I'll just have to cheer you up!"

Susie had packed her lunch, but I knew the cafeteria was serving pizza that day, so I bought. The slices were lacking enough meat, in my opinion, but I couldn't imagine ever turning down pizza. My new friend even insisted I take her vanilla pudding cup as a cheer-up offering. I loved vanilla pudding almost as much as pizza...or beef. She must've been psychic. The smooth, sweet texture was comforting, sliding into my empty stomach. Susie watched me eat my treat, quietly.

Waiting politely until I'd finished, she didn't try to talk to me until after I'd followed dessert with the main course. "So...you having a hard time living in a new place?" she queried.

"You could say that," I answered, as I wiped the pizza grease from the corner of my mouth. I looked into her eyes for a moment. The interest was heartfelt; there was no lurking, hidden agenda like the kind which had always presented with my false friends back home. I realized then; I'd lied to myself so I could overlook the obvious. Her brows lifted in anticipation of my answer, inviting me to spill my guts.

And that was just what I did. I told that stranger everything for some strange reason. Wasn't being able to trust her no more than a hunch? Nevertheless, Ron, his sick mother, my increasingly busy mother...even a few tiny details about my health worries...all came spilling out. After I was finally done, it was pretty much time for classes to start again, and I

was in complete shock at the amount of personal truth I'd unloaded on a girl I barely knew. Somehow, she didn't feel like a stranger, though.

She'd listened carefully, nodding from time to time, but never interrupting. "Wow, you really needed that pudding," she said, putting her hand on mine. Her eyes grew even wider. "You're so cold! I hope you aren't really getting sick." I could hear the compassion in her voice, but I automatically withdrew my arm from the tabletop. I ran my other hand over the one she'd touched. It felt to be a perfectly normal temperature to me...warm even. I only had time to say, "I hope not either," before the bell rang, calling us away from the present conversation.

"Maybe you'd like to join more of us tomorrow?" She pointed toward a small group of students abandoning a table nearby. None were wearing football or cheerleading attire, to my relief. The awareness sunk in that she'd abandoned her own friends to have lunch with me. I knew she'd probably done that because she saw I was still settling in and didn't want me to be overwhelmed by a large group. I was in awe of her thoughtfulness. It left me speechless.

"Maybe later in the week?" She mistook my silence...and the slight drop of my jaw from the shock.

"No! No, that would be...okay." At least I was being genuine too.

Susie gave my arm one more squeeze. "I have to run to Biology. I'm sorry! But we'll talk tomorrow, okay?" I nodded. "Oh, and I'm really sorry

about Ron's mom. I hope she gets better."

I watched her walk away, making myself late to geometry and facing more embarrassment when the teacher commented on my tardiness... but I had a new hope in my heart, a small bit of happiness to take up residence with all the turmoil.

The rest of September melted away, the days conglomerating into a slow-running stream of stress, loneliness...and the occasional happiness.

Ron wasn't around much. We had maybe three 'dates' the rest of the month. I was mournfully stung that he never mentioned the card and guitar songbook I'd sent him for his birthday. But he had good reason for being distracted. His mother's condition had deteriorated the night of her collapse, so she was in the hospital indefinitely. Months of chemotherapy, and the ensuing nausea, had left her unable to keep down much of anything. She needed several weeks of IV-fed nutrition to get her strength back up.

As if being her sole support system wasn't enough stress on poor Ron, he had a ton of assignments to complete. His mother had insisted he keep up with his coursework. He'd told me he was able to work on them while sitting in her hospital room, watching over her while she slept. Added to all that was the sad situation that gigs had become a necessity. When his father had passed away, the victim of a car accident, his

mother had wisely paid off the house and banked the remainder of the life insurance benefit. During her illness, they'd lived on that money, but the nest egg was almost depleted. I'd begged Ron to let me ask Caelyn for help, but he'd stubbornly refused. In fact, he forbade me from saying a word to her, explaining that the frat had passed the word around about the band. Death Moon had bookings every Friday and Saturday night until the end of October. They'd be playing at not only other fraternity house parties, but even some of the bars in town—one of the bar owners, an alumni, had shown up at the last gig. Even though there was no house payment, Ron still had to cover the electric bill, groceries and gas. Luckily, playing in the band was taking care of that for him.

A hospital bound—possibly even dying—mother, a full-time college schedule, weekend-filling gigs and weeknight rehearsals in preparation for those gigs. He didn't have time for me, and I knew it. The few times we did talk, I never complained, never looked sad, never mentioned that other mystery girl—who was killing me inside—never mentioned any concerns I had about my own health. I tried to support him as much as possible, radiating joy through every pore while in front of the computer screen. The dark shadows under his eyes and tired pallor of his face broadcast clearly; Ron *couldn't* handle even one more infinitesimal crisis. I texted him happy thoughts and encouragement, even when I knew he wouldn't be able to answer.

I filled in my time as best I could. There was the housework, less engaging in the one-level apartment. My homework was always, dutifully done. I even went on a few outings with some of my newfound friends.

Susie had introduced me to the rest of her small group, and they were all very nice, but from the start, she and I seemed to have a special bond. Besides, I hadn't wanted everyone else to know what was going on in my mess of a personal life, so when Susie and I ventured out, it was almost always alone so we could talk. It was an enormous relief to have someone of my own age to confide in—who occupied the same room.

Susie had come into my life at just the right time. Caelyn became progressively busier at work. She had dinner meetings several times a week, sometimes even on weekends. I was proud of her success and the happiness it brought her, so I never whispered a word about Ron or let on that our calls had diminished. Whenever she asked about his mother, I always said she was “doing much better now.”

Caelyn had loosened up a bit, but when I went out, I still had to be in by 8:30—11:30 on weekends—and I always had to call my mother at least once, no matter where I was. She was obviously worried about my health too. She'd taken to monitoring my temperature at least three times a week and was still watching my diet very carefully. Still, when I badgered her about not having a dental appointment yet or complained

that the health cards were never going to show up, my mother kept telling me to be patient.

I was incessant, asking every day, when finally, at the beginning of October, she slapped an appointment card down on the counter.

“There, Maura!” she exclaimed. “You officially have an appointment with the dentist. Happy now?” Caelyn didn’t look very happy.

I looked at the card and frowned. “November! This isn’t for a month! I have to wait another month? Mom!”

“Oh my god, Maura!” She rolled her eyes at me. “It was the best I could do! Everyone is booked up with school starting back, if they’re even taking new patients at all. It’s for the first of November. It’s not really that long to wait.”

“Mom...” I started to protest anyway.

“Maura Maxine!” Her emerald eyes blazed, and I took a step back. “Are you in any pain?!”

“Well...no...”

“Does it hurt to eat? Do you bleed when you brush?”

“I’m worried about them falling out...” I absent-mindedly put a finger under one of my canines and wiggled.

Caelyn smiled at that. Her tone was full of amusement. “Have you been eating too much junk before bed? Stop placing stock in bad

dreams, Maura; your teeth are not going to fall out.” She reached up to playfully wiggle the tooth I was playing with.

“Ow!” She drew her hand back in a flash, and I had a strong sense of déjà vu. I saw a ruby bead on the tip of her finger. The strong desire to snatch her finger back, so I could take the blood away with my tongue, filled my whole body... I swallowed hard and restrained myself.

“Well, they’re certainly sharp enough!” She raced for the bathroom, and I thought I heard her mutter under her breath, “I’ve got to stop doing that!”

I followed, running the tip of my own finger back and forth under first one canine and then the other. Nothing, not even a scratch.

“Mom?” I stood in the doorway, watching her run cold water over the wound. My voice was shaky.

She smiled back at me, unshaken entirely. “It’s nothing, Maura. I just reopened a nasty paper cut I got at work this morning.” She quickly wrapped a Band-aid around her fingertip. “Hey, what’s for dinner tonight?”

16. Reconnaissance

If absence makes the heart grow fonder, it also wounds in the process. I'd grown far too used to Skype allowing me to let me see Ron's face. Since he had only a few precious moments to give me, I was like a drug addict going through withdrawal. I'd observed the process on TV and in movies, and our separation felt just as hard. He texted at least once a day, most days, but the mode of communication just wasn't the same.

I was having a particularly morose day, late in October. Susie was in full cheer-up mode. She even resorted to flicking a french fry across the table at Amanda, a very quiet brunette. Our friend squealed as the greasy bit bounced off her cheek and fell into her top. Most of the lunch room turned around to look, and Amanda flushed a red that was dangerously close to purple.

"Susie!!" she hissed, careful not to let the volume of her voice draw further attention. She fished for the fry, digging deep into the v-neckline of her purple sweater.

The two guys in our group, Kevin and Daniel, both howled with laughter, and I had to giggle a little. Susie had gone to such effort, after all, even if I did feel contrite over Amanda's embarrassment.

"You can't be mad." Susie batted her light-colored lashes at her friend. "Look; you got a giggle out of Maura."

“Ewww,” was all Amanda said in response. She dabbed at her chest with a napkin and shot Susie a venomous look. Kevin and Daniel laughed harder.

Megan, the last member of our group, put her hand on my shoulder. “You haven’t been smiling enough lately, Maura. It is nice to see, even if Susie did have to resort to such lengths.” She shook her finger at Susie, like a scolding mother. Megan was a walking school-teacher stereotype. She wore either red or black, thick-rimmed glasses, depending on the color of her clothes, her straight, shiny dark hair twisted into a knot on the back of her head. She was perpetually studious and unobtrusive, with the occasional sarcastic flare.

“Thanks.” I smiled at all of them, trying to show how grateful I was to have friends who cared about me.

“Hey, do you guys wanna meet down at the skate park after school?” Daniel asked. “I think I’ve finally taught Kevin how to stay on his board.” Kevin immediately flicked Daniel, hard, on the ear.

Susie waited until the ensuing, short-lived scuffle was over before she answered. “Maybe for a little while, but I’m going to take Maura out for dinner, so we won’t be staying long.”

