WEATHERING STORMY

AUBURN J. KELLY
To my loving husband and my two awesome children for their love and support.
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Finding Grace – Sneak Peak
*** Warning: Contains mature subject matter that may not be suitable for all readers. ***
Chapter One

The sun sat lazily on the horizon, illuminating the clouds in layers of orange, red, and the most striking shade of pink. The colors mingled and danced across the shimmery surface of the lake below, and it was so stunning that it nearly took her breath away.

Sturdy, muscular arms wrapped her in a cocoon of warmth, love, and safety. She was content and completely at ease with the world at that moment. She wanted to stay that way forever. She wanted to feel that way forever.

But as the sun slowly sank below the horizon, it took all of its warmth and radiance with it, leaving the sky dark and ominous-looking. A breath of cool air brushed over her skin, sending a chill up her spine and causing her to shiver. And a strange whirring, buzzing sound emerged in the distance. She tried to ignore its intrusion, but it only grew louder and louder.

Foreboding washed over her when thunder crackled through the air. And the warm, comfortable arms that held her just moments ago suddenly vanished. She was instantly grief-stricken over the loss. “No,” she cried out, “Please don’t go!”

“Stormy!” Someone was calling her name in the distance. “Stormy….”

“Stormy!” BANG! BANG! BANG! “Stormy Rae!”

Pulling the sheet over her head, Stormy grumbled at the intrusive noise, “Enough already, Mama.” Stormy’s exhausted body told her to stay in bed, despite the annoying ray of light streaming through the part in the curtains.

BANG! THUD! CRASH!

“Ugh…” The bumping and thudding coming from her mother’s room was competing with the dull pounding in her head.
Reluctantly, Stormy peeled back the sheet and reached over to slap at the obnoxious screeching coming from the clock on the bedside table. She squinted at the illuminated red blobs on the clock until they morphed into numbers. They read seven-twenty. “Oh, no, no, no, no.” Why hadn’t the alarm gone off? Knowing full well she’d set it the night before, Stormy picked up the traitorous object and stared at it. Dammit! It was switched to radio instead of alarm, and she had slept through the static of the faded out radio station.

It was the one and only time she was thankful for her mama’s bellowing. She scrambled out of bed, tripping on the comforter that somehow ended up on the floor, and reached for the light switch. Her fingers hovered over it for a few seconds, but then she drew them back. If she played her cards right, she might be able to slip out of the house undetected.

As quietly as possible, she shimmied into a pair of jeans and grabbed a random tee-shirt from a hanger in the closet. After a quick peek down the hallway to make sure it was clear, she tiptoed to the bathroom to brush her teeth and wash her face, ever grateful for having showered the night before. Then she made a quiet dash back to the dark bedroom to grab her shoes and backpack.

Gently pulling the bedroom door closed, Stormy snuck silently down the hallway while mentally crossing her fingers. Getting past Mama’s bedroom was going to be tricky, but if she was really, really lucky….

Screeeak! The ratty old trailer with its squeaky floors gave her away.

“Just where in the hell do you think you’re sneaking off to, girlie? I’ve been trying to get your attention for nearly an hour. Didn’t you hear me calling you?”

Shit!

Stormy backtracked down the hallway and leaned against the doorframe of her mother’s room with an exaggerated sigh, “What is it, Mama? I need to get to school. I’m already going to be late enough as it is.”

Marni reached over to grab her pack of Winstons from the bedside table, letting her faded floral bedspread slide to the floor in the process. “School? Well then who’s going to take care of me today, Stormy Rae?” she croaked in that gravely, two-pack-a-day voice of hers. “You know I’m sick.”

Surveying the mess in the room, Stormy’s obsessive compulsive tendencies drew her over to her mother’s bedside to pick up the discarded bedspread. She fanned it out over her mother and collected a couple of empty beer bottles from the dresser. “Take the aspirin I left for you and
drink that bottle of water there on the table. You’ll be fine, Mama. I have
to go. Now.”

“What? You can’t just leave me here to—”

Oh yes I can. Stormy closed the door and continued down the hallway
with the muffled tirade trailing behind her. “Stormy Rae! Don’t you walk
away from me, girl! This is my house and you only live under my roof
because I allow you to. Do you hear me, Stormy Rae Black?”

Stormy cringed at the sound of her full name. For some reason it
always sounded dirty coming out of her mother’s mouth, as if it was a
curse. And that same old tired rant had been beaten to death—how she
owed her mama her life, and how Mama sacrificed everything just to give
Stormy a home…blah, blah, blah.

Marni Black—always the martyr.

When Stormy reached the living room she eyed the empty hook by
the front door. No keys. Rolling her eyes at the incessant ramblings that
were still trickling down the hallway, Stormy dropped to her knees and
began searching the couch. Her fingers worked their way around the edges
and between the cushions, producing nothing but some crumbs and some
loose change. Then she eyeballed the mess of overflowing ash trays and
empty bottles on the coffee table, but they weren’t there either. “Keys,
keys…. Where could they be?” Time was ticking and she needed to get
out of the house before Mama had a chance to stumble out of the bedroom
and all hell broke loose.

Stormy braced her hands on her hips and closed her eyes while she
tried to remember the last place she’d seen them. With all of the
commotion last night they were liable to be anywhere. But it was hard to
concentrate with her mama’s ranting and raving drowning out her
thoughts.

“You’re so damned ungrateful, Stormy…after everything I’ve done
just to keep a roof over your head…."

She bit down on her lip to keep from engaging in what could easily
turn into an all out battle. After all the cleaning up after that woman, the
sleepless nights, and the endless berating…. Maybe she should have just
left her on the bathroom floor last night instead of cleaning her up and
dragging her sorry butt to bed. Her mother was deluded if she thought
there was any truth in what she was rambling on about. Stormy had
earned her keep around that house…and then some. How dare her mother
insinuate otherwise?

She dragged in a much needed breath and counted to ten. Breathe
through it and then let it go. It was an exercise she used when the dark
thoughts threatened to take over. She tried to remind herself that the
raging lunatic in the bedroom wasn’t really her mother. It was the version of her that Stormy had learned to put up with over the years. The real Mama was buried underneath somewhere. At least that’s what she told herself. In the recesses of Stormy’s mind there was another Mama—a sweeter, kinder, gentler Mama. But it was getting harder and harder to remember that one.

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Nine Years Ago

Stormy stared at the slushy green mess on the floor in horror while the vinegary odor permeated the air of the tiny kitchen. There were pickles and glass shards everywhere. The crash was loud so there’s no way her mama didn’t hear it, and she was going to be livid.

It had happened so fast. One minute she was making a bologna sandwich, and the next, the pickle jar was flying over the edge of the counter. She’d tried to catch it, but she just wasn’t quick enough.

Stormy was reaching for the roll of paper towels when her mother stormed into the kitchen. Her eyes were blazing and a snarl marred her normally pretty face.

“Mama, I’m sorry. I’ll clean it—”

Her teeth were clenched and her eyes pierced right through Stormy. “Look what you did! What were you thinking? Do you think I like cleaning up your messes? I ought to beat you black and blue, just like my daddy…..” She reared her hand back and Stormy flinched. This was it. Mama was finally going to make good on all those threats to beat her senseless. Reflexively, she braced for impact, turning away slightly and arching her shoulder upward. Standing stone still, Stormy squeezed her eyes shut and balled her hands into fists until her fingernails bit into the soft flesh on her palms. She was ready for the impending blow…but it never came.

The only sound cutting through the thick silence was that of her mother’s heavy panting. When Stormy mustered up the courage to open her eyes, her mother was just standing there, hand still raised and a pained expression painting her face. After several agonizing seconds, and without a single word, she turned and retreated to her bedroom.

A bewildered Stormy just stood there…in the middle of the kitchen in her pickle juice soaked socks. Waiting. Was Mama coming back? Surely that couldn’t be the end of it…could it?

The thought crossed Stormy’s mind to run, to haul ass out of there before her mama got back. But she knew better than that. She had
nowhere to go, and it would only prolong the inevitable. So she stayed. With the threat of punishment still hanging in the air.

When the suspense got to be unbearable, she swallowed her fear and crept down the long hallway to her mother’s bedroom. When she pressed her ear to the bedroom door, the only sounds coming from the other side were those of muffled, gut-wrenching sobs. Stormy knew right then that something in that house was broken…something other than the pickle jar.

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Stormy pulled her thoughts back to the present, where time short and her keys were still missing.

Rummaging around the living room for them proved to be fruitless, so Stormy darted into the kitchen and let her eyes roam over the tiny space. Aha! She snatched the keys off the counter, slung her backpack over her shoulder, and darted for the door.

She flew down the steps of the dilapidated trailer and then took some frustration out on her poor old truck by slamming the door. Hard. Once inside the truck, she pushed big sigh of frustration through pursed lips, willing herself to calm down. Drama was the last thing she needed today, and she’d already endured a week’s worth before even leaving the house.

A quick check in the visor mirror revealed walking death. Her lack of sleep was evident in the big, blue-gray rings under her eyes. Her normally tan skin looked ghostly and, to top it off, her hair was a big frizzy mess. She looked like an extra in a zombie movie.

There wasn’t much she could do about it at that point so she slapped the visor back into place and put the truck in reverse. The mud sloshed under the tires on her way down the driveway and Stormy mumbled a curse under her breath. She was tired of the depressing gray skies and the soupy winter weather that was so typical in Southeast Texas.

As she made her way down the waterlogged dirt road and headed toward the highway, she imagined what it was going to feel like when she left Mama behind for good.

“Five more months,” she uttered to herself.

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Twenty minutes and several potholes later, she pulled into the deserted student parking lot of Yaupon High School. A gargantuan yellow and white banner was strung across the main building that read Home of the Fighting Yellow Jackets. “How original,” she whispered a sarcastic sneer. Nothing about the current situation was okay and it had her in a foul
mood. It wasn’t fair to be starting a new school so close to graduation, and looking up at the red brick monstrosity in front of her was like staring down the barrel of a shotgun. *Thanks a lot, Mama.*

The plain red brick and double-hung windows reminded Stormy of a prison, but at least the place looked clean. As far as she could tell, it hadn’t been tagged with any graffiti and she didn’t see any trash or debris scattered around. Yellow and white striped awnings covered the sidewalks that connected the four main buildings. The pop of color was a nice contrast to the dark brick and bland concrete; she’d be able to stay dry when it rained… unlike her last school where she was guaranteed to get soaked on her trek from class to class. And she had to admit that the landscaping was decent. The oak trees dotting the courtyard were a nice touch. They made the place look and feel a little less institutional.

The absence of people milling around told her that she was more than a just little bit late, kicking her anxiety up another notch. She groaned internally. So much for slipping into class undetected. There was no way to avoid the awkward staring that was sure to come—no better way to draw attention to oneself than to interrupt a classroom.

She pulled the heavy glass doors open and wondered what kind of label she’d get stuck with this time around. Her presence—new kid in the middle of the school year—was bound to set off a few rumors. She didn’t quite understand the phenomenon, but she’d seen it time and time again…the pointing and whispering and sideways glances. Over the years she’d been branded everything from a practicing witch to the daughter of a psychopathic serial killer.

But she let them think what they wanted. Because sometimes the rumors were better than the truth.

Stormy practically tiptoed down the hallway, silently cursing herself for not having worn sneakers as her footsteps echoed off the cinderblock walls and concrete floors. She was so focused on her footfalls that she didn’t notice the other presence in the hallway. “Shouldn’t you be in class?” a petit brunette woman barked from out of nowhere. Startled, Stormy gasped and ended up stumbling over her own feet. Where the hell did she come from?

The woman stood there tapping her toe in overly starched slacks with her arms crossed over a white, poufy-sleeved satin blouse. She might have been pretty if not for the sour expression that tainted her features. Stormy didn’t appreciate her accusatory glare, as if she’d caught her committing some sort of felony. She shoved down the urge to pull the woman’s pouty bottom lip up over her snooty little head. She was so not in the mood to be antagonized. *Be the bigger person, Stormy.* She stood up a little taller,
squared her shoulders and looked the woman straight in the eye. Since she was in her face, she may as well make use of her. Masking her disdain in syrupy sweetness, she said, “If it’s not too much trouble, could you please point me toward the registrar’s office?”

With an exasperated sigh, the woman mumbled and pointed down the hall, “It’s the third door on the right.”

Stormy forced a smile that didn’t quite reach her eyes. “Thank you.” With a not-so-subtle eye roll, the woman clopped down the hallway, her shiny black hair bouncing on her collar, and then she disappeared around the corner. Stormy mentally shook off the strange encounter and mumbled to herself, “I sure hope she’s not one of my teachers.” The idea of having to deal with that pompous princess every day…. Ugh. A disturbing thought. As if she didn’t have enough problems already.

A little further down the hall, she spotted the sign that read, Registrar’s Office. She took a second to smooth her long frizz and dragged in a deep breath. “Okay, here goes nothing.” Again.
Chapter Two

“Mr. Knight, please have a seat.” Principal Flint nodded to the faux leather chair across from his expansive mahogany desk while extending a big, meaty club of a hand.

“Good to meet you, sir,” Brylan replied while taking in his potential employer. Arliss Flint wasn’t quite what he had pictured, and he couldn’t help being a little intimidated by the guy. Towering over Brylan’s six foot frame, Flint was every bit of 240 lbs., with wide shoulders and a thick neck. If memory served, he was a former college football star. Aside from the protruding gut and the severely receding hairline, the guy certainly looked the part.

Brylan’s nervousness festered under the scrutiny of the man’s gaze. Heat crept up his neck and he could swear that someone had sucked all the oxygen out of the room. He straightened his tie and tugged at his blazer, cursing his hands for refusing to be still.

Mr. Flint raised an eyebrow and peered at him over his thick-rimmed eyeglasses. “You alright, Mr. Knight?”

Humiliation seeped out of his pores. “Yes, sir. I’m fine.”

“Well. Let’s skip the formalities and get to the point, shall we?”

Brylan gave a slow, apprehensive nod. “Sure.”

The big man leaned back, his chair squeaking in protest, as he laced his fingers together over his large belly. “As I’m sure you’ve heard, our last history instructor was dismissed for some rather…disturbing behavior,” he began. Brylan nodded again. Anyone within a hundred mile radius of Yaupon, Texas knew about the high school’s assistant football coach slash history teacher who got caught with his pants down. Literally. The dumbass made a cliché of himself by romancing the students. Two of them, actually. Both of them cheerleaders, and one of them happened to be the granddaughter of the school’s superintendent. Brylan wasn’t too sure about the particulars of it all, but he’d been told that it was the biggest scandal the town had seen in decades.
“I have to say,” continued Flint, “I’m a little apprehensive of hiring someone so young. Personally, I would have gone with a female instructor after our latest debacle; however, I need a quick replacement, and you already have a little experience from subbing from time to time. Our faculty here thinks very highly of you.”

He let out a breath and picked up a manila folder with Brylan’s name handwritten across the top of it. “Your resume says you ranked in the top ten percent of your class at Sam Houston State. I understand that you were a pretty fair ball player too,” he said with a little more enthusiasm than he started with.

“I was, yes. But I haven’t played in a long time.”

“Yeah. Damned shame about your shoulder.”

A shame indeed. Playing professional baseball was all Brylan had ever wanted to do ever since he was big enough to hold a bat. But all those hopes and dreams vanished after a game of tackle football with his brothers. Yeah. Football. In addition to the torn ligaments and tendons in Brylan’s shoulder, it had also ripped out a chunk of Brylan’s soul.

His father’s voice drifted through his head: “You know…you had about a snowball’s chance in Phoenix of ever making a living playing ball anyway.”

Leave it to his old man to pour salt in the wound.

“Mr. Knight,” Flint’s voice broke through his thoughts, “I want you to take what I’m about to tell you very seriously.” The big man leaned over his desk with his thick hands still clasped together, “Fraternization with students outside of an academic setting will not be tolerated—under any circumstances. We may never recover from the backlash we received because of that asshole’s actions. I still have pissed off parents calling at least once a week, asking me what the hell kind of place I’m running.” He paused and hung his head with his eyes closed. The tension in the office was palpable. Flint had been on a roll, but something had knocked the wind out of his sails, causing him to suddenly look small and defeated. When he lifted his head, he fixed his gaze on Brylan. But he wasn’t looking at Brylan, he was looking through him.

Brylan squirmed uncomfortably while some sort of internal dialogue played out in the big man’s head. You could cut the awkward silence with a dull butter knife, and Brylan desperately wished Flint would return to the present.

Then, without warning, Flint raised a brawny fist and brought it crashing down onto his desk. “Dammit!”
Brylan nearly pissed himself. His physical response to the outburst—his nearly jumping the hell out of his seat—seemed to snap Flint out of his reverie.

“T’m sorry, son. I just get a little riled up when I think about how many years I’ve worked to keep this place in reputable standing, only to have our reputation nearly obliterated in the span of five minutes by some shithead that can’t keep his hands to himself. Do you see what I’m getting at, Knight?”

Brylan swallowed the grapefruit-sized lump in his throat. “Yes. I do, Sir.”

He hadn’t even been officially offered the job yet, and here he was having his ass handed to him by the boss. Uneasiness slithered over him, making him rethink his decision to teach full time. He was suddenly wishing he’d majored in something a little less…violent. Like basket weaving. Surely there weren’t any scary-looking, fist wielding ogres in basket weaving.

“I just wanna be clear, Mr. Knight,” His gaze burned through him, “I won’t be shamed again.”

“Yes, Mr. Flint. I hear you loud and clear. I’m here to teach. That’s all.”

He harrumphed, “Well I certainly hope so. I won’t hesitate to send you packing if I suspect otherwise.”

“Understood,” he said with a single nod.

At that, they both stood. Flint looked Brylan straight in the eye, extended his hand, and deadpanned, “Don’t screw this up.”

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Two weeks after the strangest interview of his life, Brylan Knight was a bona fide teacher…and he was as nervous as a long-tailed cat in a room full of rocking chairs. It was the middle of the school year and he had no idea how the students were going to receive him. He only hoped that they wouldn’t ask any questions about their old teacher. He had no intentions of going down that rabbit hole.

Anxiously awaiting the arrival of his students, he took a seat behind the metal, wood veneer topped desk and clasped his hands together. A faint ringing sound caused his stomach to drop. Surely that wasn’t the tardy bell. It was still too early for that. What the hell was that sound and where was it coming from?

He was starting to wonder if the noise was all in his head until he realized he was bouncing his knee. He patted his pocket and then chastised
himself under his breath, “I’m such a dumbass.” He pulled out the handful of quarters, the ones he’d stashed to spring for a soda later, and tossed them into the desk drawer. *Okay, Bry. Get your shit together.*

Students started trickling in a few at a time. Brylan gave what he hoped was a friendly-looking smile, hoping they wouldn’t sense his unease. Some of the kids smiled back at him before choosing a seat, some of them looked at him curiously, and others just ignored him completely.

The tardy bell rang and Brylan cleared his throat to get everyone’s attention. It was time to sink or swim.

“Hello, class. Welcome to the second semester of American History. I’m Brylan Knight and I’ll be your instructor for the remainder of the year.”

He hoped.

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“Hey Bry. How’s it going?”

Cooper Strausse sauntered into the teacher’s lounge while Brylan was picking at the stale bread on his turkey sandwich. He made a mental note to stop at the grocery store on the way home and pushed the sandwich back, his appetite suddenly gone. “I don’t know, man. I’m feeling a little bit like a fish out of water. These kids…they’re not what I expected.”

Cooper chuckled. “Let me guess. You were expecting a bunch of happy kids, thirsty for knowledge and eager to participate.”

“Well, I didn’t expect them to be plumb giddy with excitement or anything, but I hoped…. Ah hell. I don’t know what I expected.”

“Don’t worry about it. They’ll come around. You’re the new guy so they’re still sizing you up, trying to figure out whether you’re going to be a hard-ass or a marshmallow.”

Brylan sank against the back of his chair. “Maybe.”

Cooper dragged one of the plastic chairs over to the table and straddled it. “Hey, how’d the house thing go?”

Brylan was grateful for the change of subject. “I just signed the papers yesterday on a little place over on Pecan.”

Cooper cocked a blond eyebrow, “Pecan Street, huh? Not the best neighborhood.”

“Ah, it’s not so bad. I’ve seen a lot worse. The houses around there are just old. But the neighbors are quiet. Elderly people mostly. And it beats the hell out of paying rent. Plus, I don’t have to make that hour-long commute from Dad’s place.” In Brylan’s eyes the little house was a palace. It liberated him from living under his dad’s thumb. At twenty-two
years old it was embarrassing to have to report his whereabouts to the old man, having his every move monitored and critiqued. It was time to move on…for the sake of his sanity.

“The house has a garage apartment too. It needs some fixing up, but—”

“Man cave!” Cooper cut in, his face lit up like Christmas.

“Uh, noooo,” Brylan corrected him, “I’m going to lease it out.”

Cooper chewed on the idea for a minute. “Yeah. I guess I can’t fault you for wanting to make a little extra income,” he conceded before snatching up Brylan’s bag of Fritos.

“Dude! There’s a snack machine right behind you.”

Cooper pulled the pockets of his pants inside-out. “No funds. Teacher salary and all.” A cocky grin spread over his face, “Surely you wouldn’t deny a poor man a meal.”

Brylan couldn’t help but chuckle. “I would hardly consider a few Fritos a meal.” He plucked the bag out of Coop’s hand. Anyway, changing the subject, are you game for giving me a hand on Saturday? I’m moving my furniture to the new place.”

“Yeah, sure. Just text me the address.” Cooper paused for a beat. “Speaking of new, have you seen that chick that’s been hanging around here?”

The week had gone by in a blur. He likely wouldn’t have noticed anyone if they’d been wearing a chicken suit while singing The Star Spangled Banner. He shook his head. “Nope.”

“She’s about yea tall?” For effect, Cooper flattened his hand so that it was horizontal to the floor and raised it to chest height.

“Dude, you’re gonna have to be more specific than that.” Brylan hated charades and he wished Coop would just spill it already.

“Come on, Bry,” he insisted, as if his clue should be obvious. “You must have seen her. She’s been hanging around the campus on and off for weeks. Been observing some classes and checking things out. She’s got kinda short, black hair. Walks like she’s got a stick up her ass….” Brylan bit back a laugh as Cooper strutted around the room with a pinched look on his face in imitation.

He couldn’t resist goading the guy a little. “Ohhhhh! You mean that chick!”

Cooper nodded excitedly, proud of himself for finally making Brylan see the light. He was such an easy target.

Brylan let his face drop, although mischief twinkled in his eyes. “Nope. I have no damn clue who the hell you’re talking about.”
Irritation flashed across Cooper’s features. “You’re such an ass,” he said, snatching up another Frito. “Anyway, this chick....”

Brylan wasn’t about to let him off that easily, so he interrupted him just to piss him off, “I’m pretty sure ‘chick’ is politically incorrect.”

Cooper rolled his eyes. “Whatever,” he continued in an exaggerated drawl, “This woman is going to be teaching geometry here next year. And she just happens to be Principal Flint’s niece.”

“Okay. So what?”

Cooper scowled. “It’s messed up, that’s what. It’s not like Yaupon High is desperate for applicants. Everybody wants a job teaching here because of our exemplary status. Hell, my aunt—who teaches math by the way—has been trying to get on here for two years. The school where she works is a zoo. It’s one of those schools where there’s always a fight going on, kids are dealing drugs in the hall, and you have to go through a metal detector to get in.” Brylan heard a tsk sound as Cooper shook his head slowly. “She actually had a kid follow her to her car one day after school. He threatened her, looked her dead in the eye and told her she better give him a passing grade...or else.”

Brylan swallowed hard. “No shit?” He’d heard the stories, but this one really hit home. Suddenly his job didn’t seem so bad after all.

Cooper’s shoulders sagged as he looked down at the floor. His expression was solemn, which was not a good look on him. It didn’t fit his easygoing persona. “It’s just not right.”

The two of them sat in awkward silence while Brylan searched his brain for something comforting to say. He was coming up empty.

“Oh well.” Coop returned his chair back to its rightful position and headed toward the door with his usual shit-eating grin. His quick change in demeanor was dizzying. “Don’t forget to text me your address before Saturday. Oh...and don’t forget the six-pack of beer you’re going to owe me.”
Chapter Three

It was Friday, and Stormy had survived her first week at Yaupon High. Aside from a bit of murmuring and a few sideways glances, she’d gotten through it virtually unscathed. It was as if the whole student body had made a unified decision to ignore the new girl, and it suited Stormy just fine.

When the final bell sounded, Stormy hustled her way across campus toward the parking lot. When she reached her beat up truck, she set her backpack on the hood while she fished her keys out of her pocket.

“Nice ride,” someone sneered in her direction.

Stormy glowered at the girl. Marissa something or other. She didn’t know why, but the girl had it in for her, always finding little ways to irritate her. A roll of the eyes, a death stare…nothing that Stormy couldn’t handle. But it was the first time Marissa had hurled a verbal insult. And at Stormy’s truck no less. And that just wouldn’t do.

Marissa huffed and kept walking, with her giggling group of blonde cronies trailing behind, and then they all piled into a shiny, new convertible Mustang. A sharp prick of envy stung her as the giggling carpool spun out of the gravel lot. She blew out a breath and forced herself to let it go.

She was in too good a mood to have it ruined by some materialistic Barbie doll with an attitude problem. She had a job interview to get to. Granted, it was only a cashier position in a gift shop, but it was a job. And a job meant money, and money meant freedom. Freedom from Mama. Her plan was to save every nickel she could between now and graduation. Then she’d be able to make her escape…for good.

She heaved open the driver-side door and slid her backpack across the worn out bench seat. Once inside, Stormy gave the dashboard a little rub and whispered, “It’s okay. Don’t you listen to those mean girls.” It was a silly thing to do, talking to an inanimate object, but Stormy’s truck was her most prized possession. For her, the old Ford was more than just a mode of transportation—it was a faithful friend. That truck had provided a
place to cry when Mama’s tantrums got to be too much; it was a quiet place to think when the house was too noisy; and, it would ultimately be Stormy’s ride to freedom when the time came.

She cranked the truck and headed downtown, which, fortunately, was only a five minute trip. When she rolled up Main Street there were cars lined up end to end on both sides and there wasn’t a single available parking space in sight. Shoot! She made the block, scouring the street for a place to park as she went, but she still didn’t have any luck. She was about to circle around for the third time when she noticed the public library sitting on the next block over…and it had a big ole parking lot full of empty spaces.

Once parked in the library lot, she darted across the street, silently praying that nobody got their panties in a twist over her truck being there after hours. She hopped up on the curb and looked down the long sidewalk at all the shops. Trudy had said the store, Trudy’s Treasures, would be easy to spot, but as Stormy looked down the long row of businesses—all sandwiched together and all done up in the same shades of beige, cream, and peach—she wasn’t so sure. They all looked exactly alike. Stormy glanced down at her watch and relaxed a little when she saw that she still had fifteen minutes to spare.

The historic buildings showed their age with chipped bits of concrete and peeling paint. However, there was a certain charm to them that Stormy was drawn to. They were picturesque, and yet simple, and Stormy suspected that they looked much like they had a hundred years ago.

As she meandered down the sidewalk, she took in the artfully displayed items behind the plate glass windows. It was like stealing a glimpse into the past. Antique dress forms stood proudly, boasting of all the pretty garments they had once helped create while the handmade cloth dolls smiled their cheeky red-stitched grins. The rusty old farm implements sat like old men, exhausted from a long life of toil, now enjoying a subdued retirement.

An elderly man exited the nearby café and the mouth-watering aroma of fried chicken wafted over her, making her stomach growl. The man gave Stormy a smile and a curt nod of acknowledgement. She returned his smile with a slight wave before continuing her journey down the sidewalk. And then there it was. Three stores down, Trudy’s Treasures, in all of its purple, red, and neon green glory was practically smacking her in the face. It was such a stark contrast to the neighboring shops that it was a little startling, but in a good way. How she didn’t notice it sooner was baffling to her.
She checked her reflection in the glass, smoothing her ponytail and straightening her baby blue cardigan, before pulling on the heavy glass door. Immediately she was taken in by the vibrancy of the place with its bold colors and touches of whimsy everywhere. It was like something out of a fantasy. Every inch of the place was covered in bright colors and textured fabrics. Two plush, overstuffed, red-orange armchairs just begged to have someone curl up in them with a good book and a warm beverage. The scent of coffee and mint permeated the air. It was comforting and inviting and not at all what she had expected, since most old buildings smelled of dust and mothballs.

“Hello?” It didn’t appear as though anyone was there at first. The place was eerily quiet. Then she heard the faint rustling of paper coming from behind a shimmery, jewel colored, beaded curtain in the rear of the store. The beads parted and an attractive, fortyish-looking woman with a mass of purply-red curls appeared.

“Hey there! You must be Stormy, right?” Her burgundy-lipped smile was a beam of sunshine and her eyes sparkled with enthusiasm.

“Yes. That’s me.”

“Give me just a second, sweetie. Be right with ya!” The curtain swallowed her up again with a swish.

The sheer volume of stuff in the place was amazing. It was an amusement park for the eyes with its eclectic mix of quirky outfits, colorful trinkets, bold pieces of jewelry, and rustic home accessories. Everywhere Stormy looked there was something to ogle, and then her eyes landed on a pop of purple that looked out of place. Hanging amongst the tie-dye shirts and leopard print leggings was the most beautiful, most elegant dress she’d ever seen. She plucked it off the rack and held it up, admiring the way the light played off the satiny fabric.

Such a stunning garment—shimmering violet overlaid with delicate ivory lace—she was drawn to it, almost as if it was calling to her, begging to be worn. It was a stark contrast to anything in her closet, which wasn’t much, and she couldn’t help but run her fingers over the soft, cool fabric. For just a moment, she closed her eyes and imagined what it would feel like to wear such a dress, could practically feel the satin swishing against her legs.

Trudy’s voice broke through her thoughts. “You like coffee?” she hollered from behind the curtain.

“Yeah, sure.” With a small, reluctant sigh she placed the dress back on the rack and continued her perusal of the store. There was a brief clattering of dishes and then Trudy reappeared with two bright yellow ceramic mugs in tow.
“Here ya go, hon. I hope you like peppermint. It’s my own concoction and it might not be for everybody,” she warned with a half grin.

Stormy lifted the cup to her lips an inhaled deeply, “It smells heavenly.” She took a timid sip and couldn’t contain the little moan of satisfaction that escaped as the sweet, nutty, minty goodness rolled across her tongue. Trudy chuckled and gave a little wink, “Glad you like it.” Now let’s step into my office.” She waved Stormy over to the big orange chairs that had caught her eye previously. Stormy set her cup on the little wicker coffee table and resisted the urge to curl up like a cat on the overly soft piece of furniture.

Trudy sipped her coffee and placed it on the table. “Well, my name is Trudy Carmine. I’m the owner of this little jewel,” she said while spreading her arms out wide, “But I imagine you already figured that part out.”

Stormy smiled and nodded.

“Now, tell me. How in the heck did such a pretty little thing like you end up here in Nowheresville, Texas?”

“My mama’s boyfriend lives here…. Ugh. Stormy twisted her hands together in her lap to keep from burying her face in them. She should have anticipated that question and come up with something that didn’t sound so…pathetic.

Trudy cocked a perfectly sculpted eyebrow toward the pink ceiling. “I see,” she said knowingly. “Well, things do tend to happen that way sometimes.” She waved dismissively and moved on. “I’m a transplant myself. From Austin. Been here going on three years now. My uncle got sick a while back and asked me if I was interested in buying him out. He never had any kids of his own to offer it to, and I didn’t have much else going on at the time…so, here I am.”

Trudy, as Stormy soon found out, was blessed with the gift of gab. She and Stormy talked…and talked…and talked. And Stormy welcomed it. Trudy’s rich, twangy voice was like a warm blanket on a cold day. A stark contrast from her mother’s shrill bark, Trudy’s voice was comforting. And it made her forget the loneliness that awaited her at home. Trudy conveyed a genuine interest in what Stormy had to say—which was a drop in the bucket compared to Trudy—but Trudy clung to her every word nonetheless.

A half hour and another cup of coffee later, the pair stood and Trudy clasped both of Stormy’s hands in hers, “You’re going to be a wonderful addition here. We’re going to have so much fun! I can already tell.”

“I can hardly wait. Thank you so much for the opportunity,” Stormy said with a big smile. And she meant every word.
When Stormy stepped out into the remainder of the afternoon sun, she felt lighter. Happier. Her interview couldn’t have gone better and she felt more normal that she had in a long time. She sucked in a long, cleansing breath before crossing the street. As soon as she stepped off the curb, something brown and furry skittered past her, and she was unable to suppress a yelp. Stupid squirrel.

“Better watch out. Those things can be deadly to unsuspecting victims,” said a masculine voice from somewhere behind her.

A tall gangly guy with a mop of sandy blond waves was leaning against the end of the building facing the library.

She eyed him suspiciously. “What are you talking about? Squirrels aren’t dangerous.” Is this guy nuts?

His eyes widened and he glared at Stormy like she was the one with a few screws loose. “Ohhhh. You mean, you don’t know?” he asked incredulously.

She shifted her weight to one foot and put her hands on her hips. “Don’t know what?” she asked flatly. Her creep meter was tugging at her insides but she didn’t want to let her weariness show, so she tried to look bored and uninterested.

The guy was persistent. “That wasn’t some ordinary squirrel… It was el chupardilla.”

“Chupa…what?” her eyebrows scrunched in confusion.

“El chupardilla.” He made the l’s sound like a y. “According to Mexican legend, it’s a squirrel-chupacabra hybrid. They look and act just like regular tree squirrels…but don’t let that fool you. They have sharp fangs and a taste for human blood. If one of them latches onto you… you’re a goner.”

She lowered her eyes at him. “Bullshit.” She was ninety-eight percent sure he was making it up, but the other two percent had her glancing around for signs of the deadly squirrel.

The uncertainty was plastered all over her face and the guy burst into an uncontrollable fit of laughter at her expense. “Nah. I’m just messing with you. Those things are more of a nuisance than anything,” he finally admitted. Then he added, “The ones around here are pretty tame actually. They’ll even let you pick them up and pet them.”

“Will they really let you hold them?” She felt stupid the moment the words left her mouth. She looked down at the gutter, thinking she’d like to crawl into it. How could she be so gullible? And what was it about this guy that had her second guessing herself?
His mouth turned up in a smirk, “Only if you don’t mind losing a finger. Bastards got sharp-ass teeth. And that part is true.”

His beaming smile was infectious, and now they were both standing in the street grinning at each other like a couple of idiots.

Stormy took a hair tie out of her pocket and twisted her hair up while thinking of something else to say. “Hey, aren’t you in Ms. Knoll’s biology lab?” She tried to remember his name. Buzz? Fozz? Fuzz?

“Yes. You sit at the second lab table on the left side and you always twirl your hair around your finger when the teacher starts asking the class questions. Like you’re nervous about being called on or something. It’s actually pretty cute.” He lowered his eyes and his cheeks flushed when he realized he’d said too much. He was cute, in a sort of puppy dog way, with those big green eyes and floppy hair. And he’d made her laugh, which was always a bonus. When it came to friendship material, humor was at the top of her list.

Starting to look uncomfortable from the strained silence that had settled between them, the guy shifted his weight from one foot to the other before extending his hand. “I’m Nozz, by the way.”

“Stormy.” She grabbed his hand for a quick squeeze. Another few moments of awkwardness passed. “Well, it was good to meet you. I should probably get going.” She started walking backward in the direction of her truck.

Nozz stuffed his hands into the pockets of his baggy jeans and rocked back on his heels. “Yeah, me too. See you at school.” Then the left side of his mouth turned up into a lopsided smile. “Be sure and watch out for those blood-suckers….”

He was a smartass. She liked him instantly.

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The windows were down, whipping hair all over her head, and the radio cranked out a 90’s pop tune that had Stormy drumming her thumbs on the steering wheel. Optimism thrummed in her veins, and for the first time in a long, long time, she felt like things might turn out okay for a change.

And then she spotted the rusty yellow jeep in the driveway.

Dread hung over her like a dark cloud as she made her way up the wobbly front steps. Stormy and Mama didn’t get visitors. Stormy’s dad had always been a big question mark in her life, and there was no other family to speak of since Mama’s family had disowned her before Stormy was born.
Smoke billowed out the front door when Stormy pulled it open, and she was immediately overwhelmed by the stench of cigarettes and marijuana. She coughed and made a futile attempt to fan the smoke away from her face.

“It’s about time you dragged yourself in here,” Mama drawled. “This here is my Bill,” she said with a wink. She was draped over a big, hairy, all-too-comfortable looking man on the couch. The middle-aged biker wannabe lifted his cigarette wielding hand a couple of inches off his knee in a sort of half-wave of acknowledgement as he grunted a salutation, “Hey.”

Stormy echoed his flat greeting, “Hey.”

His heavily hooded, bloodshot eyes met hers for a split second before traveling all over her body and then settling on her chest. It sent creepy crawlies up and down her spine. She cleared her throat loudly as she protectively crossed her arms over her chest before shooting her mother a questioning glare. *Hello? Do you see this?*

Marni was oblivious to the silent assault to her daughter. “We were just about to go get somethin’ to eat. Then we’re heading over to The Rusty Fender. I hear they need a waitress. I don’t know how late we’ll be so you’ll have to fend for yourself for supper,” Marni informed her.

Stormy sat on the urge to say something sarcastic. She *always* fended for herself. Today was no different. It wasn’t like Mama was going to make a meal. She’d worked in bars for as long as Stormy could remember, so her schedule didn’t exactly put her home in time for dinner.

Not in the mood for a fight, Stormy opted for the simplest response, “That’s okay. I grabbed a sandwich earlier.” She flopped down in the broken down recliner on the opposite side of the room and covered herself with a throw pillow, the green one that reminded her of pea soup. Ugly or not, it provided a shield between her and the Neanderthal on the couch who was still molesting her with his eyes. She glared at him and wished he could read her mind. The silent message she was sending him was anything but nice.
Chapter Four

After Mama and Bill sputtered away in his sorry-looking jeep, Stormy felt restless. For the sake of having something to do, she washed the dishes, wiped down the counters, and got rid of the stench in the ashtrays that littered the living room. But after all of that, she was still too keyed up from the day’s events to relax. Glancing at the digital clock on the stove, she realized it was still early enough to head back to the school for a much needed run on the track. It would be a good way to burn off some steam and clear her mind. And the exercise certainly couldn’t hurt considering that her jeans were fitting a little snugger than they used to.

The absence of cars in the stadium parking lot was a good sign, meaning Stormy would have the whole track to herself. She pulled her keys from the ignition and grabbed her can of pepper spray from the glove compartment—because a girl could never be too careful—and then nudged the truck door closed with her hip. It was taking more and more effort to get the thing closed, and she made a mental note to get it fixed when she was able to afford it.

The football stadium was not as glamorous as she’d expected, considering the school’s reputable football standing. The grass field, where she had expected Astroturf, was dotted with brown patches and the red dirt track was in serious need of repair. The surface looked uneven and the white stripes dividing the lanes were barely visible.

The sun had begun to set, casting long scary shadows over everything, and the temperature had dropped several degrees just in the short time it had taken her to make the drive over. Her skin prickled a little, partly because of the chill, and largely because of how eerie and desolate the place looked. Out of the corner of her eye, she thought she saw something move amongst the shadows. Was something there, or was her imagination working overtime?

Just as she was about to completely psyche herself out and return to the safety of her truck, the stadium lights clicked on, illuminating the entire field. Figuring they must be on a timer, she shook off the heebie jeebies, did a few warm up stretches, and then commenced with her jog.
One lap.
Two laps.
Three laps.
Side stitch.

“Owe!” She pressed her hand to her side and pushed through the pain. She couldn’t believe how out of shape she’d gotten in just a few weeks. She used to be able to run two miles before breaking a sweat. Determined to make at least one more lap, she pressed on despite the trembling in her fatigued calf muscles. The pain in her side eased up though, thankfully, so she focused on keeping one foot in front of the other until she got to the finish line.

Just as she rounded the last curve, a figure stepped out from the shadows and scared the bejeezus out of her. For the longest time he just stood there, watching. Was he stalking her…or was she just being paranoid?

She was only a few yards from the gated exit, but the man was standing right next to the track…between her and the only egress out of there. She had no other option but to go past him. *Shit.*

It was time for fight or flight, and she chose the latter.

Her adrenaline bolted her into a full run. If the guy was a threat, then he’d have to catch her to kill her. If he was just some poor sap that happened to be there…then she’d just look like a jackass.

She wasn’t about to stick around long enough to find out.

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It was the end of a long week and Brylan had just finished grading his first set of quizzes. His co-workers preferred to take their work home with them, but Brylan opted to leave work *at work.* He didn’t want anything looming over his head all weekend. Besides, his dad had invited him to go fishing on Sunday. And Brylan knew what that meant. It was code for *I want to butt into your personal life.*

He seriously doubted he’d be in any mood for grading papers after that, so it was better to go on and get it out of the way.

He wiped down the chalkboard and grabbed his jacket before flipping off the light and locking up. Something in the back of his mind nagged at him on the way to the faculty parking lot, but he couldn’t quite place it…until he started his car and the headlights came to life. “Damn it.” He’d almost forgotten about the stadium lights. Someone had reported that some of the bulbs were out, and Cooper had asked if Brylan could take a look so it could be reported to maintenance.
Brylan slammed the car door and zipped up his light jacket to ward off the biting wind. The chilled air put an urgency in his steps as he made his way across campus. The quicker he got this done, the better. By the time he reached the control shack his fingers were numb. He fumbled with the massive set of keys and cursed, “Damn it!” None of the damned things were marked, meaning he’d have to find the right one through process of elimination.

It was a rotten end to a rotten day, and all he wanted to do was stretch out in front of his TV and watch 80’s reruns in the warmth of his own home.

“Finally!” The lock clicked and the door pushed open. His eyes roamed the small room until they settled on a gray panel full of switches. At least they were labeled. He flipped the ones that were marked FBS Stadium and headed out to the field. He passed underneath the bleachers and entered through the gate of the cyclone fence. Squinting up at the lights, he noted the dark spots in the set nearest to the scoreboard and made a mental note to inform the maintenance crew on Monday.

It was actually the first time he’d had an excuse to come down to the stadium so he decided to take a closer look around. He’d meant to come down and check it out sooner, but he’d just been too busy.

Big yellow splotches dotted his vision. He squinted and shielded his eyes, giving his pupils a chance to adjust after staring at the bright lights. From what he could tell, the worn out dirt track needed some repair, and the grass had been neglected. The handrails along the stadium seating looked like a case of tetanus waiting to happen, and they were in desperate need of a coat of paint. Other than that though, the place looked to be in decent shape.

When his pupils finally adjusted, he made out a slender figure on the track. Someone was running. He was a little taken aback at first, but then he remembered what Cooper had told him about the place being open to the public after hours. The idea was to allow the community an opportunity to exercise in a place where they could feel safe. It made sense.

