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*For Vance.
Some fathers give you life. Some show you how to live it.
Thank you for showing me how.*

Sunday, October 28, 2012

7:29 p.m.

I stand up and look down at the bed, holding my breath in fear of the sounds that are escalating from deep within my throat.

I will not cry.

I will not cry.

Slowly sinking to my knees, I place my hands on the edge of the bed and run my fingers over the yellow stars poured across the deep blue background of the comforter. I stare at the stars until they begin to blur from the tears that are clouding my vision.

I squeeze my eyes shut and bury my head into the bed, grabbing fistfuls of the blanket. My shoulders begin to shake as the sobs I've been trying to contain violently break out of me. With one swift movement, I stand up, scream, and rip the blanket off the bed, throwing it across the room.

I ball my fists and frantically look around for something else to throw. I grab the pillows off the bed and chuck them at the reflection in the mirror of the girl I no longer know. I watch as the girl in the mirror stares back at me, sobbing pathetically. The weakness in her tears infuriates me. We begin to run toward each other until our fists collide against the glass, smashing the mirror. I watch as she falls into a million shiny pieces onto the carpet.

I grip the edges of the dresser and push it sideways, let-

ting out another scream that has been pent up for way too long. When the dresser comes to rest on its back, I rip open the drawers and throw the contents across the room, spinning and throwing and kicking at everything in my path. I grab at the sheer blue curtain panels and yank them until the rod snaps and the curtains fall around me. I reach over to the boxes piled high in the corner, and without even knowing what's inside, I take the top one and throw it against the wall with as much force as my five-foot, three-inch frame can muster.

"I hate you!" I cry. "I hate you, I hate you, I hate you!"

I'm throwing whatever I can find in front of me at whatever else I can find in front of me. Every time I open my mouth to scream, I taste the salt from the tears that are streaming down my cheeks.

Holder's arms suddenly engulf me from behind and grip me so tightly I become immobile. I jerk and toss and scream some more until my actions are no longer thought out. They're just reactions.

"Stop," he says calmly against my ear, unwilling to release me. I hear him, but I pretend not to. Or I just don't care. I continue to struggle against his grasp but he only tightens his grip.

"Don't touch me!" I yell at the top of my lungs, clawing at his arms. Again, it doesn't faze him.

Don't touch me. Please, please, please.

The small voice echoes in my mind and I immediately become limp in his arms. I become weaker as my tears grow stronger, consuming me. I become nothing more than a vessel for the tears that won't stop shedding.

I am weak, and I'm letting *him* win.

Holder loosens his grip around me and places his hands on my shoulders, then turns me around to face him. I can't even look at him. I melt against his chest from exhaustion and defeat, taking in fistfuls of his shirt as I sob, my cheek pressed against his heart. He places his hand on the back of my head and lowers his mouth to my ear.

"Sky." His voice is steady and unaffected. "You need to leave. Now."

Saturday, August 25, 2012
11:50 p.m.

Two months earlier . . .

I'd like to think most of the decisions I've made throughout my seventeen years have been smart ones. Hopefully intelligence is measured by weight, and the few dumb decisions I've made will be outweighed by the intelligent ones. If that's the case, I'll need to make a shitload of smart decisions tomorrow because sneaking Grayson into my bedroom window for the third time this month weighs pretty heavily on the dumb side of the scale. However, the only accurate measurement of a decision's level of stupidity is time . . . so I guess I'll wait and see if I get caught before I break out the gavel.

Despite what this may look like, I am *not* a slut. Unless, of course, the definition of slut is based on the fact that I make out with lots of people, regardless of my lack of attraction to them. In that case, one might have grounds for debate.

"Hurry," Grayson mouths behind the closed window, obviously irritated at my lack of urgency.

I unlock the latch and slide the window up as quietly as possible. Karen may be an unconventional parent, but when it comes to boys sneaking through bedroom windows at midnight, she's your typical, disapproving mother.

“Quiet,” I whisper. Grayson hoists himself up and throws one leg over the ledge, then climbs into my bedroom. It helps that the windows on this side of the house are barely three feet from the ground; it’s almost like having my own door. In fact, Six and I have probably used our windows to go back and forth to each other’s houses more than we’ve used actual doors. Karen has become so used to it, she doesn’t even question my window being open the majority of the time.

Before I close the curtain, I glance to Six’s bedroom window. She waves at me with one hand while pulling on Jaxon’s arm with the other as he climbs into her bedroom. As soon as Jaxon is safely inside, he turns and sticks his head back out the window. “Meet me at your truck in an hour,” he whispers loudly to Grayson. He closes Six’s window and shuts her curtains.

Six and I have been joined at the hip since the day she moved in next door four years ago. Our bedroom windows are adjacent to each other, which has proven to be extremely convenient. Things started out innocently enough. When we were fourteen, I would sneak into her room at night and we would steal ice cream from the freezer and watch movies. When we were fifteen, we started sneaking boys in to eat ice cream and watch movies *with* us. By the time we were sixteen, the ice cream and movies took a backseat to the boys. Now, at seventeen, we don’t even bother leaving our respective bedrooms until *after* the boys go home. That’s when the ice cream and movies take precedence again.

Six goes through boyfriends like I go through flavors of ice cream. Right now her flavor of the month is Jaxon. Mine is Rocky Road. Grayson and Jaxon are best friends, which

is how Grayson and I were initially thrown together. When Six's flavor of the month has a hot best friend, she eases him into my graces. Grayson is definitely hot. He's got an undeniably great body, perfectly sloppy hair, piercing dark eyes . . . the works. The majority of girls I know would feel privileged just to be in the same room as him.