I opened my mouth to protest, but the bell rang, and Susie ran off to class, wearing a smug smile while waving goodbye, before I could say a word.

“Okay, Maura, Mexican or Chinese?”

“Huh?” I’d been deep in thought as Susie and I were walking down Sixth Street. She’d hooked her arm through mine, and I’d happily been lead along so I could better concentrate on the image of Ron’s face in my head.

“Do you want to go to Hon’s or Taco Del Mar?” She turned so she could rap on my skull with her free hand. “Hello? Anyone awake in there?”

“Sorry.” I smiled repentantly. “Are tacos okay? And I can buy my own dinner!”

“I was hoping you’d say that! About the tacos, I mean... I’m *still* treating you tonight.”

“But...”

“No buts.” She gave me as stern a look as she could muster with that cute, round face of hers. “A girl can take her friend out for a gourmet, extravagant dinner at Taco Del Mar, can’t she?”

I laughed. “Okay, but I owe you one. And you can at least let me buy you a Starbucks after.” Susie nodded as we crossed the street to the restaurant.

I knew Susie had readily agreed to coffee after dinner because she wanted to talk. I didn’t talk much while I was eating. My friend knew me

well enough by then to know there wouldn't be much dinner conversation while I had food in front of me.

"Wow..." Susie remarked as I polished off four beef tacos with a huge side of rice and beans. I'd even eaten some of Susie's salsa and chips she'd so graciously offered. Susie'd told me a while ago she was in awe of my seemingly-bottomless stomach.

"Oh my...that was sooo good!" I patted my finally-full tummy appreciatively. "Thank you, Susie!"

"Hey, I'm just glad you came out with me tonight. You ready to go get that coffee?" That translated to: "Okay, I'd like to talk to you now." Funny how she and I had an unspoken communication after such a short time.

"Well, you're lucky Caelyn had a work meeting tonight." My mother liked for me to be home on the nights she was there as well.

"Yeeeeaaaaah..." Susie let the mystery of her sarcasm hang in the air. She flitted quickly to her feet and was halfway to the door before I got out of the booth.

"Hey, wait up!" I moved after her as fast as the heavy meal would allow.

After we'd waited for our beverages—there was an unspoken rule that we started no conversations until seated—Susie found two cushy chairs in a back corner.

Her nose crinkled up in delight as she sniffed at her Cinnamon Dulce Latte. The drink suited her, with that sprinkling across her nose. The flecks somehow made her even more endearing, like you could trust her with any secret, maybe even your life. I'd always wanted freckles, so I envied her that perfect little dusting. But my skin was unmarked paleness. I didn't possess a single freckle or birthmark—not even a mole.

I sipped at my regular coffee. I was trying to learn to like the beverage...drinking it made me feel more like the adult I was becoming. I still had to put in some sugar and a hefty amount of cream.

"Honestly, Maura, I don't see how you stay so slim. You eat like a lumberjack!"

"Good metabolism?" I shrugged my shoulders. Must have been, because I hadn't gained an ounce in the last six months.

"Some of us are just lucky, I guess." Susie sipped thoughtfully at her drink. She had her hands wrapped around the cup, drawing in its warmth. Fall was good for that, accosting people with that first chill, prompting them to seek out all the warm things that transformed the season into cozy and comfortable.

"So, your mom had another work dinner, eh?" Susie asked. She had a funny look in her eyes.

"Yeah...so?"

Susie leaned in, conspiratorially close. “You want to know what I think?”

“Well, I’m sure you’re going to tell me, right?”

“I think your mom has a new boyfriend,” she finished triumphantly.

“What?! No! You don’t know how impossible that is!” I shot back. I regarded Susie as though she were a mental patient concocting a theory of impending zombie apocalypse.

“Oh, come on, Maura! Think about it... Who schedules work dinners on the weekend?”

“Some of her clients come from out of town. They stay for weeks at a time. There’s just no way...” My mind was reeling at just the idea.

“Well, that does sound reasonable...” Susie seemed less sure of herself then. Then, she voiced her next thought. “But she didn’t do this in Pennsylvania! You told me she just started working on weekends since you two moved here. Don’t you find that at all strange?”

“Okay, yes, but it’s a different country and different clientele. Vancouver’s a much bigger city...” But I had to admit I’d started to mull over Susie’s suggestion. She’d successfully planted the seed of doubt.

“Has she started dressing differently? Like better, you know? Does she get her hair done a lot, wear more makeup? Anything like that?”

I laughed at her line of questioning. “Oh, you don’t know my mother! She always looks spectacular—her hair and makeup are always perfect,

and she's always dressed up. Millionaire clients to impress, remember?"

"Well...has her mood changed at all? Is she forgetful, dreamy? Happier?"

That word made me start. Could a man be the reason behind Caelyn's upgraded mood? No, it had to be the new job, the change of scenery.

"Did I strike a nerve there, Maura?" Susie looked quite pleased with herself.

"Take it easy, Sue-lock Holmes!" She giggled at that. "Like I said, you don't know my mother. Okay...yes, she has had a definite mood turnaround, but if you knew her the way I do, you'd know that a boyfriend is, simply, an impossibility for her."

"How long's it been since she was seeing someone?" Susie kept up the sleuthing.

"She never has," I said. My voice came out weird and strained because the conversation was bringing up the whole Dad thing in that raw spot reserved for him inside my heart.

"So your Dad...?"

"Was the last guy she had in her life, yeah." I couldn't help wincing. I'd tried not to think about my missing father. The absence of Ron was sufficient to deal with.

"Wow..." Susie's face was frozen in a mask of awe. "Now, that's true love!"

“Yes,” I answered softly, “and she’s never stopped being miserable over losing him. She’s only told me a little bit about him. Even talking about him hurts her too much. She doesn’t like love songs or romantic movies. And I guess, now, I know how she feels. I don’t think it’s possible for her to be interested in someone new.” I was speaking about myself at the end, as well as my mother.

“Still...” Susie’s richly-green eyes were focused on some imaginary thought hanging in mid-air. “...seventeen years. That is a very, very, very long time to be single, don’t you think? Maybe the move, the new surroundings have gotten to her somehow? Or maybe she just had to meet the right guy? Isn’t it even remotely possible?”

I pondered on all that for a moment. “Okay...remotely, infinitesimally possible,” I admitted. “But even if she is, there’s no way she’s going to tell me. Well, not unless it gets to a very serious point, anyway.” I knew my mother well, and that kind of thing would definitely be on a need-to-know basis, like if she were getting engaged or something. I knew her guilt over depriving me of my father... I could tell she felt, at least, partly responsible...so she wouldn’t bring a new man into our lives unless there was a rock-solid future there. “Guess I’ll just have to wait and see.”

“No, you don’t!” Susie interjected, a wild light in her eyes. “You know where her office is, right?”

“Yes...”

“The next time she has one of her dinner meetings, we’ll go downtown after school and follow her.” She appeared quite satisfied with herself.

I thought about her suggestion for a couple of minutes. “I don’t know...” I finally answered. “That seems pretty sneaky...and intrusive...and dishonest.”

“Okay, point taken, but *if* she is seeing someone, who was the first one to be sneaky, intrusive and dishonest? Okay, not so much intrusive.” Susie chuckled.

The thought that Caelyn could be doing what Susie had suggested behind my back started to make me a little miffed. Even if she didn’t want me to meet men she might date, and that I could understand perfectly, she could at least be honest and tell me she was dating again. She had to know how much I worried about her relentless grief over my father’s loss.

“And you’ll go with me?” I asked meekly. I’d only been downtown once, to see my mother’s spectacular new office. She’d driven me. Given my summer, living like a hermit crab, I hadn’t tried out the SkyTrain yet. Hey, any new thing was a bit scary.

“Of course! We’ll just go take an innocent peek. Either we’ll find out your mom is telling you the truth and has been schmoozing her fingers to the bone, or...well, you know the alternative.” Susie cut off at the end, seeing my pained expression at the thought of that outcome.

When I got home, Caelyn still wasn't back, so I popped on Skype to see if Ron might somehow, magically be available. He wasn't online, but Merina was. She hadn't been on much lately, and every time I'd looked at her offline status for the past few weeks, I'd cultivated a knot of dread in my stomach, making me wonder if there might be a troubling reason why she was staying away.

Nervously, I clicked on the call button. Merina answered, but she didn't look overly happy to see me. The knot doubled, tripled, making me feel nauseous, as always, when I felt that level of dread. I tried to slow and deepen my breathing so I could keep down the dinner gift from Susie.

"Hi, Maura." Merina spoke the words timidly like she was afraid her words were dangerous weapons. The trepidation that filled me made my blood icy in my veins.

Better to cut to the truth, and whatever was bothering her in such an obvious way? "Merina, I can tell something's wrong...and you haven't been around for such a long time. Just tell me. No matter how bad it is, it can't be as horrible as being left in the dark wondering, not knowing the truth. Would you want me to keep something from you about Shane, even if it was terrible? Wouldn't you want to know the truth instead of feeling like an idiot for believing something that was a lie?"

I was referring to that other girl; I supposed because Merina had been the one who'd revealed her existence in the first place, but then I had an even scarier thought. "Oh my god, Ron's mom... Has something happened, Merina?"

"No, no! She's doing pretty good, actually. Shane and I went to see her yesterday. She's still really weak and everything, but she's better than she was even a week ago." Merina had become a little more animated while relating the good news, but once she finished, she dipped her head. I knew she did so to avoid looking me in the eye.

"Come on, Merina." I sighed and bolstered myself up, prepared to hear the worst. "Out with it already."

Merina glanced up, and she had a fire in her eyes then. When she spoke, there was fury in her voice, and she found her courage along with it. "I just hate to see you get hurt! You're too sweet to have someone treat you like this!"

Oh boy, the news must've been bad. "Ron, right?"

"Yes Ron! He's a jerk, Maura. I know he hasn't been talking to you much. I asked him myself!"