The swinging pony-tail and the pink hoodie told Brylan that the figure was female. And she was fast. Really fast. Impressed, Brylan admired her athleticism for a few more moments. Just as he was about to turn and head back in the direction of his car, he heard it—the sickening crunch of gravel, followed by a howl so pitiful it would make a coyote cringe.

Jumping into Good Samaritan mode, he jogged toward the girl that was sprawled out on the track. She sat up slowly, clutching at her ankle
and grimacing in pain. She didn’t notice Brylan’s presence until he was
about ten feet away. Her pained expression suddenly turned to horror and
she started frantically backing away from Brylan in a movement that
reminded him of a three-legged crab.

“Don’t touch me! Get away!” she shouted.
“It’s okay. I just want to help.”
“No!” She fished something out of the waistband of her pants and
pointed it at him. “BACK THE HELL OFF!”

Shit. Pepper spray. He recognized it because he’d bought one just like
it for his sister last year. “Alright, alright. I’m backing off.” He put his
hands up, palms facing outward, and took two slow steps backward. The
look in her eye said that she had no qualms about blasting him with that
stuff.

“Okay, let me at least call an ambulance.” Brylan slowly reached into
his back pocket for his phone.

“No, no, no. No ambulance,” she pleaded.
Shit. What was the deal with this girl? His mind raced, trying to
come up with something to make her trust him.

“Look, I know you’re in a lot of pain. Trust me. I know all about that
kind of pain.” He pointed to his right shoulder, “Rotator cuff injury.” He
paused to give the words time to sink in. “My name is Brylan Knight. I
work here at the high school. I just want to help.”

The wildness in her eyes faded a bit and a muscle in her jaw ticked.
She looked him up and down, assessing whether or not he was a threat.

“Show me your I.D.,” she ordered, pointing to the lanyard around his
neck. He’d forgotten he was even wearing it.

He pulled it over his head and gave it a gentle toss in her direction. It
landed about two feet away, and she winced when she leaned over to
retrieve it from the dirt. Brylan wondered just how badly she’d been
injured. It may have been more than just an ankle. She’d taken a pretty
good spill.

After scanning the I.D. card she looked up and held it out to him.
“My truck is over there.” She jerked her head toward the stadium parking
lot. “You’re driving.”

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The trip to the hospital was nerve-rattling. It had been years since
Brylan had driven anything with a manual transmission. The truck whined
and lurched forward a couple of times, and Brylan noted the sharp intake
of air through clenched teeth.
“Sorry. I know it hurts.”

The girl rolled her eyes at him. “It’s my truck that I’m worried about. You’re stripping the gears.”

Brylan cringed at her admonishment. It wasn’t like he was grinding the gears on purpose. He knew the girl was in pain, but geez, she needed to lighten up. “I promise to fix it if I break it,” he said sheepishly, offering a half smile.

“You’d better,” she responded flatly.

Wow. Still cold as ice.

“Ya know, I still don’t know your name,” he tried again.

An eternity passed before she responded. “It’s Stormy.”

_Huh?_ He leaned over the steering wheel and peered up at the cloudless sky. He was starting to think she may have bumped her head when she fell. “Noooo,” he drawled, “It’s actually a clear night.”

Her snickers worried him a little. “Yes, it is a nice night. But my _name_ is Stormy.”

He felt like a jackass. “Sorry ‘bout that. I’ve never known anyone with that name before. It’s cool though. I like it. Different.” Great, now he was rambling. For reasons unbeknownst to him, this girl made him nervous. He let out a breath of relief when he saw the blue sign pointing toward the hospital.

When they pulled into the parking lot Brylan threw the door open and attempted to climb out, but the asphalt was still moving beneath his foot. “Oh shit!” They were rolling backwards.

“You forgot to set the parking brake, you idiot!”

Brylan scowled at her salty demeanor and set the brake as he’d been so shrewdly instructed. Apparently, humiliation was his reward for helping out a total stranger. He mentally shook it off and ran around to the passenger side. Naturally, the hard-headed brunette already had the door open and was attempting to climb out.

“Just hold on a damned second.” He couldn’t hold the reins on his irritation any longer. “Let me grab a wheelchair.” She rolled her eyes at him and he fully expected her to put up a fight, but she didn’t. Instead, she let out a very audible sigh.

“Fine. Whatever.”

After retrieving the wheelchair, he leaned over to pick her up as she reached her hands around his neck. As she did, her fingers brushed the nape of his neck, sending a little tingle through his scalp. He tried to ignore it while he gently lifted her from the truck and set her in the chair,
ever mindful of her ankle, which was already turning sickly colors and had grown to twice the size it should have been.

He may have imagined it, but it sure seemed like her arms lingered on his neck just a tad longer than necessary. “Are you good?” There was a little less annoyance in his voice this time.

She looked up at him, and for the first time her gray eyes met his, and for the briefest of moments, he was swept up in the smoky depths of them. “I’m good. Thank you,” she said softly.

Tending the registration desk was a robust older woman in red scrubs that were more than a little too tight. They looked as though they’d been melted and poured over her. And she was way more interested in her cell phone than she was in Stormy and Brylan’s presence.

“Yeah, girl. I heard he was messing around with both of ‘em at the same time. Mmmm hmmmm. Yep. Well, I dunno….

“Excuse me,” Brylan tried to get the woman’s attention, “We need to see a doctor.”

Without so much as a glance in their direction, the woman turned her back to them and continued her gossip session. Brylan had steam coming out of his ears. He cleared his throat loudly and tapped on the glass partition. “Hello?”

She held up a red-tipped index finger signaling them to wait. She was aware of their presence, but clearly didn’t give a damn. Apparently, nobody had gone over the meaning of emergency during her orientation.

He looked down at Stormy, who appeared to have a lot more patience than he had. She hadn’t said a single word during the entire five minutes they’d been there. Brylan, however, was livid.

He banged on the window again to get the woman’s attention. When the woman looked up he raised his eyebrows, shrugged his shoulders and raised his hands as if to say, what the hell.

Finally, after a few more giggles on the phone, the woman hung up and ambled over to the window. “What can I help you with?”

Seriously? Couldn’t she see the injured girl in the wheelchair? He couldn’t help but give a seriously exaggerated eye roll. “This woman is injured. She needs a doctor. Now.”

The woman looked just as unconcerned as she had ten minutes ago. “Are you the husband?” she asked nonchalantly.

Husband? Uh oh. He searched his mind, looking for a way to explain the situation. But he was coming up with zilch.

Thankfully, Stormy saved him by chiming in, “No. He’s a friend.”
Why didn’t I think of that? Brylan didn’t do so well under pressure. Whenever he was flustered, all of his thoughts seemed to float away.

The woman started typing away as she asked Stormy a series of questions and had her sign a large stack of forms. In an attempt to give Stormy some privacy, Brylan stepped out of earshot. Or at least he tried to. Apparently he was just a little too close to the automatic sliding doors, and every time he moved, they shot open with a loud *whoosh*. Stormy and the registrar both shot him a questioning look. He simply shrugged his shoulders and slunk over to the waiting area, figuring it might be safer there.

Once the paperwork was done, Stormy motioned for Brylan to push her over to the waiting area. A layer of awkwardness settled over them once again while they waited for the doctor. Stormy stared absently at the while linoleum tile. Her hair had come undone and hung like a curtain over one side of her face. Brylan felt the need to make small talk, just to break the silence, but just as he was about to ask her a question, a set of stainless steel doors opened up and a nurse came to whisk Stormy to the treatment area.

Other than Brylan, the only people who remained were a young woman and her little boy. Brylan watched as the little curly haired toddler climbed from chair to chair with a snack-sized bag of chocolate chip cookies in tow. His mother was busy texting and didn’t seem to mind that the kid was coating everything in the room in chocolate drool. Bile rose in the back of Brylan’s throat and he had to suppress his gag reflex when one of the slime-coated cookies fell to the floor.

For a moment it looked as though the little boy would cry. He sat there for several seconds, lip protruding, and stared down at the lost cookie. He tugged on his mother’s shirt and pointed. Brylan expected her to dispose of the germ-infested treat, but she never took her eyes off her cell phone. “In a minute!” she snapped at him.

Eventually, the little boy’s impatience won out. He climbed down from the chair and reached out a chubby little arm…

*Oh no. Please don’t put that in your….* Brylan’s silent plea was useless. He watched helplessly as the kid crammed the whole cookie in his mouth, and all Brylan could do was cringe. Didn’t his mother know what kind of shit was all over those floors?

About an hour later, when Brylan’s germophobia was just about to send him over the edge, Stormy’s nurse appeared. “Are you Brylan?”

“Yes, ma’am. Is Stormy okay?” He had spent the better part of his wait worrying. And then he had wondered why he was so worried about a girl he’d just met.
“Yes, she’s fine. But can you come with me for a minute? The doctor has some instructions he needs to go over with you since we can’t get a hold of her mother. Stormy said it was okay to talk with you…and since she’s legally an adult....”

He was perplexed for a second. “Oh, okay.” He threw another glance over at the slimy cookie bandit, relieved that he’d fallen asleep with his head in his mother’s lap. She stroked his curly little head lovingly, but her nose was still buried in the phone. Brylan just shook his head.

The back area was ghostly quiet aside from the occasional beep of a machine and some faint muttering from behind the rows of pink and gray curtains that separated the patients. Somewhere in the vicinity of the place came a wet, gurgled cough, making Brylan wish he had on a biohazard suit.

Brylan hated hospitals. He’d spent far too much time in them when he was younger, and in his experience, nothing good ever came from them. His anxiety hitched up a bit as they approached the last set of curtains on the end. He wasn’t sure what to expect.

“She’s in here,” the nurse said while sliding back one of the panels.

Stormy was back in the wheelchair, but this time her foot was extended and it was encased in a bulky, black, velcro contraption. Her pants were cut off at the knee and there was a small bandage on her elbow. Other than that, she looked okay.

Brylan let out a breath that he hadn’t realized he was holding. Stormy looked up at him, beaming and glassy-eyed. “There’s my knight in shining armor,” she said brightly. Then she started giggling. “Knight in shining armor…get it?”

“Yeah. I get it.” It was a corny joke that he’d heard more times than he cared to admit.

Her words were slurred when she looked up at the nurse, “Isn’t he hot?”

The nurse’s eyes danced with amusement and Brylan thought he saw the corner of her mouth twitch, but to his relief, she remained professional. His ears were hot and turning ten shades of crimson.

“I see the meds are working.” An older gentleman with white hair and a white coat stepped up and grinned at Brylan knowingly.

Brylan shifted his weight and cleared his throat nervously. “The nurse said you needed to speak with me?”

“Yes. Well,” he crossed his arms, pinning his clipboard to his chest, “She’s got a mild to moderate sprain to that ankle. I didn’t see any obvious fractures, but I advise that she follow up with an orthopedist in a few days
just to make sure. He may want to order some more tests in case there’s something we missed with a standard x-ray.”

Brylan let out a small sigh of relief and nodded his head in understanding. “Okay. Anything else?”

“The rest is just a few scrapes and bruises. And, I gave her a pretty strong pain killer. She’s going to be out of it for a while. Does she have someone around that can keep an eye on her tonight?” When Brylan directed his attention back to Stormy, her eyes were starting to droop and the cheesy grin was gone. “Stormy? Is there someone I can call for you?”

Silence.

“I’ve tried multiple times to contact her mother,” the nurse pitched in, “but I haven’t been able to reach her.” She stooped down so that she was eye level with Stormy. “Is there someone else we can call for you, honey?”

Without looking up, in a voice barely audible to human ears, the three of them heard Stormy say, “No. There’s nobody else. Just Mama. And if she doesn’t want to be reached, then….” She let the words trail off.

In Brylan’s peripheral vision he noticed the doctor shake his head slowly from side to side. “Poor kid.” It was barely more than a whisper.

Not knowing what else to do, Brylan chimed in, “I’ll load her up and take her home. Maybe someone will be there that can take care of her. “Stormy, can you tell me how to get….”

She was snoring.

He rubbed the crease between his eyes and looked over at the nurse with an awkward grin, “Um, can you look up her address for me?”
Chapter Five

Stormy awoke to a dull throb in her foot. And her leg. And her elbow…. Hell, her whole body hurt. She felt like she’d been run over by a Mac truck. She squeezed her eyes shut, fearful that opening them would only worsen the ache in her head. She desperately wished for sleep to take her back. It was the only way to escape how miserable she felt. But the constant clattering of dishes and the acrid smell of something burning were impossible to ignore. What the hell was that? Was her mama cooking? No way. Mama didn’t cook. Something wasn’t right.

Slowly, she cracked open one eye and peered over the top of the covers, and a small gasp escaped her. To her horror, she was on a strange couch, in a living room she didn’t recognize, and there was a strange man standing in the adjoining kitchen.

This was not good.

“Good morning.” The man sauntered over from the kitchen. “I’m making breakfast. Figured you might want to put something in your system to offset the meds.”

Huh? What med—ohhhhh. It all came rushing back to her. Running… pain…a bumpy ride in the truck…. Oh, shit! “My truck! Where’s my truck?” she asked in a panic.

“Whoa, settle down. Your truck is fine. It’s right outside…all safe and sound.”

The guy…she tried to remember his name…Bryan? No, Brylan, was looking at her with concern on his face. And what a face it was. Deep, milk chocolate eyes dotted with gold flecks, prominent nose—strong and straight, to compliment the rest of his angular features. His dark, almost black, wavy hair had that mussed up just-got-out-of-bed look to it. She imagined running her fingers through it. Then her eyes roamed a little further south to discover wide, muscular shoulders and narrow hips, covered up with a green tee-shirt and matching plaid pajama pants. Even his bare feet were sexy.
His chest rippled as he stalked slowly towards her. “You alright?” he asked, knocking her out of her trance. She dragged her eyes back up his body to meet his face. The left side of his mouth turned up in a smirk and revealed the most adorable little dimple in his cheek.

Embarrassed, she stammered, “Um, yeah. I mean…no.” She had to think hard to figure out how to answer what should have been an easy question. Her brain just wouldn’t cooperate. She tried shaking the fuzziness from her head. “Sorry. I just…I guess I’m still a little loopy.” She attempted to sit up, but when she tried to move her foot, pain shot all the way to her hair roots.

Feeling defeated, she flopped back against the stack of pillows behind her and stared up at the ceiling. “What the hell happened last night?” Memories swirled in her head, but she just couldn’t make them stay still long enough to made sense of them. “I mean, I remember the track…I remember being scared….” She noticed Brylan flinch in her peripheral vision. “Then my stupid ankle gave out and I slid across the gravel. And I almost blasted you with my pepper spray….”

That one caused her to grimace. “Sorry about that by the way.” Brylan shrugged nonchalantly.

“I remember the hospital…but after that I’m a total blank.”

Brylan sat down on the edge of the coffee table. He was close enough for her to smell his aftershave, and it was…distracting.

“Well…” He hesitated. “After the doctor fixed you up, the nurse tried to contact your mom. She wasn’t able to get a hold of anyone…and you didn’t have anybody else listed on your paperwork.” He ran a hand through his hair while he searched for the next words. “You told the nurse it was okay for the doctor to talk to me about your discharge instructions since you were so…out of it.”

How humiliating. Stormy hoped that she hadn’t made a total fool out of herself. “So then what happened? How did I end up here?”

“I had the nurse look up your address on the computer.”

_Oh no._ Panic clutched her around the throat and her heart threatened to beat its way out of her chest. He’d been to her house, the dilapidated trailer with the broken front step and the overgrown weeds. And Mama!

“Brylan, what happened when we got to my house?” She wasn’t sure if she wanted to know.

“Nothing really. I knocked on the door, but nobody ever came.”

_Whew._ She resumed breathing. “Then what?”
“We stuck around for a little while…maybe fifteen minutes or so. It was getting pretty late, and I didn’t know what else to do so I brought you here.”

“Oh” was all she could manage. She searched his face for traces of pity or judgment…but there was only concern there, etched in the teeny tiny lines across his forehead.

Stormy closed her eyes and let out a long, drawn out sigh. When she tried to adjust her leg, to get more comfortable, her ankle screamed in protest, causing her to flinch.

“Looks like your pain meds have worn off, huh.” It was more of a statement than a question. He stood up and walked to the kitchen to retrieve a little white paper bag. “I had a buddy of mine take me to get my car this morning. I stopped by the pharmacy to pick up your prescriptions on the way home. You should probably take something before the pain gets too unbearable. I noticed that the bottle says ‘take with food,’ so I recommend eating first.”

“Yeah. You’re probably right.” She made another attempt to sit up, but the pain gripped her.

“Here. Let me.” Brylan moved to the end of the couch and gently slid a hand under her splint-encased foot. Ever so gently, he eased it up and over, moving with her as she turned her body, and lightly set it on the floor. Gravity immediately took hold of the injured limb, signaling the nerves to start firing all at once as the blood rushed to it. The pain was unbearable and a wave of nausea hit her.

“Deep breaths. In and out,” Brylan cooed while rubbing small circles on her back. “Breathe through the pain. You can do it.”

She did as she was told, sucking in deep breaths and letting them out slowly while silently counting to ten. After a couple of rounds of counting and breathing, the pain and the nausea subsided a bit. Brylan bolted to the kitchen and returned with a pair of crutches. He thrust them at her, “I picked these up at the pharmacy too.”

She stared at the crutches as realization dawned on her. Brylan had done so much for her, a stranger, and she didn’t know how in the world she would ever be able to pay him back. Experience told her that nothing in this world was free. “How much do I owe you for all this…the medicine and the crutches?” she asked timidly while he helped her to her feet.

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The pained expression on Stormy’s face was almost too much for him to bear. He didn’t want her to feel indebted to him. “Please. Don’t worry about it.”

“No. This stuff…the medicine and the crutches…it wasn’t free, Brylan. Now, tell me, what do I owe you?”

Damn, she was headstrong. “Don’t worry about it, Stormy. I’m sure we can arrange something later.”

Oops. That came out wrong. Really, really wrong, judging by her horrified expression. He needed to do damage control. And quick!

“I meant…that stuff really didn’t cost much. There’s really no need to worry about it.”

Stormy’s face relaxed some, but she still looked a little weary. He almost saved himself, but he just couldn’t seem to keep his foot out of his mouth. “Maybe we can trade favors or something once you’re all healed up.” Dammit! She was going to think he was some sort of pervert. Hell, he was starting to wonder if there was something wrong with him.

“Arrggrrhh!” He let out an exasperated growl while rubbing his face with his hands. How was he even going to be able to look the girl in the eye after that?

And then he heard giggling.

“I know what you’re trying to say, Brylan. You can let yourself off the hook,” she said through her snickers. “I think if you were some sort degenerate I would have picked up on it by now.”

He let out a sigh of relief. “I’m sorry. I’m usually not this awkward. Maybe I’m just sleep deprived.” He knew he was lying. Stormy got to him. There was just something about her that made him edgy. She was beautiful, smart…and feisty. And he was drawn to her like a moth to a flame.

Stormy cleared her throat. “Hey. You zoned out for a minute. Everything okay?”

“Oh. Yeah. Sorry. How ‘bout we get you fed? I made two kinds of eggs. Would you like burnt, or slightly charred?”

Her eyes lit up and she giggled again. “I’ll have burnt please.”

It took a little while for Stormy to figure out how to distribute her weight on the crutches without falling over. “Now put them out in front of you, and then swing your legs through,” Brylan instructed. Stormy hated feeling helpless. Who knew crutches could be so difficult?

Once she made it over to the tiny kitchen island, Brylan helped her up on the stool and set a plate down in front of her. It was overflowing with bacon, toast, and something resembling scrambled eggs, with little black
bits stuck to them. “Were you expecting an army or something?” she asked while raising an eyebrow. But then she noticed that his plate was piled high too.

His fork paused mid-way to his mouth. “Huh?”

“Never mind.” She picked at the food on her plate. She didn’t have much of an appetite, especially with those peculiar looking eggs staring back at her, but she made herself take a few bites of toast. She watched in awe as Brylan plowed through his plate like a man on a mission.

He nibbled absently on his last piece of undercooked bacon and Stormy could see the thoughts formulating in his head.

“So…I guess you have a pretty long commute back and forth to school during the week, huh?”

The question struck her as strange. “Well, I wouldn’t exactly call it a long commute. Usually takes about fifteen minutes or so to get to the high school from my house.”

Brylan stopped chewing and all the color drained from his face. He swallowed once…twice…three times before he spoke again. He suddenly looked as though he might be sick.

“You’re in high school?” he asked incredulously.

She startled at his response. “Um, yeah. For a few more weeks anyway. I’ll be graduating in May. Why the face?”

He shifted around uncomfortably, looking as if he’d done something terribly wrong. He gripped the edge of the counter and squeezed his eyes shut briefly before answering. “I just…I uh…I thought maybe you went to the community college over in Wharton. I overheard you give your birth date to the lady at the hospital last night and I did the math. You’re almost nineteen. I just assumed….”

“Yeah, I….” How was she going to explain being a year behind in school? She couldn’t tell him that she had to repeat the sixth grade because she and her mama spent three months in a shelter for battered women. “I had to repeat a grade,” she said simply, hoping that he wouldn’t question her further.

“Oh. Sorry. I didn’t mean to be nosy.”

“No, it’s okay,” she said, some of the tension leaving her shoulders, “It was a reasonable assumption.” She was just glad he hadn’t prompted her to spill the ugly details.

Brylan downed his orange juice before gathering their plates and taking them to the sink. Stormy was feeling really guilty about him waiting on her hand and foot. His back was to her as he squirted dish detergent into the steaming water. “Brylan?”
“Yeah?”
“I’m really sorry about last night… I was rude to you when you were just trying to help.”
“It’s totally fine, Stormy. You were freaked out. I get it. No harm done.”
“Thanks. I’m not usually like that. It’s just….” She wasn’t exactly sure what she wanted to say. Sorry just didn’t seem like enough. “I was already on edge…because of some stuff that happened earlier.”
“Stormy. You don’t have to explain anything to me. Really.” The sincerity in his eyes pulled at her heart strings. He was such a good guy, the kind of guy she could easily fall for. Wait. No. What was she thinking? She couldn’t fall for him. She was leaving town as soon as graduation was over, hopefully, and he was a distraction that she couldn’t afford.
She looked up at the clock mounted on the wall. “It’s nearly one o’clock in the afternoon?” Panic suddenly hit her. Mama was probably freaking out …and assuming the worst. “Can I borrow your phone?”
“Sure.” He handed her his cell phone.
She made repeated calls to the house phone. Nothing. Then she tried Mama’s cell, but all she got was her voicemail, “This is Marni. You know what to do.” She groaned and hung up before the beep.
“Looks like she’s still out.”

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Brylan could tell Stormy was feigning her indifference by the way her smile didn’t quite reach her eyes. She was obviously distressed by the fact that she couldn’t reach her mother and she was trying to hide it. But Brylan recognized it for what it was. It was the same disappointment he’d seen in her eyes when he’d taken her home at three o’clock that morning.

He couldn’t bring himself to tell her how her mother had been too drunk to comprehend what was going on, that her daughter had been hurt and had needed her. The woman had groaned something incoherently and passed out on the front porch before he’d even had a chance to fully explain what had happened.

If only Stormy had stayed asleep….

He’d never forget the stricken look on her face when he got back inside the truck, or the anguished tears that had rolled down her cheeks. He was so grateful that Stormy didn’t remember any of it, and he secretly hoped that the memory would stay hidden in the depths of her medication-induced stupor. It was bad enough that she experienced it once, but the thought of her having to relive that moment sickened him.
Anger boiled in his belly and he knew he needed to shake it off before Stormy caught on.

He shifted his thoughts to how peaceful Stormy had looked on his couch while she slept. Her face had been relaxed, and the moonlight filtering in from the curtains had cast a silvery sliver of light across her delicate features. As he watched her, he couldn’t help but smile at the way her breath pushed through her barely parted lips in little whistles. He had longed to touch her, just to see if she was as soft as she looked.

Brylan snapped out of his reverie and gave himself a silent reprimand. Stormy was still in high school. Principal Flint would skin him alive if he even suspected he was thinking about her. He’d made it crystal clear—students were off limits.

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Stormy was standing in Brylan’s living room, balancing on one foot with her arms outstretched.

“Is this really necessary?”

“Yup. Now, touch your nose with your right index finger.”

“I’m going to fall over!”

“Nah. I’ll catch you first. Just don’t poke yourself in the eye, or else you fail.”

“I. Am. Fine. To. Drive,” she spat for the fifth time. “It was hours ago when I took my meds.” Brylan’s over-protectiveness was grating on her nerves.

“Okay. Touch your damn nose already then.”

He was grinning like a Cheshire cat and it crossed her mind to hit him in the shin with one of her crutches. He wasn’t going to let up until she complied. He was so bullheaded. But, since she would be borrowing his car, she figured it was best to play along. There was no way she would be able to maneuver the clutch in her truck. “Fine,” she sighed. “Let’s just get this over with.”

She stood perfectly still and brought her index finger to the tip of her nose without so much as a wobble.

Brylan finally seemed satisfied. “Okay. Good to go. But sheesh, you’re a stubborn one.”

“I’m stubborn?” she said in disbelief. “You’re the one that’s holding me hostage.” She waited for some sort of snarky comeback, but he just laughed at her. She growled in frustration.

“You’re pretty cute when you’re pissy. You know that?”
The room got quiet. It was an obvious flirt, and it caught them both off guard. The spark dimmed in Brylan’s eyes while Stormy’s mind spun in circles. She couldn’t deny the attraction. As much as she tried to ignore it, it was there. Being in the same room with Brylan…it was like that feeling she always got after a thunderstorm, when the air still crackled with remnants of electricity and she could feel the little tingles on her skin.

And then there was his smile. It was completely disarming, and a simple grin could make all of her thoughts go tumbling right out of her head. It was startling, the way her body responded to him, and she did not like the loss of control. It scared her.

He was a good guy. Charming, generous, funny…and so good looking it made her breathless. But there were barriers that called for her to shield herself. Shield her heart. She’d seen the look on his face when she told him she was in high school.

He was a teacher. She was a student. It didn’t take an Einstein to see that anything beyond friendship had disaster written all over it.
Chapter Six

A million and one scenarios played out in Stormy’s head on the drive home. Why hadn’t her mama answered the phone? Did she pass out in her car again? Was she stuck someplace with no phone, no money, and no car? Whatever it was, Stormy was certain that alcohol was involved.

The other half of the equation was Bill, the new boyfriend. He was some guy, amongst a long list of others that her mother had met online, fallen madly in love with, and moved halfway across the state to be with. Stormy didn’t trust the guy as far as she could throw him. For all she knew, Bill had left her mother somewhere, stranded and destitute…or worse.

She drove as fast as her banged up ankle would allow, and the bumpy dirt road had her cursing under her breath. She was going to need a ton of ibuprofen when she got home. When she turned down the long driveway leading to her house she spotted Bill’s dusty, old jeep…and the small flatbed trailer attached to it.

Getting out of the Brylan’s car was a challenge. For starters, Brylan wasn’t there to help her. Plus, it was low to the ground, which meant pulling herself up, as opposed to earlier when she’d been able to lower herself into it. Using the door for support, she pulled herself upright, and then hopped on one foot over to the rear door to retrieve her crutches. By the time she made it to the front steps she was exhausted. She stopped to wipe the sweat that had accumulated on her upper lip, despite the chilly temperature outside, and noticed Bill leaning against the side of his jeep. The creep had just stood there watching her the whole time, never once offering to help…not that she would have accepted it anyway, but it was the principle of the matter. And it pissed her off just the same. The whole way up the steps she could feel his eyes on her, and it took everything she had in her not to clobber him with one of her crutches.

“What in the hell happened to you?” Marni asked as Stormy hobbled her way through the front door. Her tone was laced with accusation, rather than concern.
Stormy’s temper got the best of her. “I fell,” she spat at her mother. “Where the hell have you been? I’ve been calling and calling.” She paused, taking in the new mess in the living room. “And what’s with all these boxes?”

Marni practically jumped out of the faded, broken recliner and made it across the living room in two long strides. Her face was six inches from Stormy’s, close enough for her to catch the pungent scent of booze that seeped out of her pores. “You better watch how you speak to me, girl,” she hissed. “I don’t have to answer to you…I don’t have to answer to anybody for that matter.” Her nostrils flared and her thickly lined blue eyes were wide with fury.

Her eyes. Something wasn’t quite right about them, but she was too pissed off to care at that moment.

The atmosphere in the room was volatile, and Stormy knew she needed to diffuse the situation before things got too out of hand. She took a difficult step backward and pulled her eyes away from Marni’s locked gaze. “I’m sorry, Mama. It’s just that I was going crazy not knowing where you were. I hurt my ankle and had to go to the hospital…and the nurse couldn’t get you on the phone. I was scared that something bad had happened to you.”

Marni visibly began to simmer down. Her pupils returned to a somewhat normal state and she retreated to her spot on the recliner.

“Well,” she huffed, “I’m too tired to fight with you anyway. Been moving Bill’s stuff in all afternoon. He’s been practically living here anyway so we figured he ought to just save his rent money and stay here full-time.”

*Translation: Bill’s an unemployed bum and he’s going to mooch off us for a while.*

Stormy resisted rolling her eyes. She sighed and sagged against the crutches that were pinching her underarms. Nothing she could say would make that nightmare go away anyhow. Her mother had never been receptive to any of her advice before, and Stormy had given up trying.

She maneuvered around the cardboard boxes that littered the living room and headed to her room. All she wanted to do at that moment was climb into her bed and prop some pillows under her throbbing foot. Just as she was about to shuffle her way down the hall, she decided to stop and make one request, “Mama. Can you at least tell him to stay out of my room?”

“Now what possible reason could that man have for going into your room?” she said, exasperated. And then something like realization
flickered across her face. She set her mouth in a hard line. “Stormy, there’s nothing in your room that he would want.”

Yeah, right, she thought. Except for possibly me.

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“Where are you going, munchkin?” Brylan snatched up his nephew before he could make it to the edge of the pond. The little kid was fearless. “Duckies! Wan’ feed duckies!”

“Okay, okay.” Brylan opened up the package of stale bread and tore it into small pieces. “Here…throw it to them…like this….”

River giggled and clapped his chubby little hands together as the mob of greedy ducks and geese raced each other for the scraps of bread. “Again! Again!” he squealed with delight. His big blue eyes were wide and he was grinning from ear to ear. “Look at dat one. He’s silly,” he said, pointing to the black duck with a plume of fluffy feathers on top of his head.

“Hey! He’s got a mohawk. How about we get you a haircut like that?” Brylan teased him while mussing up his white crop of baby-fine hair. “Yeah! Mow-ock!”

“Great influence you are,” his sister said while giving Brylan a playful shove. “Next he’ll be wanting a tattoo.”

“Oh, Lil. Lighten up. He’s only two. You’ve got at least… ten years before he starts hollering for a tattoo.”

“Ha ha. Funny, little brother.”

Brylan and Lily were Irish twins, barely a year apart, and she never missed an opportunity to remind him who was older. As much as it annoyed him, he let her get away with the “little brother” jab.

He felt himself staring at her features while she watched River play. Something was off with her. He could see it in the hollows under her eyes and the sag in her shoulders. She wasn’t her usual spunky self and it worried him.

He sat beside her on the concrete bench. “You look tired, Lil.”

“I am tired, Bry. Chasing that little guy around all the time…he’s a handful.” She nodded toward River, who had apparently lost interest in the ducks, and had found something else to amuse himself. “River, take the rocks out of your pockets, please.”

Brylan smirked as he watched the little boy fling the pebbles into the pond, angrily. He definitely had inherited the Knight stubborn streak.

“How long before Derrick gets home?”
“Only two more days. Then he’ll be home for two weeks before he has to go out again.”

“That’s good. I know how much you guys miss him.” He knew what a toll his brother-in-law’s long haul trucking job had taken on his sister. “Yeah, we do. I thought I would eventually get used to him being on the road all the time…but it just gets harder and harder. And I’m constantly explaining to River why Daddy can’t come home. It’s like he forgets, and I have to remind him why Derrick isn’t there. Sometimes I have to remind myself why he’s not there.”

She wiped at a stray tear and Brylan put an arm around her and gave a little squeeze. He wished there was something more he could offer her.

They sat together quietly for a few minutes while River resumed chasing the ducks around.

“I’m thinking of going back to school,” Lily said. “It bugs me that I never finished my degree.”

He hadn’t been expecting that announcement, but he was glad to hear it. Lily was always the brainy one in the family. Everyone was shocked when she had announced that she was dropping out her senior year of college and getting married. But it all clicked into place when River was born a few months afterward.

“That’s awesome, Lily. Won’t it be hard though…I mean with River?”

“I have a really sweet lady that lives next door who offered to babysit. I figured now is as good a time as any. And I want to set a good example for River. You know? I mean, I’m proud of my husband…He does what it takes to provide for us, but I want more for our son. I want River to have options. Like his Uncle Bry.” She nudged him playfully.

“Yeah…I don’t know about options. This whole teaching thing…it was Dad’s idea. So far it hasn’t been what I thought it was going to be. I’m not sure I’m cut out for teaching.”

“Maybe you just need more time. It’s a respectable career, Bry. Don’t give up on it just yet.”

Brylan’s shoulders sagged. “Don’t get me wrong, I like the idea of being a role model and all…I just don’t know if I’m going about it the right way. I’m not sure I belong in a classroom.”

He knew he shouldn’t be complaining. With the economy like it was, he was lucky to have a job at all. But, sometimes his job was like a pair of shoes that were a half-size too small. It rubbed him the wrong way.

“Mommy! Let’s go pway! Swides!” River was running toward them, his chubby cheeks red from the cold.
Lily picked him up and snuggled him. “Okay, okay. Let’s zip you up first.” She set him back down and zipped his jacket up to his chin.

“Is Uncle Bwy going too?”

Just as he was about to answer, he saw his car, the one Stormy had borrowed, roll up at the next picnic table over from where they were sitting. He watched Stormy clamber out and hobble over to the table, seemingly unaware of his presence. He was surprised to see her out and about so soon after her injury.

“Hey, River. Why don’t you and your mommy go on to the playground. I’ll catch up in a little while, okay?”

“Everything okay?” Lily looked at him questioningly.

“Yeah, everything’s fine. It’s just that I know that girl over there, and I wanted to pop over and say hi.”

Lily smirked at him knowingly and raised an eyebrow, “Oh, really?”

“It’s not like that, sis. She’s a friend.”

“Oh huh,” she said with a devilish smile. “Well, you and your friend have a nice chat. I’m going to go let this little guy play for a little while.”

River put his hands on his hips and scowled. “I’m not wittle.”

Lily and Brylan both snickered.

“Oh, excuse me,” Lily tried to match River’s serious tone, “My big guy and I are going to go to the playground.”

Brylan chuckled. “Okay, I’ll catch up in a bit.”

He watched as Lily took River’s little hand and led him to the playground. He returned River’s little bye-bye wave before strolling over to where Stormy was sitting. She was staring out at the water vacantly, apparently lost in her thoughts. She didn’t notice him until he cleared his throat.

“Hey, how’s the ankle?”

“Oh, hey! I didn’t notice it was you over there. It’s a little better.”

“I didn’t notice any crutches…”

“Nah. They were a pain in the ass. I get around okay without ‘em as long as I don’t put too much weight on it.” She peered over his shoulder, “Who was that?”

“That was my sister and her little boy. They’re staying with me until tomorrow. I think she just came to check up on me. She does that sometimes.”

“That’s sweet,” she said. “It must be nice having somebody who cares enough to do that.”
“I suppose.” He hopped up on the concrete picnic table with her. “I make out like she bugs the hell out of me. You know…the obligatory brother-sister thing…but I’m secretly glad I get to see her.”

She smiled at him. “It must be nice. Having a sibling, I mean. I don’t have any brothers or sisters. It’s just always been me and Mama.”

He tried to imagine his life without his sister and brothers, but he couldn’t. They were like appendages…he’d be lost without them.

She got that faraway look again. “Everything good at home?”

She hesitated, which he took as a bad sign. “Yeah. Okay, I guess,” she said flatly.

“You don’t sound very convincing.”

More hesitation. Brylan was starting to wonder if he was overstepping an invisible boundary.

“Mama’s new boyfriend moved in with us. And he’s… I just don’t like him. He gives me the creeps.”

Brylan bristled at her answer. “What do you mean?”

“He just looks at me like…I don’t know. He’s just always staring at me. It makes me feel unwelcome in my own house.”

“Have you told your mom about it?”

“No. It wouldn’t do any good anyway. She’d never believe me. So I usually just stay in my room…with the door locked.”

“Geez. That’s no way to live, Stormy.” Alarm bells were going off in his head, and he gripped the edge of the concrete table to anchor himself. Instinctively, he wanted to find the guy and punch his lights out. “Is that all he does? Stare?” His body tensed in anticipation of her answer.

“Yeah. I don’t think he’s bold enough to try anything with Mama around. So I make sure I’m never alone with him. I don’t trust him. That’s why I’m here. Mama had to go to work. She waits tables at The Rusty Fender. Usually he goes with her and hangs out at the bar until her shift is over. Tonight he didn’t. He said he had a headache or something. So I left.”

“I think that’s probably pretty smart, although it must really suck to not be able to go to your own house.” He let the information digest for a moment. “So…what are you gonna do, stay here in the park until the bar closes? That’s not until what, midnight?”

“Something like that. It’s fine. I don’t mind it here. I brought a book to read.”

He looked down at his watch. Midnight was six hours away.
He heard giggling and looked over to see River and Lily returning from the playground. He’d lost track of time and a tingle of guilt struck him for not keeping his promise.

“I have an idea. Why don’t you come over to the house? We already promised River some pizza for dinner. You can hang out with us for a while.”

Hope flickered in her eyes for a second, but then her expression morphed into something else he couldn’t quite read. Concern? Embarrassment?

“I can’t. You’re having family time and I don’t want to take away from that.”

“I’m not taking no for an answer.” He hadn’t realized how cold the concrete table was until he tried to stand up. “I think I have frostbite on my ass. It’s too damned cold to stay out here. Besides, my sister will love having another girl around to talk to. Trust me. And River is a blast. You’ll have fun. I promise.” He gave her his best smile and held out his hand to help her up from the table.

She smiled back. “Okay. If you’re sure.”

“Absolutely.”

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Stormy couldn’t remember the last time she’d laughed so hard. Brylan was tickling his nephew mercilessly on the living room floor, and their laughter was infectious.

River’s giggles were exactly what she needed to take the edge off. She and Brylan had taken turns amusing the toddler all evening, and she was already half in love with the kid. She was nervous at first, not having much experience around children, and she was afraid that he’d pick up on her misgiving somehow, but he didn’t. There were no preconceived notions or judgments in those big blue eyes. Only love and adoration… with a side of mischief.

“Stop!” River said through his laughter.

Brylan complied and flopped over on his back, breathing heavily from all the horse playing.

“More! More!”

Brylan tickled him again. They’d been going on and on like that for an hour and it was impossible to not giggle with them. It was one of the cutest things she’d ever seen—Brylan giving in to the whims of a toddler to the point of exhaustion. There was no question that someday he would make a great father.
“They’re adorable, aren’t they?” Lily took a stool next to Stormy in the kitchen.

“Yeah. They really are. I’ve never seen Brylan like that before…so playful and carefree,” she gazed dreamily at the two who were pretend wrestling on the floor.

Stormy could sense Lily’s stare. When she looked up at her there was a small smile playing on her lips. “You like my brother, don’t you?”

“I…he….” The comment caught her off guard and she was tripping on her own tongue.

Lily laughed softly and placed a hand on Stormy’s arm. “It’s okay. I didn’t mean to put you on the spot. But I’m no dummy. I’d have to be blind not to see the sparks between you two.”

Stormy wrung her hands, nervously. “Brylan’s a really good guy…but we’re just friends.”

“If you say so,” Lily grinned.

“Hey, what are you two gossiping about?” Brylan crossed over to the kitchen and grabbed a bottle of water out of the fridge. His sweaty hair was sticking to his forehead.

“None of your business.” Lily’s words were clipped, but her eyes danced with amusement.

Brylan nodded toward the living room where River was yawning and rubbing his eyes. “I think the little man is about all played out. You want me to read to him?”

River’s little ears were perceptive. He toddled over to the overstuffed blue and green diaper bag and dug through it, tossing out about half of its contents in the process, and ran to the kitchen with a book in tow. “I want Stormy to wead me my book.” He looked up at her with those big, round eyes. “Pease?”

He had her…hook, line, and sinker. “Sure, sweetie. Where do you want to read it?”

He rubbed his eyes once more and then pointed to Brylan’s rocking recliner. “Over der.”

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Stormy stretched and yawned before opening her eyes to reveal a dark, quiet living room. How long had she slept? She strained her eyes to see her watch and let out a sigh of relief. It had only been an hour since she’d sat down in the recliner with River.

River! She tossed the blanket aside—the one that had magically appeared as she slept—and limped down the hallway. Her ankle had
gotten stiff and sore, and she was wishing she’d brought her ibuprofen with her. She paused at the doorway of the spare bedroom where River’s tiny form slept soundly. His eyelids fluttered and his little fingers twitched. He was smiling in his sleep, obviously in the middle of a nice dream.

But where were Brylan and Lily?

The back porch light was filtering through the curtain covering the glass-paneled back door at the end of the hall. She figured they must be out on the patio. As she got closer, she could hear a muffled conversation going on. She put her hand on the doorknob, but then she heard her name and froze.

“Stormy’s a sweet girl, Brylan. And I’ve seen the way you look at her. I don’t see what the problem is.”

It was Lily’s voice, and she sounded aggravated.

“Come on, Lily. You’re a smart person. Why can’t you see it?”

“See what? You like her. She obviously likes you too….”

Stormy’s heart sped up. It was like a hummingbird flittering around in her chest. *He likes me?*

She pushed the little curtain aside, just enough to get a glimpse of him chugging back a beer and setting it on the makeshift table that looked like an old whiskey barrel. He set his elbows on his knees and put his head in his hands.

“Ughhhh….Lily…. It doesn’t matter. None of it. It’s just too… screwed up…. I can’t afford to screw up my career. Hell, I just barely started it.”

Confused and hurt, Stormy let go of the curtain and quietly made her way back to the living room. She didn’t want to hear any more. The words were true, but that didn’t make them sting any less. A few days ago she was fine. She’d made up her mind that they were nothing more than friends. She had made peace with the fact that there could never be anything else between them.

And then today happened.

Somewhere between feeling sorry for herself at the park and playing with Brylan and River, a change had taken place inside her. She’d let her guard down and hope had managed to sneak its way into her heart.

It was a costly mistake.

She felt the threatening sting of tears, but she didn’t want them to fall before she had a chance to get out of Brylans’ house. She grabbed her jacket, felt for the keys in her pocket, and slipped quietly out the front door.
Chapter Seven

February, and Brylan was soaked to the bone in his own sweat. Good ole Texas weather. The only thing you could predict about the weather was that it was unpredictable. The weatherman had said to expect mild temperatures, which is what compelled him to move the last of his belongings from his dad’s house in the first place. What the forecaster didn’t say was that the humidity would be at eighty percent, making the seventy-five degree temperature feel like ninety. It was hard to believe that just a week ago they’d all been bundled up in coats.