It's too bad *I* don't.

I close the curtains and spin around to find Grayson inches from my face, ready to get the show started. He places his hands on my cheeks and flashes his panty-dropping grin. "Hey, beautiful." He doesn't give me a chance to respond before his lips greet mine in a sloppy introduction. He continues kissing me while slipping off his shoes. He slides them off effortlessly while we both walk toward my bed, mouths still meshed together. The ease with which he does both things simultaneously is impressive *and* disturbing. He slowly eases me back onto my bed. "Is your door locked?"

"Go double check," I say. He gives me a quick peck on the lips before he hops up to ensure the door is locked. I've made it thirteen years with Karen and have never been grounded; I don't want to give her any reason to start now. I'll be eighteen in a few weeks and even then, I doubt she'll change her parenting style as long as I'm under her roof.

Not that her parenting style is a negative one. It's just . . . very contradictory. She's been strict my whole life. We've never had access to the internet, cell phones, or even a television because she believes technology is the root of all evil in the world. Yet, she's extremely lenient in other regards. She allows me to go out with Six whenever I want, and as long as she knows where I am, I don't even really

have a curfew. I've never pushed that one too far, though, so maybe I do have a curfew and I just don't realize it.

She doesn't care if I cuss, even though I rarely do. She even lets me have wine with dinner every now and then. She talks to me more like I'm her friend than her daughter (even though she adopted me thirteen years ago) and has somehow even warped me into being (almost) completely honest with her about everything that goes on in my life.

There is no middle ground with her. She's either extremely lenient or extremely strict. She's like a conservative liberal. Or a liberal conservative. Whatever she is, she's hard to figure out, which is why I stopped trying years ago.

The only thing we've ever really butted heads on was the issue of public school. She has homeschooled me my whole life (public school is another root of evil) and I've been begging to be enrolled since Six planted the idea in my head. I've been applying to colleges and feel like I'll have a better chance at getting into the schools that I want if I can add a few extracurricular activities to the applications. After months of incessant pleas from Six and me, Karen finally conceded and allowed me to enroll for my senior year. I could have enough credits to graduate from my home study program in just a couple of months, but a small part of me has always had a desire to experience life as a normal teenager.

Of course, if I had known then that Six would be leaving for a foreign exchange the same week as what was supposed to be our first day of senior year together, I never would have entertained the idea of public school. But I'm unforgivably stubborn and would rather stab myself in the meaty part of my hand with a fork than tell Karen I've changed my mind.

I've tried to avoid thinking about the fact that I won't have Six this year. I know how much she was hoping the exchange would work out, but the selfish part of me was really hoping it wouldn't. The idea of having to walk through those doors without her terrifies me. But I realize that our separation is inevitable and I can only go so long before I'm forced into the real world where other people besides Six and Karen live.

My lack of access to the real world has been replaced completely by books, and it can't be healthy to live in a land of happily-ever-afters. Reading has also introduced me to the (perhaps dramatized) horrors of high school and first days and cliques and mean girls. It doesn't help that, according to Six, I've already got a bit of a reputation just being associated with her. Six doesn't have the best track record for celibacy, and apparently some of the guys I've made out with don't have the best track record for secrecy. The combination should make for a pretty interesting first day of school.

Not that I care. I didn't enroll to make friends or impress anyone, so as long as my unwarranted reputation doesn't interfere with my ultimate goal, I'll get along just fine.

I hope.

Grayson walks back toward the bed after ensuring my door is locked, and he shoots me a seductive grin. "How about a little striptease?" He sways his hips and inches his shirt up, revealing his hard-earned set of abs. I'm beginning to notice he flashes them any chance he gets. He's pretty much your typical, self-absorbed bad boy.

I laugh when he twirls the shirt around his head and

throws it at me, then slides on top of me again. He slips his hand behind my neck, pulling my mouth back into position.

The first time Grayson snuck into my room was a little over a month ago, and he made it clear from the beginning that he wasn't looking for a relationship. I made it clear that I wasn't looking for *him*, so naturally we hit it off right away. Of course, he'll be one of the few people I know at school, so I'm worried it might mess up the good thing we've got going—which is absolutely nothing.

He's been here less than three minutes and he's already got his hand up my shirt. I think it's safe to say he's not here for my stimulating conversation. His lips move from my mouth in favor of my neck, so I use the moment of respite to inhale deeply and try again to feel something.

Anything.

I fix my eyes on the plastic glow-in-the-dark stars adhered to the ceiling above my bed, vaguely aware of the lips that have inched their way to my chest. There are seventy-six of them. Stars, that is. I know this because for the last few weeks I've had ample time to count them while I've been in this same predicament. Me, lying unnoticeably unresponsive, while Grayson explores my face and neck, and sometimes my chest, with his curious, overexcited lips.

Why, if I'm not into this, do I let him do it?

I've never had any emotional connection to the guys I make out with. Or rather, the guys that make out with *me*. It's unfortunately mostly one-sided. I've only had one guy come close to provoking a physical or emotional response from me once, and that turned out to be a self-induced delusion. His name was Matt and we ended up dating for less than a month before his idiosyncrasies got the best of me.

Like how he refused to drink bottled water unless it was through a straw. Or the way his nostrils flared right before he leaned in to kiss me. Or the way he said, “I love you,” after only three weeks of declaring ourselves exclusive.

Yeah. That last one was the kicker. Buh-bye *Matty boy*.

