

FLOWERS QUICKLY FADING

a romantic tragedy by

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Prologue

By the time you read this, I will be gone.

To be completely transparent, I am left empty of words to write down. It is funny, because when I sat down with pen and paper, the words seemed to be black-and-white, ready to be dredged from the back of my mind and placed on paper in perfect order. But when I sat down, none of those 'black-and-white' words came to me. And this is where I am now. So many thoughts are coming, so many untouchable images that words fail to describe, are trying to find their way onto this notebook paper. It's ironic. Finally I can force someone to hear my story, to see it from my angle, but the way I tell it in my head is impossible for me to translate onto paper. Emotions, memories, feelings, hopes, dreams, despairs and fears guide the story within, and how can I accurately tell you what this brew of voiceless thoughts describes? Quite simply, I can't.

You know what happened. You were there all along. My goal is not to simply tell you what happened. I hope this does so much more than that. I am hoping this is a window into my soul. Although you witnessed those things I am going to describe, although you saw it with your eyes, you were denied its true power and experience, simply because *you aren't me*. I want to show you what happened, not just from my eyes but from my heart, the wellspring of life. I want to show you this so you can, if possible, see the entire picture... and maybe even understand.

Please. Don't judge me.

I feel I have no other choice.

And maybe, when you finish this, you'll agree.

So I am going to turn the page and start telling my story. I'm certainly no expert storyteller, so I will just try to tell this story as best I can. I don't think I'll change my mind.

I've already bought the pills.

But life's no story book
Love is an excuse to get hurt
And to hurt
"Do you like to hurt?"
"I do! I do!"
"Then hurt me."

- Bright Eyes, *Lover I Don't Have to Love*

Chapter One

(When this began)
I had nothing to say
And I get lost in the nothingness inside of me
(I was confused)
And I let it all out to find
That I'm not the only person with these things in mind
(Inside of me)
But all the vacancy the words revealed
Is the only real thing that I've got left to feel
(Nothing to lose)
Just stuck, hollow and alone
And the fault is my own, and the fault is my own
- Linkin Park, *Somewhere I Belong*

So where do I begin? Again, I really don't know. I just want to get on with it, my entire being cries out for its completion, but I know I can't duck out prematurely. I am going to have to start at the beginning, yes, before I even met her, though *she* is the epiphany of this entire work. Without her, this note or letter or whatever you want to call it would never be written. I have to start at the *very* beginning. Our story finds its core recently, but without the past, it would be rather meaningless and empty, wouldn't it?

I was born in a cold, white-washed, blue-tile Augusta hospital during the winter of 1988. I was born either on the nineteenth or twentieth, depending on who you talk to. Was I born on 11:59 pm on the nineteenth or 12:00 am on the twentieth? The nurses say the former, but the doctor who proceeded over my birth says, "The twentieth." So that's why I go with, though I can never really be sure. The day before my birthday I always wonder, "Am I a year older yet?" I know it sounds stupid, but that's what it's like. Sometimes my thoughts are random and disjointed, and since this writing is flowing not from an outline but from the jumbled thoughts *attempting* form and function within my head, you will no doubt see the chaos and uncertainty of my thoughts.

My mom was alone when she gave birth. What I mean is, my dad really wasn't there. He followed his father who followed my great-grandfather by going into the fishing business. If you don't know how it works, let me lay it out for you. As a fisherman, my father didn't have the typical 9-4 job you would imagine for someone of his age. Instead he was gone for months at a time, and when he was gone depended on the desired catch. He was signed on to three fishing vessels, two of them private. Sometimes he joined his companions and they drank beer and smoked on the waters as they drew up nets full of that famous red lobster, or the King Crab Legs that are so popular in staple American restaurants like Red Lobster. A lot of times he fished for Atlantic sturgeon, rainbow smelt, Atlantic salmon, striped bass... all the popular fishes that populate the Maine fish joints.

My mom should've been a little smarter about her choice for a husband. Don't get me wrong, she loves Dad to the grave. The thing is, her side of the family has a grand history of mental illness. Not schizophrenia or psychosis, not at all. I'm talking depression. My grandmother committed suicide because of depression, and Mom went through several long bouts of depression while Dad was away. Dad knew what was happening but his trade was fishing and fishing alone—what could he do but hope she fared well? My uncle would come down sometimes to help out, but it grew rarer and rarer until his visits just stopped. I still don't know where he is.

There were long stretches of time—sometimes days on end—when Mom wouldn't come out of her room. She would just watch TV or lie there and stare at the ceiling. I was only four and just thought Mom was really sick. I'd always bring her food and she'd kiss me on the forehead, say thank you, tell me how much a sweetie I was, and then go on watching the television. I loved her to death then and I love her just as much now. I feel bad for her now. My love for her could be the only thing keeping me from my resolution. I don't pity her for her past, but for her future. I know how depressed she can become. I know what my grandmother did, and I know what I'm going to do. Yet I have this deep, innate feeling that things will go well with her.

I just can't stay here any longer.

The depression in the bloodline didn't come to completion in Mom. It passed on to me through her genes. I really can't remember much about my childhood. My counselor—she's also a psychologist—tells me it's because of repressed memories. Whatever these repressed memories are, or were, actually, I don't know, and I don't think I ever will. All I can tell you is what I know. Even when I go down into the den and open up the scrapbooks and look at the pictures of me as a little kid, no memories are stirred. I simply can't remember anything.

Repressed memories.

Whatever *that* means.

I guess you're lucky for that. I don't know if I'd want to sit here and pour out my single-digit years. I don't think you'd want to sit here through all that, either. The story, after all, is pretty much the same. Mom is depressed, Dad is away, I am left to fend for myself. This pretty much continues until my seventh grade year. It's here that I began to catch tastes of Mom's sickness. My brain, I am told, was beginning to react to that god-awful gene, and depression became a staple of my life. I don't think Mom ever knew, and I don't blame her. She was so entrenched in her own depression, how could she see mine?

It was in seventh-grade that depression became the worst for me. Its explosive tendency was triggered by my entrance into a brand new school. Where I had grown up knowing my peers, now we had moved across-state, up the coast because Dad was getting a new job, a better job, working with a fishing company as a contractor. It basically meant he would be home a lot more (that's one of those 9-4 jobs) and he wanted to be around Mom and me. He thought it would be excellent for me, and my spending time with him was, I loved it! But he didn't think about what submersing me in a new environment with new kids would be like. He's an adult. I don't think he could understand.

I vividly remember sitting in the counselor's office, reading all those 'inspiring' signs they put all over the place. One I remember very well: it is made by the author of the cartoon Calvin & Hobbes, and it has Calvin making several different facial expressions, and underneath each expression was a description, like *angry*, *joyful*, *excited*, and *anxious*. I didn't really know about depression yet, but there was one that seemed to represent my own swirling emotions—feelings of hopelessness, loss, futility, and not being wanted—and underneath the picture its caption read: *Depressed*. So that's how I was formally introduced to this clinical illness.

The guidance counselor came inside and smiled at me, introduced herself, and without smiling, I told her who I was and what grade I was in. She kept smiling like she was having the time of her life, and I *hated* it. I can't stand faked sincerity, and I could feel it saturating this woman. She was making herself happy and that ticked me off. I immediately closed myself off from her, even when she led me through the school, practically jumping off the walls, and showed me to my classroom. "Have an *awesome* day!" she told me. I told her thanks and turned to face that very first class.

It was one of the worst moments of my life, looking over all those unknown faces. I'd thought I'd been depressed in the counselor's office, but this broke that depression to shreds. I wanted to just die. I didn't know anyone. It's when we're submerged in the crowds with complete anonymity that we feel the most alone. It's a horrible feeling, and it's how I felt at that moment in time.

The teacher was a strapping young man straight from college, and crossing his arms he said, "Welcome to class. What's your name? Where you from?" His voice was deep and reminded me of the voice from that actor in *The Armies of Darkness*.

"My name..." I stumbled over the words and my voice quivered.

The teacher smiled. "Calm down, Son. It's all right."

Some kids laughed.

I wanted to scream. Why were they laughing? My face flushed red. More laughter.

"Why don't you just have a seat?" the teacher encouraged. He hushed the kids down.

I don't remember walking through those rows and sitting down. I don't even remember my first day of school at all, except for up to that point. I'm sure it was a horrible day, and I can't imagine what it was like standing in the lunch-room at all those crowded tables and thinking, *Who will I sit with?*

Repressed memories, I guess. Now I'm getting the idea.

My entire Junior High career—why do teachers call Junior High a career, anyway?—was pretty much the same thing. My depression shocked me into never opening my mouth, so I never made any friends. I was the ghost in the school, forgotten even when being stared at, or rather, stared *through*. I would get on the

bus, do the school thing gritting my teeth, and come home. On good days Mom was vacuuming the carpet and listening to country music on the speakers, with all the windows open during the summer. We had screens on the windows, but sometimes the mosquitoes got in anyways. I never really had many friends all those years, and I would spend my time either in my room on video games—or writing—or spend it outside playing in the woods behind our house. When Dad came home, we'd often go out to eat and I'd pretend I was just a normal kid enjoying life. But when we were driving home in the darkness and quiet, the feelings would crawl back and I'd feel a lump of coal in my heart once more. Summers were the absolute worst. Imagine the most excruciating boredom ever lacerated with thoughts of, *No one likes you, no one wants you, you are a miserable, stupid and boring person.*

My eighth grade year it got really bad. I lay in bed one night, listening to the grandfather clock downstairs. For three years I'd been locked in the vicious sway of depression. I couldn't see any hope of escape, any hope of resurrection, any hope of attaining the life I dreamed for.

A life of acceptance and love.

It was totally hopeless. So I decided to end it all.

In eighth grade, near the end of the year, sometime in May, I got up out of my bed, so quiet so as to not wake anyone. It took me nearly ten minutes to walk out into the hallway, and twenty minutes to descend the stairwell. I especially didn't want to wake my little sister who was a light sleeper. Eventually I made it down the stairway with little or no creaking and made my way to the kitchen. I stumbled over the dog. He looked up and yawned. I petted him on the head and told him to be quiet, then I found myself standing in the kitchen.

The handle of the drawer seemed to be glowing, beckoning me forward. I took the bait and opened the drawer. Inside were all of Mom's assorted knives. Steak knives, slicing knives, butchering knives, and all kinds of weird-shaped knives for cutting up fish and working with crab and lobster, from my Dad's sea-faring days. I took out a regular steak knife with serrated edges. I remember standing next to the refrigerator, and from the moon- and starlight coming from the big open bay window, looking at that steely blade.

I was going to kill myself.

I took the knife in one hand and held out my other wrist. Placing the knife on my wrist, I took a deep breath and yanked as hard as I could.

Or at least I tried to.

The blade wouldn't go. My muscles had frozen.

The fear in my heart shrieked through the roof of my skull.

I'd be dead right now, echoed over and over inside my head.

I put the knife back in the drawer and shut it, when suddenly a voice rang out: "What're you doing?"

I turned and saw Dad standing there. My mouth went dry and I almost urinated all over my nighttime trousers. "Just getting... Water?" It came off like a question. I knew he'd see through me.

He stared at me, his eyes telling me his brain was working.

Oh God, he knows...

"Are you sure you're not sleepwalking?" he finally asked.

I answered quickly, the relief saturating my voice. "No. No, I'm not sleepwalking. Water." I quickly turned, grabbed a cup, filled it with water, and walked past him, up to my room. I set the cup of water on my bedside and didn't touch it. I just stared at the ceiling, mortified.

Dad had been right there.

He changed jobs so he could be around me.

And he almost walked in to see me dying before his very own eyes.

The guilt of my almost-fate rushed through me and I can remember exactly the thoughts that ran through my head the entire night. I wept that night, thinking of my father. I didn't deserve a dad who loved me and wanted me so much that he would give up a dream job for a paper-pushing cubicle. I didn't deserve a mom who, even in her deepest depression, still loved me and would take the bullet for me. I didn't deserve anything good; in fact, I believed that because I had been on the verge of slitting my wrists and spilling my life into a puddle on the floor, I deserved every mouthful of Hell, now and for eternity. Somehow I fell asleep that night and Dad woke me up in the morning and told me to get ready for school. "The bus will be here in twenty minutes."

I wonder if he noticed none of the water in the glass had been drunk?

This is how my Junior High years pretty much went. It wasn't until High School that things began getting a little better. No. A *lot* better.

I don't know what triggered it. Chance? Fate? Destiny? Luck? Whatever the reason, I found myself bathing in friends. I made four great friends, and those friends branched into more. I found myself at the center of a circle of friends, bathing in friendly love.

It was, simply, paradise.

Maybe it was normalcy for everyone else, but for me, it most certainly *was* paradise.

And that's how Freshman Year, Sophomore Year and Junior Year went for me. A divine dance in a restored life. We went to concerts, movies, hung out at the park. I even tried to skateboard but discovered that wasn't for me. They really were some of the best times of my life. My depression went out the window to a large degree, and it branched into my home-life. Mom saw me hanging out with friends—and bringing them to the house!—and it made her life so much better.

To get an idea of how hopeless it seemed that I'd make a friend, I remember in Junior High when an acquaintance called and said, "Hey, why don't you come over?" When I hung up the phone, my world was spinning.

I asked Mom if it was okay and she brightened and said, "Of course!"

I dialed him back and said, "It's cool. What time?" I tried to sound cool and composed, like I was a natural, a pro at this. But in reality, my insides were leaping with ecstatic joy.

"How about an hour?" he asked.

"Okay," I said and hung up the phone.

Mom was watching TV in the den, so I sat down with her. I couldn't keep still. During a commercial break, she looked at me and with a smile said, "You're really excited, aren't you?"

I nodded. "When do we leave?"

Despite an eternity passing three or four times before me, I ended up standing on my friend's doorstep. I rang the bell. And waited. And waited. Finally the door opened and an older woman asked, "Can I help you?" She had her pocketbook. I think she thought I was going to try and sell her some Boy Scout cookies or something.

I swallowed, fear beginning to invade the fleeting joy. "Is Shawn here?"

"Shawn?" She shook her head. "No, no, he's not. It's just me and my husband. Sorry."

I thanked her and began walking across the lawn towards the van.

The woman called out, "Please don't walk on my grass, okay, Sweetie?"

I apologized and walked on the driveway. She went back into the house. Mom was in the driver's seat. When I got in, she looked at me with confusion in her eyes and asked, "Wrong house?"

"No," I said, voice shaking. "This is the right house. I made sure."

"Are you sure?"

My face was a mask of defeat. "Yes."

A pause. A taint of hope. "Absolutely sure?"

"Mom!" I hollered.

She didn't say anything, just drove away.

Later that night I heard her crying in her room upstairs. Not for herself. For me.

So you can see why it was such a big deal when kids *willingly* came to our house, definitely not for Mom's cooking as some kids do, but for *me*. Mom happily bought all kinds of snacks and such, bought Coke and Pepsi and Mountain Dew, and fed my kids through the roof. This drew them to come all the more and our friendship blossomed. These acquaintances became excellent friends, and they still are today, except they've grown distant.

No. *I've* grown distant.

But that's for later on.

My hand hurts. I'll have to stop for now.

I can't really go on and tell the entire story without bringing Hope into the picture. See, I contemplated whether or not I wanted to bring her into all of this. I don't really want to hurt her in any way, shape or form, nor do I want anyone to look down on her. The simple truth is, I'm biased. What I say isn't always going to be the case, but this isn't a history text, it's my story flowing from my heart. I read into things wrong, I know. I interpret peoples' words wrong, I know. But even if I am biased, my own bias plays a crucial role in the development of this story.

I'm sorry. I just have to mention her.

She doesn't really play a huge role in the story itself. Actually, I lose contact with her before things go out-of-control. It's simply our past, what happened Freshman Year, Sophomore Year, and Junior Year that shaped some of my influences and trepidations when it comes to the greatest challenge of them all: girls.

I have a huge problem with meeting girls. I really do. In college, one of my friends and I were sitting down after class to a PS2 game of *Ghost Recon*, and out-of-the-blue he said, "Sometimes I hate myself. I really do."

I was expecting maybe some deep confession, which would've been a little awkward, this being the second week of college and all, and I asked, "What are you talking about?" It was a pretty straightforward question.

He continued, "I don't know what it is. I just *can't talk to girls*. I really want to. I want to so bad that it's all I can think about. And I imagine ways I can strike up conversations, and even when I'm around girls, I can see myself doing it, and doing it with much suave." He pronounced it 'swauv-ay'. "There's this really cute Freshman girl, I think she's the cutest girl I've ever seen, really, but I can't bring myself to talk to her. I want to, I really do. But I can't. It's like there's a wall up and I can't get around it. I want to climb it, I want to scale it, I want to reach the other side. I really do. But I don't know." He squeezes off a round of a sniper rifle in the game. My player gives off a fountain of blood and falls over. He doesn't even realize he got a kill, it seems, because he's just lost in his little woe-is-me world. "I hate myself for it."

I say woe-is-me like I have no idea what he's talking about.

But the truth is, I know woe-is-me all too well.

It's what this is all about. If you experience my woe, my hope is that maybe you'll understand.

My friend is like a mirror image of me. I can't talk to girls.

Period.

I want to. I imagine myself doing it. I think, "It's not really that hard, is it? They're just people!"

I can't talk to girls.

Period.

Don't give me formulas, don't tell me you've got the solution. I can't do it.

You guessed it: period.

Girls have always been an enigma. I started liking girls when I was in kindergarten school. When all the other boys were wailing about cooties, I was lifting up the frills of the girls' dresses to check out their legs. It's really gross now, it is, since they're kindergarten girls, but for my little kindergarten mind, they were jewels of perfection.

One time my older cousins who have lived in Florida their entire lives were having fun with me during a family reunion. We were sitting out on the beach watching the white night crabs scurry sideways and they started talking about how gay I was. You know, the usual boy-talk. Mock each other, call them faggots. I never really understood why homosexuals were so beaten upon, but it is funny, I'm sorry. I was trying to defend myself but it was getting out-of-hand. They were getting graphic and it was beginning to make my skin crawl. I was standing to go into the cottage when my grandma came out with some drinks and was like, "What're you boys doing?"

So, I told her. Not in a mean, tattletale way. It didn't really bother me, I just didn't feel like getting sick at grotesque images filling my mind. I couldn't help but imagine what they were saying. It's like someone telling you, "Don't think about purple elephants." Dang it. You failed. And you thought about them right then.

Grandma looked at my cousins, set the drink down on her chair, and crossing her arms, she said with all the authority she could muster (and grandmas have lots of authority) said, "Now, boys, he's liked girls ever since he could walk." She's right.

They stopped making the jokes. Until we went swimming the next day.

But grandma was right. I've always been obsessed with girls.

And ridden senseless by them, too. Paralyzed by their presence.

If you've experienced it, you know: it sucks.

There are many times when friends and I have gone to the movies, and a particular scene in the flick or something I see in the velvet hallways resurrects passion and I declare to my friends, "I'm going to start talking to girls. Really, I am." And they encourage me, but we all know what happens.

Nothing.

Nothing changes at all.

I see really popular guys all the time grabbing chicks left and right, while we who aren't so popular are left to wallow in our own waste. I remember my first week of college, seeing all those rich and preppy kids docked out in the finest clothing and newest hair styles with perfectly sculpted and blemish-free faces. I must be honest, I feel a certain jealousy towards them.

And anger.

Jealousy because they have everything they want handed to them on a silver platter.

And anger because they have everything they want handed to them on a silver platter.

I remember lying in my dorm room all alone, since my roommate wouldn't be arriving for another week. My dorm window was open and I could hear the laughter outside and I felt this swell of anger rise within me, choking out any other thoughts or emotions. All I've wanted is a girl to love and be loved by, and I have, for the most part, always been denied. The girls always go after these other kids who have everything handed to them at no cost. They coast into the lifestyle that everyone wants, the lifestyle they don't deserve. The ones who want to have a girl to treat right, to cherish, to really love and be sacrificial towards are left to only their hopes, and those who want to abuse girls, want to make them their sex-slaves, succeed and are surrounded on every side by girls flocking for attention.

This is what makes me angry, too. So many girls are just longing for *acceptance*. They want to be desired. Romantically. And some guys take advantage of this. They grab them, promise acceptance, promise they will desire them and even fight for their beauty, then coaxed into this little la-la land, the girls take off their clothes and let their heroic lovers go at it. When the sex gets stale or another beauty with smaller ears or bigger breasts or more slender legs comes along, the heroic lover leaves the beauty locked up in the castle and goes after someone else. And the girl, in all her innocent desires, is left even worse off than before.

Or even worse, she is turned into a hollow shell, a slut of a human being.

It just drives me insane.

In all my anger, you'd think I'd take up my metaphorical sword and rush out there to save at least *one* precious girl from those who had bunk them then dunk them. And it's what I *want* to do. I want to give a girl everything she desires, everything she deserves. Respect. Honor. Love. Care. Understanding. Mercy. Sacrifice.

But I can't.

Period.

And why?

As I sat in the dorm room, I mulled over this question: "Why can't I talk to girls? What is wrong with me?" Not everyone suffers this problem. In fact, other than me and my friend from college and a few other here and there, it seems to be a pretty rare phenomenon. No, not 'phenomenon.' Disease.

"Why me?"

Was it fate? Destiny? A roll of the dice? Chance? Was it in my genes? Hereditary?

The next day the questions were still fumbling about in my mind and I was in a psychology class. I don't really remember the gist of it all, but we were talking about some scientist who showed that our past experiences mold us into who we are. Our current personalities are held up by the blocks of our past. This triggered me so much that I nearly fell out of my chair. Really. The room went dizzy and I almost collapsed. Maybe it was because ten minutes he'd hypnotized us by way of hypnodisc, but I don't think so. I think it hit me with such force because *it was so true*.

"Why me? Why can't I talk to girls? What's wrong with me?"

The answer, I've come to believe, lies in Hope.

Wait. No. I have to backtrack. I keep getting ahead of myself.

Hope can't be at the center of it all. Obviously I've had my own issues to deal with (depression, for instance). But Hope definitely isn't the only girl I've ever set my eyes upon. There was Amanda, there was Rachel, there was Rikki. I can remember them all so vividly.

Amanda was one of the girls whom I up-skirted in kindergarten school. I guess she wasn't too into cooties because she took onto me real well. It was a really shallow relationship as most relationships go, but since we were only in kindergarten school, you can't expect miracles. Our moms would drop us off at each other's houses and we'd hang out for a long time. I remember Amanda's brother would taunt us and make fun of us a lot but we didn't care. I was just happy to be around her. She was quite a possessive girlfriend. She would get angry when I talked to other girls, she would call and complain to my mom when I wasn't

being nice to her, or if I didn't say hi to her at school that day, whatever upset her. It was usually a whole host of dumb things.

I remember my first kiss came with Amanda. I can remember standing behind their couch, hidden by the drapes from the outside world. Amanda's mom was somewhere in the kitchen and Amanda grabbed my hand, and dragging me over to the window, said, "We're going to play a game."

Yay. A game. How excited I was.

We reached the windowsill and she said, "Now, turn around and face me."

I obeyed. You don't cross Amanda.

"Okay. You're going to kiss me. And you're going to stick your tongue in my mouth and I'm going to stick my tongue in your mouth."

I don't know how old we were. We were kindergarten school kids. But regardless, I had *no* idea what she was talking about. It sounded a little gross, but I didn't care. I think she later told me she saw it on television, saw two people French-kissing on the rocks beside the ocean or something. I really don't know where she got the 'knowledge' of French-kissing, but wherever she came across it, she decided she was going to do it. And she stuck with her decisions.

"Okay?" she asked me after she gave me her instructions.

I nodded. "Okay."

"Now, lean forward." She was coaxing me through the entire thing.

I leaned forward.

"Do what I do," she told me. She stuck out her tongue.

I stuck out *my* tongue.

She kept getting closer and closer. Our tongues touched.

That was too much. I backed off.

She stared at me. "Why'd you do that?"

I didn't answer. I didn't want to offend her.

"Let's try again," she said.

She leaned forward. I leaned forward. She stuck out her tongue. I stuck out my tongue. The tips of our tongues touched.

And I pulled away.

She put her hands on her hips. "Now what?"

"It doesn't feel right," I told her. No. It felt *gross*.

How could she be enjoying this?

She seemed lost deep in thought. Then she exclaimed, as if a light bulb blew up over her head, "I've got it! Okay, let's do the same thing. Except close your eyes. Okay?"

Let's get it over with, I thought. "Okay."

She leaned forward. I leaned forward.

"Close your eyes," she said, and she stuck out her tongue.

I saw her with her eyes squinted shut and tongue sticking out and blond curls falling over her shoulders and I just wanted to laugh. She looked so hysterical. I closed my own eyes and stuck out my tongue. We kept leaning forward. She moved quickly and I moved just as quickly, she because she didn't want me to back away and me because I didn't want this to go on forever. *Land of the Lost*, my favorite TV show of all time, was coming on soon. I couldn't miss that. Better get the French-kissing out of the way.

Our tongues touched. Instinct yelled, *Back off!* But I ignored it, countering with: *Land of the Lost! Land of the Lost! Land of the Lost!*

And our noses touched. Our mouths touched. Our tongues were inside each other's mouth.

And you know what? I was surprised.

It really wasn't that bad at all!

A voice boomed: "*What are you two DOING?*"

We wrenched apart. Amanda's mom stood there, face ashen. She probably thought she was raising a grade-A slut.

Needless to say, I went home early that day.

And I missed *Land of the Lost*.

The first kiss. Girls always want it to be memorable.

My first kiss happened behind a chair with an kindergarten-aged girl who didn't even know what kissing was. And we were caught in the act, dirty-handed. For me, that was like getting caught having sex. It really was. My life felt ruined.

Until the next *Land of the Lost*.

I really liked Amanda, even if she was a little obsessive-compulsive at times, even if she was more... physically and romantically... advanced than I was. I sometimes wonder what she's doing now, how her life is going. I wonder what she looks like, and wonder what would've happened had she not moved to Montana, a billion miles from our frosty Maine mountains and valleys and rock-studded shorelines.

Amanda was only the first. Then came Rachel. I met her at school and we became really good friends. I didn't really 'fall' for her as you'd expect, but we did have an intimate relationship. We were transparent with each other. She was cute, too. I think this was like fourth grade or something. We would always hide in the shadowy corners of the gymnasium, between the bleachers and the floor, when Coach Hamilton made us run laps. He was too busy to notice, as he was reading his newspaper. The fattest gym teacher ever. I don't think he walked ten feet on any given day. They probably brought his food out to him.

Rachel and I would sit under those bleachers and just talk. Talk about life, our families, tell jokes. Whatever elementary-school kids talk about.

And then she moved away. Just like Amanda.

I remember going into my room the day after she left, knowing I'd never see her again.

My little sister had built a fort in my room and said, "Wanna play House?"

"Sure," I said in a monotone voice devoid of any creativity. She pretty much played. I watched.

I kept thinking of Rachel, kept seeing her face. It made me want to cry.

Elementary-school kids aren't supposed to feel those feelings, are they? But I did.

And then Rikki, the latest in my line of successful relationships. Rikki was, in the words of my little sister, a little "off". She was an animal freak. My dad knew her mom through a work exchange and I met her my sixth grade year. When we went to her house, there were also six or seven kittens running around. I 'adopted' a gray little kitten that was the best. She'd always take me and my sister up to her room and we'd play with the kittens. It was a quaint little yellow-walled cottage set against the slopes of one of the mountains, and after we ate dinner, usually sloppy-Jo's, she'd ask us, "Do you guys want to play aanimals?" Yes, aanimals. Just like every little kid usually says it. Amanda thought that game was the worst. But I loved it.

The game sucked. *She* didn't.

I fell in 'love' with her instantly. She fell for me first, though. I remember we were going to a church day-camp once and she put a little heart sticker on the back of my hand and laughed. It was that laugh, that smile that captivated me. It's the laugh, the smile, the eyes that draw me in, and she more than drew me in. I was captivated.

She would come to our house a lot. We would play hide-and-seek with my little sister, and she was hiding, we would sneak into the crawlspace. My sister and I had built a makeshift fort. It was a very poor fort because, since it was in the crawlspace, we couldn't stand. We had to squat. Even sitting was dangerous. Rikki and I would enter the fort and lay down on sleeping bags. We would lay next to each other for hours, lying there in the darkness, and we would just talk, talk, talk. We never made out. We held hands and I rubbed her arm a lot, but we never made out. Our relationship wasn't built upon that. Our relationship was, can you believe it, solid.

She told me she wanted to be a veterinarian. No surprise, since she was in love with "aanimals" as she called them. She said she wanted to get married and have some kids and have lots and lots of pets. I told her I would marry her and I swear it would've worked out. We were in love with each other. Can Junior High kids be in love? I think so, I really do. No, I know so, because I was.

I vividly remember when she spent the night. We laid out the mattress for her to sleep on and she pulled me to the side and said, "We're not allowed to sleep in the same bed." That hurt, because I really wanted to. I wanted to hear her sleeping beside me. It would've been so romantic. If there's one thing you'll discover about me, it's that I'm romantic. "My mom says we can't sleep in the same bed because she doesn't want us having sex."

I took that very solemnly then, but now I laugh.

I wasn't about to have sex with her. I hadn't even kissed her.

And I wish I had kissed her. Because I moved away. And I couldn't drive. I couldn't see her.

The day we left, I got one more visit with her. We all went swimming in her pool and hung out and ate hot dogs and hamburgers her dad fixed on the grill. I remember looking at her and seeing her in that little bikini and I realized what I was missing. Please. Don't misunderstand this for shallowness. I am one of the

least-shallow people you will ever meet. I am simply saying that this girl didn't only have it in her personality, the who-she-was whom I fell in love with, but she had it also where most boys would desire first and foremost. It ached to think about it, but what if someone ever took her hand, and instead of loving her for her awesome personality (as I did), pursued her for her looks—and turned her into that shell?

She's in college now, I assume. Just like me. I want to meet her again.

I wish it never would've ended.

That last day together I ran off into the woods. I sat upon a fallen log and stared up the mountain, my heart wrenched in two. I had experienced my first heartache with Amanda's departure, and I felt like crying when Rachel left my life, and now I was moving away from Rikki. It killed me. It tore me up.

Why couldn't I ever keep someone so special?

Sitting on that log, I wanted to cry. I wanted to scream. I wanted to stop time.

I wanted to die.

I knew I wouldn't see her again. Our parents wouldn't drive hours for our own enjoyment. They had much better things to do. This really *was* the last time I would see her.

The sorrow was so deep that I couldn't cry. I just... existed, there on that log, lost in the ephemeral reaches of the human psyche. I kept seeing her face, seeing her in that bikini... and I saw her in the hands of another, someone just reaching for her beautiful body. I looked up to that sky and I wanted to scream. I wanted to scream at God for doing this to me.

It wouldn't be the only time I've wanted to scream at God. If there is a God.

Rikki came through the woods, bounding towards me. "Your dad's looking for you."

"I know," I told her. *It's time to go. This is it.*

"Are you going to go?" she asked, standing before me.

I turned my head, looked into the forest. So wild, so untamed, so dangerous.

So lonely.

"Are you going to go?" she asked again.

A moment, then, "I don't want to go."

"Your dad's calling you." She was right. I heard his voice yelling my name.

No. No, I didn't want to go. I wanted to stay there, in that spot, forever. I wanted to be with her, forever. I wanted her. Her and her alone. I wanted to sit on that log and hold her hand and just *be*. I wanted to walk through the golden fields of wildflowers behind her house, underneath the ruby rays of sun, just living the carefree life, heart enraptured by her presence. I wanted to sit under the crawlspace and just talk. I wanted her to spend the night. I didn't even want to sleep in the bed with her. I just wanted to *be with her*.

But I couldn't. It wasn't my choice.

Dad was calling me. His voice was coming closer. He seemed agitated.

It was getting late. It was a long drive home, and he had to go to work in the morning.

She said my name, as if she was asking a question, and I stood from the log, took her by the arm, and pulled her close. We looked at each other, deep into each other's eyes, for eternity upon eternity. Nothing could separate us. Nothing.

Except fate. Except destiny. Except Him. Except God.

He could change this. He could let me have her.

But He didn't.

Dad's voice: "Where are you? Come on!"

Rikki asked me, "What are you doing?"

"Just stay here with me," I told her, hugging her close. "Just stay here." I wanted to kiss her.

My dad was coming up through the woods. I could see the flashes of his orange fishing jacket between the trees.

I pulled Rikki close and just held her against me. My arms wrapped around her bikini and I felt her bare skin beneath my fingers. I could feel her spine pressing against my fingers with each breath. Her breath tingled upon my neck and I felt her hair rubbing against me cheek. This wonderful, beautiful, exquisite girl, who loved me and whom I loved, was in my hands, and we were inseparable. We were perfect. She was the One.

It was perfection. It was beauty. It was utopia.

It was robbed from me.

Dad came through the trees. He saw us hugging. He didn't care. He never was much of the romantic type. "What are you doing? Haven't you heard me? Come on."

I gently pushed her away from me. She looked at me with those gorgeous fawn eyes.

I wanted to kiss her. But Dad stood right there.

"We really have to go," he told me. "My first day is tomorrow. I need the sleep."

"Bye, Rikki," I told her. I joined my dad.

Rikki was left alone in the woods, watching us leave.

I never even looked back. What's worse? She is one of the greatest things that has ever happened to me.

And I never even blessed it with a kiss.

On the way home I stared through the window at the stars, watched them stoic above us, unmoving despite us driving two hours. The same stars that shined over her house that night as she—perhaps—lay in bed thinking of me, those same stars shined over me as I got out of that car at our new house crammed with boxes. I went into my room. I shut my door.

And I cried.

How come I am blessed with such beauty, and then it is ripped away from me? How come I am given such wonderful tastes of Heaven, only to be dunked into the miseries of Hell? How come my life is one constant sorrow after another, with no hope of life. How come I can't even enjoy those good things which are given to me, because I know that, one day, perhaps soon, they will be taken, and I will be left even more hollow than before? Amanda. Rachel. Rikki. These girls meant everything to me. They were the epiphany of my desire.

And all were seared from my life.

When things seemed to be at the ultimate bottom, Hope came onto the scene with a big smile.

And I came to understand what true pain really is.

Okay, so I know that I didn't even mention Hope in the last part I wrote. Maybe it was my subconscious trying to squirm around it, I don't know. I just don't know if I want to include her in this, yet I know I have to, because this is about *my* life, and she plays such a huge role. So, yes, I think I am going to include her in this. I have to! I guess I'll throw up a smokescreen, a metaphorical disclaimer. See, what you may see of her in my writings goes without being said those things she did that affected the story. She did many things, many, many things that I could only dream of doing. She really is a wonderful person. Really. She is cute, funny, fun to be around. Maybe that's why I was drawn in. She has a personality that is rich and diverse and hard to be fought against. One of my good friends is blessed to have her. I'm proud for him. I really am. He's a lucky guy.