His thoughts drifted to the day he’d taken Lily and River to the park. It had been a damned good day. Lily and Stormy had gotten along like two peas in a pod. Seeing them laugh and talk with each other had been such a relief to him because it was something they both needed. Granted, most of the laughing was at his expense thanks to Lily’s embarrassing childhood stories, but it was worth the humiliation to see them both look so happy. And Stormy with River...his heart ached at the memory of her rocking him to sleep. River had conned her with his toddler charm—the big, pleading eyes and pouty little mouth—and Stormy hadn’t been able to refuse him.

Of course, Stormy had her charms too. River had been transfixed by her as she read the first few pages of *The Bear Snores On*. Ten minutes of watching her and listening to that silky voice while he twirled her chestnut hair around his chubby little finger...he was out like a light. And so was she. He’d been a little startled, however, when she’d left the house without saying goodbye. He guessed that she must have awakened from her nap and figured everyone else was sleeping.

Brylan drained the last of his water bottle and looked at the sky. There wasn’t enough daylight left to sit and reminisce, so he climbed back up into the bed of Cooper’s truck, the one that he borrowed, and stared down at the overwhelming amount of stuff that still needed to be unloaded.

As he bent down to retrieve one of the many boxes, he heard the unmistakable scrape of a skateboard rolling down the sidewalk.

“Hey, Coach! Need a hand?”
At first, all he could see was some shaggy hair poking out from the rim of a baseball cap. As the guy got closer, he recognized it was one of his students, Joshua.

“Sure, I could use a hand…but you can’t call me Coach just yet.” Then it struck him. “Hey, how did you know about that anyway? I just got the offer yesterday, and it’s not even official yet.” Cooper had been offered a spot as Head Coach in the next town over, leaving a spot open for assistant coach. He knew about Brylan’s baseball history. Apparently, he’d thrown Brylan’s name in the hat as a replacement. There were still a lot of hoops to jump through though. Principal Flint had yet to sign off on it so Brylan wasn’t counting his chickens.

“Word travels in a small town. You should know that by now.”

“I guess it does, Joshua.” he chuckled lightly. “But let’s hold off on the new title until it’s a sure thing. You might jinx me.”

“Well, in that case, you should call me Nozz.”

Brylan cocked an eyebrow and eyed him suspiciously. “Why in the world would I do that?” If that was a nickname, it was an odd one.

“I dunno, it’s just what everybody calls me,” he said with a shrug.

Brylan sensed a slight change in the kid’s demeanor. He was curious as to why, but he let it go. He didn’t know him well enough to pry, plus they were burning daylight. He needed to get his junk unloaded before dark.

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It had taken about two hours to unload the truck and Nozz had proved to be pretty good help. Brylan figured he owed the guy a meal at least. “Hey, Nozz? You want to stick around for some chili? I’ve had it simmering all day on the stove. It’s the least I can do for all your hard work.”

“Sounds good. It’s been a while since I’ve had homemade chili.”

Halfway up the sidewalk to the house, Nozz stopped. Alarm flashed across his face as he looked down at his watch.

A crease formed between Brylan’s eyebrows, “Everything okay?”

“Yeah, but I can only stay for about an hour.”

“Hot date?”

Nozz scowled. “Yeah, right. I wish.” The words came out a little harsh, harsh enough to make Brylan flinch. Seeing Brylan’s reaction, Nozz’s expression softened, “Sorry. I’m just a little uptight, that’s all.”

“Okay.” Brylan sensed that there was more to it, but he decided to let it drop.
Once inside, Brylan scooped out the chili and set two steaming bowls on his tiny kitchen island. It was obvious that something was bothering Nozz by the way he’d gotten so quiet. Nozz was the biggest prankster in his class, so Brylan knew that silence was out of character for him. He could almost see the wheels spinning in his head. He started to ask him what was bothering him, but then decided against it. He didn’t know the guy that well and he didn’t want to pry.

“Hey, Nozz…I heard about an incident in the biology lab today, but I only got bits and pieces of the story. Care to fill me in?” He hoped that some mindless conversation would draw the kid out of his funk.

“Okay,” Nozz said, “but first you have to tell me something…like what in the world did you do to this chili?”

“What do you mean? You don’t like it?”

“Dude. Did you make it with roadkill or something? Not to be mean or anything, but it tastes like ass.”

“Damn, Nozz. Don’t sugar-coat it. Tell me what you really think.”

A laugh erupted from Nozz, causing his floppy hair to fall down over his eyes. Brylan couldn’t help but chuckle too. “Hey, I offered you a meal. I never said it would be a good one.”

“You’re right. I’m sorry,” Nozz said, still sniggering. “Beggars shouldn’t be choosy and all of that…but maybe next time we could order a pizza.”

“Yeah, yeah. Whatever. Now tell me about what happened in biology.”

Nozz’s face lit up with excitement. “Oh, yeah! It was epic!” he started, “You see, today we dissected rats.”

“Rats?” Brylan cut in. “When I was in high school we dissected frogs.”

“Yeah, we did frogs already. It was boring,” he said glibly. “Anyway, so we were sitting in class when Ms. Knoll brought in a bucket of live rats. Then she went into the storage room to ‘do the deed.’” Nozz made air quotes before continuing, “And while was gone, someone—I won’t name any names—started telling a story about last year’s biology lab, and how one of the rats was still alive after being cut open. Its heart was still beating and everything….”

By the way Nozz was grinning, there was no doubt as to who started that story. Brylan propped his head up on his elbow and gave Nozz his full attention.

“So, by the time the teacher got back, everybody in the class was a little freaked out already. Then Ms. Knoll put a freshly killed rat on each
lab table—one for each group. Then everybody started arguing about who had to make the first cut, because nobody wanted to be the bad guy.

Anyway, as soon as that was all settled, we made the first big cut. The room was really quiet because everybody was so focused on what they were doing. And then, all of a sudden, we all heard this little squeaky noise. Everybody got all wide-eyed and started looking around.”

Brylan’s eyes widened too. He was totally captivated by Nozz’s animated storytelling. “And then what?” he asked eagerly.

“And then the most awesome thing happened. This rat—alive and well—comes scurrying across the table, right in front of Marissa—who happens to be a girl I can’t stand by the way—and she starts shrieking at the top of her lungs, ‘It’s alive! It’s alive! Somebody do something! It’s alive!”

By that point, Nozz was laughing so hard he could barely get the words out. “Oh, but that’s not the end of it,” Nozz said through the cackles. “Marissa ended up falling off her stool, backwards, with her legs stuck up in the air…and when she finally scrambled to get up, she took off running. She was so busy screeching and looking at the rat—which was still running around all over the table—that she slammed right into Ms. Knoll’s life-sized plastic skeleton…and then she started screaming again.”

Brylan’s side hurt from all the laughter and his eyes were watering.

“So, what ended up happening to the rat? The one that got a stay of execution?”

“Oh, he’s fine. Whiskey was never on the chopping block,” Nozz admitted.

“Whiskey?”

“Yeah. He’s mine. I brought him from home. I just wanted to get back at Marissa for being such a bi—uh, mean person.”

“What did the girl ever do to deserve all of that? Poor thing may never recover.”

Nozz took another bite of chili and made a face. It was a small blow to Brylan’s ego, but he took it in stride.

“She had it coming,” Nozz continued. “She’s been picking on this girl that I kind of like. You might know her. Stormy Black?”

Oh shit.

Brylan could feel all the blood drain from his face and he felt like he had been punched in the gut. It took him a minute to figure out why he was having such a visceral reaction to Nozz’s statement. It was something that he didn’t want to admit to himself. But it was there, the glowering, green-eyed monster.
Jealousy.

He swallowed his discontent and tried to keep his voice nice and even as he spoke. “I know Stormy. We met a couple of weeks ago. She hurt her ankle on the track and I just happened to be there. I gave her a ride to the hospital.” He decided to omit all of the other details. No need to stir up a hornet’s nest.

“Oh, okay,” Nozz said simply. “All she told me was that she sprained it when she was running. I didn’t know that you two knew each other.”

“We didn’t. Not until that night. I’ve never seen her around school so I didn’t even know she was a student at first.”

Nozz twirled his spoon around absently. “I think she tries to lay low, being the new girl and all. I can’t really blame her. People tend to give the new kids a hard time at our school.”

“Is that why that girl picks on Stormy? Because she’s new? That doesn’t really seem fair.”

“Nah. Marissa’s problem, other than being a snobby, spoiled, brat, is that she’s jealous. She can’t stand it when guys pay attention to anyone besides her.”

Brylan gnawed on that bit of information for a couple of minutes. “So Stormy gets a lot of male attention, huh?”

“Um…duh. Have you seen Stormy?” Nozz stared at Brylan as if he had antlers growing out of his head. “She’s smokin’ hot. And she like, doesn’t even have to try. She doesn’t cake all that goo on her face or wear fancy clothes… She’s just Stormy. Ya know?”

Yeah. He did know. But he couldn’t tell Nozz that. He was in dangerous territory, and he needed to change the subject. Fast.

“So, Nozz. How are things on the college front? Where are you planning to go?”

His smile disappeared and he mindlessly picked at a loose piece of formica on the countertop. “I’m not going to college.”

Surely he didn’t hear him correctly. “Did you say you’re not going?”

“Yeah.”

“With your grades? You gotta be kidding me.” Brylan was astounded by the revelation. He’d heard the other teachers in the lounge talking about Nozz, and the general consensus was that he was an excellent student with really good grades. He was a bit of a joker, but he also bordered on genius. His state test scores were off the charts.

Nozz went rigid and his gaze shifted to the floor. Apparently college was a touchy subject. Brylan was sorry for bringing it up. “Well, college
isn’t necessarily for everybody, Nozz. I’m sure you’ll figure out what you want to do.”

“Yeah. Maybe. But right now what I need is a job. I really don’t want to flip burgers, but there aren’t a whole lot of options around here.”

“Hmm.” Brylan tapped his knuckles on the counter while he formulated a thought. “Hey, you know anything about carpentry?”

Nozz looked at him curiously. “I can swing a hammer. Why?”

“Because I have a garage apartment that needs a lot of work. You interested?”

The answer was plastered all over Nozz’s face. “Hell yeah.”

“Alright then. You free to start tomorrow morning? Around nine?”

“Yeah, sure.”

“Okay, I’ll pick you up on my way to the hardware store.”

His face fell again and Brylan could see the gears turning. “No. How about I meet you there? I’ll ride my skateboard to the store and then ride back here with you.”

“Okay. That’ll work.”

Something was fishy. The cryptic behavior was driving Brylan nuts. But he still didn’t feel it was his place to butt in.

What he really needed to worry about was his own situation. He was already on shaky ground with Stormy, the girl that had him twisted up like a damn pretzel on the inside, and now he’d gone and offered Nozz a job.

So much for the no fraternization rule. He was practically begging Flint to fire him.
Chapter Eight

Stormy pushed a button on the ancient cash register and the cash drawer popped open with a ding. She handed the elderly patron her bag and smiled. “Have a nice day.” On the inside, she was snickering though. Glitter nail polish and zebra print underwear seemed like an odd purchase for someone with that many wrinkles and liver spots. She suspected—or rather hoped—that the items were a gift. For a granddaughter maybe. However, that hope went down in flames when the woman turned around and she caught the slogan on the back of her pink tee-shirt: Sexy Senior.

Oh my.

The cowbell clanked as the lady exited the store and Stormy stared after her through the windows until she disappeared from sight.

“Whatcha lookin’ at?” Trudy rounded the end of the checkout counter and started digging around for something under the register.

“Oh, nothing.” She was a little embarrassed and she internally scolded herself for the thoughts she was having. It wasn’t her business what other people did with their time. “Whatcha looking for, Trudy?”

“Ah. Found ‘em.” She held up a couple of white ceramic cherubs. “I think these will be cute in the window. Don’t you?”

Stormy nodded her agreement. Trudy had spent a good portion of the day sticking pink and red heart decals all over the plate glass windows in preparation for Valentine’s Day.

Trudy finished up her display and glanced around the store. “Looks like things have slowed down a bit. Why don’t you go and sit for a while and give that ankle a rest.”

Trudy had been fussing over her like a mother hen from day one.

“I’m fine, Trudy. It’s not even that sore anymore.”

“Well, I’m going to put on some coffee anyway. I think we deserve a break. And some girl talk. Don’t you?” Trudy cocked a hip and winked at her. She had that twinkle in her eyes that said she had some good gossip to share. It was pretty obvious that she wouldn’t be taking no for an answer.

“Okay. Sounds good.”
As she disappeared to the back, Stormy made herself comfy in one of the plush, orangey chairs, the ones she’d fallen in love with the first time she saw them.

Stormy rubbed the soft fabric of the chair and smiled to herself. She couldn’t imagine a better job...or a better boss. She loved it there. And she and Trudy had become fast friends.

After her injury she’d been scared to death that she’d lost the job before she even had it, but Trudy had been more than sympathetic: “Now don’t you worry about it one bit,” she’d said, “You just get yourself well. I’ve been without help for two months so another week or two won’t matter much.”

Stormy leaned into the velvety fabric of the chair and closed her eyes. She was so tired. Two weeks of Mama and Bill’s partying had been the stuff of nightmares. Stormy hadn’t managed a decent night’s sleep ever since Bill, Mama’s neanderthal, moved in. When the two of them weren’t arguing over who drank the last beer, or staying up all night playing horrible, screeching, heavy metal music, they were in Mama’s bedroom making noises that made her want to cut her ears off and soak them in disinfectant. Just the thought of it made her shudder.

“Somebody step on your grave?” Trudy shot her a look of curiosity while setting two lime-colored, steaming cups on the table.

Stormy waved dismissively. “No, I just got a little chill is all.” She didn’t want to delve into a conversation about how screwed up things were at home. It was too heavy of a topic, and she preferred to keep things light.

The two of them sat and watched the passersby through the big, plate-glass window. Trudy had the scoop on every one of them—where they worked, which one dated whom, who was getting divorced.... It really wasn’t that surprising that Trudy knew so much though. She exuded so much warmth, optimism, and compassion.... People were drawn to her like kids to an ice-cream truck.

“So,” Trudy reached for a cup. “How are things on the boyfriend front? Do you have a date for Valentine’s?”

Stormy cringed. “Ugh. That holiday is so overrated. And no, I don’t have a date. I probably wouldn’t go even if somebody did ask me,” she lied. Trudy’s big green eyes got even bigger. “Oh, you must be kidding. I bet you have guys lined up for a mile to take you out. Why would you want to just sit at home on the most romantic night of the year?”

Stormy ignored the cliché. “It’s just not my thing...romance all of that.” She made a stinky face to punctuate her statement. “It’s a holiday for suckers. I prefer to live in the real world.”
The truth was, she didn’t want to date any of the boys her own age. Sure, she’d been asked out by a few people, including Nozz, but she had turned them all down. Most of the guys were too immature, not her type, too tall, too short…her bogus excuses were plentiful. If she was really being honest with herself, there was only one person that she’d be willing to give her heart to, and he was off limits.

Brylan Knight had gotten deep under her skin. She knew it was stupid. After all, she’d heard what he said to Lily and he’d made it plain that he had no intention of pursuing her. The situation was messed up beyond measure, but that didn’t make it any easier to let him go. For the past two weeks he’d been tormenting her thoughts, consuming them completely.

“Ask him out,” Trudy chirped, reading Stormy’s mind.
“What? Who?”
“Whoever’s got your heart all tied up in knots,” she said gently.
Instinctively, Stormy wanted to deny it, tell her that she had it all wrong. But there was no way to lie to Trudy. She’d see right through her.
“Okay, there is this guy. But he’s just not interested in me.” It was a half-truth.

Trudy had her elbow propped up on the arm of the chair and her chin rested in her hand. She tapped a freshly manicured nail against her bottom lip as if something was puzzling her. The shop had gone quiet, except for the tinny sound of the small FM radio playing country music from across the store. Stormy squirmed in her chair, wishing Trudy would change the subject.

After a couple of awkward moments, Trudy brought her hands down and placed both of them in her lap while a small smile tugged the corners of her mouth. “You like Brylan.”

Wow, she was spooky sometimes.

Stormy’s eyes widened, the confirmation written all over her face. The moment Trudy had mentioned his name, Stormy’s cheeks flushed and her breath caught in her throat. Trying to deny it would be futile. Not knowing how to respond, Stormy put her head in her hands and stared at the swirly pattern in the purple rug. She was suddenly regretting having told Trudy about her accident, and how Brylan had taken such good care of her during her injury. Come to think of it, she’d told Trudy everything that pertained to Brylan, including the night he’d invited her over to have pizza with River and Lily. Now she was wishing she hadn’t opened her big mouth quite so much.
A silent movie began playing in Stormy’s head of Brylan and River, stacking up wooden blocks as high as they would go, and then Brylan laughing like a madman when River knocked them down on purpose. And there was Lily. She had been so sweet and easy to talk to. For just one night, Stormy felt like she was part of a family.

“Yep. Makes perfect sense,” Trudy said, knocking her out of her trance. “He’s the only guy you’ve ever mentioned, besides Nozz. He rescued you when you were in trouble. Was nice to you. Was concerned about your well being. Cooked for you.”

She paused briefly, and then added, “Then throw in the fact that he’s hot enough to make butter melt…. Hell, you’d be crazy if you didn’t fall for him.”

Stormy’s eyebrows shot up in surprise. “You know him?”

“I’ve seen him around town. Seen women fanning themselves while they gushed about how good looking he is… He’s fresh meat. Everybody knows about the new bachelor in town.”

Stormy leaned back in the fuzzy chair, exasperated. She was an open book. And she hated it. “I can’t get him out of my head, Trudy. Is it possible that I misread things? Am I just some stupid girl that he took pity on?”

“Oh, Honey. I doubt that’s all he saw in you. You’re gorgeous, and smart, and you have a good sense of humor….,”

“I know he’s hung up on the whole teacher-student thing, but he knows I’m about to graduate. Is it really that big of a deal? He’s not much older than me….”

“I know, sweetie. Ordinarily it wouldn’t be such a big deal…the age difference…but around here….,”

Trudy let out a sigh and took a sip of her coffee. Stormy could see the wheels turning in her head. “It’s all coming together now.”

“What is?” Stormy’s eyebrows gathered in confusion.

“Well, did Brylan tell you anything about why he started teaching half-way through the school year?”

Stormy shook her head. She knew Brylan was new at the high school, but she’d never given it any real thought. She tugged the collar of her tee-shirt, nervously. Somehow the air in the shop felt heavy all of a sudden.

Trudy took a sip of her coffee and then set it back down. “There was this big scandal at the high school a few months back,” she began. “The head football coach… good looking guy, but dumb as a post… got caught romancing a couple of the students. They were young girls, fifteen and sixteen. Anyway, your principal, Arliss Flint, was quick to throw that
S.O.B right out on his ass when he found out about it. There were charges filed and parents threatening to sue…. It was a great big mess. And if I know Arliss, and I do know Arliss…”

Of course she did. Trudy knew everybody.

“…he put the fear of God into Brylan Knight and told him he’d better mind his p’s and q’s, or else.” She sliced a hand across her throat for emphasis.

Stormy sat stunned while the information rolled around in her head. She didn’t blink. She didn’t move. She just kept hearing the words “charges filed” and “sue.” No wonder Brylan was conflicted. Trudy’s revelation cemented what Stormy had been sensing all along. She and Brylan liked each other, but there wasn’t a damned thing they could do about it.

The cowbell on the door clanked to announce the arrival of another customer. “I’ll get it,” Trudy said softly. She stood up to go greet the group of giggly girls that walked in and gave Stormy’s shoulder a light squeeze as she passed by. “I’ll give you a minute or two to wrap your mind around things.”

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Stormy took her time driving home. She wasn’t in any hurry to deal with Mama and Bill’s shenanigans. Plus, she needed time to clear her head. She needed to evict all thoughts of Brylan from it.

She turned off of the main drag and cruised through one of Yaupon’s more prestigious neighborhoods. A couple of kids rode down the sidewalk on their bikes. They smiled and waved without a care in the world. She wondered which one of the big, stately homes they lived in as she smiled back at them. All of the houses were surrounded by large lots of perfectly manicured lawn, each one impressive in its own right. The modern houses with their whitewashed stone and massive expanses of glass were nice, but the older, historic homes were absolutely breathtaking. Large, wrap-around porches with matching balconies, colorful shutters, and large, white columns flanking grand entryways….

A middle-aged couple caught her attention as they strolled down the sidewalk hand in hand. She smiled as the man bent down and whispered something in the woman’s ear, making them both laugh, and then he wrapped an arm around her lovingly.

Stormy wanted that.

Before Brylan, she’d convinced herself that she didn’t need any of that. Told herself she was better off without it. But then he’d stepped into
the picture and turned her whole world on its head. *Damn him and his generosity... and his charm...and his good looks.* Confusion was having its way with her mind. Things would have been so much easier if she and Brylan had never met. She’d been fine before. Now her emotions were a mess.

Maybe she should move to Alaska and become a hermit like those guys on TV. No human contact. No expectations. Just her and a few bears. And mountain lions. And lots and lots of snow.

No. Nix that idea. She liked indoor plumbing. And being at the top of the food chain.

She rolled down her window for some much needed fresh air. Her mood was dark and she knew it was clouding her thinking. The pity party she was throwing herself wasn’t doing her any good. She reminded herself that she was young and had the world at her feet if she wanted it. It was something that Jimmy, her ex-stepfather, used to drill into her—building her up when Mama tried to tear her down. He could always make her feel better, and she wished he were there with her now.

Thinking about Jimmy brought some clarity to her mind. She didn’t need Brylan. She just needed to focus on the future. Things would get better with time. They just had to.

When she rolled up in the driveway, after wrapping up her little pep talk with herself, she was breathing a little easier. Bill’s jeep was absent, so maybe she’d have the house to herself for a change. She desperately needed the day to end on an even note.

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The empty Jim Beam bottle stared at her mockingly. It was the first thing she saw when she’d opened the door. Mama and hard liquor were a bad combination. Stormy surveyed the mess in the living room and spotted a cigarette still smoldering in the ashtray. *She’s home!* Stormy needed to get out of there. Go anywhere. And not come back until it was safe. She turned around and headed back toward the door with her heart hammering in her chest. Her hand was on the doorknob when she heard her mother’s raspy voice.

“How just where in the shit do you think you’re going?” Marni hissed.

Too late.

Stormy squeezed her eyes shut. She needed a second to compose herself before turning around to face the monster in the living room. “I uh...forgot to lock my truck doors,” she lied.
Mama scoffed at her. “Pfft. What? You think somebody’s gonna steal that rusty piece of crap?”

It was pretty bold coming from someone whose car stayed broken down more than it ran, but Stormy kept the thought to herself, knowing full well that it was not the time to engage in an argument.

Marni stumbled around the living room, and for a second, Stormy thought she was going to fall, but she managed to steady herself by grabbing the back of the recliner.

“Mama. Maybe you should go to bed.” It was the best thing Stormy could hope for at that moment.

She ignored her while she fumbled her pack of cigarettes out of her jeans pocket and clumsily took one out of the pack. She was even more out of it than usual, and Stormy wondered if there was more than booze in her system. Then she watched as Marni stuck the wrong end of the cigarette in her mouth and lit the filter on fire.

Stormy stood there and waited for her mother to notice the small flame that burned mere inches from her fingers, but she never did. Stormy bravely walked over and took it from her and snuffed it out in the ashtray before the woman burned the whole place to the ground.

“What the hell are you doing?” she slurred.

Stormy fibbed again, “I’m just putting it out for you…. You finished it already.”

“Oh.”

Marni stood there staring at the ashtray, looking lost. Empty.

Stormy stared at her mother’s features. Her face was gaunt and her eyes were bloodshot. The black tank top she was wearing did nothing to conceal her almost skeletal frame.

What had Bill gotten her mother into?

Bill. It suddenly struck her that he wasn’t there. Not that she cared in the least about the man’s whereabouts. He could drop off the face of the earth for all she cared. But she needed to know if he’d be showing up anytime soon. “Mama, where’s Bill?”

Marni shook another cigarette loose from the pack and lit it…the right way. “You mean that sorry no-good piece of shit? He’s gone.” Her face contorted and tears started pooling in her eyes.

“Is he coming back? I see his stuff is still here.” She didn’t want to push the subject, but it was important information. For her peace of mind.

Marni recoiled as if something stung her. “Hell no, he’s not coming back! And I hope his ass rots in jail!”
Uh, oh. That couldn’t be good. Stormy was afraid to ask the next question, but her curiosity was getting the best of her. “What did he do?”

Marni let out a sardonic snort. “More like who did he do? Got caught feeling up a sixteen year-old girl over at the city park.”

Her admission made Stormy’s blood run cold. All those creepy, lust-filled stares flooded her memory. And then another thought hit her.

The park.

How many times had she gone there since he’d moved in? She couldn’t help but wonder if he’d ever followed her there…watched her. A shiver ran up her spine. She had the sudden urge to take a shower and wash away the filthiness of it all.

Without another word, Marni stumbled across the room and headed down the hallway. The best possible scenario would be for Mama to pass out in her bed. If that happened, then Stormy could bank on a few hours of sleep. But the odds were stacked against her. Marni was in the bathroom giving up the contents of her stomach. It was going to be a long night.

Part of Stormy wanted to run. She probably should have gotten in her truck and left for good. Left her mama to wallow in her own misery. But she couldn’t. She had enough sense to know that her mother wasn’t born that way. Something haunted Marni Black. Something that she couldn’t escape. And, rational or not, Stormy’s heart ached for her. She was the only person on the whole planet that gave a damn about the woman.

Besides, where would she go if she left? She barely had two nickels to rub together. Well, she had a little bit saved, but she wasn’t naïve enough to think that a few hundred bucks would be enough to survive on her own. She was still months away from having enough to make her get away. She needed more time, because she’s be damned if she ever ended up on the streets. She’d seen what that looked like…and she swore she’d never end up like that.

The first time Stormy saw homelessness was when Mama took a wrong turn during one of their moves. They’d ended up in the downtown area of some city…she couldn’t recall which. She was just a kid at the time, but she would never forget the brown lumpy forms huddled around trash cans and lying on the sidewalk. There was one boy, around sixteen or so, that would haunt her memories forever. He was skinny and dirty, and there was a desperation in his face like she’d never seen before. He’d tapped on the window of their car while they were at a stop light and nearly scared her to death.

“Do you think you could spare some change for—”
“No! Get on out of here!” Mama had shooed him away like a stray dog. And the look in his eyes…. Stormy had been mad at Mama for the whole rest of the trip. How could she have been so cruel?

The flush of the toilet brought her back into the present. Hopefully that was the last of the vomiting. She helped her mama up from the floor, slipped her arm around her neck for support, and dragged her to the bedroom, just as she’d done a hundred times before. Once she’d slipped her jeans off of her, she tucked her in and began bathing her face with a damp cloth.


_Ewe._ Stormy hated the sappy Mama. It didn’t fit her normally brusque personality. And there was something especially creepy about her tone this time that made the hair stand up on Stormy’s neck.

“I used to be pretty too,” Marni rasped.

“I know, Mama.” It was a true statement. She’d seen pictures of her mother when she was younger. Blonde and curvy. Big blue eyes. She was a knockout…before the booze and the drugs and the hard living.

“My daddy used to think I was pretty too. I was the apple of his eye.”

Stormy paused. It was such an odd thing to say. Her mother rarely talked about either of Stormy’s grandparents, especially her grandfather, and when she did, she didn’t paint a very pretty picture. Stormy had always just assumed that her mama hated the guy. She dismissed it and continued wiping her mama’s face and hair.

“Daddy’s friends…they all thought I was pretty too.”

_Please just go to sleep, Mama._ There was something about her manner and the way that she was looking at her that made her want to bolt from the room.

“There was this one friend of Daddy’s…His name was Ted. He really, really liked me. Said I was the prettiest thing he ever saw. Said I was special….”

The temperature in the room dropped ten degrees. Stormy shivered. Her arms were covered in gooseflesh and a knot formed in her stomach. She didn’t like where the conversation was headed. All of her instincts were screaming at her to leave but she ignored them. She couldn’t miss a chance to put the pieces of the puzzle together. Figure out what it was that fueled the torment that resided inside of her mother.

But nothing could prepare her for what was about to come. “It didn’t matter that I was sixteen. Didn’t matter that he had a wife….” She
hesitated briefly and a tear trailed down her face. “And it didn’t matter… that I said no.”

The air was trapped in Stormy’s lungs and her eyes were stinging with tears. Her brain didn’t want to acknowledge what she’d heard. It was too ugly. Too atrocious. How was she supposed to respond to that?

She reached out to wipe away the tear on Marni’s face, but recoiled when Marni’s gaze sharply snapped up to meet hers.

“You have his eyes.”

Shaking, Stormy stood up and backed away from the bed, feeling as though she’d been drenched in icy cold water. Her heart seized in her chest and she couldn’t move. No, no, no. This isn’t happening. She could feel her mama’s eyes burning through her. It was a hatred-filled glare that set off alarm bells inside her skull. She wanted to look away. She wanted to run…but she was frozen. She couldn’t speak. Couldn’t move. She just sat there with her mouth gaping open, even though the little voice in the back of her mind was screaming at her: RUN!

Marni propped herself up on one elbow, still fixing Stormy with that evil stare. Stormy took three tentative steps backward until her back brushed up against the wall.

“Day in, day out… I have to look at you… be reminded of what he did to me. What he took from me…. It’s just too much for one person to take. I can’t even look at you without seeing him,” Marni seethed through fresh tears. “Just get out. I can’t stand it anymore. Get out of here!”

Stormy was hit by a second wave of shock. Her mind was swimming and the thoughts just wouldn’t stay still long enough to make sense out of what was happening.

“Didn’t you hear me? I said GET OUT!”

Her shrill scream jolted her senses awake. She ran to her bedroom, grabbed her purse, and bolted out of the house, leaving the front door wide open.

With a shaky hand, she fumbled the key into the ignition and slammed the shifter into reverse. She tore out of the driveway in a cloud of dust, not having a clue where she was going. And she didn’t care.
Chapter Nine

Brylan handed Nozz a much deserved bottle of soda and wiped the sweat from his neck with his bandana. “Place is lookin’ good.”

He and Nozz had been working steadily on the garage apartment and the kid had turned out to be quite the carpenter. Not to mention good company. The two of them had spent almost as much time laughing as they had working.

They’d patched drywall, laid new flooring, and had given the place a new coat of paint. The fixtures in the bathroom and the small kitchenette were in pretty good shape, which was a blessing, because plumbing was not Brylan’s area of expertise. All that was lacking was a little trim here and there, and the place would be good to go.

Nozz swallowed a big gulp of his Mountain Dew. “Yeah, you ought to be able to put some tenants in here pretty soon.”

“That’s the plan.” Brylan stretched some of the soreness out of his back and then started gathering up tools and putting them in the toolbox.

“Hey, did you hear that?” Nozz asked.

Brylan paused and listened. “Sounds like someone pounding on my front door. It’s probably Pam.”

“Oh, yeah? I didn’t know she was coming over today.”

“Neither did I,” he groaned.

He met Pamela a couple of weeks ago at a faculty luncheon. Principal Flint introduced her as his niece and asked if Brylan would mind showing her around since she was new in town. It was an odd request, especially since he was fairly new to Yaupon himself. He had a sneaking suspicion that the old guy—or his wife, rather—was making an attempt at playing matchmaker.

His friend Cooper was less than thrilled about the idea. He had already made his feelings clear about her that day in the teacher’s lounge, and he never missed an opportunity to rattle Brylan’s cage with comments like, “You get that stick out of her ass yet?” But, despite Coop’s opinion on the matter, Brylan thought she was a nice girl and didn’t see the harm
in showing her around town and taking her for coffee. If nothing else, it might score him a few points with his boss. And if he was really being honest with himself, he needed the distraction.

Brylan and Nozz headed out to the landing, expecting to see Pam’s shiny new Prius, but instead, there was a familiar looking Ford truck sitting in his driveway.

It was her.

Brylan’s heart thumped wildly as he took the stairs two at a time. His mind was reeling as he crossed the yard toward the girl he’d been working his ass off to forget. He hadn’t heard a peep from her since the night she’d snuck out of his house. Why in the hell was she sitting on his curb?

As he got closer he could see that her head was in her hands and her shoulders were shaking. She looked up when she heard the grass crunch under his boots. On her face was a mixture of anguish and relief. Her eyes were rimmed with red and brimming with tears.

“Stormy?”

“Hey,” she sniffed. “I thought you weren’t here. I knocked on the door but no one answered….”

She started to cry again and it wrecked his insides. He’d seen her take a nasty fall that would have brought grown men to tears, and yet she hadn’t shed a single one. She was tough as nails, so whatever was going on with her had to be bad. Really bad.

Brylan reached down to gently pull her up from the curb and pulled her into his chest. “Shhh…It’s going to be alright,” he cooed with his nose buried in her hair. “Whatever it is…we’ll fix it.” The scent of lavender and vanilla was intoxicating and he was having a hard time ignoring the fact that her chest was pressed against his. The only thing separating them was a few layers of fabric. He mentally scolded himself for noticing.

“No,” Stormy sniffled through the tears, “Nobody can fix it. It will never be alright…..” Her words were cut off by the sobs that engulfed her once more. Brylan felt helpless. He wanted to take away whatever was causing her so much pain, but he was completely bewildered as to what to do. So he just let her cry…for as long as she needed to.

Eventually, the blubbering dwindled down to an intermittent sniff. “Stormy? Tell me what happened, sweetheart,” he said softly.

She stepped back and wiped her eyes with the collar of her shirt. “I’m sorry. I just didn’t know where else to go. I tried my boss’ house first, but I forgot that she’s out of town at her cousin’s bridal shower. I don’t know anybody else in town.”
“It’s not a problem. I’m just glad we heard you knocking over all the noise we were making.”

She scrunched her face up in confusion. “We?”

Nozz stepped out of the shadows. Brylan had forgotten he was there.

“Hey, Stormy.”

Brylan could see the embarrassment on her face and saw the way her body stiffened when she saw him. “Hey. What are you doing here, Nozz?”

“I’ve been helping Coach out. We’re fixing up his garage apartment.”

He nodded toward the garage.

“Oh.”

An awkward silence fell over the three of them. Stormy stared at the ground while Nozz kicked at a chipped piece of concrete on the curb.

Brylan ran a hand through his hair while he thought of something to tamp down the weird vibe between them. He was hoping Nozz would head home so that he could get to the bottom of Stormy’s problem, but he hated to ask the guy to leave after he’d worked his ass off all day. He looked at his watch. It was seven-thirty. Nozz usually didn’t stick around past eight anyway, so he invited the both of them inside.

On the walk up to the house Brylan heard Stormy’s stomach growl.

“When’s the last time you’ve eaten?”

She shrugged. “I dunno. Breakfast, I think.”

“Well…how ‘bout I stir up something for all of us to—?”

“No!” They said in unison.

What the hell?

Stormy cracked a tiny smile and shot a knowing look at Nozz, who had no qualms about sharing his opinion, “Dude. I’ve had your food before, remember?”

The comment stung, but Brylan couldn’t argue with him. He had never been much of a cook…but at least he tried. “Fine, hurt my feelings why don’t ya,” he teased. Their silly banter earned a giggle from Stormy, making the air feel lighter all of a sudden. Brylan would endure a thousand of Nozz’s insults just to hear that sound.

“I’ll order some pizzas then. I wouldn’t want to cause insult to your refined palate or anything,” he told Nozz sarcastically.

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Stormy was relieved when Nozz finished off his fourth slice of pizza and headed home. He was a sweet guy, but it was sheer willpower that held her together, and she didn’t want to break down in front of him. For
the last half hour she’d been forcing back a massive wall of emotions that threatened to spill over at any moment. The effort was draining.

Now that Nozz was gone she was on to the next hurdle—trying to explain to Brylan why he’d found a basket case in his driveway.

Brylan was putting on a pot of coffee while she paced the living room floor, anticipating all the questions that she knew he had. She didn’t want to come here. Her feelings about Brylan were so mixed up...and she really didn’t know where things stood between them. But after driving around town aimlessly for over an hour, she simply didn’t know where else to turn. She’d considered sleeping in her truck, but then she remembered the news about Bill and wondered how many more creeps were out there just like him. No place felt safe.

*If only Trudy had been home*....

Brylan entered the living room with two coffees, handing one to Stormy and then taking a seat on the recliner. She expected him to start peppering her with questions—which he had every right to do considering the way she’d shown up out of the blue—but instead, he sat quietly and sipped his coffee.

Stormy stared into her cup. She owed him an explanation but she didn’t know how to approach it. Should she try to sugar coat it and spare him the ghastly details? Or would brutal honesty be the way to go?

She glanced up at Brylan and he gave her an easy smile. His eyes were full of tenderness. She saw the same compassion that he’d shown her twice before. Once, right after she sprained her ankle, and again on that cold, lonely day in the park.

Brylan was a good man. She owed him the truth. It was time to rip off the Band-Aid.

“I’m sorry for showing up like I did. I’m sure the last thing you wanted to do this evening was deal with a blubbering pile of mush in your driveway.”

“Stormy, you don’t have to be sorry. It’s what friends do. I’m glad I can be here for you.”

So he considered her a friend. The bittersweet endearment caused a tiny bubble of disappointment to rise up. She pushed the feeling back down and reminded herself that friendship was the best that she could hope for under the circumstances.

“I’m glad too.” She gave a small smile. “I drove around and around trying to figure out what to do…and somehow I ended up here. I just…my mama threw me out of the house. I had no place else to go.” She hesitated,
taking a sip of coffee to offset the anxiety that threatened to resurface. “My mother is an alcoholic.”

Stormy let the words linger in the air. It was the first time she’d ever spoken them out loud. It was strange, almost as if someone else had said them. She stole a glance at Brylan, expecting a change in his expression, but he was stone still. There was no judgment in his eyes, only genuine interest in what she had to say, which gave her the courage to continue.

“Today, when I got home, she was more messed up than I’ve ever see her…stumbling around and slurring her words. Her eyes were all wrong, and there was something about her voice…it just wasn’t right. I knew something was off from the moment I walked in the house. I knew it was going to be bad when I saw the empty whiskey bottle, but I just never dreamed—”

The flood gates opened once again, and Brylan was on the couch beside her in a blink, putting his arm around her and pulling her into the warmth of his body. But he still didn’t say a word.

Stormy willed herself to suck it up and finish her story. She was tired of crying, and it was starting to piss her off. She wiped her face with her hands and exhaled a shaky breath. The next part was going to be tough as hell.

“Tonight I found out that my mother was….” She couldn’t bring herself to say the word. “A man forced himself on her when she was only sixteen.” She focused on her knuckles that had turned white from wringing her hands. “Brylan, she got pregnant. I’m the offspring of a monster. I’m an abomination.” She heard a faint gasp come from Brylan as he pulled her closer, and buried his face in her hair. Her own words echoed inside her head until she couldn’t hold back the next wave of sobs that hit.

Brylan held her and stroked her hair until the violent shaking subsided. “Stormy. Look at me.” He leaned away from her just enough to lightly grab her chin and tilt her face to meet his. His eyes were shining with unshed tears.

“Stormy, you are anything but an abomination. I don’t give a damn how you came to be or who your father was. You are here because you’re supposed to be. And I can’t even imagine what your mom had to go through.” A muscle twitched in Brylan’s jaw. Anger. He squeezed his eyes shut, as if he was forcing the emotion back down. “Listen, sometimes bad things happen. We may not be able to comprehend all of the how’s and why’s…. All I know for sure is that the world is a better place because you’re in it. Do you understand?”
His gaze was so intense that she felt paralyzed, but she still managed a small nod. Brylan wrapped her up in a tight hug and gently rocked her back and forth. “It’s all going to work out. Your mom will come around.”

Stormy’s face was pressed into his chest and her words were muffled, “I don’t know, Brylan. You didn’t see the way she looked at me. She hates me. She blames me for ruining her life.”

Her scalp warmed as Brylan sighed into her hair. “I’m sure it’s not you she hates, Stormy. Her anger is just…misdirected. Maybe she just needs some time.”

She hoped with all her might that his words were true, but she had her doubts. He hadn’t seen the contempt on her mother’s face, or heard the vile words that oozed out of her mouth. She focused her attention on the sensation on her back…the small circles Brylan was gently rubbing.

Stormy didn’t know how much time had passed while she stayed wrapped in Brylan’s little bubble of refuge, and she didn’t care. She could have stayed that way forever. There, with Brylan, with nothing but the ticking of the wall clock and the faint hum of the refrigerator to disturb them. It was just the two of them. No Mama. No Bill. No awful stories or twisted emotions. For those few minutes, it all just melted away. It felt good to just…be.

And then something in the air suddenly shifted. Brylan released his hold on her and leaned back against the couch with a long sigh. Stormy worked hard to hide her disappointment. She didn’t want to be thrown back into her cold reality just yet.

“The garage apartment is almost finished. How about you stay up there for a while? For as long as you need to. Give yourself some time to think and figure things out.”

The offer stunned her. It was a proposition that was fraught with peril, posing a danger to his career. As well as her heart. She rolled it over in her head, trying to come up with a solution that was more…safe, but she was coming up empty. And going back home simply wasn’t an option.

“Are you sure, Brylan? I don’t want to cause you any problems.”

“It’s absolutely fine. I mean it.”

“Well, I can’t afford to pay you anything right now, but...”

He cut her off. “Stormy. Please. I don’t expect anything. I just want you to be safe. Hell, it’s just as much for me as it is for you. I couldn’t rest at night if I didn’t know you were okay.”

There it was again. That sincere concern. Hesitantly, she nodded her agreement to stay. She dismissed the confusing thoughts that were trying to make their way to the surface. They were just friends. He told her so.
So why did it feel like more than that?
Now that the adrenaline high had worn off, the exhaustion—physical, mental, emotional—was starting to weigh her down. It had been the day from hell and she was past ready for it to be over. She would think about tomorrow when tomorrow came.
She followed Brylan to the door, admiring the way his back muscles moved underneath his white tee-shirt, and then another thought hit her. She didn’t have a single material possession to her name other than the clothes on her back.
“Uh, Brylan? I hate to ask you for anything else. You’ve been so great to me already…”
“Whatever you need, Stormy. Name it.”
“Can I use your washing machine?”
Chapter Ten

Bryan flopped down on the couch and ran his hands through his hair. For two days he’d been losing his mind with worry, pacing a hole in the carpet of his living room, and agonizing over whether or not to go to the garage apartment and knock on the door. So many times he’d been tempted, but he’d talked himself out of it. Stormy needed time and space to deal with her demons. As bad as he hated it, he knew it was something she had to do on her own. Experience had taught him that…that when the world smacked you right in the face and threatened to drag you down into the bowels of hell, the only thing to do was to fight, scratch, and claw your way out. No amount of consoling, no amount of talking would do it. And his heart bled for her.