"You did? You talked to him? Okay, what's going on?" What had he done that had upset Merina so much?

"Yes, I saw the snake. We were coming back from getting some dinner—me and Shane—and he was out on the steps of that frat house...you

know, where we went to the party?”

“Yes, yes...” I nodded impatiently, wishing she’d get to the part where Ron was behaving like a reptile.

“Well, he was sitting on the steps with *her*. The same girl from the pizza place. Shane said she’s in one of his classes. Her name is Natalie.”

I didn’t care at the moment what the girl’s name was; I just wanted the rest of the story. I grasped the edges of my computer desk in white-knuckled fury and implored Merina with my eyes...which felt as though they were bulging out of their sockets.

“He was sitting there with his arm around her, rubbing his hand across her back. He stopped when we walked up, like he felt guilty or something. I was so furious! I asked him if he’d talked to you lately, right in front of her! He even had the nerve to say he’d been really busy with his mom and homework, so I said to him, ‘Well, you seem to have some free time now!’ Then, I walked away, even leaving Shane there by himself... I was just so angry! And the way he acted like it was nothing...like he wasn’t doing anything wrong.”

I was hung up on a particular set of her words. “You said he was rubbing her back?”

“Yes, he was!” Merina spit the words out. I could tell she’d been bottling her anger regarding his actions. “But like I said, he stopped when we walked up...like he knew he shouldn’t be. Jerk!”

“Well, I guess I know the real reason he hasn’t had any time for me. He has something else to take up his time.” I felt like the biggest fool in the world, making up all those excuses for his lack of attention. Why couldn’t he have just told me? At least that would have been a truth I could respect.

“Oh, Maura.” Merina’s anger melted away in an instant. “I’m sorry. I’m so sorry to be the one to tell you. But Shane said I had to...and I knew he was right. It’s not fair for him to keep deceiving you. And I thought he was a good guy.” Her voice quavered.

“Yeah, I did too.” I was fuming. I didn’t usually lose my temper to such a degree, so it was an unfamiliar feeling, being so enraged—being made such a fool of. At that moment, my phone vibrated, making me jump, I was so on edge. I picked it up to read the text lighting up the home screen. “Oh, it’s Ron.” I sounded much calmer than I felt, but it was a bitter, dangerous calm.

“Really? What did he say?”

I read his text aloud: “Maura, I’m at the hospital right now, but I need to talk to you. Can we Skype once I’m home? Give me an hour.”

Merina got angry again. “Damage control, huh?”

“Yes, he has to know you’d tell me. The last time, he didn’t know you saw him, did he?”

“I don’t think so... Are you going to give him a chance to explain?”

“Not tonight. I’m too mad to even see straight. I need some time to cool down before I say something too unpleasant. His mom *is* still in the hospital.”

“Maura, you’re too nice,” Merina chided. “Not that I don’t wish I could do the same if I were in your shoes.”

I heard the front door open, to my surprise. “Oh, Mom’s home?” I questioned no one except myself.

But Merina answered, “It is after eight there, shouldn’t she be home?”

“She had a work dinner... She usually isn’t back from them so early is all.” I thought about the possibility Caelyn could be lying to me too, and I became incensed all over again. “I’m going to go check it out, okay?”

“Sure, Maura...and, Maura?”

“Yes?”

“I’m really, really sorry I had to tell you that.”

“No. Thanks, really. At least I can trust you to be honest with me.” I ended the call. It was time I started standing up for myself. I couldn’t help but wonder if *I* was the reason people were dishonest with me. Was I projecting myself as a doormat?

Caelyn came into my room before I could venture out to find her.

“You’re home early.” I tried to keep any kind of negative emotion out of my voice.

She crossed the room to me. “Maura, are you okay?”

I still didn't want to tell her about Ron. She'd already reacted with too much caution regarding my involvement with him. I didn't want to give her any more ammunition in her quest to prevent me from getting my heart broken... I guessed somewhere deep down I was hoping Merina might be mistaken. But, given what she'd described to me, coupled with Ron's secrecy and avoidance, I didn't see how she could be.

"Yes, I'm just tired. I had a lot of homework."

She saw the open Skype screen. "Looks like you were talking to Ron."

I let her believe that. "Aren't you home early?" I pointed the fact out again.

"Oh, the dinner meeting!" She said as if she'd completely forgotten to mention her appointment to me that morning. I grew more mistrustful. "Something came up at the office, so I had to put it off until tomorrow night."

"Oh yeah, what came up?"

Caelyn looked rightfully taken aback. I rarely asked her about her work. She eyed me with suspicion when she answered. "Some samples that were supposed to be in today got shipped to the wrong location. I had to pacify the screaming client when she showed up at 4:00, and I had nothing for her. Then, I had to track the samples down. Luckily, they were delivered to Calgary, which is close enough for the courier to deliver

them to me by 7:00 AM tomorrow.” She raised her perfect eyebrow at me. “Why the sudden interest, Dear?”

I knew I had to be more nonchalant if Susie’s plan was going to work. Caelyn would never slip up if she thought I knew something was amiss. Her overprotectiveness would outweigh her own happiness, as it always had. That thought softened me up just a touch, so I could pull off acting more normal.

“I don’t know. It just feels like you’re never around anymore, and even when you are, I never ask you about what you do when you’re at work. I guess I just think it’s time I started showing more interest—like you do about my schoolwork. And, I mean, you seem to really love what you do. Who knows, maybe that’s what I’ll end up doing too.” I shrugged at the end, looking at her with what I hoped was innocent curiosity.

She walked over and hugged me, and I breathed a sigh of relief—imperceptibly. “Wow, Maura, you really are growing up, aren’t you?” She pulled away from me and gazed into my eyes, her own glistening. Instantly, I felt guilty and lowered mine.

“Thanks,” I muttered softly.

My mother seemed thrilled to find I could be interested in interior design. I’d sentenced myself to an evening of animated discussion, focused around what she did on a day-to-day basis. She even went into her office and brought out some tile and curtain samples to show me. I

feigned interest and gave Caelyn my full attention until it was time for bed. I figured that was my penance to pay for lying in the first place... well, not a complete lie. I did think what my mother did for a living was cool, and learning more about her job had offered me a chance to tuck the whole Ron situation into a back recess of my brain.

When I was lying in bed, I sent a text to Susie.

Mom canceled dinner tonight. Is tomorrow too short notice to go downtown?

In just a couple of minutes, she answered.

No way! Tomorrow is perfect! :)

I was happy Susie didn't have other plans. I was hoping to prove her wrong and put the whole scheme behind me. But what if her suspicions congealed into fact? I tried to quiet the muddy thoughts seeping around in my brain, keeping me awake.

I had no idea what time I finally fell asleep. Ron had texted a couple of times, but I had no desire to read them. I had zero energy left to deal with anything. When I did drift off, my dreams were full of my mother.

She appeared in several different places...waiting in a restaurant, walking down a city street, sitting on a bench in a park. In every location, she was with a man—I could tell by his stature—but in every scene, he was shrouded in darkness, his features indiscernible. It was like his own personal shadow followed him, obscuring him, no matter how the light fell

around him—which gave me a sense of déjà vu I couldn't quite place. Caelyn was speaking, enthusiastically, but her companion remained a mystery to me. He was left in the dark, just like me. But I was the only one standing on the outside.

When morning finally came, I felt as tired as I had when I'd gone to bed the night before. I dragged my feet into the kitchen where Caelyn was making a pot of coffee. The dark liquid smelled delicious. I wondered, since she'd remarked on my growing up, if she would share.

"Mom, can I have some coffee? I didn't sleep good." My voice came out with a touch of whine...definitely not good for achieving adult status.

"I don't think that's a good idea, Mink." Caelyn was rushing around, smoothly, getting ready for work. She'd always limited, and most times restricted, my sugar and caffeine intake.

"But I'm so sleepy!" And cranky.

"Mink, I said no." She ruffled my hair as she whizzed by. "It's a bad habit."

"But you're drinking it." I pouted.

"I'm too far gone for help." She winked as she emptied the pot into her travel mug. "Have some eggs, okay? That'll jump start you." She hurried off to the bathroom to finish doing her hair.

I moved like a sloth over to the cabinet to grab down a bowl, so I could whisk up some scrambled eggs. I was careless, and when my arm came

down with the heavy object, I sent Caelyn's handbag flying. "Crap!"

Of course her purse was open...and, of course, it landed upside-down, more than a little annoying given my drowsy state, but I quickly got down on the linoleum to scoop the contents back in. Luckily, even though it was a pretty roomy bag, Caelyn traveled light. When I turned the Italian leather over, though, the plain brown envelope that was the trademark of the Canadian Government caught my eye. I'd been watching for an envelope like that to show up in our mailbox for weeks.

It had been opened, so I could easily peek inside. There were two health cards, one for me and one for my mother. The mailing address on the letter inside was for her office downtown. My head reeled as realization sunk in. Caelyn must have asked for them to be sent there, while she'd had me checking our home mailbox for weeks. And how long had she had them? Could it be possible she'd been so busy she'd forgotten to mention they'd arrived? She knew how worried I'd been. I felt dizzy with all the insufferable questions spinning inside my head.

I knew my mother would be coming out of the bathroom at any minute. At first, I was tempted...very tempted...to thrust the envelope in her face and demand an explanation. I was shocked to find my mother had been hiding my health card from me—which she claimed was the only thing stopping me from going to the doctor for a checkup. I was livid. I looked the envelope over. The postmark date made me see red—July thirty-first!

Susie must have been right! The only explanation had to be that Caelyn was dating a new boyfriend and was so distracted she couldn't even remember to give me my health card. Or she was too busy, juggling a more exhilarating career and a new love life, for sparing a moment to care about me anymore?