There are many things I've done that I regret. We all have. And she is no different.

So here goes nothing.

I don't remember meeting Hope. You know how it is. Someone becomes a really good friend through a slow process so much that you can't remember initially *meeting* them. My earliest memory of her is when we ate at some pizza buffet a few miles from the coast. I remember putting so much parmesan and red spice pepper on my pizza that I got sick. But it was okay. She dared me to do it and I would've taken a bullet for her if she called me to. A bullet to the head, a bullet to the stomach. It didn't matter. A bullet is a bullet, right?

Over time I really began to like her. I mean, I didn't really like her because of her prettiness. And she is very pretty. That's not what snagged me. It was her personality that caught my attention: so warm and friendly. And since this was my eighth grade year (we moved away from Rikki at the end of sixth grade), I wasn't too high on the social row. She was. It's odd. I loved her *because* she was so nice to me, because she was such a cool person, and because, unlike me, she was so uncannily cool. I couldn't even compare.

It came to the point when my heart just danced at her name. I was always wanting to be around her! It was a suffocating desire. I'd go over to her house and she'd come over to mine. Things were going great. I loved it.

But I loved it too much.

See, I was deceived. Coming out of Junior High and entering Freshman year, she was cool.

And if you've had *any* real experience of High School, you know what those popular girls are like.

But I didn't know this. I didn't know how the social quo worked. I knew two things and two things only: she was cool. I was not. She liked me. Therefore, if we were 'connected,' then *I* would be cool. It was a full-proof plan, or so I thought, and I decided to bank on it.

One day her parents picked me up and we went to the local YMCA. It was a warm summer day, in the 70's, and there were lots of games going on atop the soccer field. I remember the ball was kicked right at me and

I ducked. Hope laughed. Her laugh was so nice. I smiled and we kept walking. The world spun around the sun but it felt like the solar system was revolving around me. The world was perfect. Everything found rest in my hands.

Hope's mom wanted to work the treadmills, so we went into the gymnasium. Hope decided to try out one of the machines. She sat down in the red cushions and was grabbing at the weights. "Hey, can you help?" she asked me.

I said, "Okay." I bent behind her, looking at the weights. "How much do you want?"

"Thirty pounds?" she asked, almost hesitant.

"You sure?"

Her voice! So luxurious! "I think I'll be okay." I loved her voice. So gentle and soft.

Like honey, really.

"Okay," I said, putting them on. I walked around the machine. "We're good."

She pushed her legs against the metal plate and the weight moved up. Her bronze legs shimmered. I liked that.

"Wow, you're strong," I said.

She grinned. "Girls have stronger legs than boys."

"I guess so." Strength wasn't the *only* good thing about them.

"You try," she told me, getting up. "See if you can do thirty."

I sat down, considering losing for her sake. As I positioned my feet, my eyes were cast downwards so I was unable to see them walk in. Robbie, Dustin, Blake. All on the Freshman basketball team.

Gods in human flesh.

I looked up. "Okay. Watch."

But she wasn't looking at me. She was staring between the scattered machines, trailing them with her eyes. I saw them but didn't think anything of it. No. I hoped they'd see me with her. The cream of High School see me with a princess. I would become... a knight! "Hope?"

She turned, looked at me.

And something in her eyes chewed through me. Something... different.

"I'm about to do--"

But she scattered away, leaving the machine.

I watched her meander between the machines, looking for a new one. "Hope?" I stammered. Standing, I abandoned the leg-press and followed after her. She was looking at a machine to strengthen the biceps when I touched her on the shoulder. "Hey, aren't you going to--"

She tore away, violently.

My heart recognized it. My senses screamed.

No. No, it wasn't possible.

I denied it. "Why don't--"

She glared at me with hatred, intense eyes glowing. "Stay away from me," she told me. She stormed away, leaving me with the machines. She stormed right past her mom and reached the door. There she stood. I kept watching her. She almost went through. But she didn't.

Thank God, I thought. She was just feeling sick. She needed air. She was fine.

She turned and started walking down the side of the room.

I moved to intercept. I came between two machines. "Hope--"

But she walked faster. We brushed shoulders. I spun around and saw her running over to the popular kids. She waved her arms and happily laughed their names. They waved back and she joined them.

I watched in the shadows as they flexed their muscles and showed off their strength with free-hand weights.

I even watched her squeeze someone's arm and cross her legs.

I didn't say anything on the way home. Neither did she. Her mom dropped me off and I went inside. Mom asked, "How was the gym?"

"Fine," I told her. She was cooking buttered noodles. "Supper will be ready in--"

My reply was quick. "I'm not hungry." I ran up to my room, quietly shut the door, and locked it.

That was the first time. The first moment I ever experienced it.

The acrid evil. The hated maneuver. The ultimate defeat.

Rejection.

That night was my first taste, a bitter sip of a drink that would have to be choked down.

I celebrated that night: I soiled my pillow with tears.

A couple weeks passed. I felt better.

"That was just a fluke," I told myself one time, looking in the mirror. "She's not really like that. Not at all." I forgot it—for the moment—as she became herself again and we hung out at each other's houses and played tug-of-war and watched movies and ate multicolored ice popsicles until we threw up rainbow puke.

But it happened again. I remember this very well, too. We were sitting in her basement and Amber calls. Amber is one of the prettiest girls at the school. If there was a slut who didn't sleep around, she fit the bill. All the guys loved her. They crawled over her. She picks up the phone and it's on speaker phone. She goes into the other room. I sit and watch TV. But you know how we are. I really eavesdropped on the conversation.

Amber: "Hi! How are you?"

Hope: "I'm fine. What are you up to?"

Amber: "I'm about to go the basketball game. Do you want to come?"

Hope (excited): "Yeah! Sure! I'll come."

Amber: "I'll pick you up." Bonus: she could drive. "Is anyone there who wants to come, too?"

And I remember this clearer than this notebook and pen before me now.

"No. I'm all by myself."

My heart sank like a stone in the sea. And it dragged me to the bottom with it, leaving me to suffocate and drown and feel no breath of escape. I was drowning in her words and actions.

She hung up the phone and came out into the TV room. I flipped through the channels. A knot formed in my throat. I flipped through the channels but didn't really pay attention. It was all a blur inside my head.

No. Not again. No. Had I been alone, I would've screamed and thrown something.

She said, "Hey, my mom just called. She's coming home. You probably need to get out of here."

"Yeah," I said, quickly standing. I turned off the TV. I couldn't look at her. Couldn't see those eyes.

I was afraid what I might find.

My feet carried me towards the back door. It was only a ten minute walk home.

"Hey," she said. "Aren't you going to say bye?"

"Sorry," I muttered. "I forgot." Still didn't look at her.

She ran up to me and grabbed my arm. "Hey."

I turned but didn't look at her.

"I love you," she told me.

"I know." I opened the door and left.

I love you. Her words echoed in my mind as I cut through the lawns and dodged sprinkler systems. How could she have said something like that?

Fast-forward a year. I have made several friends and things are going better. We still talk and enjoy each other's company. It's been a year and I'm convinced she's changed. She *had* to have changed. So it was one snowy night that she came into my room and laid down on my bed. Oh, I remember that day so well. I remember her striped sweater; it was yellow and blue. Her blond hair fell all around her face and she smiled at me with those dazzling eyes. Yes. She'd definitely changed. Even her straight hair had become curly. She was a bronze princess. And she even told me she loved me.

It was all mine. It was my move.

I was King.

I told myself, "Things will be different this time. She's changed. She really has."

So as she lay on her bed, I asked, as calmly as I could, "Will you go out with me?"

Perhaps I should've used a prologue or something, because she looked stunned. "What?"

"Go out with me," I told her. We didn't drive so I couldn't say "date." "Well?"

She didn't say anything.

Oh God, I was wrong.

Then she spoke, squirming uncomfortably on that bed. "I don't know."

"You don't know?"

"I like your personality and everything," she told me. "But you're not that strong... And if you'd clear up the acne on your face..."

It hurts to remember. It is playing over and over in my head. It's a movie reel. I want it to stop.

But it can't stop.

It never would stop.

It never *has* stopped. It goes on and on, always with me.

She liked my personality. But I didn't live up to her physical attractiveness demands.

Rejection. Third time's a charm. Oh, how I hated that very moment.

I wanted to curl up in a hole somewhere and die.

"If we did," she said, "we'd have to keep it secret."

Secret? What was I, some untouchable leper? The way she looked at me, perhaps she thought so. "No, it's okay," I stammered. I wish I would've said something different. I wish I would've stood up for myself. But, no, I'm a coward, remember? Especially around girls. "It's okay." My face was drained of color. The room was so thick with awkwardness that it could be cut with a dull knife.

She slowly rose from the bed. "I'm going to go now."

"Okay," I told her.

That was the end of that relationship. We didn't talk to one another for nearly a year, and then it became a mere acquaintance basis. Nothing deep. I didn't *want* anything deep.

I must mention her because she becomes involved in my story later on, but there is no dirt on her. She is different now. She suffered the plague that so many popular girls suffered, and I am thankful that she grew out of it. Some never do. I hope that if she ever reads this, if somehow this notebook falls into her hands, that she will not look down on me. Despite her pitfalls, she is a better person that I could ever hope to be. And I know it. I almost feel shameful writing these words down, making her look so poor and filthy. But for the sake of my parents, I won't talk about the flipside of the coin. I was never perfect for her, either. I probably deserved the rejection she doled out upon me.

Still, rejection it was. And it tore through me.

I think this rejection lent a huge hand into my incapability with girls and awkwardness around them. I think, in a sense, that my past condemned me from the beginning. It is a miracle that she, the high point of this story—not Hope, please don't be confused—ever saw me as more than a quiet kid in the corner of the room reading a thick-leafed fantasy book.

Hope, if you read these words and they hurt you, forgive me. I mean nothing bad by them. You're golden in my book. If you ever read these words, it means I've done something much worse than you. And repentance is not mine to be grasped.

Some of my buddies here in college found this notebook in my book-bag. They started reading it, and terrified at what they might find, I casually told them it was a school essay for College English 1. They tossed me the notebook. I put it back in my book-bag and saw that my hands were shaking. What will happen if someone finds this notebook? They'll discover my plans, read between the lines, and everything will be ruined.

Even worse, this note would be ruined.

I'm home for the weekend and laying in the crawlspace, the same place where Rikki and I used to lay down and just talk. When I got down here with my little flashlight, notebook and pen, I just laid in the cold gravel and closed my eyes, imagining Rikki's laugh and my fingers caressing her smooth arms. Oh, how I ache for past. How I ache for just one moment.

There are no moments for me. None anymore.

I am a scourge, a plague, an insect stomped on and left for dead.

I want to go now. Every night is filled with nightmares. Every day with regrets and bleeding memories.

This notebook is my only way out.

No. There is another.

I just got back down here. I went upstairs and stood by the pills for an eternity, wanting to swallow them all and just be done with it. But my parents are gone for the weekend, at some retreat for Dad's work, and my little sister is at a friend's house. I tossed two pills in the back of my mouth and swallowed. I lay on my bed, staring up at the fan, and instead of feeling relief—it will all be over soon—I felt terror.

I kept seeing my little sister getting home. Coming upstairs. Opening the door (none of our doors lock except the front, back and garage; not even the bathroom doors). I imagined her seeing me on my side, face a mask of pain, eyes bloodshot and cheeks purple, ooze coming out of my mouth. And an open bottle of rat poison lying by my hand. I see it now and it scares me. My little sister doesn't need to see that. She's innocent. Unscarred. She has a beautiful life of happiness and love ahead of her.

I wrenched up, ran to the bathroom, stuck my finger down my throat, and stopped it short there.

But not forever. No. I have to do it. I can't stand this world anymore. This earth is draped in painful memories. I can't stand it.

I will do it where she will never see my body in its state of loss.

I can't do it here at home.

Besides, I need to finish this story. I need you to understand. I need everyone to understand.

I feel very weak now. I am just going to go get some sleep and take a break for a few days.

Chapter Two

I wanna heal, I wanna feel what I thought was never real
I wanna let go of the pain I've held so long
(Erase all the pain till it's gone)
I wanna heal, I wanna feel like I'm close to something real
I wanna find something I've wanted all along
Somewhere I belong

- Linkin Park, *Somewhere I Belong*

That's enough about my past. Frankly, I don't enjoy writing about it. Though I don't think I'll enjoy writing much of this. It is a tragedy, after all. I have realized that writing this at home sometimes isn't too safe, like today. Dorm inspections are today and they'll be rooting through everyone's stuff; I grabbed my notebook and bailed. As I speak Mom is cleaning for my birthday party. She just called and told me, all excited about the decorations and my grand eighteenth birthday. Yes, I turn eighteen soon. You'd think I would be excited, but I just have no stomach for it anymore. I've lost any thrills for it because of what's going on, what lies in my future, what I am writing right now. The plain and sickening truth is that everyone will be smiling and laughing at my party and I'll smile as I open my presents and they'll think that I'm really enjoying myself when I'm just dreaming for the time when I will take the plunge.

And get out of this hellish society.

Right now I sit in Panera Bread Company. There was a group of High School kids in here a few moments ago. I stopped writing and watched them for a little while, not stalking-like, don't worry. I watched them and hungered for those times. When my laughter was real, when my happiness wasn't farce, when joy wasn't a lie. They laugh because their hearts told them to. I laugh because my mind tells me to. My heart has already melted and died under the loss. I see them laughing and having fun and eating their bread bowls filled with soup and I ache to be them, I ache for the innocence, and I realize how much I've really lost.

Someone just dropped a plate behind the counter and it shattered. It brings me back to my story.

The story really gets interesting around April of Senior Year. My world begins to slowly fall apart and I don't even notice. Not at first.

See, all through Senior Year, life was fun. I hung out with friends, we went rock-climbing in Augusta, we would go sledding nearly every day at a friend's house that winter. My days were filled with smiles and wide eyes and overjoyed shock. One of my friends was even jealous of me. He would see me sitting in the back of algebra class, staring into space with a big smile on my face, and he'd be so angry. Not a bad anger, a jealous anger. He demanded to know how I could sit through that class with an authentic smile on my face.

I told him matter-of-factly, as if I were a Master teaching an apprentice, "I just don't care."

I wasn't lazy. Really, I wasn't. I just didn't *care*.

"Aren't you worried about college? Transcripts?"

"I'll be fine," I told him. And I was. Right now I'm enrolled in a state university with a friend whom I will mention later. Some of this could even be her fault.

How come I shove blame on everyone else?

I'm the only one to blame. *The ONLY one*.

Hope isn't to blame. Destiny isn't to blame. Only me. Me and me alone.

So my friends were jealous of me because, quite simply, I was *enjoying life*.

But that would change quickly.

Hope comes into the story now. We meet her first-person. She went to school with me, we talked on a casual basis. She kept trying to reinstate our deep friendship but I just couldn't do it. For a year we were completely separated and she became a Christian and everything and she was trying to reach out for me. She wasn't like Destiny, either. Her reaching out was done for *me*, not some hidden agenda. I know she was genuine, but I couldn't let myself go down that route. It hurt too much. I knew she had changed, everyone told me she had and you could see it in her eyes, even in the way she *walked*. But I was stubborn and refused. So she would always strike up conversations and ask me my opinions and invite me to her

church. Not like Destiny, mind you. Hope didn't have an agenda. Her agenda was love... And because she did it out of love and compassion—perhaps knowing how she had hurt me so?—I could respect her immensely. And I *do* respect her. Oh God, I don't want to hurt her by this!

Over the summer I befriended a new kid to the school. His parents named him Alex but he told us to call him Alexander; he has a huge interest in ancient history, especially the Greek civilization. *Alexander* with Colin Farrell is his favorite movie of all time. So we call him Alexander, and sometimes Alexander the Great if you want something from him. The name just gets him excited. It's really weird, actually. But Alexander and I spent lots of days over the summer hanging out behind the grocery where I worked. He worked there, too, and we'd take our breaks together, grab some chicken, mashed potatoes, potato wedges and corn-rolls from the deli and sit outside—when it wasn't too hot. He bared his soul to me and I did the same. Like Hope, he was a Christian. He actually went to Hope's new church. He'd been a Christian much longer, and he showed me the love Hope showed me. If I weren't going to go through with my plans, I would check out their church. I really would. Just because they're not forceful about their beliefs, they're kind and gentle.

They're compatible.

And so it wasn't long before Alex started taking a liking after Hope. I could see it in his eyes, especially when I mentioned her name. It bothered me, to be honest, because he seemed to be *infatuated* with her. Completely head-over-heels. Where we would talk about girls and college, he would talk about Hope. Talk and talk and talk. It became the only thing he talked about. He talked about her *constantly*.

But he hardly ever *talked TO* her.

He told me how it went at church:

Alex: "Hi, Hope! How's your day going?"

Hope: "Umm... Fine. Really good. How are you? You look happy!"

Alex: "I'm good. Really good, actually. How did you like the service?"

Hope: "It was okay."

Silence.

Alex: "Well, okay. See you later!"

Hope [distantly]: "Bye..."

As we sat munching on bananas one evening after work in April, he told me, "How come I can't ever just *talk* to her? Have, like, a conversation? It's always an interrogation. I hate it."

"Pretend you're talking with me," I suggested.

He sighed. "I've tried that. It doesn't work. Because I'm staring *right at her*. Not at you."

"So you're intimidated by her?"

"Well, yeah. Wouldn't you be?" He shook his head, eyes sparkling. "She's so cute."

My insides burned. He didn't know about Hope's past and how it mingled with mine.

Quite frankly, I was shocked he was coming to *me* for girl advice. Why would he come to *me*? You already know how I become a dead log when around girls. Why's he seeking pointers for talking to hot girls from *me*? It just didn't make sense. I mean, I'm the one who gets a heart attack when approached by a cute girl who is asking for directions to the Mall. I'm the one who dreams every night about holding a girl in my arms.

And this is what drives me insane, too. I like to think I'm a romantic at heart. I really do. I mean, my dreams are laced not with sex, sex, sex or even kiss, kiss, touch and grope. The greatest dreams I've ever had that involve girls are dreams where they want me and I want them and we're content to be with each other. A few weeks ago I dreamt that the world was coming to an end under some great dark plague and a girl—the girl—grabbed me by the arm, looked at me with hopelessness, and although I could promise nothing and was just as condemned as she was, I held her close, wrapped my arms around her, and felt her against me. Those dreams are perfect. The world sucks. It's falling apart. But I have her. And she has me. And therefore we exist in utopian paradise.

Last night I had a dream as well. It is vague and is mostly dialogue but I remember it okay.

I was in a house somewhere and there was this really beautiful, lovely girl. She was depressed and lonely. I sat down beside her and asked what was wrong. I don't remember the exact words that played out, but she said something to the extent of, "I feel so lonely. There's no one out there who loves me for me. The only people out there are people who are out to get me in bed." She shook her head. In the dream. "I hate it."

I told her, "Well, I think you're cute. And I think you're a wonderful person."

And she looked at me and said, with a twinkle in her eye and an emotional blush, “I think you’re cute, too.”

A perfect dream.

Why? Because it was realistic?

No. You’re probably never going to come across dialogue like that that’s real. The dialogue was cliché but it echoed what I desire most. I desire to love and be loved not for sex or making out or anything else, but just out of genuine *love*, genuine *attraction*, to the soul, the essence, the being of a person. That dream was so wonderful because *she wanted me* and *I wanted her* and it worked out perfectly because we *liked each other*. The dialogue, now, might not say that, but it’s what I felt, and I believe love is something you feel, not something you say. Or something like that. I don’t know. I was never really great with words.

It angers me that there are guys who just want to get into a girl’s body and they’re given the most awesome chances for deep-seeded romance. Girls are hungry for romance. Sometimes I think I was made for them because I’m such a romantic, the wine and candle-lit dinner guy. I’m the guy who says, “Let’s take a walk in the park,” or “Let’s go out to eat.” When most kids would want to be making out or taking off clothes, I want to talk. Discuss. Enjoy each other’s company. My desires are noble. My desires are right. My desires are respectful of girls.

I am the perfect Knight in Shining Armor.

But there are wolves about, and they parade romance but just want to feel orgasms. They’re the ones who succeed, the ones who come out on top, who manipulate the girls’ hunger for romance. They promise romance and just take their virginity. Oh God, I hate it. The other night I saw a girl crying beside the coffee-shop here on campus. I knew her story. Her boyfriend had promised her romance and a life of love and after a few bangs inside the car in the parking lot shadows, he dumped her for a ‘prettier’ girl. She has been ruined.

How come people like that are given the keys to such beauty, only to toss them to swine?

If I were in control, I’d make sure they were the ones who ended up lonely their entire lives, and let the girls experience true love, true romance, what they’ve always desired, from men who will love them for them, who will never deny their beauty, men who will *fight* for that beauty.

But I’m not in control. And my life, at times, seems to dictate that no one is.

No one.

Alex asked me as I finished eating my banana, “What should I do? I’m so clueless.”

I was wrapping up my banana peel to throw it away. I felt bad for the guy. I really did. So I just said it without thinking; it may have been like stamping my own death sentence. “Okay, how about I talk to her? She talks to me everyday at school. I’ll just bring you up.”

“Okay,” he said, nodding at the thought. He’d forgotten all about the banana. He looked at me. “What will you say?”

“I don’t know... What do you want me to say?”

“Something good. Make me look good.”

“Do you want me to ask her out for you?”

“No!” he exclaimed. “No. That’s so uncouth.”

“Uncouth? What’s that mean?”

“Uncivilized.”

“Oh.”

He tried to put his thoughts together. “I just want to hang out with her.”

“Don’t you hang out with her every Sunday?”

“I want it to be different this time. Just me and her. But what do we do? Go bowling?”

“Bowling? Bowling’s boring, Man.”

He agreed. “I think she likes bowling. Does she like bowling?”

“I don’t know,” I said, “but do you want to risk it? If she hears bowling and doesn’t like it—”

“She’ll turn it down,” he completed.

Licking my lips, “Yep.”

“How about go out to eat?”

“Are you going to pay?”

“Should I pay? Or would paying make it seem like a date.”

“Is it a date?”

“Not really. More like a pre-date.”

Pre-date. Whatever. “So she’s going to be paying?”

“Yeah. *If* she comes.”

“It sounds good,” I told him. “And your best bet is Applebee’s, three to seven. Half-price appetizers.”

He snapped his fingers. “Yeah, Dude! Awesome idea. It’s cheap.”

“For you *and* her.”

“Tell her I’ll pay. It’s half-price.”

“You sure?” I asked. “I thought it wasn’t a date?”

“She won’t think it’s a date,” he said. It almost seemed like his own internal question.

“Okay. So Applebee’s and you’re paying... When?”

“Umm... Saturday?”

“What if she has to work? Sometimes she works the golf course in the middle of the day.”

“I thought she was quitting?”

“Is she? She didn’t mention it.”

“I think she’s quitting.”

I went over the information. “Applebee’s. Half-price. You’re paying. Saturday.”

“Got it,” he said with a wink.

Our break was almost over. We still had an hour and a half to put in, but since it was getting late, the stars were beginning to show up in the pale blue sky. I looked at those stars and thought, *How beautiful*. I wished I were him. He had a chance with girls. I’ve never had a chance with girls. Not recently, anyways. Not since Rikki, except for... Well, that’s not important yet.

“Okay,” I said, standing. “Back to the cash register.”

“Hey, she pays, okay?” Alex spurt.

I laughed. “Okay. Okay.”

“Pre-date.”

“I got it.” Tomorrow I would make it a point to actually talk to Hope. Wouldn’t she be surprised?

It was about this time, too, near the end of April, that one of my best friends, whom was one of those I met going into Freshman Year, breaking the cycle of loneliness so experienced in Junior High, got his license and started showing up every day after school. My little sister was always there, and after much pleading, I let her hang out with us. She began to conform to them—and to me—and it made me a little happier that she wasn’t watching Nickelodeon anymore, but ingesting such classic High School TV shows such as VH1, Freaks and Geeks, The Family Guy, South Park, and the ultimate, That 70’s Show. She even bought the season to Reno 9-1-1 when it came out. We would watch it with my friends and we’d all laugh and have a good time.

When we hung out, things were always perfect. We would often load into my Supra and make our way to the nearest strip mall, hitting up the popular bookstores and Best Buy. One of my friends got us addicted to coffee and we made it a habit to show up at Borders Coffee. In my own humble opinion, Borders coffee beats the living daylight out of Starbucks. And it’s a lot cheaper. Granted, it doesn’t have the luxuries of Starbucks, but it *does* have a worn out cloth couch and a leather chair with several holes and stained by coffee spills. It was on that couch and in that chair around that coffee table that held our drinks that we would tell stories and make fun of each other as the sun set in the distance and its bleeding rays turned the windows into stained-glass replicas of another time. We were fearless in those moments, worry-free. My depression became nonexistent.

It took me a while to notice, however, that Caleb was sitting beside my sister more and more.

She started to model him. Model his dark and tight clothes, model his personality. She modeled the books he read and the movies they watched. I am ashamed it took me so long to see it, but a long time it *did* take. One time Caleb and my little sister went up to throw away their trash. I just kept drinking the last of my caramel frappe-chino as one of those friends with us threw out, “Look at them: inseparable.”

I looked at her. “What?”

“Your sister and him,” she said, pointing.

I followed her finger with my eyes. Caleb took the trash out of her hands and threw it away.

“They’re all over each other,” she said.

I kept watching them. She smiled at him and he made a funny face. “Are you sure?”

“What? *Sure*? Are you *watching* them?”

I turned and returned the gaze. “I haven’t really been paying attention.”

“What’s wrong with you? Are you blind?”

I smiled weakly. So what? It didn't bother me. I didn't care if they liked each other. I didn't know how much he would hurt me.

The night I was planning my speech in front of Hope for Alex's benefit, my sister came up to my room and knocked on my door. I opened it up and she asked me, "Who were you talking to?"

"No one," I told her.

"It sounded like you were asking someone on a date?" Her eyes told me that she thought *that* was unlikely.

"No, it's for Alex."

"Hope?"

"Yeah."

She nodded, standing in the doorway. "Figures..."

I looked past her, into the empty hallway. From her cracked bedroom door came the soft sounds of *Brand New*, her new favorite band. "Are you here for a reason?" I asked with a crude yet determined grin.

She fidgeted, curling her toes. "Can I talk to you?"

"Umm... Yeah." I've always been her confidant.

Lots of times Mom will come to me and ask me, "What's your sister saying?"

And I tell her, "Sorry. Can't tell you. I promised."

She would get agitated. "How come she tells you everything but leaves your father and I in the dark?"

"Maybe because she doesn't want to be punished?"

Her eyes would burn sulfur.

"I'm kidding. I love her. If something big is happening, you'll know."

Now I feared something big had happened. Something in her eyes spoke... concern.

Had she taken a shot of heroin? Thrown back the bottle? Spread her legs in some boy's bed?

Oh God, no.

"Sure," I told her. I stepped aside, showing her the way.

She sat down on my bed, the springs bouncing beneath her. "You have to promise not to tell Mom."

No no no no no

I shut the door and turned on the radio to block out our voices. "Okay." I rolled my computer chair around and sat down in it. "Okay. So what's going on?"

She didn't seem able to talk.

"Do you want me to guess? I'll guess if you want me to." *Please don't make me guess...*

"No. It's just—Don't get mad."

I never got mad. I was beginning to fear that I *would* get mad.

She bit her upper lip, then, "I kissed Caleb."

] I don't know how I felt at that moment. It's not that I've forgotten, it has nothing to do with repressed memories, it's just that... I don't think I felt much of anything, really. I just stared at her with a weird look in my eyes. Caleb? The Caleb who had become my best friend, the Caleb who rode with me for the very first time I ever got to drive with a friend, Caleb who had vowed, "I'll always love you like a brother?" and in ancient past told me, "You're sisters kind of homely." *This* Caleb?

"Look," she defended herself, voice rising, "I didn't mean to! It just sort of happened!"

"Sort of happened?" I asked, wondering what she meant by such a statement.

"Yeah," she said, calming down. I could tell her heart was racing, though. "We were close, he leaned in, he kissed me—"

"Where? Cheek?"

She looked at me with incredulity, then, "I didn't know he was going to do it."

"So did you kiss him back?" I asked.

She opened her arms wide. "What else was I supposed to do?"

"Pull away," I told her calmly.

"I didn't have time—"

"So you returned the kiss?"

She shook her head. "You're not going to tell Mom are you?"

"That depends," I said. "Are you still a virgin? Please say yes."

"What?" she gasped. "Yes! You can't get impregnated with a kiss."

"Then, no, I won't. Kissing is no big deal. My first French-kiss was in kindergarten."

"Yeah, right," she slurred. "I thought I should tell you, though."

"Because Caleb's like my best friend."

"Yeah."

I thanked her. "So... So what's this mean? Does this kiss... *signify*... anything?"

She didn't answer, then, "I think he's going to ask me out."

"Oh... What're you going to say?"

"I don't know..."

"You *did* kiss him back. Is Dad going to be okay with it?"

"He's going to ask Dad first."

"That's a good idea," I told her.

And that was the end of that. So my little sister was going to go out with my best friend. Maybe. That night, instead of practicing the speech to Hope, I lay in bed and wondered to myself, *So what's this going to change?* Probably not a lot, I told myself. He's still my best friend. He's like a brother for me. So except for the stress of talking to Hope, I fell asleep peacefully that night and slept through a big storm.

The next day I approached Hope in the hallway. I knew exactly where her locker was because she'd always turn from it and yell my name, want to talk, and I'd tell her I didn't have time for class and run off, always two minutes early. But this time as she was bent over digging through her books at the bottom of her locker, I completely surprised her by yelling *her* name. She spun around and saw me bounding over to her. She exclaimed my name and grinned. I said, "I need to talk to you about something."

She grabbed her Statistics textbook, shut her locker, and said, "Yeah, what's going on?"

A look of complexity covered her face when I said, "It's Alex."

"Alex?"

"Alexander the Great?"

"Oh," she said. I thought, *Oh no*, but then she smiled. "Yeah, he's a friend of mine. From church. Do you want to come sometime? Is he a friend of yours?"

"Yeah, he's a friend of mine, and I'll check it out later." Later. That's always my excuse. The truth is, I'm not really into the whole church-scene. A girl by the name of Destiny turned me completely against them, but that's a different story. Well, no, it's the same story, just not yet. "Well, he wants to know if you want to go eat Applebee's with him on Saturday. I mean, if you're not working."

"With Alex?" she asked.

"Yeah," I told her. I had to get to modern literature class. She was supposed to have said yes or no by now. But you know how girls are with these things.

"Umm... Is it a date?"

"No. You'd have to pay. A friendship thing."

"Oh. Okay." She bit her bottom lip.

Please hurry up and answer, I thought. The bell was about ready to ring!

"Tell him..." She mewed through her words, sifting her mind eternally.

Come on! "Hope, I've got class--"

"Tell him I'll go. What time?"

"You'll have to talk to him, really." I headed away. "I'll give him the news."

She yelled after me, "Why didn't *he* just ask me?"

"He never sees you! Your guys' classes don't intersect." And I was gone.

It was in Modern Literature class that the resurrection came.

Now, understand, I'm sure it happens to people all the time, but it happened to me this day again. I say again because the resurrection had happened before. The most recent one happened sometime between fall and winter 2004. I remember that for nearly a week the very name of *Hope* stirred my emotions. I filled my journals with wanderings and wondered if she liked me in the way I liked her. I thought she might.

After the fatal rejection that one day when she laid on my bed, Dad comforted me, saying, "Maybe when she gets older, like Senior Year, she'll see the good qualities in you and be attracted to you." Sometimes I take Dad's words as scripture and I nodded my head and thought, *Yeah, it could happen!*

And now, here in our story, I heard his words again, and felt hopeful. Hopeful; hope. *Hope*. My heart would shimmer and shine. I can remember what I wrote in my journals, too. I wrote about how all I wanted to do was be around her, to hold her, to hug her, to feel her against me as we sat under the stars. I wanted to go out to eat and laugh and go to movies. We could drive now so it'd be really easy.

It was this resurrection that drove me in 2004 to pick up the phone and call her. My voice shook with tension but I tried to hide it. I expected her to pick up the phone, but she didn't. It was her brother. I said, "Hey, is Hope there?"

"No," he told me, stoic. "She went to the store."

"Okay. Can you tell her I called?"

"What'd you call for?"

"Umm... We have Chemistry by the same teacher and I have a question to ask her."

"Okay."

He hung up. I sat in the living room, listening to the grandfather clock tick back and forth.

An eternity.

That's when the doubts came, hard and fast.

If you've ever been locked in a resurrection like this, you know that sometimes you do dumb things. I was convinced I'd done a dumb thing. She would see through the veil, she wouldn't call back, it'd be an undying Hell. I saw her hearing that I called and feeling fear. Her brother would tell her, "It's for Chemistry," and she'd feel better, then when she called, I would pick up the phone and say, "Actually, what I called about—" Things would either go uphill or downhill. I feared downhill. Still, I could bail myself. Ask a Chemistry question that sounded relevant. She wasn't too smart in Chemistry of all things, she wouldn't see through it. But then, I had a failing grade in that class so I'd end up asking something stupid and she'd give me a clear-cut answer and everything would bottom out.

So go through with the plan?

Or make up a Chemistry question?

Right at that moment the phone rang. I leapt up and grabbed it. "Hello?"

It was her. "Hey. I heard you called."

She didn't mention Chemistry—did her brother not tell her why? "Yeah. I just wanted to know if you wanted to go see *Dawn of the Dead* with me."

"Oh." Silence. Shooting myself in the foot. "Umm... When?"

"Well, what days are you free?"

I should've said a day so it looked like she was an add-on, not the focus. Whoops.

"Tuesday I have a study group, Wednesday and Friday I have to work..."

"What about Thursday?"

"I have small group on Thursdays... Sorry."

"It's okay. Bye."

"Bye."

One word: awkward.

I wanted to kill myself. Especially when Caitlyn told me the small group was on Mondays.

Dad had caught wind of the conversation. He stood in the shadows, and when I turned around, I saw him standing there. "Who was that?" he asked, voice cautious.

"No one," I said.

"Was it Hope?"

I didn't say anything. My face filled with blood in shame.

He shook his head in frustrated disbelief. "Why did you call her?"

"I just... I don't know. Look, it's no big deal."

"I just don't want you being hurt again."

"Dad," I said, walking past, "it's *no big deal*."