But on the third day, having not seen so much as a peep out of her, his worry won out over rationale. He needed to see if she was okay.

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When Stormy woke up on Saturday morning her body still ached, her mouth was sticky, and her eyes were gritty. Her first thought was to call in sick, again, and crawl back under the covers with her angst. But then she remembered the pact she’d made with herself before she’d gone to sleep the night before. No more wallowing. But depression was a sly son-of-a-bitch, and she’d almost let it worm its way in again. She needed to be vigilant, and continuing to lie around in bed was only inviting trouble.

For two days she’d been riding the proverbial rollercoaster of emotions. Stormy wasn’t sure what all the different stages of grief were, but she was sure she must have experienced most of them. At first, she had taken a head-long dive into denial. Her mother was just drunk and made the whole thing up, and none of that stuff had really happened. Maybe she just wanted Stormy out of the house and used that story as an excuse to get rid of her.

But then she remembered the look in Mama’s eyes…stricken, odious, and indignant. The truth was the truth and there was no way around it. Her
mother had suffered an assault, Stormy was the result, and her mother hated her for being a constant reminder.

And then the denial morphed into anger. It came crashing down on her in violent waves and filled her with questions that had no answers. What kind of vile creature could hurt a young girl the way Ted hurt Mama? Why had God allowed it to happen? Why did Mama blame her for something she had no control over? And if Mama hated her so much, why had she bothered to keep her?

The notion picked at the edges of her brain until a revelation took hold, one that became almost tangible. Mama had kept her. She didn’t have to…but she did. She hadn’t given her away. Hadn’t done away with her. She’d had options, and yet she’d chosen to keep Stormy. A sliver of hope shined in the darkness. It was something. Something she could hold on to. So, she tucked it away in her mind for later.

And then, just when she’d found something to latch on to, the dark pit of depression threatened to suck her in again, whispering in her ear, pointing out all the things that were wrong in her life. She was alone, without much money, living in the apartment of a man that she adored, but couldn’t have, and she didn’t have a clue what her future held. The weight of it all pressed down her, taunting her like a bully on the playground. It was an endless circle of doubt, resentment, and fear that snaked its way over, around and through until she just couldn’t take it anymore.

Enough!

She was done with the tears. Done with torturing herself. She knew that if she didn’t climb out of the hole, then she might just get buried alive. Like her mama had.

And she’d be damned if she’d let that shit happen.

Grudgingly, she dragged herself out of bed and over to the refrigerator where she remembered seeing a couple of water bottles. She was chugging the water as if it were the last bottle on earth, not caring about the little streams that dribbled down her chin, when she heard a rap on the door.

Her heart started thundering in her chest and she froze.

Oh no! *She found me.*

“Stormy? You up?” Brylan called from the other side of the wooden door.

*Whew. Thank you, God.* “I’ll be right there.”

She rushed to the bathroom to splash some water on her face, silently wishing she had a toothbrush. On the way to the door she made a mental
note to pick up a couple of much needed toiletry items on the way home from Trudy’s.

“Good morning,” she opened the door to reveal a very spry-looking Brylan. How did he manage to look so good so early in the morning?

“G’mornin,’ sleepyhead,” he responded with a grin. Then he held out a grease-stained paper bag and a brown paper cup. “Breakfast.”

“Awe. That was sweet of you. You really didn’t need to do that.” She peeked in the bag curiously.

“I didn’t know what you liked so I got you a ham and cheese croissant and donuts.”

Stormy smiled. “Well, I plan to eat both, so don’t judge,” she said as she fished a syrupy glazed donut out of the bag. She was starving, having survived on peanut butter crackers for two days. She stuffed the donut in her mouth while her eyes roamed over Brylan greedily. The food looked good, but not nearly as good as Brylan did. He was casually leaning against the doorframe with his arms crossed over his broad chest and the left side of his mouth was turned up in a smirk, revealing the little hollow in his cheek that she loved so much. He was purely masculine in his chambray button down work shirt, which had been left open to reveal a snug white tee-shirt underneath. It was tucked into a pair of faded, worn out jeans that had holes worn in the knees and hung loosely on his narrow hips.

Right now the only thing Stormy wanted for breakfast was him.

“I probably should have loaned you my bathrobe,” he said, still grinning.

“Huh,” she said through a mouthful of donut. Then realization hit her. The thin tee-shirt that she borrowed from Brylan left little to the imagination. Her cheeks flamed with mortification as she snatched a blanket from the futon and wrapped herself in it. “Sorry. I was still half asleep and I wasn’t expecting anybody.”

Brylan chuckled. “Hey. I’m not complaining.”

She gave him a little punch in the shoulder, but she couldn’t keep the smile off her face. “Perv!”

“Is that the best you’ve got? We’re gonna have to work on that right hook,” he laughed some more.

“Trust me, you don’t want to find out,” she mock threatened. Now if you don’t mind, I have to get ready for work.”

“Actually,” his voice took on a more serious tone, “I wanted to ask you if it was okay if Nozz and I come inside and finish up some things while you’re out.”
“Oh. Yeah, sure. It’s your place after all. You don’t need my permission.”

“Uh, actually, for now it’s your place and I wouldn’t feel comfortable barging in.”

A light breeze could have knocked her over. Brylan’s thoughtfulness never ceased to amaze her.

“Oh, by the way, I was also wondering if you might be up for a fishing trip next Sunday with me, my dad, and Nozz. I thought we could all use some down time…if you’re up to it, that is.”

She considered the idea for a moment. Maybe it would be good to get away from everything for a little while. Put some distance between her and Mama…and the horrors of that dreadful night. “I haven’t been fishing in years. That sounds perfect, actually. Trudy’s is closed on Sundays and I don’t have anything else to do.”

Something resembling relief crossed Brylan’s face and his eyes brightened. “Well alright then. I’ll let Nozz know.” His work boots clomped down the stairs. When he got to the bottom he looked up and gave her a little wave. “See you later.”

“Bye.”

Stormy pushed the door closed and leaned her back against it.

He had flirted with her. Right? And his invitation to take her on a fishing trip with the guys…what was that all about? Once again, her mind was a tangled mess. Had she misconstrued things yet again? Trudy’s words played in her head, _he’d better watch his p’s and q’s…or else._

There’s no way Brylan would throw away his career and his reputation for the sake of some girl he hardly knew. That would be stupid. He was being nice. Period. She reminded herself that that’s the kind of person he was—the cowboy in the white hat, the knight in shining armor.

She just wished someone would explain it to her heart.

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Trudy eyed Stormy suspiciously. “Aren’t those the same clothes you were wearing Wednesday?”

Stormy grimaced. “Unfortunately, yes. I hoped you wouldn’t notice.”

“I notice everything, girlfriend. Now, are you going to tell me what happened or are you going to keep me guessing for the rest of the day?”

Judging by the way Trudy was tapping the glass display case with her fingernails, and the way she was staring at her with an eyebrow raised, there was no way of getting around it. It was the moment she’d been dreading all day. Trudy was the salt of the earth and had a heart as big as
Texas, but she was also her boss. And Stormy really didn’t want to revisit that whole nasty scene again. So far, she’d been doing a pretty fair job of keeping herself busy so she wouldn’t have time to think about it.

“It’s a long story. Maybe we should wait until later…when the store closes.”

Trudy sashayed over to the door and flipped the sign over to the side that said closed. “Done. I’ll make the coffee. You sit.” She pointed to the orange chairs. Stormy filled her cheeks with air and blew it out slowly as she made her way across the store. She slipped off her shoes and tucked her feet up under her while she waited for Trudy. It didn’t take long for her eyelids to become heavy. If Trudy didn’t hurry, she might fall fast asleep right there in the store.

She watched as a lady walked up to the door, scrunched her face in confusion, and then turned around. Stormy felt a little bad for her. Technically, the store should have been open for another fifteen minutes. Stormy’s mess had officially carried over to Trudy’s store, and she may have missed a sale because of it. She groaned internally. How had things gotten so screwed up? She leaned into the softness of the chair and closed her eyes. She was just drifting off when she felt Trudy’s warm fingers brush across her cheek and tuck a strand of hair behind her ear. “You look like you’ve been through the ringer, baby girl.”

Stormy sat up straight and reached up for the mug of coffee being extended to her. “You could say that.”

Trudy took the seat adjacent to hers and sipped on her coffee while Stormy formed a mental outline of what to say. The pain on her face couldn’t be missed.

“Sweetie, it’s okay if you really don’t want to go into it. I just thought it might help to get whatever it is off your chest.” Her eyes were sincere. Trudy’s curiosity was coming from a place of genuine concern. She had that motherly quality that her own mother had always lacked. Stormy had often wondered why Trudy didn’t have any kids of her own. She would have made a great mom.

“It’s been a rough couple of days,” she began. And then she told Trudy every grim detail…from the empty whiskey bottle to Brylan’s offer to let her stay in his garage apartment. It was the first time she’d ever seen Trudy speechless, and it was making her nervous.

An eternity passed before Trudy finally spoke. “I’m sorry, honey. I’m just trying to process everything.”

“It’s okay, Trudy. It’s a lot to take in, I’m sure.”

“You poor, poor baby. It’s just not fair for your mama to treat you that way…no matter what. A child is….“ She took a steadying breath, and
her eyes lit with anger. “You are a blessing, Stormy Black! Do you hear me? A blessing! And don’t you ever think otherwise.” She was shaking her finger at Stormy and the words were tipped with fury. Stormy recoiled a little bit from the outburst. The words were harsh, but they were coming from a place of love. Stormy knew the anger was directed at her mother, not her.

A lone tear spilled over the rim of Trudy’s bottom lid and slid down her face. Stormy startled when Trudy stood up and pulled her into a hug so tight that she gasped for air. Reflexively, she wanted to push her off, but the death grip told her that something else was going on. Something in Stormy’s story had touched something inside Trudy. It had stirred up something in her. Something hidden. Something dark. As much as Trudy was comforting her, Stormy felt that she was somehow comforting Trudy too. So, she let Trudy cling to her…for as long as they both needed it.

When Trudy finally did release her from the bear hug, she looked flustered. “Oh, my. I bet I’m a complete mess,” she said while she wiping at her eyes with her fingers. Then she tugged her pink peasant blouse back into place and fiddled with the big purple flower on her headband.

“Nope. Still pretty as ever,” Stormy reassured her.

“Now Stormy, I’m the one that’s supposed to be making you feel better. Not the other way around,” she playfully scolded. “Now, about your things…. I have a whole box of clothes from twenty pounds ago that I think would fit you just fine. It’s just sitting in my closet collecting dust. We’ll head over to my house later so that I can give them to you.”

“Really?” Stormy’s face lit up with hope. “That would be great, Trudy. Thank you.” She gave Trudy’s outfit a once-over and a sliver of worry washed over her. She was in no position to be picky…but she wondered just what kind of stuff Trudy planned to dress her in.

“Don’t worry, hon. I wasn’t always this outlandish,” she said with a wink.

Okay...that was freaky.

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Trudy’s house was exactly the way Stormy had pictured. It was colorful, just like the shop, with mismatched furniture and trinkets everywhere, and the walls were covered in an eclectic mix of pop art and old tapestries. It matched Trudy’s personality perfectly.

“I’m going to go dig that box out of my closet. I’ll be right back. Feel free to watch TV or get a drink out of the fridge if you want.”

“Do you need any help?”
“No, baby. I’ve got it,” she gave a dismissive wave, “Just make yourself at home.”

Still feeling a little dehydrated, Stormy headed to the kitchen to take her up on the drink offer. The contents of the refrigerator had her gawking in awe. Her food choices were just as eccentric as Trudy was. There were tons of brightly colored vegetables, some of which she’d only seen on cooking shows, a dish of left-over sushi, diet Pepsi, regular Coke, fat-free mayonnaise and salad dressings, a tub of real butter, and what looked to be a homemade apple pie. She let out a little chuckle while she swiped a can of Coke and then headed back to the living room.

Though not exactly her taste, Trudy’s place was warm. Inviting. Lived in. And just like the store, it was an amusement park for the eyes. There were shelves and shelves of things Stormy would have deemed useless, and she couldn’t imagine having to dust that place. She idly wondered where Trudy found the time to do it. She never could understand the need for people to clutter up a perfectly good house with things that served no real purpose. Maybe it was just her obsessive need to keep things nice and orderly that made her that way. Or, maybe it was the fact that she and Mama had never owned anything worthy of displaying.

She was pondering the possible reasons for her aversion when something else caught her eye. Nestled on a bookshelf, next to a basket of knitting, was a King James Bible.

It reminded her of Ms. Hattie.

Ms. Hattie had been a sweet old lady that had lived next door when Stormy was twelve. When Mama couldn’t pay the rent and the landlord threw them out, Ms. Hattie had taken pity on them and invited them into her home. Mama had spent her days locked in the tiny back bedroom of Ms. Hattie’s house, never paying the old lady much mind, but Stormy couldn’t get enough of her...or her peach cobbler.

Ms. Hattie was one of those grandmotherly types that called everybody “sugar” or “baby” in that sweet southern lilt she had. She always wore floral print dresses and kept her gray hair twisted up so tight that it made Stormy’s head hurt just to look at it. And in the depths of her dark crinkly eyes was kindness and wisdom. Wisdom that she imparted to anyone who would listen, and Stormy soaked it up like a sponge.

She remembered the small plastic replica of The Ten Commandments that sat on Ms. Hattie’s coffee table, right next to her worn, leather-bound Bible. Stormy had read them many times, and it all sounded pretty good to her. Love God. Love your neighbor. It was the one about honoring your mother and father that she always struggled with. Young Stormy had always wondered how she was supposed to honor a mother that hardly
acknowledged her existence and a father that she’d never met. Many times she’d wanted to approach Ms. Hattie about the subject but she’d been too bashful about it. And then when Ms. Hattie fell and broke her hip, she’d never gotten the chance. Ms. Hattie’s daughter took her away to live with her in Arkansas...and Stormy and her mama ended up in the women’s shelter.

Trudy’s voice startled her back to the present, “Found it!” She lugged a huge cardboard box into the living room and set it on the blue and white striped sofa. “It was buried underneath a whole bunch of junk. Sorry it took so long.”

“Oh, it was no problem. I was just taking a look around. You’ve got a lot of stuff in here.”

“Yeah. I’m a little bit of a hoarder, I’ll admit. When I see something cute I just can’t help myself. See,” she picked up a ceramic green frog with a grimace on his face and a daisy covering his private parts, “I just couldn’t pass him up when I saw him.”

“Oh. He’s cute,” Stormy lied. She thought it was tacky, but she couldn’t hurt Trudy’s feelings when she’d gone out of her way to be so kind.

Relief washed over her when Trudy pulled the flaps of the box open and revealed modest looking jeans and an assortment of colorful tee-shirts. Some of it was a little outdated and a little loud for her taste, but she wasn’t about to complain. “This stuff is perfect, Trudy.”
Chapter Eleven

It was the perfect day for fishing. The air was crisp, but not cold, the sky was clear, and the traffic was surprisingly light. And Brylan was finally getting the hang of driving Stormy’s truck. In the forty-five minutes since they’d left his house, he’d only heard her suck air through her teeth once.

Brylan was glad for the chance to get Stormy and Nozz away from Yaupon for a bit. They both needed a distraction. Hell, he did too. His new job hadn’t been giving him the warm and fuzzy feeling that he’d hoped to have by now, and he was starting to second guess his career decisions.

As much as Brylan liked to give his dad a hard time about fishing, he’d grown a real appreciation for it over the years. There was something therapeutic about standing on the edge of the water with a fishing rod in his hand. There were no expectations, no responsibilities…. It was a good way to quiet the mind. He only hoped that Stormy and Nozz would find the same peace in it that he did.

Stormy was stuck in between Nozz and Brylan on the bench seat of the truck, and Brylan was having a real love-hate relationship with the gear-shift. The warped part of his brain got a cheap thrill each time his hand accidentally brushed the soft, creamy skin of Stormy’s leg. The logical part of his brain wanted to beat the shit out of the other part.

Another graze and he was dying on the inside. Stormy appeared to be unfazed by it, so he tried pretend he didn’t notice it either, even though it was torturing him.

“Now that I think about it, Stormy…I should have told you to wear jeans.”

She looked over at him with a puzzled look. “Why? It’s nice outside. You mean you don’t like the raggedy cut-offs that Trudy gave me?”

The problem was that he liked them a little too much. “I just thought…uh…that it might be better if your legs were protected. You know, in case there are any…uh…mosquitoes or anything.” He turned his blushing face toward the window and rolled his eyes. It was a lame justification and he knew it.
“But you’re wearing shorts,” she pointed out.

He hadn’t quite thought that one through. He was 0 for 2. Time to change the subject. “Everything good over there, Nozz?”

“Yeah. I’m cool.”

He’d been peculiarly quiet the entire drive and Brylan wondered if it was because of his close proximity to Stormy. He’d noticed Nozz steal a glance at Stormy’s legs more than a few times. Hell, what guy wouldn’t? And he’d already told Brylan that he had a thing for her, but there hadn’t been a single indication that she liked him back. She had him in the friend-zone, and Brylan wondered if Nozz was planning to step up his game. Considering the circumstances, Brylan should have been rooting for the guy. He was closer to her age, and he wouldn’t be risking his whole career to be with her.

Laughter was something that Stormy needed, and Nozz was good at providing it for her. In actuality, Nozz was a good match for her. He was a good guy, smart, funny, and a hard worker. He and Stormy would make a good match.

So why did the thought of them together make his stomach hurt?

The wind blew a strand of Stormy’s hair across her eyes. She tucked it back behind her ear and flashed Brylan the smallest of smiles. Hidden beneath that pretty exterior lived an emotional warrior. Less than a week ago she had gone through hell, and now here she was, sitting beside him, looking mildly happy. Brylan smiled back and resisted the urge to shake his head in wonderment. This girl was something else.

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The trip was excruciating. On her right was Nozz, who couldn’t seem to peel his eyes away from her bare legs. Each stolen glance amplified her unease because she knew his interest in her went beyond platonic. She’d picked up on the little nuances over the last several weeks—holding doors open for her, offering extra help in biology lab, going out of his way to make idle chitchat—but she just wasn’t attracted to him. He was sweet, smart, funny, and strangely charming in an unconventional sort of way…but it wasn’t enough to entice her into anything beyond friendship.

And on her left was Brylan, who was sexy, compassionate, engaging…and completely off limits. Every time his knuckles grazed the inside of her thigh it sent white hot jolts of electricity through her that were blissfully torturous.

She wished with every fiber of her being that she could feel that way with Nozz. Damn, her life would be so much simpler. She knew where she
stood with him. He liked her. Period. But with Brylan, the relationship was one big fat question mark. There was an obvious connection between them. Stormy didn’t know what to call it—animal magnetism, chemistry, enchantment—there was definitely something there. But whatever it was, it was pock-marked with complications.

And it was driving her mad.

Eventually the truck slowed and turned off the main highway onto an old, washboard road that was little more than a cow trail. The sun was blocked by the dense overgrowth of trees and brush spilling over the road and the earthy stench of manure assaulted her nostrils. The scrape of low-lying branches across the top of the cab made the skin on Stormy’s arms prickle. The scene reminded her of one of those horror movies where the car breaks down in the middle of nowhere and the people get hacked to death by a bunch of axe-wielding miscreant rednecks.

The truck clattered and squeaked over a particularly rough patch of road, “Arrrrre wwwweree theeeerrrrre yyyeetttttt?” Stormy’s face flushed and she scowled when the laughing erupted from both sides of her.

Leave it to her to pick the worst time to try to speak.

“Almost there,” Brylan answered. “Why? Aren’t you enjoying having your teeth rattled out of your head?”

She shot him a dirty glare, “Not particularly.”

He responded with a grin, “Look up ahead.”

The truck left the rutted up road and rolled into a flat grassy clearing, and in front of them, just beyond the majestic live oaks and the patches of wildflowers was a big, beautiful, sparkling lake. Stormy shielded her eyes from the intensity of the sun that danced across the water. “This is gorgeous, Brylan.”

“Thanks.” Brylan pushed the door closed. “We like it.”

“This is yours?” Nozz asked in disbelief. He too was awestruck by their surroundings.

“Yeah. Well, I mean it belongs to my family. We’ve got about eighty acres that’s been passed down over three generations. My dad still lives in the original house that my granddaddy built. It’s up a ways just over that hill.”

“Wow, Coach. Didn’t know you were so well off,” Nozz snorted while sporting a sarcastic smirk. Stormy was glad to see he was coming back to his old self. She was starting to worry about him.

“I wouldn’t say that exactly. My dad is the one who’s well off. Not me.”
The words were laced with animosity toward his father. Stormy shot him a questioning look, but he averted his eyes, not wanting to go there. “Well speak of the devil.” Brylan nodded in the direction of the big, shiny, platinum-colored Ford pickup that was headed down the hill in their direction. When it rolled to a stop, a salt-and-peppered, slightly shorter version of Brylan stepped out. “Howdy, folks. Didn’t know Brylan was bringing company.” He looked to Nozz with a slight smile and a nod, revealing that same familiar dimple, but when his attention shifted to Stormy, the smile dropped from his face. It was incredibly brief, but she caught it…and when he smiled again, it didn’t quite reach his eyes. “Hello there, little lady.”

Stormy flashed him an awkward smile and rubbed her upper arms in an attempt to get rid of the discomfort she was feeling. A hint of a scowl crossed Brylan’s face as he silently assessed the situation. “Dad, this is Stormy,” he pointed to her and then shifted his gaze to Nozz, “and this is Joshua.”

Joshua? It threw her for a minute, but then she remembered their teacher calling him that in class and felt foolish. She gave herself a mental smack on the forehead.

“Alright. You kids ready to do some fishing?” The older Mr. Knight asked.

“Yes, sir,” Nozz chirped enthusiastically. “Just show me what to do.”

Stormy was taken a little by surprise. “Nozz, you’ve never been fishing before?”

“Nope. Never had the pleasure.”

The surprised look on Brylan’s face mirrored Stormy’s. “Never?”

Nozz’s shoulders dropped and the spark in his eye dimmed under the scrutiny of their stares. He looked like a scolded puppy and it broke Stormy’s heart. She hadn’t meant to embarrass the poor guy. “That’s cool, Nozz. I haven’t been fishing in years myself.” She flashed him her biggest smile. “Come on. Let’s see if I can still remember how to rig up a fishing pole.” He recovered his cheesy grin and followed her to the back of the truck to retrieve the tackle boxes and fishing rods.

While Stormy educated Nozz on how to tie a proper fishing knot, Brylan and Mr. Knight spent several minutes arguing about where the best spots were for catching bass, and then bickered some more about night crawlers versus lures for catching catfish. It was amusing to watch, and Stormy could definitely see where Brylan’s stubborn streak came from.

Tied to the end of the pier, painted in green and brown camouflage, was a small flat-bottomed boat that just begged to be used. “Is it okay if
Nozz and I take the boat out?” Stormy had been eyeballing it for the past half-hour and couldn’t resist asking. If nobody else was going to put it to use, then she certainly would.

All three of the guys looked at her as if she’d just announced that she was going to light her hair on fire. “You know how to navigate a boat?” Brylan raised a dark eyebrow.

“I sure do. It’s been a while…but it’s like riding a bike, right?”

The older Knight rubbed his chin thoughtfully. “Well, I reckon that’ll be alright,” he said in that blasé drawl of his. Stormy was having a hard time figuring the man out. She really wanted to like him for Brylan’s sake, and she wanted him to like her too, but the jury was still out on the subject. She was still wondering about that look he gave her when he first showed up. He had been nothing but polite afterward, but she still sensed something was off.

Nozz was wary of the boat idea, “You’re not gonna get us killed, are you? I don’t know anything about boats.”

“Can you swim?” she asked teasingly.

“As a matter of fact, I can. I was a lifeguard at the country club pool for two summers, but that’s not the point. Besides, I don’t see a motor on that thing. How are we going to go anywhere?”

By that time Stormy had already grabbed up the fishing gear and planted herself on one of the metal bench seats. She grabbed an oar and held it up. “Here’s your motor. Now get in the darned boat.”

“Pffft….I never signed up for manual labor,” Nozz complained, but the glimmer in his eye said that he was intrigued. The smart-ass just liked giving Stormy a hard time.

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It took a little while to work out the kinks, but before long, Nozz and Stormy found harmony in their rowing and had the boat moving down the lake in a slow, steady line. Once they made it around the bend, Stormy spotted a shady little alcove. “Over there, Nozz.”

He followed her line of sight until he spotted the place she was gesturing to. In a voice three octaves higher than it should have been, he said, “What? That spooky looking spot over there with all the gnarly stumps sticking out? Are you crazy?”

Stormy frowned. “What’s wrong with that spot? That’s where the fish are. I can feel it.”

“Oh yeah? I bet you’ll feel it when an alligator or a snake bites your ass too!”
Stormy snorted a laugh, “Nozz, you need to man-up, because that’s where we’re going. And I doubt this place has any alligators.”

Nozz shook his head in defeat. “It’s your funeral.”

Once they were close enough, Stormy reached out for a low-hanging tree limb that was jutting out from the bank and threw the rope over it. “That oughta do.” Once the boat was secure, she grabbed a couple of red and white bobbers from the tackle box, figuring it would be the best method for a first-timer like Nozz. Then she picked up the white styrofoam container of night crawlers. “Now don’t get all squeamish on me,” she told Nozz while handing him a thick, purple, wiggly worm.

“What the hell am I supposed to do with that?”

“Uh, you put it on your hook, dummy….like this.” She pushed the hook through the worm, ignoring the little niggle of guilt at the back of her mind. She never did like that part of fishing, but she knew it was a necessary evil. “See,” she said proudly, “nothing to it.”

A peaceful quiet enveloped them as they sat gazing over the water. The water lapped gently against the sides of the boat as the cicadas and crickets buzzed in the thick brush surrounding the lake. Quietly, Nozz asked, “How do you know so much about fishing?”

Stormy kept her gaze fixed on the water bugs that skittered across the top of the water in circles. “Mama used to be married to a guy that took me fishing a lot. Taught me everything I know actually. They were together for about a year. He was a nice guy. Probably the closest thing I’ve ever had to a father figure.”

“Huh,” Nozz snorted, “I’ve got the real thing at home and he couldn’t give two shits about me. He sure as hell never took me fishing.”

The revelation knocked her for a loop. Stormy didn’t know how to respond, and the confusion on her face was obvious.

“I’m sorry. I shouldn’t go there,” Nozz said. “I wouldn’t want to ruin this lovely fishing expedition we’re on.” His slight attempt at humor fell flat.

“Nozz, it’s okay. We’ve all got our issues. Trust me, I know all about shitty parenting.”

“Yeah, I guess you do. I didn’t hear much, but I know you have some issues with your mom.”

_issues_. That was a nice way of putting it.

Nozz got quiet again and Stormy knew he was struggling with something. Judging by his comment about his dad, he and Stormy were probably kindred spirits in the family dysfunction department, but Stormy wasn’t sure she wanted to confirm it. Nozz was a good guy, and if his dad
was being mean to him, she didn’t know if she could stand hearing about it. Lord knew she already had her fill of burdens. She’d been trying really hard to lock them up tight in a secret compartment in the recesses of her mind, and hearing Nozz’s confessions…well, she was afraid it would bring it all back to the surface, and she wasn’t ready for that.

But this wasn’t about her, she reminded herself. It was about Nozz. And it was obvious that he was hurting. The two sides of her psyche were warring with each other. Would she dare open what might very well be Pandora’s Box? Or should she let sleeping dogs lie?

The pain was evident in the depths of those sad green eyes. The poor guy needed to vent his frustrations. So, she blew out a breath and started what she knew was going to be a hard conversation.

“I couldn’t help but notice how quiet you’ve been today. You don’t seem yourself. Do you want to talk about what’s eating you?”

He let out a sigh and shrugged his shoulders. “Just stuff.”

It was a typical guy answer.

“What kind of stuff…if you don’t mind my being nosy? Just tell me to butt out if you want.” She didn’t want to push too hard.

He stared absently at the bobber in the water, which hadn’t bobbed once since he cast it in. Stormy was starting to wonder if there were any fish in the lake.

“My dad….” he started to say but let the words trail off. “My dad can be a real prick.”

*That’s it?* Surely there had to be more to it. Stormy squashed her disappointment and sat quietly in case he decided to elaborate…which he did.

“He’s really mean to me and my mom sometimes. It started a few years ago when he got laid off at work. He tried for a while to get another job, but I think he couldn’t compete with all the young people with degrees. Ya know?”

He looked up at her with big, questioning eyes. She nodded her head in understanding. “Yeah. That’s rough,” she concurred softly.

“In the beginning, Mom and I thought he was out all day looking for work. But then he would come home smelling like a brewery. And more than once we’d seen his car parked in front of the bar in the middle of the afternoon. Mom would confront him about it and it always led to a big fight. But he started coming home later and later…and the later he stayed out, the drunker he got. And the drunker he got…the meaner he got.”
Out of the corner of her eye she saw her bobber jerk, but she ignored it. The fish would have to wait because Nozz needed her full attention. His lip was quivering and tension was rolling off him in waves.

“Lately,” Nozz continued, “he started hitting her. And last night…he sent her to the emergency room with a concussion.”

A gasp escaped Stormy before she could catch it. “Oh my God, Nozz. Is she alright?”

“Yes. This time,” he said while gazing absently at the water.

“Nozz, I’m so sorry.” Another grim thought hit her, and she was almost too afraid to ask, “Has he ever hit you?”

“No yet. But he will. Eventually.”

His answer was so matter-of-fact that it sent chills up her spine. She didn’t know how to respond. The poor guy. It just wasn’t fair. Mama had put her through hell, but things had never gotten physical. Well, not much. Some of her boyfriends had gotten a little out of hand, but Stormy had never witnessed the kind of violence that Nozz had. Mama had always sent the guys packing before it had ever gotten to that point.

Nozz’s shaky voice startled her out of her thoughts, “I’ve begged her to leave him. To just go. I told her I’d quit school and get a job and help her out financially…but she says she loves him. Says she knows he has it in him to stop. That he’s really sorry for what he does. That he’ll quit drinking. And it’s all bullshit.”

“Maybe it’s not, Nozz. Maybe there’s hope. At least he said he’s sorry, which is more than my mama ever did.” It was true. Never once had Marni Black told Stormy that she was sorry. Never had she shown any remorse for her behavior or the way that they lived. And she sure as hell had never promised to stop.

Did that mean that her mother was too far gone?

“Damn, Stormy. I’m sorry to unload on you like this.” Nozz sniffed and rubbed his eye on his shirt sleeve. “You didn’t even check your line after you got a nibble a little while ago.” He was attempting to lighten the mood and Stormy was grateful.

“I was hoping you didn’t notice that,” she said with a sheepish grin.

“Well, I’m not a complete idiot. I’m pretty sure that when the little red and white thingy goes under the water you’re supposed to do something.”

Stormy chuckled and reeled in her line, knowing full well that her bait was gone, nibbled away by some hungry fish. At least it was confirmation that there were fish in the lake.
While she prepared to re-bait her hook, Nozz reached into his shirt pocket and produced a slender white object that she recognized immediately. “What the hell is that?”

“Duh…It’s a joint,” he said nonchalantly. Stormy’s jaw went slack with shock. She shouldn’t have been so surprised. That crap was about as common as chewing gum at school. But for some unknown reason, seeing it in Nozz’s hand infuriated the hell out of her. He was better than that—or at least she thought he was—and she felt betrayed. And before she even knew what she was doing, she plucked it from his lips and tossed it in the water.

“What the hell, Stormy? That was the only one I had,” he said in disbelief.

She looked him straight in the eye. “Good.”

He looked pissed.

Stormy looked at him, eyes pleading with him to understand. “I’m sorry, Nozz. I just don’t like that stuff. Okay?”

Nozz gaped at her for several awkward seconds, but then his expression softened. “Yeah, okay. I didn’t know it was that big of a deal. I just do it to take the edge off sometimes. I didn’t know it would offend you. I thought you would be cool with it.”

No. She wasn’t. As far as Stormy was concerned, that stuff was pure evil and nothing good ever came from it. “I didn’t mean to blow a gasket. It’s just…I’ve seen what that stuff does to my mom. She stays stoned out of her gourd most of the time.” She tucked a loose strand of hair behind her ear, feeling bashful all of a sudden. “I like hanging out with you, Nozz. But I don’t think I can be around you if you smoke that shit. It…just doesn’t sit well with me.”

Nozz was quiet for a moment. “I get it. I really do. And I like hanging with you too. I don’t wanna mess that up.” With a hangdog grin, he raised his hands in surrender, “No more. I promise.”

A relieved smile spread across her face. “You better mean it…or I’ll have to kick your ass,” she said playfully.

Stormy pointed to Nozz’s bobber, which had drifted dangerously close to some stumps that were peeking out of the water. “You might wanna re-cast your line so you don’t get it snagged.”

Just as the last word was leaving her mouth, there was a huge splash right behind Nozz. He jumped up and crossed over to her side of the boat, nearly tipping it in the process, and wrapped himself around her protectively, “It’s okay, I’ve got you! What the hell was that! A gator?”
Stormy burst into a fit of ridiculous laughter. It had her doubled over until her side hurt. Nozz let go of her and stared at her incredulously. It was obvious that he thought she’d lost her mind. “What the hell are you laughing about? I just saved your life.”

“Oh, Nozz,” she said through the snickers, “That was a really sweet gesture…but you were trying to protect me from a nutria rat.”

“A what?” His eyebrows drew together.

“A nutria. It’s like a cross between a giant rat and a beaver,” she tried to explain through the chuckles.

“Yeah, right. Now who’s making up imaginary critters? You’re just trying to get me back for that whole vampire squirrel thing I pulled on you.”

“No, you jackass. These actually do exist. You can Google it.” The look on his face was priceless.

“Hey Nozz?”

“What?” he huffed, clearly agitated by the fact that she was still laughing at him.

“Let’s give the nutria a name….We’ll call him Karma.”

He flipped her the bird…and then he started chuckling too.

****

A pang of jealousy tore through Brylan when Stormy and Nozz disappeared around the bend. He felt like hitting something, but since his dad was standing a mere five feet away, he had no choice but to swallow the bitter pill of envy.

He’d never seen anything like it, the sheer bliss on Stormy’s face when she hopped in that thing. He just stood there in awe of her while she maneuvered that boat like a pro. He was wishing like hell he’d gone with them. But here he was, stuck on the pier with Dad. And he could tell by his dad’s demeanor that he had something he wanted to get off his chest…and he was certain he wasn’t going to like it.

Brylan’s dad cast his line out. The tiny glimmer of the lure disappeared beneath the surface. He gave it a minute to sink down to the bottom, then he began reeling it back in again. “So how’s the teaching thing going?” he asked over the methodical clicking of the reel.

“Good so far.”

“And the house?”

“It’s good. Nozz, I mean, Joshua, has been helping me fix the place up.”

“Uh huh.”
And there it was. The tone.
“And the girl? How does she fit into the equation?”

I knew it. So that’s what put a burr under his saddle. “She’s renting my garage apartment from me.”

“Huh. They both seem kind of young to be hanging out at your place. Students of yours?”

Nosy ole bastard. “Joshua is in one of my classes, yes. Stormy goes to the same school, but she’s not in my class.”

“Huh. So, your employer doesn’t mind you hanging out with your students socially?”

“Dad. Don’t start. These kids…. Hell, they’re not much younger than me. And yes, I befriended them. Is that a crime?”

“I don’t know…. Is it?”

“Just what in the hell are you getting at, Dad?”

“Lower your voice, Brylan. I don’t appreciate the attitude. I just don’t want to see you screw up your life. You can’t afford to make any more mistakes.”

Cutting his eyes at the old man, Brylan heaved out a heavy breath. He’d known in his gut that his dad would bring that ancient shit up. Things that he wanted to stay buried in the past, but his dad just had to keep digging it up. “That mistake happened when I was practically still a kid.”

“Oh, so now you admit that you were just a kid? Because at the time, you swore to me that you were all grown up and ready to take responsibility.”

His old man was a master at twisting Brylan’s words and using them against him, and he hated him for it. “Yes, Dad. I admit that I was young. But I still wanted to do the right thing. It should have been my choice. I should have had a say.”

“Oh, so at the age of sixteen, you think you were ready to be a father, huh?” He turned toward Brylan and put his hand on his hip. “Son, when will you see that you dodged a bullet?”

Dodged a bullet?

Brylan tightened his grip on his fishing rod. What he really wanted to do was knock the smug bastard on his sanctimonious ass. For six years—six long years—he’d wondered and worried about a child that may or may not even exist anymore.

He and Becky were best friends all through school, from the time he first pulled her hair on the playground until tenth grade…when they became more. They had tried to be careful. But apparently they weren’t
careful enough, and then two pink lines on a plastic stick turned their world upside down.

Both of them knew they were too young. But that didn’t mean Brylan wasn’t willing to break his back to try and do the right thing. It’s what his mom would have expected from him…if she’d still been alive.

They hid their secret for a month, giving themselves time to formulate a plan, knowing full well that neither of their families would be supportive. Determined to make things work, Brylan told Becky he would marry her and drop out of school to support her and the baby. But Becky was scared, and despite Brylan’s desperate pleading, she broke down and told her family about it. Within a week of Becky’s disclosure, her parents whisked her away without so much as a word to Brylan. No phone call. No letter. He just happened to be driving by her house the same day the realtor was staking a for sale sign in the yard.

To this day he had no idea what happened to either Becky or the baby, and for years it ate him alive. He spent countless hours online looking for clues, anything that might link him to Becky or Becky’s family, but his searches always left him just as empty as when he started. It was as if they’d vanished from the face of the earth. Poof. Gone. And then about a year ago Brylan decided to stop torturing himself. He let them go. Or at least he tried to. And he had been pretty successful at it.

Until now.

“How can you bring that stuff up right now, Dad? I’ve tried to move past all of that. Why can’t you?”

“Because, son. It sure looks like you’re headed for certain disaster, hanging out with those two,” he flippantly gestured in the general direction of where Stormy and Nozz were headed. “What are you thinking, socializing with your students outside of school?” He shook his head in dismay. “Are you trying to throw your career away?”

It was taking every bit of restraint Brylan had in him not to throw his ass in the lake. At some point the words got muffled and all he could hear was the whooshing between his ears. He focused on the dragonflies that were hovering over the water in an attempt to lower his blood pressure. Until his dad got so loud he couldn’t ignore him anymore.

“Do you hear what I’m saying to you, Brylan?”

“Yeah, Dad! I’m an irresponsible screw-up! That’s all I’ve ever been and it’s all I ever will be. Got it!” he snarled at him while looking him right in the eye.

For a moment his dad looked stricken. His mouth was hanging open and there was something like regret in his eyes. It was the first time Brylan had ever stood up to his father like that.
It was uncharted territory for both of them.

“Brylan. That’s not what I said.”

“Yes, Dad. You DID! The words may have been a little different but
the meaning was very much the same. You’ve always treated me like the
substandard son—the one you’re ashamed of. And it doesn’t make a damn
what I try to do to prove myself to you. You’re always going to find some
excuse to pick my life apart and analyze the shit out of it until you can find
something to criticize me about.”

He watched as his dad turned the color of a ripe tomato. *Oh shit, I’ve
gone and done it now.* He braced himself for the wrath that was sure to
ensue. But it never came. Brylan and his father stared at each other for
several excruciating seconds before his dad turned his attention back to the
water. He reeled in his line, picked up his gear, and marched back to his
truck without looking back.

Brylan’s conscience was kicking his ass, telling him to run after him
and apologize. But his temper wouldn’t allow it. It wanted the old man to
stew in his own juices for a while. So Brylan just stood there, grinding his
teeth with his hands balled into fists as he watched his father drive away.

As the last glimmer of the silver tuck disappeared over the hill, he
heard giggling and tiny splashes of water. Stormy and Nozz were coming
around the bend. *Shit!* He had mere seconds to shake off his foul
disposition before either of them caught on to it.

He tried to keep his voice light, “Hey, guys. Good to see you
survived. Y’all catch anything?”

“Nah,” Stormy said, “We got a couple of nibbles, but that’s it.” They
exchanged glances and grinned at each other while some unspoken
conversation passed between them. And that damned green-eyed monster,
called *jealousy*, was biting him in the ass again.

*What the hell is wrong with me?*

His pocket buzzed and Brylan’s shoulders slumped when he saw the
text from Pam:

*Dinner tonight?*

As if he didn’t have enough emotions filling his plate, he added a
side of guilt. He hadn’t given the woman a single thought all day. And
how in the world was he supposed to look Pam in the eye over dinner?

He wished that he could feel something for her. It would make things
so much simpler.

But his heart had taken a liking to the brunette that was tying the boat
to the dock. The one that he had no chance with.
He needed his head examined. Maybe his dad was right. Maybe he
did have a propensity for self-destruction.

He thought for a minute and then sent a return text:

*Been a long day. Rain check?*

His phone buzzed again:

*Okay.*

She added a frowny face, as if he didn’t feel bad enough.

Brylan paced back and forth, rubbing his neck and listening to his
hollow footsteps on the wooden pier. But no amount of rubbing was going
to relieve the amount of tension that had accumulated in the last few
hours.

Stormy finished securing the boat to the pier and jogged over to
Brylan, “Hey, are you okay? You look a little…tense.”

“Oh yeah, I’m fine,” he lied to her. She raised a skeptical eyebrow but
didn’t say anything.

“Where’s your dad?” Nozz asked.

Brylan had more than exceeded his threshold for lies and it was
killing him. “He uh…he had a headache so he headed back to the house.”

“Oh. Okay.” Nozz shrugged it off as nothing, but he could see the
suspicion in Stormy’s eyes. He wasn’t fooling her for a minute.

“Brylan, it’s okay if you want to head back now.” The softness in that
silky voice nearly did him in. If he’d been a lesser man, he would have
buried his face in her satiny hair and cried like a baby right there on the
pier.

“No, I’m good.” He plastered a fake smile. “I know a good spot a
little ways down from here where we can throw our lines in. You game?”

There was uncertainty in her eyes.

“Hey, I ain’t leavin’ here without a fish.” Nozz said emphatically.

“Well, I guess that settles it,” Stormy said with a small smile.

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“Man, that was awesome!” Nozz said while peeking at his catch in the
ice chest. “I think I found a new favorite sport.”

“From a rookie to a master fisherman in one day, huh?” Brylan said
sarcastically.

“Hey, I can’t help it if mine is bigger than yours.”

Stormy snorted a laugh, “Are we still talking about fish?”

Nozz waggled his eyebrows, “Maybe. Maybe not.”
“Whoa, I think this conversation took a wrong turn somewhere,” Brylan said through a grin while loading up their tackle. His mood was a damn site better than it had been a little bit earlier, but his ego was still sore. He’d wanted to impress Stormy with his fishing skills…and then Nozz went and caught a catfish that dwarfed his in comparison.

He laid the rods in the back of the truck and noticed Stormy walking back toward the lake. It didn’t take a genius to figure out that she was reluctant to leave. She sat cross-legged by the edge of the water and Brylan watched as she plucked a handful of grass and started absently tossing the thin blades into the water one by one.