I heard the tapping of her toothbrush against the porcelain sink and knew she was finishing her morning routine, so I quickly stuffed everything back into the purse, including the telltale envelope. Trying to focus on Susie's plan, I went to the fridge to retrieve the eggs. All I had to do was hold back my temper for a few more minutes, I told myself, and my mother would be out the door. If I confronted her then, I knew everything would come out once we started shouting at each other. Even if I didn't spill the beans about my other suspicion—one that seemed far more plausible at present—Caelyn would probably stop seeing the guy, just to be careful. I wanted the whole truth.

Like clockwork, my mother emerged from the bathroom at precisely the same time she did every morning. I concentrated on making sure the eggs were blended together perfectly, with no clear gobs showing through, when she came over to kiss my cheek and tell me goodbye.

"Have a good day, Mink."

"Mmm-hmmm."

"Be careful going to school."

“MMMM-HMMM.”

She sighed heavily. “Maura, are you really that upset about not getting any coffee?”

My phone rang. I glanced over but could tell by the ringtone, Muse’s “Endlessly,” Ron was calling.

“Aren’t you going to almost break your leg to get that?” Caelyn asked, surprise in her voice.

“Nope,” still concentrating on the eggs, trying not to be enraged...at either of them.

“Are you two fighting?” I wouldn’t look over at her, but I could tell my mother had her eyes narrowed in utter suspicion.

I thought fast. “No, he’s being stubborn. He didn’t want to wait until tonight to talk, but I told him I don’t want him wasting the money. I know they don’t have much right now.”

“Oh! I didn’t know that. Are they going to be okay? Do they need some help?” The concern in Caelyn’s voice softened me up, but it also made me speculate why someone who had such a great heart would do anything to bring me harm. I started to wonder if she could, possibly, have a valid reason for hiding the health cards from me. If so, what could that reason be?

“Ron’s playing a lot of gigs, so they should be okay.” I finally turned to face her. “I don’t think he’d take any kind of handout anyway.”

“Yes...” She turned her eyes heavenward, thoughtfully. “He seems like that type of person.” I knew she was thinking back to the time she’d offered to pay his tuition, as was I. How could someone as generous as Caelyn want to hurt her own daughter? My quick temper had cooled quite a bit, but I was still feeling very confused.

Mom looked at her watch. “Oh no! I have to run, Mink! Don’t forget, I’ll be at a client dinner tonight, but you tell Ron that if he needs any help...”

I shoved her purse at her. “Yes, yes! I will. Here. Go...go!” My attempt at shooing her out the door and avoiding further, dangerous confrontation worked. She kissed my forehead and told me to try not to worry, before sprinting out the front door.

She’s still lying to you...about several things, a little voice in my head reminded me. My phone started ringing again. “I guess her apple doesn’t fall far from Ron’s tree,” I countered, aloud.

“Well, if she’s doing what you think she’s doing, I’ll have no problem confronting her about the whole thing, *including* the health cards,” I told Susie as we rode the SkyTrain downtown that afternoon. I’d waited until we were safely away from the school to tell her about the morning’s discovery. None of our little group knew I was having health problems except Susie, and I wanted to keep it that way.

“So, how are you doing, anyway? Anything else weird happen?” Susie queried lightly. She knew I didn’t like talking about my condition, that the effects made me feel powerless. I was much happier forgetting about it entirely when I could.

“Well, I’m still starving all the time, weird cravings”—I’d never revealed specifically what those were—“and sometimes my senses seem like they’re on overload...”

“In what way?” Susie asked.

“Well, it’s like I can hear things I shouldn’t be able to hear. Some stuff I eat...well, if it’s something I really like...it’s like my taste buds are ridiculously amped up—not a completely bad thing. And when I am hungry, I can’t help eating those things; I have no choice...or control...”

“Like sweets?”

“Like meat...actually.” Susie raised an eyebrow at that, and I felt like a freak again, antsy and fearful of rejection.

“Hmmm, the meat craving could mean your body needs some iron. Or some other vitamins and minerals. Maybe that’s causing the other things to malfunction. I’ve read a lot about how you can be lacking in a certain vitamin, and how it causes all sorts of bad stuff to happen.”

“That could be it.” I’d never considered such a possibility before.

“Thanks, Susie. I have to admit I’ve been skipping the fruits and veggies of late. I bet you’re right!” I felt a new sense of relief course through me.

“Hey, I bet that causes problems with teeth too. I mean, we are still growing...for a little while longer anyway. My diet has been too meat heavy. Milk, fruits, veggies and multivitamins. I bet that’s the fix!” I *needed* her suggestion to be the fix. My whole mood brightened, considerably.

“Yep, I’m a genius.” Susie beamed back at me. “Wow, but the protein must be super good for your hair! It’s so gorgeous.” She ran her fingers down one thick, shiny strand.

“The next station is Burrard. Burrard Station,” the SkyTrain speaker announced.

“Well, her office is on Pender, so that’s us!” Susie stood and looked at me expectantly. I rose and followed her to the doors.

Lucky for us, there was a Starbucks right across from my mother’s office building. I felt twitchy, being so close to her without her knowledge, so I ordered a hot chocolate instead of a coffee. I didn’t believe Caelyn would actually consider that choice to be much better. We settled into a window seat, both sets of our eyes locked on the revolving glass door of the tower. Even when we talked to each other, we didn’t turn away.

Ron’s ringtone sounded again, shortly after we’d settled in—so exasperating!—so I turned the sound off on my phone and, with an afterthought, the vibrate mode as well. Spying on Caelyn set me on edge, and I just couldn’t have any other distractions at the moment.

“There she is!” Susie thought my mom looked like an elegant Italian model and was always talking about how beautiful she was after they’d met. I knew, before I locked eyes on my mother, Susie wouldn’t be mistaken. We’d been waiting for over an hour, since we’d walked straight to the SkyTrain from school, but Mom was still leaving work a little early.

And she wasn’t alone.

The days grew dark early in October, so the sun was well on its way to slumber. Long shadows were thrown across the paths of the people passing on the sidewalk across the street. The tall man had come out after Caelyn, and we’d been so focused on her, neither of us had gotten a good look at him while he was still inside the well-lit lobby. Outside, he fell in beside her—of course on the side farthest from my and Susie’s prying eyes. He was enveloped in the deepening shadows of the buildings, reminding me of my dreams.

“Oh! I can’t see him at all!”

“But...there is a guy,” I sulked.

“Clients can be guys.” Even though the whole thing had been Susie’s suggestion, she seemed to be rooting for my team once she’d taken note of my expression. “Come on! Before they get away!” She leapt to her feet, dragging me by the hand as she made for the door.

Once we crossed the street, I noticed my mother and Mystery Man were barely in view. As if reading my mind, Susie squealed, “Hurry, let’s

get closer!”

We ducked through the crowds, excusing ourselves in quiet voices and shortening the distance between us and the pair ahead. My mother had on a long, cream-colored sweater, so it was easier to keep track of her amid the sea of dark coats in the mounting gloom.

A dark shape moved into the small of her back...the guy’s arm. I, unexpectedly, felt a bolt of possessive resentment. “Hey, did you see that?!” I fumed at Susie. “He’s got his arm around her.”

Susie grabbed my hand and squeezed it. “Calm down. Any guy doing business with your mom is going to try to touch her. That doesn’t mean it’s welcome on her part.”

“Yeah...you’re right.” That brought back memories of the wormy client back home. Poor Caelyn!

That line of thought disappeared in the next moment. Caelyn turned toward the stranger and tilted her face up to him. He stopped walking and brought his face to hers to kiss her...on the mouth! She allowed the intimacy. Susie and I stopped dead in our tracks, too.

The kiss lingered for a moment, and then they walked on, that time hand-in-hand. I thought flames might shoot out the top of my head at any second.

“Ow! Maura!! Don’t squeeze so hard!” Susie was trying to wrench her hand from mine. Her face was contorted in pain.

I released her immediately. “Oh god, sorry Susie!!” She held the hand close to her chest, rubbing it gingerly with the other.

“Geez! You don’t know your own strength! I think it’s broken.” Her expression appeared wounded, as well.

“You do?! Oh no...I’m so sorry! Let me see.” Instead, she shook it, curling all the fingers.

“I think it’s okay.” She was still wincing. “Seriously, though, have you been working out?” I noticed the darkening, already, under her pale skin which heralded the advent of a nasty bruise.

“I—I...”

She shook the appendage one more time, looking up. “Crap! We’re going to lose them. Hurry!” Susie didn’t take my hand again but dragged me along by my wrist instead. My mother and her secret lover were strolling along slowly, so it required little effort to catch up.

We kept a safe distance, but I could still see enough details, by the shop window lights, to put two and two together. Caelyn was leaning into whoever-he-was, and she turned to smile at him quite often. Any worry I’d had about being discovered quickly melted away. My mother’s attention was too fiercely captured for her to catch on to being followed. I couldn’t help but feel deeply betrayed, even though some part of me could understand why she might want to keep the relationship a secret from me for a while.

I stumbled over my own two feet at the unadulterated shock of it all as I walked along, uncharacteristic for me. Susie was very quiet at my side. Finally, the couple turned into a quaint-looking little restaurant which more closely resembled a cottage. The sign overhead read 'La Gavroche.'

"Oh! I've heard of this place!" Susie exclaimed. "It's supposed to be one of the most romantic restaurants in Van..." She stopped talking when noticed my scowl.

"Let's cross the street and see if they sit by the window?" Susie suggested.

"No, I've seen enough. I want to go home." The tone of my voice sounded almost as miserable as I felt.

Susie ran her hand over my back in a gesture of comfort. "Are you okay?"

I simply shrugged, completely beaten down...by my mother, by Ron, by life in general.

"I hate to say it, Maura, but it was bound to happen sooner or later, ya know?"

I couldn't help but glare at her.

"Oh, come on; think about how happy you were with Ron, right? Don't you want that for your mother? I'm sure she has every intention of telling

you, once she thinks the time is right. I mean she always seems like she's so worried about you, and I can tell she's not a bad person."

Curiously enough, I'd been having precisely the same thoughts that morning. "Yeah, I don't want to admit it, but I guess you're right." I sighed in defeat.