Six and I have analyzed my lack of physical response to guys many times in the past. For a while she suspected I might be gay. After a very brief and awkward “theory-testing” kiss between us when we were sixteen, we both concluded that wasn’t the case. It’s not that I don’t enjoy making out with guys. I do enjoy it—otherwise, I wouldn’t do it. I just don’t enjoy it for the same reasons as other girls. I’ve never been swept off my feet. I don’t get butterflies. In fact, the whole idea of being swooned by anyone is foreign to me. The real reason I enjoy making out with guys is simply that it makes me feel completely and comfortably numb. It’s situations like the one I’m in right now with Grayson when it’s nice for my mind to shut down. It just completely stops, and I like that feeling.

My eyes are focused on the seventeen stars in the upper right quadrant of the cluster on my ceiling, when I suddenly snap back to reality. Grayson’s hands have ventured further than I’ve allowed them to in the past and I quickly become aware of the fact that he has unbuttoned my jeans and his fingers are working their way around the cotton edge of my panties.

“No, Grayson,” I whisper, pushing his hand away.

He pulls his hand back and groans, then presses his forehead into my pillow. “Come on, Sky.” He’s breathing heavily against my neck. He adjusts his weight to his right arm and looks down at me, attempting to play me with his smile.

Did I mention I'm immune to his panty-dropping grin?

"How much longer are you gonna keep this up?" He slides his hand over my stomach and inches his fingertips into my jeans again.

My skin crawls. "Keep *what* up?" I attempt to ease out from under him.

He pushes up on his hands and looks down at me like I'm clueless. "This 'good girl' act you've been trying to put on. I'm over it, Sky. Let's just do this already."

This brings me back to the fact that, contrary to popular belief, I am *not* a slut. I've never had sex with any of the boys I've made out with, including the currently pouting Grayson. I'm aware that my lack of sexual response would probably make it easier on an emotional level to have sex with random people. However, I'm also aware that it might be the very reason I *shouldn't* have sex. I know that once I cross that line, the rumors about me will no longer be rumors. They'll all be fact. The last thing I want is for the things people say about me to be validated. I guess I can chalk my almost eighteen years of virginity up to sheer stubbornness.

For the first time in the ten minutes he's been here, I notice the smell of alcohol reeking from him. "You're drunk." I push against his chest. "I told you not to come over here drunk again." He rolls off me and I stand up to button my pants and pull my shirt back into place. I'm relieved he's drunk. I'm beyond ready for him to leave.

He sits up on the edge of the bed and grabs my waist, pulling me toward him. He wraps his arms around me and rests his head against my stomach. "I'm sorry," he says. "It's just that I want you so bad I don't think I can take coming

over here again if you don't let me have you." He lowers his hands and cups my butt, then presses his lips against the area of skin where my shirt meets my jeans.

"Then don't come over here." I roll my eyes and back away from him, then head to the window. When I pull the curtain back, Jaxon is already making his way out of Six's window. Somehow we both managed to condense this hour-long visit into ten minutes. I glance at Six and she gives me the all-knowing "time for a new flavor" look.

She follows Jaxon out of her window and walks over to me. "Is Grayson drunk, too?"

I nod. "Strike three." I turn and look at Grayson, who's lying back on the bed, ignorant of the fact that he's no longer welcome. I walk over to the bed and pick his shirt up, tossing it at his face. "Leave," I say. He looks up at me and cocks an eyebrow, then begrudgingly slides off the bed when he sees I'm not making a joke. He slips his shoes back on, pouting like a four-year-old. I step aside to let him out.

Six waits until Grayson has cleared the window, then she climbs inside when one of the guys mumbles the word "whores." Once inside, Six rolls her eyes and turns around to stick her head out.

"Funny how we're whores because you *didn't* get laid. Assholes." She shuts the window and walks over to the bed, plopping down on it and crossing her hands behind her head. "And another one bites the dust."

I laugh, but my laugh is cut short by a loud bang on my bedroom door. I immediately go unlock it, then step aside, preparing for Karen to barge in. Her motherly instincts don't let me down. She looks around the room frantically until she eyes Six on the bed.

“Dammit,” she says, spinning around to face me. She puts her hands on her hips and frowns. “I could have sworn I heard boys in here.”

I walk over to the bed and attempt to hide the sheer panic coursing throughout my body. “And you seem disappointed *because . . .*” I absolutely don’t understand her reaction to things sometimes. Like I said before . . . *contradictory*.

“You turn eighteen in a month. I’m running out of time to ground you for the first time ever. You need to start screwing up a little more, kid.”

I breathe a sigh of relief, seeing she’s only kidding. I almost feel guilty that she doesn’t actually suspect her daughter was being felt up five minutes earlier in this very room. My heart is pounding against my chest so incredibly loud, I’m afraid she might hear it.

“Karen?” Six says from behind us. “If it makes you feel better, two hotties just made out with us, but we kicked them out right before you walked in because they were drunk.”

My jaw drops and I spin around to shoot Six a look that I’m hoping will let her know that sarcasm isn’t at all funny when it’s the *truth*.

Karen laughs. “Well, maybe tomorrow night you’ll get some cute *sober* boys.”

I don’t think I have to worry about Karen hearing my heartbeat anymore, because it just completely stopped.

“Sober boys, huh? I think I can arrange that,” Six says, winking at me.

“Are you staying the night?” Karen says to Six as she makes her way back to the bedroom door.

Six shrugs her shoulders. “I think we’ll stay at my house

tonight. It's my last week in my own bed for six months. Plus, I've got Channing Tatum on the flat-screen."

I glance back at Karen and see it starting.