He left Nozz to finish loading up the gear and joined Stormy at the water’s edge. “Penny for your thoughts.” He crouched down and plucked a blade of grass and twirled it between his fingers.

She kept her gaze fixed on the lake. “Look at all those colors on the water,” she said dreamily. The sun was setting and the lake looked like it was on fire with all the different reds and oranges bouncing off it.

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Chapter Twelve

Stormy opened Brylan’s refrigerator and wrinkled her brow in confusion. “Brylan, I thought you said you didn’t have much to work with. This thing is full.”

“How?” He laid the freshly filleted fish on a plate and joined her at the fridge for a quick inventory. He couldn’t remember the last time he bought real food. The last time he’d checked there was little more than ketchup and a half gallon of chunky milk. When he peered inside his refrigerator his mouth dropped open. The refrigerator was brimming with all sorts of stuff. Stuff that he hadn’t put there. Even the produce bins were full. What the hell?

Pam.

He had forgotten that his dumb ass had given her a key. And when she had texted him about dinner, he’d assumed she meant going out, but apparently she was planning to cook. In Brylan’s mind she’d crossed a boundary. It even bordered on stalker-ish. The unwelcomed image of a boiling bunny on the stove popped into his head. What was the name of that movie? Oh yeah, Fatal Attraction. He shrugged it off and grabbed a beer, making a mental note to ask for his key back. “You’re welcome to use anything in here, Stormy.”

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Stormy was thrilled to have someone to cook for. Well, someone who would actually appreciate it. She had never seen such a well stocked refrigerator and she was plumb giddy at the prospect of having so many things to choose from.

She stood there in front of the open refrigerator, rubbing her chin while she planned her meal. Hmmm. What went with fish? She spotted all the ingredients for an awesome salad—romaine lettuce, cherry tomatoes, cucumbers, carrots. . . . Okay, what else? She remembered seeing potatoes in the pantry and sweet onions on the counter. Ah ha! She snapped her fingers as each component of the meal came together in her head. She
wanted the meal to be memorable for Brylan and Nozz. She hated to admit it, but she was secretly hoping to impress Brylan with her cooking abilities.

It took a little while to get her bearings in Brylan’s haphazardly arranged kitchen. The pots and pans were where she thought the glasses would have been, and the glasses were in the cabinet next to the stove. When she found the knives stashed in a drawer next to the refrigerator she shook her head and made a silent vow to come over and organize the chaos someday.

The fish was seasoned and ready to go and Stormy was cutting up potatoes when Brylan casually strolled into the kitchen and popped a tomato in his mouth. He was so close that she could smell the intoxicating mixture of aftershave and the outdoors. It was messing with her concentration.

“Looks like you know your way around a kitchen.”

Stormy blushed. *Damned pheromones.* She was tempted to tell him to stand on the other side of the kitchen so she could focus. She didn’t want to lose a finger…or her self control. “I’m just cutting up potatoes. No big deal.”

He cocked an eyebrow, “It is to me. I probably would have already cut off a finger by now. What are you making anyway?”

“Nothing fancy…just smothered potatoes and a salad. And maybe some of that garlic bread I saw in the freezer.”

His eyes brightened, “Smothered potatoes? Really?” He looked like a kid on Christmas morning. “I love those things. My mom used to make them all the time.” Then his eyes turned more somber. It was a subtle change, but Stormy noticed it. “I haven’t had them since before she died.”

She suddenly felt like a heel. In her attempts to show off, she had somehow managed to conjure up a hurtful memory for him.

“I’m sorry about your mom.”

“Nah, it’s alright. It was a long time ago. I was fifteen.”

“How… I mean….” She was tripping on her tongue, and possibly overstepping an invisible boundary.

“Cancer.”

“Oh,” she said quietly. “Wow. That must have been hard.” She couldn’t imagine having to go through something like that. Her mother was no picnic, but at least she was still around.

“It was. Sure. But I had my dad and my sister and brothers…. Somehow we got through it.”

Brothers. Another revelation. And a subject changer.
“How many brothers do you have?”

“Three. All older. I’m the baby, or the runt, as my brothers like to refer to me so affectionately.”

Runt. That was too cute. She giggled at the thought of a little Brylan being bossed around by his older brothers. She pictured them ruffling his hair and playing tricks on him, the way siblings did. She couldn’t really relate though, being an only child. She’d always wished she would have had siblings, but it hadn’t been in the cards. Considering her home life, it was probably just as well.

“Anything I can do to help,” Brylan offered. Being a former victim of his cooking, Stormy was a bit reluctant.

“Um, do you want to slice up the cucumber?”

“I think I can handle that.”

Nozz sauntered into the kitchen and looked at his watch for the umpteenth time. Stormy picked up the pace, knowing that he would have to leave soon.

“What do you two have going on in here?”

Crap! He was on to them. Oh wait. No. He was referring to the mess on the counter, not her and Brylan. She had the sudden urge to put her head in the freezer to cool her flaming cheeks. Instead, she went to the sink to wash her hands and give herself a second to recompose. “Pan-seared catfish, potatoes, and salad,” she answered over her shoulder.

“Cool.” He had his hands in his pockets and he was rocking back on his heels in that laid-back way of his.

Stormy peeked at Brylan’s progress and decided that fat chunks of mangled cucumber would have to do. She warmed up the olive oil and began sautéing the onions. The scent flooded the kitchen and made her stomach growl.

Fifteen minutes later Stormy was beaming with self satisfaction as the guys eyed their plates like a couple of hungry dogs. Her pan-seared catfish and smothered potatoes turned out perfectly. “Alright guys. Dig in.”

Their groans of delight gave her ego a much needed boost.

“Wow, Stormy. This is awesome,” Nozz said through a mouthful of food. She was tempted to scold him on his bad manners, but he was enjoying himself way too much and she didn’t want to ruin it for him.

Brylan swallowed a big bite. “Yeah. This is pretty incredible. Where did you learn to cook like this?”

“Mostly self-taught. But there was a lady I used to know that showed me a few things too.” An image of Ms. Hattie’s smiling face popped into
her head as she put a flaky bite of fish in her mouth. It was amazing what a little bit of dill and lemon could do.

The three of them enjoyed their meal in comfortable silence. When Brylan was done, he scooted his stool back from the island and took his empty plate to the sink.

“Prom’s coming up. Are you two going?”

Stormy flinched at the abrupt change of topic. One that made Stormy uncomfortable. The prom buzz was already starting around school—banners begging for theme ideas, flyers asking for king and queen nominations, eager girls yapping about hair and dresses…. The whole thing made her queasy.

“I hadn’t planned on it,” Stormy said flatly.

“Me neither,” Nozz concurred.

“Why not?”

Stormy was glad she had finished her meal, or else she might have lost her appetite. “Never thought about it,” she fibbed. “No date, no dress….”

“Well I’m going,” Brylan announced.

Nozz’s fork halted and hung suspended over his third serving of fish and Stormy nearly choked on her iced tea. The looks on their faces demanded an explanation.

“I’m chaperoning,” he said simply.

“Ohhhh, okay. Now it makes sense,” Nozz said nonchalantly and scooped another bite into his mouth. “You taking Pam?”

What? Who the hell is Pam? Stormy suddenly forgot how to breathe. She set her glass down and looked over at a very uncomfortable-looking Brylan. “Pam?” she managed to ask lightly. It took a supreme effort to keep the scorn out of her voice.

Brylan cleared his throat nervously and she couldn’t help but notice the red that was creeping up his neck. “She’s somebody I’ve been sort of dating.”

“Oh.” The single syllable came out strangled. In an effort to disguise her hurt feelings, she forked a cherry tomato from her unfinished salad and put it in her mouth. She needed something to keep her from making a bigger fool of herself. A full mouth might just do it.

“Hey, why don’t the two of you go to prom together? You know, as friends?”

And the hits just kept on coming.

Was he serious?
Now Nozz was the one looking nervous. The look he shot Brylan was crystal clear: *Dude, I can’t believe you just did that to me!*

Brylan had the audacity to look unfazed by Nozz’s death stare.

Nozz put his fork down and turned his attention on Stormy.

*Crap. He’s going to ask me.* She was so going to kick Brylan in the shin for this.

“What do you think, Stormy? Want to go to prom with me? It might be fun.” The proposal was timid and weak-sounding. Then he added, “It would get my mom off my back about it. She’s been going on and on about tuxes and pictures… so technically you would be doing me a favor.” His big green eyes pleaded with her to say yes.

How in the hell was she supposed to say no to that? Even worse, how in the hell was she going to endure a whole evening of watching Brylan with another woman? Could things get any more screwed up?

Knowing she was too damn generous for her own good, she accepted.

“Sure, Nozz.”

“Well alright then. It’s settled,” Brylan beamed like a moron.

Stormy was so screwed.

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After the most awkward dinner of her life, Stormy and the guys retreated to the living room. Her mind was still reeling while Nozz grabbed up the remote and flopped down on his pile of throw pillows in front of the TV. Brylan and Stormy sat on opposite ends of the couch with an invisible wall of tension between them. Stormy fidgeted with the fringe on the chenille throw blanket and stared blankly at the TV while she wrangled her insane, completely irrational jealousy. Of course Brylan would date. Why had it come as such a surprise? He had no obligations to some needy high school girl with a crush and a truckload of baggage. She knew there was no hope for them beyond friendship.

So why did it sting so much?

Her eyes drifted over to Nozz and his fluffy, dark blond hair and forced some of the tension away with a big exhale. She hated the idea of prom, and loathed the idea of seeing Brylan there with some mystery woman even more. But, in truth, she could do a lot worse for prom dates. Nozz was a good friend. He was sweet, funny, and cute as a button, but she couldn’t help but worry that going prom with him might put other ideas in his head about their relationship.

As she sat there staring at the back of his blond head it occurred to her that there was a lot she didn’t know about him.
“Hey, Nozz?”
“Yeah?” he answered while still flipping through channels.
“How did you get your nickname…if you don’t mind me asking?” It was something that had bugged her since the first time she met him.
“Yeah, Nozz,” Brylan chimed in, “How did you end up with that crazy handle?”
Nozz put the remote down and spun around to face them. “Well,” he began with a semi-serious look, “A couple of years ago I was riding my skateboard down the sidewalk in front of our house, minding my own business, when the neighbor’s psychotic chihuahua decided to run out and attack me. Stupid thing grabbed the ankle of my pants and I ended up face-planting right into a damned tree. Stupid dog caused me to break my nose.”
Brylan chuckled and Stormy stared at his nose. For the first time she noticed that it wasn’t completely straight, and there was a slight bump on the bridge of it.
“Okaaaay,” Brylan drawled, “That still doesn’t explain the nickname.”
“Well, when I came home from the hospital my nose was all swollen and gnarly looking. My bratty little cousins were visiting and they kept making fun of my schnoz. I was dopey on pain killers…and I tried to tell them to ‘leave my schnoz alone,’ but it came out ‘Nozz’ instead. They all got a good laugh…and I got stuck with a stupid nickname. Over time I just learned to live with it. I actually started to like it better than my real name.”
“I can see that,” Stormy said. “Somehow it suits you.”
“Gee thanks,” he feigned insult and she stifled a giggle.
“I didn’t mean it like that. It’s just so…carefree and charismatic. Like you.”
He waggled his eyebrows at her in a fake flirt, “So you like my charisma, huh?”
She threw a pillow at him, “Stop it. You know what I mean.”
Nozz laughed and then turned his attention to Brylan. “Hey Coach, speaking of unusual names, how did you get yours?”
Brylan shifted around in his seat uncomfortably. “Well, it’s not nearly as entertaining as your story. My mom wanted to name me Bryan, after her dad; and, my dad has always been a fan of Dylan Thomas…so they compromised by blending them together.”
“Who is Dylan Thomas?” Nozz asked.
Brylan shot him a quizzical look and a small crease formed across his forehead. It looked like he wanted to say something but he didn’t.

Stormy couldn’t believe her ears. “He’s a poet. Haven’t you read anything of his in school? ‘Do not go gentle into that good night.’ Ring any bells?”

Recognition registered on his face, “Oh, yeah…that guy! Cool.”

Nozz pulled at a loose thread on the knee of his jeans for a minute, and then he looked back up her, “Okay, Stormy. Your turn. What’s with the name?”

“Uh, nothing really.”


“All I know is that I was born during a thunderstorm.” That part was true, although she suspected it might have been inspired by the turmoil in her mama’s life…especially in light of her recently acquired knowledge about her conception. Goosebumps popped up on her arms at the thought.

“Nozz, you’ve been flipping through channels for ten minutes. Pick something already,” she said with an air of humor. It was time to shift their focus from her back to the TV.

A half-hour, and one stupid sitcom later, Nozz jumped up from his pile of pillows and announced that it was time for him to leave.

“You need a ride,” Brylan asked. “It’s getting dark.”

“No thanks. I have my trusty skateboard and a mini flashlight. I’m good.”

Brylan shook his head. “Well alright then.”

The three of them stood and walked Nozz to the door for their goodbyes. Nozz reached out and pulled Stormy to him in a brief and totally unexpected hug. “Thank you, Stormy,” he practically whispered in her ear. When he stepped back she could see the meaning in his eyes. He wasn’t just talking about dinner. He was referring to their earlier conversation in the boat.

“You’re very welcome, Nozz,” she smiled at him.

As soon as the door closed, an awkward silence flooded the house. Stormy opened her mouth to say that she should go too, but then she eyed the mess in the kitchen. There was no way she could leave it like that. It would drive her nuts if she left it behind, so she started collecting dishes and putting them into the sink.

Brylan rushed over to the sink and grabbed the bottle of Palmolive out of her hand. “Hey, what are you doing?”

“Um, what does it look like? I’m cleaning up.”
“Awe, don’t bother with that stuff. You’re a guest. I’ll clean it up later. Let’s watch a movie. I have all of the premium channels…. Free preview weekend.”

She glanced at the dirty dishes once more, and then up at Brylan’s face. He looked so…hopeful. But a movie? With Brylan? That sounded dangerous. She was already on an emotional rollercoaster, and she wasn’t sure she could trust herself to be near him for the duration of a movie without making a total ass of herself. But there was something in his eyes that said he didn’t want to be alone. “Okay, I’ll stay for a movie. But first you have to help me do these dishes. Oh, and I get to pick the movie.”

“You drive a hard bargain, Miss Black.” He handed her back the dish liquid and broke into a full grin that showed off his dimples.

*Lord, help me.* There should have been a law against being that good-looking. She tore her gaze away from his and focused on the rising suds in the sink while Brylan slid a stack of plates into it.

“Does that mean we’re watching a chick flick?”

She shot him a mischievous smile. “Of course it does.”

And the sappier the better.

****

The credits were rolling on *Steel Magnolias* and Stormy silently praised herself for staying on her side of the couch. She was stronger than she gave herself credit for.

Brylan was giving her a glare that suggested her movie choice had been a bit…harsh.

“Okay. I think I’ll go cut my wrists now.”

Stormy laughed. “Oh, it wasn’t that bad.”

“Are you kidding? That was the saddest shit I’ve ever seen! I mean…you women must be masochists or something.”

She’d never thought about it before, but there could be some truth to it. But she wasn’t about to tell him that. “Admit it though. It was a good story. And it wasn’t all sad. There was some humor too.”

He smirked. “Alright. I’ll grant you that. It was a good movie…but if you tell anyone I said that…I’ll have to off you.”

“Oh, Bry,” she chortled, “Your secret’s safe with me.”

As much as she hated to leave her comfy spot on the couch, her mouth was sticky and she desperately needed to remedy it. “I’m parched. You want anything to drink?” she said on the way to the kitchen.

Brylan hopped up from the couch and followed her. “That’s alright. I’ll get it.”
She had to stretch to reach the glasses on the top shelf, and a cool
draft graced the bare skin of her midriff. Brylan was standing with the
refrigerator ajar, but his focus was fixed on her, making her self-
conscious. “What?”

“Huh? Oh. Nothing.” He was suddenly flustered, “Just thought you
might need help reaching the glass, but it looks like you got it.” He leaned
into the refrigerator and grabbed a bottle of beer.

“I’d offer you one but, ya know, the whole being underage thing.” His
expression was apologetic.

“That’s okay. I don’t touch the stuff anyway.”
He twisted the cap off with the tail of his tee-shirt. “Because of your
mom?”

Yes. “No…because it tastes like horse piss.”
He nearly choked on a mouthful of beer. “And how do you know
what horse piss tastes like?”

“I don’t, Mr. Smarty Pants. But if I had to guess….”
Brylan let out a few chuckles, and then his face darkened slightly.
“Does this bother you?” He held up his beer. “Because I can pour it
out….”

“No, Brylan. It’s fine. This is your house…and unlike my mother, I
suspect that you know your limits. There’s a difference.” The last thing
she wanted to do was make the guy uncomfortable in his own house.

“Thank you for being so considerate though.”

He didn’t say anything more, but gave her a slow nod of
understanding.

With their drinks in tow, Brylan and Stormy headed back into the
living room. Stormy set her glass of Coke on the coffee table and resumed
her spot on the couch with her back against the armrest and her legs half-
stretched out in front of her. Brylan patted his thigh to signal that it was
okay to prop her feet up on his leg. Stormy was reluctant and hesitated for
a moment. It was an innocent gesture, but there was a level of intimacy
involved in what he was suggesting. It meant touching him, and she
wasn’t sure her heart, or her body, could handle it. She hesitated for a
second and decided that maybe just one foot would be okay.

She gingerly placed one foot on top of his thigh and he absently
rested his hand on her ankle and began rubbing his thumb across it,
sending tingles all the way to her scalp. She’d never experienced anything
like it. It was so light and gentle, but highly erotic at the same time, and
Brylan was completely clueless what his touch was doing to her. In
desperate need of a distraction, she snatched the remote from the coffee
table and started surfing the channels.

Brylan was the one to break the deafening silence, “Pick something
that won’t make me suicidal this time, okay?

“We’ll see.” She scrolled through the titles until she found one that
she knew would drive him nuts, then she hit enter on the remote.

“Love Story! Oh HELL no! Give me that remote!”

His reaction had her dying with laughter. He reached for the remote
and she held it away from him, higher and higher until her arm was
completely outstretched above her head. Brylan started tickling her ribs
until she was about to implode. He tickled with one hand and reached for
the remote with the other. Before they knew it, Brylan was covering the
entire length of her body with his.

Realization struck both of them, and the only sound in the room was
that of heavy breathing.

Brylan placed one hand on the couch near her head to steady himself
and fixed her with a smoldering, lust-filled gaze. Stormy had never wanted
to be kissed so badly in her life. His full lips were mere inches from hers
and she was completely breathless with anticipation. All logic and
reasoning were gone from her mind, and in that moment she would have
given herself to him completely.

But then something changed in Brylan’s dark eyes. The lust was
replaced with a pained expression that said he was at war with himself. He
backed off of her and slowly retreated to the other end of the couch.

A thick cloud of silence hung in the air as Stormy tried to recover
from the cold slap of rejection. Brylan rested his elbows on his knees and
hung his head. His speech came out strangled, “Stormy…I’m so sorry.”

He’s sorry?

Stormy bit back the urge to unleash on him. Her thoughts weren’t
exactly rational at that moment. The remorse in Brylan’s eyes made her
feel dirty and ashamed.

“I feel like I crossed a line that I shouldn’t have.”

“No. It’s fine. Really.” The lie was bitter on her tongue.

Brylan ran his hands through his disheveled hair. “It’s not fine.
I…We’re friends. And I don’t want to—”

Stormy held up her hand. “Stop. Please.” She didn’t want to hear what
was coming. She was too humiliated and angry already. The last thing she
needed was for him to give her a list of excuses.

She chewed on her lip while staring down at the carpet. The warmth
of unwanted tears started trickling down her face. “Dammit!”
Brylan reached for her but she jerked away. She needed to get out of there. She ran out of the house and across the yard without looking back. She took the stairs leading up to the garage apartment two at a time and didn’t stop until she was locked inside.
Chapter Thirteen

Brylan had been staring at the same damned paper for thirty minutes and had yet to read a single word. He threw his red ballpoint pen across the desk and cursed under his breath. “Shit.” He would never get those papers graded if he didn’t get his head out of his ass. That night on the couch had floated in and out of his mind all day long and it was driving him crazy.

*I’m so damned stupid.* The words repeated in his head over and over like a broken record. Stormy had every right to be pissed. He was supposed to be her friend, someone she could trust, and now he’d gone and caused her more pain…all because he couldn’t control his damned hormones.

He was already flirting with disaster by letting her stay in the garage apartment. What in the hell made him think spending time alone with her would be a good idea?

Since it was clear that he wasn’t going to get any work done, he grabbed his bag and started shoving papers into it, thinking maybe he’d get more accomplished at home. He grabbed his keys from the desk drawer and switched off the classroom light. When he was locking the door he heard the unmistakable clicking of heels on the concrete floor.

Gail, the principal’s secretary, was headed straight for him. “Mr. Knight…I’m glad I caught you. Mr. Flint would like to see you.”

“Right now?”

“Yes. He’s in his office.”

Damn. Flint never stayed late. Whatever he wanted to talk about, it probably wasn’t good.

“Okay, Gail. I’ll be right over. Thanks.”

She turned and clicked back down the hallway without another word, which seemed strange. The woman was usually overly friendly to the point that he could never get a word in edge-wise.

Maybe she was just in a hurry to get home.

With his bag over his shoulder, Brylan headed down the hall toward Flint’s office. His office door was open and Flint was staring out the
window from his big leather office chair. Afraid he would startle the old
guy, Brylan gave a light knock on the doorframe. Flint turned his attention
from the window to Brylan, “Come on in, Brylan.” He pointed to the chair
across from his desk. “Have a seat.”

Brylan’s anxiety meter spiked. It was out of character for Flint to
address faculty by their first names. Something was off.

Flint’s chair squeaked in protest as he leaned back. He then crossed
his arms over his expansive chest. “I’ve been hearing rumors that you
have a girl living with you.” His words were eerily calm. “And not just
any girl. One of our students, to be exact.”

Brylan’s Adam’s apple bobbed. “No, sir. She does not live with me.
She’s a tenant. I’m leasing my garage apartment to her.”

It was the plain simple truth…well, it was the truth anyway. There
was nothing simple about it.

“Uh, huh,” he grunted, seemingly unconvinced. “Well that’s not what
I’ve been told.”

It was time to try and cover his ass. “Sir, I’m telling you the truth. If
someone is saying otherwise, then they’re either misinformed or else
they’re flat out lying. We have a business arrangement. That’s all.”

Until he’d gone and screwed it all up.

Flint harrumphed and then fixed Brylan with that death stare of his.
“For your sake, Mr. Knight, I certainly hope so. It was pretty bold of you
to go and lease your apartment to a high school student. It still doesn’t
reflect well on us. You know how people talk around here.”

Yeah. I’m starting to get that.

“Sir, I was just taking an advantage of an opportunity to get the place
leased. I didn’t really think it would matter who I leased it to.”

His demeanor softened just a smidge. “Alright, son. Just remember
what I told you about the no fraternization policy. I meant every word.”

“Yes, sir. I remember well.” He couldn’t help it if his damned
hormones didn’t get the message.

“Good. Now, how are things going with you and my niece?”

Meddlesome son-of-a-bitch. “Things are good. Pam is a sweet girl.”
Brylan was paving a road to Hell with his lies and half-truths.

“Good to hear it. Well, I best be gettin’ home. Got the missus waiting
for me.” He stood up and held out his hand for Brylan to shake.

“Have a good evening, sir.”

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The five minute drive home was spent mulling over his little sit-down with Flint. It irritated the hell out of him that someone was out there telling tales that could end his career in one fell swoop. Who could possibly have it in for him already?

Nozz had sure been right about one thing—news traveled fast in a small town.

As his blue Camry rounded the corner he spotted Pam’s car in the driveway. His day had just gone from bad to worse. It was her third visit in a week, and he just wasn’t in the mood for company.

She was nice enough, but as time wore on, it was becoming more and more apparent that he and Pam just weren’t very compatible. Brylan was perfectly content to stay in and watch a movie in a pair of sweats with a beer in hand. Pam, on the other hand, was a wine and caviar type of girl, and she was forever begging him to take her out to fancy places that made him wear a damned tie, places that were hard on his wallet.

“Hi, sweetie!” Pam rushed over and gave him a quick peck on the lips.

“Hi.” He gave her a small squeeze as he surveyed the colorful mess that was strewn all over his kitchen island. “What’s all this?”

“They’re fabric swatches and magazine clippings. We need to color coordinate our outfits for prom. I’m having my dress made—”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa. Hold up a second,” he cut her off. “We’re just chaperoning. We don’t even have to get that dressed up.”

Her pale features darkened just a tad and a tiny bit of anger flickered in her blue eyes. “I know we’re just chaperoning, but I want us to stand out. You know?” She wrapped her dainty arm around his waist and batted her eyelashes at him. “I just want to show you off. Is there anything wrong with that?”

There was a lot wrong with that.

“Pam, I don’t think we should try to outshine the students. Prom is about them. Not us. Hell, I think we should try to be as inconspicuous as possible. You know, incognito?”

Her face fell and she stuck out her rosy bottom lip in a pout. “But I already have my designer working on a dress.”

Brylan smelled bullshit. Something wasn’t adding up. “I thought you brought all this stuff over so that we could choose colors. How are you having a dress made already if you don’t know the color?”

Her lying cheeks flushed. He’d obviously called her bluff and wondered how she planned to get around it.
“What I meant was…I need you to pick colors for your tie and vest that will coordinate with what I’m going to be wearing.”

_Ah. I see._ She wanted to make sure Brylan wouldn’t make her look bad. How thoughtful.

“Fine. Why don’t you pick out the colors for me? That’s not really my area of expertise anyway. I trust you to pick something nice.” He stepped back from her and retreated to the living room. She could do whatever she wanted, but he didn’t want any part of it.

She was back to brooding but he didn’t really care. He let her go back to her swatches while he turned his attention to the TV and started flipping through the channel guide. He was disgruntled when he saw one reality show after the other. Was that what the world had come to? What…people didn’t have enough problems so they had to watch other people bicker and fight on national television?

After a few minutes of scrolling he finally settled on an old episode of _Miami Vice_. Thank goodness for the classics.

Halfway through the show he felt the couch cushions sink beside him. “You look tense. I thought you might want one of these.” Pam handed him a beer. “So. What are we watching? I don’t recognize this show.”

_Figures._ “It’s a show from the 80’s. Couple of cool detectives, running around and solving crimes, driving fast cars…. My brothers and I used to watch it all the time.”

“Oh. Okay,” is all she said as she snuggled up next to him. Not knowing what else to do with his arm, he draped it across her shoulders while they watched Don Johnson jet across the bright blue ocean in a really nice, very expensive looking speed boat. After a few minutes, he felt a tickling sensation on his thigh that gave him the urge to scratch…but when he looked down he realized it was Pam’s hand. She started mid-thigh and gradually worked her way upward, slowly increasing the pressure of her touch which eventually caused a reflexive stirring in his jeans. Apparently Pam noticed it too because she looked up at him with a small, devilish smile playing on her lips.

He didn’t say anything, just chugged a big swallow of beer and let her continue her exploration. Right as she reached for the button of his jeans, a picture of Stormy’s face popped into his head. He remembered that night, on that same couch, when their bodies had been pressed together and he could feel the heat of her through their clothing. Those mesmerizing, smoky gray eyes, her full lips…. The image instantly ignited a battle in his brain. Part of him wanted Pam to stop, said she was not the right woman, that letting things continue would not be fair to either of them.
But there was another part of him that said that a romp with Pam might just be the distraction that he desperately needed.
Chapter Fourteen

Stormy was counting down the minutes until closing. It had been a slow day, a day that had given her way too much time to think. Brylan and Mama had been tag-teaming her thoughts all day, and all she wanted to do was go home and crash out in her bed, or rather, Brylan’s futon. But she promised Trudy that she would stick around and help her re-paint the store after closing. Trudy insisted that the mint green color on the walls behind the cash register was just too bland, and she opted to “liven things up” with a screaming shade of scarlet.

Trudy set a can on the counter and her eyes lit up like a kid on Christmas morning when she opened the lid. “Isn’t it gorgeous?”

The cowbell clanked before Stormy could answer, announcing the arrival of new customers, and causing a bubble of irritation to rise up. It was five minutes to closing time, and Stormy was just about to flip the sign over. When she looked up to see who it was, all she could see was red…and it wasn’t just the paint.

Marissa, her arch rival, and two other girls, sashayed into the store and started browsing around as if they had all the time in the world.

“Should I tell them to leave?” she asked Trudy.

“No, no. We don’t ever turn away a customer. That would be bad for business. I’m sure they won’t be long.” She pulled out the yellow wet floor cone from behind the counter and placed it on the floor near the register. “Just in case.” Then she added, “I’m going to the office to get the paint rollers and drop cloths. I’ll be right back.”

Stormy wasn’t thrilled with the idea of being left alone with those snooty girls meandering around, but she kept her misgivings to herself. “No problem,” she told her.

To pass the time, Stormy grabbed a bottle of Windex and began wiping down the glass display cases…until a large shadow fell across her.


Stormy was absolutely not in the mood to be taunted. “Is there something I can do for you, Marissa?” Her tone was clipped.
“Well, since you’re asking…you could go back to wherever the hell you came from. We don’t need your kind fouling up our nice little town.”

_That does it_. Rage permeated every cell in Stormy’s body as she stood to face her adversary, the one who was about to get her ass kicked. “I don’t know what the hell your problem is, Marissa, but I’m about to fix it for you!”

Marissa’s eyes went wide with fear and she started backing away from her. Apparently she was all bark and no bite, and seeing her cower under Stormy’s scrutiny just fueled her fury even more. The floodgates of her pent up frustration were wide open. “I’ve never done a single thing to you, Marissa, so just BACK OFF!” Before she realized it, she had Marissa backed all the way up against the adjacent counter and right up against Trudy’s can of red paint. Marissa bumped into it, causing it to slosh out. All over her fake blonde tresses.

“Ahhhh! My extensions! You bitch! I just paid fifteen hundred dollars for these…and now they’re ruined,” she held up the end of her paint-splattered hair, “My mom is an attorney, and I’m going to make sure she sues the hell out you and the owner of this tacky little store!”

Trudy stepped from around the corner, “No, honey. You didn’t pay for those extensions. Your mama did. She told me all about it last Friday during our weekly chat over coffee. Real sweet lady. Sure would break her heart if she found out her daughter was a thief.”

The look of horror on Marissa’s face was picture-worthy, but it only lasted for a second. Her chin jutted out in defiance and she lowered her eyes on Trudy, who was still calm, cool, and collected. “I don’t know what you’re talking about. I’m no thief. It’ll be my word against yours.”

“Wrong again, princess. It’s your word against my security cameras.” She crossed her arms and nodded toward a small camera affixed to the ceiling in the corner. Stormy hadn’t even realized it was there.

“Why don’t you hand over the turquoise bracelet in your pocket and get on out of here. You should probably get on home anyway and wash your hair before the paint dries. Lucky for you, it’s water-based. Should come right out.”

Stormy had never seen anyone turn purple before, but Marissa looked like her head was about to explode. She huffed and puffed all the way to the door, taking her friends, and her deflated ego, with her.

Trudy locked the door behind them and spun around to face Stormy, “You okay, kid?”

“Yeah. That girl just knows how to push my buttons, that’s all.”
She crossed her arms over her chest, “That’s not what I’m talking about. Why don’t we sit down and you can tell me what’s really bothering you?” She motioned over to Stormy’s favorite orange chairs. Trudy’s expression was unreadable, and it made her uneasy. “Trudy, are you mad at me for going off on Marissa?”

“No, no, sweetie. I heard the whole thing. That girl had it coming. I just sense that your anger wasn’t all meant for Marissa. It’s not like you to blow up like that. You’ve been wound up tighter than an eight day clock all week.”

Sweet, intuitive Trudy. It shouldn’t have been any surprise that she’d picked up on her angst. Stormy let out a sigh. “First of all, I’m worried about Mama. She was in bad shape when I left. I feel like I should go and check on her, but I don’t know if she wants to see me yet.” She felt a lump form in the back of her throat. “I don’t know if she will ever want to see me again.”

This time it was Trudy who heaved a sigh. “I don’t know, sweetie. She knows where you work. I suspect she’ll reach out to you when she’s ready. Just give it some more time.”

Trudy pointed out what Stormy hadn’t wanted to admit. Yaupon was a small town. If her mama had wanted to find her, she could have.

Stormy mindlessly fiddled with the little ceramic butterfly sitting on the counter while she sulked over her messed up life. Why did everything have to be so complicated?

“That’s not all. Is it?” Trudy said knowingly.

Stormy hated being so transparent. “No,” she admitted, “I’ve been a little worked up about last weekend.”

“Oh?” A look of surprise crossed Trudy’s face. “Care to elaborate?” She really, really didn’t, but there was no way out of it. “Brylan took me and Nozz fishing out at his dad’s place last Sunday.”

“Oh? How’d that go?”

“Well, it started out okay. I’m not sure Brylan’s father likes me much. He acted a little put off by my presence. But other than that it was fine. I took Nozz out for his first boating experience and we had a blast.”

“Sounds good so far. So what happened after that?”

“Well, Brylan’s dad was gone by the time we got back with the boat. Brylan said he’d had a headache, but I suspect something else happened. Brylan didn’t say, but I could tell he was upset about something.”

“Oh huh,” Trudy said suspiciously.

Then Stormy told her about their dinner… and the prom proposal.
Trudy clasped her hands together and lit up in a big, toothy smile. “That’s wonderful!”

“No. It’s not. I mean, Nozz is a good friend, but sometimes I get the impression he wants to be more. Plus, he’s going to show up at my door tomorrow night wearing a tux. And I don’t even have a dress.”

“Bullshit.”

Stormy nearly swallowed her tongue. It was the first time she’d ever heard Trudy swear. “What do you mean? I really don’t have anything to wear, Trudy.”

“Girlfriend, don’t think I haven’t noticed you lusting over that purple dress out front…more than once. Your eyes light up the whole store every time you look at it.” She got up and headed out to the front of the store and went right for the violet and ivory dress—the one that caught Stormy’s eye the very first time she walked into the place.

She took it off the rack and held it up, letting the bottom drape over her forearm. “Go try it on.”

“Oh, Trudy. It’s beautiful, but I can’t. I’ve seen the price tag.”

Trudy chuckled, “I’m going to let you in on a little secret. This is my dress. I mean, it’s not mine per se, but I made it myself. All it cost me was a few scraps of material that I took from my old wedding dress and an old bridesmaid dress that was horribly outdated.”

Stormy’s mouth dropped open in shock, “I didn’t know you could sew like that, Trudy! That thing looks like it should be on a runway in New York or Milan or something.”

Apparently, Trudy wasn’t used to compliments. The woman doled them out like candy but she wasn’t accustomed to receiving them, as evidenced by the rosiness of her cheeks. “Oh, come on now. It was the machine that did all the work. I just put it all together.” She took the dress from the hanger and held it up to Stormy’s bosom. “Dozens of girls have come in here and tried this thing on…but either they don’t have enough boobs to fill it up, or they’ve got a little too much junk in the trunk….”

“So what makes you think it’ll fit me?”

“Just a feeling I’ve got,” she said with a wink. “Now go try it on.”

Panic reared its ugly head and opened the door for self doubt. What if it didn’t fit? What if she got it dirty…or ripped it?

“But Trudy, what if I mess it up or something? I don’t think I should ___”

“Nonsense.” She cut her off with dismissive wave, “That’s what drycleaners are for. Now go!” She shooed her all the way to the dressing room. There was no giving this lady “no” for an answer.
Having no other choice, Stormy did as she was told and slipped behind the green paisley curtain of the dressing room and plopped down on the little wicker stool with the dress draped over her arm. The satiny fabric was cool against her skin and she loved the swishy sound that it made when it moved.

Was she bold enough to wear such a dress?

“How’s it going in there?”

Ugh. *Buck up, Stormy.* “Give me just a minute.”

She kicked her discarded Converse into the corner and peeled off her shirt and jeans while she swallowed the anxiety that threatened to choke her. “It’s just a damned dress,” she whispered to herself. She wiped her sweaty hands on her discarded tee-shirt and slipped the dress over her head. She managed to get the zipper about half-way, but her arms just wouldn’t bend quite far enough to get it the rest of the way. “Uh, Trudy… a little help?”

Trudy threw back the curtain and, surprisingly, the zipper glided right up without a problem. “Oh. My. Gosh. It’s perfect on you, Stormy. I knew it would be!”

The curvy form staring back at her in the mirror was unfamiliar. Stormy ran her hands over the beaded bodice and broke into a smile.

“The dress fit perfectly.

“You look just like a movie star. You’re ready for the red carpet,” Trudy crooned.

“I feel a little bit like one,” she had to admit. But her joy was short-lived as an unwelcomed image of Brylan popped into her head and the sting of tears pricked at her eyes.

“What’s wrong, honey? I thought you liked the dress.”

“No. The dress is beautiful. But Brylan is chaperoning the prom tomorrow night…with his girlfriend.” She plopped back down on the padded stool and let the embarrassing tears fall.

A look of shock overcame Trudy. “Girlfriend? How did that one get by me?”

“I got the impression they haven’t been dating long. But that’s not even the worst part,” she croaked as another wave of sobs overtook her, “I didn’t tell you everything that happened the other night.”

Trudy stiffened. Then in a soft but stern voice she asked, “Baby, did that man hurt you? Because if he did anything….”

“No! No,” she interrupted her, “It wasn’t anything like that. Actually it was kind of the opposite.”

Confusion marred Trudy’s face. “What do you mean, ‘the opposite’?”
Stormy sniffed, “We were watching TV after Nozz left. We were goofing around and he was trying to get the remote from me…and the next thing I knew he was on top of me…and I thought he was going to kiss me…but he didn’t. He dropped me like a hot potato and said he was sorry. Sorry! Can you believe that?”

She was expecting Trudy to share her distress…to agree with her, tell her that his actions were despicable and unforgivable. She wanted Trudy to be mad at him with her…but she wasn’t. Her eyes softened as she laid a gentle hand on Stormy’s shoulder and said, “Stormy. Can’t you see, sweetie? The man is just as infatuated with you as you are with him. He was just trying to do the right thing. Trying to be a gentleman. What he did was actually pretty commendable. Most guys would have taken full advantage. You have to see it from his point of view. He has a career to think about.”

“I know, Trudy. I know. But I can’t help but feel rejected. You know? It hurts like hell.”

“I know, baby.” She pulled her into a much needed motherly hug, “I know it hurts, but I promise you…everything will work out the way it’s supposed to.”

Stormy held her out at arm’s length so she could see her eyes, “Do you really believe that, Trudy? Because I really need to believe that. The last few weeks…. I just don’t know how much more my heart can take.”

Trudy tucked a stray strand of hair behind Stormy’s ear, “I have to believe that, sweetie. It’s what keeps me going.” There was a sadness in her eyes that contradicted the soft smile on her lips, “One way or the other, things will work themselves out even if it’s in a way we don’t expect. We just have to keep the faith, focus on the good in people. Otherwise all the bad stuff will swallow us whole.”
Chapter Fifteen

Stormy barely recognized the reflection staring back at her, “Oh, Trudy! I love it. You are an absolute miracle worker.” Her waist length chestnut mane was done up in big, loosely piled curls with little wispy tendrils trailing down the sides of her face.

“Nonsense. I’ve always said you have gorgeous hair. You just need a lesson on how to use hair products,” Trudy laughed.

Stormy couldn’t quit looking in the mirror. Her hair was perfect and her makeup was flawless. Trudy had managed to give her that sultry smoky-eyed look, something that she’d never be able to duplicate in a hundred years. And her jewelry sparkled even in the dim lighting of the tiny bathroom. The choker style necklace made up of lavender crystals, on loan from Trudy’s shop, set the dress off spectacularly.

A streak of remorse ran through her as she stood in front of the floor length mirror. She’d never really noticed a resemblance to her mother before, even though plenty of people had said it in the past. She’d always dismissed them as being nice and never once admitted to herself that she had anything in common with Marni Black. But the irrefutable evidence was literally staring her in the face. The high cheekbones, the almond shaped eyes, the thin nose…. They were her mother’s features beyond a shadow of a doubt. And it was at that moment that Stormy realized that she missed her mama…and tears began pooling in her eyes.

“Don’t you dare blink! Just hold on…let me get a tissue.” Trudy was back in a flash, waving a Kleenex. “Can’t have you messing up my masterpiece,” she smiled. “Now what in the world has you so upset, sweetie? This is your big night…you’re supposed to save the tears for afterward,” she joked.

Stormy stared into the light blue eyes of the woman who had been more of a mother to her than her own mama had ever been. “You’re so good to me, Trudy. And I am so grateful that you’re here with me. I just…. After everything Mama put me through…I still feel like she should be here. I just can’t quit wondering about the what-might-have-beens. You know?”
Trudy nodded and blotted Stormy’s eyes with the tissue once more. “I know, baby,” she said softly.

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With her emotions carefully put away and her makeup retouched, Stormy was ready for the prom. “I sure hope I don’t break my neck on the way down the stairs.” The three-inch ivory-colored heels were beautiful, but she feared that they might just be the death of her.

“Wow, Stormy. The guys will be drooling and the girls are going to turn green with envy.”

She waved her away. “Yeah, right.” She loved her makeover, but she still felt like a fish out of water, almost like she was borrowing someone else’s skin. She cursed the butterflies that bounced around in her stomach and took a long steadying breath. The thought of seeing Brylan for the first time since their little episode on the couch had her tied up in knots. She was planning to apologize for unleashing her wrath on him that night…if she didn’t lose her nerve.

And then there was the fact that he would have another woman on his arm at the prom. She didn’t like it, but she had to take it for face value. Brylan was out of her reach, and there was no use pining away for something that could never be.

She was startled by a knock at the door. Trudy shot her a wink on her way to the door, opening it up to reveal a very nervous sounding Nozz.

“Hi, Ms. Carmine.”

Stormy rolled her eyes. She’d told him a million times, every time he visited her at the store, that it was okay to call Trudy by her first name. But she guessed she couldn’t knock the guy for having manners.

Trudy let out a long, exaggerated wolf-whistle, “Well look at you, Nozz! You look like you just stepped out of GQ magazine! I think my heart just skipped a beat.” Stormy couldn’t see him because Trudy was blocking the doorway, but she would bet that Nozz’s cheeks were about ten different shades of crimson.

“Well, come on in, sexy,” Trudy flirted. She was such a riot. And when she finally stepped to the side, so that Stormy could see him fully, it was obvious what all the fuss was about.

There stood Nozz, tall and confident in a black tux, white shirt, and finished off with a violet tie. His normally shaggy blond hair was pulled back, and for the first time Stormy could see his whole face.
She had never realized just how good-looking the guy actually was, with his chiseled features and gleaming emerald eyes…. He was a little bit beautiful, and it sort of took her breath away.

When she finally found her voice, Stormy stepped out into the soft light of the living room lamp and drew his attention, “Hey Nozz.”