There wasn't really anything to get angry about...that could be justified anyway...and I'd never been one of those teenagers who flew off the handle at every little imagined crisis. The words Susie had spoken started to burn in my mind.

"Oh yeah, Ron. I guess I should talk to him too." I fished in my pack for my phone.

"Yeah, maybe it's time you asked him about that girl. Are you calm enough to do that, though?" Susie looked pretty motherly herself at that moment. She wrapped her hand around my arm as I brought the phone up out of the bag.

"Maybe. I just hate the way things are... Oh my god!" I'd hit the home button, and the screen showed me the list of things I'd missed. At the top was a text from Ron. I squealed with excitement as I turned the phone around to show Susie.

Maura! Natalie is my COUSIN!! I've been trying to talk her out of leaving college because she's homesick. I knew Merina would give you the wrong idea and I wanted to tell you with a call, not this way,

but I guess you were mad? Can we Skype tonight please??? You know you're my favorite girl.

Susie squealed almost as loudly as I had.

"So, she's really going out with someone?" Ron winced on my computer screen as he spoke.

"Well, Susie did point out that it's been seventeen years... I guess she's due?" I hated admitting she was, even as I was reasoning the whole situation aloud to Ron. I guess I'd always hoped, somehow, by some unlikely miracle, the father I'd never gotten to know would find his way back to my mother and I.

"I guess so..." Ron answered. "But I know you well enough to see you aren't completely on board with the idea. Am I right?"

"I just always wished... I know it's stupid..." Allowing myself the luxury of playing out my lifelong fantasy hurt a lot, and I was dangerously close to tears.

"You want your dad back. Believe me; I know. When mine died, I might have been young, but that's all I wanted for the longest time and still do. But you never got to know yours at all. I think that's way worse." Ron was being very generous, especially being faced with the very real possibility of losing his remaining parent. At least I'd always had my loving, if

overprotective, mother and was in no known danger of having her disappear from my life.

I just nodded, my eyes in my lap. I hated crying in front of other people, even my own mother.

Ron knew me perfectly well. He changed the subject. "So, are you going to confront her about the health cards? I still think you need to go see a doctor, and I can't imagine why she'd want to keep you from going. Maybe I could talk some sense into her?"

My mother and Ron having a discussion about my well-being. I was horrified at the thought. I knew exactly how Caelyn would take that—as insulting, at the very least. "No!" The word came out more vehemently than I meant it to. "I mean, believe me, my mom does not appreciate parenting advice. I've seen people try, and nothing gets her back up more. I don't think it would help. But, I have a plan."

"Oh, you do?" He smiled in a sly manner. "I should've known. You're always full of good ideas. My clever beauty."

I couldn't help but blush and look down again, but quickly gathered my composure. "Thanks...but yeah, I don't want to reveal anything yet. I need to catch her off guard. I can't really be around her, because if I am, I know my curiosity will get the best of me, and I'll have to ask about the guy. If we start fighting about that, I'll lose my temper and start screaming about finding the health cards."

“Right, and no one wants to be on the receiving end of that.” He grinned in a knowing way.

“Hey! I said I was sorry for ignoring your calls!”

“I know. I just couldn’t help teasing you about it again.” He was enjoying my guilt far too much. “But, please, continue with this plan for your poor, unsuspecting mother.”

“Poor unsuspecting! She hid my health card from me and is dating some man in secrecy!” I crossed my arms over my chest with a huff of angry breath.

“You’re so cute when you’re angry.” He smiled disarmingly, making me giggle. “Okay, now continue.”

I realized he knew completely how to push my buttons, alarming, but still effective. “Okay...” I gave him a mock look of warning. “So, tomorrow, I need to do two things. The first is to stay away from her, so nothing slips out.”

“Does she have another dinner? I thought she didn’t do those back to back?”

“No, so I have to get out. I’m going to see if Susie will go to the library downtown with me tomorrow night.”

“Downtown?” I could tell by his expression he didn’t like that part of the plan. “I hope she’ll go, because I don’t like the idea of the two of you

there at night by yourselves. So, you going alone is definitely a bad idea. You should just go to the library in New West.”

Who was being overprotective then? I decided to ignore his concerns. “Well, that would defeat the second part of my plan. I’m going to ‘steal’ my health card out of Mom’s purse and go to the clinic instead. I have to go downtown because the one in New West is closed for renovations.”

“Oh wow, so you’re going to the doctor behind her back.” He thought about my idea for a moment. “Well, I can’t say I’m against the idea. I don’t know why your mom would put it off, but I can’t see a good reason for doing so. You might be right, and she’s too distracted by this new guy to see how badly you need to go. I mean, if nothing else, for your own peace of mind...and mine, of course. I don’t want anything to happen to you... I can’t lose you.” He actually looked fearful when he said that.

I was desperate to quell the spark of fright in his eyes. “Another great reason to do this my way. Don’t worry!” I unconsciously brought my hand up to the screen, wishing I could touch him across all the stupid miles between us. “I’m going to have them do all the blood tests in existence and check everything out, those weird, sporadic headaches too. It’ll be okay.” I was reassuring myself in addition to Ron. Facing the eventuality of going to the doctor made the chance of getting bad news a rock-solid reality.

“Oh! She’s home!” I heard Caelyn’s key turn in the lock. “Let’s cut the anmay and octorday talk.” I winked and smiled at my own joke.

“Cool.” He gave me a thumbs up.

“Mink!” my mother called out as she came into my room with a small knock. I fumed at her with my eyes, and she remembered she wasn’t supposed to use my nickname in front of others—any others—especially that one. “Sorry! *Maura*, is that Ron?”

“Yes!” I couldn’t help but transmit back happy; I was so glad everything had been straightened out between us. Having Ron back, after I’d felt like he was being torn away from me, had delivered a good chunk of calm amid all the other storms raging inside me.

“How are you, Dear? How’s your mother?”

“She’s a lot better, thanks, Ms. DeLuca. I’m fine too, just studying and playing a lot.”

“Well, don’t you wear yourself out too much.” I noticed Caelyn’s eyes had a misty, dreamy kind of look to them. Her dinner date must have gone well.

“I won’t,” Ron promised.

“And if you need anything, anything at all, you let me know, okay? You have my cell number. You can call anytime.”

“Thanks, Ms. DeLuca.” Ron looked a little uncomfortable. I knew he didn’t like the suggestion. The pride in his voice, when he’d told me how

he'd been paying all the bills not covered by his mom's disability check, told me he felt good about being able to take care of himself.

"Well, don't stay up too late, okay? I'm going to bed, but, Maura, we can have dinner tomorrow, spend some time together. Do you want to go out?"

"Actually, Mom, I can't." I couldn't help but notice Ron squirm onscreen, out of the corner of my eye. I shot him a quick look I hoped would remind him to stay cool. "I have a huge paper due next week, and I have to go to the library downtown tomorrow night." I had a weird, swirly kind of flitting in my stomach...the product of lying to my mother's face with her wide green eyes set upon me.

"Downtown?" She didn't like my plan; that was apparent in her frown and the troubled furrows on her brow. "Why can't you go to the library in New West?"

Apparently, my skill at concocting untruths on the fly was improving. "Because that library sucks! Susie and I went there after school, and they have *nothing*! Come on, Mom; Susie's going with me."

"Okay..." She paused, thinking. "But only if you two meet me for dinner after."

"Mom!"

"That's the only way to get a yes, Maura Maxine!"

"Mom! Not the middle name!"

Ron chuckled. "Maxine, huh?"

I turned briefly to dart my tongue out at him. "Hush, you!"

"Well, do we have a deal?"

"Alright, alright!" I was running numbers inside my head and realized I'd have plenty of time to get to the clinic before I had to meet Caelyn. And by the time I did, it'd be too late for her to stop me. If she just wouldn't discover my missing health card... I sighed. It was going to be another sleepless, restless night..

17. All I Ever Wanted Was the Truth...Right?

The next morning, I was a bundle of nerves, knowing what I had to pull off. Even though I knew Caelyn's routine better than my own, I was positive that would be the morning she'd come out of the bathroom early and catch me digging in her purse. I worked at being quick, but that only caused me to drop her bag on the floor...again. My hands were shaking so bad; I couldn't get a grip on anything. I pulled out her health card instead of my own, cursed under my breath and put it back so I could retrieve the correct one.

You'd have thought I would've grown used to going behind her back, starting several months ago with the whole swimming incident. I even took her driver's license out of her wallet and put it in my missing health card's place—with the back facing out—so its absence would be less noticeable. Once I finished burying the card in my pack, my palms covered with a thin sheen of nervous sweat, I ran to my room to get dressed. I needed as little contact with my mother as possible.

I'd purposefully only gotten into my bra and underwear. When she came into my room to say goodbye, I had a dress ready to cover my front.

"Mom! I'm getting dressed!" I had my line planned.

“Mink, I’ve seen it all before.” She rolled her eyes. “You do realize I used to bathe you?”

“Yes! Several hundred years ago...” I protested. The banter was keeping my mind away from all the things I was deceiving her about, just as I’d hoped so that I wouldn’t do something to give myself away.

She came over to kiss me goodbye—as always—anyway. “Have a good day at school, Mink. Do your best.”

“Don’t I always?” I gave her my best angelic smile.

“Can’t argue with that.” She turned to go. “But, hey, you two stay away from Hastings Street, you got that? I mean it, Mink, there are prostitutes and drug dealers all over down there.”

I shuddered, my revulsion genuine... My mother and I had driven down that street once. “No problem!”

“7:00, okay?”

I did some mental calculating in my head. I should be left with more than enough time. Caelyn must’ve thought I was coming up with an argument.

“If you need to go back to the library, I’ll drive you on the weekend.”

“Okay,” I said agreeably. My ruse had worked; she thought she’d won and, looking satisfied, turned to leave.

“Love you.” She waved one more time.