"Don't, Mom." I begin walking toward her, but I can see the mist forming in her eyes. "No, no, no." By the time I reach her, it's too late. She's bawling. If there's one thing I can't stand, it's crying. Not because it makes me emotional, but because it annoys the hell out of me. And it's awkward.

"Just one more," she says, rushing toward Six. She's already hugged her no less than ten times today. I almost think she's sadder than I am that Six is leaving in a few days. Six obliges her request for the eleventh hug and winks at me over Karen's shoulder. I practically have to pry them apart, just so Karen will get out of my room.

She walks back to the door and turns around one last time. "I hope you meet a hot Italian boy," she says to Six.

"I better meet more than just one," Six deadpans.

When the door closes behind Karen, I spin around and jump on the bed, then punch Six in the arm. "You're such a *bitch*," I say. "That wasn't funny. I thought I got caught."

She laughs and grabs my hand, then stands up. "Come. I've got Rocky Road."

She doesn't have to ask twice.

Monday, August 27, 2012
7:15 a.m.

I debated whether to run this morning but I ended up sleeping in, instead. I run every day except Sunday, but it seems wrong having to get up extra early today. Being the first day of school is enough torture in itself, so I decide to put off my run until after school.

Luckily, I've had my own car for about a year now, so I don't have to rely on anyone other than myself to get me to school on time. Not only do I get here on time, I get here forty-five minutes early. I'm the third car in the parking lot, so at least I get a good spot.

I use the extra time to check out the athletic facilities next to the parking lot. If I'm going to be trying out for the track team, I should at least know where to go. Besides, I can't just sit in my car for the next half hour and count down the minutes.

When I reach the track, there's a guy across the field running laps, so I cut right and walk up the bleachers. I take a seat at the very top and take in my new surroundings. From up here, I can see the whole school laid out in front of me. It doesn't look nearly as big or intimidating as I've been imagining. Six made me a hand-drawn map and even wrote a few pointers down, so I pull the paper out of my backpack and look at it for the first time. I think she's trying to over-compensate because she feels bad for abandoning me.

I look at the school grounds, then back at the map. It looks easy enough. Classrooms in the building to the right. Lunchroom on the left. Track and field behind the gym. There is a long list of her pointers, so I begin reading them.

*-Never use the restroom next to the science lab. Ever.
Not ever.*

-Only wear your backpack across one shoulder. Never double-arm it, it's lame.

-Always check the date on the milk.

-Befriend Stewart, the maintenance guy. It's good to have him on your side.

-The cafeteria. Avoid it at all costs, but if the weather is bad, just pretend you know what you're doing when you walk inside. They can smell fear.

-If you get Mr. Declare for math, sit in the back and don't make eye contact. He loves high school girls, if you know what I mean. Or, better yet, sit in the front. It'll be an easy A.

The list goes on, but I can't read anymore right now. I'm still stuck on "*they can smell fear.*" It's times like these that I wish I had a cell phone, because I would call Six right now and demand an explanation. I fold the paper up and put it back in my bag, then focus my attention on the lone runner. He's seated on the track with his back turned to me, stretching. I don't know if he's a student or a coach, but if Grayson saw this guy without a shirt, he'd probably become a lot more modest about being so quick to flash his own abs.

The guy stands up and walks toward the bleachers,

never looking up at me. He exits the gate and walks to one of the cars in the parking lot. He opens his door and grabs a shirt off the front seat, then pulls it on over his head. He hops in the car and pulls away, just as the parking lot begins to fill up. And it's filling up fast.

Oh, God.

I grab my backpack and purposefully pull both arms through it, then descend the stairs that lead straight to Hell.



Did I say Hell? Because that was putting it mildly. Public school is everything I was afraid it would be and worse. The classes aren't so bad, but I had to (out of pure necessity and unfamiliarity) use the restroom next to the science lab, and although I survived, I'll be scarred for life. A simple side note from Six informing me that it's used as more of a brothel than an actual restroom would have sufficed.

It's fourth period now and I've heard the words "slut" and "whore" whispered not so subtly by almost every girl I've passed in the hallways. And speaking of not-so-subtle, the heap of dollar bills that just fell out of my locker, along with a note, were a good indicator that I may not be very welcome. The note was signed by the principal, but I find that hard to believe based on the fact that "your" was spelled "you're," and the note said, *"Sorry you're locker didn't come with a pole, slut."*

I stare at the note in my hands with a tight-lipped smile, shamefully accepting my self-inflicted fate that will be the next two semesters. I seriously thought people only acted this way in books, but I'm witnessing firsthand that idiots actually exist. I'm also hoping most of the pranks being played at

my expense are going to be just like the stripper-cash prank I'm experiencing right now. What idiot gives away money as an insult? I'm guessing a rich one. Or rich *ones*.

I'm sure the clique of giggling girls behind me that are scantily, yet expensively clad, are expecting my reaction to be to drop my things and run to the nearest restroom crying. There are only three issues with their expectations.

1. *I don't cry. Ever.*
2. *I've been to that restroom and I'll never go back.*
3. *I like money. Who would run from that?*

I set my backpack on the floor of the hallway and pick the money up. There are at least twenty one-dollar bills scattered on the floor, and more than ten still in my locker. I scoop those up as well and shove it all into my backpack. I switch books and shut my locker, then slide my backpack on both shoulders and smile.

"Tell your daddies I said thank you." I walk past the clique of girls (that are no longer giggling) and ignore their glares.



It's lunchtime, and looking at the amount of rain flooding the courtyard, it's obvious that Karma has retaliated with shitty weather. Who she's retaliating against is still up in the air.

I can do this.