A couple weeks earlier in mid-winter I had another resurrection. I sent Hope an e-mail asking, "We should hang out sometime." This was before she was making all those Christian-calls to befriend me. We still weren't speaking that much.

"You did *what*?" my little sister asked when I told her my dirty deed. "Why do you keep messing around with that girl?"

"She's not a bad person." And she isn't, believe me!

"She's not right for you."

"I just asked if she wanted to hang out!"

"You don't just ask old romances if they want to 'hang out'," she scolded. "God."

As I crawled into bed that night, freezing even under all those heavy quilts (Maine can become quite cold, below zero all the time), I thought of how Hope would read the letter. Unlike last time, when I went through with my plan, this time I chickened out.

I crept to my sister's room and woke her up.

She leaned up on her elbows and wiped groggy eyes. "What- What is it?"

"What should I do? The e-mail? To Hope?"

She had an idea. And we went with it two days later.

For a day I was filled with terror. It seemed she was avoiding me.

Even one of my friends pointed out, "She just blew by you, Dude."

The e-mail! my mind screamed.

She told Hope that I sent a letter to her by accident; it was *supposed* to go to her brother. She said, "Okay," then, "I haven't read it yet." So the whole avoiding thing was an illusion. My own paranoia kicking in.

Sitting in class, I could feel the resurrection brewing, boiling just underneath the surface of my skin. All throughout the class I could think of nothing except *her*. The book we were reading was *5 People You Meet in Heaven* by Mitch Albom or some guy by a name like that. We were talking about the romance in the story and I could only think of me and Hope.

I fought so hard for her. And it never worked.

And now she goes out to eat with Alex.

He doesn't deserve her. I deserve her.

At lunch-time, Destiny could see the emotions beneath my skin. She was always good at reading peoples' emotions. I think they trained her to do it in her cult... I mean, church. Destiny has always been the girl who's hardcore Christian to the point of it being sickening. I was her friend because no one else would be. Some Christians even avoided being around her, she carried such a bad wrap! But I pitied her and befriended the poor girl. She replied with thankfulness by constantly trying to convert me.

As I sat down with my packed lunch (I usually packed, so as to avoid the long lines), she asked, "Hey, what's wrong? You don't look so hot."

"I'm okay," I told her. We always sat alone. No one would sit with us.

I mean, with her.

"Come on," she said. "Be open about it. We need to be honest about our feelings."

"There's nothing to be honest about," I told her, opening my brown lunch-bag.

She folded her arms. "Come on--"

"I'm being honest!" I exclaimed, laughing at the same time. A cover-up. We've all done it.

"Okay," she said, picking through her mashed potatoes and turkey-gravy.

I unwrapped a bologna sandwich and bit into it, chewing methodically, hardly there at all.

She stopped playing with her food, looked around, then asked, "Aren't you going to pray?"

I said while chewing my food, "You don't have to pray at every meal, Destiny."

"Of course you do!" she told me. "Jesus blessed His food."

"Then I claim His blessing," I said. "Do you want a Macadamia-nut cookie?"

"No, I don't want a cookie," she said. Passionately, "I'm really worried about you."

"I told you, I'm fine."

"No, I'm worried *for* you. You don't respect God enough. We all need to respect God."

"I've been trying my hardest," I promised. "It just doesn't come naturally."

"Not at first," she said. "You have to give it some time."

I broke the cookie. "Do you want half?"

"Some things," she told me, "are more important than cookies."

"Yeah. All right." I stood. "I need to go to the bathroom." I just needed to get away from her.

"Don't forget to wash your hands," she told me.

"Okay." And I walked away, relieved to have her off my back. I didn't return till the end of lunch.

She asked me, "Where have you been?"

I saw the cookie-half was gone. "I had to go to the bathroom, too."

"Are you going to walk me to my locker?"

"Sure," I said.

As we walked down the hall, she asked, "So what're you doing tonight?"

"I don't know." And I instantly regretted it. I knew what was coming. Grit your teeth and bear it.

"Tonight we have chapel. If you want to come, that'd be fun. We could eat out with my friends afterwards, too."

"Thanks," I said, "but I've got lots of homework to do." Are her friends as forceful as she is, shoving their beliefs down peoples' throats and demanding others to live by them?

"Really? We can do it together before the service!"

We reached her locker. "It's really okay. Church just isn't for me."

"No, church is for everyone. *Especially* you. You just don't know it."

I raised my eyebrows and said, "Good-bye, Destiny. See you tomorrow."

All evening I lounged around on the couch, eating salt and vinegar potato chips, watching Gilligan's Island reruns and contemplating the past. How come Alex got farther than I ever got with Hope, and when I had almost two years, he only had one day? How come, when I had to wade through rejection and despair and take stabs at luck with my own hand, he's allowed to succeed while using me as his puppet?

While entrenched in these thoughts, the phone rang. Mom picked it up, spoke lowly, then yelled my name. "It's for you!"

I groaned, stood, walked over and picked up the phone. "Hello?"

A girl's voice. Too familiar: "Hi, how are you doing?"

A mental sigh. "Okay, Destiny. And how are you?"

"I'd be a lot better if you came to chapel with me. I'm on the road. I can pick you up if you want."

"Thanks, Destiny, but like I said, I'm bogged down."

"Are you sure? We should always take breaks for God."

"I prayed before supper. Does that count?"

She laughed. "You really ought to come, though. I'm almost to your subdivision."

"Don't waste your time," I said. "Maybe next week." I always said that.

A pause, then, "Okay. Bye-bye..."

"Bye—"

"Are you sure?"

"*Destiny*. Bye." And the phone joined its cradle. Back to the couch for depressing resurrection.

Shortly after, the phone rang. Mom: "It's for you again."

I already told her no! I muttered as I stood. I took up the phone in the kitchen. "Hello?"

It wasn't Destiny, thank God. Caleb, on the other end, said, "Hey, Man. What's up?"

"Just watching TV," I told him. "What about you?"

"Listening to Elliot Smith. I called because I need to talk to you."

"Okay." So spill it. Commercials were almost over.

"You may or may not know, but I'm going to ask your sister out—"

"She told me," I said. "Are you asking for permission?"

"Well... yeah."

"I don't care," I told him. "Really, it doesn't bother me." Then, almost nonchalantly, an afterthought, a foreshadowing, "Just don't forget me."

"Forget you?" he asked, overwhelmed. "No way. You're like my brother, Man. I could never forget you. Ever. Nothing's going to change."

Even after hanging up the phone, when Mom's homemade tacos were ready to be eaten, the resurrection hadn't worn off and I felt just as depressed as I had earlier. She could see it written on my face and said, "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine," I lied. "I'm just tired." I stood from the table. "I'm not hungry."

"Why don't you get some sleep?" Dad ventured.

I agreed. "I'll see you guys tomorrow."

I crawled up to my room and laid down, thankful, at least, that while I was torn in two by Alex and Hope's possible fling—why did it bother me? I didn't want anything to *do* with Hope! But bother me, it did—I was thankful, at least, that Caleb promised me nothing would change. I could always rely on him.

Whatever.

My birthday is this weekend. I can already see the smiles and hear the laughter, and excuse me, but I want to part of it. But what am I going to do, tell them, "No thank you?" Ask if I can leave the party? My parents have been worried. Worried about me getting over the accident. I know what they hope for. It's the

impossible. Times will be harder for them shortly, so I will just act like I've forgotten the accident and moved on with my life. I will let them sleep quietly after the party.

They will know the truth soon.

Which is why I must continue writing. I want you to hear my story, and I don't want to waste my time in idle chit-chat and walking dead-end tangents. I want to expose my heart and let you see. I want you to experience what I've experienced. It's just that I don't know if... writing... is the way to do it. But since I see no other way, I will write.

Caleb promised me, the great and loyal friend he was, that things would never change. When I hung up the phone Wednesday evening, I felt really good. Despite the resurrected passions, I felt good that nothing would change between me and Caleb, and we might even grow closer through the whole thing! I imagined him being my brother-in-law. It may be me being weird, but I always think about these things. You know they'll never work out, but that doesn't stop you from imagining it in your head. And I imagine things would've been going great.

But then things took a drastic turn, a twist of fate, perhaps a curve ball from the gods, if there are such beings. Maybe the Greeks and Romans were onto something. I don't know. But that's a tangent, and no matter if I enjoy ancient history, it's not for this.

The next day as I got out of the shower, the mirror fogged up by the steam from the water, I was half-asleep when I tried to open the lid to my pills. My hands worked without my mind, and chance dictated that they worked directly above the toilet seat. Of course, I'm a guy, so the seat wasn't down. The lid popped off and, startled, I dropped both bottle and lid. The lid hit the rim of the toilet and fell onto the tile. The bottle didn't fare too well. It splashed into the clear water of the toilet and the pills were surged into the water. I rubbed my eyes and bent down to watch as the pills dissolved in the water, turning it into a milky cloud. Reaching down into the bowl, I withdrew the bottle, and set it on the sink counter. My heart was pounding. The psychiatrist said I needed the pills, and Mom was always on my back about it; but since the pills were under-the-counter, we couldn't get a refill date till the time had expended for the current bottle. In layman's turns, I'd just lost all my pills for the next month. Really, I wasn't worried about not having the pills. I was worried about Mom breathing down my neck for losing it. So I took the bottle into my room, stashed it away, and whenever she asked about the pills, I faithfully told her, "Every morning and every night." She'd call me a good boy and return to her TV.

I missed my morning pill, and lived my day quite fine. Cameron, Brian and I even went to see a movie. I forgot all about the pills until I stood brushing my teeth at eleven thirty at night. For a moment I felt a string of fear—my pills!—but calmed down. I'd felt fine today. Yeah, I'd be all right. The pills weren't *too* big a deal.

Or so I convinced myself.

No morning pill on Friday. That's when I started to feel it. Sluggish all day, barely moving around. I fell asleep in Chemistry. While this may not sound so fantastic, I can't even take naps while listening to nature music. My body just doesn't *let* me. But here I was, head on the crisp black Chemistry tables, snoring away and kids laughing. I only had a small appetite for lunch and didn't feel like anything. Destiny asked me what I was doing and I told her I was fasting. That made her smile, but I couldn't even enjoy the deception. I kept throwing my eyes over to Hope's table across the cafeteria, could see her laughing with her friends; all these memories were dredged up, and oh! how they hurt.

Destiny could see the pain all over my face. "Jesus said we're not supposed to make our faces contorted or eyes downcast when we're fasting."

"What?" I asked her. "What if you're really sad?"

"It doesn't matter," she told me. "You're sinning when you make yourself look sad."

"I'm not *making* myself do anything." I didn't know what I looked like, but had I seen my face reflected in her eyes, as she was staring directly at me, I would've seen very clearly that my face had emotional agony written all over it.

When I got home after school, Mom was waiting for me in the kitchen. "Guess what?"

I threw my book-bag down beside the door. "What?"

"We're going to China Village tonight."

No emotion. "That's nice." I walked right past her, heading for my room.

She spun around and asked, "Hey, what's wrong?"

"Nothing," I told her. I didn't know what was wrong.

Then, "Are you taking your pills?"

I froze in the living room. After a moment, “Yes, Mom. I’m taking my pills.”

When Dad came home, the whole family went out for Chinese. I picked through my orange chicken as Dad and my little sister talked about the school day. My little sister looked over at me and said matter-of-factly, “You have the most depressing blue eyes.”

I looked over at her, up from my food. Do you know why? “Really.”

Dad laughed. “Girls will kill for those eyes.”

I shut my eyes. The last thing I wanted to think about was girls.

Hope refused to leave my mind. She was always there, always before me, haunting.

I lay in bed all night, staring at the plaster ceiling, listening to the spring wind outside. Do you ever have those nights when your brain is messing with you and you feel so... messed up? I mean, when I was a little kid, about five or six, I remember laying on Mom and Dad’s bed and staring at the ceiling slowly moving back and forth. Dad came in with a hamper basket and when I looked at him, he seemed to grow huge. I just felt so... out-of-it. Now that I think about it, it is kind of like hypnotism, with the twirling fan blades serving as the hypnotic spiral. But now I felt the same thing, except there was no spiral, just a whitewashed ceiling and enough memories to keep me screaming inside.

I kept seeing the pizza parlor, the gymnasium, when we’d hang out at each other’s houses, when she ditched me for Amber, even when Amber indirectly invited me, and I remembered all the times we’d go on walks together in the park or go to King’s Island with our parents... And then I remembered how she laid on the bed—the bed that I sleep in every night—and told me, in less spicy words, “I can’t date you because you’re not cool enough and not hot enough for me.”

The depression was suffocating. But the anger was even worse.

All day Saturday this went on; I was caught in the madness of depression and anger. I went for a walk around the neighborhood, just dwelling on my thoughts and feelings. I felt so hopeless, so insecure, so... futile. I convinced myself I hadn’t a chance for romance, that I was dead weight who would never know what a beautiful kiss was like. I was convinced I was the dirtiest low-life, the scum of the town, best serving humanity by being the person who is trampled on so others don’t have to be uncomfortable.

Alex called Saturday. “Hey man! How are you?”

I tried to sound perky, but don’t think it worked. “Okay. How was... Applebee’s?” Why did I ask?

“Dude! It worked out *so* well. We met there at four o’clock and then we got one of those high-chair tables, near the bar, right? And we sat across from each other and talked about school and church and then we ordered. She got honey barbecue boneless buffalo wings and I got the classic style. And then guess what, Dude? She told me *next time* we’d have to split! Dude! *Next time!* And we didn’t even have our food yet!”

This was killing me. I felt like someone was shoving a hot iron poker up my butt and burning out my bowels.

“She is the most interesting person in the world, Dude. She knows so much, too! She talked about how she’s been on all these trips to like Israel and Greece and Rome, and she said that she loved that stuff, ancient history and the likes. Dude, she’s just like you!”

I wanted to strangle the kid.

“I don’t know, Man. She’s just so... I don’t even know. I don’t even have words! There’s so much to her I can’t even touch it. And her *eyes!* Have you ever seen them? They’re green like... Like really green. They sparkle, Man. How often do you see that? Wow. Just being around her is intoxicating. I’m so blessed, Man. So blessed.”

Of course you are. And I’m happy for you.

“I walked her to her car afterwards, but it wouldn’t start. She’d left her lights on and the battery was dead. She said she’d have her dad jump it in the morning, so I said I’d take her home. So we got in the car and drove out of the lot, and as we neared her house, she said, ‘Why don’t we just drive around?’”

Murder. Murder. Murder.

“So I said, ‘Okay. Where do you want to go?’ And she smiled. Have you *seen* her smile?”

Yes.

“It’s like... Like it’s from another planet or something. It’s just so heavenly, so vast, so... indescribable. I feel like a poet searching for words. So I said, ‘All right, let’s just drive,’ and we drove in silence for about half an hour before she said, ‘Stop here,’ and I turned into one of the mountain lookouts, because

we were up in the mountains. She grinned at me and opened the door and I jumped out of my car after turning it off. She comes around the car and takes my hand—

Hang up the phone. Hang up the phone!

“—And she drags me over to the bench. She pulls me around and she sits down, and pats the bench part next to her. So I sit down, too. And we look out over the stars, talking about how beautiful it all really is. The stars are really beautiful, aren’t they? I never really noticed. But *she* made me notice. She *showed* me the beauty. She’s like... No, the stars are like an *echo* of her own beauty.” He laughed. “I sound like a school-boy.”

So happy for you!

“When we finally got back to her house, I walked her to the door, and she stood there jingling her keys in her pocket. I didn’t realize what she was doing till, like, ten minutes ago, but it’s okay, because as she walked inside, she asked, ‘Do you want to hang out after church tomorrow?’ I smiled so big and I wasn’t even ashamed. So we’ve got a *real* date—at least I *think* it’s a real date—tomorrow after church.”

Good. Great. Grand. Wonderful.

“And, Dude, I owe this all to you. All of it. Thanks for helping me out.”

My voice cracked, “No problem.”

“See you around?” he asked.

“Yeah,” I said.

The line went dead.

Mom entered the room, closing her cell phone. “I just talked to your sister.”

“Where is she?” I asked. I hadn’t seen her all day.

“I guess she and Caleb went to Borders and ½ Price.”

My eyes bellowed sulfur. That was *my* route, not theirs. I invented it. And why didn’t he ask me to come?

“He asked her out,” Mom said, smiling.

“What’d she say?”

“She said yes. Oh, I’m so excited for her! I hope he treats her right.”

“Yeah,” I said. “Me too.”

But I didn’t care. After hearing Alex on the phone, I just wanted to puke.

Chapter Three

I still get lost in your eyes
 And it seems that I can't live a day without you
 Closing my eyes and you chase my thoughts away
 To a place where I am blinded by the light
 But it's not right

- Michelle Branch, *Goodbye to You*

I am so double-willed. Some days I want to complete this, other days I do not. Some days I want to just take this notebook and tear it apart, but other days I crave to take up the pen and tell my story. Sometimes I just feel like this is a bad idea. I mean, I am opening up so many windows to be judged and frowned upon, to be condemned and misunderstood. It is a risk one always takes, but this time it is so much more real, because *this is my life*. I wonder how it will be accepted when I am gone. My hope is not sympathy, but empathy. I don't desire tears, I desire understanding. But I have a fear that neither sympathy nor empathy will result from this letter, but that my image will be stained, my reputation ruined, as I lay myself bare on the rocks and hope people either help me to land rather than whip me with sullen cords.

I am home for the weekend, and the birthday party is tomorrow night. Dad took me outside under the stars and we just looked up at the mountains and talked. He bought two cigars, handed me one and took his own. We lit up and made a small fire out of sticks, then proceeded to simply smoke, warm ourselves by the fire (it gets cold here in Maine) and talked about life. Mostly about college. The classes I'm taking, the friends I'm meeting. He mentioned girls, and when he didn't get a response, moved on. I told him about the Minoans and Mycenaeans, early Greeks I am studying, as well as the culture of ancient Israel.

It was a wonderful time. Except for the girl thing, he made me forget what was going on.

I actually *smiled*.

That may not seem like a big deal, but from someone who has to fake every laugh, a genuine smile is monumental. At the time I just wanted to trash this whole thing and throw the pills away. I had great confidence. "Everything will be O.K.," I told myself. "Everything will be fine. You'll move on. You'll have a career. You'll have a life. Everything will *be O.K.*"

Then he said, "It's getting cold. I'm going inside."

So we went inside. He went to bed.

I sat downstairs on the couch, alone, and in the silence of the grandfather clock, the deep, impenetrable sorrow returned.

That moment was but ephemeral, gone in a heartbeat, never to return.

I want to slit my wrists now.

But, no, I can't. This must be finished. So... Where was I?

Alex would tell me that Sunday went well, too. They ate out at Red Lobster, and this time he paid. A first date. He said they talked about everything and that he just felt complete around her, like life was just *perfect*. When he would tell me this, I would feel angry, because what I'd wanted for so long turned over to him. He also sealed our conversations with the stamp Caleb had thrown my direction: "Don't worry, Dude, nothing will ever change. You're my best friend."

I believed him. Just like I believed Caleb. Oh, sweet ignorance, how satisfying and yet damning.

I saw Hope that Monday at school. She talked to me and said, "Hey, come here!" So I went over to her. It hurt just to see her. Resurrection again. "Omgosh, I never knew Alex liked me so much!"

"Yeah," I told her lamely. "He does."

"I had such a fun time with him Saturday. He's so cool and so cute!"

He's so cool. Of course. He's popular. "He's right up your alley," I said with a charming yet deceptive grin.

"Oh, I know! I think God has put us together."

Okay. That was enough. If God put them together, then He also spit in my face. "I have class."

"Hey, I want to talk to you later. About Alex."

"Okay," I said, walking away. We never had that talk.

She and Alex kept seeing each other. It got so bad that they were *always together*. Alex's brother complained to me, "He's never around anymore! He's always with Hope!" Alex's parents were being driven insane, and whenever Alex's friends told him, "She's got you on a leash, Dude. Back off," he'd always tell them to be quiet because they had no idea what he was talking about. Those comments stopped, not because of the threats, but because Alex just wasn't around anymore. Best friendships plunked into the water. I heard from him a few more times, but then there was a period of silence for a week, with no sign of letting up.

He had forgotten all about me.

Mom said, "Where's Alex been? I haven't seen him around the house. Do you guys still hang out?"

"He's always with Hope," I told her. "All the time."

"Well, what about when she's at work?"

"He's there, too, in the parking lot, waiting for her break."

She looked at me in awe. "Are you serious? Tell me you're joking."

"No. He really does that. He's never around, really."

I got used to it. Our schedules at the grocery store changed with new management and I never saw him. It was a Dark Age—no Alex on the radar screen and no hope of seeing him. For the next two weeks he was constantly with her, and I learned from my sister that they were living it up.

"Nothing bad, don't worry," she said. "But it's beyond kissing."

I had never kissed Hope. For two, three years I'd wanted to.

She told me she loved me, but I didn't fit the bill. Three years.

Two weeks with Alex and they moved on.

"What do their parents think?" Mom asked. "Don't they know? They're Christians!"

"Well, they're not having sex or doing anything oral, so I don't know if that's bad."

"I thought it was bad."

"Well... Perhaps they're liberal Christians?"

Destiny had different ideas on the subject. "I can't believe he's doing that. He's profaning the name of Christ. Both of them have become magnets for sin."

I didn't really feel like listening to it. "Come on, they're teenagers—"

"It doesn't matter! God's very explicit on this. They shouldn't even be kissing."

I rolled my eyes.

"I mean, it's like they're demon-possessed! They need an exorcism or something."

"I'm sure they do," I muttered.

Destiny shook her head in disgust. "They're backsliding into the fires of Hell. And do you know what the sad thing is?"

"No," I said, "I don't."

"No one is there to show them the Light, to show them the errors of their ways."

"Why don't you step up and help them?"

"It has to be an ordained preacher," she explained calmly. "Otherwise, I could be drawn into their sin."

"Oh. Yeah. I forgot about that."

Destiny and I shared different outlooks on Hope and Alex. She wanted to perform an exorcism to save them from the fires of Hell. I just wanted to get Alex away from her. Every step closer he got to her, I was taken a step away from happiness. My resurrected passions ran rampant and everything I did to crucify them was run aground. I felt utterly hopeless, lost in a sea of sorrow, choking on seaweed and drowning, reaching for the surface, but unable to grasp it. And Alex and Hope were flaunted before my own eyes every single moment.

Since I'm at home, I have the leisure of drawing out my journals. In April, this is what I wrote:

Sometimes I have to wonder. I sit in silent amazement, and close my eyes, and just feel it--it never leaves. When I close my eyes, the feeling presses me in the blackness. When I go to sleep, my dreams do not betray my hidden desires. Every moment I walk and every second I breathe, my mind is on fire and no one and nothing can quench the burning longings. Every inch of me wants to bow down, wants to love, to embrace, to cry out and talk and hold and be there to fight for and to be loyal, to sacrifice, to put myself to death even without warrant. I can't explain any of it. All I know is how it is--why, I can't explain and don't pretend to. I cry out for answers. I wail to

understand. I beg for it to end--such beauty and wonder is torture on the mind if in the mind it remains.

Is it love? I wouldn't know.

Why can't I forget her?

How come I ever had to meet her?

Why don't my feelings for her leave?

Why must my heart suffer for futile longing every time I see her?

How long must I go through this hostile and agonizing torture?

Why are her words, her laugh, her very eyes so deep and beautiful?

How come I feel this way about her?

Why won't this end?

How come my mind plays games with me?

Why do I reach out and long for someone I can never have?

I want to see her sitting across the table from me. I want to hold her hand, to feel the blood rushing through her veins. I don't want her to look away, but to look at me and smile. I want to hold her in the rain, under the thunder and lightning. I want to be free and untethered. I want to run wild like the stallion, and be as ferocious as the lion. I want to spend hours driving through the countryside with her by my side. I want all this. I want it simple. I want her.

But it seems I can't have all this; I can't have it simple; and what kills, I can't have her.

Maybe it is just me being a teenager. But after countless prayers to an unknown god and attempts to forget, I am left empty and hurt and thirsty for her. It should take months to get rid of her. But I've been trying for years. She never leaves me. Never leaves. Never.

Alex is sitting across the table from her. He is holding her hand, feeling the blood rushing through her veins. She looks at Alex and smiles with keen desire. He holds her in the rain, under the thunder and lightning. It is he who runs wild like the stallion and is as ferocious as the lion. He is the one who spends hours driving through the countryside with her at his side—and per her request! I want all of this, I want it simple, I want her. But I can't have all this, I can't have it simple, and what kills the most, is *I can't have her*.

He can have her. He has her.

Is it fair?

I don't think so. It tears me up inside even now just to think about it.

I want a 'girl'. I held Mandy's hand in choir last week, and I realized how much I wanted a girl; a girl to laugh with, cry with, hang out with, eat with, pray with, go to parks with—nothing sensual or sexual.

And all around me everyone was scoring but me: Bryon and Jessica, Cameron and Jesse, Caleb and my little sister, Brian and Anna, Ashlie and Bertrum, Ashley and Tom, Jenny and Don, Megan and Forrest, Derek and Andrea, Alex and Hope, Jimmy and his girl...

My social suave was pathetic: when meeting someone new, especially a girl, I was a stumbling fool with all pearls of speech vanished. I could pull it off excellent when I was alone, but put me in the situation, and I froze. I felt abandoned on a raft in the middle of the Pacific amidst the storm of the century. My face bursting with radiant red upon first words—and it does this even if I am not embarrassed—doesn't help; she thinks I am embarrassed, so she feels awkward; then I am truly embarrassed for making her feel awkward, and the red-shocked face deepens; by this time blood vessels are popping and I retreat back underneath my rock. I don't know what to do about that.

And I'm sorry for jumping tense around so much. I am in a writing frenzy, carpal tunnel murdering me, but I cannot stop. My heart denies even the most-needed break.

I really don't like how much of a social blunder I am. If I don't know someone 200%, I find myself saying dumb things and making futile attempts to jumpstart dying conversations. Every time there is someone I meet, I can't ever get into a conversation and really contribute. I am left looking dumb and abashed and feeling like a golden opportunity has slipped through my fingers again. I will never be able to meet a girl because I won't know what to say. I'll just keep stumbling and falling, stumbling and falling, and unless she sees *that* as attractive, there's no chance in that.

Sometimes I can get really depressed to where a ball of pity sticks in my throat.

Pity because I have been blessed with the worst genes possible, and all around me are the most beautiful and handsome people the world has ever seen. Pity because I have had to work so hard to enter the normal range of the human gene pool.

Pity because everyone misreads everything I do.

Pity because I am treated like dirt for no reason.

Pity because I've shown so much love and received so little. And to those I've shown love, they've grown to believe they deserve my love like it's a contract.

Pity because the one thing I want, I can't have, and am forced to watch everyone around me engage in it.

Pity because every time I've almost had it, it slips between my fingers.

Pity because I endured three miserable years trying, pleading, praying to forget her, being led like a lamb to the slaughter—against my own will—only to see her fall in love with one of my best friends—and then our friendship breaking.

Pity because I feel so alone, so unwanted, a scourge of society, a leper, the scapegoat and laughingstock.

I have to stop now. I will hold back the tears and try to sleep, and hope I don't dream.

Hope I don't dream—and hear her screams.

The family members are going to be here soon. There's nothing else for me to do so I decided I might as well waste time by writing some more in this notebook. My hand and heart ache to return to the gems of my life, to not dwell on the pain and suffering that I endured before—and after—I met her, but endure I must, so that you will understand.

I write about how Hope and Alex get together in a deepening relationship because it continually added to my depression. My pills had washed down the toilet so the emotions weren't held back at all.

Was there anything really *wrong* with Hope and Alex's relationship? No.

Was I justified in experiencing anger towards both of them? Not for the relationship; the anger was directed at Hope because she 'took away' one of my friends, and anger towards my friend because he had promised, "Nothing will change," and then I never really saw him again.

This was really just the tip of the iceberg. It set off emotions that ran through me day and night.

Anger. Jealousy. Despair. Hopelessness. Futility. Suicidal tendencies.

I didn't want to live anymore.

And all this time I saw Alex and Hope holding hands and going to movies, and all I knew was that I wanted *what he had*. Not Hope, not really, I understand now, but I wanted a relationship with a girl where the girl actually liked me and I liked her!

Desiring and being desired—what would that be like? I constantly wondered with a smile.

A girl who liked me not for anything *except* me—what that be like?

I saw Hope and Alex laughing and living life to the fullest and I said, "*That's* what it would be like."

And yet I could not grasp it. It always eluded my fingers, always slithered from my grasp. I was held back by unseen forces, and despite my screams and rants and savage cries for help, nothing ever changed.

I always wanted a deep and intimate relationship... And I was always left hollow.

While this was going on, Caleb and my little sister are living it up, too. Caleb ditching me during a Borders and ½ Price run was only the beginning. He started going to Applebee's without me, taking only my sister. He would always be with her. Even when he came over to see *me*, he would just say, "Hello... Where's your sister?" And since I didn't have a backbone, I'd tell him where she was, then crawl into my room, completely alone, and journal.

Journal sometimes for hours, expressing my hatred.

Boys and girls all over the walkways, playing kickball, huddling in groups, leading pointless and unknown lives, ignorant of ignorance, being watched and admired and lusted over, never knowing, nor caring, nor tackling the futility of their own wasteful existence, squandering hope and grace and love as if it were pocket-change, scraped yellow to the bone. Convinced they are centers of centers, a complex web of talk and thought; lovers, friends, acquaintances. Life in all its spectacle and glory will fall, whether, and waste, just as we all will.

Fall.

Wither.

Waste.

Forgotten.

It is not fun to be caught between a lie and a truth, and not be able to tell one from the other. Terrible to have a friend who lies and backstabs and only lets the guilt out in feeble doses, just enough that doubt is strangled by blind trust. How much worse it is to believe you are something when you are not, and worse still to see yourself as nothing when you are something; but nothing or something, both have the same end. Fall. Wither. Waste. forgotten. Eat. Drink. Screw. Fear God, or don't. You will still die.

Caleb and I used to hang out after I got off my shift at the grocery store. I couldn't hang out with Alex there anymore because he had quit and spent all his time with Hope. So Caleb and I decided to hang out, but he only showed up once, and then he left early because he was taking my little sister out to a High School volleyball game. It eventually evolved to the point where I didn't even *consider* if he would show up; I'd just walk out into the cold and dark parking lot, the spring sun burning behind sullen clouds, and in the shadow of Maine's scattered mountains, I would hunker down into my car, start the engine, and drive home through the tender drizzles. Upon reaching my room, I would strip of my clothes, shower, then lay down in my covers, burn incense and listen to depressing bands such as *Straylight Run* or *Eisley*.

These bands weren't depressing because they were meant to be. Their themes all revolved around romance, and the voices of the girl singers always made me ache for a girlfriend. I would imagine they were singing their love songs about me, and lost in the dream, when I returned to reality, I would be deeper into depression, thoughts running over in my head, as if skipping in a broken CD player:

You'll never have what you're looking for.

Don't even start hoping: you've been abandoned.

Your fate is a life of despair; get out now.

I hear these voices now and I want to agree so much.

No, I do agree.

Grandma came to me during the party and asked, as nicely as she could, with no ill intentions, "So, how are you dealing with what happened?"

The room grew opaquely silent. She realized her mistake immediately.

I looked up from my plate of tasteless barbecue chicken. The scent of tears wafted within me and I knew I had to get out of there. I felt my veins beginning to quiver. This happens a lot nowadays. Just the sudden mention of her name, or passing of a place that brings memories of her, any of this triggers an emotional onslaught. At that moment I lost it, and glaring at her, I snarled, "How the %\$@# do you think I feel?" I threw my plate on the ground, the barbecue chicken smearing the carpet, and walking past several of my wide-mouthed cousins, I stormed down to my bedroom and slammed the door loud.

I fell upon the bed, fell upon my knees, and digging my head into my blankets, sobbed myself dry.

Between the choking gasps, I could hear knocking at the door.

Dad said quietly, "Son? Son. Can I come in?"

I balled my fists and tried to take control, but even my muscles were shot.

His voice again: "Son." Calm and serene. He knew this was holy ground.

I raised my bloodshot eyes and swollen cheeks and coughed, "Leave."

He obeyed. There were no more knocks.

I'm not crying anymore. I will again, though, I promise. But for the time being I feel better, and this journal has proven a relief again. I must finish this story. I cannot bear under the weight of this loss any longer. So let me continue. Please excuse the tear stains on the paper.

As Caleb abandoned me for my sister, my sister's appreciation of me fell into the ocean, too.

Mom used to say to me when she wasn't around, "She looks up to you so much. She's always wanted to be just like you. And she tells you everything. *Everything*." Grinning, "It makes me jealous."

Now I seemed to be a hindrance, a bother, an annoyance. I would say hi and she'd blow past. She would walk into a room and tell me how stupid I was for something, then keep walking, shocking not only me, but Mom and Dad as well. And she told me nothing. She locked her door and listened to her music. She ate Spaghettios in her room and didn't let anyone talk to her. She felt that if you said even a word to her face you were thereby invading her privacy.

I hadn't just lost Caleb. I'd lost my sister to him, as well.

And my sorrow evolved into anger. Bitter, infuriated rage.

Cameron saw what was happening, and one day when I was at his house watching a zombie movie after school, he said to me, "Do you hang out with Caleb anymore?"

"No. I don't see him anymore. He's always with my sister."

"He hasn't come around here anymore, either. It feels like we've never known him."

"He hasn't even come around for Brian?"

"Why would he? Brian's never here, either. He's working though."

"Yeah," I said. A zombie was eating someone's face. "He has an excuse."

I continued going to Cameron's house during the week because I didn't have anything to look forward to at home. Even though he was three grades below me, a freshman while I was a senior, I took a liking to him immediately. If you know Cameron you know how it happens. He either freaks you out or you fall in love with him. We would go on walks and watch movies and talk about life. And girls. He was the one whom I discoursed all my girls troubles to. He had been in several relationships and had good pointers here and there, and would serve a crucial role in getting me to involve myself with *the* girl.

Oh. There she is again.

I can feel the tears coming.

But I was interrupted. Mom came to the door: "Come outside to your party."

I walked over and opened the door.

She handed me a Kleenex. "I didn't know if you'd need this."

"Thanks," I said.

She saw this notebook sitting open on the bed. "What's that?" she asked.

"Nothing," I said. To change the subject, "Sorry about... About what I said."

She shakes her head. "Don't worry about it, okay, Sweetie? It's understandable."

So I went back to the party.

Now that it's over and I lay in my bed again, I am returned once more to the past.

And to Destiny.

We all know Destiny. Perhaps too much. The super-Christian who says, "There are no super-Christians. Only Christians and hypocrites. *I'm* a Christian. And you'd better be one, too. Or you're going to Hell." She didn't actually say that, but that was her message.