“I love you too.” I really did, despite my lying and scheming... *And,* I reminded myself, *I’m not the only one doing so.*

If Caelyn just wouldn’t get pulled over for speeding or running a red light, my plan would work just fine. In fact, if something did turn out to be wrong with me, my mother would probably thank me for following through with everything I planned to do.

“Sorry, Maura; I can’t. Not tonight. It’s my mom’s birthday, and my whole family’s going out.” Susie looked disappointed. She shouldn’t have. If I were her, I’d much rather go to a birthday dinner than sit in a boring clinic waiting room all evening.

“It’s okay,” I assured her. “I don’t mind going by myself at all. Besides, it would just be boring for you, and I really just want to get it over with. It’s not like it’ll be any fun.”

“The dinner with your mom would be fun!” Susie was quite taken with Caelyn.

“I’ll make sure we go out with her sometime soon then; I promise.” I smiled back at her, hoping she wouldn’t keep feeling bad about not being able to go along.

So, I’d be going alone. I felt more than a little nervous about going downtown solo. I’d never been downtown anywhere before, alone—

Indiana Pennsylvania's downtown was too small to count—consisting of a few blocks along one street.

Susie kept looking at me all through lunch, and I knew she was trying to gauge my true reaction, but I managed to hide my trepidation well. I launched into a full-scale discussion of my plan to talk Ron into a Christmastime visit. Everyone in our group perked up their ears to listen. I so rarely talked about Ron that I knew it would be like revealing some kind of big secret. But as Susie walked off to her Biology class, I watched her back as if my friend were a life preserver floating away in the middle of a vast, empty ocean.

The trip downtown wasn't bad. No one bothered me on the SkyTrain while I read my English assignment. As fate would have it, our teacher actually *did* give us a rather large research paper to complete. Going to the larger library would then be a necessity, so I was glad Caelyn had offered to drive me on the weekend...and I was relieved some part of my story had become truth.

I found the clinic easily. The Broadway Station Clinic was an easy walk from the SkyTrain stop of the same name. However, the waiting-room was past capacity, with people standing against the wall, sniffing and coughing into their sleeves, since there weren't enough chairs for

everyone. Since classes were back in full swing, cold and flu season was too.

The wait was two hours! It wasn't even 4:00 PM yet, so I'd still have almost an hour with the doctor. That would surely be more than enough time. Besides, if he ordered any blood tests, I already knew from searching the internet I'd have to visit a separate lab to get them done. The Biomedical Lab, unlike the clinic, in New West was open and would be easy to get to right after school. At the moment, I just had to find a two-hour distraction close by.

The library! Maybe I wouldn't have to bother Caelyn to drive me downtown on the weekend and having a few books with me would help back my original excuse for making my way downtown.

I figured out which bus to take from one of the friendly drivers waiting along the curb near Broadway Station. It wasn't far, about ten minutes on the bus. Once there, I got a card first thing in case I found books I wanted to take along, and then went to lose myself among the stacks.

I hadn't meant to but ended up losing track of time and staying at the library until my two-hour wait time had nearly run out. Jumping up from the table I was sitting at in a panic, I knocked my chair over and almost tripped over the jutting legs in my attempt to escape. I didn't look up to see if anyone had witnessed my humiliating fumble and made my way to

the front desk to check out a small stack of books—three for my class assignment and two I couldn't resist for pleasure.

I was hurrying, worried I'd lose my spot in line at the clinic if they called for me and I wasn't there. As luck would have it, I saw the bus pull away from the stop just as I was running up to the stop. It would be fifteen minutes before another arrived, so I decided to walk to the next stop in an effort to keep warm. The late October air was pretty chilly, since the sun had disappeared behind the snow-capped mountains, and I was wearing a fall-weight jacket that was proving too thin for the evening temperatures.

I walked along quickly, but I wasn't scared of being downtown. It turned out to be something different in real life than what my mind had imagined. There weren't dark characters lurking in the alleys or side-streets, waiting to draw in innocent victims. Rather, the sidewalks were filled with happy people. Students with backpacks, laughing and joking. Couples arm-in-arm or hand-in-hand, leaning into one another or whispering intimately in a way that made me long for Ron, my heart aching.

There were several cozy, well-lit restaurants lining my walk. I noticed I was hungry, and more than a couple appealed to my growing appetite. I almost stopped at a cute little coffee shop, the smell of the roasted beans making me sniff appreciatively, but remembered the clinic and hurried on.

I caught sight of a sushi place—I was absolutely dying to try sushi!—as I passed by an alleyway. It sat at the end of the darkened space, beckoning like a beacon in a storm. My stomach growled fiercely and the next moment flashes of the delicious, little ricey pieces danced in front of my eyes. All I could think of was food...well, that specific food. Oddly enough, although I'd never tried any of the exotic-looking rolls, I could smell every fragrance. Essences of avocado, fried shrimp and teriyaki-style meats invaded my senses. Some small, insignificant part of my brain alerted me I should be doing something else...something important...

I took a step into the alley, like a rabbit being lured into a carrot-filled trap. The sight of the sushi restaurant made me move forward. A couple steps more, and I was enclosed in darkness. A wariness came over me, but then the smell and imagined taste of sushi assaulted my senses again. Then, they picked up on something else.

It was the smell at first. A dark, delicious smell. The best male cologne I'd ever inhaled. I knew whoever was wearing that alluring scent was in the alley with me. There were no footfalls behind me, no sound at all, besides the traffic I could hear on the busy streets above and below me. But I could feel a presence—that itch at the base of your skull screaming out you're being watched—or followed in that case.

There weren't any doorways in which to hide down that particular stretch of alley, and I'd realized, once I'd started toward the restaurant, the space was deceptively lengthier than it had seemed upon first inspection. Every time I turned around, the space behind me was empty, as it had been the last five times I'd jerked my head around, certain I'd catch a glimpse of whomever I *knew* had to be there. I was about halfway through the narrow, dark walkway then, my skin consumed by the cold-running chill of fear.

Maybe I should call Caelyn? *No, Maura,* I stubbornly told myself, *you'll scare her to death. You're probably imagining things.* I could envision the near hysterics at the other end of the line and ruled that option out completely. Besides, I was almost at the other end. *If* anything should happen at that point, I was sure someone would hear me scream. Wow...I really didn't want cause to scream... I rubbed my hands over my arms in an effort to calm, comfort and warm myself.

I tried to put myself at ease by telling myself anyone who smelled that good could be no homeless drug addict. And if he meant me harm, wouldn't he have made his move before I'd gotten that close to the crowded street? As I inched through the last quarter of the alley, I took in a deep breath, just to catch one last whiff of whatever scent the guy was wearing. I tried to store it in my memory so I could try to find some to give Ron—and myself—as a Christmas present.

“You know I’m here, don’t you, Maura?”

My legs felt like cooked spaghetti, and it was all I could do to keep from collapsing in utter fear, right there on the pavement. Though the deep male voice was smooth and beautiful...but still should not carry across the night in the syllables which made up my name.

My brain fumbled around inside itself for a reasonable explanation. One of the teachers must have been at the library? A far more rational part tossed out the thought that even *if* one of the teachers from my school was the mysterious, sweet-smelling man in the alley, he had been lurking around, not allowing me to catch a glimpse of him. And I just couldn’t propose any way that could be a good thing.

Then, my brain tossed out anger, reminding me that person, whoever he might turn out to be, had stalked me, frightened me, made me doubt my own perceptions, only to let me come so close to a place of safety? He’d cruelly let me believe I’d soon be inside a well-lit restaurant, only snatch my safe harbor away when I’d believed myself to be home free. My ever-increasingly volatile temper flared white-hot, burning away most of the fear I’d felt. I irrationally whirled to face whoever he may be, infuriated by the twisted way he’d kept me rooted to the edge of the darkness at the very last few feet.

He was there then. And when I saw him, my consciousness slipped, like the swirl of a kaleidoscope, and I saw the revelation that was his face

no more.

Dreams swirled through my head, strange dreams which made no sense. I dreamt of eyes, dark like mine—identical. They stared back at me with no reason, no purpose. I was lost in absolute blackness, with only those eyes to keep me company. My eyes, my own eyes. *Stop it! Stop watching me!* my dream voice, with no real power, cried out.

I started awake. Those eyes hung over me. I shut mine and screamed. I screamed for my mother, calling out for her again and again until I actually heard her voice.

“Maura! Maura listen!” I felt someone shaking me by my shoulders as I lay on the ground...which was cold and hard. “I’m here; open your eyes.”

I did as I was told, slowly. Then, my mother’s eyes stared back at me. Her long, dark hair was swinging into my face, tickling. “Mom!” I reached up to find her back, wrapped my arms around her warmth and pulled myself up to her. She hugged me back, pulling me close.

“It’s okay, Maura. You’re okay,” she soothed into my ear.

My memory of the moments before blackness started to come back to me. I struggled to climb to my feet, pulling Caelyn with me, and somehow—in very awkward fashion—we managed to stand.

“Mom! There was someone following me... I think someone tried to attack me.” I noted movement over my mother’s shoulder.

“That was me.” The same resonant voice from before reverberated in my ears in the close space between the alley walls. My mother didn’t seem alarmed. In fact, she stepped aside, and my brain struggled to figure out why.

Until I saw him. My mother had been right; I did look like my father. We had exactly the same eyes. His features were my own, with a bit of Caelyn’s thrown in to soften them, including her full, heart-shaped lips. I couldn’t look at the man and not know who he was.

“Dad?” I squeaked—not how I wanted my first word to him to sound.

He nodded, and I noticed, even in the dim, his eyes welling. But they weren’t tears. I felt panic as I saw the spill from one eye, and the liquid was just the color of blood.

My mind was reeling. I couldn’t make sense of any of it. Of his sudden appearance, of the ghastly red tears in his eyes... My mind flashed back to the day I’d left Pennsylvania. The day I’d been crying over leaving Ron. That moment, he’d thought a tree branch had struck my eyes...and the red stains on his shirt. The welling red swimming in my eyes the night Ron’s mom had gone into the hospital.