I place my hands on the doors to the cafeteria and open them, half-expecting to be greeted by fire and brimstone.

I step through the doorway and it's not fire and brim-

stone that I'm met with. It's a decibel level of noise unlike anything my ears have ever been subjected to. It's almost as if every single person in this entire cafeteria is trying to talk louder than every other person in this entire cafeteria. I've just enrolled in a school of nothing but one-uppers.

I do my best to feign confidence, not wanting to attract unwanted attention from anyone. Guys, cliques, outcasts, *or* Grayson. I make it halfway to the food line unscathed, when someone slips his arm through mine and pulls me along behind him.

"I've been waiting for you," he says. I don't even get a good look at his face before he's guiding me across the cafeteria, weaving in and out of tables. I would object to this sudden disruption, but it's the most exciting thing that's happened to me all day. He slips his arm from mine and grabs my hand, pulling me faster along behind him. I stop resisting and go with the flow.

From the looks of the back of him, he's got style, as strange as that style may be. He's wearing a flannel shirt that's edged with the exact same shade of hot pink as his shoes. His pants are black and tight and very figure flattering . . . if he were a girl. Instead, the pants just accentuate the frailty of his frame. His dark brown hair is cropped short on the sides and is a little longer on top. His eyes are . . . staring at me. I realize we've come to a stop and he's no longer holding my hand.

"If it isn't the whore of Babylon." He grins at me. Despite the words that just came out of his mouth, his expression is contrastingly endearing. He takes a seat at the table and flicks his hand like he wants me to do the same. There are two trays in front of him, but only one *him*. He scoots

one of the trays of food toward the empty spot in front of me. “Sit. We have an alliance to discuss.”

I don’t sit. I don’t do anything for several seconds as I contemplate the situation before me. I have no idea who this kid is, yet he acts like he was expecting me. Let’s not overlook the fact that he just called me a whore. And from the looks of it, he bought me . . . lunch? I glance at him sideways, attempting to figure him out, when the backpack in the seat next to him catches my eye.

“You like to read?” I ask, pointing at the book peering out of the top of his backpack. It’s not a textbook. It’s an actual book-book. Something I thought was lost on this generation of internet fiends. I reach over and pull the book out of his backpack and take a seat across from him. “What genre is it? And please don’t say sci-fi.”

He leans back in his seat and grins like he just won something. Hell, maybe he did. I’m sitting here, aren’t I?

“Should it matter what genre it is if the book is good?” he says.

I flip through the pages, unable to tell if it’s a romance or not. I’m a sucker for romances, and based on the look of the guy across from me, he might be, too.

“Is it?” I ask, flipping through it. “Good?”

“Yes. Keep it. I just finished it during computer lab.”

I look up at him and he’s still basking in his glow of victory. I put the book in my backpack, then lean forward and inspect my tray. The first thing I do is check the date on the milk. It’s good.

“What if I was a vegetarian?” I ask, looking at the chicken breast in the salad.

“So eat around it,” he retorts.

I grab my fork and stab a piece of the chicken, then bring it to my mouth. “Well you’re lucky, because I’m not.”

He smiles, then picks up his own fork and begins eating.

“Whom are we forming an alliance against?” I’m curious as to why I’ve been singled out.

He glances around him and raises his hand in the air, twirling it in all directions. “Idiots. Jocks. Bigots. Bitches.” He brings his hand down and I notice that his nails are all painted black. He sees me observing his nails and he looks down at them and pouts. “I went with black because it best depicts my mood today. Maybe after you agree to join me on my quest, I’ll switch to something a bit more cheerful. Perhaps yellow.”

I shake my head. “I hate yellow. Stick with black, it matches your heart.”

He laughs. It’s a genuine, pure laugh that makes me smile. I like . . . this kid whose name I don’t even know.

“What’s your name?” I ask.

“Breckin. And you’re Sky. At least I’m hoping you are. I guess I could have confirmed your identity before I spilled to you the details of my evil, sadistic plan to take over the school with our two-person alliance.”

“I am Sky. And you really have nothing to worry about, seeing as how you really haven’t shared any details about your evil plan yet. I am curious though, how you know who I am. I know four or five guys at this school and I’ve made out with every one of them. You aren’t one of them, so what gives?”

For a split second, I see a flash of what looks like pity in his eyes. He’s lucky it was just a flash, though.

Breckin shrugs. “I’m new here. And if you haven’t de-

duced from my impeccable fashion sense, I think it's safe to say that I'm . . ." he leans forward and cups his hand to his mouth in secrecy. "Mormon," he whispers.

I laugh. "And here I was thinking you were about to say *gay*."

"That, too," he says with a flick of his wrist. He folds his hands under his chin and leans forward a couple of inches. "In all seriousness, Sky. I noticed you in class today and it's obvious you're new here, too. And after seeing the stripper money fall out of your locker before fourth period, then witnessing your nonreaction to it, I knew we were meant to be. Also, I figured if we teamed up, we might prevent at least two unnecessary teenage suicides this year. So, what do you say? Want to be my very bestest friend ever in the whole wide world?"

I laugh. How could I not laugh at that? "Sure. But if the book sucks, we're re-evaluating the friendship."

Monday, August 27, 2012
3:55 p.m.

Turns out, Breckin was my saving grace today . . . and he really *is* Mormon. We have a lot in common, and even more out of common, which makes him that much more appealing. He was adopted as well, but has a close relationship with his birth family. Breckin has two brothers who aren't adopted, and who also aren't gay, so his parents assume his gayness (his word, not mine) has to do with the fact that he doesn't share a bloodline with them. He says they're hoping it fades with more prayer and high school graduation, but he insists that it's only going to flourish.