And one day at lunch near the end of April she invited me to her lunchtime prayer session. See, I never really went to these, because in the words of a girl I knew, "It's just a bunch of hypocrites meeting together to say little prayers and show off their religion." And I didn't want to be identified with any religion, *especially* not a religion with hypocrites. But today she convinced me by saying, "I think you should hear what they have to say. You're going to be *sooo* excited!"

"All right, all right," I said. I hid my face all the way there, hoping no one would look up.

The group consisted of about fifteen kids. Football players and geeks and the average kids. Even two cheerleaders. Destiny had arranged it as a tool for "Spreading salvation through our schools," a "training camp for the soldiers of God." They all welcomed me in with smiles and handshakes, and I knew half of them wouldn't say hi to me ten feet outside the door.

Hypocrites? Definitely. I *hated* being there. Pretentious creeps.

Why did I ever agree to come here? My reputation was spoiled for an eternity.

"Okay, guys," Destiny said. "Are there any prayer requests?"

Some kids raised their hands and began to speak. "My uncle has cancer."

"Pray that we will win the baseball game tonight."

"My family is moving houses. Pray for safe travel."

Destiny looked right at me. "Do you have any prayer requests?"

"Me? No."

"Are you sure?"

A pause, then a nod. "Ummm... I'm pretty sure."

She sighed. "Okay. This is your chance to tell God anything."

A band geek echoed, "*Anything*."

"That's great," I said, "but there's really not much going on." What a lie. But I wasn't about to expose my soul to these flattering bozos. "Would you like me to make something up? We could *pretend* it was real."

All the kids looked horrified. Wow. Careful—holy ground, holy ground, holy ground...

"Okay, guys," Destiny said. "Let's pray."

Suddenly someone took my left hand and another my right. At first I recoiled, but then I thought, *When in Rome...* and threw a glance behind me, out the double door windows to the flooding cafeteria. *God, here's my real prayer: don't let anyone see me!*

Everyone closed their eyes. I just looked at them all with their eyes shut and imagined them sleeping.

Destiny told me, "We have to close our eyes. It's what God wants."

So I closed my eyes and she started to pray.

"Oh great and gracious God, please lend your ears to us sinners now. I pray that you will heal Stephanie's uncle. Oh God, you made his body and you created this world! You have *all* the power to heal him, all the miracle-working power! Yours is the power! The honor! The glory!"

Her voice was rising. I found myself rather frightened.

"Oh God, we call upon your name to cleanse that man of that god-awful cancer, rid him off the malignant demons manifesting themselves within, and make his voice sing Your praises!"

A girl piped with such randomness that it made me jump, "Amen!"

"And, great and gracious God, I pray that you will give us victory. There are more real Christians in this school than the other one. I pray that you will give your children victory, that you will shower your favor upon them, so we can say it's *You* who gave us victory, You and no one else!"

Was she *serious*?

She prayed that Jimmy's family would have a safe move, then it got *really* exciting.

"Oh, great and gracious God, you know the sins of these kids, you know the atrocities they commit, you know the dark secrets of their hearts! I pray, great and gracious God," and her voice kept getting louder and louder. I wanted to tell her to tone it down. "I pray that you will expose the wicked deeds of these heathens, and show them your power as seen in your justice! Show them no mercy for *Your* glory!" And then she abandoned her place in the circle and I felt her presence before me. She gripped my shoulder and cried out heavenward, "Oh, great and gracious God! You know the sufferings of my dear friend, and he suffers unjustly. You know the sins of Hope and Alex, who claim to be your servants, but who deny it by their actions, licking each others' privates and grabbing each other's bodies!" My eyes popped open and I saw her, eyes closed, rocking back and forth before me, eyes closed and hands raised. "Draw them back to you, great and gracious God! Redeem them from the fires of Hell, their new destinations!" All the people in the room shot out "amens" and "hallelujahs". She continued the 'prayer', "Forgive them of their sinful, sexual iniquity, and may Your hand—"

My hands abandoned their post and swung out; Destiny flailed through the air and hit the ground rolling, coming to a stop against the legs of stunned prayer warriors. When she looked up, she could see my eyes were flaming torches, and I imagine smoke was coming out of my nostrils. All the kids stared at me in shock—I'd shoved the princess onto the ground!—but I didn't stay with them; I turned, threw out a word that made them choke on air, and throwing open the doors, angrily stormed into the cafeteria, drawing a thousand pairs of eyes but caring not.

Destiny later approached me, rubbing her bruised elbows. I sat at the table, glowering, anger fermenting. "What's wrong with you?" she growled. "I'm just trying to help. Besides, after what they did to you—"

"Oh, shut up," I snarled. "Stop using your piety to spread your own Gospel."

"What?" she asked, completely confused. "What the heck are you talking about?"

"Look, I don't care if they spit in my face, I'm not going to use prayer as a tool for getting back at them. Prayer isn't a weapon. How could you use it to just gossip about people behind their back? Isn't anything... sacred... to you?"

"Sacred to *me*?" she shot back. "I am in right standing with God, and—"

"Really?" I barked. "Then why don't you start acting like it." I stood and left the table.

She yelled after me, "I'm just trying to show them God's love!"

I swung around and hissed, "You don't know the first thing about love."

Well, she was determined to turn *me* from my evil ways, and when she realized that her prayer group friends still wouldn't sit with her, she decided to befriend me again. She apologized, and although her piety was completely staged—I could see she wasn't sorry at all—I saw that she'd been crying all last night and accepted.

We sat down to eat and she said, "I saw your sister at the Mall yesterday."

"Really. With Caleb?"

“Yes. I heard Caleb’s a Christian.”
“Yeah. He goes to a church in the mountains. A small backwoods place.”
Destiny shook her head in amazement. “He doesn’t even know his Bible...”
“What?”
“He can’t date your sister. God doesn’t want us dating people who aren’t Christians.”
“That’s the dumbest thing I’ve ever heard,” I told her flatly.
“No. How can a citizen of light partake in citizens of the darkness?”
“Is that a poem or something?”
“Unless Caleb is trying to save your sister, a very noble cause, I think he’d better change.”
“Do we *have* to talk like this?” I didn’t want to hit her again. “My sister doesn’t follow your rules.”
“But she *should*. God is pretty clear on this. At least Caleb could back up his words with actions.”
“By dumping my sister?”
“It’s what God commands us to do. There’s no way around it.”
She annoyed me more and more with each passing day.
And then the rumors started.

Word got out about Alex and Hope’s foul-play. Hope led a small Bible Study in the biology room after school, and when the rumor got out, it fell apart. That night I heard Mom on the phone with Hope’s mom. Hope’s mom was distraught, and from the words I heard on Mom’s side of the phone, I could tell Hope was, too.

When Mom hung up the phone and left the house, perhaps to visit her, I paced back and forth in the kitchen, fighting with myself. Then I picked up the phone, dialed, and let it ring. And ring. And ring. Failed attempt. No. A voice, soft and tender, perhaps shaky. “Hello?”

“Hope?” I stammered, voice crisp and cracking. “Hi.”

“Oh,” she said. I heard a sniffle. “How are you?”

“Well, I called to ask you that question...”

She said quickly, “How could anyone ever say that about me and Alex? We’ve never done *anything*! We’re both committed to staying pure! We’ve been tempted but we haven’t given in. We know... We know that God will forgive us if we do anything... But we don’t want to distance ourselves from Him or hurt each other.”

I could tell in her voice that she was completely sincere. “I’m sorry... I don’t know how...”

“Why would someone make that up about me?”

I didn’t say anything. I couldn’t even remember where I’d heard the rumor first nearly a week or two ago.

“I really like Alex. I really do. And it’s great because we both love God and we’re both going into the ministry. We do bible studies together and pray together and worship together... And then someone is spreading these rumors, staining our reputations... I know I shouldn’t worry about my reputation, but... But I love God so much and I love the kids at the school. I don’t want them to think less of me, because they’ll think less of God. They’ll make me look like... a hypocrite. I don’t want to be a hypocrite.”

“You’re not,” I told her. “You’re not. Believe me. I’ve seen hypocrites. I know hypocrites.”

“Who could do this to me, though?” she asked. It sounded like she was beginning to cry.

I didn’t tell her who it was. She would’ve been torn up if she knew a fellow Christian had started all the rumors.

“It’s really hard,” she said. “It’s really hard. I just don’t know what to do. I was laughed at today and some Christians told me I was going to Hell.”

“Don’t listen to them. They don’t know anything.”

“I didn’t *do* anything! I’m just as blameless as them.”

“They’re *not* blameless,” I said, thinking of Destiny. “Trust me on that one.”

There was a tender pause, then, “Thanks for calling. I really appreciate it.”

“Don’t hesitate to speak up if you need something, okay?”

“Thank you. Dad is calling me. I have to go.”

“Bye,” I said into the phone.

She sounded calmer now than she did when I first heard her voice. “Bye.”

And the phone went dead.

Now I realize that this letter has been nothing but doom-and-gloom. You need something else. *I* need something else. Perhaps the next several pages will take me back to a wonderful time and perhaps I will sleep easy. Just that all in itself is appetizing.

The relationship between Hope and Alex upset me in so many different ways, but I knew I didn't have anything against Hope at all. After Destiny spread the rumors to spoil her reputation, I actually sympathized with Hope. It didn't remove the sorrow or desperation for such a genuine and loving relationship, but I need to make it clear that I didn't hold any grudges against Hope at the very end of April.

Caleb had taken my sister with him and vanished. This absolutely depressed me.

No way around *that*.

Destiny continued to drive me crazier and crazier. Her self-serving righteousness ate away at my conscience. And it made me hate the idea of Christianity and Jesus and just turned that faith into a garbage-dump. At least in my eyes.

I found myself in a constant battle with depression, wanting a romantic relationship, and this desire never leaving me. *Never* leaving me. It was with me always, and I felt convinced—holistically convinced—that it would never be a reality for me.

But then, in modern literature class, the teacher announced, "Okay, guys, we're going to get in groups for a debate project... And since there's only three guys in here and there are groups of five, sorry guys, but you're going to have two girls in your group."

And so she walked over, and smiling at me, said, "Hi, I'm Jena."

Chapter Four

Turn it inside out so I can see
 The part of you that's drifting over me
 And when I wake you're, you're never there
 But when I sleep you're, you're everywhere
 You're everywhere

Just tell me how I got this far
 Just tell me why you're here and who you are
 'Cause every time I look
 You're never there
 And every time I sleep
 You're always there

- Michelle Branch, *Everywhere*

Every morning I would walk over to Cliff's seat, and I'd lean against the chalkboard and talk as the rest of the kids waltzed in. Modern Literature is your run-of-the-mill literature class; chocked full of pretty girls with only a handful of guys (in my case, three: me, Cliff, and David). I remembered Cliff was into reading the Chuck Palahniuk novels; his bookmark rested halfway through a copy of *Choke*, with an image of a skinned weight-lifter on the front. As with all of Palahniuk's books, it was woven with complexity, and for us to try to waste our time by understandings its intricacies would be just that: a waste of time. So I would ask if he's read anymore and he'd say, "Yes, I have," and that would be the end of that.

That day late in April, Cliff brought up, "Did you remember about the projects?"

I squeezed my eyes shut. "Whoops. Oh well. We're in a group, right?"

"I think it's volunteer."

"Then, yes," I said.

Miss Calhoun entered and said, "Everyone, take a seat! Roll call."

There was no roll call. We would just sit down and think about lunch as she patrolled the room looking at the seating chart.

As I had walked to the school from the parking lot, something beautiful met my eyes. The rain-clouds of the previous night were breaking apart, riddled by shafts of brilliant orange light. The light sprinkled itself into the mist and caused the air to shimmer as if I were walking in an ephemeral rainbow. It made me smile and despite all the havoc Destiny was going through and the rumors lurching Hope into the front-page gossip, something told me today would be good. As I walked into the school, book-bag slung over my shoulder, I smugly nodded to myself and crooned in a whisper to my life, a mere subtlety under my breath, "Today is going to be good."

Peaceful. Relaxing. Uneventful yet speedy. That's what I hoped for. It's what every kid hopes for. But so much more lay on the cosmic agenda.

Miss Calhoun walked to the front of the class, and standing behind her podium, the sunlight coming between the blinds on the window behind her, giving her an almost silhouetted appearance, she gave us the instructions: "There are ten controversial topics. We're going to be getting into groups where you will do your research and draw *different* conclusions. There will be four people to a group: two on one side, two on the other. For instance, if we *were* doing abortion, but we aren't because it has been beaten to death and I've seen how fiery it can get in a classroom full of senior-aged girls (and I'm sure the guys don't want to experience our feminine hormones out-of-control), but in the case of abortion, two of you would take, 'Yes, it should be legal,' and the other two will say, 'No, it's illegal.' What if all four think it should be banned or approved? Too bad. Two of you will have to defect. Fight it out amongst yourselves."

She placed the topics on the board, writing them out with greasy chalk.

"Which one do you want?" Cliff asked, leaning forward and whispering into my ear.

"How about Gay Rights?" I asked. I knew one of Destiny's friends was in the room and imagined how fun it could be. *There* would be hormones.

"Gay Rights?" Cliff said. "No way. What would that look like, a group of guys doing gay rights?"

"You're right," I told him. "Okay... So smoking?"

"Don't you smoke cigars?"

"Well, yeah--"

"So you're biased."

"If you don't want to do it, just say something."

"It just sounds so boring. All statistics and such."

"Okay. So what do *you* want to do?"

A pause, then, "I don't know. Let's just take whatever's left over, okay?"

"Fine with me," I said.

Miss Calhoun finished writing the topics on the board and turned to face the class. "Okay. Groups are volunteer oriented. If you don't have a group, come to me and I'll assign one to you. Come on, let's get to work here."

Everyone stood and shuffled around, cliques clinging to one another. All of us guys gathered in a corner of the room, debating what to do as the girls milled about. We were ready in less than five seconds, but the girls were still trying to organize the groups two minutes later. This irritated Miss Calhoun, who said, "What's your guys' deal? Come on. Get with the program. I'll start assigning groups..." But groups were formed. She looked them over and shook her head. "Four people to a group! We have a group of seven. You guys need to split up."

"But if we split," someone said, "then there won't be enough people for debate."

"What?"

"It will be four against three. What about the group of three?"

Some skinny girl piped, "There's an odd number, Miss Calhoun."

"All right..." She turned around on her heels. "Do we have any groups of—Yes, boys." She faced the group of seven girls. "Two of you march over and join them. We'll have two groups of five. It won't be too big a deal."

The girls all looked at one another, debating silently who deserved to be excommunicated.

How embarrassing, no girls wanting to be around you.

Story of my life, eh?

One skinny girl with wide-rimmed charcoal glasses chirped, "I'll go."

"Thank you, Danielle," Miss Calhoun breathed. "Who else isn't afraid of the boys?"

A girl stepped forward. "I'll go."

I looked over and saw her coming towards us. Jet-black hair fell around her shoulders and eyes as deep as the Black Sea swam over me and drew me in. Her smile revealed pearl-white teeth and she walked with a confident gate. She wasn't big, she wasn't skinny. She was my height, she was regular size, she even had a little pudge in the gut (confession: you girls who strive so hard to have not an ounce of fat on you, *you really aren't all that pretty*). Her arms were bronze and smooth, and she wore a diamond necklace around her stately neck. At that moment my hand itched for a pen and paper, and I would write my own Songs of Solomon. I could take his descriptions of his beauty and place them on her. She walked straight to me and I felt myself go cold and rigid, as if fear itself captivated me in all its gruesome splendor.

Next thing I knew, she was standing right in front of me. "Hi," she said. "My name's Jena."

These four words are words that will never leave me.

They haunt me day and night, for they are the beginning and the end.

They seal the beginning of life as it is meant to be lived, and they herald the end of life taken by my own hand.

I didn't really know what to say. And so I said nothing. It's that paralyzed fear that has always stripped me of words, that fear that denudes my masculinity and leaves me flopping like Atlantic Salmon on the deck of a fishing boat, gills flapping for air but denied. My heart and mind and soul screamed to say something—anything!—back, but it was useless. My trachea decided it didn't want to work and my vocal cords rotted within.

Cliff took the opportunity. "Hey. Sorry you had to be split from your group."

She smiled at him. "It's okay. It doesn't really matter. It's just a dumb debate."

"Yeah," Cliff said. "I hate it how some girls are so prissy about the stupidest things."

She nods, laughing. "Yeah, I know!"

I throw in, "Yeah."

Cliff looks at me weird and the girl smiles.

Danielle asks, “So which one do you guys feel like doing? Gay rights?”

“NO,” Cliff said, quite energetically. “I think that should be left to the guys.”

I had a funny joke, but it didn’t matter. I still couldn’t speak. Not intelligently, at least, maybe a grunt here and there.

The girl—Jena—said, “Umm... So which one?”

Finally! I speak! “Well, what do *you* want to do?”

“I was asking you guys,” she said.

“Yes,” my voice cracked. Was my face getting beet-red? I imagined so. Screw it. “But I believe chivalry is a forgotten virtue, and it’s in chivalry that we ask the women what they want, and do it without alternative reasons.” Wow. Did I actually *say* that? It sounded like something out of Webster’s dictionary.

The girl grinned at me. “You really want me to decide?”

David said, “Well, *someone* has to.”

“Okay,” she said. “Creation versus evolution.” A disclaimer, “It sounds interesting.”

I looked her right in the eyes, defiant—wow, I was doing good—and said, “All right.”

Miss Calhoun came to our group. “And what is the topic you’ve chosen? No repeats.”

“Creation versus evolution,” Danielle replied.

The teacher’s eyes lit up. “This one usually draws out some deep feelings. How exciting!”

She walked away and Cliff said, “That was weird.”

The girl—I am going to call her Jena from now on—said, “Okay, so what are we going to do? I mean, we have to research and stuff. And figure out who is going to be on what side.”

“Let’s brainstorm,” I said. “Write down ideas for both sides.”

She nods. “Okay. Let’s do that.”

So we all sat down in a circle—and she was directly across from me—and we pulled out paper and pens and went at it. My legs went numb but I kept writing, looking up every so often to catch a glimpse. She was scribbling lots of information down so I knew she had a handle on this subject. No wonder she’d chosen it. I was going to come out looking like a blind fool. My legs were scorching with that tingling yet painful feeling when you sit on them too long, so I changed my position as the teacher said, “The period’s almost over, Class, so be sure to bring some research here tomorrow!”

Kids were shuffling around.

David said, “So who’s doing what? We’ll need to get together for research.”

“I’ll do for evolution,” Danielle said. “But I don’t really believe in it.”

“So I guess I’ll go against it,” Jena said.

Cliff said, “I only know stuff against it, so I’ll go with you.”

Before I could speak up, David affirmed, “Yes, me, too.”

I looked over at Danielle and forced a smile. “And I guess I’m with you.”

I overheard Jena telling the other boys, “Let’s meet after school in the library, okay, to get some research done?”

I stared at the girl with black glasses and ached *so much* to be in the other group. I didn’t mind Danielle, not at all, but there was just something... I don’t know, *something*... about Jena that made me feel... Made me feel like there was a reason to have *hope*. I wanted that feeling, an escapist feeling that carried me from the abyss of my depression. But, no, Cliff and David would get to drink from that cup of beauty, and I’d be researching stuff for creation, and I really didn’t want to get God involved in my life right now.

Danielle said, “Okay. So do you want to meet?”

“Sure...” I said. “In the library?” I could still sit by Jena...

“I have to work,” she said. “How about after work at the public library?”

“Umm... Sure,” I said.

The bell rang. Everyone was getting up.

Danielle stood and I gathered my things. By the time I got to my feet, Jena was out of the room.

Here in Maine spring rains comes almost unceasingly. A clear and sunny day is almost unthinkable. Most people don’t really know it, but Maine has *five* seasons. Summer, fall, winter, spring—and mud. The rain can come down so hard in spring—and does so with regularity—that the back roads in the mountains become so thick with mud that they aren’t navigable. I didn’t drive to the library that day. After completing some homework and lounging around at home, I grabbed my backpack, took up notebook and pen, and headed out the door. The clouds spun a mosaic of grays and dark blues spreading to the sun hidden behind a murky façade; the street sparkled with the freshly-lain rains and the sweet scent of broken ozone, the

gentle waft of iron in the air, came over me. My boots splashed in the mud as I hiked through the local park of scattered pines. The needles brushed upon me over the narrow trails; the park opened up into a wide area with swings and tennis courts and a playground, not to mention a one-mile lap I would often run in the summer. I walked through the park and entered the adjacent subdivision, taking the main road towards town. The rain began to patter all around me and I pulled the jacket closer around me. As the library came into view, the rain intensified, coming down like sleet, and I jogged to the front doors, entered into the dryness, and submerged in heat, stripped of my wet jacket and draped it over my arm.

The librarian softly clicked her keys and two little boys browsed VHS's and DVD's to my left. I turned my head to the right, past the Kids' section, along the row of computers, and saw Danielle waiting with her big black-rimmed glasses being tossed back and forth in her hands, impatiently. I walked over to the table and set my book-bag on top of it.

"How long have you been waiting?" I asked.

"Are you ready to do this?" she asked.

"Yeah," I said. "Where do we start?" The rain tapped on the windowsill behind us, sliding down the glass. So depressing.

"Well. First, where do you stand on this issue?"

"For creation? For it. Right?"

"I can't answer that for you," she said, standing from the table. "It's an opinion."

"We have to argue for it, don't we? At least, I thought that--"

"Yes, but I need to know if it's what you really believe."

I wondered where she was going with this. "Umm... I never really gave it much thought."

"Never?"

"I always just assumed we evolved. It's what I've been taught."

She shook her head. "Then you're in the right place. God put you here. With me."

Why couldn't He have put me with Jena? "All right. Good. So let's get to work. Convince me."

She scolded, "You need to take this seriously."

"I am. I want a good grade."

"There's more than a grade riding on this! It's your salvation. Don't you know?"

"Don't I know what? Since when does the beginning of the earth correlate with my salvation?"

"Since you aren't saved, you wouldn't know." She continued, "Look. If we say that God didn't create the earth in six literal days, we're calling God a liar."

"A liar? I'm not really following you--"

"How can you not follow me?"

"How does the creation of the earth have any bearing on what Jesus says?"

"Because," she explained quite clearly, "Jesus *created* the world!"

I couldn't believe this. I found myself looking around to make sure no one saw us together. I could feel my face flushing red. I looked her in the eyes and could read the ample concern within. "Okay. Listen. Show me your evidence. Jena and the others are coming up with evidence for evolution, so--"

"It's all false evidence," she interjected. "All lies. Evolutionists are liars. They're going to burn in Hell."

I just gaped at her. It was Destiny fleshed out before my eyes. "Maybe we need to just stick with the project, okay? This isn't church, it isn't Mass, it isn't Sunday School. It's the *public* library, and I say public because it's not affiliated with religion, and neither am I. So let's do this project, get our facts together, make our case, and hope—in your case pray—that we do a good job. Okay?"

She grinned. "All right." She turned to her backpack and zipped it open. "I have several tracts--"

I rolled my eyes. "Maybe we should stick with science on this one?"

To avoid any more confrontation, I crept away into the science section, browsing for titles on creationism. All the titles were books by Stephen Hawking or Carl Sagan; no sign of any good creationism books. I kept thinking, *Wow, we're screwed*. Danielle's attitude all on its own drove me crazy, too. How did she equate creation with salvation? I didn't go to church, but I knew enough to know that whatever the Christian said about salvation, it wouldn't be effected by whether or not creation took a long time or six days. I mean, if evolution were true, did it rule out God? Not in my mind. Why did she keep shoving her creationism down my throat? And how come, like Danielle, she used every opportunity to show me up-front how wrong *I* was, and how right *she* was? I hated it with a deep-engraved passion.

I returned to the table and she was pouring through about fifteen tracts, marking them up with orange and green highlighter. Thunder crackled and the lights dimmed; she looked up at me and asked, "Did you find anything?"

"It's a public library," I said, hoping she wouldn't go off on me.

She didn't. Instead she shoved two tracts to the other side of the table and motioned for me to sit. I obeyed and opened one of the tracts. It had about fifteen reasons evolutionism was wrong and creationism was right, interspersed with such fallacies and myths that had been disproved years ago. Some were, if I remember right, Darwin recanting evolution on his deathbed, there being no Ice Age, and moon dust not being thick enough for an old earth. She was marking these arguments with a frenzy and it would've hurt for me to say anything, so I didn't. She'd get the humiliation, not me. I was actually *for* evolution. Besides, I wanted to be with Jena. She intrigued me, she really did, but my dumb mouth never moved when it was supposed to.

As we were packing up to leave, Danielle offered me a ride home. The rain was coming down hard, so I said, "Okay." On the ride to my subdivision, the windshield wipers furiously fighting the onslaught, Danielle brought up, "So what's this I hear about Hope? Hope and Alex? You know them, don't you."

"Yeah," I said. "I know them both."

"What do you think?"

"I think," I said gently—after all, she was giving me a ride—"that you have no idea what you're talking about."

"Destiny told me—"

I looked at her. "You believe what *Destiny* said?"

"She goes to my church."

"I see the connection," I said. "Look. They aren't doing *anything*, it's all made up—"

"They're staining the names of Christians everywhere."

"What? *They're* staining the names of Christians everywhere? Destiny was the one who used prayer to gossip!"

"Don't bring Destiny into this. God's on her side, and if you're not on her side, God's against you." She said smugly, "It's in the Bible."

My eyes turned out the window to the descending rain. "I can't believe this. You guys are crazy."

"*We're* crazy? Why? Because we live by our morals?"

"No," I said, still not looking at her. "Because you just accept what everyone says without thinking about it for yourself." Now I looked over at her. "So *what* if Destiny says this-or-that? She isn't perfect. No one's perfect. She can be wrong. So why take what she says and claim it as absolute truth? Why not actually try to *see* if she knows what she's talking about? Hope and Alex are both friends of mine, and I talked to Hope last night. You guys in your little evangelism circle are spreading the rumor of Hope and Alex, for whatever reason I don't know, maybe it turns you on, I don't know, but it's really hurting her. Prayer isn't a tool for gossip, all right?"

"Prayer is the only thing that can help them," Danielle said, pulling up to the curb beside my house.

I opened the door, stepped out into the rain, and without thanking her for the ride, shot over my shoulder, "*You* guys are the ones who need help." As I walked to the front door, head down to keep rainwater from my eyes, I heard her car squeal away.

That night as I lay in bed, I wrote in my journal:

I am distraught. She is a beautiful girl. I'm not talking hot or sexy. Swimsuit models are such, but to them I am not drawn; they are empty and vacant. *She* isn't. Her eyes are so deep, her laughter so wonderful, she holds delightful conversation. She's beautiful. An eclectic of joy and smiles and laughter and enjoyment. Beauty. It's not skin-deep. She has it. *Someone has it.*

Needless to say, I was excited about school the next day, something rare. I just wanted to see her again. Modern Literature was my third class of the day, and I hoped and prayed that we would be put in our groups to work on the projects. My hopes were ill-founded however, when Miss Calhoun announced that we were going to continue reading *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* on our own. All during class I kept throwing glances over to her, seeing her flipping through the book, and I tried to read her mind, wondered what was going on inside. At the end of class, Jena walked over to me and said, "We're getting together after school in the parking lot to film a video for the project. I know I didn't tell you, I forgot, but if you

can't make it, then it's okay. I know you work the grocery store, so if you have to work today, then it's okay."

Would I *really* suffer the grocery store when I could be with her? "No, no, I don't have to work."

"So you'll be there?"

I nodded. "Count me in. What time?"

"Two forty-five," she said with a growing smile. "Okay. Then we'll see you."

Except I did have to work. All day long as I drove home after school to put on some cologne and brush my teeth and buy a few mints at the gas station, I couldn't stop thinking about her. My heart hammered within my chest, literally. It felt like my ribs were going to split. I called the grocery store and said, "I'm not going to be able to come into work today... I have a huge project for school, we have to film a video, and--"

The manager laughed. "It's okay, really. Shannon can cover you."

So I showed up in the parking lot and no one was there. I circled the lot searching for everyone, but no one was there. Three o'clock came and I was thinking, *They must've changed plans and forgot to tell me... At least I get off work today.* But then Cliff came beside me in his yellow Sunfire. I asked him, "Where's everyone else?" Where's *she*? "It's fifteen minutes late."

Cliff said, "I had to sweep and mop the kitchen. I couldn't be here on time."

But where is *she*? "And the others? Have you heard from them?"

He shook his head. "No, but--"

A charcoal SUV pulled alongside me and the window rolled down. She leaned from the driver seat and came into view. Her eyes chewed through mine and she said, "Sorry I'm late! I had to get gas, didn't realize it was so low."

"It's okay," I told her warmly, grinning back. "Do you know where David or Danielle are?"

She shrugged. "Danielle said she couldn't come. David is the one who had the idea..."

We sat in our idling cars. I kept looking to the rain-clouds above, threatening rain, and I prayed the day wouldn't be ruined. Some trucks pulled up beside us and they started unloading buckets of flowers to adorn the school for the upcoming baseball game. I've always admired flowers, always loved everything about them. The taste, the contour, the color, the texture. The background and screensavers on my desktop were shots of roses and lilies and daisies. I actually got out of the car and knelt beside one of the flowers when the truck's crew wasn't looking, and took a giant whiff. Cliff said, "You're weird."

Jena leaned out her window and said, "You're the first guy I've ever seen who loves flowers."

I stood, back cracking, and told her, "I've always loved flowers. The peace, the serenity, the calm. The beauty, it's... It's just wonderful. I almost went to the career center Junior Year for botany. One of the choice careers I had was to be one of those guys who lives out in the country and works for a private nursery in some small country town."

She nodded. "Nice dream."

"What about you? Any big dreams?"

She shrugged. "Graduate. School. Marriage. Babies."

I liked her a lot. "Nice dream," I echoed.

The sound of an engine floated over us and David showed up in his Jeep. "Sorry..."

"Are we ready, then?" Jena asked.

I walked over to my car and got in. "We're good to go."

"Good to go where?" Jena broke in. "Do we even know where we're filming?"

"We can film at my place," David said. "It's got some woods."

"Yeah, but there's always a lot of people there," Cliff said. "You're house is right beside East Park."

My mind clicked and whirled. "Umm... Hey, how about Clearcreek Park?"

"Where's that?" David asked.

"It's almost in Franklin. No one knows about it. It's always empty. Lots of woods and brush-land."

Jena said, "Sounds good to me. Do you know the way?"

"Yeah, I've been there a few times. A really relaxing place."

"Lead the way," she said.

I led the caravan out of the school, down the main road, and made sure not to lose them at the stoplights. The main road branched into a smaller road and this road weaved within the woods at the foot of the mountains; we passed several farmhouses and some back roads thick with mud; there was an abandoned truck up to its wheels in mud down one road. As the road kept stretching, part of me became fearful that I

was lost. How would *that* make me look? But I played it cool and kept going, wondering if I wasn't just digging a deeper hole for myself. Then, around a bend came the gravel drive with baseball fields on either side and the trees alive and vibrant with flowers and jade leaves. And it was completely vacant.

Success.

A trail of dirt and gravel came off of my tires as I pulled into the park, and the CD player skipped as the car bounced back and forth, the suspension nearly shot. I pulled the car up to the side of the gravel drive, next to a thick wooded area rich in shady alcoves and forests of splendid trees. Brian and I had come here once and found a deer skeleton in the middle of the tree-patch. Now I turned off the car and stepped out into the gentle warmth, and my eyes naturally went skyward, doubtfully, as dark clouds continued to intersect and exchange high above, the bland light barely cutting through.

Everyone else stopped their vehicles and got out. David brought out the video camera and Jena opened the back to her SUV and pulled out two aero-soft handguns. I walked over to her car and, seeing one of the guns, called out, "I've got dibs on this one." It looked like a sleek, silver 9 millimeter. "It looks realistic."

Jena, beside me, set down a container with plastic pellets. "These are the bullets. Load her up."

"Thank you," I said, very conscious of her movements behind me as I loaded the gun.

Jena explained her thoughts to those gathered. "David's going to be our sasquatch. He's going to come out of the trees and then we're going to shoot him."

David grinned. "Nice."

Cliff bit his bottom lip, then, "But what's this got to do with creation and evolution?"

"Well," Jena said, "Miss Calhoun said this was a sensitive subject, so I was thinking that we could kind of lighten the situation by, I don't know, making a comical video."

"And sasquatch?" Cliff repeated.

"We'll say that he's a transitional animal. A cross between ape and man."

"A Neanderthal."

"Right."

Cliff shook his head. "That doesn't make any sense."

"It's not *supposed* to."

I threw out over my shoulder, "What about creation? Do we get a video?"

"We're going back to my place," Jena said. "And we're going to film Noah and the burning bush."

"That's Moses," David said. "Just thought I'd throw that out there."

Jena shrugged. "Okay. Moses. So, David, you're the sasquatch, and Cliff, you and—"

"Me?" I asked, gun loaded. "I get to shoot David?"

"Yeah."

"All right," I said. "What about you?"

"I'm the cameraman. Well. Camera-girl."

"Let's do this."

So we did it. She taped us in the act and I got to shoot David with plastic pellets. They left welts.

"I'll lead the way to my house," Jena said, as we were loading up. "Who's going to be the voice of God?"

"Let me do it," I said.

"Okie-dokie."

She lived about fifteen minutes away in a log cabin with two barns. She had us park out on the street—"My dad is going to be here soon, don't want to block his way in."—and then we helped her carry firewood to a pit. I carried more than I could bear and made it look easy. She looked at me with a twinkle in her eye and laughed. I think she knew, but I never asked about it. She ran inside to get matches and when she returned, we realized we weren't going to be able to light the dry logs.

Cliff asked, "Do you have any newspaper?"

"The logs are wet," I said. "We need something flammable."

"How about fire-starter logs?"

Jena shook her head. "No..."

David, the undauntedly daring one, ventured, "Gasoline?"

Jena mulled over it in her head. "Okay." She looked at me. "Can I get some help?"

"Of course!" I exclaimed, and felt embarrassed at how I'd just shouted it out.

I followed her past the cars and into the garage. There was a barrel of gasoline and she needed to siphon some into a bucket to pour on the logs. She got out a tube and stuck it in and started the suction. Gasoline

dribbled into the can. I paced back and forth in the garage, looking over all the stuff hanging on the wall, and telling myself, *Say something! Say something! She asked YOU to come with her! Talk to her! You're making the situation awkward, Coward.*

"Is your dad a fireman?" I blurted, pointing to a fireman suit in the corner.