His mouth gaped open at the sight of her.

“Wow. Stormy.”

He’d gone temporarily mute. All he’d ever seen her in was baggy tee-shirts and jeans, so he was obviously a little stunned. “You…you’re uh…freaking gorgeous.”

Now it was her turn to blush. “Thanks, Nozz.”

“I mean it. You’re…wow.”

Stormy giggled like a little girl while the two of them just stared at each other, starry-eyed.

It was Trudy’s voice that broke the spell that bound them, “Okay, you two,” she grabbed her camera and ushered them out the door, “We’ve established that you both look pretty darned incredible, so now let’s get downstairs while it’s still light out so I can take some pictures.”

The stairs were even trickier than Stormy anticipated. She had one hand on the rail and the other looped through Nozz’s arm, with Trudy following closely behind them. If all else failed, she was hoping Trudy could grab a handful of hair if she started to fall.

Better to have a bald patch on her head than wind up as a splattered mess at the bottom of the stairs.

She focused on one slow, steady step at a time until they reached the bottom. And when she finally looked up, she was face to face with a tuxedo-clad, heart-stoppingly handsome Brylan.

And she forgot how to breathe.

“Brylan,” she stammered, “What are you doing here?”

There was no smile, no hint of a dimple anywhere. In fact, she’d never seen him look so solemn. He had his hands shoved in the pocket of his crisply starched jeans, causing his tuxedo jacket to bulge out on the sides. His expression was unreadable. “I…just came to see you off. Thought you might need a ride to the dance.”

Stormy couldn’t tear her eyes away from his. There were a million things tumbling around in her head, making speech all but impossible.

“I have my mom’s car,” Nozz interjected. Stormy had almost forgotten he was standing beside her. Brylan’s gaze jumped from her to Nozz. “Damn, Nozz. Almost didn’t recognize you, buddy. You clean up really nice.”
“So do you, Coach. But aren’t you a little overdressed for chaperoning?”

Brylan looked down at the ground and kicked at a little rock at the edge of the grass with his shiny black cowboy boot. “Wasn’t my idea.”

Trudy began to clear her throat loudly, drawing their attention away from each other. “Time to get this show on the road. Stormy and Nozz… over by that big oak tree.” She pointed. “It will make a nice backdrop.”

*Nice save, Trudy.* The awkwardness was getting to be unbearable.

After Trudy got enough pictures taken to fill up an entire album, Nozz and Stormy headed to the car with Stormy cursing her shoes the entire way as her heels sunk into the soft dirt. When they reached the car Trudy placed a hand on her shoulder and whispered in her ear, “Be strong, girl. And have fun.” Stormy spun around and grabbed her up in a bear hug, “Thank you for everything, Trudy.”

****

Nozz didn’t say much in the car on the way to the prom, but he did manage to steal several glances at Stormy’s overabundant cleavage. She wanted to say something snarky or clever just to break the ice, but her mind wouldn’t cooperate.

Instead, it was filled with thoughts of Brylan, standing there with those big, broad shoulders, dressed in that charcoal colored tux jacket and starched jeans. His dark, wavy hair was gelled to perfection and the top button of his white shirt was undone with his black tie hanging loosely around his collar. It’s a good thing his mood was somber, because if he had grinned at her she would have collapsed into a purple heap of mush right there at the bottom of the stairs.

For the life of her she couldn’t figure out what he was doing there. It should have been quite obvious that she and Nozz had transportation. For Pete’s sake, there were two extra cars in his driveway. Not to mention that she still had her truck.

Was he looking for an excuse to talk to her?

Stormy’s stomach started doing summersaults when they pulled into the crowded parking lot. Music echoed from inside the brightly lit gymnasium as several couples trotted across the lot and headed inside. A knot formed in Stormy’s gut as panic tightened its grip on her. When Nozz approached her side of the car she pushed the lock. Amusement twinkled in his eyes when he grasped the door handle and nothing happened.

“Stormy,” he said flatly, “what are you doing?”
She rolled the window down a couple of inches. “I can’t do this. There’re too many people here.”

Nozz shoved his hands into his pockets. “Uh, that’s kind of the point.”

Stormy stared at her hands in her lap, too embarrassed to look him in the eye while she tried to get a handle on her nerves. She jumped when she heard the sound of the driver side door open and Nozz hopped back into the car. “What are you doing, Nozz?”

“Well…I’m hoping to go to prom…but I’m not going in there by myself.”

“Sure you can. People go stag all the time,” she stammered.

“It’s not really stag if your date is in the car.” He looked at her with a lopsided smile. She realized that she wasn’t just sabotaging herself, but she was ruining the night for one of her best friends. So, she swallowed hard and took a few cleansing breaths until she felt the panic recede a little.

“Okay, you win.” She placed her hand on his forearm, “Just…stay close, okay?”

Nozz put his hand on top of hers, “You’ll have to beat me away with a stick.”

Once inside the gymnasium, Stormy had to push down the urge to run back to the car. Sensing her discomfort, Nozz gave her hand a squeeze. Maybe it was her imagination, but it seemed like every pair of eyes was fixed on the two of them. Nozz leaned in closely and said, “I’ve always wanted to be the guy with the prettiest girl in the room on his arm.” He was giving her that big goofy grin of his and some more of her nervousness dissipated.


“Sit. Definitely sit,” she insisted. “For a little bit anyway.” He nodded his understanding and led her to a table on the backside of the room where it seemed less crowded.

Stormy was impressed with the way the decorations turned out. She didn’t detect a specific theme, but the place looked surprisingly chic. The tables were draped in white tablecloths, with the soft flicker of battery-powered candles and pastel rings of flowers as centerpieces. Hanging from the ceiling were silver, white, and powder blue streamers.

Who knew a high school gymnasium could be converted into such an elegant ballroom?

Across the gym, there was a small stage set up where a band cranked out really loud, fast country music. Stormy and Nozz sat quietly while taking in the scene. People were dancing and laughing and seemed to be
having a genuinely good time. Stormy was grateful for Nozz and his easy-going personality as he sat there with her, content to be a spectator. It was why she liked him so much. With Nozz there was never any pressure. No expectations.

As her eyes wandered around the room they finally settled on Brylan. He was standing next to the table of refreshments and appeared to be having a conversation with the assistant baseball coach. She thought the guy’s name was Strausse, but she wasn’t certain. She didn’t keep up with anything sports related around school.

On Brylan’s arm, was a very bored looking young woman in a form-fitting, short dress which Stormy deemed inappropriate for a chaperone. The offensive hot-pink color clashed with her ivory skin and short black hair, and the five-inch stilettos were a bit over the top.

“Nozz? Who is that woman with Brylan?” She was pretty sure she already knew the answer.

“That’s Pam. I’m not sure what her last name is. She’s the one that’s been after Coach for weeks now. You mean you haven’t seen her over at Coach’s house?”

She shook her head. “No. Is she a teacher too?”

“No, but I hear she’ll be teaching here next year. Why?”

The woman suddenly turned away and ran to greet someone who just entered the room. The light bounced off her shiny black bob with each step.

_Ah ha._ She remembered. “She’s the one that was so rude to me in the hallway on my first day.”

Nozz scrunched up his eyebrows in confusion. “The bitchy one you told me about? I thought you said she was a teacher.”

“I thought she was. She acted like she belonged there… and that I didn’t. It pissed me off.”

“Huh. That’s weird.” He shrugged his shoulders. “She’s kind of a weird chick anyway. I don’t know what Coach sees in her.”

Right answer. It earned him a few more points in Stormy’s book.

The band started playing one of Stormy’s favorite ballads by Brooks and Dunn. “I like this music. I’m so glad they decided to switch it up a little bit. The new stuff is okay…but it doesn’t have the same heart, the life in it that the earlier music had. It was so gritty and raw. Hit you right in the heart kind of stuff. Ya know?”

The corner of Nozz’s mouth turned up in a small smile. “I couldn’t agree more. I think we were just born in the wrong decade.”

She giggled. “I think you might be right.”
Stormy absently swayed from side to side while watching the band play when her view was suddenly obscured. Nozz was standing in front of her with his hand out. “Come on, beautiful. Dance with me.”

****

“Hey, man. What do you have against paper cups?” Cooper asked Brylan, knocking him from his envy-induced stupor. He nodded toward the empty paper cup that Brylan had managed to twist and crumple to oblivion without even realizing it.

“Nothing. Just bored I guess.”

“Bored, huh? Try sellin’ that shit to somebody else, ‘cause I ain’t buyin’ it.”

Brylan shrugged it off and tossed the cup into a nearby trashcan. Cooper was a good friend but, at the moment, Brylan was in much need of some space.

Tension was rolling off him in waves. The night was a disaster. Pam was driving him crazy with her incessant chatter and he was tired of hearing her critiques. He didn’t care whose dress was outdated, which girls were wearing the wrong shoes, which boys needed their hair cut, or who looked silly on the dance floor. Those kids were there to have a good time. Who was she to judge them? Her comments were mean and uncalled for. Had he not been committed to stay, he would have left her standing there alone with her opinions.

And then there was the music.

The song they were playing, about broken dreams and lost loves…the band may as well have been pouring gasoline on his heart.

“Brylan?” Cooper was still trying to get his attention, but it was fixed on Stormy as she glided across the dance floor with Nozz. He saw Nozz lean in close to her ear and say something. Her head tilted back as she laughed, her eyes sparkling in amusement. She was so damned beautiful. Why had he suggested they go to prom together? What on God’s green earth made him think that was a good idea?

I’m a glutton for punishment, that’s what.

He thought back to earlier, when he first saw her coming down the stairs of the apartment. He thought surely his heart would explode. His lungs had seized up and refused to drag in a breath. And now it was happening again.

He needed some air…and fast.

He flung open the doors to the gym and marched out to the parking lot. The restrictive damned jacket was the first to go. He flung the
offensive thing into his car, followed by the tie that threatened to choke off his air supply. He should never have agreed to wear them in the first place, but Pam had nearly blown a gasket when he’d told her he wasn’t wearing the slacks. The jacket and tie seemed like a good compromise at the time.

He unbuttoned the top button of his shirt and rolled up his sleeves while sucking in a big breath of the warm, damp, night air. Exasperated, he ran a hand through his hair, cringing at the crunchy feel of the dried gel that Pam had insisted on.

“Brylan, are you going to tell me what the hell is wrong? Or do I need to beat it out of you?”

“Wow, Coop. Way to be subtle.”

“Well…I’ve been trying to get your attention for half an hour….”

“I’ve just got a lot on my mind is all.”

Cooper cocked a suspicious eyebrow, “Does it have anything to do with that brunette goddess in purple that you’ve been gawking at since we got here?”

“Damn. Am I that obvious?”

“Oh, yeah. To me anyway. I recognize that look. I was sporting it myself not long ago after I busted up with Monica.”

Brylan leaned over the hood of his car and hung his head, “Tell me what I should do, man. I just can’t get her out of my head. She’s smart, and beautiful, and funny….”

“Man…. If this were any place other than Yaupon, I’d tell you to wait it out until she graduates in a couple of weeks. But this is Yaupon… and people like to talk. Doesn’t matter if what you’re doing is right or wrong. It only matters what people around here think about it. You know how it is. Opinions are like assholes—everybody’s got one. And around here, opinions are what count.”

“Yeah. I’ve figured that one out already. Yesterday I had Flint call me into his office to more or less ask me if I was screwing one of his students.”

Cooper’s eyebrows shot up to his hairline. “No shit?”

“Well, he asked if I had a girl living with me…I had to explain to him that she’s a tenant.”

“Damn, dude.” He exhaled loudly and ruffled the back of his hair. “That’s rough. I wonder who’s been running their mouth.”

Brylan stood up straight to stretch some of the tension out of his shoulders and leaned against the side of the car so that he was facing Cooper. “That’s what gets me, Coop. I haven’t done a damn thing wrong.
I’ve only been in this town for a few months and people are already starting rumors… and I don’t like living under a microscope.”

Cooper clapped a hand on his shoulder, “Man, I hate to tell you this…but if that’s the case, you chose the wrong town…and the wrong profession.”

Cooper was right. Brylan was living a life that he hadn’t chosen for himself. His dad had talked him into teaching; an injury had taken away his chance at a baseball career; and, Principal Flint had roped him into dating Pam. It seemed that everything in his life had been dictated by something or someone other than him. And he was sick of it.

Brylan looked up at the small sprinkling of stars in the sky and let out a long sigh. “Guess we better get back inside before rumors start flying about me and you.”

Coop dropped his head back and let out a hoot of laughter. “I oughta take some empty boxes over to your house and pretend I’m moving in…start a feeding frenzy amongst the town busy bodies.”

“Pfft. You’re a real riot, Coop.” He opened his car door to retrieve his jacket and then paused. He slammed it closed again.

Screw the damned jacket.

****

Stormy giggled as Nozz twirled her around and then pulled her up against his chest again. Who knew he was so smooth on the dance floor? She couldn’t help but notice the several pairs of female eyes that were staring in their direction. Too bad, ladies. He’s with me tonight.

Surprisingly, Stormy was having tons more fun than she had anticipated, but she was still a little distracted by Brylan’s earlier disappearance. By the look on his face and the tension in his frame as he walked through the gym, he was clearly upset. She wondered if he was coming back, or if she’d missed her opportunity to talk to him.

And then she spotted him.

He returned to the gym sans jacket and sexy beyond words. A rogue lock of hair escaped from his previously slick sculpted head and had fallen down over his forehead. It was just begging to have her fingers run through it.

“You’re going to set the room on fire if you keep looking at him like that.” She whipped her gaze from Brylan to Nozz in horror. She wanted to defend herself, but all thoughts had fallen from her head. All she could do was stare at him with wide eyes and mouth ajar while Nozz smirked at
her. “Geez, Stormy. It’s okay. Just keep moving your feet…or else we’re gonna get plowed over.”

She squeezed her eyes shut and begged for the right words. *Come on, Stormy. Think!*

Still nothing.

“Don’t look so shocked. I’ve known you had a thing for the coach for a while now.”

“Nozz,” she opened her eyes and looked at him apologetically, “I don’t know what to say….”

“You don’t have to say anything. I knew I was sloppy seconds before I asked you to prom.”

She shook her head in disbelief. “Sloppy seconds? I wouldn’t exactly phrase it like that, Nozz. In case you haven’t noticed…every girl in here has drooling over you. You’re a catch.”

His grin widened. “I know. I’m not totally clueless. I had plenty of options for prom dates.”

Stormy realized that she was more self-absorbed than she had originally thought. Why wouldn’t girls be throwing themselves at Nozz? He was handsome, funny, and he had that whole lackadaisical thing going on that made him seem a little mysterious. In other words, he was charming.

“So why did you come with me if you knew I had eyes for somebody else? I don’t understand…you ruined your own prom.”

“No. I absolutely did not,” he said emphatically. “I knew you wouldn’t come to prom otherwise, and I didn’t want you to miss it. Plus, you’re good company. I didn’t want to spend the whole night listening to some girl gush over what everybody else is wearing and obsessing over her hair…and all that other crap that most girls do.”

“So, it was mostly all about you, then?” she teased.

“Definitely.”

His cockiness earned him a light punch on the shoulder. “Nozz…. What am I going to do with you?”

He waggled his eyebrows suggestively, “I have some ideas…."

She punched him again, a little harder this time.

“Owe!” He feigned injury by clutching his shoulder and then embarrassed the hell out of her with, “Help! Abuse! This girl is hurting me!”

“Shhhh! Shut up, stupid,” she scolded him in a giggly, whispered yell. “People are looking at us!”
She wasn’t exaggerating. People were staring. One of them was Brylan. And he looked like he could spit nails.

Stormy stopped dancing and told Nozz, “I have something to take care of. I’ll be right back.”

The look on his face turned grave and he gently tugged her back toward him. “Stormy, I know it’s not my business, but you’re my friend and I don’t want you to get hurt…..”

“What is it, Nozz? Spit it out.” His tone had her worried.

“Coach…. Even if he likes you back, there’s nothing he can do about it. He’ll lose his job, Stormy.” His words came out slow and careful and his eyes were apologetic, but it wasn’t enough to prevent the ripple of anger that ran through her.

“I know Nozz. Everybody has made that abundantly clear.” As she spoke the words, understanding set in, and she knew what she had to do. The writing was on the wall and it echoed what everyone had already told her.

She and Brylan didn’t have a chance.

Trudy said it. Nozz said it. And hell, even Brylan had said it…just not in as many words. She dragged her eyes from Nozz’s and scanned the gym, only to see that Pam had rejoined Brylan at the refreshment table. She watched as Pam smoothed the front of Brylan’s shirt and then slipped her arm through his. The small, intimate act helped cement her decision.

“You know what, Nozz? What I have to say to Brylan can wait. I’m all yours for the rest of the night.” Nozz raised a cocky, blond eyebrow and a cheeky grin spread across his handsome face, earning him another punch in the arm. “That’s not what I meant and you know it.”

He clutched his fake injury again, “Good. Because I’m probably going to need a doctor later.”

****

Butterflies bounced around like ping-pong balls inside Stormy’s stomach as she and Nozz made the trek up the stairs to her apartment. Though they were just friends, the evening had still felt very much like a date. And didn’t most dates end with a kiss? The whole idea of it made her nervous.

“Don’t worry,” Nozz said as she put the key in the door, “I’m not going to try to kiss you or anything.” He was leaning casually against the doorframe with his arms crossed across his chest, smirking as if not kissing her was a foregone conclusion. And for some reason unbeknownst
to her, a wave of disappointment washed over her. She turned the key until she heard the click and then paused. *Do I want him to kiss me?*

The clearing of his throat interrupted her thoughts, “I should tell you that you’re not going to be seeing much of me anymore.”

She was panic stricken. *Oh no.* She’d screwed things up. He never wanted to see her again. “Wh... why not?” she stuttered.

“I got a job over at the hospital. I’ll be mopping floors and emptying trash cans.”

Relief mixed with disappointment. “That’s good I guess. You getting a job I mean. But it’s going to really suck not having you around.”

His expression was solemn as his eyes focused on the wooden boards of the landing beneath their feet. Stormy gave his forearm a light squeeze. “You don’t look too thrilled about it.”

“Would you be? Mopping up people’s vomit and urine and...” He shivered. “I don’t even want to think about it.”

Stormy could definitely identify with that sentiment. She’d been there and done that... and it wasn’t pretty.

“Maybe it won’t be so bad,” she tried to reassure him even though she knew otherwise.

“Maybe,” he said thoughtfully. “At least the pay is decent. Not great, but better than flipping burgers. But the most important thing is the hours. I’ll mostly be working the day shift so I’ll be able to get home before dad does.”

Stormy didn’t know how to respond in words, but her heart ached for him. Poor guy... his whole life centered on protecting his mom from his dad. It wasn’t fair.

“That’s good, Nozz,” she said with forced enthusiasm. She secretly wished she had a magic wand that she could wave around and change his circumstances. Hers too, for that matter.

Suddenly, the thought of going inside the quiet apartment didn’t appeal to her. She wasn’t ready to be alone, and she definitely wasn’t ready to go to bed. Sleep would be impossible anyway, as bedtime was when the demons came out to play. That’s when her mind always came alive with thoughts of Mama... and Brylan... and every damned bad thing that’s ever happened to her.

“I know it’s late, Nozz, but do you want to go get a burger or something? Unless you need to get home, in which case I totally understand.”

Nozz’s shoulders visibly relaxed. “A burger sounds really good right now. I’m starving, and since my brother and his wife are visiting, I can
stay out as late as I want. For tonight anyway. Dad’s always on his best behavior when other people are around.”

Huh. A brother. She wondered if he was just as much of a charming smartass as Nozz. The thought made her smile. “Just give me a minute to change my shoes.”
Chapter Sixteen

It had been a long, lonely two weeks since the prom. Stormy had barely seen Nozz since he’d started his job at the hospital. He worked every afternoon and most weekends, and after graduation the hospital would be putting him on full-time.

Although Stormy didn’t envy him having to empty bedpans and mop floors, at least Nozz had a plan. She, on the other hand, had no idea what the future held for her. Graduation was just around the corner and her whole life was up in the air.

Unfinished financial aid applications crinkled beneath her as she rolled over on the futon and stared up at the ceiling. What the hell was she going to do if the whole college thing didn’t pan out? Before Mama had thrown her out, she’d saved every penny she could. But being on her own hadn’t allowed her savings to grow as she’d originally planned. Buying food and paying rent left very little left over, and things were looking bleaker by the day.

In the beginning, before everything got so messed up between them, Brylan had told her she could stay for as long as she wanted. Rent free. But that was when they were friends. Now, things were tense between them and it just didn’t feel right living in his place for free. Not wanting to face him, and knowing he’d refuse them anyway, Stormy had been placing bi-weekly payments in his mailbox. It wasn’t much, but it was something. And it made her feel better to put a label on things.

She and Brylan weren’t friends. They weren’t in a relationship. They were leaser and lessee.

As if on cue, a lawnmower cranked up outside, drawing Stormy out of her thoughts and drawing her over to the window. Sure enough, there was Brylan, shirtless and glistening with sweat as he push-mowed the strip of yard between his house and the garage apartment.

And there she was, staring at him again.

Grrr…. What is wrong with me? She yanked the frilly yellow curtains closed and buried her face in a pillow to stifle her frustrated groans.
For the next two hours Stormy distracted herself with grant and loan applications. She was nearly cross-eyed from staring at the tiny print, and her hand was starting to cramp up. She was regretting her decision to print them out and take them home rather than completing them online at the public library. Had she realized how much of a pain in the ass they were going to be, she would have stayed there and endured the musty smell and the creepy librarian that kept eyeing her as if she were a criminal. What did she thing she would do, stuff the desktop computer under her shirt and make a run for it?

Her stomach growled, reminding her that the half a bag of chips she had for breakfast wasn’t enough to sustain life, so she hopped up from the futon and sauntered to the tiny kitchen.

Hmmm…there wasn’t much to choose from. She had cereal, but no milk. There was peanut butter, but no bread. “Story of my life,” she ground out between clenched teeth. Then she spotted a can of tuna fish… and a sleeve of crackers. “Okay. Guess I’m having tuna.”

Just as she was pulling the can opener out of the drawer somebody knocked on the door, startling her and causing her to drop the can opener on her bare foot. “Dammit!” She hobbled over to the door and was surprised to see Nozz standing on the other side.

“Hey, Nozz. What are you doing here? I thought you were working.”

“I was, but my supervisor let me off early. Look, I’m really sorry to barge in on you…”

His expression was grave she detected a note of anxiety in his tone. The remorseful look in his eyes caused unease to slide over her. “What is it, Nozz? Are you okay? Did something happen—”

“No,” he cut her off, “I think it’s your mom.”

She couldn’t have heard him right. He didn’t even know her mom.

“What do you mean? What about her?”

Nozz let out a shaky breath, “Well, I was taking out the trash in the emergency department when EMS rolled in a woman on a stretcher. She was yelling and cursing… and I didn’t think anything of it at first. They bring in drunk people all the time that scream and yell about wanting to go home. It always makes me wonder why they called for help in the first place.”

“Get to the point, Nozz,” she snapped at him unintentionally. “Sorry.” She squeezed her eyes shut briefly in an attempt to center herself. “Just tell me what happened. What makes you think it was my mother?”
“Because I heard her call out for you…I heard her say, ‘Stormy,’ and then I heard the nurse address her as ‘Marni’. Isn’t that your mom’s name?”

All of the blood rushed out of Stormy’s face and pooled in her feet. Her head was swimming.
Mama needed her.
“Maybe you should sit down for a minute, Stormy.”
“No. I…I’ve got to go.” She shook the fuzz from her head and started rushing around to find her keys and shoes. On her way to the door Nozz reached out and grabbed a hold of her arm.
“Hold on a second, Stormy. I need to tell you something else but I don’t want you to freak out. I just want you to be prepared just in case….”
“What is it, Nozz?” What else could he possibly have to tell her right now?
“Stormy, she was vomiting blood.”

****

Stormy made it to the hospital in record time and threw the truck in park before it even came to a complete stop. It felt like her heart was going to beat out of her chest as she sprinted through the automatic doors of the emergency room entrance. Once inside, she bent over and put her hands on her knees, silently begging them to stop shaking while she tried to catch her breath and compose herself. When she erected herself to standing, she realized that there were a handful of people in the waiting area. They were all looking at her suspiciously. If they were thinking she was a basket case…well, they’d be right.
But did she give a damn?
No.
Once she caught her breath enough to speak, she made her way to the glass window. To her dismay, on the other side of the window sat the very same woman who registered her on the night she sprained her ankle. And, once again, she was jabbering away on her cell phone and giggling.
The mere sight of the woman made her want to scream. She didn’t have time for this bullshit. She started slapping the glass with her palms to get the woman’s attention, “I need information on my mother,” she started to say, but the woman held up a finger, signaling for her to wait while she giggled into the phone some more. Stormy was dying on the inside and she wasn’t going to stand there like a moron for one more second when she had no idea what was happening with her mother.
She’d had enough.
“Look, lady! My mama might be dying right now! Get your lazy ass off the phone and do your damned job!”

The woman didn’t even flinch. Apparently she was used to the insults, which spoke volumes. She simply rolled her eyes and Stormy could hear her tell the person on the other end of the line, “I’m gonna have to call you back.” She then stood up and straightened her scrub top as she sauntered over to the window. “How can I help you?”

Stormy took a deep breath. You could start by coming out of that little room so I can put my foot up your ass. As bad as she wanted to say it, she bit her tongue. “Marni Black...she was brought in a little while ago...I’m her daughter.”

“Hold on,” she huffed as she starts punching keys on her keyboard. “What was the name again?”

Right as Stormy was about to unleash on the woman for the second time, the stainless steel doors opened... and, like an angel sent from Heaven, out walked the nurse that was so nice to her on the night of her accident. It was Angela. And, thankfully, she recognized her. “Hey, Stormy.”

“Angela, thank goodness! Is my mama back there?”

“She sure is, hon. She was asking for you earlier. Come on, I’ll take you to her.” She snaked an arm around Stormy’s shoulders and led her toward the big double doors leading to the treatment area. Stormy couldn’t help but cast a dirty look at the receptionist... the one who now stood with her mouth ajar and a disbelieving look on her face.

As they passed curtain after curtain and the antiseptic smells began to assault her nose, the reality of the situation crashed down onto Stormy like a tidal wave. She had no idea what she was about to encounter and the urge to flee was overwhelming.

“She’s right here, sweetie,” Angela chirped while sliding the pink and gray curtain aside. The apprehension must have been obvious on Stormy’s face. “It’s okay. Go on in. She’s just sleeping.”

Stormy had never seen her mother so still...and so small. The lifeless lump curled up in a ball on the gurney could have easily passed for a child. Stormy took a few cautious steps forward to confirm that it was in fact her mother lying there, because a part of her simply couldn’t believe it. The person on that gurney looked so helpless and vulnerable. It barely resembled the loud, surly spitfire of a woman that had raised her.

The quiet was deafening. The only sounds were that of the beeping heart monitor and Mama’s soft snores. Stormy half hoped that Mama would wake up and start hurling insults at her just to make the situation feel more real.
Stormy wiped at something warm on her cheek. A tear. She hadn’t even realized she was crying.

“We’re going to admit her so we can run some more tests.” The doctor’s voice startled her. It was the same white-haired man that had treated her on the night she sprained her ankle. Stormy was starting to wonder if the hospital had any other staff.

“What happened to her, doctor? Why is she here?”

There was something grim hidden behind his watery blue eyes. “Well, apparently some of the neighbors saw her collapsed in the driveway when they drove by. They called 911. From what I can tell so far, she’s severely dehydrated…and highly intoxicated.

Stormy swallowed down the humiliation and tried to focus on what was in front of her. “Is it true that she was vomiting blood?” The doctor’s face twisted into a scowl and he looked down at the floor while running a hand down the back of his head. He was obviously trying to find the right words. “I’m a big girl, doc. Just tell it to me straight. Please.”

He looked back up at her and clutched his clipboard to his chest. “Yes. I’m afraid so.”

“Well, what does that mean?” Stormy’s fuse was getting shorter by the minute. Cryptic answers were not going to cut it.

“Stormy, your mom…she’s been a heavy drinker for quite a while, hasn’t she?”

The words slammed into her like a two-by-four. She’d asked for honest answers, but she hadn’t been prepared give any. The truth was bitter in her mouth, “For as long as I can remember. Why?”

“Well, I can’t be sure of anything right now…but sometimes when the liver gets damaged, it can cause other problems…. But let’s not jump the gun right now, okay? Let’s get her upstairs and see what the tests turn up.”

Stormy turned her attention back to the motionless form on the bed as she wiped more moisture from her face.

Oh, Mama. What have you done to yourself?
Chapter Seventeen

Bryan had been twirling Stormy’s apartment key between his fingers for so long that they were starting to tingle. It was the last thing he had expected to find when he checked his mail this morning. It shouldn’t have shocked him that Stormy moved out, and yet it did… right down to his very core. And the accompanying letter…he’d read it so many times he had it memorized.

Dear Brylan,

There aren’t enough words to convey how grateful I am for your generosity. You gave me a place to stay when I had nowhere else to go, and you offered me kindness and friendship when I needed it the most. For that, I will carry you in my heart always.

Unfortunately, there are circumstances beyond my control that are calling for me to move back home. I’ve enclosed your key along with a partial rent payment. I know it isn’t much, but I hope that it helps.

I wish you all the best.

Stormy

She was gone.

The apartment was empty. She had left during the night and unknowingly took a piece of Brylan’s heart with her. He could only imagine what “circumstances” could have driven her back to her mother’s house. Worry was already starting to eat a hole into his gut.

He stuffed the money inside the yellow padded envelope with all the other “rent payments” that she’d been leaving in the mailbox. Then he put it back in the desk drawer in the bedroom along with the apartment key.

Lying on his unmade bed, he looked up at the dust bunnies that had accumulated on the ceiling fan and willed himself to sleep, but it just
wouldn’t come. The events of the last few months swirled around in his head until he was dizzy. Stormy. His dad. His boss. So many things. So many mistakes and missed opportunities.

The rattle of the front doorknob jolted him out of his thoughts.

“Hellooo? Brylan?”

Shit. It was Pam. She was the last thing he wanted to deal with and the woman had the worst timing. If Brylan could have gotten a key back, it would have been Pam’s copy of his house key. It was a real bonehead move, giving her a key to his house in the first place.

Maybe if he were to lie really still she would think he was sleeping and go away.

“Hey, sweetie! What are you doing in here in the dark?” She flipped the light switch, flooding the room with unwanted light and causing him to shield his eyes.

“I was taking a nap…or at least I was trying to,” he snarled at her.

“Well aren’t you Mr. Grumpy…. Get up out of this dark room. We can go for a drive. It’ll make you feel better.”

He rolled over and punched his pillow before settling back down on it. He didn’t want to take a drive. He didn’t want to feel better. All he wanted to do at that moment is wallow in misery. Geez, couldn’t the woman take a hint?

“Pam, I don’t feel like…” His ringtone cut him off and he grabbed his phone off the nightstand despite the scowl Pam was shooting at him.

“Hello?”

“Coach?”

Brylan tensed at the sound of Nozz’s voice. There was a crackle in it that wasn’t quite right. “What’s wrong?” There was sniffing on the other end of the line.

“I…my…he….” Nozz couldn’t seem to get the words out.

Brylan’s grip on the phone tightened and a muscle in his jaw ticked. “Nozz?” There was more sniffing. “Just calm down and tell me where you are.”

“I’m at the city park… over by the basketball court…under the pavilion.”

“Okay. Give me five minutes.” He shoved his phone in his pocket on the way to the kitchen to fetch his keys.

“A friend of mine needs help. I don’t know how long I’ll be.”
“Let me guess…one of those kids that you’re so insistent on hanging out with? That figures. And just where do I come in on your list of priorities?”

“Pam, I don’t have time for this right now.” He grabbed his wallet and headed for the door.

“Brylan, I really need to talk to you about something. It’s important,” she whined.

With his back to her and his hand on the door knob he rolled his eyes, “Fine. Stay here. We’ll talk when I get back.”

****

It didn’t take long to spot the scruffy blond kid in the hoodie, sitting all alone with his head in his hands. From a distance he looked okay, but as Brylan exited the car and got closer he could see the puffy eyes and the bluish discoloration along the side of his jaw. “Hey, Coach,” he rasped. He’d obviously been screaming, or crying…or both. Brylan took a seat beside him on the concrete picnic table, reminding him of the day Stormy had told him about her mother’s creepy, stalker boyfriend. Brylan shook the memory away and sat quietly, waiting for Nozz to take the lead in the conversation.

“I’m sorry to make you come out here like this, Coach, but I didn’t know what else to do.”

“It’s fine, Nozz. I didn’t have anything going on,” he tried to assure him by leaning back on his elbows nonchalantly. “I’m guessing this has to do with that bruise on your face. Did you get into a fight?”

He looked down at the ground, shoving his hands into his pockets. “I guess you could say that.”

“With who?”

“My dad,” he reluctantly answered. Brylan sat straight up, his senses on high alert. Damn. He’d known something was up with the kid, but this…he didn’t see this coming. But maybe he should have—always looking at his watch, never letting Brylan drive him to his house—Brylan knew something was out of kilter. He should have picked up on the clues. Should have figured out he had problems at home, but he hadn’t. The guilt was heaping hot coals on his head.

“Do you want to tell me what happened?”

Nozz was quiet for a minute, trying to find the right words. “I was stretched out on the couch watching TV. My dad came home from the bar, drunker than usual. Mom was unloading the dishwasher, minding her own business when he started picking on her again, calling her names and
telling her she was worthless. Then he shoved her. I...I just couldn’t take it anymore.”

“So you hit him?”

“No. Not at first. I started defending my mom like I always do. I was afraid he was going to hit her again…so I got in his face. I wanted him to hit me instead. I knew it was bound to happen sooner or later anyway.”

Brylan gripped the edge of the table until his knuckles were white. He was having a hard time wrapping his mind around what he was hearing. “So that’s what happened? You got between him and your mom, so he hit you?”

Nozz didn’t answer right away and Brylan noticed the quiver of his lip. “I hit him first. I didn’t mean to…but I couldn’t help myself…. He…he….”

“He what, Nozz?”

A tear ran down his cheek and he wiped it away with his shirt sleeve before speaking again. “I was screaming at dad to leave mom alone…to pick on me instead…and that’s when Whiskey ran out from under the couch…and Dad spotted him. He picked him up by the tail, just to piss me off…and Whiskey bit him. So he threw him against the wall. He killed him.”

Brylan laid a hand on Nozz’s shoulder and squeezed. Nozz had always talked about his pet rat the way most people go on and on about their dogs or cats. He loved that thing. “Nozz, I’m so sorry.” He didn’t know what else to say to the poor guy.

“Yeah. When I ran over to check on him…and saw that he wasn’t moving…that’s when I lost it. I belted Dad good. Right in the damned nose. Broke it. Blood was all over the place. I guess it freaked Mom out because for the very first time, she called 911. I guess Dad realized he was going to be in trouble this time so he decided to get one last punch in for good measure.” Nozz rubbed his jaw and winced.

“Are you alright? Do you need a doctor?”

“Nah. I’ll be alright. I’m just glad that that rotten son-of-a-bitch is in jail. For now anyway.”

“Damn, Nozz. I wish you would have come to me sooner. Maybe I could have helped somehow.”

“Nah. There’s nothing you could have done.”

“Maybe. But I would have liked to try. So, what happens now?”

“Mom said she was pressing charges this time. She’s supposed to be getting a restraining order. She promised me. And I finally called my brother. I told him all about it.”
“You mean he didn’t know?”

“No. Dad didn’t start acting this way until he lost his job a couple of years ago. My brother was already out of the house and married by then. I’m going to live with him and his wife right after graduation. He’s going to give me a job. He owns a professional carpet cleaning service.”

“That’s great, Nozz. Really. Well at least something good came out of all of this. I’m just sorry as hell you had to go through it.”

“Yeah. Me too.”

A strained silence settled between them. They just sat on the picnic table and listened to the wind as it whistled through the metal rafters of the covered basketball court. Nozz was the one to break through the quiet.

“How’s Stormy doing?”

Brylan was caught off guard by the abrupt change of topic, one that he really wasn’t up for discussing. “I don’t know. She left sometime last night. Left me a note. But all it said was that she needed to go back home. She didn’t give any details.”

“That sounds like her. Tough chick. She feels like she has to take on the world all by herself. Doesn’t want people to worry.”

“Yeah. Sounds like somebody else I know,” he said as he flicked the bill of Nozz’s baseball cap. “You wanna fill me in on what’s going on while I give you a ride home? That is, if you’re ready to go home.”

“I should probably be there when Mom gets home from the police station. You know…to make sure she’s okay.”

“Alright. Let’s go.”

****

Pam’s car was still parked in the driveway when Brylan pulled up to the house. His shoulders sagged in defeat. He really just wasn’t up for whatever Pam had in store for him. His mind was still reeling from the bomb that Nozz just dropped on him.

Well, make that two.

First, there was Nozz’s dad and that whole mess, and then about Stormy…and the battle she was facing with her mom being sick. It just didn’t seem fair. To be so young and have to deal with so much bullshit instead of being out with friends and doing the normal things that young people do.

When he opened the door Pam was waiting for him in the kitchen, sitting at the island with her hands around a glass of milk. “Hey,” he grunted, “I figured you would have left by now.”

“You said we could talk when you got back. Remember?”
Oh yeah. He had said that, didn’t he? Dammit.

“Pam, I’ve had a really shitty day, one of epic proportions. Whatever it is…can’t it wait? I just want to take a shower and go to bed.” He pulled his shirt over his head on his way to the bathroom.

“No, Brylan. It can’t wait…. I’m pregnant.”

Right then Brylan’s world stopped spinning and the bottom dropped out of his stomach…and all he could hear was the whooshing sound in his ears. “What did you say?” He was praying he hadn’t heard her right. Maybe his psyche was just messing with him and he really didn’t hear what he thought he heard. Maybe….

“I’m pregnant, Brylan.”

He stared at her in disbelief. “What? I don’t understand. We slept together once.”

“Well, apparently once was enough, Brylan.”

The sound of his own name was grating on his nerves and he wished she would quit using it. He backed against the wall and scrubbed his face with his hands. His day had gone from bad to—“Wait a minute. I thought you said you were on the pill?”

“I was. But I was taking antibiotics for that ear infection I had. Remember? And the doctor said that taking antibiotics can make birth control ineffective. I didn’t know that at the time.”

“Well that’s just great, Pam! I’m one big freaking cliché, aren’t I?”

“What? What are you talking about? I thought you’d be happy.”

“Happy? Pam, we’ve only been hanging out for a few weeks. How can I be happy right now? This is so…messed up!”

She stilled, standing right there in the hallway with the two of them facing off against each other, hands clenched into fists, eyes blazing…and then she broke down into sobs. And all Brylan could see was Becky. Becky with the same dark hair, same blue eyes, and crying for the very same reason.

She was scared.

Was the universe secretly plotting against him?

No. He did this. There was no one else to blame. He’d managed to self-destruct again. Only, this time he would have a say. He would take responsibility for his actions.

He let out a breath he didn’t realize he was holding and slowly made his way down the hall and pulled Pam to his chest, resting his chin on her head. He held her and told her that everything was going to be okay.

He just hoped that he was right this time.
Chapter Eighteen

It was strange to be standing in the kitchen of that old run down trailer again. It felt like a lifetime since she’d been there, but fifty lifetimes still would not have been long enough. Not long ago Stormy thought—no, had hoped—that she would never, ever set foot in that place again. And now here she stood, completely bewildered by yet another curveball that life decided to throw her way.

With Mama tucked away in bed, the run-down house was quiet, leaving her alone with nothing but her thoughts. And at the moment, her thoughts didn’t make good companions.

Stormy leaned against the counter and stared at the piles of dirty dishes that were screaming to be washed. The brown, drippy stains leading from the coffee pot to the floor were begging to be scrubbed, and the grimy counters hadn’t been cleaned in who knew how long.

Stormy turned on the faucet and squirted dish liquid into the sink. As much as it irritate her to have to clean up her mother’s mess, she needed something to occupy her mind, something other than the long list of disappointments in her life.

Four hours later, Stormy had cleaned the bathroom, done two loads of laundry, and cleaned the kitchen until it sparkled. It was a major feat considering the shape it was in when she got there. After emptying an entire can of Lysol she could barely smell the stench of stale cigarettes and curdled milk anymore.

Satisfied by her achievements and thoroughly exhausted, Stormy stretched out on the couch and closed her eyes. The moment that she did, the doctor’s words drifted back into her mind. She can’t keep going like this, Stormy. She dodged a bullet this time, but if she keeps drinking....

He didn’t have to finish his sentence. The meaning was pretty clear. Her mother was slowly killing herself.

A fit of coughing coming from the back of the trailer yanked her out of her thoughts, so Stormy dragged herself off the couch to go check on her. Marni was in the hallway pulling her faded blue bath robe tighter
around her tiny frame. She stiffened when she noticed Stormy walking toward her.

“You okay, Mama?”

“Yeah. I’m fine. I was going to go find something to eat.” She pushed a rogue strand of hair out of her face with a shaky hand and a flicker of fear flitted through Stormy. The doctor had told them that the worst of the withdrawal symptoms were over, but she couldn’t help the bubble of fear that rose to the surface. What if Mama didn’t take her medicine? What if the medicine didn’t work? How would she handle the violent tremors and the vomiting all by herself? There were no nurses to run in and help. Stormy was on her own now.

She pushed the worry away and forced a smile. At least Mama had an appetite. That had to be a good sign. “I think I saw a cup of jell-o in the pantry.”

Mama looked up at her with clear blue eyes and a small smile. “Ha. Ha. Very funny. If I never see jell-o again it’ll be too soon.”

Stormy chuckled. “I was just kidding. I was just about to make something for supper. What sounds good?”

The smile on Marni’s face disappeared and her eyes dimmed. “I…. I haven’t been grocery shopping in a while…."

“That’s okay, Mama. I’m sure I can find something to whip up. Do you want to lie down on the couch while I make us something?”

“No, no, no. I’ve been lying down for way too long. I want to sit in the kitchen for a spell. Do we have any coffee?”

Such a normal request. It was a small thing, but hope began to bloom in Stormy’s chest. “I’ll put on a pot.”

****

Stormy flipped pancakes on the griddle while her mama sat quietly and sipped her coffee. It wasn’t a conventional supper, but the pantry was practically bare aside from a few staples and a box of pancake mix.

Wind whistled through the cracks in the window frame. “The sky sure is getting dark. Looks like a storm is brewing.” Stormy grabbed a pot from under the cabinet and set it on the floor in the corner to catch the water that was sure to start seeping through the leaky roof. When the pancakes were nice and golden she heaped three of them onto a plate and set it in front of her mother.

“This looks good, baby. You always were a pretty decent cook. More than I ever was.”
The endearment caught Stormy slightly off guard. Mama hadn’t called her “baby” in years. And she couldn’t remember the last time her mama had paid her a compliment. “Thanks,” she said around a mouthful of pancake. “You look a lot better, Mama. You have some color in your cheeks.”