His dream is to one day be a famous Broadway star, but he says he lacks the ability to sing or act, so he's scaling down his dream and applying to business school instead. I told him I wanted to major in creative writing and sit around in yoga pants and do nothing but write books and eat ice cream every day. He asked what genre I wanted to write and I replied, "It doesn't matter, so long as it's good, right?" I think that comment sealed our fate.

Now I'm on my way home, deciding whether or not to go fill Six in on the bittersweet happenings of day one, or go grocery shopping in order to get my caffeine fix before my daily run.

The caffeine wins, despite the fact that my affection for Six is slightly greater.

My minimal portion of familial contribution is the weekly grocery shopping. Everything in our house is sugar-free, carb-free, and *taste*-free, thanks to Karen's unconventional vegan way of life, so I actually prefer doing the grocery shopping. I grab a six-pack of soda and the biggest bag of bite-size Snickers I can find and throw them in the cart. I have a nice hiding spot for my secret stash in my bedroom. Most teenagers are stashing away cigarettes and weed—I stash away sugar.

When I reach the checkout, I recognize the girl ringing me up is in my second-period English class. I'm pretty sure her name is Shayna, but her nametag reads *Shayla*. Shayna/Shayla is everything I wish I were. Tall, voluptuous, and sun-kissed blonde. I can maybe pull off five-three on a good day and my flat brown hair could use a trim—maybe even some highlights. They would be a bitch to maintain considering the amount of hair that I have. It falls about six inches past my shoulders, but I keep it pulled up most of the time due to the southern humidity.

"Aren't you in my Science class?" Shayna/Shayla asks.

"English," I correct her.

She shoots me a condescending look. "I *did* speak English," she says defensively. "I said, 'aren't you in my Science class?'"

Oh, holy hell. Maybe I don't want to be *that* blonde.

"No," I say. "I meant English as in 'I'm not in your *Science* class, I'm in your *English* class.'"

She looks at me blankly for a second, then laughs. "Oh." Realization dawns on her face. She eyes the screen in front of her and reads out my total. I slip my hand in my back pocket and retrieve the credit card, hoping to hurry and ex-

cuse myself from what I fear is about to become a less than stellar conversation.

“Oh, dear *God*,” she says quietly. “Look who’s back.”

I glance up at her and she’s staring at someone behind me in the other checkout line.

No, let me correct that. She’s *salivating* over someone behind me in the other checkout line.

“Hey, Holder,” she says seductively toward him, flashing her full-lipped smile.

Did she just bat her eyelashes? Yep. I’m pretty sure she just batted her eyelashes. I honestly thought they only did that in cartoons.

I glance back to see who this *Holder* character is that has somehow managed to wash away any semblance of self-respect Shayna/Shayla might have had. The guy looks up at her and nods an acknowledgment, seemingly uninterested.

“Hey . . .” He squints his eyes at her nametag. “*Shayla*.” He turns his attention back to his cashier.

Is he ignoring her? One of the prettiest girls in school practically gives him an open invitation and he acts like it’s an inconvenience? Is he even *human*? This isn’t how the guys I know are supposed to react.

She huffs. “It’s *Shayna*,” she says, annoyed that he didn’t know her name. I turn back toward Shayna and swipe my credit card through the machine.

“Sorry,” he says to her. “But you do realize your nametag says *Shayla*, right?”

She looks down at her chest and flips her nametag up so she can read it. “Huh,” she says, narrowing her eyebrows as if she’s deep in thought. I doubt it’s that deep, though.

“When did you get back?” she asks Holder, ignoring me

completely. I just swiped my card and I'm almost positive she should be doing something on her end, but she's too busy planning her wedding with this guy to remember she has a customer.

"Last week." His response is curt.

"So are they gonna let you come back to school?" she asks.

I can hear him sigh from where I'm standing.

"Doesn't matter," he says flatly. "Not going back."

This last statement of his immediately gives Shayna/Shayla cold feet. She rolls her eyes and turns her attention back to me. "It's a shame when a body like that doesn't come with any brains," she whispers.

The irony in her statement isn't lost on me.

When she finally starts punching numbers on the register to complete the transaction, I use her distraction as an opportunity to glance behind me again. I'm curious to get another look at the guy who seemed to be irritated by the leggy blonde. He's looking down into his wallet, laughing at something his cashier said. As soon as I lay eyes on him, I immediately notice three things:

1. *His amazingly perfect white teeth hidden behind that seductively crooked grin.*
2. *The dimples that form in the crevices between the corners of his lips and cheeks when he smiles.*
3. *I'm pretty sure I'm having a hot flash.*

Or I have butterflies.

Or maybe I'm coming down with a stomach virus.

The feeling is so foreign; I'm not sure *what* it is. I can't say what is so different about him that would prompt my first-ever normal biological response to another person. However, I'm not sure I've ever seen anyone so incredibly like *him* before. He's beautiful. Not beautiful in the pretty-boy sense. Or even in the tough-guy sense. Just a perfect mixture of in-between. Not too big, but not at all small. Not too rough, not too perfect. He's wearing jeans and a white T-shirt, nothing special. His hair doesn't look like it's even been brushed today and could probably use a good trim, just like mine. It's just long enough in the front that he has to move it out of his eyes when he looks up and catches me full-on staring.

Shit.