"What?" She followed my point. "Oh. No. He's a salesman. He sells that stuff."

"I've always wanted to wear one," I said.

She smiled. "Dad's not home. Why don't you try it on?"

I walked over and picked it up. "Wow. It's heavy. What's it made out of, lead?"

"Something like that," she said. The bucket was nearly full. "Guess how much it cost."

"Is it expensive?"

"Yeah."

"Hmmm... One hundred?"

"Way off."

"Five hundred?"

"Up."

"One thousand."

"Still way off."

"Are you serious?"

"Are you done guessing?"

"No way. Two thousand?"

"I'll spare you the embarrassment," she said, laughing. "I see your face is getting red."

Why did that always have to happen? I wanted to slap myself, and the fact that she knew made it only get redder.

She didn't seem to mind, though. "Seventeen thousand."

"For *one* of these?"

"Just one," she said. "They're expensive." She finished filling the bucket. "There we go..."

"I can't get it on... Oh well." I was setting it down.

"I don't want you to explode when you throw on the gasoline. You should wear it."

"I would if I could get inside it."

"Here," she said, walking over. She stood before me, took the jacket and helped put my arms through, then she buttoned it in the back. "See how it works?" Her voice was so wonderful and to feel her arms tugging against me was just... phenomenal.

"So we're ready?" I asked, turning around. It felt like I was the Michelin man.

She picked up a fireman's helmet. "Not yet." She handed it to me. "Put it on."

I put it onto my head and pushed it down. "Wow. It's uncomfortable. Almost hurts..."

She laughed. "You have it on backwards."

My face bleated. "Oh." Turning it around, I said, "Okay."

Cliff and David laughed when they saw me. I poured the gasoline all over the logs and then stood back. Jena handed me the box of matches and I lit one and threw it down. It smothered in the gasoline.

"Is that supposed to happen?" I asked.

"Try again," she said.

I did and it caught. The fire erupted and on the other side of the pit, David was thrown backwards, glasses flying. Cliff caught them midair. David stood, rubbing dirt off of himself, and by then the fire was roaring, the heat wafting over me. But under the jacket I felt cool and relaxed. Walking over to Jena, seeing the fire reflecting in her auburn eyes, I said, "This thing actually works."

She looked at me. "That's why it costs seventeen thousand dollars."

A truck pulled into the driveway and a man got out. Jena muttered under her breath; I looked over my shoulder and saw a man getting out. He stared right at me and hollered, "Hey! What do you think you're doing? Playing around? Take that stuff off! Do you want to pay for it?"

"Sorry," I stammered, taking off the helmet. It fell to my feet, splashing in the mud.

The man cursed. "Respect it, all right? Respect it!"

Jena walked behind me and, undoing the straps, whispered, "I'm so sorry."

"It's all right," I told her as the behemoth approached.

"Who are you and what're you doing wearing that?" he demanded.

Jena came out from behind me. "I told him he could. I told him he should."

Then the man did something I didn't expect.
 He slapped Jena across the face, leaving a swollen handprint.
 Fear and anger welled within me and she hung her face low.
 "Take it off," he growled. "And you guys get off of my property." He stormed inside.
 David and Cliff stood in silence.
 Jena rubbed her face and my heart broke. "Are you all right?" my voice cracked.
 "I'm fine," she answered quietly. "Put out the fire. You guys have to go."
 I shed off the jacket and she took it. I didn't know what to say.
 "We'll just scratch the video," she said in a low voice. "Sorry to waste your time."
 "It wasn't wasted," I said.
 Her father had slapped her. It kept playing over and over in my mind.
 She spit blood from her mouth. "You guys really need to go, okay?"
 I nodded. "All right. I'll see you at school tomorrow."
 "Yeah," she said, and she walked inside. David and Cliff were putting out the fire with a hose.

As I drove home that day I kept seeing it, over and over. Seeing his hand coming across her face, hearing the vicious slap. I kept seeing her eyes shut and her face burn with the imprint of his hand. I kept seeing her spit blood, awash in defeat. And with each repeated memory, the hatred and anger and bitterness crowded within me. I forgot about my depression and just burned with fury. Here was such a beautiful, wonderful, personality-rich girl—and her father treated her like this?

It just didn't make sense. It still doesn't make sense.

I didn't drive home, actually; I went over to Cameron's house and we sat down, watching TV as usual, and I told him about her (not mentioning the... abuse). He told me, "Well, it sounds like she likes you. From what you tell me. Honestly, Dude? I'd say you have a chance. A *good* chance, actually."

I nodded, eyes glued to the screen but mind elsewhere. "Are you sure?"

"Well, no. But, like I said, it's worth a shot... So are you going to ask her out?"

I shrugged. "I don't know. Not now, at least."

"Well, don't let it get stale. The longer you wait, the less she will remember you."

"Well, I'm not going to forget *her*. That's for sure."

"But can she say the same about you?"

He had a good point. So I told myself I would talk to her tomorrow at school.

She wasn't there. Her seat remained empty. At first I pitied myself, then I started to worry.

The slap. Over and over. I would close my eyes and see it, hear it, even *taste* it.

After school I drove past her house. My little sister complained, "This is a stupid short-cut."

"Sorry," I said, peeking over at her house. The SUV was in the driveway, but the house was eerily quiet.

"Whose house is that?" my sister inquired.

"I don't know," I lied.

She muttered, "Whatever."

All day long I wondered why she hadn't come to school. And the slap never left me.

That night Bryon took me out to Chipotle with him. I asked him, "How are you always able to find a girl?" Every week he had a different one.

He told me as he dipped a salty chip into some corn salsa, "Girls are attracted to the personality. So I just show them my personality."

Girls like guys with lots of personality? As I took a drink, I thought, *Yeah? So where are they?*

The next day she wasn't there again. Now I was really freaking out.

Cliff said, "Where is she? We have to present tomorrow. I hope she has her stuff done."

"She must be sick," David said.

But I kept seeing the slap. Had they forgotten? Or did they just *wish* to forget?

God, if I could forget it, how wonderful that would be!

In my journal that night I wrote:

I wish she liked me. I really do. She is a deep thinker, intellectual, reads a lot...

I wouldn't even mention my hypothesis in my secret journal.

It was just too frightening to think about.

She showed up the next day. She looked normal and acted cheery. My heart warmed immediately and I forgot everything. Maybe I'd been blowing things out of proportion? That made much more sense. We did the class project and she kept looking at me and smiling through the entire thing, and I looked back at her and smiled, too. It really went well. We talked afterwards for a little bit, but it's hard because we didn't sit next to each other and the classroom was packed with a ton of girls, so it was awkward. I really wished she'd liked me. She really was amazing.

That night, with the slap forgotten in a haze of numbed beauty, I wrote in my journal:

I cannot forget her. She is not "hot", as most would define the word; nor is she blessed with a charming, feminine voice. Yet none of this matters. I see now what this means. We always say, "It's what's on the inside that counts," but until we experience it, it's just lofty philosophy we really don't believe in. Beauty is not something you see, but something you *feel*. When her eyes catch mine and she smiles, I am riveted, floored, captivated. Something unseen but felt pierces me and I shudder in ancient longing. Not a longing to kiss or embrace, but a longing to just drink from that splendid cup of beauty once again! I keep rewinding time, imagining how things could've been different, and wonder if I am bent to forever suffer such an excruciating torment as fantastical hindsight! Amidst this sea of beauty and archaic longing is an unfathomable question: *has she felt such attraction to me?* Her actions, Cameron says, dictate yes! Could she now be journaling about my deep and bottomless eyes, my glowing countenance, peace and joy? Could she be dropping her pencil, shaking her head, and saying, *No way he could like me. No way at all—I'm not pretty like those cheerleaders.* Well, could she? I would give up my entire book collection (sacrifice!) for just one gift: the ability to see inside her head. This would make this thing much (way much!) easier.

But I was a coward and would never make a move. I would long to do something but would never find the strength to do it. That's where I would've remained had Cameron not called me out on the carpet and said something to the extent of, "If you never make a move, you'll never make her smile like that again." In other words, "You can keep writing fantasies in your journal, or take a step and, if things work out, write reality." His words stirred me and I decided, yes, I would do it. He seemed surprised when I said, "All right. I'll ask her tomorrow. At her locker."

I had uncovered her locker number earlier that week, and I stood near one of the classroom doorways as she did the combination and began pulling out books. First period was only moments away and I knew I had to act. I just kept waiting for the perfect moment... And kept waiting... And waiting. And watched as she shut her locker and walked past me on the other side of the hallway, not noticing the kid hiding in the shadows. And I still remained there.

Cameron caught me in the hallway. "So, what'd she say?"

"My mouth glued shut."

"Oh God," he breathed. "I bet she felt awkward."

"Well... My legs froze, too."

He glared at me. "You didn't even talk to her?"

I shook my head. "I saw her at her locker, though."

"How long did you stand there?"

"About two minutes."

He cursed under his breath. "Why wouldn't you make the move?"

"I was waiting for the right time."

"Right time?" Cameron exclaimed. "Define 'right time'. Is it when you're not fearful? When you have complete confidence? Because that time isn't going to come. You're going to be single forever unless you get your act together." His words were harsh, quite unlike him, but I knew he was doing it so I would stop screwing around. "Okay. Plan B. When do you see her again?"

"Third period. Modern Literature."

"Really? Beautiful. Ask her then."

"The room is filled with girls."

“Look. I can’t fight this battle for you, okay? She’s yours, not mine.”

“I know. I know.”

Modern Literature came and I sat in my seat the whole time, fighting with myself. Miss Calhoun had us continue debates but I didn’t participate. I just gave an empty stare into empty space. Then the bell rang, jostling from my dream-state. Jena was standing and walking towards the door. I frantically grabbed up my books and ran out of the room, pushing through the people towards her. My legs carried me against my innate will.

“Jena!” I exclaimed, right behind her.

She turned, confused, then grinned when she saw me. “Oh. Hi!”

“Hey... I’m glad I caught you,” I said.

“What’s up?”

My mind went blank. No! “About the other day... Don’t worry. I understand.”

Her smile fell. “I don’t need your sympathy.”

Bad move. “I’m not offering it. Understanding isn’t sympathy.”

“How’s your home life?”

“My home life? Good, I guess.”

“Then you can’t possibly understand.” She turned away.

That would’ve been the end of it, and in hindsight I would’ve stopped there. But I made the fatal move and grabbed her by the shoulder. “Wait.”

She turned around again.

“Look. I didn’t come over here... To say that. I just wanted... Do you want to go to Applebee’s with me around 6:30? I’d pick you up, I know where you live-“

“Why do you want to do that?” she asked.

Now what do I say? “Because I like you,” I stammered. “I mean, of course I like you, but I... I *like* you.”

And then a smile creased her lips. *Thank God!* “I don’t know...”

“Look. If you don’t want to, that’s okay. Really. But... come on. Just one meal.”

“You’re paying?”

“Of course. Why wouldn’t I pay?”

“All right,” she said. “I’ll go.”

And so it began.

Chapter Five

I didn't know that it was so cold
 And you needed someone
 to show you the way
 So I took your hand and we figured out
 That when the time comes
 I'd take you away

If you want to
 I can save you
 I can take you away from here
 So lonely inside
 So busy out there
 And all you wanted
 was somebody who cares
 - Michelle Branch, *All I Wanted*

I sat in the parking lot at the school as all the other students left, lost deep in thought. The conversation after third period ran over and over inside my head and I kept seeing her smile. It was strange, too: even when upset, she carried with her a gem of beauty. Even when her heart was breaking, she was still captivating. As I sat in that car, I thought of the night ahead. I had never imagined—I always assumed, but never thought it would come this soon—that I would have a date—yes, it was a date, wasn't it?—especially with *her*, and only—what?—five days after I met her? But her smile, her eyes... It had to be divine.

As I left that evening, Mom said, "I'm making chicken and rice. Why don't you wait?"

"I'm not really hungry," I said. It wasn't a lie, either; my insides were crumbling.

"Well, I made it for you," she said, sounding a little depressed. "Where are you going?"

"Out," I said, and I shut the door to the garage behind me.

I rang the doorbell at her house twice before it opened. The scent of cigarettes came over me and she appeared, dressed in the same clothes she'd worn at school. "Hi," she said, coming out and shutting the door behind her. "You're a little bit late."

"I got lost," I told her, realizing I didn't know how to act or what to say.

"Well, let's go," she said. As she got in, she said, "You cleaned it. It was dirty when we filmed."

"I know. I'd just been really busy." I shut the door for her and got in on my side. "What music do you like?"

"I don't care," she told me. "Whatever you like, I guess."

"Well, Straylight Run is stuck in the CD player. Has been for a week now. Really strange."

"I've never heard of them."

I was backing out of her driveway. "They're really good. Song number three is just phenomenal."

She clicked it to three as I pulled onto the road and drove away.

"You're right," she said, the music coming in from the speakers. "What's it called?"

"*Existentialism on Prom Night*," I told her. What I *didn't* tell her is that I planned on playing it in the car the day I drove to my honeymoon. The lyrics simply captivated me and expressed beauty in ways simple words never could.

"Well, it's good," she said. And we drove down the road.

"So what kind of stuff are you into? I mean, sports or anything?"

"I'm not really into sports."

"Neither am I. I think they're... I don't know. I just don't like them."

"Well, I think they're dumb. I can't stand them."

I laughed. "Yeah. That's *exactly* how I feel. I used to play soccer once."

"Really?"

"Not really," I said. "I mean, I was on the team. I didn't play. I sucked."

"Well. If you didn't enjoy it—"

"I hated it. And felt bad, because my Dad joined the team to be around me."

She grew silent at that.

I mentally smacked myself. *Way to screw up.*

She said, "Your dad likes you, huh?"

My mind raged. "Look. I'm sorry. I didn't mean--"

"It's okay. Really," she said. "It's okay."

How could it be okay? There was a perturbed silence. We both just stared out the windows.

"Jena," I said. "Can I be honest about something?"

She looked over at me. "Yeah. Sure."

"I've never really... Never really done this before... I mean, a date... So if I mess something--"

She said, "You're really kind of strange."

This was *not* going well. "I'm sorry--"

"No," she said. "No, it was a compliment."

I smiled as I drove around a curb. Things were getting better...

"And you're doing fine," she said with a smile.

Lots better. I relaxed a little bit. "So. What kind of movies are you into?"

"I like comedies a lot. I also really like drama, like *Schindler's List*. One of my favorites."

"Really? I think... What's his name... The actor?"

"You mean Liam Neeson?"

"Is that his name? So how about food? What's your favorite--"

Jena said, "Don't turn it into an interrogation."

My face began to get red. "Sorry--"

"Your face is getting red," she said, leaning against the door and smiling.

"It happens," I stammered. "Even when I'm not- Does it make you uncomfortable?"

"No," she said. She bit her lip and looked out the window. "I think it's cute."

I turned onto the main road and the next thing I knew, we were sitting at a booth in the Applebee's bar.

"What're you going to get?" I asked her. "What tickles your fancy?"

She looked at me with a befuddled look. "'Tickles my fancy'?"

"You know. Makes you tick. Makes you smile."

"Ah. In that case, loaded potato skins. Simply wonderful."

"Hey, I agree." The waiter came and I told her what Jena wanted, then I said, "Boneless buffalo wings, half classic and half honey-barbecue." The waitress, who looked to be around twenty, smiled at us and walked away.

Jena looked at me. "Half-and-half."

"Oh yeah," I said. "I can never decide which I like most. So I always go that route."

The waitress came by with our drinks and set them down. "Are you two going to Prom?"

"What?" I asked.

"Isn't Prom this weekend?"

"Umm... Yeah. I'm not. I don't know about her."

She shook her head. "No."

The waitress looked back over to me, asked politely, "Why aren't you going to Prom?"

"I didn't ask anyone," I said. Awkward.

"I didn't go to my Senior Prom. I was eight months pregnant."

I said, on-the-ball, "Find the right dress and you'd look good."

Jena glared at me. Was that good or bad? Then she asked her, "What'd you have? Boy or girl?"

"A boy," she said. "Now I have a girl, too." As a curious afterthought, "I'm done."

"Well," I said. "That's a pretty good place to stop, I'd say."

She left me and Jena alone at the booth. We sipped our drinks and talked. Talked about school, our lives, talked about recent news, talked about people at school. She asked about Hope since she knew that I knew her, and when I told her that Hope and Alex had somehow been framed, she nodded and said, "I expected as much. They don't really fit the bill of hypocrites." I asked her what she meant and she said, "Hypocrites, especially *Christian* hypocrites, don't really love other people. I mean, I don't know why, but if you're a Christian hypocrite, you don't love people. I know it sounds crazy, and maybe it's just me--"

"No. No, I think I know what you're saying."

“Yeah, well, it’s just that Hope loves everyone. I’ve never seen her be mean to anyone.”

Except for me. “I know. One of my friends started spreading the rumors.”

“Oh? Who’s that?”

“Ummm... You might know her... Destiny?”

“*That* girl?” Jena asked. “I went to her church once. Craziest thing in the world.”

“I can imagine.”

“All they did was talk about sin and Hell and damnation. It gave me a headache. Your friend Hope isn’t like that. She’s... Different somehow. I mean, I’m sure she believes in Hell and salvation and everything, but she doesn’t shove the fires of Hell down peoples’ throats. She’s really gentle about her beliefs and people respect that.”

“Well, a lot of people think she’s a bad person now. It’s really hurt her deep.”

“Sometimes people make me mad. Really mad.”

“Especially religious people,” I said. “Or people who hide their cruelty behind a religious smokescreen.”

We talked about religion for a little while. I threw her my beliefs—agnostic, really, I didn’t know if God existed or not—and she said she definitely believed in God, but Destiny’s church had thrown her away from the Christian ideas. “I think there’s more to spirituality than just living life better so not to be thrown into Hell. I mean, I think God’s more interested in our lives than... Than where we go when we die.” Then, “At least, I hope so. It’s pretty depressing if God just kind of lives outside our world and lets us run our lives. I want Him to be in and around us, you know, not some distant grandfatherly-type.”

I said, “I guess I like that idea. I mean, if I decided to believe in God, then I’d—like you—hope He’d be around. And more interested in us than just our destination. Destiny seems to act like it’s all about being saved and being kept from Hell. If she’s right, then I’ll just wait till I’m about to die to say the Jesus-prayer. If God really wants me that much, He’ll save me.”

“A God who is ignorant of us in the here-and-now isn’t much of a God at all.”

“Precisely,” I said.

The waitress brought our food and set it down. I picked through my chicken. “I mean, sometimes I wonder, ‘How in the world could God be around us in our world and let terrible things happen?’ Did you know *thirty thousand* kids die each day because of starvation? I mean, there are people out there who talk so much about hellfire and damnation and speak out against, I don’t know, abortion or gay rights, and they are so ignorant of what’s going in the world. Rape, murder, genocide, starvation, natural disasters. When I see someone who claims to know God, I don’t want to see someone who just follows a list of rules, you know?” She was nodding and munching on half a potato skin. “I want them to actually *care* about the world. I mean, if someone is, for lack of a better word, ‘intimate’ with God—and I don’t even know if that’s possible—then shouldn’t they care about what’s going on in the world?”

She said, “That’s right. I’m like you. I think that if someone is going to claim they know the way to God and everything, they ought to back it up. Ignoring the struggles of others isn’t backing them up. Just being stuck in your own little American world isn’t backing it up. I mean, the poorest people here in America are more wealthy than half the people in the rest of the world. I may sound heretical or something, but sometimes I think we ought to stop paying so much attention to the American poor and give some of that attention to the poor who are *starving* and *dying*. Thirty thousand kids die each day? How can we just complacently stand by as this happens? I think if anyone claims or infers that they’ve got the whole God-thing figured out—and I don’t think anyone really does—then they should have an eye and heart for the rest of the world, not just what they see in their little, plush circle.”

She was amazing. She really was. She wasn’t shallow like half of the people I knew. She could carry on conversation! “I’ve always thought that America should destroy the fast food joints and start eating rice and bread for the diet. We should get rid of all the expensive homes and live the simple basics. Stop spending so much money on expensive cars and fancy television sets. I mean, what if America really did this—stopped being so materialistic and stuff? I think a lot of things would change. We really *could* end world hunger. Thirty thousand kids would *live* each day.”

“We’d be happier, too,” Jena said. “I’ve been on one or two missions trips in my life, and the people who always have the least are always the happiest. My idea? Materialism hasn’t infected them like it’s infected us. It’s a disease, a plague, it really is. We need to cure ourselves of it.”

“It’s a disease,” I said, “that doesn’t just hurt us, it hurts everyone around us.”

“Hence a plague.”

We continued to talk and elaborated our ideas on spirituality and a world vision. The waitress came and said, “Do you really think people would resort to rice and bread? I overheard you. It’s a wonderful idea, it really is. But look where you’re sitting. Look what you’re eating. You’d have to give up Applebee’s. You’d have to give up ice cream and French fries and hamburgers and pizza and candy bars. I look at you two and I think, ‘Hey, these kids can do it,’ but most of America isn’t. The disease of materialism has so choked us that now we *live* out of our superfluous pleasures. Ignorance is the underscore of America, and no one wants to be bothered. They won’t worry about other people and they won’t give up their pleasures. ‘Let the children die,’ they’ll say. It’s really sad. And that’s why America is getting more and more corrupt, I think... I’ll come back with the check.”

Jena looked at one of the desert menus. “Wow, that cream cheese pie looks good.”

“Do you want it?” I asked her.

“What?”

“I said, ‘Do you want it?’”

“What about the thirty thousand dying children?”

“Good point,” I said.

“Plus I try not to eat fatty foods.”

“Worried about getting fat?”

“No. Just... I don’t like to put on more pudge than I’ve got.”

“A lot of girls think they need to look like cheerleaders to be pretty. I remember one time I was in the store and I saw some exercising equipment. One of the aerobic machines had a before and after picture. The before picture looked better, in my opinion. Girls—and I mean this in a general sense—need to stop trying to fit into culture’s ideal image. It’s not the way it’s supposed to be. Besides, girls—in my opinion—are cuter when they have a ‘little pudge’.”

The waitress returned and I asked for two servings of pie. She smiled and left.

“Now you can’t feel bad,” I said, “because I’m going to be eating one, too.”

As we used forks to cut the chilled pie and put it into our mouths, Jena said, “You know what really bugged me about Destiny’s church? It was so elaborate. They poured so much money into that thing, bought all these purples banners and had bronze statues and state-of-the-art media centers. It just bugs me now, because we’ve been talking about this... This materialism mentality... And it’s infected the spiritual people, too. I mean, here’s a church that should be focusing on the world and helping the people of the world, and they’re spending hundreds of thousands of dollars on a nice-looking building, when only a few thousand dollars could build them a tent or something to worship their God in. I mean, I know a tent is a little extreme, but my point is this: if they were really so intimate with God, why couldn’t they use that money to help others? Why not invest it into charities or something? Just my thoughts.”

“I agree. It doesn’t make much sense, does it? Hypocritical, if I can say that.”

“My grandmother is a Christian and when I was little she’d read stories from the Bible to me. I remember one story where Jesus tells a rich guy he has to give up everything if he wants to be saved. This kind of stunned me as a kid, but I realize now that Jesus is saying that he can’t be materialistic, so obsessed with his wealth and status and goods, if he wants to have anything to do with God. I know it sounds harsh but that’s the way I read it.”

“Hey, sometimes harsh is right,” I told her. “But if you’re right... Lots of people who *think* they’re right are really wrong.”

“I’m not claiming that I’m right. These are just my thoughts.”

I paid the bill and we stood out in the parking lot. The sun was just sinking, bleeding yellow light across the pavement. “We hardly ever get nice days like these. Why don’t we take a walk? Just through that park over there.”

“Sounds fine,” she said, and we walked. And talked.

And talked.

We talked for what seemed hours. The stars were shining as we returned to the car, got in, and I drove towards her house.

“One thing that drives me crazy about Destiny’s church, too,” Jena said, “is that they always say that if we’re really saved, then God will make our lives so much better. Make a lot of money, have success

everywhere, have the perfect, blessed life. According to what my grandma said, Jesus said His Way was hard a lot of the times, and that life would not get easier, at least not in the way we think of it. I remember one time as I sat on her knees, she told me, 'Jesus' Way is hard, Jena. But if we're really following Him, it will be easy to endure the hard times.'"

"How old is your grandma?"

Jena replied, "She died a few years ago. She was in a train wreck."

"Oh."

"I remember..." She looked out her window at the stars. "Someone from Destiny's church, some kid at school, came and told me that God killed her because she was a fake Christian."

A deep silence filled the car. It began to rain, clouds moving in from over the mountains, and the windshield wipers cranked back and forth in a dull, rhythmic motion.

"I can see," I said, "why you're not a Christian."

"My grandma was the perfect Christian. She really was. Destiny and her church stain her name."

"But you still believe in God."

She gave me an intent gaze. "God loved my grandma very much and she loved Him."

We reached her house. Lights were on inside. I could hear a loud TV when she opened her door. Rain came in. It was coming down hard. "Wait," I said. I opened the glove box and pulled out an umbrella; getting out, I opened the umbrella, walked around, and kept her dry as I walked her to the front door. She fumbled for her keys and I stood there with her in the rain.

"I had a fun time tonight," she said. "I'm glad you grabbed me in the hallway."

"Me too. Definitely me too. I was scared witless."

She laughed and opened the door, stepping into the warm dryness.

"Bye," I said, turning to go.

"Wait," she said. I turned back around. She seemed to fidget, then, "Why did you ask me to with you tonight? I mean, no one's ever asked me to... go with them... before."

"Honestly?" I asked, the rain pelting the spread-eagled umbrella.

Am earnest answer. "Yes."

"Because the moment I looked into your eyes—really *looked* into your eyes—my idea of beauty was completely transformed."

Jena smiled and closed her eyes at those words, then closing the door, cooed, "Goodnight."

When I got home, I laid on my bed and held my journal, but I couldn't write anything. How could I inscribe such a day with words worthy of its mention? I let that journal remain untouched and I stared at the ceiling, lying in the darkness, listening to the rain and thunder, and I fell asleep with a once-in-a-lifetime smile on my face.

The next day at school Cameron asked me, "So, how did it go?"

"Applebee's? It was fine."

"Fine? I mean, does she like you?"

"She might. I don't know."

"Are you going to ask her out again?"

"You mean today?"

"Well... Why don't you wait a day?"

"I thought girls liked perseverance."

"Yes. *Not* obsession."

So I waited a day and May came. It was on the first day of May that I found her at her locker and said, "Hi, how are you doing?"

"Good," she said, showing little emotion. She just kept rummaging around.

"So... About Applebee's—"

"I get the picture," she said.

I furrowed my brow. "Excuse me?"

"Act like you had the greatest night ever, then don't even talk to me the next day." She looked at me with those deep and enriching eyes, now laden with sorrow. "I understand. I really do. It's happened before."

She tore away and walked down the corridor.

Cameron was watching from the other side of the hallway and came up. "What was that about?"

I glared at him. "Your advice sucks."

He asked what had happened and I gave him all the details. The guilt was visible in his eyes. "All right," he mused calmly in the hallway. "All right. We just need to figure out a way around this. You need a good excuse for not talking to her."

"I don't want to make an excuse."

"I have an idea."

I didn't know if it was wise or not to go along with Cameron's plan, but seeing as he had a girlfriend, I thought it couldn't be *too* bad a plan. I tracked Jena down at lunch-time, catching her in line. I said, "Look. I want to talk to you. Explain some things." She just looked at me. "I know... I know how it looks. I really do, and I don't blame you for turning your back on me. I deserved it. It's just... I've never really had good luck with girls, you know? I mean, I've known a lot of good ones, but I've known a lot of bad ones. There are some who will make your heart sing and others who will make your heart weep. I mean, don't worry, you're definitely one to make my heart sing. It's just that after all this history of failed relationships with girls... I wanted to make sure I knew what I was doing. I just didn't want to get hurt again, and I didn't want to hurt you because of the way my past affects me now. All day yesterday I was trying to figure out, you know, what to do. It's like one of those moments in life when you stand at an intersection and you know that the route you take may very well change, in the least greatly effect, your life. It takes contemplation, you have to think about it, it's needed. Big choices like this always are. And yesterday I decided to throw my past out and just look to the future. Because what I've found in you, what I experienced at Applebee's and what I want to continue to experience, is definitely worth the risk."

I let the words sink in and she didn't show much emotion. Then, "Okay."

A pause. "Okay?" What did that mean.

She nodded. "Yeah. Okay."

"Well," I said. "I'm going to go sit back down. I always pack my lunch."

"Or you could stand in line with me," she said. "Keep me company."

I grinned. "Or I could do that, yes." And I stayed.

Cameron found out later that day and literally jumped up and down. "You've got a girlfriend!"

"Look," I calmly protested. "She's not my girlfriend--"

"What? Dude! You went on a date and now she's still with you! She's a girlfriend!"

"Can we just watch the news or something?"

"This *is* news! No one ever expected you to get a girlfriend."

"How encouraging."

"No. It *is* encouraging. We were wrong. And she seems like a really cool girl. Not like those preppy cheerleaders who chase after the jocks."

"I know. She really is nice. And she's a deep thinker, too."

"Really? See, I couldn't handle that. But *you*. She's definitely for you, Dude. She could be 'the One'."

"What? Cameron!" I turned on the TV. "Let's watch TV now."

"So when do you get back with her? Like a second date?"

"I don't know. I'm just kind of winging it."

"Persistence. Here. Come with me." He went into the kitchen.

I groaned, stood, and followed him in. He was going through the shelves. "What's this about?"

He pulled out the white pages and flipped through them. "What's her last name?"

I told him. "You're getting her phone number?"

"No, *you're* getting her phone number. And you're going to call her."

"And tell her what?"

"Here it is," he said. He fed me the number. "Dial it and call."

"I don't even know what to ask."

"Ask if she wants to get together again."

"Go to a movie? Go out to eat? I have a cheap-paying job and insurance and gas and--"

"Just ask to hang out. You don't have to spend money for fun. Dial!"

I dialed and waited for the ring. Cameron waited, too, on the counter, kicking his legs.

It rang several times, then a man's voice: "Hello?" The father.

I addressed him as Mr. and asked if I could speak to Jena.

A quick answer: "No."

Now what do I say? "Can you tell me when she's getting back?"

"Listen to me, Boy. No one touches my daughter. No one but me." And he slammed down the phone.

Cameron asked, "So what happened?"

My face was ashen pale as I set the phone on the cradle. "She wasn't home."

"You look like snow, Dude. Are you feeling okay?"

"I have to go," I said, and I left the house.

The next day at school Jena wasn't there. Nor was she there the next.

I phoned her every day and no one answered. Then there was a woman's voice, distant and detached. "Hello?"

Maybe I had a chance? "Is Jena there?"

A pause. Ruffling. "No. Call back tomorrow."

"I've called every day," I persisted. "Can you tell me how I can get a hold of her?"

Then she said in a whisper, "Now's not a good time, okay?" And she hung up the phone.

The weekend came and went and no sign of Jena. My heart screamed. I couldn't live like this. I picked up the phone and always called, but either she wasn't available for some mysterious reasons or I got an unlimited number of rings: no answering machine. It was at three in the morning Sunday night, four hours after I had gone to sleep, when my cell phone rattled next to my bed. I awoke with a start and opened it, saw an unknown number. I flipped it open, and blinking crust from my eyes, breathed, "Who is this?"

I heard a voice laden with fright and tears. "Please help me. Please."

My eyes popped. "Jena?" I leaned forward in the bed. "Where are you?"

"He doesn't know I'm not there... He doesn't know..."

"Jena. Shhh. Tell me where you are. I'll come get you."

"I think he might be looking for me," she cried.

"Jena. I want to help you but I can't if you don't *tell me where you are.*"

"The park," she said. "Please help me. *Please.*" And the phone hung up.

Fifteen minutes later my twin headlights swerved down the gravel drive where we had parked a week and a half earlier to film, and now the area was drenched in murky shadows. A gentle rain tapped on the windshield and the wipers creaked back and forth. I peered forward and drove slowly, seeking out a figure in the rain, but there was nothing. Only the steady drum of the rain and the gravel crunching under the tires.

I turned my head and jumped. She was standing beside my window in a flannel night-gown, dripping rainwater, hair awash.

I stopped the car and flipped open the door, jumping out. "Oh my God. You look sick."

She wiped rainwater from her eyes. "Thank you for coming." Her eyes were bloodshot and cheeks bloated.

I walked her around the car and opened the front passenger door, helping her inside. She shut the door herself and I got in. I shut my door and we sat there in the car, in the middle of the park, she didn't say anything, nothing at all. I just listened to the rain on the roof and her broken breathing. I wanted to ask so many questions, thousands urging to be voiced, but I said nothing at all, just let her breath. I blasted the heat but she didn't react. She kept her arms close to her and stared out the rain-streaked window.

"I just want him to stop," she said in a course whisper.

I looked over at her, compassion dripping from my eyes. "Stop what?"

"I want him to stop... Stop hitting me... Stop hitting Mom..."

And then she looked at me in the light from the dashboard and I could see one of her eyes was swollen and there was a thick-blooded gash across her cheek. Horror traveled through me, mingled with rage.

She said, "He is nicer... And then he gets drunk... And then... He's not himself anymore."

"Is he at your house?"

She shook her head. "No."

"Where is he?"

"I don't know."

"Well I'm not going to take you home."

"I don't want you to."

"You need to go to a hospital, okay? You may need stitches."

She was firm, shaking her head, saying, "No. If anyone finds out--"

"He's going to beat you more? Look at you."

She bit her lip and held off tears. "You don't understand--"

"I understand that what he's doing is wrong and he needs to stop. We both understand this."

"Are you going to save me?" she crooned. "Are you going to make everything better?" She shook her head and sniffled. "You can't help. So what if we tell the police what he does? They have no evidence."

"No evidence?!" I exclaimed. "Look at your face. Listen to your own voice--"

"It doesn't matter. He'll deny it. And so will Mom. She's been submissive since before I was born. We can't just tell the police on them. He'll just dismiss them, then when they leave me, beat me again and again and again--" She continued to stare out the window. "You can't save me."

We sat in the car with the rain drumming and I asked, "Why'd you ask me to come here, then?"

She had been hanging her head low, and then she looked at me and said, with a mingle of hope in her eyes, "Because you're someone who cares."

Her words ate through me. "And I can't just... Let this go on."

"You don't have a choice. I don't have a choice."

We sat in the car forever. She said, "He's been doing it since I can remember. It's just a part of my life. I wear long sleeves to hide the bruises and don't come to school when they're really prominent on my face."

"You're always so happy--"

"When I'm at school," she said, "I forget about it all. I act..." She shook her head. "This sounds crazy, but I act like I'm a normal kid with a dad who... With a dad who doesn't *do* that..." She hung her head and tears trickled down, mingling with the drying blood.