I fought to gain meaning from the images running through my head, from the image right in front of me. There had to be only one explanation. Whatever disease I had, whatever was wrong with me...I’d inherited the

same. My dad was sick too, and he'd come back to help, or at least let me know what was wrong with me.

Whatever the reason, I was overcome with relief he'd finally returned. Overcome by questions, as well as love, at the sight of the man who'd helped create me. I started to cry, my body wracked by great, heaving sobs I couldn't control. I buried my face in my hands, hoping my father wouldn't get the wrong idea from my tears. I wondered why he'd been gone for so long, yes, but at the moment, I was overwhelmingly filled with the exhilaration of laying eyes on him for the first time. I put my hands down, away from my face, so I could tell him...so he wouldn't go away again.

I paused, unable to speak. My gaze followed my hands, smeared by the same garish red tears as those shed by the man standing in front of me. I looked up at him and my mother, my expression begging an explanation for the bloody tears staining my palms.

"I'm sick... That's why you came back, right? Are you dying? Am I dying?" I could barely speak, my voice straining to break through my crying.

The man, *No, Maxwell,* some part of my brain said to me, stepped over and his arms claimed me. He pulled me close, painfully close, to his body. He felt oddly cold through the front of his coat. Then, he held me away, so he could look into my face. His eyes glittered like black jewels

through the red haze of his tears. His fingers traced lovingly, and like ice, across my face.

“No, my daughter,” he said, his voice like dark music, “you are not dying. In fact, you will live forever.” The next words he spoke crept over me like a rising tide. They thrashed and rose over my whole being, threatening to drown me in a surreal dreamworld, from which I might never return. “I have come home to tell you who you truly are, Maura. My words may be very hard for you to comprehend, but you *were* created from a very old, very elite bloodline. Very soon, my dear loved one, you will complete your transition into the exquisite creature you were born to become. A vampire.”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Claudette Melanson lives in Kitchener, Ontario, with her husband Ron and four bun babies: Tegan, Pepper, Butters & Beckett. She graduated from Indiana University of Pennsylvania with a BA in English and an MA in Literature. Vampires have been a passion since age five. She hopes to one day work full time as an author, since there are many, many books living inside her head.



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Bonus! Read the first chapter of Undertow: Death's Twilight below:

Darkest Discovery

“W-w-what?!!” seemed to be all I could manage in way of a response.

My long-lost father had appeared, after seventeen long years...and informed me I was turning into a vampire. My hold on reality was tenuous at best. The very air around me felt watery and surreal. In fact, I was reasonably sure I *had* to be dreaming.

My father, Maxwell, had released me from our first-ever embrace, and I'd begun to back away—an auto-response to his little revelation. He stood with my mother now, both hands out in a conciliatory gesture. “Now, Maura, please calm down...”

“Calm down?!” My voice came out shrill and thready. He'd just said something utterly ridiculous—impossible. I threw both arms around my ribcage, trying to stabilize myself somehow. My breaths were coming so fast; I was sure I'd hyperventilate.

My mother finally spoke, after her long silence, “Maura, it's okay.” She was advancing very slowly toward me.

I didn't feel like anything would ever be okay again. What my father had divulged defied reality itself. That tiny, but logical, voice in my head I'd been hearing insisted they explained a lot of things happening lately. Like the bloody tears smeared across my face and hands... *But vampires weren't real!*

The disease I'd inherited must've possessed the capability to deteriorate the mind in order for my father to believe such a thing. *Then why does Caelyn believe it too?* my mind asked. Or was she merely going along with his maniacal raving to avoid upsetting a dying man? I looked back and forth between them and another realization struck.

"It was *him!* This is who you've been with at all those 'work dinners!' We saw you!" There! I'd let the cat out of the bag about me and my best friend, Susie, following Caelyn after work one night. Once I'd put two and two together, I became so enraged, all thought of ludicrous vampires was chased from my head.

My mother's eyes narrowed suspiciously. "Excuse me? Did you just say you've been spying on me, Maura?" My father simply stared at the ground.

That was the last straw. "You have the nerve to be angry about me spying on you?!! You've been keeping me from my own father!!" I was screaming now. "How could you?? **How could you?!!!**"

Caelyn's mouth was moving, but no words were coming out.

I continued to scream at her, my temper completely beyond my control. “We’re both sick, maybe dying, and you sneak around behind my back.” My brain connected more dots. “And you?!” I pointed a trembling finger at Maxwell. “You didn’t want to see me? Or are you just completely out of your mind, spouting nonsense about vampires?”

My father’s head jerked up suddenly when that word escaped my lips. His eyes darted to either end of the alley, and I noticed small groups of people peering in, most likely in response to the volume of my shrieking.

His expression switched from alarmed to a combination of stern and resolute. I’d seen an identical look on my own face in the mirror before. He moved past my mother—reminiscent of a mannequin stuck in suspended animation—to grab me firmly by the arm. “Come along, Maura, we are leaving.”

There was no arguing with that vicelike grip. He towed me along and collected my mother in similar fashion, as we moved toward the end of the alley from which I’d originally come. A lingering assault of the senses flashed in the forefront of my mind, overwhelming me. I unconsciously muttered, “Sushi.”

“What?” my mother asked, glancing over at me like I’d grown another head.

“I planted that suggestion,” he explained to her calmly.

“Oh! I see.”

I felt my legs go weak again...and the fog that had stolen my consciousness before started creeping in from the corners of my eyes.

“Have they figured out you’re here?” My mother’s voice made its way to me through thick, dense fog. Muffled as her words were, I didn’t miss the tension-laced edge to her question.

“No, no, Caelyn. Not to worry, Love. You forget; I *am* more experienced than the rest. I know how to hide from them. And we’ve managed to keep our little secret thus far, haven’t we?” The tone of his voice, calm and soothing, seemed the wrong vehicle to carry the words he was speaking.

My brain broke free from the sluggishness weighing it down, and I switched to high alert in a microsecond. Who were *they*? Why was my father hiding from whoever they were? More experienced? A surge of remembrance... Vampire?? All the troubling questions escaped from me with a gasp.

“I think she’s coming around, shhhhhhh,” my mother said in a whisper that sounded too loud in my ears.

I realized then we were in Caelyn’s car, and a close examination of the world outside the windows told me we were moving toward home. I didn’t know if I should speak at all, because what could I possibly say? I had so many worries and questions rolling around inside my brain, it was making

me lightheaded. Besides, I hadn't forgotten I was angry with both of them and bit my tongue to keep it from uttering something foolish. The buzzing worry, over who the mysterious 'they' were, almost overshadowed my ire...almost. An uneasy worry started to creep among my insides.

The silence hung heavy inside the car as we pulled into the underground parking garage. It was like a blanket I tried to wrap myself in to keep safe. Not talking about my possibly-insane, newly-found father being hunted was safe. Not talking about vampires was safe. And keeping my temper in check was definitely safe.

The white-hot anger I'd felt in the alley when I'd realized Caelyn had been keeping my father a secret—and the fact he'd kept himself hidden, as well—was quickly dissipating. I had far too many questions that needed answers and behaving irrationally wouldn't help me accomplish my goal, I reminded myself.

Shock must have been a powerful debilitator, as my legs nearly failed me once I'd managed to climb out of the car. Maxwell moved to put his arm around me, but seemed to think better of it, stepping closer to my mother instead. I couldn't handle any more distance or absence, snuggling myself into his other side. Maybe it was because the resemblance between us was so strong, but through some miracle, he already felt familiar to me. His arm came up to draw me into our little trio, and though we continued to the elevator in silence, both parents smiled

at me warmly. It was hard not to get drawn into their allure and felt better than holding onto the exhausting anger I'd been inundated with lately.

Once the elevator doors closed, I recognized the scent permeating the closed space—the artificial fresh of the baby wipes Caelyn kept in her purse for mess emergencies. The scent clung to all of us, and I realized all the bloody tears shed by both me and my father had been wiped away. My palms were cleared of crimson evidence, as I was sure my face would be, too. Maxwell had also been scrubbed clean. While bloody tears might be something you'd want to hide from passersby, I still wasn't ready to buy into the whole vampire theory.

As Caelyn turned the key in our apartment-door lock, Ron's text tone sounded from my jacket pocket. Oh yeah, Ron! Nothing like the return of the father you'd never known to make you completely forget about the boy you were in love with, for a few hours. I dug frantically for my iPhone, desperate for some normalcy.

Hey how'd it go at the clinic?

The clinic! Another thing I'd completely forgotten about.

I looked up to see Maxwell and Caelyn standing inside the front hallway, looking at me expectantly. Before stepping inside, I quickly texted back.

Didn't go. Have to explain later. My DAD is here!

Wait! What?? Your DAD???

I saw his immediate reply, before I begrudgingly slipped the phone back into my pocket, clicking on the mute button. He must have been going crazy with curiosity, but then so was I. Ron would just have to wait. My empathy for him escaped my body in the form of a loud, deep sigh.

“I guess Ron will just have to wait, eh?” My father chuckled.

“What?! How do you know...” I thought about recent developments after speaking. Of course, my mother must have been filling him in on all the time he’d been away.

But he shocked me once again with what he spoke next. “Maura, you may not realize, but I’ve kept up with your life quite completely. From the time you ran your trike into that tree when you were four, to your first ride on the school bus...to your sneaking off to see your boyfriend’s rock band play at that frat house.”

Oh...had *he* ratted me out to Mom that night? Wait—had she been in touch with him all that time, merely pretending he wasn’t a part of our lives? Why would she keep him all to herself and feign being heartbroken for years?

I felt a depth of betrayal I hadn’t known existed. Far beyond her obvious lack of concern for my health problems the last few months, beyond her lies about hiding our health cards—always refusing to take me to the doctor—beyond even sneaking around behind my back with the father I’d been dying to know my whole life.

“Caelyn...” I hissed at her. I couldn’t even call her Mom while feeling the way I did at that moment.