I would normally pull my gaze away as soon as direct eye contact is made, but there's something odd about the way he reacts when he looks at me that keeps my focus glued to his. His smile immediately fades and he cocks his head. An inquisitive look enters his eyes and he slowly shakes his head, either in disbelief or . . . *disgust*? I can't put my finger on it, but it's certainly not a pleasant reaction. I glance around, hoping I'm not the recipient of his displeasure. When I turn back to look at him, he's still staring.

At me.

I'm disturbed, to say the least, so I quickly turn around and face Shayla again. Or Shayna. Whatever the hell her name is. I need to regain my bearings. Somehow, in the course of sixty seconds, this guy has managed to swoon me, then terrify the hell out of me. The mixed reaction is not good for my caffeine-deprived body. I'd much rather he regard me with the same indifference he showed toward

Shayna/Shayla, than to look at me like that again. I grab my receipt from what's-her-face and slip it into my pocket.

"Hey." His voice is deep and demanding and immediately causes my breathing to halt. I don't know if he's referring to what's-her-face or me, so I slip my hands through the handles of the grocery sacks, hoping to make it to my car before he finishes checking out.

"I think he's talking to you," she says. I grab the last of the sacks and ignore her, walking as fast as I can toward the exit.

Once I reach my car, I let out a huge breath as I open the back door to put the groceries inside. *What the hell is wrong with me?* A good-looking guy tries to get my attention and *I run?* I'm not uncomfortable around guys. I'm confident to a fault, even. The one time in my life I might actually feel what could possibly be an attraction for someone, and I run.

Six is going to kill me.

But that *look*. There was something so disturbing about the way he looked at me. It was uncomfortable, embarrassing, and somehow flattering all at once. I'm not used to having these sorts of reactions at all, much less more than one at a time.

"Hey."

I freeze. His voice is without a doubt directed at me now.

I still can't distinguish between butterflies or a stomach virus, but either way I'm not fond of the way that voice penetrates right to the pit of my stomach. I stiffen and slowly turn around, all of a sudden aware that I'm nowhere near as confident as my past would lead me to believe.

He's holding two sacks down at his side with one hand

while he rubs the back of his neck with his other hand. I'm really wishing the weather were still shitty and rainy so he wouldn't be standing here right now. He rests his eyes on mine and the look of contempt from inside the store is now replaced with a crooked grin that seems a bit forced in our current predicament. Now that I have a closer look at him, it's apparent the stomach virus isn't the root of the sudden stomach issues at all.

It's simply *him*.

Everything about him, from his tousled dark hair, to his stark blue eyes, to that . . . *dimple*, to his thick arms that I just want to reach out and touch.

Touch? Really, Sky? Get abold of yourself!

Everything about him causes my lungs to fail and my heart to go into overdrive. I have a feeling if he smiles at me like Grayson tries to smile at me, my panties will be on the ground in record time.

As soon as my eyes leave his physique long enough for us to make eye contact again, he releases the tight grip he has on his neck and switches the sacks to his left hand.

"I'm Holder," he says, extending his hand out to me.

I look down at his hand, then take a step back without shaking it. This whole situation is entirely too awkward for me to trust him with this innocent introduction. Maybe if he hadn't pierced me with his intense glare in the store, I would be more susceptible to his physical perfection.

"What do you want?" I'm careful to look at him with suspicion rather than awe.

His dimple reappears with his hasty laugh and he shakes his head, then looks away again. "Um," he says with a nervous stutter that doesn't match his confident persona in the

least. His eyes dart around the parking lot like he's looking for an escape, and he sighs before locking eyes with me again. His multitude of reactions confuses the hell out of me. He seems close to disgusted by my presence one minute, to practically running me down the next. I'm usually pretty good at reading people, but if I had to make an assumption about Holder based on the last two minutes alone, I'd have to say he suffers from split-personality disorder. His sudden shifts between flippant and intense are unnerving.

"This might sound lame," he says. "But you look really familiar. Do you mind if I ask what your name is?"

Disappointment sets in as soon as the pickup line escapes his lips. He's one of *those* guys. You know. The incredibly gorgeous guys who can have anyone, anytime, anywhere, and they know it? The guys that, all they have to do is flash a crooked smile or a dimple and ask a girl her name and she melts until she's on her knees in front of him? The guys who spend their Saturday nights climbing through windows?

I'm highly disappointed. I roll my eyes and reach behind me, pulling on the door handle to my car. "I've got a boyfriend," I lie. I spin around and open the door, then climb inside. When I reach to pull the door shut, I'm met with resistance when it refuses to budge. I look up to see his hand grasping the top of the car door, holding it open. There's a hard desperation in his eyes that sends chills down my arms.

He looks at me and I get *chills*? Who the hell *am* I?

"Your name. That's all I want."

I debate whether I should explain to him that my name isn't going to help him in his stalking endeavors. I'm more

than likely the only seventeen-year-old left in America without an online presence. With my grip still on the door handle, I discharge a warning shot with my glare. “Do you mind?” I say sharply, my eyes darting to the hand that’s preventing me from shutting my door. My eyes trail from his hand to the tattoo written in small script across his forearm.

Hopeless

I can’t help but laugh internally. I am obviously the target of Karma’s retaliation today. I’m finally introduced to the one guy that I find attractive, and he’s a high school dropout with the word “hopeless” tattooed on himself.

Now I’m irritated. I pull on the door one more time, but he doesn’t budge.

“Your name. *Please*.”

The desperate look in his eyes when he says *please* prompts a surprisingly sympathetic reaction from me, way out of left field.

“Sky,” I say abruptly, suddenly feeling compassion for the pain that is clearly masked behind those blue eyes of his. The ease with which I give in to his request based on one look leaves me disappointed in myself. I let go of the door and crank my car.