I reached out my hand, shoved out the awkwardness, and put it on her shoulder. She flinched at the touch but didn't react. I moved my hand up and ran it through her hair. She sniffled and said, "All I've wanted... Is someone... Someone who cares."

"You found him," I said quietly.

"Don't leave me, okay?"

"I won't."

"Do you promise?"

I nodded. "Yeah. I promise."

She leaned back in the seat and curled against the door. She closed her eyes and fell asleep.

I sat at the wheel, muscles burning, just listening to the rain. And I, too, fell asleep.

When I woke up, the birds were singing and the sun was shining through the breaking storm-clouds. And she was gone.

Mom worked at our school and when she saw me come in three hours late, she hollered at me in front of everyone. I walked over to her and told her that I just needed to get out. She told me to stop being so irresponsible. I just walked past and went on to my third period class. Her seat was vacant.

Miss Calhoun took roll call. "Jena's not here?" A little tssk-tssk, then, "Some people are so irresponsible."

I bowed my head and anger welled within me. How come everyone has to always judge?

"Where were you this morning?" Cameron asked me. "Your mom said--"

"I really need to talk to you," I said.

After school we went for a walk because it was so nice out, and I told him, "I just don't know what to do. Please don't tell anyone what I tell you, okay? Do I have your word?"

"Yeah, Dude."

"Don't mess around, Cameron. You know a lot of people and claim lots of good friendships but this needs to be *between us*."

He stopped in his tracks and said, "I swear it. Man of my word. What's up?"

So I told him what was up. I told him about the last week and a half and how she was always absent from school. I told him about last night and told him how worried I was. "He hurts her. He *really* hurts her. And it's not just the physical bruises that make me hurt for her," I said. "She's just so emotionally traumatized by it all. She's existing in a living Hell. We couldn't imagine it. I want to help her but she says the police wouldn't be able to make a case because her mom would deny it; she gets beaten, too, but she's too terrified to speak out."

Cameron was quiet. "This world is corrupt, Man."

"I just want to help her, but I don't know how."

"I have an idea," he said. "It may or may not work. I'm not sure."

Step one of his plan was to talk to Jena. Thankfully, she came to school on Wednesday. I walked over to her locker and said, "I need to talk to you."

She batted her eyes away from me. "I don't want to talk about it. I'm okay."

"No. No, you're not."

"Come on. Leave it rest. Forget about it."

"You said you wanted someone who cared. And I said you found him. I wasn't lying. I just can't turn my back to this. No. *You* dragged me into this. I'm sorry."

"What don't you understand about Sunday night?" she asked me hotly. "You can't help me."

"I know," I said. "At least not before you get hurt again."

Friday afternoon I was sitting in my room listening to music when the cell phone rang. I picked it up and saw the number. After closing it, I called 9-1-1 and alerted them to a domestic disturbance at Jena's address. I would later get the news from Jena: two cop cars pulled up to the house, and hearing shouts and curses inside, broke down the door and ran inside just as Jena was about to be struck in the face. They threw her father against the door and pinned him down, handcuffing him. They helped Jena's mother outside and Jena as well. Jena's mother was to go to the jail-house with her husband to press charges, inspired now by the fact that he would easily be busted. The cops asked Jena where she wanted to go, and in less than half an hour after I got the phone call from her, she showed up at my door in the hands of the police.

I didn't want my family to know so I met her at the door and said, "Let's go on a walk, okay?"

The cop smiled at me and said, "Nice thinking, Kid." He walked to his cop car and drove away.

"Your cheek is a little swollen," I said as we walked down towards the creek, the mountains looming in the distance.

"He hit me a few times," she said. "But it's over, I think." There was something... else... in her voice. She was Jena again. And the sun warmed our backs.

"It's a wonderful day, isn't it?" I asked her.

"Thank you," she told me, walking right next to me. "Really."

"I couldn't do otherwise," I said.

She smiled and wrapped an arm around me, resting her head on my shoulder.

And we walked into the sunset.

Chapter Six

When the sun came up,
We we're sleeping in,
Sunk inside our blankets,
Sprawled across the bed,
And we we're dreaming,

There are moments when,
When I know it and
The world revolves around us,
And we're keeping it,
Keeping it all going,
This delicate balance,
Vulnerable all knowing.

- Straylight Run, *Existentialism on Prom Night*

Jena's father found himself in jail, so she and her mother were, for once, able to come home from work or school without fear and go to sleep without fearing him as he drank from the bottle. Jena's mother moved to an apartment and Jena had to get a job, now that her father wasn't bringing in income (even though most of his profits went to stimulating his alcoholism). Jena was able to work at a nursery across from the ice cream parlor. When I say nursery, I don't mean place for little kids, but tree nursery. Anyways. When I was off, I would meet her at the ice cream parlor on her break and buy her chocolate ice cream—it was her favorite—and we'd sit in the chairs under the umbrellas and laugh and eat and hang out. She always looked so cute in her uniform. She told me how much better life was. She and her mother sold lots of their goods because it wouldn't fit inside their apartment, and Jena told me, "We didn't really need the money, we're so much better off now, that we adopted three kids from Uruguay. We're using the money so they can have food and education. It helps their families, too." I thought that was just amazingly beautiful. Destiny told me how they invested ten thousand dollars to build a giant Jesus statue in front of their church building; when Jena heard this, she gasped and said, "That's, like, nearly a thousand kids who can be fed!"

As I was new to the whole dating thing, I had Cameron show me the ins-and-outs. I mean, I hadn't actually asked her out yet, but it was known. At least, I thought so. Cameron told me matter-of-factly, "Until it's sealed in words, it's just an idea. You need to make it official. I've seen a lot of times where someone will think he's dating someone just because they're really, *really* good friends, and then when he leans in for the kiss—smack."

His words rattled me and for a few days I was petrified.

What if she just saw me as a friend, a shoulder to lean on?

What if she has no romantic interests in me?

And worst of all, I feared that if she wasn't romantically interested in me, I wouldn't want to be with her. Was this shallowness? No, not at all. But there was just something so amazing and wonderful and even excruciatingly painful—like you're in a moment and know it will end, and this thought depresses you—when I was around her. If I would always be around her but always denied my heart... That was like being a dog with a stick pointing out of the collar with a bone dangling on the end. The dog keeps running, and running, and never gives up, and despite the exhaustion and the pain and the obstacles, it's always falling short.

What it desires cannot be achieved.

And this thought *terrified* me.

Cameron said, "You have to ask her, Man. You can't just... assume, you know?"

My heart was racing. “I don’t want to have been wrong these last two weeks.”

“Well. You could be wrong for two weeks. Or three weeks. Or three months. Or—”

“All right,” I said. “All right.” I wished I could’ve talked to Caleb, but... He was out-of-touch.

Cameron said, “Just ask her out on a date. Don’t make it sound special or anything.”

“Why not?”

“Because if she thinks you guys are going out—like you do, and she probably does, it’s just to know for sure—then she’ll be like, ‘Okay!’ But if she can’t, she’ll have a reasonable excuse and postpone. If she’s not interested in you that way, it *will* come as a surprise and you’ll be able to read it on her face.”

Two days later she trotted across the street and I bought her the chocolate waffle cone. She chose a seat in the shade, as the temperatures were getting warmer with spring. The day was sunny and bright and wonderful, pure relief from the bitter cold and rain of the past Maine months. I have always been health conscious, to a certain degree, so I bought a fat-free snow cone, and as we talked and I ate the red slush I couldn’t get myself to ask her out. I mean, until Cameron talked about it, it would’ve been no problem. But doubts surged inside and cowardice held me back.

As it was close to her time to leave, to head back to the nursery, I said, “Screw it,” to myself and said, “Hey, do you want to go to Acadian Whale Watch with me? Me and you?” She seemed to mull it over. “I mean, I’ve been having a lot of fun and stuff and I’d like to know if you’d like to go with me and—”

A smile crept over her lips and she laughed. “What? Are you asking me out?”

“Umm... yeah.”

She shook her head. “We’ve been going out since... Since the day I called you. Why do you think I called *you*?”

I let her words sink in and relief flooded over me. “Saturday. Do you work?”

“No. I mean, I won’t. I have a sick day still available for this month.”

“Take it,” I said.

She smiled and walked away with her own precarious bounce, chocolate hair flipping behind her.

On Saturday I pulled up to the apartment block and got out of the car. I had been here many times before; sometimes her mom would cook for us. She called me the little hero, and her food bordered on cuisine. I opened the main door and ascended the flight of steps to their apartment number door, where I knocked a handful of times before Jena came out.

She looked radiant.

“You look beautiful,” I told her, absent of pretense.

She blushed a moment then said, “So. I’ve never been whale watching before.”

“Neither have I,” I said, “so I don’t know what to expect.”

It was a beautiful twenty-minute drive to the seacoast. It took me some time to find the place, and when we got out, I locked the car and looked up at the sky, saw the brilliant plumes of pearl cumulus clouds stacking on the horizon, out over the ocean. Diamond water crashed on slick rocks and fishermen hauled nets and crates on and off boats at the piers. We walked past a beer-bellied fisherman hacking at a fish and she stopped, watching in fascination as he deposited the head in a bucket and proceeded to skin it. She said it was so cool but I made sure she knew that we had an appointment. I showed the tickets at the entrance and we were loaded onto a yacht. There were two average American families and an older couple on board with us. Jena went right into conversation with them; she was an enigma and I was glad to be associated with her.

As the boat settled out to sea, leaving the shoreline behind, I sat in a deck chair and watched Jena play with some little girls from one of the families. They were laughing and crawling all over her. I imagined Jena doing it but with *our* kids. The moment this thought came over me I felt my blood chill. Because I saw it as a reality. I could see myself, easily, spending the rest of my life with her.

And here’s what made it even more chilling.

I had seen myself with Hope. Many times. And with Rikki and Rachel and Amanda.

But then she looked at me with that big smile and dazzling eyes, and I knew it was a possibility.

Oh, the joy of that day! If I could only feel it again! To remember it brings hurt.

Some of us never feel that way. We live these boring lives in bad relationships. But some of us feel this, feel this completeness when we are around the one we were made for. I have felt this passionate longing, I have felt what true love is. I know it. Don’t tell me I’m wrong. You’re not me and can’t enter into my heart, especially now that I am gone. On that boat, when she looked at me, I feared nothing. As the wind rushed

against my face and the waves split against the boat, the world was, even if but for a fleeting moment, perfect. Her laughter, her smile, her eyes... her soul. Perfection.

I don't know about God, but at that moment, I prayed: "Show me if she's the one."

The boat slowed and the driver pointed. In the distance, a whale leapt out of the water, blue hide shimmering with a million silver droplets of water. A geyser of water erupted from its blowhole before it descended underneath the water. The little girls around Jena jumped up and down, clapping and oohing, and Jena grabbed one and swung her up, swung her in a circle, and set her down. She looked over at me and she laughed. She smiled wider.

The little girls ran over to their parents and Jena walked over.

"You're perfect with kids," I told her as she sat down next to me.

"I really like them. I want to be a teacher someday."

"You'll be really good at it."

On the other side of the boat a whale appeared, spraying water and sucking in oxygen.

She leaned against me, wrapped an arm around my neck, and resting her head on my shoulder, said, "It's so beautiful."

I snuck my arm around her body and held her close, smelling her hair. "Yes. Beautiful."

Mom met me in the kitchen when I came home that evening. Spaghetti noodles were bubbling on the pot and she was stirring meat-sauce in a crock-pot. The dog groaned and stretched underneath the table. She asked me where I had been and I told her, "Just with a friend." She hadn't found out about Jena and I didn't want to tell her. I mean, I didn't want to... Curse it. Sometimes it seems like the moment you confess something with happiness and pride it is taken away from you. And that was the last thing I wanted.

But she didn't let me leave. "You haven't really been around much. You're always gone." She kept stirring as she spoke. "So I decided to call Cameron and ask him if he was with you. He sounded a little surprised and confused, and told me you were with Jena." She stopped stirring and looked up at me. While her face appeared stoic, I could read a twitter of hope in her eyes. "Who's Jena?"

I was on the other side of the island counter, just catching her gaze, and said, "A girl."

"Really," she said. The spaghetti boiled. "Why didn't I hear about her?"

"There was nothing really to say," I said.

Mom nodded. "Okay. I see. So there's nothing going on. Just a friend, then?" The hope in her eyes, where had it gone?

"Not... Not exactly," I confessed. "I mean, it wasn't. I mean, it was--"

"You're not making any sense."

"I mean, there was something to tell. But it wasn't official, you know? And now it is."

"Where'd you go? Can you tell me that?"

"I took Jena with me whale watching."

Mom smiled and returned to the spaghetti. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"I don't know." I wasn't moving, feet nailed to the floor.

Mom stopped stirring again. "Honey. Please be honest with me. Why didn't you tell me? I'm just curious, really. Don't think I'm going to get mad--"

"There's nothing to get mad about," I said.

"Then come on," Mom urged. "Tell me. Why was I left out of the circle?"

"First of all," I began, "it wasn't just you. I didn't tell Dad. The only person I told was Cameron, because I knew he could help me out. So I wasn't, like, exorcising you out of my life or anything."

"Did you tell your sister?"

"No."

"Caleb?"

"Mom. I don't see him anymore."

She sighed and shook her head. "And I don't see your sister anymore. Now I won't see you."

"Come on. It's not like I'm getting married or--"

"Not yet," she said quickly, almost an afterthought. It tore through me in a good way. "But why didn't you tell anyone? Except Cameron. Did you think I couldn't help you? I would've helped you. I've always wanted you to have a... girlfriend?"

"That's why I didn't tell you," I said. "I didn't want you to get your hopes up, get all excited, and then it all... I don't know, not work out. And I didn't tell Dad because he'd tell you and so what would that

accomplish? Now, I guess it doesn't matter, because... Today we had our first official date so it's official, and even if it doesn't work out—"A god-awful thought! "—"at least it won't be a disappointment."

Mom smiled. "My little boy has a girlfriend. What's she like?"

"She's nice," I said. Wow. What an understatement.

My little sister walked into the kitchen. "Can I just have ice cream for dinner, Mom?"

She didn't answer her. "Guess what. Guess who your brother found."

She looked at me. "Who?"

I grinned as she answered, "A girl named Jena. And they went on a date today."

A beaming smile cut across my sister's face and she bolted from one end of the kitchen to another, swinging around the island counter and leaping at me, embracing me and screaming in excitement. I laughed and fell against the wall and somehow pried her off me. As she reluctantly stepped back, a flood of questions ran off her lips: "What's she look like?" "What grade is she in?" "What kind of clothes does she wear?" "Can she drive?" "Is she cute? Is she hot?"

I tried to answer but couldn't really answer all of them. She looked like a goddess and was a grade beneath me. She didn't wear fancy clothes but she wasn't in rags, either. She was average when it came to fashion. Could she drive? Yes, she had an SUV and her own car. Is she cute? Yet another understatement. Is she hot? As most define hot, no. But hot is so overrated. My greatest answer: "She's beautiful."

"What do you mean?" she asked as Mom was getting out plates for us.

"I mean... There's something about her... That words cannot describe... And we call it beauty."

Mom called out Dad's name then told me, "You're such a romantic. You're going to make some girl—maybe this girl?—so very, very happy."

Life kept getting better. I would lay in bed at night or in the afternoon and just read through my journals, looking at the past entries, seeing the desperation and hopelessness. I would shake my head and tell myself, "You had it coming all along. You just never saw it." During my romantic hopelessness and raw suffering, I would often search the heavens for an answer, a reason, some logic to it all. "Why am I suffering?" Now I asked, "Why did I suffer?" Why was I forced to see beauty flaunted before my eyes, then snatched into the hands of a best friend? Why was I always forced to watch girls who just want acceptance and romance taken advantage-of and manipulated? Why had I gone through such rejection and ill-treatment all those years? Why had I always been so forcefully ripped away from all the worthwhile girls I'd met? Now answers seemed to come, as they always do once a trial has ended. I came to believe that I suffered so that I would meet current suffering with past suffering. I mean, Jena suffered even worse than me, and she had to be met by someone who would treat her right, with respect, loyalty, sincerity, love, reverence, service, sacrifice, selflessness. She did not deserve the pre-packaged, run-of-the-mill, flesh-over-heart boys that crowded the school hallways. She needed someone genuine, someone real, someone who could, even in a small way, identify—and love despite the suffering. That was me.

As the temperature grew warmer and warmer with the retreat of spring and the arrival of summer, the rains began to lessen and the days groomed bright and charming. The mountains burst with color and the fields erupted with life. Dragonflies hummed about the ponds; porcupines, bobcats, black bears and moose inherited the woodlands; beavers lounged about in the rivers and streams; seals frolicked off the rocks of the coastline. The great blue heron returned and at night I would open my window and listen to the crickets and cicadas in an eclectic choir. When I didn't work and she didn't work, I drove over to her apartment or she came over to my house, and we'd go on long walks to the park or crawl down the sidewalks in the old part of town, or just drive for the fun of it. We would watch movies on the big-screen in my basement and I'd wrap my arm around her and she'd rest her head on my shoulder. And the best thing about it was, it wasn't fake, it wasn't forced, it was real.

I desired her. And *she* desired *me*!

Alex saw me come in to the grocery with her one day when I wasn't working. She was buying some cake batter and we were going to make some cake together for my sister's birthday party. Alex asked about her and I told him we were going out.

"Why didn't you tell me, Dude?" he asked, excited. *Because you're never around.* "I'm like your best friend!" *Sorry. You lost the position to Cameron.*

"Well, yeah, we're going out," I told him.

"How do you like her?"

"What's that mean? I like her a lot. We *are* going out."

"She's really pretty."

"Thanks, Man."

"I might be treading holistic ground, but didn't her father--"

"It's over," I told him quickly. "And how did you know about that?"

"Umm... Well..."

For a moment I forgot about my little romance and just felt concern for Jena's reputation. "Dude. Who told you that? I didn't tell you that, and certainly Jena didn't. She says it's the family's secret past they're trying to get rid of. Everything's changed..."

"I don't know if I should tell you," he said, caution in the sails.

I thought I had an inkling of knowledge. "Can I guess?"

"You probably don't have to."

"\$&#@ her!" I hollered out loud.

He winced and the people around us stared. My face was burning red.

"I didn't tell you," Alex said. "Okay?"

"Why did you believe her?" I commanded. "She's the one who started the lies about you and Hope!"

"Dude. Jena. She had... bruises, Man."

I turned around in the aisle, the chili cans swinging by my vision. "What the &%*\$ is her problem?" I growled. "Seriously. Why can't she just keep her @\$&#*\$ religion to herself? Why's she got to drag everyone else into it?" Steam was wafting off of me.

Had he been her, he would've told me not to cuss because it was a sin. But he put an arm on my shoulder and said, "I know. It's not right. I didn't ask to know. She came up and told me like she was feeling sorry for Jena. I think... I think she just wasn't happy that you and her aren't together."

"What's the problem?" I demanded. "Now I've got a pagan *influence* in my life?"

"Come on, Man. Calm down. She's not... She doesn't have it all figured out, okay?"

"*I don't care!*" I hollered, voice floating over the aisles. "She's just... I can't even... God!"

A shadow behind me and Jena said, slowly, "Are you okay?"

Alex said, "He's fine. It's just--" He felt awkward, it was steaming from his pores.

"We have to go," I said, grabbing Jena by the arm gently.

As we walked away, she gave a confused look to the Alex and said, "Bye, I guess..."

I walked out to the car and opened the door hard. "Get in."

But she didn't. "What's wrong?"

I paced back and forth before the front of the car.

"Something's wrong..."

I looked over at her and then viciously slammed my fists into the hood, denting the metal. My hands roared with pain.

She ran over to me and took my hands, rubbing them. "I hope they're not broken--"

"It's Destiny," I said slowly. "She's... She's telling people..."

The look on Jena's face told me she was getting the idea. A face of desperation.

"People know," I told her. "Somehow Destiny found out, and she's telling people. She told Alex."

"Oh my God," Jena breathed. "This isn't... Oh my God... I didn't tell anybody!"

"I know. I know."

"Did you tell her?" Jena demanded, anger coming in, something I hadn't seen.

I glared at her with compassion, shaking my head. "No! God, no!" I embraced her hard and squeezed. "I wouldn't tell her the salvation story if I knew it."

I could feel Jena's broken breath on my neck, the anger saturating each wisp of air. I held her for a long time and several cars passed, the drivers and passengers staring, but finally I realized and walked around for a bit, walking off the steam. Jena sat down inside the car, the door open, legs dangling out. She stared at the road, the cars passing, and the horrified look I'd seen in her eyes that rainy night showed up again. It made my heart bleed lead.

I walked around the car and knelt beside her. "Let me talk to Destiny. Let me talk to her."

"I don't want you to talk to her. I want you to just... She's crazy."

"I know. I know."

"She's a hypocrite! She says she's a Christian but she's not like Christ at all--"

"I know," I said.

"What are you going to say to her?" Jena asked me. There was a force to her voice.

I read it clearly and asked, "What do you want me to say?"
 Matter-of-factly, "Tell her she's going to go to Hell."
 "Maybe something less metaphorical."
 She countered, "I wasn't being metaphorical."
 "Okay. Okay. Look. I'm angry, too. But *she's* the one who condemns people to Hell, right?"
 "Look. If you want to keep her as a friend, fine. But she's hurting me and she's hurting other people and everyone knows it."
Hurting me. Her words pierced me, a double-bladed sword. "I'm just going to... express myself."
 A brief smile crept over her lips. "Please. For my sake... Express yourself well."
 I edged into that seat beside her and squeezed her close. "You know you're so perfect, don't you?"

I sat down beside Destiny at lunch. She asked if I wanted to pray and I said, "I want to talk to you."
 She was probably excited, as my face was serious; she may have been thinking, *Does he want to accept Jesus into his heart?* Or something corny like that. She said, "After we pray—" "I need to talk," I said, not dodging the issue. "I need to talk *now*."

"I have to pray with the other Christians," she said, standing. She walked away. I hated how she said 'the other Christians.' A few weeks ago she told me, "Only the Christians who go to pray at lunch are real Christians." What did this say for Hope and Alex? "They're not real Christians." That pissed me off. Could anyone possibly *be* more ignorant than her?

She returned after the prayer and sat down. "You should've joined us. What do you want to talk to me about?"

"I want to talk about Jena. And why the..." I didn't cuss, because I didn't want her to steer off course and condemn me for my foul mouth. "Why did you tell people that she was being... abused?" The anger was rising, up at the back of my throat, hollering to be released. "Why do you have to stick your head into peoples' business and play God with your theology?"

She looked at me crazy. "You're dating her! I thought you would've been happy—"

"HAPPY?!?!!" I screeched, too loud. For a moment the lunchroom grew quiet; Destiny's face was glossed a beet red. When things returned to normal, I hunched over the table and snarled, "Now why in the world would I be *happy*?"

"I only have Jena's best interests in mind—"

I opened my mouth.

"Please. Let me finish, okay? I know how hard abuse can be, and I just wanted people to pray for her so she could cope well."

"You know how hard abuse is?" I asked. "You don't know *anything* about abuse."

"I can imagine."

"No," I said, "you can't. And stop acting, for the love of God, like you care about these people when you're just using your prayer as a way to gossip. It sickens the #&@% out of me."

She looked horrified. "God doesn't like cussing—"

"Listen to me!" I shouted. "Stop trying to change the subject!"

"I'm only interested in her well-being. Jesus tells us to care for those who are mourning—"

"*But you don't care about her!* How do you *care* for someone by spreading the secrets, the past, that they want to forget?"

"You're reading me wrong—"

"#%\$& it, Destiny!" It was at this point that I decided to let Jena take over. She'd told me *exactly* what she—and I—wanted Destiny to hear. "What the \$%#& is the matter with you?! How the \$%#& can you go about doing this, acting like this, and calling yourself a Christian?! Do you know **NOTHING** about Jesus??? You're the biggest #&@\$%& hypocrite and everyone is sick and tired of it! All you do is throw out your rules and tell people how much they're messing up! You point out everyone's failures like you're some &\$%#@#\$ goddess who has the world figured out and you act like you're the queen of perfection..." As I wrenched out of my seat, I hollered, "\$%# you!"

The cafeteria was eerily quiet and I stormed away, propelled by anger.

Destiny was left in the seat, ashen-faced. Most of the lunchroom was smiling.

Principal Weaver grabbed me in the hallway and dragged me into his office. He sat me down in a chair and shut the door. He stood before a mirror and straightened his tie, then said without facing me, "Everyone in the school heard what you said."

"I'm sorry," I lied.

"No," he said. "You're not." He turned around.

"Am I getting suspended?" I glowered.

"You *should* be," the principal told me. "The words you yelled out, the way you treated that girl. You *should* be."

"But you're not?"

"No," he said. "No. Why? Because you're right. Because I know Destiny and I've seen how she treats people, how she puts on a mask of piousness, thinks she's doing God's will and all. I've read all the Gospels. I think Jesus is absolutely beautiful. The only reason I'm not a Christian is because of the kind of people lots of Christians are. I like to model Jesus' teachings as much as I can, but I don't... I don't want to be associated with people like her." He sat down behind his desk. "I think it was Gandhi who said, 'I really like you're Christ. I love you're Christ,' and someone asked him—because he's Islamic or Buddhist or Hindu or whatever—'Then why aren't you a Christian?' Do you know what he told the guy? He said, 'I love you're Christ. But you Christians are nothing *like* your Christ.'"

He let his words sink in, then continued. "I know what Jena has done. I've heard the rumors about Hope and Alex and their parents called and I had to explain to them that it was just a rumor, and thankfully now it's squashed. And now she's doing it again with Jena... Your girlfriend?"

I nodded.

"She's a terrific student, she really is. I know about what happened in the household. The police told me, in case anything... happened here at school. I haven't told anyone. I don't know how Destiny found out. I don't *care* how Destiny found out."

"She really hurt Jena," I told Principal Weaver. "She's trying to forget this—"

"I know," he said. "By law, we can't do anything to Destiny. It's freedom of speech."

"She's spreading lies!"

"I'm sorry. This isn't a lie."

I wanted to curse *him* now.

He comforted, "By seventh period, everyone is going to know about what you did. Every *word* you spoke—and every word *she* spoke—is going to be common knowledge. Jena won't be treated bad at all. People will be drawn away from the rumor to the person who started the rumor."

I wasn't completely satisfied.

"I know you want me to do something to Destiny. I can't. But I'm not punishing you, when I should. I think you're a wonderful student and I think Jena needs someone like you. I'm not going to attach the stigmata of troublemaker to you by putting you on suspension. Just leave here and go about the rest of the year in peace, okay?"

Sure enough, Weaver was right, and the entire school knew. Destiny was publicly shamed.

Alex caught me and said, "Whoa. What's this I hear about the lunchroom?"

"Don't worry about it," I told him.

"Did you mention my name?"

"No. And no one would care anyways."

He said, "All right. You could've been a little more subtle, though," he said with a smile.

"Really?" I asked. "This coming from a victim of her little ploys?"

"Jesus just says to forgive and be gentle. But then, these are my values, not yours. Forgive me for throwing them at you. I'm sorry."

"You're turning into Destiny," I mocked with a wan grin.

Alex threw up his hands. "Dear God, no!"

Jena bounded over from her locker. Students kept telling her they were sorry for what Destiny did. Now Jena leaned against me and said, "You ready to go?"

"Where are you guys going?" Alex asked. "Another date?"

"Olive Garden," I said.

Jena chimed in, "We skipped lunch."

Alex said, "Hope and I are going to the park. We should double-date sometime?"

I didn't think it was a good idea, so I declined.

"All right," he said. "See you guys later."

As Jena and I walked out to the parking lot throbbing with students in cars and busses, Jena leaned over and whispered into my ear, "Thank you." And she gave me a little peck on the cheek.

It wasn't crowded at all inside the restaurant; we were shown to our seats and given a big bowl of salad with breadsticks. We sat next to the table where I had sat the first time I ever came here with the family. It made the moment... a little more romantic somehow.

"So you leveled Destiny down pretty bad, huh?" Jena asked, picking through her salad.

"Yeah. I kind of feel bad, though... It's just... I exploded on her."

"Well. She needed it. Do you want some salad?"

"No. I'll take a breadstick, though."

We made small talk before the waiter came and took our order.

"Have you decided where you're going to college yet?" she asked me.

"I think the University of Maine," I said.

"Zoology or Botany? Or are you still clueless?"

I shook my head. "I like them both. Nature's just so... rich."

"I know. I remember when you smelled that flower when we met for the project. It made me laugh."

Some more chit-chat, then the waiter came with our food. Seafood portifino for me and some chicken parmesan for my date. It still felt weird: my date.

As we ate, I asked, "You've been thinking about college, right? One year."

"I think... Education. I really like working with little kids."

I remembered the yacht, the girls crawling all over her. "It's a wonderful plan, really."

Some more small talk. I asked, "In two weeks--"

"You're inviting me?"

"Yeah. Mom's throwing a huge party. She's made a scrapbook and everything."

"*Of course* I'm coming. I was going to show up anyway."

"You don't have to come to the actual--"

"I know. Just the party. But I'll go anyways. I still want to see you."

"You don't have to buy a present for me or anything."

"I know," she said. "Are you excited? Nervous?"

"No. Not really. Well, not nervous. Excited, yes. I'm finally done."

"I wish I knew that feeling."

"Excitement?"

"Being done."

"One year and you will. These last few weeks at school have been slower than *ever*."

"I bet you're happy that... Well, that's none of my business--"

"What?" I protested. "No. Tell me."

"No. I feel bad. It's *so* self-conceited."

"Come on!" I joked.

"All I was going to say is, 'I bet you're happy you have me.'"

I smiled. "Yeah. Yeah, I really am."

Storm clouds were building two weeks later. I had gone over to a friend's house after the actual graduation, and now I returned home to see Mom setting out the tables and the tent and pulling out the chairs and steaming food she'd prepared overnight. I hesitantly looked up the storm clouds rolling in off the coast when Mom asked me to go inside and get the scrapbook. I picked it up in the study and it opened. I saw on the last page a picture of me and Jena, one Mom had taken from behind. Beneath it was a little caption that read *His First Girlfriend*. I don't know how long I stood there, but when your entire life has been a sequence of failure after failure, to the point of convincing you that you're deprived of any sensible hope, seeing that in flesh-and-blood and reality is like drowning your entire life, lungs burning and mind screaming, and sucking in a giant breath of air and understanding what it feels like to live.

Mom came up the steps and entered the room. She stood next to me and said, "I thought I should put it in here. It is your High School scrapbook."

I kept looking at the picture. Could it be real? Yes. Yes, it was very real.

"Is it okay?" Mom asked.

I nodded. "Yes. It's perfect."

She took the scrapbook from me. "She's here."

I ran out into the garage and saw her picking through barbecue chicken wings. "Jena!"

She swung around and embraced me. She pulled away and said, "You looked so short compared to everyone else there!" Laughing, "You looked like Yoda."

I laughed, too. "Sorry it was so boring."

"No, it's okay, I went of my free will. Hey, did your mom make this? It's really good."

"Yeah. Well. She warmed it up. It came in a box..."

She turned and faced me and said, "I bought you something."

"What? I told you that you didn't have to buy--"

"I know. But I didn't care. I wanted to." She handed me a box. "Open it later, okay? Tonight. With me."

"All right," I said, clutching it tight. "Let me put it inside."

Cars were pulling into the driveway. "This is your party. I'll just mill around."

"Don't abandon me!" I cried out half-jokingly. "I don't know half these people..."

The party went well; I was showered with lots of gifts and lots of money, hugs and kisses and, "Congratulations," from people who say it but know it really isn't all *that* hard to graduate from High School. It was all pretty hollow and it was giving me a headache. Finally people were leaving, except for my grandparents and some relatives who lived in Ohio.

The storm clouds were growing thicker and a shadow draped over the state. I walked Jena to her car. I opened the door and she was getting in when she said, "Can you meet me at the park where you found me... back then? Tonight? In an hour?"

I nodded. "Sure. I guess. I'll wiggle out of my family's grasp."

"Then meet me there." She shut her door and rolled down the window. "Don't open my gift. Bring it to with you tonight."

The rain was just beginning to sprinkle when I pulled into the park, a few minutes late. I saw her car idling on the gravel road and pulled beside it. As I got out of my car, she threw on a giant grin and exited the SUV. I walked around the SUV and she met me. "Did you bring it?" she asked as darkness wrapped its fingers around us.

I pulled the small ring-sized box from my jacket. "I've got it right here."

Tiny water droplets dripped here and there. Lightning flashed inside the clouds. "Open it."

Crowded together, me facing her and she facing me, I gently pulled off the wrapping paper and found inside a crumpled flower. I bent down before her headlights and let the light wash over it. A golden-haired lily.

She knelt beside me and said in almost a teasing whisper, "That day, after everyone was gone... That evening I went back to the school. I pulled off one of the flowers and kept it. I wanted to remember... I wanted to remember that there are people like you here in the world. In that garage, when you were with me, I felt... I forgot everything. I forgot about my dad and how he treated us. I forgot about the project altogether. All I knew was you." She leaned in closer. "You've told me so many times how beautiful and lovely and wonderful I am, and I appreciate it. But you're just as beautiful. I know you don't think so, but you really are."

Thunder crackled and we stood up. The rain started to come down harder. I quickly folded the box and clutched it in my hands. "Thank you," I said, choking back emotion.

Jena smiled at my failed attempt. A tear caressed my face. "Is there something in your eye?" she joked.

"Shut up," I said sarcastically.

She hung her head low and said, "You might not understand how much that flower means--"

"No," I said quickly. "No, no, no. I do. I do."

The rain was coming down harder now. Thunder boomed and lightning crackled.

I reached out and touched her arm, drawing her close.

"It's raining," she said.

"I know." But I drew her in even closer. She pulled in and wrapped her arms around me.

Lightning snaked down before a mountain and thunder shook the ground beneath our feet.

The rain fell between our faces and the wind tore at our clothes, but I wouldn't trade that moment in for all eternity. It was in that moment, with the thunder and rain and lightning and wind, that I leaned for her, and she leaned for me, and our lips touched, and my arms went the sides of her neck, and hers pulled tight behind me, and despite nature's beautiful Hell unfolding around us, we were lost in utopia. The kiss lasted, passionately, for several seconds, before she broke away, smiling, and said, "See you Monday, okay?"

I stood in the rain, grinning wide as a Cheshire cat. “Yeah. Monday.”

She drove away and I stood in the rain for a few more minutes. Sitting on top of the car’s hood, shivering in the rain, I tried to hold onto this feeling, to grasp the moment again, to feel her warmth so close to me, to experience it just one more time. I had known a few kisses in my time, only a few, but this one... This one broke them all.