My mother’s spine stiffened, and the look on her face told me I’d crossed a line she wouldn’t allow me remain behind. “Maura Maxine! I am *still* Mom.” She crossed her arms over her chest in a way that screamed ‘end of discussion.’

My temper boiled up over the top again. “Then **act like it!!**” I hurled the angry words at her.

“Maura! That is enough!” That was the booming voice of my father. “You have no idea what sacrifices your mother has made for you! The hardship she has had to accept, the choices she decided to make...all for your benefit.”

I thought about that for a moment. I really didn’t know. Right then, I felt like I didn’t know much of anything.

“Well, then, why don’t you both explain it to me?” I asked calmly, without a hint of whine or sulk in my voice. Of that, I was proud. I guessed I really might be growing up after all.

My father and I were seated at the dining room table. Caelyn brought me a cup of coffee. I looked up at her with an eyebrow raised in surprise.

“Well, I hear you’re already drinking it anyway.” She sighed and shrugged her shoulders in a gesture of defeat before striding back into

the kitchen.

“Wow, you really are watching me closely.” I had to admit I was a bit annoyed with my father. Happy to see him or not, I didn’t appreciate my every move being reported back to my mother. It felt like he was behaving more like a little brother than a dad.

“Unfortunately, Maura, you were making that very necessary.”

“What?” My tone sounded exasperated...and I certainly felt that way.

“Demanding that your mother take you to the doctor and even finding a way to sneak in that one dental appointment. Luckily, I was able to destroy *that* set of records—they will think it was a computer glitch,” he added when he saw my shocked expression. “You have to realize why we must be careful about our existence. It is extremely dangerous for anyone to collect medical information about you...especially so for anyone to have access to a sample of your blood. It is absolute law we keep hidden the truth of what we are.”

I couldn’t help rolling my eyes. Science was one of my best subjects, and I was firmly grounded in the real world, coupled with my belief there was a rational explanation for everything. But I wanted to be gentle with him. If our shared disease was afflicting his mind, causing him to believe these things, then they were real, at least, to him.

I laid my hand, comfortingly, on his arm. “Dad, not the vampire thing again. Come on, now. You may be sick, but down deep you have to know

the difference between fantasy and reality.”

“So, you do not believe me?” he queried with a soft, confident smile on his thin, but elegant, lips.

“I’m sorry, but what you’re saying...it just isn’t possible. Vampires, werewolves, zombies—all those things are fiction. They just aren’t real.” I was trying to be as kind as possible. His words and the strength behind his belief were frightening me. I feared for the degeneration of my own mind.

“Not even after all you have gone through? All the unexplainable changes? Think back on those, and tell me if you still think it is impossible.”

So, to humor him, I did. I thought back to the change in my hair, the enhancements to my memory, my craving for blood... My eyes flicked from the dark imperfection in the tabletop they were studying to lock on his.

“Okay, I’ll admit that some of that stuff is very strange and hard to explain.” I still couldn’t speak aloud the fact I craved, and drank, blood. “But...”

“No buts, Maura. What about the time you wanted that boy at the bridge to return your clothes to you? He very nearly did, did he not? That was because of your emerging powers. For a moment, you were able to control his mind with the influence of your own.”

What he was saying was disturbing...because I did remember it just the way he described. A group of my cruel classmates had abandoned me in the woods, wearing only my underwear, but I had nearly convinced the brother of the instigator to hand them over. And he *had* behaved as if he'd been caught in some kind of trance. I felt my insides go a bit cold as I let myself consider, minutely, the possibility of truth in his words. Then, another consideration presented itself to my troubled mind.

"Wait a minute...how could you know about that? Were you there that night? How do you know about that??!" To what depths did all these secrets run?

"No Maura, I was not *physically* there that night. But, I could see it through your mind. You and I...we share a very deep connection, especially now you have begun your journey toward the final transformation."

I wanted to ignore all of what he'd just said. I didn't want it to be possible that he could see into my mind, or that I could be changing in the way he was suggesting. I shook my head, wanting to rid it of the nonsensical things he'd been suggesting all evening. Where was my mother? She couldn't possibly be a believer in any of that.

As if on cue, she came back to sit at the table with a mug of coffee for herself and one for Maxwell.

“Ha!” I pointed an accusing finger at my father. “If you’re a vampire, how can you drink coffee?” I settled back in my chair quite pleased with myself.

“I do not need to,” he explained matter-of-factly, “but I still like it very much. A few sips will not upset my system, and I love the aroma.” He inhaled deeply and smiled with satisfaction.

“A few sips, huh? I guess you can’t eat solid food either?” My tone took on light sarcasm, as I was getting more irritated with the lengths to which he was carrying his charade. He may have believed the story he was spinning, but I did not. I crossed my arms stubbornly across my chest.

Maxwell shook his head and allowed a small sigh to escape. “I did not want to have to resort to this. I so hoped you would trust that feeling inside you—the one telling you to believe. But if I must...”

My father tilted his head back ever so slightly and opened his mouth, pulling his lips up and away from his teeth as he did so. I couldn’t help but notice my mother’s sudden anxiety, apparent in the slight ringing of her hands—a telltale sign for her. For some reason, her reaction stimulated the flurrying of a hundred butterflies in my stomach. I turned my attention back to the source of her stress.

For an instant, Maxwell’s teeth were like any other human’s, but as I watched, his canines grew, descending downward until they became an extraordinary set of fangs. They dropped so slowly, so deliberately...I

could tell he had complete control over them. He drew them up again in the same unhurried manner so I could see there was no trick to what he was doing. Even the best, most professionally-fabricated fangs couldn't move like that. I felt like I'd stepped into one of the horror movies Caelyn was so fond of watching—only none we'd ever seen had been about vampires. Could that have been another painful reminder?

“That can't be real,” I breathed.

“It's real, Maura.” Caelyn's voice was smooth and steady.

My mind wanted to continue to protest. To argue what he was saying simply wasn't possible.

“And you drink human blood?” My voice was a scratchy, irritated whisper. He nodded almost imperceptibly in answer to my question, as if he were trying to soften the blow. “Show me.” I glanced in Caelyn's direction.

My father looked over toward my mother, too, before answering with finality and deadly calm. “Absolutely not.”

“So you don't drink her blood?” The look on Caelyn's face told me he most certainly had.

“That is an intimate thing, Maura,” he stated in explanation.

I started to play out what I'd suggested in my mind and realized how right he was. “Okay, okay. Yeah, keep your intimate...stuff...to yourself.” Thoughts of my mother as lover were incredibly foreign to me.

I reached my hand out toward him then. He was my father, there was no denying that. No need for a DNA test when you bore such a strong resemblance to the parent who'd helped create you. Wait...creation! That was the loophole!

I was very smug when I exclaimed, "Vampires can't have babies. Aren't they frozen in time or something? *If* you're a vampire...like you think you are...how could you possibly be my biological father?" My hand came down on his as I finished my sentence, and the wintry feel of his skin was a blatant contrast to the words I'd just spoken. That uneasy sensation started twisting around in my gut all over again.

"That one is simple. Female vampires cannot have babies, no. But nature always seems to find a way for the continuation of a species—whether mammal, insect, fungi, even viruses and bacteria. Vampire males retain the power of procreation. There is strong science behind what we are, Maura. I have studied it for decades."

Just because he was now speaking my language did *not* mean I was going to start buying in to what he was saying, even though there was a part of me arguing away that his words were the perfect explanation for the freak-show my life had always been.

"Science, huh? I'm sorry, Dad, but I don't see how anyone could explain vampires with any kind of scientific absolution." I was trying so hard to be rational, to drown out that part of my brain—becoming very

loud now—screaming, *perfect explanation!* in response to what he was telling me.

He chose to ignore my words and kept up the ‘perfect explanation.’ “Think of vampires as human upgrades.” He glanced quickly at Caelyn, “I mean no offense, My Love.”

She smiled calmly, lovingly. “None taken.”

“Sometime during the fourteenth century, human DNA changed, mutated. I believe this was evolution’s survival response to The Black Death, which decimated Europe.” Maxwell eyed me up to gauge my reaction. “It happened the same way reptiles or insects change coloring to match their surroundings. Mother Nature gives them camouflage, so they can blend in and survive.”

“Dad...that’s not really the same kind of thing at all.”

He put his pale, cold hand on top of mine. “I know, Maura. I am merely trying to explain things in a way you can understand.” He smiled softly, those strange, sparkling eyes of his locking on mine. “At its apex, The Black Death wiped out better than half the population, right around sixty percent. I believe that triggered a call for survival in the human blueprint. The catastrophic body count caused dramatic changes that could, literally, stop Death in his tracks. Human DNA reworked its own code, mutated to create a being who could survive The Black Death—or any other plague—and so much more. A human was born, who seemed like

any other at birth. He grew, appearing to be like any other child in the world, but once he reached manhood, a dramatic transformation took place. His body became unnaturally strong and perfect. All but essential systems shut down, making him impervious to injury and disease. This also brought a halt to the aging process...”

I interrupted him before he could continue. “Speaking of age, just how old are you?” I’d noticed abruptly, when my father had spoken that last line, just how young he looked—as if he were aged less than a decade beyond his seventeen-year-old daughter. He looked younger than my mother, who’d supposedly met him when she was fifteen and he was twenty-five. Caelyn still appeared to be in her twenties, though she was nearly thirty-three. Still, nearly imperceptible lines could be seen at the corners of her eyes, whereas my decade-older father had not a wrinkle to speak of. His skin was perfect, smooth alabaster.

I felt the cold shock following my observance settle into my bones. My thoughts felt like pieces in one of those Barrel of Monkeys games. They hooked together, growing into a long chain that started to present like truth. His uncharacteristic pallor, the perfection and temperature of his skin, blood in place of saline tears. And could I really deny the astonishing pair of fangs I’d witnessed growing out of his skull with my own eyes? I was beginning to believe.

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