“Sky,” he repeats to himself. He ponders this for a second, then shakes his head like I got the answer to his question wrong. “Are you sure?” He cocks his head at me.

Am I *sure*? Does he think I’m Shayna/Shayla and don’t even know my own name? I roll my eyes and shift in my seat, pulling my ID from my pocket. I hold it up to his face.

“Pretty sure I know my own name.” I begin to pull the

ID back when he releases my door and grabs the ID out of my hand, bringing it in closer for inspection. He eyes it for a few seconds, then flicks it over in his fingers and hands it back to me.

“Sorry.” He takes a step away from my car. “My mistake.”

His expression is glossed over with hardness now and he watches me as I put my ID back into my pocket. I stare at him for a second, waiting for something more, but he just works his jaw back and forth while I put my seatbelt on.

He’s giving up on asking me out that easily? Seriously? I put my fingers on the door handle, expecting him to hold the door open again in order to spit out another lame pickup line. When that doesn’t happen and he steps back even farther as I shut my door, eeriness consumes me. If he really didn’t follow me out here to ask me out, what the hell was this all about?

He runs his hand through his hair and mutters to himself, but I can’t hear what he says through the closed window. I throw the car in reverse and keep my eyes on him as I back out of the parking lot. He remains motionless, staring at me the entire time I pull away. When I’m heading in the opposite direction, I adjust the rearview mirror to get a last glance at him before exiting the parking lot. I watch as he turns to walk away, smashing his fist into the hood of a car.

Good call, Sky. He’s got a temper.

Monday, August 27, 2012
4:47 p.m.

After the groceries are put away, I grab a handful of chocolate from my stash and shove it in my pocket, then crawl out my window. I push Six's window up and pull myself in. It's almost five o'clock in the afternoon and she's asleep, so I tip-toe to her side of the bed and kneel down. She's got her face-mask on and her dirty blonde hair is matted to her cheek, thanks to the amount of drool she produces while she sleeps. I inch in as close as I can to her face and scream her name.

"SIX! WAKE UP!"

She jerks herself up with such force that I don't have time to move out of her way. Her flailing elbow crashes into my eye and I fall back. I immediately cover my throbbing eye with my hand and sprawl out on the floor of her bedroom. I look up at her out of my good eye, and she's sitting up in the bed holding on to her head, scowling at me. "You're such a bitch," she groans. She throws her covers off and gets out of bed, then heads straight for the bathroom.

"I think you gave me a black eye," I moan.

She leaves the bathroom door open and sits down on the toilet. "Good. You deserve it." She grabs the toilet paper and kicks the bathroom door shut with her foot. "You better have something good to tell me for waking me up. I was up all night packing."

Six has never been a morning person, and from the

looks of it, she's not an afternoon person, either. In all honesty, she's also not a night person. If I had to guess when her most pleasant time of day occurs, it's probably while she sleeps, which may be why she hates to wake up so much.

Six's sense of humor and straightforward personality are huge factors in why we get along so well. Peppy, fake girls annoy the hell out of me. I don't know that *pep* is even in Six's vocabulary. She's one black wardrobe away from being your typical, broody teenager. And fake? She's as straight shooting as they come, whether you want her to be or not. There isn't a fake thing about Six, other than her name.

When she was fourteen and her parents told her they were moving to Texas from Maine, she rebelled by refusing to respond to her name. Her real name is Seven Marie, so she would only answer to *Six* just to spite her parents for making her move. They still call her Seven, but everyone else calls her Six. Just goes to show she's as stubborn as I am, which is one of the many reasons we're best friends.

"I think you'll be happy I woke you up." I pull myself up from the floor and onto her bed. "Something monumental happened today."

Six opens the bathroom door and walks back to her bed. She lies down next to me and pulls the covers up over her head. She rolls away from me, fluffing her pillow with her hand until she gets comfortable. "Let me guess . . . Karen got cable?"

I roll onto my side and scoot closer to her, wrapping my arm around her. I put my head on her pillow and spoon her. "Guess again."

"You met someone at school today and now you're pregnant and getting married and I can't be a bridesmaid at your wedding because I'll be all the way across the damn world?"

“Close, but nope.” I drum my fingers on her shoulder.

“Then *what?*” she says, irritated.

I roll over onto my back and let out a deep sigh. “I saw a guy at the store after school, and holy shit, Six. He was beautiful. Scary, but beautiful.”

Six immediately rolls over, managing to send an elbow straight into the same eye that she assaulted a few minutes ago. “What?!” she says loudly, ignoring the fact that I’m holding my eye and groaning again. She sits up on the bed and pulls my hand away from my face. “What?!” she yells again. “Seriously?”

I stay on my back and attempt to force the pain from my throbbing eye into the back of my mind. “I know. As soon as I looked at him it was like my entire body just melted to the floor. He was . . . wow.”

“Did you talk to him? Did you get his number? Did he ask you out?”

I’ve never seen Six so animated before. She’s being a little too giddy, and I’m not sure that I like it.

“*Jesus*, Six. Simmer down.”

She looks down at me and frowns. “Sky, I’ve been worried about you for four years, thinking this would never happen. I would be fine if you were gay. I would be fine if you only liked skinny, short, geeky guys. I would even be fine if you were only attracted to really old, wrinkly men with even wrinklier penises. What I haven’t been fine with is the thought of you never being able to experience lust.” She falls back onto the bed, smiling. “Lust is the best of all the deadly sins.”

I laugh and shake my head. “I beg to differ. Lust sucks. I think you’ve played it up all these years. My vote is still