I remembered my health teacher saying, “Sex isn’t all about orgasm and climax. Emotions play most of the parts in sexual activity.” She went on to tell us, “No matter what the person looks like, sex is better if you love that person. It’s all emotional.”

I imagine it works the same for kissing.

With Jena I had found something wonderful, different, something stunningly beautiful.

Was the kiss, in all its physical dimensions, really that wonderful?

What is a kiss, anyways? Two tongue muscles entwining in a ballet of spit and mucus.

Romantic? No.

It wasn’t the physical aspect of kissing that made it so beautiful. It was the affection. The adoration. Dare I say it, the love. And with Jena, I had felt something I had never felt. It wasn’t the kiss itself, but was spawned by the kiss. And even now I fail to find words to describe it.

Chapter Seven

Sing me something soft,
 Sad and delicate,
 Or loud and out of key,
 Sing me anything,
 we're glad for what we've got,
 Done with what we've lost
 Our whole lives laid out right in front of us.
 - Straylight Run, *Existentialism on Prom Night*

I lay in bed that night, my cousins sleeping in the other room, and I stared up at the whitewashed ceiling, thinking about the future. My required schooling was down. Now I could start a family, get a job, devote my life to something—or someone. I mean, for the last twelve years I'd been led places whether or not I wanted to go, but now the world opened up, the door swung open, and the decision rested in my hands. Laying in that bed, I spent hours contemplating the future, wondering what it held. Who would I marry? Would I marry? Where would I work? Would college work out for me? What would I study in college—botany or zoology? It all pressed in on me as if I didn't have a few years to make a decision. Sure, college started in—what?—three months? I had three months of no obligations, working at a grocery store and spending time with Jena.

As I lay in that bed, for the first time ever, I realized how blessed I really was.

I had entered High School in shambles, broken and rejected, plagued with a hopeless future. Hopeless and desperate—the key words of my High School “career.” But things changed. They always do, for better or worse (and I would come to learn that you cannot receive too much of a good thing without being punished for it).

At the end of Senior Year, I met the most wonderful and awesome and beautiful girl in the world.

I had crucified my fear, taking the words of a good friend to heart: “How much of my life was wasted because of fear? How much of life have I avoided because of the paralyzing nature of fear? How many lives not touched? How many dreams not realized? How many friends never met?” My friend's words came to me now; I remembered the fear that came before I ventured out and asked that potentially fatal question—“Applebee's?”—and I was so thankful that I hadn't let fear control me.

The summer after my Senior Year was the best summer I'd ever had. As a kid my summers were spent playing video games downstairs, or toying around with Star Wars action figures in the dirt on the front lawn. I would be thrown between different relatives throughout the states to keep me out of my parents' hair. But now my video games were stashed away and my action figures collected dust in the crawlspace. See, now I had something greater, something unimaginably wonderful and incomparable to any... I will go to a little biblical language here... earthen vessel.

I spent all Sunday with the family. We went to see the new Star Wars movie and ate out at Skyline. After everyone left, Dad withdrew his own graduation present: two Cuban cigars. “I've got a fire-log,” he said. “It's already outside.” I smiled and we went onto the deck; he tossed me the lighter and I held the flame to the end of the cigar, and placing my mouth on the end-piece, drew in deep breaths so as to get the wrap burning. Mostly I had known K-Mart or Shell Gas Station cigars, but these were... Wow. That's all I can really say. The flavor erupted within me and tickled down my throat. Blowing the smoke through my mouth and nose was phenomenal. Dad lit the fire and let it rise; we sat down in the cool Maine summer and let the flames lick about. Dad brought life to his cigar and we let smoke run up to the heavens, incense of the most divine nature.

With the stars a blanket over our heads and the fire warming our fronts, Dad said, “It's nice for them to be gone.” He spoke of the family. “Things are quieting down to normal.”

“Yeah,” I said, just enjoying my cigar. I didn't really feel like conversation.

He dashed ash from his cigar upon the linoleum table. “What're your plans? Do you know yet?”

“The university,” I said. “Botany. Or zoology. I'm not sure.”

Dad nodded in the shadows. “You'd be good at both, I think.”

The fire smoldered. Ages passed.

The question itched in the back of his throat. "What about... What about Jena?"

I inhaled and exhaled, smoke ringing a halo around my face. Eyes on the fire, "What about her?"

"You're going to college," he said. "Are you guys going to keep... Keep things going?"

I smiled. "Do you expect me to dump her?"

"What? No."

"Do you *want* me to dump her?"

"It's nice not to be burdened at college."

I shook my head and grinned. "So you *do* want me to?"

"No," he said quickly. "God. No."

"Then... Where is this going?"

"Nowhere," he said. "Do you like the cigar?"

"It's wonderful."

"It's Cuban. Through Europe."

"Work?"

"Yeah. Got it from the boss. I told him you smoked cigars with me, and he gave me two."

"That's nice of him."

"He's a pretty nice guy."

We continued to smoke under the stars.

"You know," Dad said slowly, "I haven't ever really seen you like this." I cast him a perturbed look. "I mean," he attempted to explain, "so happy. It's no secret. Depression runs in the family. It's a plague. It's always broken my heart... Always broken my heart to see you suffer. I mean, I don't know about God. I really don't. But I pray anyway. Don't tell your mom, I know she's a die hard atheist and wouldn't get off my back about it. But I pray about you. For you. For Mom and for your sister. I pray for our family. We're good people. We respect the law and pay our taxes. I've prayed for you for so many years—and then Jena came along. I know what's gone on with her. The police came to our house. I think she was an angel to you—and you to her."

An angel. Were I unknowing, I would describe her as an angel.

"I just think," he said, "that you and her are perfect together. Really."

"Then why," I asked, "did you try to convince me to dump her?"

"What? No. That wasn't my intent at all." The cigar dangled in his fingers. "I wanted to know if you were serious or not. And I hoped to God you were."

"I am," I told him. The stars shone above us as they shined above the Bethlehem stables. "Trust me. I am."

I have been writing a lot. Ever since the birthday party, I've been holed up inside my room. For two days all I've done is write. Mom and Dad and my little sister haven't bothered me. They generally leave me alone. Perhaps they think they're helping me. But here I am, alone and suffering, and they think that being away from me is helping me cope? It's crazy, it really is. But it's not their fault. I know I'm sending all the leave-me-alone messages. I don't even mean to... It's strange, because I want someone to hold me, to rock me asleep, to tell me everything is okay, but I resent them if they do that. I mean, I want them to care but I get mad when they do. I yell, "Leave me alone!" but inside I'm screaming for them to just embrace me as a human being.

The tears have been lessening lately. It is almost euphoric to get lost in the summer of 2005. So many memories come to me, so many precious memories that I can't trade in for anything in the world. So I write them down. I write down all the good things from that summer. But I can't write them all down. The book would never end. But I'll have to end somewhere. Because, you see, this isn't the conclusion of the story. This is just the middle of the story. Things will change. My life will fall apart. I thought the bad times were over. No, they were just over the horizon, preparing to leap upon me. I lived Summer '05 in ignorance. And I paid for it.

God, I paid for it.

On Monday I picked Jena up from her house and we drove to East Park. There were some Pee-Wee baseball games in session. I parked the car and we walked the mile track, and rested for a little while by the creek, taking off our shoes and dangling our toes in the water. Jena slipped down onto the rocks and caught some crayfish, and threw them at me. I don't like things with pincers. She climbed out all wet and

embraced me; I laughed and tried to push her off because she was getting all my clothes wet, then she pushed me down in the weeds, laughed, and ran off. I ran down the trail, chasing her through the winding blur of summer-erupted trees. She raced up a trail and emerged beside a pond surrounded by cat-tails. I came out behind her and stopped.

"Wow," she said. "Look at them all."

A swarm of thousands of dragonflies hovered over the pond, a shimmering hoard, green and silver wings glossy in the sunlight.

Jena said, "It's so beautiful..."

The wings of the dragonflies looked like a million reflecting mirrors.

"Can you believe it?" she asked. "It's like... I don't know."

I pulled her close, ignoring the wetness. "We could stay here forever, you know."

And we sat down on the grass and sat there with each other until sunset.

Sometimes, especially at night, we just drove around. Sometimes for an hour or two at a time. It killed my gas, of course, but that's where my graduation money came in. We would drive through the mountains and visit some scenic resorts—like mountaintops or valleys and sometimes we would take the highway that runs along the Atlantic coast. We gave up trying to hold conversation that long. Jena made a burned CD "for us, the two of us" and it had music from Michelle Branch, Straylight Run, Eisley, Bright Eyes, and even some Johnny Cash ("for when you and your dad smoke cigars together"). We would play the CD over and over, roll down the windows, blare the music, and just sing. The wind would blow inside the car and her hair would radiate glistening splendor behind her as we carved paths upon the beaten highways.

When we wanted to get out of town, we would walk the docks. We found an abandoned harbor with the boards on the boardwalks breaking, so we would nimbly go out about halfway, then sit down and watch the sun reflecting off the waves swirling past.

Halfway through June, when we were sitting on the dock with our ankles dipping in the massaging waves, Jena said, "This weekend... Mom and I are going to a cabin in the mountains. It's a really nice place. She invited you."

"She invited me?"

"Yeah. She really likes me."

"This weekend?"

"Yeah."

A pause. "Do *you* want me to go?"

She wanly smiled and slapped my shoulder. "You should be shot for asking that question."

"I'll go," I said.

"Are you sure it'll be okay with your parents?"

"I'm sure it will be okay."

It wasn't. Dad demanded, "How do we know her mother is going? For all we know—"

I constantly tried to calm him down. "Dad... Dad... Why don't you just call her?"

He shook his head. "I don't want her popping out a baby right before college—"

My face reddened. "What? Come on! I'm not like that, all right?"

"How do I know?" he asked. "I never see you anymore."

I shook my head in amazement. "What?!"

"You're always with Jena! Your mom and I never see you!"

"I'm here more than—"

Dad cut me off. "Don't bring your sister into this."

I tried to be quick. "But she—"

"She isn't going to a lonely cabin in the middle of the woods with him. For *two nights*!"

I shook my head, going insane. "I thought you were all for me and Jena."

"Yes," he said. "You and Jena. Not you, Jena, and baby."

"We're not going to have sex!" I hollered.

"I don't know that!"

"I'm sleeping on the couch!" Before he could say anything, I grabbed the portable and threw it at him, ran a number off my lips, and said, "Now call. Okay? Call and ask her. She'll tell you everything."

His breathing was harsh but growing easier. "All right. All right..." He clenched his fists together. "Fine. Go. I don't care."

I gave him an odd, whimsical look. "What? You just spent five minutes--"

"It's not you," he said, going upstairs. He dropped the phone on the couch.

I showed up at Jena's with a duffel bag and suitcase. Her mom stood in the apartment driveway and was loading up the van when I locked my car and said Hi. She smiled at me and took my bags. I thanked her for letting me come and she laughed, saying, "Oh, don't worry about it. I'm glad to have you come with us. We wouldn't be taking this vacation were it not for you, you know."

Can you say 'uncomfortable?' "I still appreciate it."

"Honey," she said, looking at me in empathy, "don't worry about it." She continued loading the van.

The door to the apartment stairs opened and Jena appeared, shoulder-first, dragging her suitcases. When she saw me standing beside the van, a smile lit up her face. "You never called to tell me if you could come!" she yelled, coming over.

"I told you on the docks," I explained, as she dragged the suitcases.

"I thought you had to ask your dad?"

"Well, yeah, but I said it wouldn't be a problem."

She set her suitcases against the car and leaned forward, pecking me on the lips. "Welcome aboard."

Maine is absolutely *beautiful* in the summer. The temperature rises to 70 degrees, not too hot nor too cold, and sometimes, on a rare occurrence, it can flare into the humid 80's. I was allowed to ride shotgun and talked with Jena's mom almost the entire time, then when conversation died and music turned up, I watched out the window, seeing the pines, spruces, firs, sugar maples, yellow birches, aspens, and paper birch trees flashing by along the craggy mountain slopes. After an hour or two of winding roads we came to a driveway draped in shadows, a low gravel road, and the van parked beside an old-fashioned log cabin set against an L-shaped, sparkling lake with a dock and rowing boat attached.

After we unloaded, Jena and I built a fire and the three of us roasted hot dogs and made s'mores as dusk crept over the cabin. We spent all night long throwing back stories as if it were sharp whiskey, tossing around a soccer ball of laughter, and gazing upon the diamond lake reflecting a vast panorama of thousands of stars. Jena's mother remarked, "When we come here... It's always like stepping into another world. Away from the busyness of the town, away from all the schoolwork and studying, just to come and... Just to come and know, again, that there is peace and contentment in life. If we can find it."

As she said this, I looked over at Jena; her eyes peered into the flames, the firelight illuminating her face.

There was my peace. There was my contentment.

The stars above our heads. The world completely gone. This was, if I could bare to say it, paradise.

I awoke early and took the boat upon the waters, rowing it out alone. It was nice to just glide along the small lake, to watch the mist shedding between the trees. I even saw a moose wading into the waters on the opposite bank; it stared at me with big, sullen eyes and I didn't venture any closer. Its rack suspended into the air, a fireworks display frozen in time and rusted-over. Upon that lake I let my thoughts wander, I let myself contemplate. The end of school had brought on lots of thinking, and as I gently rowed that boat through the crisp waters, fresh bass almost visible through the turquoise waves, I asked myself, in a small voice inside my head, "What is it you desire?" I was out of school. I had a world of opportunity before me. It was an ample and much-needed question. "What is it you desire?"

What did I desire? What do I desire even now as I write in my college dorm?

What is it that fills my dreams?

I dream of a simple life. I want to have an awesome wife who I love more than I've loved anyone before, and who loves me more than she's loved anyone before. I want two wonderful kids, a boy and a girl. I want my relationship with my wife to be a relationship with a real person, not about all the sex and making out as most people seem to look at it. All that, I think, isn't as great as just someone to talk to, someone to live life with, someone to go on walks with, to share in a candlelit dinner, to lay in bed at night and stare at the stars and just talk about life with. I want to go to parties and barbecues and retreats with all my friends and family. I want to see my kids grow into adults and bud families of their own. I want to grow old with my wife, and spend the years after my retirement fishing, swimming, walking through the woods, watching the sunrise and sunset, enjoying each new day, each new season, fresh and alive. A simple life, a life of love

and romance, a life of laughter and joy. This is the life I desire. I believe that if this were prophetic, I would die a very happy man.

What are your dreams? It is a question we all must ask.

The mountains filled my vision upon that lake and my heart broke.

It would be fun to live in the Appalachian Mountains away from the big cities. To live up on the forested slopes, where there are bears and wild animals, snakes and all kinds of beautiful wildlife. At night I could lay in my bed and listen to the coyotes howling and the insects singing. I could maybe even lay out on my roof, look at the thousands of stars stretched over the rolling silhouettes of mountains, see the moon so close. Maybe I could have a small garden to work on, and be a teacher at the local school. A small house, a simple existence. Spend my free days alone with in the company of friends and family, reading and writing and working outdoors. Helping out those who need the help. It would be wonderful. My heart breaks for the simple and pristine life in the Appalachian Mountains.

A simple life, a life of love and romance, a life of laughter and joy. This is the life I desired.

I learned not to hope. I learned not to dream.

Jena and her mom were fixing bacon and eggs when I returned. Jena asked where I'd gone.

"I went onto the lake. I just woke up early and decided to take a little boat ride."

"Was it fun?"

"Very enlightening," I said, the smells of the food pervading my senses. "How long until it's ready?"

"It's ready now," her mom said, pointing at the plates. "Help yourself."

After lunch the garbage disposal broke down. Jena's mother opened up the bottom cabinets and tried to fix it. I even got underneath and tried to work some magic, but it was broken beyond any amateur knowledge of repair. She cursed under her breath and said, "Well, this needs to be fixed before we leave... I don't want to worry about it next time... Guys, I'm going to run into town, see if I can get a mechanic down here. Hold the fort, all right?" And she left us alone, driving away. Jena and I waved her off and stood on the front porch together, admiring the sun coming through the pines.

We decided to take a walk through the woods. There were no trails so we just followed the curve of the lake, nettles crunching underfoot and birds singing in the tree branches above us. We walked in silence for a long while, just absorbing the beauty. I took her hand in mine and wrapped my fingers around hers, interlacing them, and I saw her close her eyes and draw in the deep scents of the forest. The woods really is a magical place.

Her voice broke the serene silence. "Have you ever thought about... About what you would do with your life... If you knew anything was a possibility?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, if you could accomplish any dream, what would it be?"

I heard the pine nettles crunching as we walked. "This morning," I began, "as I was on the lake, just rowing around, I thought about this. A lot of times when I'm divorced from the world and everything is reduced to the basics... And I think this is true for everyone, not just for me... We think about things. I don't know what, it's probably never the same, but I was thinking about *exactly* this as I rode on the lake."

Jena looked over at me, a gem igniting in her eyes. "Really? I was thinking about it, too..."

"If I had to put into words," I began to answer, "what my dreams were... It's not really something you hear a lot. I've heard people talk about how their greatest dreams are to be great writers or great athletes or great teachers or great speakers... Great, in some way. People dream to be recognized, to be applauded, to be consumed with adoration. But me... Well, I'm different. I don't want recognition. I don't want power or prestige or wealth. The future I want is simple. It is beautiful."

She nudged me in the side with her elbow, edging me on. "Keep going..."

The tweets and chirps of the birds underscored my speech. "I want a wife. A beautiful wife. Not a hot wife, there's a difference. I see all the sports swimsuit models, and it's almost... not appalling, but they aren't as attractive as they think they are. But that's pointless. Beauty isn't about what you see, but what you feel, what you taste, what you know to be true. I want a beautiful wife—a beautiful wife with a beautiful personality, a charming charisma, a wife who is just... wow, amazing in every fathomable dimension. I want to have the wife of my dreams, perfect in every way. And I want two children. Two girls—I want to name them Kara and Kaylee. I want to go to barbecues and parties and I want to go out to eat with the family... I want to see my little girls grow up to get married and start families of their own... And I want to grow old with my wife, up in the mountains. When I die... I want to die in her arms, and I

want her to die in mine. I don't know if there's an afterlife, Jena, but if there is, I want to enter it clutching my wife."

We had stopped beside the bank and I sat upon a rock, picking up fallen nettles and tossing them onto the waters, where they floated and bobbed with the gentle lapping waves. Jena stood over me, quietly listening as I spoke: "This is the life I've always dreamed of. I always thought... It's just in my imagination, it's not a reality. All my life I've seen my dream flaunted before my eyes, fallen into the hands of those who have no... qualification... for the dream. I have seen boys crazed for sex and make-out sessions taking the girls who just want love, acceptance, and romance, and I've seen them turn into sluts. I thought... I thought I'd always be alone. I thought... I thought there'd never be anything for me."

She didn't say anything, just wrapped her arms around a tree, and resting her head on the trunk, watched me, eyes swimming with compassion.

A smile irked over my lips. "But look: here I am. I'm on the edge of a lake in the middle of nowhere, bathing in the songs of the birds, and you're behind me... Sometimes dreams are dreams... Because it's what we're designed for." I didn't look at her, but I said it quietly, and I think she heard it, because of what she did next: "I think I was designed for you. Or at least you were designed for me."

She crawled down beside me, leaning forward, looking at me. She spoke slowly: "Never stop dreaming."

I looked into her eyes and felt her soul reaching out, connecting with mine. A chill ran up my spine as she reached out and took my hands. Her hair fell over her eyes as she leaned towards me, pressing her body upon me; I followed up, and I placed my hands on the side of her stomach, felt her quick breathing underneath the shirt, and she took her arms around my back and groped my back with quivering fingers. I felt the warmth of her breath upon me in the cool air, and our eyes slowly closed. Our noses passed each other and our lips combined; my tongue entered within, bent on exploring and discovering, and hers entered mine, and the forest was forgotten in that one moment so better than any others.

We sat on that bank, and I embraced her close, and we didn't let go.

Even after the sun fell.

I had all but given up on finding the one that I could fall into on the day before you.
I was ready settled for less than love and not much more.
There was no such thing as a dream come true.
But that was on the day before you.

Now you're here and everything changes.
Suddenly life means so much.
I can't wait to wake up tomorrow and find out this promise is true.
I will never have to go back to the day before you.

In your eyes I see forever.
It makes me wish that my life never knew the day before you.
Heaven knows those years without you were shaping my heart for the day that I found
you.
You're the reason for all that I've been through.
Then I'm thankful for the day before you.

Now you're here and everything changes.
Suddenly life means so much.
I can't wait to wake up tomorrow and find out this promise is true.
I will never have to go back to the day before you.

- Rascal Flatts

Lamps on the cabin property glowered, casting forlorn light, as we entered the front door. Her mom came from the kitchen and demanded to know where we had been: "I had to stand here in the middle of nowhere as a beer-bellied repairman with too short pants worked on the plumbing. It would've been *nice* just to have you guys here."

Jena kissed her on the cheek and said, "I'm sorry. It won't happen again."
"Sorry," I said to her mother.
"Where were you guys?" she asked. "It's ten o'clock."
"We went on a walk," Jena explained, going into the kitchen. She opened the refrigerator. "Is this pudding any good?"
"It's fine," her mom said, looking at me. "What took you guys so long?" she asked me.
I shrugged. "We just walked around the lake," I said. "It's bigger than it looks."
I knew she thought we were deceiving her. "All right," she said. "It's going to rain--"
As if on cue, thunder erupted, shaking the cabin. The roof began to drum with heavy rain.
"I guess we're inside for the night," she said. "Get something to eat. It was a long walk. I'm sure you're absolutely *famished*."
"I'm fine," I quietly said under my breath.

She had made a fire but had promptly fallen asleep, perhaps dredged sick over the hours of worrying about where Jena and I had been. I sat on the couch and Jena sat beside me; her arms were wrapped around me, eyes closed, breathing slowly. I could feel her body pressed against mine as I stared into the burning embers of the dying fire.

She called my name, voice weak, half-asleep. I answered, "Yeah?"
"Don't leave me, okay?" she asked, eyes still closed.
After a moment of *deja-vu*, I replied softly, "I won't leave you."
Weakly, slipping into her dreams: "Do you promise?"
"Yeah," I said. "Yeah, I promise."
The embers died down and Jena fell asleep in my arms.
A simple dream. A simple life. *Don't leave me, okay?* As if to myself, "I won't."

When I returned home, I expected to find Mom, Dad or even my little sister. But the house was empty. I shut the garage door and threw my bags onto the floor beside the kitchen trash can and went immediately to the fridge, searching for some orange juice. I'd been craving its sugar ever since that morning. As I unscrewed the cap, I saw a message stenciled onto the door. I put away the orange juice and took a sip, reading the note at the same time:

Call Me – 1-937-623-2046

My dad's cell phone. I picked up the cordless and dialed. Moments later he answered.
"Dad?" I asked. Before he could answer, "It's me... What's up?"
"Where are you?" he asked. Stress lacerated his voice.
"Where am I? At home." I explained, looking over to the note, "I found the sticky."
"Son... Look, I'm sorry for being so snappy with you. I know you better than that."
A pause. "Okay. No, it's fine. Really."
"A lot has been going on," he said slowly, and I felt he wasn't telling me everything. I said nothing, waiting. And then he burst: "Your mom has cancer."

I had to drive nearly fifteen minutes to the airport.

From conception to that point in time, the longest stretch of my life. Period.

When I pulled in, I had to pay some quarters for parking, and after legwork running all through the whitewashed hospital corridors, I was able to track down someone who could guide me to the correct wing. She looked up my last name, checked my driver's license for I.D., and led me to a room. She knocked and opened the door; I saw my little sister standing, looking out a big window over the roof of another building and the parking lot beyond. Dad stood quickly and smiled at my presence; the nurse told us, "The doctor will be with you shortly." She shut the door.

Dad leapt forward, embracing me tight. "Thanks for coming," he said. "I was hoping my directions--"
"They were good," I said. My little sister avoided my eyes. I looked to Mom, lying uncomfortably in the bed. "Hi."

She smiled weakly.

"She's on drugs," Dad said to me in a low voice. "She has some tubes and wires going into her back."
"Oh."

The door opened and the doctor entered. He said hello to everyone and asked Mom how she was doing. She answered quietly and he turned to Dad and me. "Okay. Here's how things stand now. There *is* a chance that the bump is cancer. It's not a *huge* chance, but it's a chance, and we're going to run with it. What we're going to do, with your permission—" Now he talked to Dad. "—is take the lump we're going to extract and make sure it isn't cancer. Run a few tests. We'll be able to call you in a few days. Meanwhile, because of the medicine, she'll have to be doped up for about a week. Does she have someone to care for her?"

"My son," Dad said. "I have to work."

The doctor looked at me. "Will you do it?"

"Me?" I asked, incredulous. "Umm... Sure. I guess..."

"Great," the doctor said with a beaming smile. He left the room.

I turned to Dad. "So we don't know if it's cancer?"

"It most likely is," Dad told me under his breath. "They think... They think it's throughout her body..."

"What? No; the doctor—"

He says in a bare whisper to me so as my sister nor Mom could hear: "The doctor talked to me alone. Because of your Mom and sister..." He didn't finish. He didn't need to.

The color drained from my face revealed my absolute shock.

All throughout her body? Cancer. The killing disease. Oh God...

The light was dim and in the darkness I felt her close to me. The movie played on the screen, the room filling with spurts of color as the scenes changed and altered. The people behind us kept rocking our chairs with their feet and spilling hot buttered popcorn all over the floor. I did my best to ignore them; Jena had been up late last night arguing with her mom about something, and she fell asleep in the chair. So I watched the movie alone. It was an older movie, in the dollar theater, a chick flick that I found surprisingly good. In the movie the main character's wife is dying and he's trying to cope with it all. The scenes made me remember Mom in the hospital bed and how she was at home right now under Dad's evening supervision. As I let my mind ferment and ruminate on the complexities of life, a ball of phlegm lodged in my throat and threatened to come out. Tossing a cautious look over to Jena, I crawled out of my seat and went outside, into the cool Summer night air.

I watched the cars driving down the street and sat down on a bench, bowing my head in my hands, letting the thoughts swim.

Moments passed and then Jena's voice: "I saw you leave."

I looked up at her. "Sorry," I said slowly. "I thought you were sleeping." I patted the bench. "Feel free."

She sat down and joined me in gazing at the passing cars, the rushing blurs of headlights and tail-lights. "Why'd you leave?" she gently asked me.

At first I didn't answer. Not correctly, anyways. "I just wanted some air."

She saw through it and called out my name as a command.

"I haven't told you about... about Mom." She asked what I had to tell her. "She probably has cancer."

A moment of unperturbed and heavily-awkward silence.

She spoke: "Oh God..."

"Dad says he talked to the doctor..." My voice was becoming weak, like my mother's. "He says he talked to the doctor, and the doctor said that it was probably all throughout the body. All over her. I did some research, you know, to see... To see what we were up against... And from what it sounds like..." A tear speckled my cheek as my unfathomable thoughts formed themselves into words. "It sounds like she might not... Might not have that long."

Jena breathed, "Do they know for sure? I mean, the doctors?"

"No," I told her. "No. Tests are being done tomorrow night... God, Jena. I'm just... I don't know..."

"Scared?"

I hated to admit it, but a nod summoned forth.

Jena wrapped her arms around me, pressing her face against my cheek, kissing me. "It'll be okay," she comforted. "Everything is going to be O.K...."

"She's been through so much," I said in a breaking voice. "All her life... And now this... She doesn't deserve it, Jena. She's the last person to deserve it. Her entire life... Jena, her entire life has been nothing but... doom and gloom... And now when she's happy—really *happy*—look what happens. God," I growled. "It's so \$*%&*\$ typical."

Jena interrupted. "Quiet. We don't know anything yet. I'm sure everything is fine."

"Jena," I corrected. "The doctors—"

"Are wrong half the time," she finished.

A snuffle drew across my lungs. "I have this feeling... I have this horrible feeling..."

She embraced me tighter. "Don't think about that, okay? Think about me. Think about *me*. Look at me."

I turned my head, our eyes centimeters apart.

She smiled. "Look at where we are. Look at where you are. Do you feel my arms around you? I love you. God, I love you. I love you so much. So much." Her words were like fire on an icy heart. "I love you. I love you. I love you..." She chanted these words and I meditated upon them. "I love you. I love you. I love you." And the tears came off my face and she held me even tighter, her words running over and over, speaking peace and even joy into my heart.

Dad was unable to take her to the hospital the day of the tests, so I loaded her into my car and drove here there. I found myself flipping through magazines in the lobby in everlasting agony. The words on the magazines didn't draw my eyes; I flipped the glossy pages and stared into nowhere, eyes registering nothing but my jumbled thoughts. I even prayed a little bit, just told God that she didn't deserve this, she didn't deserve to suffer anymore.

A nurse came out and said, "Your mother's awake, Son. Follow me."

He led me to her room and I saw her smiling on a hospital bed.

The nurse said, "The doctor will be in shortly." She left.

I walked around the bed and sat down in the chair beside her. "How are you feeling?"

She managed, "Better."

"Really? That's good. I guess."

She pulled me close and whispered into my ear, "When I went under... I saw an *angel*."

The doctor entered the room. "How are we feeling?" he asked my mother.

My mother responded, "Okay."

"Good," he said with a big grin.

"What's the news?" I demanded, still sitting in the chair.

"Well," the doctor said, "we ran the tests on the samples, and—"

"Yes or no?" I said. Get to the point.

The doctor sighed. "No signs of cancer. We're sorry for the inconvenience. We just had to make sure."

My eyes were wide as saucers. "So she's okay? I mean, she's... not sick?"

"Well, she'll be a little groggy for a day or two, but, no, nothing to worry about."

"No cancer?"

"Not a lick of it," the doctor confirmed.

Mom smiled at me and she mouthed, *It was the angel!*

The doctor saw her mouth moving, but from his angle couldn't interpret. "What'd she say?"

"Nothing," I said. "Can I take her home?"

The doctor grabbed the clipboard. "Sure. Just don't let her drive."

With the fear of losing my mother to a parasitic disease vanquished out the window, I found my days sunnier and nights clearer. I almost forgot about college as June dribbled into July. I spent every waking moment with Jena, it seemed. We had our small battles, our disagreements, and one day we even refused to talk to each other. But we got over that. All relationships—good ones, at least—go through conflicts and adequately work them out. At least that's what I'm led to believe. We would often go to Applebee's, simply because for three dollars and fifty cents you could get boneless chicken wings, a giant quesadilla, or loaded potato skins. We'd also visit the parks in the area, as well as take walks up and down Main Street, hang out at each other's houses. Or we'd go to the coast and sit on the rocks, look out at the beautiful blue ocean and wonder what lives were being led on the other side. "We can't imagine how big it really is," Jena would tell me. "It's bigger than the United States. Think about it. A big ocean, that's for sure." The more we talked the more I fell in love with her. I was thankful fear did not pull me away from her, not this time, and the touch of her fingers on my arms and the soft sweet breath in her excitement, blended with the silky hair and soft, tan skin, and please, don't forget the honey taste of her tongue in my mouth and mine in hers... All of these combined for an ecstasy knowing no bounds. I felt like the most blessed guy alive with the most beautiful girl in the stretched cosmos.

"I know the perfect place," Jena told me, and she drove us to a small little pine grove overlooking the town.

The weather was warm and the sun failing as she stretched a blanket over the pine nettles and we sat down amongst the trees. Squirrels watched us from the tree-limbs, and the fireworks were breathtaking. Scarlet and orange and golden and jasper, exploding over the town in brilliant, showering fireballs. The funny thing was, I never did like fireworks too much. But now, with her... They were mesmerizing.

Everything with her was mesmerizing.

The fireworks ended, but we didn't leave. The stars burned behind wisps of clouds and I felt so insignificant in the whole scheme of things.

"I talked to my uncle on the phone," Jena said out of nowhere. "You know how we don't have enough money for me to go to college?"

"Yeah."

"Well. He called and told me that even though he didn't have the money, either... He's been promoted to a hiring position at the aquarium in Gatlinburg. The town in Tennessee?"

"Yeah, I know the place."

"So when I graduate... I think I'm going to go there. He says he can get me a paper-pushing job that pays a lot."

I let her words ruminate, then, "So what about us?"

She smiled. "I told him about you. I told him how you were going to college. For botany or zoology."

She was quiet. I urged, "Uh-huh..."

"He said that if you graduated with either grade, you could work at the aquarium. He can already put you on the roster. I don't know how, but he can. He says either a botany *or* a zoology degree would be of use at the aquarium." She snuggled close to me and looked up into my eyes. "Do you know what this means? Remember at the beach—"

"How could I forget?"

She blushed, then, "No. When we were talking? About what you wanted. A simple life."

"Yeah. I remember."

"This is it!" she exclaimed. Her voice climbed louder and louder. "Don't you see? I've got a job and you've got a job! We've got a job together! And we can live together! We can get married, we can have children, we can have a nice little house in the mountains and—"

"Whoa, whoa, whoa," I said, urging her down. "Okay. Okay."

"What?"

"Umm... Nothing. But... Don't you think this is a little rushed?"

"Rushed?" she asked, eyes speaking bewilderment. "I don't get it."

"I mean... I don't want to rush into anything."

She turned and looked out over the town, her face hidden in the shadows. I reached out and gently drew her head towards mine. "I think," I told her, "that sounds beautiful. I just... I just didn't want to get too excited... If it was an empty promise."

"It's not," she said, a smile widening in her face. She embraced me tight, we kissed passionately, and then she told me, "This is what I've wanted. I've wanted you. And you've wanted me. We have each other! And we're going to have a home. We're going to have kids. Everything's going to be perfect. Perfect and simple. Just like you want it."

A grin exploded over my face and we kissed underneath the grove for hours.

A few days later I got a telephone call. Mom called me upstairs and handed it to me.

I asked, "Who is it?"

She shook her head. "I don't know. Doesn't sound familiar."

Cradling the phone against my ear, "Hello?"

A voice that haunted my dreams. "You thieving #%\$&."

My heart melted like wax. I didn't have anything to say. My mind overloaded.

"When I get out of this #&%*#@# place, I'm going to pay you a \$#%&@#\$ visit, got that? I'd tell you how I'm gonna do it, but I'd get more time in here."

My mouth was dry. *Oh God oh God oh God... Was this really happening?*

"Six months," he told me. "Six months and I'm going to show up at your college."

He slammed the phone down.

Mom didn't see my ashen-pale face as she had her back turned to me. "Who was it?"

"Sales-person," I lied, leaving the room. I wouldn't sleep at all that night.