Marni’s fork paused and she looked up at her daughter. “Well, I certainly feel better.”

“Good.” Stormy picked up her glass of milk while she mulled over the fact that she and her mother were sitting down at the kitchen table having a meal together. It bordered on surreal.

And, as nice as it was to be there together, it was also unsettling. There was a conversation to be had. Neither of them had uttered a single word of that awful night, the one that revealed Stormy’s paternity, and the unsaid words hung in the air like a bad odor.

Marni cleared her throat as she slid her plate back. “I’ve been meaning to talk to you, Stormy. I’ve been going out of my mind trying to figure out what to say…how to explain….”

Oh, please. Not now. “It’s alright, Mama. You don’t have to. Really. We just need to concentrate on getting you better. That’s what matters.” Stormy pushed her plate away. Her appetite had just disappeared.

Marni reached out and put her hand on Stormy’s wrist. “I have to get this out, Stormy. Please listen to me. I need you to understand. I want you to know why I act the way I do.”

Stormy picked up their plates and put them in the sink, wishing she was someplace other than where she was. She didn’t want to rehash that night. Maybe some things were better left unsaid.

“Stormy…please. Come sit down and let me talk. Did you know that I saw a shrink when I was in the hospital?”

That got Stormy’s attention. “No. I didn’t know that.”

“Yeah, well, it was when I was…ya know, acting all crazy and I didn’t know where I was.”

How could she ever forget? Her mama had begun hallucinating in the hospital, swatting at imaginary insects and yelling about how they had flown in to take her away. Stormy nodded an acknowledgment and shuffled her way back to her abandoned chair.

“Well, anyway,” Marni began, “The shrink lady came back after I was…more calm and making sense. We talked about my problem. She said there’s a program for people like me, people who don’t have much money, but it could take a while to get in. Apparently there’s a waiting list.”
Stormy let out a breath she didn’t realize she was holding. “How long is the list?”

“The lady said it could be weeks. Maybe months before I could get in.”

A substance abuse program. Stormy couldn’t believe what she was hearing. It was an answered prayer.

The question was…would her mother go through with it?

“So are you on the list? Are you going?”

Marni set her coffee cup on the table and looked her daughter straight in the eye. “Yes and yes. But here’s the thing…”

Uh oh. Something twisted in Stormy’s gut. Her hope was taking a nose dive.

“Stormy, you have that look in your eye. It’s that look you get every time I do something to disappoint you. But hear me out.”

Stormy pushed her hair behind her ear and looked at Marni.

“I said I’m going. I know I have to get clean, and that place is going to help me do it. But I don’t need a bunch of counselors and psychiatrists helping me figure out why I drink. I already know why.”

Stormy shrank down in her chair. She knew why too. “It’s because of what happened to you…when I was conceived, isn’t it?”

Marni’s eyes glazed over as she turned her coffee cup around and around. She was staring at the cup, but not really seeing it. Stormy was pretty sure she didn’t want to know where her mother’s thoughts had gone. She was certain it was someplace ugly. “Mama. I understand. You don’t have to—”

Marni cut her off. “I’ve never hated you, Stormy Rae. Never. Not for one second. No matter what I ever said or how I acted. Please tell me you know that.” Her words were emphatic and her eyes were pleading and shining with un-shed tears.

The lump in Stormy’s throat wouldn’t let her answer so she simply nodded.

“Good.” Marni’s relief was obvious as she released a slow, shuddered breath. “I won’t go into the details about…you know…your birth father. I’ve been kicking myself every day for divulging that to you.”

Stormy cringed at the mention of the monster that had caused her mother so much pain.

“You only know part of the story. When I found out I was pregnant I tried to hide it for as long as I could. I didn’t know what to do and I was scared to death of how my parents would react.”
Stormy’s features twisted in confusion. “What do you mean? It wasn’t your fault,” she said incredulously. “You didn’t have a choice in the matter. Why didn’t you just tell them what happened?” She couldn’t understand how her mother was being so calm while she was absolutely livid.

“You see, when I was little I was the apple of Daddy’s eye. I was a daddy’s girl through and through. He bought me pretty dresses and took me to the park. I had him wrapped around my little finger.” The corners of her mouth turned up into a tiny smile for about a half a second, and then her face fell again. “Something changed around the time I hit puberty. I started filling out, like most girls do, and daddy started paying me less and less attention. Acted like it was a crime to grow up. And it pissed him off something fierce whenever he saw a boy so much as glance in my direction.”

“Wow, Mama. That had to have been hard. None of that was your fault though. Why was he like that?”

“I don’t know. I think it had something to do with his reputation or something. Reputation was everything to Daddy…and I think he was somehow embarrassed of me.”

Stormy just shook her head in disbelief.

“Anyhow,” Mama continued, “When he and my mama finally figured out that I wasn’t just getting fat, I had no choice but to tell them the truth.”

“And then what happened?” Stormy’s eyes were wide with curiosity.

“Daddy said I must have brought it on myself. He said I must have done something to lead Ted on.”

“Oh my God, Mama! That’s….” Words failed her. She couldn’t believe what she was hearing. Her grandfather was a cruel son-of-a-bitch. How could he say that about his own daughter? “So then he threw you out of the house?”

“Yes. But not before taking his frustrations out on me with a belt and telling me how much I disgraced him.”

“What about your mom? She didn’t try to help you?”

A tear spilled down Marni’s cheek. “She dug out five hundred dollars that she had stashed in her wardrobe and put it in my hand right before I walked out the door. She never was the type to stand up to anybody. Especially to Daddy.” She laid her head down on her forearm and her shoulders shook as she started to sob. Stormy scooted her chair around, next to her mama’s, and put an arm around her shoulder in an attempt to comfort her. But there was no amount of comforting that could take away that kind of pain.
“Stormy…I don’t hate you…I hate myself…for what I became.”
“Shhh. It’s okay, Mama. It’s going to be better now,” she tried to soothe her, wiping away moisture that had now accumulated on her own cheeks. Nothing would ever truly justify the way her mother had treated her in the past, but now she understood her mother’s pain. She understood the need to escape into the booze and the drugs. She didn’t condone it, and she certainly didn’t appreciate having taken the brunt of all her mother’s misdirected anger, but she felt better knowing that there was a rationale behind the behavior, however warped it may have been.

Stormy’s grandfather had put her mama through hell.
Stormy had been through hell because of her mother.
As strange and twisted as it was, the knowledge was somewhat comforting.
They shared a common thread.
Chapter Nineteen

When Marni had calmed down and gone to bed, Stormy figured it would be a good time to make a much needed trip to the grocery store. So, with her shopping list in hand, she headed for the solace of her old truck. A trip out was what she needed to clear her head.

The drive into town was liberating. Granted, it was only a trip to Brookshire Brothers for a few groceries, but it sure beat the confines of a hospital room and waiting on Mama hand and foot for over a week.

The air was still thick with moisture as Stormy made her way across the wet parking lot, making her wish she’d brought an umbrella just in case. Once inside, she grabbed a shopping cart and perused the aisles, grabbing what she needed—coffee, sugar, bread…. She rolled past the baking goods; nothing on that aisle was on her list, however, she had to stop when the brownie mixes began calling her name. The evening’s previous events called for a chocolate. Lots of it. But what should she get? There were so many choices. Brownie cookie dough, double fudge chunk, and oooh…cream cheese brownies. Yes. She chunked the box in the cart, finished up with the items on her list and then made her way to the checkout counter.

As usual, there were only two cashiers among the many, many registers, so Stormy grabbed a magazine off the rack and thumbed through the gossip pages while she waited in line. She couldn’t help but overhear the two older blue-haired ladies in front of her as they bantered about what kind of cake would fetch the best price at the church’s bake sale—carrot cake or angel food. Personally, if it didn’t involve chocolate, Stormy wasn’t interested. She grabbed a plastic divider and started placing her items on the conveyor belt when she heard the ladies’ conversation take an unexpected turn.

“Wilma, did you hear about that kid, Bozz or Fuzz or whatever his name is?”

“Oh, yes! I heard that he nearly killed his daddy last night.”

“I heard he took a hammer to him.”
“No, no, Betty, you’re mistaken. It was a baseball bat!”

Stormy worked hard to maintain her composure even though she was freaking out on the inside. What had happened to Nozz? Stormy had seen him once at the hospital. He had come into her mama’s room to empty the trash and had said a quick hello but she hadn’t spoken to him since. Her heart hammered in her heart as she silently willed the cashier to move faster. She had to get out of there so she could find out what happened to her friend.

Once she was in the parking lot, she tossed the grocery bags onto the seat and cranked up the truck. But where would she go? Nozz had never told her where he lived exactly, and if what those ladies had said was true, then it was likely that he wouldn’t even be home. Then she remembered that she had a phone. It was a cheap pay-as-you-go phone that she bought on the day her mama was released from the hospital. But it was useless without Nozz’s phone number. “Shit!” Frustrated, she pounded the steering wheel.

There was only one person who might be able to tell her what happened to Nozz. She just didn’t know how he was going to react to her presence.

On her way across town the sky opened up and the windshield wipers could barely keep up with the sheets of rain that were coming at her. She was a bundle of nerves as she turned onto Brylan’s street. She didn’t know what to expect when she got there. Would he be glad to see her? Would he close the door in her face? How would she get any answers if he refused to see her? She’d lose her mind with worry.

“Oh, Nozz. Please be okay,” she whispered to herself.

Brylan’s car was in the driveway and the lights were on inside. “At least he’s home.” A crash of thunder nearly jolted her out of her skin when she opened the truck door. She thought about waiting in the truck until the storm let up, but then decided against it. She was too anxious to wait.

She was soaked and chilled to the bone by the time she made it to Brylan’s door. Her tee-shirt was clinging to her and her hair was plastered all over her face, but she didn’t care. There was no time for vanity. Who cared what Brylan thought anyway? This was about Nozz.

Stormy knocked on the door and waited as thunder crashed overhead. No answer. She knocked again, louder this time. Still nothing. She peeked through the window but the blinds were drawn. Could he be asleep? Well, then he’d just better wake the hell up.

She trudged through the soggy yard to the back of the house. Surely he’d hear her knocking on the back door. As she rounded the corner of the house she noticed a gleam of light. The patio light was on… and there was
Brylan…scruffy and shirtless with his arms stretched across the back of the wooden bench with a beer dangling from one hand. His face was blank as he stared off into the unknown.

There Stormy stood, looking like a drowned rat, gawking at the man like a love-starved idiot. She must have lost her brain somewhere between the truck and the back yard because she suddenly couldn’t remember why she was there.

Nozz.

She silently scolded herself. *Snap out of it, girl. Get it together!* A bundle of nerves formed in her belly. She gathered all the courage she could muster before stepping up under the protection of the covered patio. “Brylan?”

He jerked his head in Stormy’s direction and shook it in disbelief, as if she were some sort of apparition. “Stormy? Is that you?”

“Y...yeah. Hi,” she stammered.

“Damn, girl. You’re drenched. Let me get you a towel.” He jumped up from the bench and ran inside. A few seconds later he returned with two fluffy white bath towels. He draped one over her shoulders and then put the other one over her head and started rubbing her hair. “What are you trying to do, catch pneumonia?”

Stormy’s insides flooded with warmth, but it wasn’t from the towels. She was thankful that her face was covered because she was sure it was bright red. Words like *knight in shining armor* flittered through her mind but she immediately shut those thoughts down. She was on a mission. She had to focus. “Have you heard from Nozz? Is he okay?”

Brylan stopped fussing over her and his expression changed. “Yeah, he’s okay. Why?”

“I heard two women talking in the grocery store. They said Nozz’s name…and something about hitting his dad with a hammer,” she was yammering a hundred miles an hour. “I was freaked out so I threw my groceries in the truck and came over here because I didn’t know what else to do….”

“Whoa. Take a breath. Come over here and sit down so I can tell you what happened. Do you want something to drink first? Soda? Coffee?” He looked up at the sky and then back at Stormy, “I somehow doubt you want any more water.” And that damned dimple made its appearance.

“No. I’m good, thanks,” she said as coolly as possible while making her way to the wooden bench, “Just tell me about Nozz.”
So he did. He told her every horrible detail of the awful altercation
between Nozz and his Dad. And Stormy’s heart shattered into a thousand
little shards. “He knew it was going to happen.”


“Nozz. He told me that day at the lake that his dad would eventually
hit him. He knew. But he stayed anyway. For his mom.”

Brylan exhaled loudly before picking his beer up and taking a big
swig. “Yep. That guy’s got a big heart…and balls the size of cantaloupes.”

The mental image made her giggle. “Yeah. I guess he does. Brave,
noble, sweet Nozz…. I’m so glad he’s okay. He’s a good guy, and I’m
going to miss him when he goes to his brother’s.”

“Oh, Beeville’s only a couple of hours from here. That’s not that far.
I’m sure you guys can visit each other.”

“Actually, it will be a little closer than that.”

“What do you mean?”

Stormy clasped her hands together, feeling bashful all of a sudden,
and not really knowing why. “Things are actually starting to pan out for
me for once…and it’s looking like I’ll be in San Marcos next year.”

Brylan’s eyes lit up. He was genuinely happy for her and it melted her
heart just a little bit more. “Texas State, huh? That’s awesome news,
Stormy. Congratulations.” He scooted closer and wrapped her up in a big
hug.

Oh, how she’d missed those big, strong, arms. She could have stayed
there forever, wrapped in his solid warmth, but the spell was broken when
she felt Brylan tense. He released his hold on her and swiped his beer
bottle from the glass-topped wicker coffee table and chugged it. That’s
when Stormy noticed the other four bottles that littered the table.
Apparently he’d been at it for a while. “Everything okay with you,
Brylan?” she asked softly.

“Yup. Couldn’t be better. Why?” His words didn’t match the scowl he
was wearing.

“You just seem a little…out of sorts.”

“No. I’m great.” It was an artificial answer and she decided not to
press the issue.

He took another big slug of beer. “I’m the one that should be asking
how you’re doing. Things alright at home? Your mom okay?”

Nozz must have told him about what happened. “Yeah. She’s doing
better. The doctor said it will be a while before she’s a hundred percent,
but she’s making progress. Baby steps.”

He nodded once. “And the two of you…you’re okay?”
“Oh, yeah. She and I had a good talk. Things are definitely better between us.”

“That’s good news, Stormy. Really good news. I’ve been worried about you.”

As soon as the words left his mouth a flicker of irritation flared up inside of her. She didn’t really know why, but his words just didn’t sit well. “You don’t have to worry about me, Brylan. It’s not your place to worry about me. It never was.” She hadn’t really meant it to sound as snarky as it sounded. But there it was.

Brylan’s nostrils flared and his eyes darkened, “It may not have been my place, but I am human, Stormy. I’m allowed to be concerned about people whether they want me to be or not.”

“Well I don’t want you to be. Okay?” She stood up and started across the patio but Brylan caught her by the arm and pulled her to him. He rested his forehead against hers and held his eyes closed. “I can’t help it, Stormy. I worry about you because I care about you. Don’t you see? You’re in my head. You’re in my heart….”

Tears stung the backs of her eyes but she refused to let them fall. Under other circumstances his startling declaration would have been welcomed. She loved him, deeply, but all Stormy could see at that moment were obstacles. She hadn’t forgotten about Pam. She hadn’t forgotten about the threat to his career. There were just too many complications…and she’d be damned if she’d let her heart get stomped on again.

She pushed him away with strength she didn’t know she had. “You can’t say that shit to me, Brylan! You made your choice!” She took off into the yard as fast as her waterlogged sneakers would let her but Brylan grabbed her again. His hand slipped down her wet arm and tightened around her wrist. Her feet sunk down into the mud and when she pulled away from his grasp she fell backward, pulling Brylan down on top of her. She squirmed to get free but he held her down, straddling her beneath him and pinning her hands out to the sides of her head. His deep chocolate eyes burned straight into hers.

“Dammit, Stormy! My whole damn life I’ve been doing what everybody else expects me to do. My dad. My boss. And every-damn-body else!”

Stormy stilled beneath him, her emotions swirling like a tornado. Suddenly, Brylan’s expression softened and he planted his face in the crook of her neck and murmured, “My choice, Stormy…my choice is you. It’s always been you. Don’t you see?”
Stormy’s tears mixed with the rain that was sliding down her face. She was angry, elated, confused, and aroused all at the same time. Her mind scrambled to find the words to respond, but before she could utter a single syllable Brylan’s mouth was covering hers. It was a kiss like she’d never experienced before. It was hot and sweet and completely intoxicating.

Stormy reciprocated in kind, kissing him back with a passion she didn’t know she possessed while she slid her hands over his back, across his slick shoulders, and down his muscular chest. Brylan released his grip on her wrist and snaked a hand under the hem of her shirt, across her belly, and then trailed upward. Stormy gasped against Brylan’s mouth. The delicious warmth of his hand on her cold skin sent her circuits into overload and she was gone. All thoughts melted from her brain, and in that moment she would have given him anything.

A startling clap of thunder brought her back to reality. What the hell was she doing? She broke the kiss and pushed against his chest. “Brylan, stop.”

Alarm flashed across his face. “What? Why? What’s wrong?” He rose up just enough for her to slide out from underneath him.

“This is wrong! We can’t do this. You’re not ready. What happens tomorrow when you wake up and I’m lying in bed beside you? What if you wake up and figure out it was all a big mistake? You can’t un-ring a bell, Brylan.”

He sat back on his heels and she saw the look of hurt and confusion on his face. She wanted him to argue with her and tell her that she had it all wrong.

“You see? Like right now…you’re confused. You’re not fighting for me. For us. You don’t know what you want…and I can’t take that gamble, Brylan. You have to figure your life out. At some point you have to jump off the damn fence!”

She ignored the stricken look on his face as she righted her clothing and got to her feet. She took off toward her truck without as much as a glance backward…because if she looked back she would be tempted to run right back into his arms. She didn’t trust herself. Her emotions, her body, her mind…. Everything was a jumbled up mess. She just needed to get away from there. Away from Brylan. Far, far, away. And fast.
Chapter Twenty

Stormy grumbled under her breath while she hastily dusted face powder across her nose and forehead. She didn’t want to look all shiny for the hundreds of graduation pictures that Trudy was sure to take. “If he blows that horn one more time I’m going to kick his ass,” she muttered to her reflection in the mirror. She’d told Nozz to come inside to wait, but he insisted on staying in the car. Stormy threw her makeup brushes in the drawer and slipped into her new silver flats before running to the front door. “Hold your horses, Nozz,” she yelled at him, “We’re almost ready!”

She slammed the door shut and felt something tug at her graduation gown. “Dammit!” It was caught in the door. She opened the door to release it and inspected it for damage on the way back to the bathroom to retrieve the earrings she’d left on the counter. In her frenzy, she ended up dropping one on the floor. When she picked it up she noticed the toilet tank lid was sitting askew. “Huh. That’s weird,” she mused aloud.

While slipping her earrings in she called out, “Hey, you ready to go, Mama?” She hadn’t seen her in a while. Commencement was in less than an hour and they had to get going if she was going to be there early enough for final instructions, seating, and so forth.

There was no response. “Mama,” she called, louder this time. “We need to leave.” Still nothing. Stormy whirred around on her heel and darted into her mother’s room where Marni sat on the edge of the bed, staring blankly at the carpet. “Hey. You ready?”

Marni looked up at Stormy, looking defeated and forlorn. “I can’t go, baby.” Her voice was barely audible and her eyes were rimmed with red.

“What? Why? Are you sick? Because I can stay—”

“No, no. You can’t miss your own graduation. I’m fine.” She didn’t look fine. She looked miserable.

“I don’t understand. I thought you wanted to go.” It was difficult to keep the hurt out of her voice. For the past two weeks she’d been excited to know that her mama would be in the stands, cheering her on as she crossed the stage to retrieve her diploma.
“I just can’t, baby,” a mascara-tinged tear trailed down her face, “I’m just not ready to be around people yet. I thought I was…but I just…I can’t. I’m so sorry, baby,” she stammered shakily.

Stormy pushed aside the disappointment and put her arms around her mama. “Shhh. It’s okay, Mama,” she cooed while rubbing circles on her back. “I understand. I’ll bring you a program, okay? Plus, I think Nozz’s mom is going to video tape the whole thing. I’ll get her to make you a copy.”


Stormy hated to leave her mother in that condition but Nozz was waiting and time was ticking. But she understood too. Recovery was a long process and her mama had made great strides over the past couple of weeks. However, she still had a long way to go. Stormy could see how the idea of sitting amongst hundreds of other people in a crowded stadium might be overwhelming. She wasn’t particularly crazy about it herself, but it was something she had to do. She’d worked too hard and overcome too much not to.

Marni wiped her eyes and patted Stormy’s arm. “You go on ahead, baby. I’ll see you when you get back. Don’t worry about me. Just have fun, okay? This is your day. Enjoy it.”

Reluctantly, Stormy released Marni from her embrace and stood up to smooth out her gown and fluff her hair. “Do I look okay?”

Mama smiled a big, bright smile that lit up her whole face. “Yes, baby. You’re beautiful.” The pride on her mama’s face caused tears to prick the backs of Stormy’s eyelids, but she willed them not to fall. She’d spent too much time putting on makeup to mess it up at the last minute. “Alright. I gotta go.” She leaned down to give her mama a quick peck on the forehead before heading out the door.

“Stormy?”

She paused at the doorway. “Yeah, Mama?”

“I love you.”

Nozz’s horn was blaring in the background.

“She paused at the doorway. “Yeah, Mama?”

“I love you.”

“Love you too, Mama. See you later.”

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“Okay, Trudy. You’ve got enough to fill five albums already.” The thermometer in Nozz’s car had said ninety-five degrees on the way to the stadium. Now that the ceremony was over, all Stormy could think about was getting to the restaurant and ordering a tall glass of iced tea.
“Just one more,” Trudy said. “Now come on, you two, get closer together.”

“If we get any closer we’ll be conjoined twins,” Nozz complained. “It’s hot as hell under this thing.”

Stormy and Nozz complied just long enough for one more click of Trudy’s outdated thirty-five millimeter camera then freed themselves from the stifling layers of itchy polyester. “No more!” Nozz protested, “Any longer out here in this sauna and I’m gonna be nothing but a puddle of sweat on the sidewalk!”

“Oh, that’s a nice image,” Stormy said sarcastically.

On the way across the parking lot Stormy pulled a hair tie from her purse and swept her sweaty, sticky hair into a messy bun. She was sure it looked horrendous but she was too hot to care. June in southeast Texas was no joke. All she could think about was that big glass of cold, sweet tea that awaited her. She was just about to ask Trudy and Nozz where they wanted to eat when she heard someone call her name behind her. When she turned around Brylan was jogging toward her.

“Brylan,” she said while adjusting the straps on her blue sundress. “What are you doing here?”

Trudy and Nozz stopped too.

Brylan’s face was tomato red and Stormy didn’t know if it was because of the sweltering heat or the discomfort he was feeling. Judging by her own reaction to the situation, she’d guess the latter of the two. She hadn’t exactly left his house on good terms.

He shifted his weight and shoved his hands into the pockets of his khaki pants. “I wanted to congratulate you. Both of you.” His gaze shifted to Nozz and he pulled out a hand for a hearty handshake. “I’m proud of you. The two of you have been through a lot and yet here you are.”

“Thanks, Coach,” Nozz said, beaming. He wouldn’t have been so casual if he’d had any idea what had happened between Brylan and her. Stormy hadn’t told a soul, not even Trudy.

“We were just going to head over to the steakhouse. You wanna come?” Nozz asked.

Apparently they were having steak. But there was no way in Hades she’d be able to handle sitting across the table from Brylan. As hungry as she was, and as badly as she wanted that cool drink, it wouldn’t be worth the torture. Stormy’s brain was already fabricating a list of excuses to skip the meal.
She glared at Brylan and crossed her arms over her chest while she waited for his answer. His eyes met hers, briefly. “No. You guys go on,” he said. “I have some stuff to take care of. Y’all have a good time.”

He’d received her not-so-subtle message and she was relieved.

Trudy, who had been quiet through the whole exchange, was eyeing her curiously. That meant there would be plenty of probing later. Nothing got past that lady.

“Okay, Coach. See ya around.”

Nozz took off in a jog to catch up with Trudy, who was already headed for the car. Stormy turned to leave too, but Brylan reached out and lightly touched her shoulder. “Stormy, wait.”

She turned around in a huff and rolled her eyes. She was doing her best to snub him, but this cold shoulder business was tougher than she’d thought it would be. “I gotta go, Brylan. They’re waiting and we need to get to the restaurant before it gets too packed.”

He pulled a yellow, padded envelope from his pocket and held it out to her. “I just wanted to give you this.”

A crease formed between her eyebrows. “What’s this?”

“It’s all those rent payments you’ve been sneaking into my mailbox.”

She didn’t understand why he was giving it to her. “Why are you…?”

“I told you in the beginning that I just wanted to help. You don’t owe me anything, Stormy. I’ve been holding on to the money, sort of like your own personal savings account. I thought it would come in handy when you go off to school.”

Was he doing this out of guilt, or was he just being a nice guy… again? Knowing Brylan, it was probably the latter. He was too darned considerate, a good guy with a pure heart, which is why it was so hard to reject him. “No, Brylan. I meant for you to have the money. It was the least I could do for you letting me stay in your apartment.” She handed the envelope back over to him but he put his hands up and took a step back as if the stupid thing would bite him.

“Uh uh. It’s yours. I want you to have it. Please.” The man was almost as stubborn as Stormy was.

Stormy looked down at the pavement and exhaled. “I’m not sure what to say, Brylan.” The situation couldn’t have been more awkward. “Thank you.” Her voice was tiny, almost unrecognizable to her own ears.

“It’s the least I could do after everything that’s happened. I just want the best for you. I wish you all the luck in the world.” He stepped forward for an awkward hug and gave her a peck on the cheek. Stormy avoided his
eyes as she silently waged war with herself. It would have been so easy to turn her head so that her mouth met up with his.

The two of them just stood there, neither of them wanting to leave, but not knowing what to say until Nozz’s horn blared through the warm, still air. “I better go. Nozz is obnoxious when he’s hungry,” she said.

“Yes, this is true,” Brylan replied with a smile. “Well, y’all go and have a good time.” He paused and cleared his throat. “Take care, Stormy.”

And then he abruptly turned and walked away.

On the way to the car, Stormy fought to swallow the large lump that had formed in her throat.

She was done shedding tears for Brylan.

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After two and a half hours of baking in the sun, five months of having her emotions run through a blender, and almost nineteen years of bullshit, Stormy finally had her diploma in her hand.

She should have been over the moon with giddiness, but she wasn’t. She pressed the cool glass to her cheek, willing some small bit of joy to come so she wouldn’t have to fake it.

“What’s wrong, Stormy? You’ve barely touched your steak.”

Too late. Trudy was on to her.

“Oh, nothing. The heat kind of stole my appetite,” she lied.

Trudy reached across the table and grabbed her hand. “Oh, sweetie. You don’t fool me. I’m sure your mama would have come if she could have. You just have to give her some more time.”

Well, she had it partially correct. If Mama had been there then the whole Brylan incident might have been easier to shrug off. But Stormy had taken two blows that day. Her heart wouldn’t be able to handle much more.

“She’s right, Stormy,” Nozz chimed in around a mouthful of meat. “Your mom’s just got a lot on her plate. It’ll get better.” His table manners still needed a lot of work, but his attempt to comfort her was endearing.

“I know. It just makes me a little sad. It would have been nice to have family up in the stands, you know?” Stormy picked up her tea glass and looked over at the waitress, signaling for a third refill.

Trudy pushed her plate back and started tidying up the table, picking up napkins and stacking some of the dishes. “You know,” Nozz said, “They have people that do that, Trudy.”
“I know. But it doesn’t hurt to help out a little. Those people don’t get paid enough for what they do…and it bugs me to have someone else cleaning up my messes when I’m perfectly capable of doing it myself.”

“Huh,” Nozz grunted. He looked thoughtful for a minute and then he pitched in, picking up empty sugar packets and wiping stray drops of ketchup from the table. Trudy and Stormy exchanged glances and chuckled.

Nozz was so cute.

“Well, you kids ready to go? I’ve got grass that needs watering and laundry that needs washing.” Trudy stood and picked up her rhinestone and denim handbag that was slung over the back of the chair.

“Sure. Nozz and I will drop you off and then head over to my house to show Mama the video that his mom shot.”

Trudy gave her a reassuring smile. “I’m sure she’ll like that.”

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Stormy closed the car door, laughing at Nozz who was still playing air-guitar while singing along with *You Give Love a Bad Name*. As it turned out, she wasn’t the only person her age that had a thing for 80’s music. Nozz had a whole collection of old CDs in his car that they’d jammed to on the way there. He also had an uncanny knack for brightening her mood when she needed it. “Come on, you big goober.” She motioned for him to follow her inside.

Stormy half expected her mama to be in the kitchen, waiting for her and eager to hear all the details of the day’s events. Instead, she was met with silence.

Nozz closed the door behind her. “Shhh. I think she’s asleep. I’ll go see…right after I go drain my bladder. All that tea caught up with me and my eyeballs are floating.”

“Uh, too much information,” he chuckled while flopping down on the couch. “I’ll just hang out here. Let me know if you need any assistance.”

* Jackass. “Ha ha. Very funny. I’m pretty sure I can manage on my own, thank you very much.”

Stormy took off down the hall and made it to the bathroom just in time. When she stood up to flush, she realized the toilet tank lid was no longer on the tank, but was on the floor, propped up against the side of the toilet. Occasionally the float would get stuck and cause the toilet to run constantly. Mama must have forgotten to put the lid back on.

When she was done in the bathroom she crept into Marni’s bedroom. “Mama? I’m home,” she said softly as not to startle her. She didn’t know
how long her mama had been asleep, but if she napped too long it would mess up her internal clock and she’d never be able to get to bed at a decent hour. Stormy pulled back the curtains to let the remainder of the daylight in. “Mama?” She was on the bed with her back facing her. Stormy noticed that she still had on the black and red polka dot dress from earlier, the one she had planned to wear to the graduation ceremony.

Stormy grabbed her mama’s shoulder for a little shake. “Hey, Mama. You’re not sick, are you?” The lack of response caused her scalp to prickle. Then she noticed the empty vodka bottle on the nightstand. She shook her again, much harder this time, “Come on, Mama. Wake up.” Still nothing. “Mama! Come on! Mama, please wake up!” Stormy rolled her onto her back and that’s when she saw the vomit on the pillow and the wetness on Marni’s face. It wasn’t until she pushed the hair back from her face that she noticed the iciness of her skin. Her eyes were open but they were dull and lifeless, as if someone had switched off the light in them. When she felt her wrist for a pulse she didn’t find one. “No, no, no! MAMA!”

Nozz was talking frantically on his cell phone behind her, but she couldn’t hear him over the loud buzzing in her head. This can’t be happening. She grabbed Marni and sobbed into her hair, “No, Mama. Please. You can’t leave me. Not now.” She silently prayed that the warmth would return to her mother’s skin and her limp body would spring to life and drag in a long overdue breath, just like she’d seen a hundred times in the movies.

But that didn’t happen.

Marni Black would never take a breath again.

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Nozz’s shirt was soaked through with Stormy’s tears as she sobbed quietly into his chest. He sat and rocked her on that rickety old front porch for what seemed like an eternity. He’d never felt so helpless in his life and there was nothing he wouldn’t give to take away her pain. Seeing her like that, so completely shattered and thoroughly heartbroken, was ripping a hole right through the middle of him.

The house was a blur of activity. Lights were flashing and radios were squawking. Nozz had hoped that Stormy would have kept her head buried in his shoulder when they wheeled her mother out of the house, but there was nothing he could do to stop her from looking. And there was no way to stop the second wave of agonizing, pitiful sobs that burst from her when the doors of the ambulance closed. He knew that the image was
burned into her memory forever, just as it was in his. She would never forget it, no more than he would ever forget the horror on Stormy’s face when she realized her mother was never going to wake up. Or the sound of Stormy’s hysterical pleas. They were sure to leave permanent marks on his soul.

Until that day, Nozz had never encountered death. It was too real. Too painful. And so damned unfair. Stormy had believed that Marni’s battle with booze was a battle that could be won. Hell, Nozz believed it too. The two of them seemed to be doing so well.

And then Marni went and did this to her.

A slow burn built in Nozz’s gut. He knew it was unfair of him to be angry at a dead woman, but damn-it-to-hell, Stormy was a good girl and she didn’t deserve what was happening to her. He needed to blame somebody.

“I should have known,” Stormy whispered into his chest.

“No, Stormy. You couldn’t have. Nobody could have known,” he tried to reassure her. The last thing he wanted was for Stormy to blame herself. None of this shit was her fault.

“I saw the tremors. I saw how fragile she looked. I should never have left her.”

“Stormy, don’t,” he said a little too sharply. “Your mother loved you and she would have never forgiven herself if you had missed your own graduation because of her.”

She lifted her head up and wiped her nose. “She was weak. It was my job to take care of her, Nozz. And I failed. If I had been here, she wouldn’t have gotten into that bottle. She wouldn’t have...she wouldn’t have...” Her voice began to crack, “She wouldn’t have choked on her own vomit.” She collapsed back into Nozz’s chest and he rubbed circles on her back as her shoulders shook.

Nozz knew what he wanted to say, but he had to tread carefully. “Stormy,” he began softly, “if she was determined to take a drink...I doubt you could have stopped her. You heard what the paramedics said.” Nozz wished he could see Stormy’s eyes so he’d know she heard him. It was important for her to understand what he was telling her. “Who knows how long she’s been hiding that bottle? It’s probably why she appeared to be doing so well. She was fighting withdrawal, and she probably thought it was the only way to get through until she could get to rehab. In her mind she probably figured it was helping. The paramedic said she’s seen this sort of thing before.”

The sheriff deputies and paramedics had peppered the two of them with a million questions. He was surprised he could recall anything that
had been said. Stormy had nodded in response to their comments, but he could tell that she hadn’t really comprehended any of it.

Eventually the spirit-shattering cries died down to sniffles, but Stormy was still trembling. Nozz pulled the thin blanket tighter around her. Her skin was cool and clammy despite the warm night air. Relief flooded through him when he spotted the headlights of Trudy’s red VW bug coming down the dirt road.

Trudy slammed the car door and ran toward them in her dirt-covered jeans and a sleeveless purple shirt. “Oh, my poor, poor girl.” She sat on the other side of Stormy and pulled her away from Nozz and into her bosom and started stroking her hair, the way a mother snuggles a small child. Stormy clung to her, twisting the hem of Trudy’s shirt in her fists while Trudy cooed softly into her hair, “Shhh, it’s okay, baby. Trudy’s here.” She looked up at Nozz with apologetic eyes. “I’m so sorry I didn’t get here sooner. I was working in my flowerbeds and my phone was in the house. I hopped in the car and flew over here as soon as I got your voicemail.”

“It’s okay, Trudy,” he told her, “I’m just glad you’re here now.” He meant it from the depths of his soul. He deeply cared for Stormy, and he didn’t begrudge holding her, but the helplessness he was feeling nearly did him in. He knew that Trudy would provide that motherly type of comfort that Stormy needed. She was a good woman with a heart of gold. She would know what to do. And his frazzled nerves needed a break.
Chapter Twenty One

Death was a sneaky, cruel bastard that seemed to have a penchant for taking people before their time.

And Brylan wanted to kick its greedy, merciless ass.

His soul slowly unraveled as he watched Stormy, stricken and pale, rise from her slip-covered folding chair on the front row to lay a single white rose on top of the casket. She kissed her hand and pressed it to the mahogany-colored wood and then whispered something Brylan couldn’t hear.

When her goodbyes were said, Nozz walked up and offered her his arm on one side while Trudy held her on the other, gently leading Stormy away from the graveside.

It was killing Brylan that he couldn’t be the one with his arm around her, comforting her on the worst day of her life. He’d offered his condolences back at the funeral home, but he wasn’t sure if Stormy had even registered who he was. Her face had been blank, unreadable.

“Stormy?” Her stormy, gray eyes were full of grief and sadness, but for a split second he thought he recognized a flicker of something else too…but it faded away too quickly to tell.

“Brylan,” she acknowledged him flatly.

“Stormy, I just wanted to let you know that I’m here—”

She put up a hand to cut him off, “Brylan, I can’t. I appreciate you being here but…I just…I can’t talk to you right now. You should go.” She took off in the direction of the cars that were slowly pulling out of the small, rural cemetery. Brylan watched her go, feeling worthless and irrelevant.

“Give her time, Brylan.” It was Trudy’s voice.

“I just wanted her to know that I’m here for her.”

“Are you, Brylan? Are you sure? Because from what I’ve gathered, you’re neither here nor there. You’re somewhere in between.”

Heat crept up his collared neck, partly due to the thick humid air, but mostly because of the shame he felt. Just how much had Stormy told her?
“All I want to do is be here for her, Trudy. I care about her. But things are so…complicated. You don’t understand the pressure I’m under. From my dad, Principal Flint, the town…. And there are other issues at play here too. Things….” He clamped down on his words when Pam’s face popped into his head. How in the hell did his life get so damned twisted?

Trudy stiffened and her eyes flashed anger. She crossed her arms over her ample chest and glared at him. Brylan braced for impact. “Well, Brylan, just who’s damned life are you living anyway? Yours? Your dad’s? Flint’s? And who gives a rat’s ass about what the people in this town think? They don’t have to live your life, Brylan. You do. You need to go home and figure your shit out.”

Brylan crammed his hands into his pockets, finding it really difficult to maintain eye contact with Trudy. She had his number. He couldn’t argue with the truth. “That’s the same thing Stormy told me,” he said sheepishly.

“Yeah? Smart girl. Look, Brylan. That girl,” she pointed in Stormy’s direction, “She needs somebody that’s not wishy-washy. She deserves love. But not just when it’s convenient. She deserves somebody that can be one hundred percent committed one hundred percent of the time. Are you ready to be that for her? If not, then let her go. Walk away now.”

She turned on her heel and headed toward the last of the cars parked out on the long concrete driveway circling the cemetery, leaving Brylan feeling even more bewildered and confused than ever.

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Pam’s car was the last thing Brylan wanted to see after the shitty day he’d had. How did the woman always manage to show up at the absolute worst times? It was almost as if she had some sort of radar.

He hesitated at the front door, expecting that she’d be all over him the minute he stepped through it. All he wanted was to be left alone. He gathered himself and turned the knob only to find the living room and kitchen empty.

Maybe, just maybe, she was napping and he’d have a few minutes to himself.

He quietly slipped off his loafers by the front door and loosened his tie as he padded silently down the hallway. He paused at the bedroom door when he heard female voices on the other side of it. One of them was Pam’s. She had her phone on speaker, and he recognized the tinny voice on the other end as belonging to Tessa, her annoying sister.
He released his hold on the door knob and turned to retreat back to the other part of the house when he heard his name mentioned. For some reason it made the hair on his arms stand up.

“So what are you going to do when he notices that your belly isn’t getting any bigger? You can make excuses for a while, but he’s not that stupid, Pam.”

Brylan’s hands balled into fists and his heart lurched into his throat. He heard Pam sigh loudly before answering her sister. “That won’t be an issue if I can make it happen for real within the next couple of weeks…but that’s a little difficult when he barely ever touches me.”

Brylan’s teeth ground together and the blood that was whooshing between his ears threatened to make his head explode. He ignored the tiny little voice inside that told him to turn around and leave and he burst through the bedroom door, eyes blazing. Pam’s mouth dropped open in a gasp and all the color drained from her face. Her phone dropped from her hand and hit the floor, Tessa’s voice still chattering away, “Hell-oooo? Pamela? You still there? What was that noise?”

“Pamela...” Brylan pushed her name through clenched teeth, “…will have to get back to you, Tessa.” He spat out the words like ammo through a paper target.

There was an audible gasp on the other end of the phone followed by, “Oh shit,” and a beep signaling the end of the call.

Pam rose slowly and carefully from the bed, never taking her eyes off Brylan’s. “Bry—”

He didn’t give her an opportunity to make excuses. “Get the hell out of my house,” he growled and turned to leave, unable to look at her and afraid of what he might say or do.

“B…but...”

Did she really think there was any way to justify what she’d done? He spun back around. “How could you do that to me, Pam? To me? How could you…” Becky’s face flashed in his mind. “If you only knew…. You have no idea what you’ve done, do you? How much you hurt me?”

Pam didn’t even have the good sense to at least look remorseful. She just looked…annoyed, and it pissed Brylan off even more. “You know, Pam...you’re just...” It was on the tip of his tongue to call her a heartless bitch, but he caught himself. His dad had raised him better than that. Instead of unleashing his fury on her any further, he darted for the door, eager to get away from her as quickly as possible.

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His dad’s truck was parked in the driveway when Brylan pulled up to the two-story white farmhouse that he’d grown up in. The drive over to his dad’s had given him plenty of time to think about all the chaos in his life. But he was no closer to having any answers than he had been when he’d whipped his car out of his driveway an hour ago.

He sat in the car and stared at the front door, wondering if he had enough courage to step through it. The last encounter he’d had with his father hadn’t exactly gone well and he didn’t even know if he would be welcome in his father’s house. He’d been pretty hard on his dad that day he’d taken Nozz and Stormy fishing and he’d been kicking himself ever since, wishing he could erase the whole argument.

There were a lot of things he’d like to expunge from his memory, like the pain in Stormy’s eyes as she looked down into that casket; his whole relationship with Pam; the hurt that Nozz had gone through because of his father.

Brylan closed his eyes and rested his forehead on the steering wheel, silently willing his mind to shut off. It was all just too much and he needed a few minutes of quiet before he went completely insane.

A loud tap on the window startled the crap out of him and he hit his elbow on the inside of the door. “Shit!”

“Didn’t mean to make you jump outta your skin,” his dad said through the glass. “What are you doing just sitting out here?”

Brylan reluctantly exited the car and then leaned against the door, rubbing his left elbow that was still tingling. “I dunno. Just thinking.”

“Hmmm,” Sam grunted and headed for the front porch, “well come on up. I’ll go fetch the bourbon.”

Brylan dragged himself up the broad wooden steps and over to the side of the porch that overlooked the lake. It was where he and his mother used to sit in the evenings and watch the sunset while sipping sweet tea and talking about the future. A fresh wave of grief washed over him at the sight of the old porch swing that his mother loved so much. He couldn’t bear to sit in it. Not today. He opted for one of the old wooden rocking chairs instead.

Sam returned with a bottle of bourbon and two short, thick, heavy-bottomed glasses in tow. He poured them each a drink while Brylan shed his blazer and rolled up his sleeves. His dad looked him over and shook his head. “Geez, son. You look like death warmed over. And what’s with the monkey suit? You look like you just came from a funeral.”

Brylan flinched at his dad’s poor choice of words. “I did, actually.”
The realization of his blunder showed all over Sam’s face. “Oh. I’m sorry, son. Anybody I know?”

Brylan let out a long, shaky breath before answering. “Do you remember that girl I brought out here a few weeks ago? Stormy?”

Sam’s face paled slightly, “Don’t tell me she—”

“No, no. It was her mom that passed,” Brylan corrected.

“That poor kid.” Sam hung his head and Brylan knew he was remembering when his own mother had passed on. “She’s not much older than you were when….”

“When we lost Mom. I know,” he finished for him. He hadn’t meant to open old wounds, but there was no way around it. These were shit circumstances.

The two of them sat quietly for a few minutes, sipping bourbon, both of them remembering that awful day…and the agonizing months that led up to it.

“You know, Brylan,” his dad began somberly, “I’ve been thinking a lot about what you said the last time you were here.”

Oh, no. Not this. Not today. Brylan couldn’t handle an argument. Not after the day he’d had. “Dad, please. I don’t want to rehash all that stuff right now.” Brylan sat his glass down on the small side table and got up to leave, but his dad stood up and blocked his path.

“Damn it, Brylan. Please, just hear me out.” Surprising to Brylan, Sam wasn’t angry. His eyes were soft and pleading, something Brylan had never seen before, and his guilt wouldn’t let him leave. He sighed loudly before reclaiming his spot in the rocking chair.

Sam sat down and faced Brylan, “I’ve been going over and over what you said that day. It’s been eating me up, and since you don’t come around much anymore, I figure I need to get this off my chest while I have a chance to.” He grabbed up his glass and took a long swig, obviously mustering up some liquid courage for whatever it was he planned to say. When the glass was empty, he set it back down and placed his elbows on his knees, lacing his fingers together loosely in front of him.

“When your mother died,” Sam began, “I made a promise to her that I would steer you kids in the right direction. Make you make something of your lives. I made a promise that I had no idea how to keep. Your brothers…well, they were all off doing their own thing already. But you…and Lily…. I didn’t know what the hell to do with you and your sister. Your mom always took care of all that stuff—shaping your lives and building up your character. She was the glue that held everything together. She took care of the big stuff…and I supported her decisions.”
Brylan didn’t fail to notice the wetness of his father’s eyes or the wobble in his voice. His dad was usually a man of few words so Brylan knew this conversation was hard for him. Brylan sat quietly through his dad’s monologue and nodded his understanding.

“I know I was hard on you, son. I could never understand why you weren’t more like me—pushy and ornery, business-minded. You’re so much like your mother. I used to resent the hell out of it. That big damned heart of yours. That willingness to put yourself out there, put yourself at risk, usually for the sake of other people…. I just never quite understood it.” Sam shook his head. “Don’t get me wrong, I loved that about your mother. Hell, it was one of the things that attracted me to her in the first place. And the more I’ve thought about it, the more I realized that I wasn’t really angry at you for being like her. I was just pissed off at myself for not knowing how to nurture those qualities in you.”

It was a lot to take in, and Brylan wasn’t quite sure how to process what he was hearing. On some level, he felt validated. It was what he had always wanted, for his dad to be human, to see Brylan as a person. But on another level, it was unsettling.

“I feel like a failure, son. I’ve always pushed you in one direction, and you always pushed to go the opposite way. Maybe I should have let you find your own way. Perhaps you would have landed somewhere in the middle.”

Brylan sipped his drink while he let the words digest for a minute. “You’re not a failure, Dad. I happen to think you did a pretty damn good job…all things considered.” Images of Stormy and Nozz floated through his thoughts, and all the crap their parents had put them through. His dad’s parenting faux pas didn’t hold a candle to theirs. “Trust me, Dad, you’re being too hard on yourself.”

Sam shrugged, “Maybe. But I don’t think so.” He picked up the decanter and refilled their glasses before settling back into his chair. “Hey, you never did tell me why I found you sitting in your car, draped all over your steering wheel.”

Brylan raised an eyebrow and smirked. “You haven’t exactly given me a chance to get a word in.”

Sam chuckled. “Yeah. Sorry ‘bout that. But I’m all ears, now.”

Brylan dropped his head to his chest, debating whether or not to dump his problems all over his dad. He almost decided against it, but then it thought it might feel better to get it all out in the open rather than carrying the load all by himself, like he’d been doing for months. His dad had just bared his soul to him. Maybe it was time to do the same. His subconscious had steered him to his dad’s house for a reason, right?
So Brylan told his dad every rotten thing that had happened to him, from his first encounter with Principal Flint, to his big blowout with Pam. And it was liberating.

Sam ran a hand through his thinning hair and let out a whistle.
“Damn, son. I can see why you weren’t eager to talk to me about your problems. I wouldn’t wish that shit on my worst enemy. And I didn’t know your job was making you so unhappy.”

“It’s not necessarily the job. I like the idea of being a role model to those kids and all of that, but I don’t like the politics that go with the job. It’s just…I don’t know. Sometimes it’s like I’m wearing someone else’s skin.”

“I suppose that’s my fault,” Sam said apologetically. “I pushed you into teaching. I was shocked when you actually went through with it.”

Brylan shook his head. Yeah, me too. “Dad. What do you suggest I do?”

“You mean, other than keeping that Pamela woman from crossing my path?”

Brylan let out a sardonic snort of laughter. “Yeah. Besides that.”

“I’ve done enough meddling in your life, son. This time I’m letting you make your own decisions. Hell, if my dad hadn’t forced me into the family business…I’d probably be sipping lattés somewhere in France and painting portraits for tourists or something.”

Brylan nearly spewed bourbon all over the porch. “You’ve got to be kidding me. You? A painter?” It was an impossible thought. Surely his dad was just messing with him.

Sam nodded toward the opposite end of the porch, and sure enough, there stood an easel with an unfinished painting sitting on it. “Nope. Always wanted to be a painter when I was younger. Daddy always frowned on it. But he’s not around anymore…and since I’m semi-retired now….”

Brylan was utterly speechless. He stood and crossed the porch for a better look. It was a picture of the lake. Their lake. And it wasn’t half bad.

Brylan was still gawking at the blues, yellows and greens splattered across the canvas when he felt his dad’s hand come to rest on his shoulder.
“Brylan. I can’t tell you what to do about your problems. You have to figure it out on your own. But I’ll back you up no matter what you decide to do. Okay?”

Brylan nodded. It wasn’t exactly the advice he was hoping to hear, but at least his dad was in his corner for once.
“You wanna sleep in your old room tonight? Give yourself time to think things over?”

Brylan smiled softly. “Only if you promise to go fishing with me in the morning.”

“Sounds like a plan.” The corners of Sam’s eyes crinkled in a smile as he went to gather their glasses and then disappeared through the squeaky screen door.
Chapter Twenty Two

Eleven Years Ago

“STORMY! Come in here! Look what we got!” Stormy put her Barbie with the missing arm down on the bed—the double bed that she and Mama shared in their one bedroom apartment—and ran to the living room to see what all the commotion was about.

Mama and Jimmy were carrying something big through the door. It was wedged in the doorframe and the two of them were arguing about the best way to get it through.

“Let’s stand it up.”

“No,” Jimmy told Mama, “It won’t go that way…it’s too tall.”

“Well, what if we turn it at an angle, with the back of it facing downward….”

They carried on like that for what seemed like forever in Stormy’s seven-year-old mind, and after a whole lot of grunting…and a few swear words…they finally got it through. Mama and Jimmy lugged the bulky thing across the living room and set it down in front of their tiny TV.

“We got a couch? A real live couch?” Stormy’s eyes were round with amazement. No more sitting on the floor or on those uncomfortable milk crates that left little squares imprinted on her legs. This was the real deal.

Jimmy chuckled while he flopped down on one end, breathing heavily from the exertion, and her mama sat on the opposite end. She patted the spot beside her, “Come on, baby. Come try it out.”

With a running start, little Stormy launched herself onto the middle cushion, right in between the two of them and grinned from ear to ear.

“It’s bouncy.”

Mama’s blue eyes sparkled as she laughed. “Come here, you.” She pulled Stormy into her lap and squeezed her. “I guess that means you like it?” She kissed the top of Stormy’s head with a smack and stormy nodded enthusiastically.
“Yep. It’s the most beautiful couch in the whole world. You did good, Mama!”

“Hey! What about me? I helped.” Jimmy fake-pouted, pushing his bottom lip out and crossing his arms over his chest. Stormy giggled before sliding out of Mama’s lap and scooting over to Jimmy’s side of the couch. He wrapped his huge arms around her in a bear hug.

“You did good too, Jimmy.”

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Aside from the memories that echoed inside her skull, the old trailer was quiet as a tomb. Stormy rubbed her arms to ward off the chill that crept under her skin. It was a coldness that stayed with her these days, no matter what the temperature was outside, and she was beginning to wonder if she’d ever feel warm again.

She settled herself onto the shabby old couch and brushed her hand over the thin polyester fabric. It was a pitiful-looking thing, with its sagging cushions and faded floral pattern in sickly greens and yellows…. It was hard to believe she’d once thought it was so grand. But, unsightly as it was, it had always been a fixture in her life. Wherever she and Mama went, that old beat up couch went too. It was something she always associated with home.

So why did sitting on it feel so foreign to her now?

She glanced around the room, surveying the sparse décor and minimal furnishings that needed to be dealt with. A bulky, outdated TV, a rickety coffee table that was bound for the trash heap, Mama’s old record player….

Ugh. The record player. Stormy quickly squashed the tangle of memories it brought back. Some were good, but others…not so much.

She shot up from the couch and headed to the kitchen, thinking it would be safer in there. After all, it was just dishes and cleaning supplies, right?

The clean dishes still sat in the drying rack by the sink. The same way she’d left them that day. With a graduation to get ready for, she’d been in a hurry to get them washed, thinking that she’d put them away later.

But later never came.

Now, instead of tucking them away into the cupboards, she would be packing them away in boxes.

Stormy’s lip began to quiver. She didn’t want to cry. Didn’t have time for it. There was work to be done. So, she swallowed hard and grabbed one of the boxes she’d gotten from the alley behind the dollar
store. Trying to block out her thoughts, she started packing up the contents of the cabinets. With trembling fingers, she grabbed the first plate from the cupboard and began to clumsily wrap it in newspaper. Somehow or other, the darn thing managed to slip from her hands and then shattered on the floor.

Stormy stared vacantly at the jagged pieces of white and green ceramic. It was just like her. Broken, and no longer having a purpose. She glanced at the rest of the plates that were sitting on the shelf, stacked all nice and neat…like they were laughing at her.

She grabbed another plate and dropped it to the floor. CRASH!

*Stupid!*

She smashed another one.

*Worthless!*

And another.

*Piece of Crap!*

They were all useless. The glasses, the pots and pans, the baking dishes…they didn’t matter anymore. Mama didn’t need them anymore.

CRASH!

Mama was gone. Stormy had no family left. She didn’t belong anywhere.

She grabbed the pots.

BANG! THUD!

She was all alone.

CRASH!

Stormy’s arm was on the upswing with a glass bowl in her hand when Trudy walked through the front door. She leaned against the wall with her arms crossed over her chest. Stormy froze. Her eyes were wild and she was panting heavily.

“Don’t mind me.” Trudy gestured to the pile of broken glass and dented pans on the floor. “Carry on.”

Stormy’s arm swung down. The bowl hit the floor…but it didn’t break. Still perfectly intact, it bounced across the floor and then spun around in a circle before coming to a rest next to the trash can.

“Huh,” Trudy mused, “That sucker must be made of something stronger than all the rest. I thought sure it would shatter. But somehow it survived. Interesting.”

Stormy bristled. The meaning wasn’t lost on her. She turned her fury on Trudy. “Oh, I get it. I guess that’s supposed to be a metaphor for me. Strong…a survivor. *Whatever.*” She wiped a bead of sweat from her forehead, which was strange considering how icy she felt on the inside.
“Next you’ll be telling me that everything happens for a reason…and what
doesn’t kill us makes us stronger…every cloud has a silver lining…or
some other bullshit like that. Am I right?”

She speared Trudy with a look of defiance, daring her to put up an
argument…and it ticked her off further when Trudy didn’t say anything.
She just stood there, her face blank, unreadable. She expected to see anger,
hurt, or at least…pity. But there was none of that.

“Well?” Stormy put her hands on her hips. “Come on. I know you’ve
got some bit of wisdom you wish to impart. Go on. Give it to me.”

The corners of Trudy’s mouth turned up in a small smile.

A smile!

Stormy couldn’t wrap her mind around it. “What could you possibly
be smiling about?” Her voice was beginning to crack and that familiar
lump was making its way up to her throat. “There’s nothing to smile
about, Trudy.”

The dam that was holding back the tears finally broke. “There’s
nothing….” She stepped around the pile of broken glass and brushed past
Trudy on her way to the porch. She slammed the old metal door and then
collapsed into a heap right there on the dirty wooden steps.

When she heard Trudy’s soft footsteps on the wooden planks she sat
upright and pulled her knees up to her chest so she could wrap her arms
around them. Trudy dusted some dried leaves and debris from the steps
before sitting down beside her. She pulled a tissue from the pocket of her
jeans and began wiping Stormy’s face. “Oh, baby girl,” she said through a
sigh, “I so wish you could see what I see when I look at you.” She tucked
Stormy’s hair behind her ear. “I was smiling…because a little voice in my
head told me that you’re going to be okay. Because you are strong,
Stormy Black.”

Stormy sniffed. “How could you know that? How can anything ever
be okay? Mama’s gone. The only family I had. She was taken away from
me. Everything always gets taken away from me. Right when I think
things are getting better…that maybe things will be okay….swoosh!
Somebody yanks the rug out from under me. Mama was going to get
better. We were finally getting close again.” Her voice was strained,
almost a croak, as another round of tears threatened to fall. “Why did this
happen? Why now? Why would God let me believe things were going to
be better…and then let her die? Was it all just a sick joke? Am I being
punished for something? Please, Trudy. Help me understand because I’m
totally lost right now.”

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Trudy squeezed her eyes shut while she said a silent prayer. She needed the right words. Something to help Stormy see through the muck and the misery she was drowning in.

“He’s not punishing you, Stormy. God doesn’t work that way. I know it feels that way sometimes....” Trudy knew that for a fact. She’d been in that dark place...feeling lost, betrayed, and totally abandoned. And there was nothing that anyone could have said at the time to make her see beyond the hurt. Pain like that was blinding. It overwhelmed all of the other senses and blocked out things like logic and common sense. And it never fully went away. But it did become bearable...with time.

“I know none of this makes any sense. And I know you don’t want to hear it...but what you said in the kitchen was true. There is a reason for everything, even if we don’t understand it. In times like these you have to learn to focus on what you do have, rather than what you’ve lost.”

“I don’t have anything.” It was barely more than a whisper.

“That’s not true, love. You have me. You have Nozz. And you’re going off to college in the fall.... You have your smarts and your ambition...” Trudy clutched Stormy’s hand, sandwiching it between her own, “…and most of all you’ve got heart. A great big heart with lots of love to give.”

Some of the tension in Stormy’s frame seemed to relax a bit. Her shoulders—which had been hiked up to her ears—dropped down to their normal position and she was breathing more evenly. It wasn’t a miraculous recovery by any means, but it was an improvement. The girl was tough as nails. Trudy just wished there was a way to make her realize it.

Stormy leaned over and laid her head on Trudy’s shoulder. “I’m sorry for taking my frustration out on you.”

Trudy pulled her into her side and gave her a squeeze. “Don’t even worry about it. I’m just glad the dishes took the brunt of it.”

Stormy released a ragged breath and pulled away from Trudy’s hold on her, setting her gaze on the brown grass and overgrown weeds in the yard. “I can’t go back inside. I just can’t. I don’t want to be here. It’s too hard.”

Trudy gave a slow nod and patted her knee. “It’s okay. You don’t have to. I’ll get Nozz over here tomorrow to help me pack everything up.”

The look in Stormy’s eyes when she looked at her was soul-crushing and her body began to tremble. “You don’t understand, Trudy. I can’t be here anymore. In Yaupon. I have to get away. I just...I just....can’t be here.”
Trudy cradled her against her chest and stroked her hair. Her poor, poor, conflicted girl. Her heart ached for her. “I understand, sweetie. I really do.” She rolled an idea around in her head for a minute. “I think I might have a solution for that.”
Chapter Twenty Three

The vacant trailer stared mockingly at Brylan as he leaned against the side of his car in the dusty driveway. He’d been there for over an hour, hoping to see Stormy’s old Ford bounding down the driveway. But when he looked through the naked windows at all of the clutter strewn all over the small living room, and saw the cardboard boxes stacked on the floor, he knew that she wasn’t coming back. At least not any time soon.

He scrubbed his face with his hands, then ran them through his hair, frustrated and befuddled by the situation at hand. Where had she gone? And how had she left so quickly…and without a single word?

It probably shouldn’t have surprised him that she hadn’t reached out. They hadn’t spoken since the funeral three weeks ago and things had been tense between them to say the least. But he never thought she would just vanish like that.

There were so many things he wanted to tell her. But he had wanted to give her time. Time to grieve, time to think, and time to sort out her feelings. Like he’d been doing.

But he’d waited too long. And now she was gone.

What was he going to do with himself now? Wait and worry? Wonder if she was okay? The thought of never knowing what happened to her…it was too much. He’d already been through that once before. Was still going through it.

The women he cared about were always leaving him. Was it some sort of curse?

His mother. Becky. And now Stormy.

It was too much, and it was causing a knot to form in his stomach. Brylan crossed his arms over his chest and looked toward the heavens, “Mom, if you’re listening, I could use a little help down here. Just give me a sign. Something. Anything.”

Suddenly, something soft brushed against his ankle and startled him. A scrawny looking gray cat was looking up at him expectantly. He idly wondered if its sudden appearance had anything to do with his mom. It
would be just like her to do something like that, although he couldn’t understand how the mangy thing was supposed to be of any help. Apparently her sense of humor was still intact…even in the afterlife.

The cat purred loudly, rubbing itself against Brylan’s legs and arching its back, begging for attention. “Hey, buddy.” Brylan picked it up and stroked its grimy fur. “You could use a bath.”

A dull rumble drew his attention toward the road. Brylan shielded his eyes against the setting sun, hoping beyond hope as his heart galloped in his chest. Could it be her?

The sun glinted off the vehicle, making it all but impossible to make out until it turned down the driveway and headed in his direction.

His heart sank at the realization that it wasn’t Stormy’s truck. It was silver, an older model Pontiac. He didn’t recognize the car…but he’d know that shaggy, dishwater blond mop anywhere.

Nozz pulled up beside Brylan’s car, windows open and music blaring while he sang, off key, at the top of his lungs.

He hopped out and extended his hand to Brylan. “Hey, Coach.”

Brylan shook his hand, perplexed as to why he was there. He sure didn’t want to be the one to break the news that Stormy was gone. He knew that Stormy and Nozz were tight.

He decided to open with the obvious. “New car?”

“Yeah. Just got it.”

“Nice.”

“It gets me where I need to go.” He pushed his hair back. “I see that you found Smokey.”

Brylan had almost forgotten about the cat in his arms until it started wriggling, trying to get free. “Is that his name?”

“Yeah, well, at least that’s what Stormy called him. He’s a stray that showed up last week when Stormy was packing up to leave.”

Huh. So he knew.

The surprise must have been evident on his face by the way Nozz’s expression turned grim. “Oh, shoot. Sorry, Coach. Guess you didn’t know.”

Brylan set his jaw, barely able to maintain his composure. Nozz had known she was leaving, but he hadn’t bothered to tell him. He didn’t know if he was more hurt, or pissed off. They were supposed to be friends. How could he keep something like that from him? “No. Nobody bothered to tell me,” he said sourly.

Nozz looked down at the ground, obviously unable to look Brylan in the eye. “Stormy wouldn’t let me tell you.”
“What? What do you mean she wouldn’t let you?”

“She said for me to leave it alone. Asked me not to tell you anything about her plans.” Nozz raked a hand through his wild mane of blond hair again and then stuffed his hands in his pockets. Brylan sensed that he was nervous, like maybe there was more to it than he was letting on.

“So, that’s it then…she left…and she didn’t want me to know anything about it?” Brylan wasn’t really talking to Nozz, but rather to himself. It just didn’t seem rational. He and Stormy had been through a lot, but he still hoped that she considered him a friend. They’d been through too much shit together for her to just blow him off…disappear forever without so much as a goodbye or a kiss-my-ass…something. Anything would have been better than this.

“You can’t at least give me a clue? Did she go on to San Marcos? Did she—”

“I can’t tell you anything, Bry, ” Nozz shot at him.

Brylan was taken aback by the sudden animosity and the sharpness of his tone. Plus, it was the first time he’d called him anything other than Mr. Knight or Coach. Something was definitely off about the whole thing. Either Nozz wasn’t being totally forthcoming…or else Stormy really didn’t want to be found. Both ways spelled a loss for Brylan.

Maybe the kid was just upset about her leaving, just like he was. The two of them were thick as thieves, and Nozz had always been good to Stormy. He’d always been a good friend to Brylan too for that matter.

He supposed that the guy was entitled to a little leeway…a very little leeway.

“So, what brought you way out here if you knew she was gone already?”

Nozz pointed to the gray heap of fur at Brylan’s feet. “I came to feed Smokey. Stormy made me promise…since she couldn’t take him with her.”

It seemed that Stormy made Nozz promise a lot of things.

Brylan mulled over an idea for a minute, and then it cemented in his mind. There was one more thing he could do for Stormy, whether she cared or not. Either way, it seemed like the right thing to do.

“What if I just take him home with me?”

Nozz’s eyebrows drew together, uncertainty swirling in his eyes. “Are you sure? I didn’t know you liked cats.”

“Sure I do. Plus, the little guy looks like he needs some TLC. I’ll take him to the vet and get him all fixed up…and cleaned up.” The cat looked up at Brylan as if it could understand what he was saying, brushing
himself against Brylan’s legs again, purring like a little motor. He was a sweet little thing, but ugly as homemade soap in his current state. Brylan hoped a good scrub would take care of that.

“What about Pam? Is she going to be okay with having a cat around?”

Brylan gave Nozz a pointed look, “Pam’s not a concern of mine. Not anymore.”

Nozz wasn’t the only one who could be cryptic.

“Oh,” was Nozz’s only response.

“Well, I guess I’ll go on home. No point in sticking around here.” Brylan picked up the cat and put him on the backseat of his car, hoping like hell that he wouldn’t claw the seats...or worse. “You still moving in with your brother?” he asked, after closing the door. Smokey curled up on the seat and looked at him through the window, his yellow eyes enlarging and looking anxiety ridden. Brylan hoped his decision to take him wouldn’t bite him in the ass.

“I was planning to, but I’m not so sure anymore. I have other pursuits on the horizon.”

Brylan met the challenge in Nozz’s eyes, matching him with his own steely glare. He wasn’t sure what game Nozz was playing, but he didn’t like it. He thought about pushing him for the answers he was desperately wanting, but figured it would be useless considering the way he was acting.

“Well, good luck to you in whatever you decide.” Brylan stuck his hand out, noticing the hesitation before Nozz accepted it.

“Thanks, Coach.”

****

Once Brylan’s car had disappeared from view, Nozz opened up his glove compartment and took out the plain white envelope that had been residing there for the past two weeks. His teeth ground together as he stared at Brylan’s name written across the front in Stormy’s spirally script. He fumbled open the flap and took out the letter before tossing the envelope on the floor of the car. He stared at it, having memorized every word, and felt slightly resentful toward her for entrusting him to deliver it.

Reading it was an invasion of Stormy’s privacy. He knew that, and the guilt of it pricked at him. But he knew it was for her own good. She hadn’t been in any shape to think rationally for herself when she gave it to him. The shock of Marni’s passing was still fresh and Stormy had been a wreck.
He wished she hadn’t asked. But she had. She’d made him promise and he had said that he would deliver it.

And yet here it was…still in his possession.

The wrinkled pages practically burned his hands as he read the words again. He laid it in his lap and rubbed his eyes with his thumb and index finger. Did he miss an opportunity? Should he have given it to Brylan anyway?

After a couple of minutes, he tossed the letter on the passenger seat and headed out. He tuned his radio to his favorite 80’s station— also Stormy’s favorite— and cranked the volume up until the speaker in the car door vibrated his pant leg.

When he pulled out on the highway Bon Jovi started wailing about never saying goodbye. Nozz hit the accelerator, not caring about speed limits. He just wanted the lump in his throat to go down and for his eyes to quit stinging.

He looked over to the passenger seat and snatched the letter, crumpling it in the process.

Brylan didn’t deserve to read those words. He hadn’t earned them. Hadn’t earned Stormy’s affection.

He had.

He was the one who held her after her mother died. He was the one she leaned on at the funeral. He was the one she chose to be with after the prom. Not Brylan.

Nozz pinched the paper between two fingers, letting it hang precariously out the open window. It fluttered against the wind as an internal battle took place in his head.

Keep it? Toss it?

Getting rid of it would mean betraying her trust. If she ever found out what he did…it would put a permanent dent in their relationship.

But delivering it to Brylan…that would only prolong the inevitable heartbreak he would bring her.

Both the letter and his heart were becoming a tattered mess. He went back and forth, back and forth, weighing the risks, contemplating what to do…until the first tear fell and the poignant song ended.

And then he let go.
Dear Brylan,

I hope this letter finds you well. I thought about calling, but I’m just not ready to hear your voice yet. I’m afraid it would just make it that much harder to leave.

My head is a mess and my heart is splintered. I don’t know why the universe has decided to throw up so many road blocks for you and me, but I guess it has its reasons. Maybe we’re just not meant to be together, or maybe the timing just isn’t right. I don’t know, but I would like to think it’s the latter.

My whole life I’ve been running, trying to escape the past that has always threatened to drag me under. But no more. If I have to run, you can guarantee I’ll be chasing down my future. I have to believe that life has something better to offer, something other than heartache, and I intend to grab onto it with both hands when I find it.

Perhaps someday the sun will squeeze through the clouds, shining down on both of us. That is my eternal wish.

But for now, just remember – during some of my darkest times, you provided a break in the fog, and no matter what happens, I will always remember you as my knight in shining armor.

Always,

Stormy

The End.
Dear Reader:

I hope you enjoyed *Weathering Stormy*. If you’d like to leave feedback about your reading experience and share your thoughts with other readers, please leave a review.

Curious about what lies ahead for Stormy, Brylan, Trudy, and Nozz? Don’t miss book 2 in the *Weathering Stormy* Series, coming soon. (Please continue reading for a free sneak peek.)

Bye-bye for now!

*Auburn J. Kelly*
Acknowledgments

I would like to thank my wonderful family for their love and encouragement throughout this process. I couldn’t have done it without you.

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Of course, I would like to send out a very special word of thanks to my readers for letting me share Stormy’s story with you.
About the Author

Auburn J Kelly lives in a tiny rural town in Texas with her husband, two teenage sons, and a neurotic cat. When she’s not sketching or painting, you might find her browsing antiques in some quaint little shop. However, nine times out of ten, she’s likely to be nestled in a corner somewhere with her nose in a book.

As a writer of romantic fiction, Auburn draws inspiration from the world around her. She is fascinated by the complexity of human emotion and its impact on behavior. Writing has turned out to be the perfect outlet for that interest, as well as providing another channel for her creativity.

She is the author of the novella, Alternate Route (available on Amazon), and will soon be releasing Finding Grace, Part two of the Weathering Stormy Series.
Free Preview of Finding Grace
Chapter One

There was something ominous about the stack of boxes that were glaring at her. Sorting through her mother’s things was something Stormy had been dreading for weeks, but her old landlord had forced her hand by threatening to throw them in the dumpster. So, here she was, back in Yaupon, Texas, the place she vowed to never set foot in again, forced to dig into the past she’d been so eager to forget.

“Come on, sweetie. It’s time to rip off the bandage.” Trudy, Stormy’s best friend and current roommate, laid a hand on her shoulder as a gentle encouragement.

Stormy’s body sagged in defeat and she let out a long, exaggerated sigh. “Do I really have to? Can’t we just take them with us so I can unpack them later?”

Trudy’s soft blue eyes met Stormy’s cloudy gray ones. “I know this is hard for you, baby. But it’s better this way. Trust me.” She rubbed soothing little circles on Stormy’s back in an attempt to comfort her. “Plus, I don’t know where we’d store them all in that tiny apartment of ours.”

Stormy gave a slow nod. “You’re right. I know you’re right. I can’t hide from it anymore.” What she didn’t say, was that the boxes weren’t the only thing she wanted to get away from. Being back in Yaupon was just a cruel reminder of a long list of losses she’d endured in the last six months.

It’s where her mother died.

It’s where Brylan was.

Brylan. She’d written him a letter, had Nozz hand deliver it to him, along with the address to her new post office box. And now she waited with bated breath.

Had been waiting for weeks.

With all that had happened between them and all the chaos she was drowning in at the time, a letter seemed like the best approach. It put the ball in Brylan’s court. A test of sorts, to see if his feelings ran as deep as
he claimed they did, to verify whether or not the whole thing had been a fluke—just a petty flirtation between two people who’d been thrown together by circumstance.

She needed to know. Did she and Brylan share something special? Or was she building imaginary castles in the sky, deluding herself with grandiose ideas, so desperate for something—or someone—to cling to that she hadn’t seen things for what they really were?

It had certainly felt real.

Stormy sat down on the living room floor of the old trailer and opened the flaps of the first box labeled *Mama’s clothing*. She coughed as the dust wafted up toward her face. “Geez, how did so much dust accumulate on this stuff is so short a time?” Stormy stared at the contents while trying to swallow back the hard lump in her throat. It was full of old tank tops with catchy slogans and jeweled designs emblazoned on them, a couple of frilly, western blouses, and several pairs of worn out jeans.

Her mother’s attire had been simple, but her mama had worn them well. That is, before the drugs and the booze had taken hold of her.

“Hey, Trudy. Hand me a Sharpie and that roll of masking tape.” With the black marker in hand, she put a new label on the box and scrolled the word *donate* across it. There was nothing in the box that she wanted, and she felt better knowing that somebody else might put the clothes to good use.

Trudy smiled at her. “Progress.”

“Yeah, I guess so.” She looked around the room and wrinkled her nose. “Only eleven more to go.”

****

“What about this one, sweetie?” Three hours into their rummaging, Trudy held up a simple white lamp with a faded, sickly green lampshade. It had seen better days. “Trash, donate, keep, or sell?”

“Uh, keep the lamp…but toss the shade. There’s one in your shop that I think would look awesome on it.”

Trudy stared at the lamp while tapping a manicured finger to her lip. “Ah! I think I know which one you’re talking about…the lilac one with the crystals draped around the bottom?”

Stormy smiled at her. “That’s the one,” she said while writing *sell* in sharpie on the flap of one of the three remaining boxes. With Trudy’s help, they were making good progress. The task was less daunting with her pitching in. In the weeks since her mama’s passing, Trudy had been a
godsend. She’d taken Stormy into her home, comforted her, and gave her time to heal. And then the two of them had concocted a plan together.

“So, how much longer before Trudy’s Two is up and running?”

“Couple of weeks, maybe a month…if all goes well.”

Stormy stood up to stretch the soreness out of her back from having been stooped over for so long. She walked over to the kitchen and grabbed her Styrofoam cup of watered down Coke, taking a big gulp while surveying the remaining contents of the living room. A sense of dread was nibbling around the edges of her mind. The deed was almost done and soon she’d be closing the final chapter on that part of her life—the part that had her mama had been a part of.

She pushed the thoughts away with a subtle shake of her head.

“Who would have ever thought you and I would be living together in San Marcos? It’s still so surreal.” Though she vaguely remembered sitting in the leasing agent’s office and signing the papers, the memory of it felt more like the remnants of a dream.

During a time when nothing about her life made any damned sense at all and she was drifting aimlessly about in a blanket of fog, Trudy had thrown her a lifeline. Unbeknownst to Stormy, Trudy had already been making plans to leave Yaupon and open a second store, but she’d put her plans on the back burner when Marni died…when Stormy needed her the most. And with Stormy so desperate to escape, Trudy set her plans in motion…with one minor modification. She was taking Stormy with her.

“Oh, baby. It was time. I needed to shake the dust of this place off my feet and try something new. And I think San Marcos is a good location for a second store, don’t you?”

Stormy nodded in agreement. San Marcos seemed like a perfect fit for both of them. A place for new beginnings. It wasn’t a big city, but it was full of youth and vitality, constantly buzzing with activity. A small college town, Trudy’s Two, with its ostentatious, youthful flair and cozy atmosphere was sure to attract customers. Especially since Stormy had talked her into serving her specialty coffees and offering free WiFi.

Stormy pulled her attention back to the contents on the floor, knowing that she had one more box to sift through…and looking forward to it about as much as catching the flu. So far it hadn’t been that bad. Mama’s clothing and miscellaneous trinkets hadn’t bothered her much, but the last one was going to be tough. It was full of mementos and personal effects.

“I’m going to start loading some of these in the back of the truck while you sort through the last of it,” Trudy gave Stormy a knowing look that was just a bit unsettling. The woman’s intuition or sixth sense, as she called it, bordered on scary sometimes.
“Okay. Thanks.”

She opened the remaining box and picked up a photo album full of cheesy grins and awkward poses. She’d forgotten how much Mama had liked to snap pictures when Stormy was a kid. She flipped to a picture they’d taken at Mustang Island and her mama’s laugh floated through her mind. She was surrounded by seagulls and screaming when they swooped down towards her, and Mama thought it was hilarious. Failing to see the humor, Stormy ran from the greedy rats with wings, convinced they were after more than her bologna sandwich. “Stormy…they don’t bite!” Mama had cackled at her.

“Then why are they chasing me?” Stormy cried while running through the warm, heavy sand.

“They’re just hungry. Toss ‘em a piece of your bread.”

Stormy did as she was told, flinging it over her head, and then her eyes lit with amazement when one of the birds caught the bread in mid air. “Wow, did you see that?” she’d beamed at her mother.

“I sure did.”

Stormy found herself smiling at the memory. The two of them spent a good chunk of the afternoon feeding the gulls bread and chips and whatever else they could find.

And then her eyes landed on a picture of Jimmy. She had almost forgotten what he looked like. And there he was…one arm around Mama, and the other holding up a big catfish and grinning from ear to ear. He was handsome she supposed. Rugged, with one of those smiles that made his whole face crinkle, and it automatically made you smile with him even if you didn’t know what he was grinning about.

Stormy hadn’t thought about Jimmy in a long time and she was just starting to realize how much she missed him. He and her mama hadn’t been together for more than a year, but he’d been good to them. He was the only person who’d ever actually cared enough to step in and be a father to her…or tried to, until her mother pushed him away.

A bubble of resentment threatened to make its way to the top and Stormy pushed it back down. She took the photo out of the album and stared at it, remembering their camping trip at Lake…she couldn’t remember the name of it, but what she did remember was how mad Jimmy had gotten when the raccoons kept stealing their hotdogs from the picnic table before he had a chance to put them on the grill. Stormy and her mama stood at the door of the RV snickering while Jimmy shooed them away with his cap, yelling, “Get on out of here! Damn rotten masked bandits!”
She giggled at the memory and brushed a lone tear away with the back of her hand and then slid the photo back into its rightful place before setting the album aside. Next inside was a smaller box, an old shoebox that housed broken costume jewelry, some crusty old batteries, a handful of loose change, a stack of homemade greeting cards that were scrawled in crayon, and Mama’s old driver’s license.

She traced the postage stamp sized photo with her finger as her heart wrenched. Her mama had been so young and fresh once, and Stormy was awed at how someone could look so good in a DMV photo. She tucked the license in her back pocket and then put the shoebox and the photo albums back inside. It was pretty clear that this box was going home with her.

Home.

The notion of it seemed so bizarre to her, packing up and moving someplace without Mama. It hardly made any damned sense. Mama was supposed to be there.

Wiping away another tear, she taped up the box and took it out to her old, beat up Ford and placed it in the middle of the bench seat. There was no way she was risking it being donated or thrown away by accident.

Trudy was leaning against the side of the truck, retying the red bandana that was holding her burgundy curls in place. “You okay, kid?” Her voice was soft and sympathetic.

“Yeah. I think we got everything, but I want to walk through the house one more time just to make sure.”

Trudy nodded with a smile. “Take your time, sweetie.”

They both knew it was time to say goodbye. And Stormy was dreading it. A ball of knots formed in her stomach as she walked up those rickety steps one last time, skipping the one that had always threatened to give way due to rot.

The inside of the house was all wrong. Lifeless. Empty. As empty as Stormy felt.

As she wandered from room to room, re-checking cupboards and drawers for things she might have missed, she wished that she could sort her feelings into nice neat little piles just as she and Trudy had done with Mama’s things—guilt, anger, regret, anguish, love, hate—the volatile cocktail of emotions swirling around in her head.

Despite the absence of air conditioning in the July heat, Stormy’s arms prickled with goose bumps as she stood in the middle of her mother’s empty bedroom. The room that she had died in. The room where she and her mother had spoken their last words to each other…where she heard her mother say I love you for the very last time.
It was strange standing there in her mother’s bedroom, and she half expected her mama to burst through the door and ask her what the heck she was doing in there. She wished that she would, just to hear her voice one more time…a complaint, an argument, a rant…anything. Anything would be better than the cold, vacant silence.

With trembling fingers, Stormy slid the plastic accordion doors of the closet open, the motion causing the empty hangers to swing back and forth as if they were mocking her. Just a short while ago, Stormy had been planning on leaving that run-down old trailer without ever looking back. She’d resented her mother back then and couldn’t wait to get away from her. Blamed her for all that was wrong in her life.

But then her mama had gone and left first….

The threat of more tears stung the backs of her eyeballs. Dammit! She was tired of never knowing which emotion would decide to rear its ugly head. And sometimes she could swear that they were all trying to come out at once. She was like a faulty round of ammunition—unstable and unpredictable, and liable to go off at any time.

Trudy’s voice startled her, “Everything good in here?”

No. Things weren’t good. Stormy’s gut twisted with the fact that her mother’s life was snuffed out before it was finished. Though there was nothing left in that old trailer to do, it still just felt wrong to leave it. There was no real rationale behind the feeling, and yet it was there, flashing like a neon light in her head.

“Yeah. I’m ready when you are.” She eased toward the door and put her hand on the light switch, giving the room one last glance before casting it back into darkness.

_Bye, Mama._
Chapter Two

Stormy opened the French doors that led to the tiny balcony of their new apartment and stared in awe. “Wow, look at this view, Trudy! It’s so pretty.” Through the scattering of pecan trees and live oaks there was a view of the crystal clear river that ran through town. “We’re going to have to do that. It looks like so much fun.”

Trudy sauntered over to the balcony and whistled. “Mmmm Hmmm. Nice view indeed. We definitely picked the right place,” she said as she appraised the gaggle of half naked men that floated by on inner tubes.

“Trudy!” Stormy gave her a playful slap on the arm and giggled as she rested her elbows on the railing. It did look like fun…floating down the lazy river, soaking up the summer sun without a care in the world.

Not that Stormy would know. She couldn’t remember the last time she’d been that happy-go-lucky. Maybe never.

As if reading her mind, Trudy said, “That’ll be you pretty soon. Down there floating along with all your college friends.” She gave Stormy a small, hopeful smile before turning her gaze toward the river. Something lingered in her empty stare. It took Stormy a minute to put her finger on it, it was so unexpected and out of place.

Sadness?

“Everything okay, Trudy?” Stormy rubbed Trudy’s shoulder soothingly, the way Trudy had done for her more times than she could remember.

Trudy placed a hand on top of Stormy’s. “I’m fine, sweetie. Just tired.”

That was reasonable. They’d been lugging things back and forth from the truck all morning, making Stormy wish they had gotten an apartment on the first floor instead of the second. Stormy felt sorry for the poor saps on the fourth.

“Why don’t you sit and I’ll make a couple glasses of sweet tea.” Stormy went to the refrigerator and pulled out the floral pitcher. She had
to contain a giggle when she put her glass under the automatic ice
dispenser on the fridge. For her it was a novelty, a far cry from the old
plastic ice trays that she was used to wrestling with, and she was happy
Trudy had brought her own appliances along.

    She filled the glasses and set them on the breakfast bar that separated
the kitchen from the tiny living room. “Oh shoot!” she said when she
looked at the plastic cat-shaped clock on the wall, “I’m going to be late to
orientation.”

    “That’s today?” Trudy looked alarmed. “My goodness, girl. We just
barely got here. Aren’t you exhausted?”

    Stormy had passed exhaustion several hours ago, but the campus tour
was something she’d been looking forward to for the past two weeks. She
needed it. Needed to cement the fact that college was real, that there was a
future out there for her.

    Before she could answer her, Trudy’s phone started vibrating across
the counter. Stormy didn’t miss the way Trudy’s eyes widened when she
looked at the screen. “Sorry, sweetheart. I’ve got to take this.” She hopped
up from her stool and rushed out to the balcony, closing the French doors
behind her. She’d been acting strangely over the past few days. Several
hushed phone conversations and frequent outings with no explanation….
Stormy suspected she was seeing someone, but for whatever reason Trudy
didn’t want her to know about it.

    Stormy brushed the incident aside and scuttled into the bathroom for a
shower. Twenty minutes later, she popped back into the kitchen to fetch a
water bottle out of the fridge, knowing she’d be needing it while
gallivanting across the Texas State campus in the sweltering heat.

    Trudy had resumed her spot on the bar stool in the kitchen, apparently
finished with her secret phone call. “Is that what you’re wearing?” She
made a face and wrinkled her nose as if Stormy was stinking up the place.

    “What’s wrong with my outfit? The brochure said to dress
comfortably. It’s a hundred degrees outside.” She looked down at her
white denim shorts and plain, blue tank top. She thought she looked
alright.

    Trudy ran her fingers down the length of Stormy’s ponytail. “Want
some help with your hair and makeup? There’s bound to be some cute
guys roaming around. You never know,” Trudy said with a wink.

    The last thing Stormy wanted to think about was men. It was her time
to shine and she didn’t want anything interfering with that. “No, Trudy. I
don’t have time. Thanks though. It’s too hot for all of that anyway. My
makeup would just melt off.”

    Trudy let out a frustrated sigh of defeat, “Alright then.”
It had been a long day and she was hot and tired. The experience had been worth it though. Texas State was like a city within a city and there was so much to do and see. She couldn’t help but be impressed by it.

The campus store was her last stop on the tour. She’d made a special point of stopping in to buy a couple of tee-shirts bearing the school logo, further reinforcing that the whole thing was real. For whatever reason, she was still having a hard time wrapping her mind around actually going to college. Higher education had been like a pipe dream, something she could see in her mind but was too far away to touch. Something set aside for rich kids with functional families…not people like her.

The place reminded her of a department store with racks and racks of clothing and shelves of miscellaneous odds and ends baring the Texas State emblem. A maroon baseball cap with the school mascot embroidered on it caught her eye. She put in on and pulled her pony-tail through the back while she sought out a mirror.

“You should buy it. It suits you,” said a voice from behind her. Stormy’s heart lurched in her chest at the familiar baritone. When she spun around, her eyes widened and she broke into a huge grin.

To be continued…. 