With college approaching, I was smacked in the face with the nervousness everyone experiences going into their freshman year. Jena told me so many times how she was so jealous of me because she resented eight-hour days in the classroom, then spending half her afternoons at the nursery. We would always talk about the future, dreaming of our lives together, and with each word we spoke, it looked brighter and better, that much more brilliant. But when she wasn't around to comfort me, I started to feel nervous and even a little frightened. Thoughts crept into my mind, whispering their deceitful little messages:

No one is going to like you.

You're going to be the outcast.

You're going to fail miserably.

And then the worst: *When you leave, she's going to leave you.*

I made her promise she wouldn't run off with another guy.

"Why would I do that?" she exclaimed, laughing. "I don't want another guy. I want this guy right here." And she slapped me in the chest. "Okay? So don't worry about it. I should be worried about *you*—surrounded by so many cute girls, nowhere to run, and they're all going to be flocking around you. You're going to be a pimp."

I laughed. "No, no. No, they won't. I won't let them."

On the day I moved into college, we loaded up Mom's van and were preparing to leave when Jena pulled up beside the curb. She jumped out and ran over to me. I told her, "Dad said you can't come. Says I have to get used to not being around you 24/7."

But she didn't smile. She grabbed me by the arm and pulled me down the sidewalk. "I have to talk to you."

"Jena," I protested, "I have to go."

"Just walk with me!" she shouted.

I obeyed. I hadn't seen her like this, never directed towards me or anything. We walked down the sidewalk, underneath the trees, roaming the lawns.

"What's going on?" I asked her. "You don't look too hot."

She looked horrible. Emotionally distraught. "I just... I need to tell you something..."

"All right."

But she didn't say anything. We kept walking. And walking. And walking.

"Well?" I asked.

She shook her head, laughed, and I saw a tear trickle down her face. "Never mind—"

I swung in front of her, cutting her off. "No. Look at you. Come here." I embraced her tight. "Why won't you tell me what's wrong?"

"I can't," she said. "I'm so sorry. I can't. Not now."

"You're not worried about me finding another girlfriend? Because you know that won't happen."

"Lots of things happen," she told me. "Things you don't expect to happen."

"Oh, but they're rare—"

"Not that rare."

I tried to read her but she was solid oak. "Jena." I kissed her on the forehead and ran a hand through her hair. "You're everything to me. And you'll always be everything. Listen. This four years... That's all it is. A length of time. Next year you're going to move to Tennessee. And then when I graduate, I will, too. We'll have a family. Like you said. A nice little house in the woods..."

"I want to be married now," she told me, burying her head into my neck. "I want to be married."

"Me, too," I said. "But, look, you're still in school. Everything is going to be okay."

She pulled away, sniffing. "You're right..." She shook her head, ashamed. "I'm sorry—"

"It's all right," I said. "Really. It's okay."

We continued walking, in silence.

"I'm going to miss you," Jena told me.

"I'll be home every weekend," I promised her. "Everything will work out fine."

We reached the van and Dad yelled at me: "Let's go! Do you want to be late to registration?"

I turned away from him and kissed Jena on her tender lips. "Be good for me, okay?"

As I walked away, she called out: "Call me, okay?"

Early Week went by better than I thought it would. The psychology professor let us all out early every day, so I spent the time getting to know some of the guys and gals around campus. On my floor there was a kid named Patrick, Lee and Chris who would become my better friends, and who are my friends now, showing genuine friendship through all that... All that happens throughout the rest of this notebook. The campus was up in the mountains so I was able to sit out at The View and look over much of the countryside, look in the direction of my hometown, and whisper sweet nothings to Jena. Here at college I felt blessed to have such a beautiful girl back home. So many guys and girls were crawling over each other, seeking out the right boyfriend or girlfriend, and Patrick told me it was always a lot of stress. Fruitless stress, much of the time—most of the time. So I was able to duck out of that. I talked to Jena every night on the phone. She always seemed... shallow. I couldn't quite place it, until Thursday.

After classes I sat down at my computer and was fixing myself a bowl of chili when a screen popped up on my AOL Instant Messenger:

Hopeofanotherworld412: Are you there?

Hopeofanotherworld412: IM me when you get this

I sat down beside the computer and typed back:

Dinoforensic858: Wow. You're never online. Class sucked today. But we got out early.

Hopeofanotherworld412: Remember on Sunday when we went for that walk? Remember when I started crying?

Dinoforensic858: Yeah. Sure. Why?

Hopeofanotherworld412: I was crying because I didn't want you to leave. But not because I was going to miss you. I do miss you. Don't misread me. But I was crying because I didn't want you to leave for another reason.

Another reason? I hadn't a clue, so I typed:

Dinoforensic858: o.k. What's the reason?

Hopeofanotherworld412: Don't get mad.

Dinoforensic858: I won't. Come on ☺

I waited for perhaps five minutes. She kept typing then erasing. Finally came the short reply:

Hopeofanotherworld412: I'm pregnant.

Chapter Eight

Goodbye to everything that I knew
 You were the one I loved
 The one thing that I tried to hold on to
 The one thing that I tried to hold on to
 - Michelle Branch, *Goodbye to You*

My eyes bore into the computer screen, merging with the words, entering into the words. I could almost hear her voice saying it over and over inside my head: *I'm pregnant. I'm pregnant. I'm pregnant.* I didn't know how this could happen; well, I *did*, but I didn't want to accept it. I'd guess the first emotion was shock. I mean, I'd been falling asleep in an eight-hour psychology class just a few minutes before, and now I was mentally floored, paralyzed head-to-toe, the shimmering screen reading its prophecy.

The next emotion was horror. Fear. I thought about what my father would do, but more so I wondered about what my mother would think. She was in a delicate position as it was. We didn't claim any real religious faith, but we had our sets of values and norms and rights-and-wrongs. This certainly fell into our family's idea of *wrong*; Dad had always warned me, "Don't sleep around." And he always told my sister. He was a little more protective of her, I think, because he trusted me. And I broke that trust. I broke it like a twig on my knee.

Hopeofanotherworld412: It was by the lake. I think. I didn't know for sure because I was throwing up and stuff in the morning but then I did a home pregnancy test and even went to an abortion clinic to get an official reading. Everything said I was pregnant. I haven't started to get really round yet but I know it's going to start happening soon.

I typed quickly, fingers flying as if on their own control grid.

Dinoforensic858: Don't get an abortion OK?

I already had my parents' wrath on my hands. I didn't want to compound it with an abortion. Besides, the thought of having a dead baby on my hands was even scarier. A dead baby of my own flesh-and-blood.

Hopeofanotherworld412: Don't worry I'm not. I never would. You know that. You know where I stand on the whole abortion thing. I just went there to make sure you know?

Dinoforensic858: Does anyone else know???

Hopeofanotherworld412: My mom knows

Dinoforensic858: You told her???

Hopeofanotherworld858: no, she found the home pregnancy test in the trash can

Hopeofanotherworld858: You're not mad are you? It sounds like you're mad.

Was I mad? I don't know. But even if I was mad, I couldn't be mad at her. Besides, it was my sperm.

Dinoforensic858: No. No, I'm not mad.

Hopeofanotherworld412: Are you sure?

Dinoforensic858: I don't know what I'm feeling right now

Dinoforensic858: It's kind of a shock, you know?

A shock. That's what it had been when I typed it. But the emotions continued to evolve. Shock. Fear. Anger? But then something different, something erupting from within.

Dinoforensic858: On our first time?

A long pause and finally a response:

Hopeofanotherworld412: yeah

Our first time. *Our first time*. So many people had to try up to ten or twenty times for even one stroke of luck.

Our first time.

My hands hovered over the keyboard, mind adrift in thought, and then I saw that my name appeared with words beside it; my hands had acted of their own accord.

Dinoforensic858: that's so awesome

I don't know what she really thought of that, but then she wrote back, and our online conversation continued:

Hopeofanotherworld412: what?

Dinoforensic858: it's so beautiful. Our first time!

Hopeofanotherworld412: you don't understand do you. I'M PREGNANT

Dinoforensic858: I understand perfectly

Hopeofanotherworld412: What are we going to do?????

Dinoforensic858: Nothing

Hopeofanotherworld412: NOTHING???

Dinoforensic858: What did you want to do?

A great and gracious pause.

Hopeofanotherworld412: I don't have a clue

But I did. I began to realize that my child was growing inside of her. I began to realize that I was going to be a father.

I was going to be a father.

No. I *was* a father.

That realization settled within and pushed out all shock and anger(?) and fear.

My dream, for as long as I could remember, was a simple life. A beautiful wife (Jena) and two children. One was already on the way. We had a home ready for us in Tennessee. We had a life ahead of us. Jena was probably freaking out because for like ten minutes she was sending me messages and I wasn't responding. Instead I was lost in thought, dipped into what felt like an eternal trance, a spotless mind walking through a field of sunshine.

It was all falling together.

Hopeofanotherworld412: what do you think we should do?

Hopeofanotherworld412: hello?

Hopeofanotherworld412: are you there?

Hopeofanotherworld412: HELLO???

Dinoforensic858: everything's going to be okay

Dinoforensic858: here's what we're going to do

Dinoforensic858: you're going to have this baby

Dinoforensic858: and you're going to go to Tennessee

Hopeofanotherworld412: I'm not going to give the baby to someone else

Hopeofanotherworld412: it's MY baby

Hopeofanotherworld412: it's *our* baby

Dinoforensic858: you will take the baby to Tennessee with you

Dinoforensic858: and get a job working for your uncle and get an apartment

Dinoforensic858: I'll work while I'm in school and send the money every paycheck

Dinoforensic858: and I'll fly over on the holidays so I can see him

Dinoforensic858: or her

Dinoforensic858: but I'll be there when you have the baby
 Dinoforensic858: even if I have to miss class or even exams
 Dinoforensic858: and when I graduate I'll go to Tennessee
 Dinoforensic858: we'll get married
 Dinoforensic858: and we'll live in that apartment and raise our kid
 Dinoforensic858: and eventually buy a house
 Hopeofanotherworld412: okay slow down but it sounds good you're typing really fast
 Dinoforensic858: it's what we've always wanted
 Dinoforensic858: we're just getting it a little early is all ☺

It was perfect. It was beautiful. My dream was becoming a reality before my eyes.
 Just a little early. But I could live with that.

Hopeofanotherworld412: I don't want to be an unwed mother
 Hopeofanotherworld412: do you know the stigma attached to that???
 Dinoforensic858: you want to get married before you have the baby
 Hopeofanotherworld412: yes
 Hopeofanotherworld412: it's been about a month and a half
 Hopeofanotherworld412: so we at least have what? seven months left
 Hopeofanotherworld412: to get married
 Hopeofanotherworld412: before I get married

I did the math in my head, then threw it down into the conversation:

Dinoforensic858: you'll have the baby sometime in March
 Hopeofanotherworld412: I want to get married before then
 Dinoforensic858: I know
 Hopeofanotherworld412: when tho?
 Dinoforensic858: I don't know.
 Dinoforensic858: we don't have to have it all figured out right this minute you know
 Hopeofanotherworld412: my mom is coming. I think she wants me to have an abortion, but I don't
 know for sure. Actually, I don't think she does. She isn't so angry anymore.
 Dinoforensic858: don't tell her about our plans yet
 Hopeofanotherworld412: I won't
 Dinoforensic858: I'm going to try and figure out some stuff, okay?
 Hopeofanotherworld412: I have to go. Mom needs me to come with her shopping
 Dinoforensic858: Okay
 Hopeofanotherworld412: you're not mad at me though right???
 Hopeofanotherworld412: hello?
 Dinoforensic858: I love you more than you know. And I'm happier right now than I may ever have
 been. You should be over here, seeing the big smile on my face.
 Dinoforensic858: I LOVE YOU!!!!!!

She signed off and I saved the conversation. I read through its words over and over and then grabbed my journal and wrote about fifteen pages of my thoughts. To sum it up, I was amazed and confused and excited all at the same time. I didn't know what to do, other than the small plan I'd thrown up, a plan I knew would change over time as it evolved. But the smile and joy did not leave me. Some would be filled with depression at such a situation but instead joy surged inside me. I guess I'd just suffered depression way too much.

That was the happiest day of my life.

I spent the rest of that Thursday at The View, the park in the mountains overlooking the mountains of valleys of east Maine. I could see the coast snaking away in the distance, and pinpointed my town, a bare speck in my eye. I sat on one of the benches and let the dusk sweep over, and I spent the entire time in thought, contemplating the future. I thought of our child, *our child*, me and Jena's child. The thought

always brought a smile welling from a wellspring of genuine joy. I thought of the fact that I was a father—a father!—and once I was overcome with trickling tears, and some people were watching me. I didn't care.

A friend of mine got out of class and saw me. When he came over and saw the tears, he was kind of taken aback, and asked if he could sit down next to me. I scooted across the bench and said, "Sure, Man."

He didn't know how to say it, but forced it out: "So... what's going on?" He quickly added, "If, of course, you want to talk about it. If not..."

"It's nothing," I told him. Then I started laughing.

He looked at me like I was crazed.

I told him, "I'm not crying, all right? Do you ever... cry when you're happy?"

"I don't know if I've ever been that happy," he confessed.

"I never have been," I told him. "Not until now." I wiped tears from under my eyes.

"Why are you so happy?"

I leaned back in the bench and stared at the stars beginning to show up in the darkening blue sky. "It's nothing. Nothing at all." And a giant smile carved its way across my face and wove its warm fingers into my heart.

Jena caught me online Friday while I was packing to return home for Labor Day weekend.

Hopeofanotherworld412: hi how are you

Dinoforensic858: really, really good

Dinoforensic858: yesterday I spent all day just thinking and I cried in happiness

Dinoforensic858: so you know I'm not angry

Dinoforensic858: I'm probably more excited than you are!

Hopeofanotherworld412: I called my uncle

Hopeofanotherworld412: and told him

Hopeofanotherworld412: he's a Christian

Dinoforensic858: not like Destiny is he?

Hopeofanotherworld412: haha no thank *God!*

Hopeofanotherworld412: He said that he would help me take care of the baby until you get here

Hopeofanotherworld412: and he has a little apartment at the aquarium we can stay in

Hopeofanotherworld412: and the aquarium will pay for it from my paycheck

Hopeofanotherworld412: it's really cheap

Dinoforensic858: awesome

Hopeofanotherworld412: and my uncle has your job approved and you're on the roster

Hopeofanotherworld412: even if he loses his job or something

Hopeofanotherworld412: which he won't

Hopeofanotherworld412: he's actually being promoted!

Hopeofanotherworld412: but if something happens, your job is still guaranteed

Hopeofanotherworld412: for six years

Hopeofanotherworld412: as long as you graduate

Hopeofanotherworld412: with good grades

Dinoforensic858: don't worry I will. That's so cool!

Hopeofanotherworld412: so your plan is going to work

Hopeofanotherworld412: but I still want to be married before I have the baby

Hopeofanotherworld412: it may stop social services from intervening... if they can do that

Dinoforensic858: See? Everything's going to work out perfectly fine.

Dinoforensic858: It's not the end of the world

Dinoforensic858: it's actually the beginning

Hopeofanotherworld412: the beginning of our dream

Dinoforensic858: exactly!!!

Later that day I went to the J.C. Penny at the mall and browsed the jewelry section.

A service clerk hovered over the glass counter and asked, "What can I get for you, Hon?"

At the time I felt both embarrassed and proud: "Do you have any engagement rings?"

She looked at me like I suffered a mental illness. "A what? Engagement?"

I nodded. “Yeah.”
She bit her bottom lip. “Do you think you can afford that?”
“Look. I know I look like I’m fifteen years old, but I’m a college kid.”
“Hey, I didn’t say anything.” She raised her hands in self-defense. “What kind are you looking for?”
“A nice one that doesn’t have a price up the whazoo.”
She laughed. “Are you serious about this?”
“Yeah.”
“All right,” she said, opening up the glass cabinet from behind. “What’s she into?”
“I don’t know.”
“Is she a simple or complicated girl?”
“Simple. Definitely simple.”
“How about this one?” She brought it out to show me.
“Is that a real diamond?”
“You bet.”
“How much?”
She told me the price and I almost pitched backwards. “That’s all my graduation money!”
A pause, then, “What year in college *are* you?”
“Look. I don’t need this to be an interrogation, okay? I just want a ring.”
“Did you meet her the first week and fall in love?” she asked with a grin.
“I’ve known her for a little while—”
“How long?” she demanded.
“What? No. It’s none of your business. Another ring, please?”
She sighed. “Whatever,” and brought out another one. A quartz crystal. It still looked pretty. “Not diamond,” she said, “but it’s really simple. And hard to break, too. Not as tough as a diamond, though.”
“Nothing beats a diamond,” I muttered. “I’ll take it, sure.”
She rang it up for me and I handed her my credit card. Before she swiped it, she asked, “Are you sure about this?”
“Yes.”
“It’s non-refundable.”
“Come on. I have to go home in about thirty minutes or I miss the parade.”
“Labor Day parade?” she asked, swiping the card.
“Yeah.”
She handed it to me and gave me the receipt. “Sign the one copy, give it to me, take the other.”
I quickly signed it and handed it over to her. She handed me the ring in a small designer sack and I stuffed the receipt inside. “Thank you.”
As I walked away, she called out, “Good luck!”

As I drove home that day, taking the back-roads down the mountains and then hitching onto the highway, I kept looking to the engagement ring sitting on the seat. I wondered what my parents would think—“She’s having a baby and you’re getting *married?!?!?*”—but I didn’t care. This was *my* life, not theirs. I was the one who knew Jena—really *knew* her—and I was the one who loved her. I was willing to give everything up for her. I would abandon wealth, reputation, even inheritance for her. I would be her servant for all eternity, and I would treat her right, as she and all girls should be treated. I wouldn’t make the mistakes that had been thrown on my shoulders by other girls. She would be treated right, with love and charity and chivalry.

When I got home, Mom, Dad and little sister barraged me with so many questions about college:

“How was the class?”
“Was it hard?”
“Did you have to study a lot?”
“Have you met any really cool people?”
“What’s the dorm life like?”
The usual question new college students are asked, and I spun out the usual answers:
“The class was boring.”
“No, it wasn’t *too* hard.”
“I had to study, sure. It’s college.”

“Yeah, there are lots of cool people up there.”

“Dorm life is exciting and boring at the same time.”

We readied to go to the parade and as we were loading into the van to drive to the old part of town, Mom said, “Jena’s looked a little out-of-it at school lately. Do you know what’s going on? Or can you not tell me?”

A knot of stone formed inside my throat. “Oh, I don’t know. Maybe it’s that time of month.”

Mom laughed. “Yeah. Maybe. I know how that is.”

As we pulled out of the driveway, Dad asked, “Is she going to be there today?”

I nodded, said, “Yep,” and my hand snaked its way into my khaki shorts pocket. I felt the felt box rub the tip of my fingers.

Right next to me, my little sister crooned, “What’s in your pocket?”

I acted quickly, grabbing a pen, and pulled it out. “Want me to sign your forehead?”

“Shut up,” she said, and turned to look out the window.

Ever since Caleb, she’d been different. Oh well. It really wasn’t that big of a thing on my mind right then.

In fact, at that very moment, I felt ready to vomit. The nervousness was ripping me apart. But there was no reason for the nervousness. She wanted it. But then, she didn’t expect it. Not today. I felt like I had to take a load off but I was in that van and there weren’t going to be any bathrooms at the parade... Suck it up, I told myself. Breathe deep. Everything will be O.K.

We parked in the grocery car parking lot; the co-manager was warding off traffic, but sense I had worked there over the summer and planned on returning during Christmas, he let us in, a kind of V.I.P., I guess. The grocery store was right on the Main Street intersection, so it wasn’t a long hike to the parade grounds. The place was already backed with people, there were barriers set up here and there, mounted policemen drawing the “oohs” and “awes” from curious little children holding balloons or hot dogs or caramel corn. The sidewalks were pulsating with people and we had to walk across the lawns. Kids were dangling from the trees and spraying silly string at each other. An old lady yelled at us for stepping on her lawn and Dad quickly apologized and led us back to the swamped sidewalk.

Mom tossed a word my way: “Do you see Jena anywhere?”

“No,” I said. “I know she’s there though...” I knew where to meet her, but I wanted to go alone.

Dad stopped and said, “Well, my legs are tired, and this is as good a place as any.”

I kept walking. “I’m going to go find Jena,” I explained.

Mom waved bye. “Be careful!”

As I turned my back to them, there was a distant holler of trumpets, and the parade began.

The Boy Scouts were throwing out candy and the Girl Scouts did the same with cookies. I picked up a mint wrapped in plastic, undid the wrap, and plucked it within. The mint dissolved inside and I was thankful that my breath, at least, would be kind to me. I found the ice cream parlor easy enough, right across the street from the nursery. All the tables were packed, so I just bought a root beer float and mingled around, waiting for Jena to pop up. I tried to drink/eat the float, but my nervousness felt like battery acid inside me, so I ended up tossing it away into the trash. I don’t think I’d ever felt this way before and it didn’t make any-

“Hi!” from behind.

I swirled around, my face igniting like a firecracker. “Hey! I was looking for you...”

“I’m sorry I’m late,” she said. “I had to park at the school.”

“No, no, it’s okay,” I said.

For the longest time we just looked at each other. And then I looked down at her tummy.

She blushed. “Stop it...”

“You’re right. Not round at all. But you’re going to have to start shopping Big & Tall. Or at least hit the maternity section.”

“Not so *loud*,” she scolded. “No one but you and Mom knows. I would like to keep it that way... Half the people from my school are here.”

“They’re going to know-“

“Yeah,” she said. “And then what will Destiny say to me?”

I laughed. “Do you want to sit down?”

She looked at all of the occupied tables. “Where?”

“On the curb,” I said. So we walked over to the curb and sat down.

She mingled around for change in her pocket. “Do you want something to eat?”

“No. I’m not too hungry.”

“Me neither,” she said, sliding the change back into her pocket.

We watched the parade pass us by, our voices dulled out by the chorus of screaming, excited children.

“Parades are boring,” Jena said. “Let’s get out of here.”

“What? There’s nowhere to go...”

“Let’s just walk along the back-roads or something.”

We left the crowded ice cream parlor and crept down an alleyway that led to a side-road. The alleyway was cramped on one side by the cobbled stone of an antique home, and to the left was a ten-foot-tall wooden fence, and we could hear dogs sniffing the fence as we walked. The shadows fell over us because the sun was sinking behind the building; the sky burned a fierce red and I tightened my jacket around me, warding off the cooler Maine temperatures.

“I’m afraid,” Jena told me, “of what people will think. When they see...”

“What? Like look down on you or something?”

“Yeah. I mean, if a girl sleeps around, she can deny it. But if someone has sex once—once!—and gets pregnant, you’re even worse off. It just isn’t fair. I can never deny what we did, because the evidence will be stenciled all over my body.”

“No one’s going to judge you. No one except Destiny. And she’s not really with it.”

“I’m just scared, is all.”

“Me too,” I confessed.

She looked at me, surprised. “You didn’t seem like it online?”

“When you’re on the internet... Things are different.” I grabbed her arm and stopped her, and as we stood in the middle of the dark alley, I explained: “Instant messaging rules out all the emotions, you know? All you’re left with are words. Sure, I’m thankful we’ve got a plan and everything, but that doesn’t mean I’m not scared. God, Jena, I am! I really am. I’m terrified. Petrified. Mortified. But... But I know, Jena, deep down, that everything is going to be okay. When you graduate High School, things really change. I mean, your friendships change and you forget about people. It’s just what happens. So who *cares* about people like Destiny? Really? Because she’s going to forget about you and go stomp on someone else’s turf.” I grabbed her hands in mine, clutching them in my grasp, warming her cold fingers with the palms of my hands. “A year from now, Jena... A year from now we’ll have a baby. I’ll be at school, except for the holidays and vacations... And you’ll be in Tennessee, with your uncle who really loves you and is helping us out. We’re going to raise this baby, Jena, we’re going to raise this baby into a beautiful, wonderful person. And we’re going to have a family. A house. Maybe even a dog. And we’ll go to barbecues and picnics and go out to eat at nice restaurants.”

Jena smiled in the darkness, allowing a little bit of happiness to show through.

“See?” I asked her, banking on the smile. “See?” I leaned in, kissed her. “Everything’s going to be okay,” I said. “It’s all going to work out.”

She embraced me, holding me tight, arms wrapped around me. Her face buried into my shoulder, then shifted. I could feel her breathing against me, her warmth draped over me like a silver coat, and then came her sweet pumpkin breath on my neck and she said, “Just hold me. Just hold me.” So I wrapped my arms around her waist and squeezed her against me. I could hear her crying softly. I kept whispering sweet-nothings and promising that everything would be okay; our future was sealed.

She turned her head and I turned mine, and it just happened. One of those things that isn’t mentioned but understood. Our mouths touched, and I felt a burst of adrenalin as our tongues entwined. We fell against the brick wall and slid to the ground, her hair falling around her face and her arms shaking as she cried and we kissed, all at the same time. My whispers kept pouring forth between breaths: “Everything’s going to be okay.” “We’re going to be fine.” “There’s nothing to worry about.” “Nothing to worry about...”

She pulled away, wiping tears from bloodshot eyes. “I’m so scared...” she whimpered.

“Don’t be,” I said, grabbing and pulling her against me. “Don’t be scared. We’re in this together. It’s really something wonderful, Jena. Really something wonderful.”

As she rested against me and breathed, letting the tears carve funnels across her cheeks, I somehow wrestled the velvet box from my pocket and drew it up, hovering it before her closed eyes. I whispered, “Jena. Jena.” She opened her eyes, and the moment she saw it, wonder and awe filled her eyes. I pressed my forehead against hers and whispered ever so quietly, “Will you marry me?”

She bit her bottom lip and laughed, the tears still coming, then she hugged me so tight that I fell over onto my back. She lay atop of me, kissing me hard, and finally she let go. I raised my head and saw her straightening her shirt and grinning despite the slowing tears; she held the velvet box in her hands, the quartz sparkling in the low September light.

"Well?" I asked her, propping myself up on my elbows. "A little early, but--"

"God," she breathed. "Yes."

"Well. Try it on?"

She anxiously slid it from the box and put it on her finger. She looked at me with the biggest smile on her that I've ever seen. "It fits perfectly."

"Good," I said. "Good."

She stood, brushing herself off. I stood beside her and said, "It's all coming together. Still scared?"

She nodded. "Not as much though."

"Good," I said again. I pulled her close and kissed her forehead. "Everything's going to be--"

"Fine," she said, finishing my sentence for me. "Everything's going to be fine."

"Right," I said.

We stood in the darkness just staring at each other. The parade had finished and people were leaving the grounds.

"I have to go," she said. "The boss--"

"It's all right," I said. "I'll see you tomorrow?"

"Definitely," she said. Then a *bigger* smile. "We're engaged."

"Yep."

"You're my fiancé."

"Yep."

She laughed, clutched the finger with the ring, and began walking backwards. "Bye."

"I love you." I waved bye and turned away, walking down the other direction.

At this very moment I sit inside the campus library. I knew it would come to this. It's not like I didn't see it coming. I want you to know my story. I want you to know so that, maybe, you can understand. But for that to happen, I have to get over my fears. I have to write about that which scares me constantly, that which echoes in my dreams every night. I haven't had a peaceful night since the night before the parade. It seems so long ago, now, but it also seems like it happened three minutes ago. That's the way these things are. You just remember everything... so vividly. I have been writing in this notebook for the past thirty minutes, and the librarian wants me to leave, as it is getting late. I don't want to write this tonight. I will try to write it tomorrow. I will have to do it in one sitting. That's the only way to stop me from going insane.

As I walked down the alley, I looked over my shoulder. I saw her walking away, and a great peace came over me. Something inside just felt so *right*. She was the One. I knew it, and you couldn't have told me differently. All my life had been a great search, an epic quest, concluding in the discovery of the greatest treasure ever: the One whom I would marry. My heart wanted to burst in song, it was overflowing with maddening joy.

Jena turned her head and looked at me, smiling, and she waved her hand, the ring glittering on her finger. Her smile ran through me like warm apple cider on a cold Fall evening.

She stepped out into the road. She was looking at me and I at her.

Dappled yellow light fell over her; she turned her head quickly, the light intensifying.

She raised her hand to block the light and her mouth opened.

My heart froze. I reached out, my voice knotting. *Oh God oh God oh God oh God*

And then she screamed. She screamed and her words never leave me, haunting my dreams.

She screamed my name, cried out for me; of all the names she could choose, she called out *mine*.

And I couldn't do *anything*.

I didn't even see the car. Because I was down on my knees before I could react, the world knocked out of me. All I remember is seeing her body tossed over the hood, her head smashing into the windshield, then somersaulting over the car like a rag-doll and landing on the cold pavement. The car was gone and no one knows who did it. I was on my knees, shrieking in the alley, seeing it over and over, replayed in my mind like a skipping diskette. Her body flung up, her head smashing the windshield, her body flipping, hair spinning and arms flailing, and then her landing on the ground and lying so still.

I don't remember running to the curb. I don't remember falling beside her. But I do remember her looking up at me, blood covering her forehead, curling along the broken spine of her nose and casting shadows in her eyes. She shivered on the ground, almost writhing, and she reached up a shaking hand and grabbed my sleeve. Tears gushed down my face as she cried out my name, weaker and weaker, blood staining the sides of her mouth. She whimpered my name, her grip on my sleeve growing weaker, and then her voices were overtaken by the gurgling of fluid in her lungs. Her grip weakened completely, and her hand slid to the ground.

Her chest ceased to move. The blood continued to darken her face, but underneath, the skin grew a pale and icy white. Her eyes, what weren't hidden behind a veil of blood, seemed to widen and grow empty, becoming vacant. Lifeless.

Kneeling beside her, I wrapped my hands around her, and hovering over her, allowing disjointed tears to flow, I whispered in weak pleas, summoning all my strength, "Wake up... Wake up... Wake up..."

This is all I knew. I hovered over her, my tears mingling with her blood, feeling the weight of her body—my child!—in my arms. I kept seeing her over and over, the gruesome accident. I kept hearing her gentle laughter replaced with the chilling scream just before the phantom car hit her. I kept seeing her head smashing into the windshield, sending the glass into a webbed mosaic. I kept seeing her body twisting and turning in the air before landing hard on the ground and not moving. I kept seeing the blood covering her face and the blood cutting off her cries. I kept seeing the blood in her mouth and heard it filling her lungs, her broken body bleeding all over. I kept feeling her arms grabbing at me, grabbing for hope, grabbing for existence, and then the grip lessening until her arm fell. I kept seeing her eyes grow cold and hollow and then I held a body that was not her—that was not my child—in my hands.

I couldn't save her; she had called out for *me*, she had wanted *me*, but I wasn't able to help her. God, I wasn't able to help her...

And through all of this I kept hearing her shrieks, her shrill voice sobbing my name.

I couldn't help her. I could give her everything she desired...

But I couldn't help her.

And then I felt hands all over me, pulling me back. I felt her body slide from my hands and fall back on the pavement, lying in a pool of blood reflecting the moon and stars. I heard shouts and cries all around me, but it didn't register. All I knew was that she was leaving me, and I leaving her; I kept hearing her call my name. I violently resisted the hands, tore away from them, and on my hands and knees, scrambled for her, screaming her name in broken sobs. The hands tackled me and dragged me away, up onto the curb, and pinned me against the wall of the bus garage.

I twisted to the side and vomited all over the grass. Someone patted me on the back and was speaking to me, but I couldn't hear him. Because all I heard were her screams.

Flashing lights filled the street from every direction. Tears blurred my eyes but I could see people in uniforms running around, asking questions. I saw them huddling around her and I yelled at them to leave her alone. One of them came over and knelt beside me, asked my name. I told him to let her go. He asked my name again. And then I asked him to bring her back. He looked at me in the quiet and told me he needed to know my name. I told him and he left, leaving two more uniformed people with me. I saw them take Jena and load her into an ambulance. And then they left the street and she was gone. More tears.

The man who had asked me my name came over and knelt down. "We're going to take you home, okay?"

I replied in broken words and syllables, "I... No... Stay... Let me... See... See her..."

The man shook his head. "You need to go home." He looked to those watching over me. "Take him home. Do his parents know?"

They said, "They're being called now."

The man cursed under his breath. "I hate this %&\$#@!% job."

What happened after that is known only because people have told me. The police officers took me home and my parents embraced me. Both were crying. They had been told the entire story on the phone. Dad slipped some sleeping pills in my drink and gave me some water. I forced it down and Mom held me until I fell asleep. Then she laid me on my bed and stayed at my side, watching me sleep and scattering the floor with her tissues. She knew depression once again that night.

I do remember my dream. I remember seeing her almost get hit by the car, and I see myself grabbing her and pulling her back just as the car swept by. She brushed herself off and thanked me, and we kissed in the

alley. And we got married. And we had our baby. And we got a small house with a white picket fence and watched our children grow up and get married and have families.

But when I woke up in the morning, I knew it was all just a dream.

Life is never really like that. Don't get your hopes up.

I want to kill myself again.

Popularity.

Fame.

Wealth.

None of this was my dream.

I didn't want recognition. I didn't want applause.

I wanted a simple life.

I wanted awesome friends who would be there for me no matter what.

I wanted a wife with whom I could talk about anything, a wife who would always be there for me and I for her.

I wanted children. I wanted to watch them grow up and get married and have families of their own.

I wanted a small house, a white picket fence.

I wanted to sleep in on Saturdays and go to my kids' baseball games.

Barbecues and parties and maybe even church with laughter and love.

This is what I wanted. This is *ALL* I wanted.

And it looked like it was coming. My dream, breathed into life!, before my very own eyes.

But this is how it always happens.

It is taken away.

My dream was known. My dream was mine.

But I wasn't allowed to have it.

And I never will.

Chapter Nine

Holding onto the phone,
 Holding onto this glass,
 Holding onto the memory of what didn't last.
 Waiting for better words,
 They'll never come.
 So dry your eyes,
 It's better,
 Now it's done...

- Straylight Run, *Now It's Done*

I don't have much recollection of that Sunday. I do know that I didn't leave the house, but remained inside, down in my bedroom, under the covers. Not sleeping, no, I was awake, but I didn't have the energy—the desire—to move. I let my mind swim in a sea of thoughts, none too happy—and they really never are, anymore. Mom and Dad kept peeking in, and even my little sister stuck her head in the door once. No one came in. Mom left in the morning, and Dad held off police and reporters. I could hear him cussing some out upstairs, something he never would do, something out-of-character.

Mom returned around noon with a sandwich. Before she said anything, I broke the silent barrier: “No. I'm not hungry.”

“You really should-“

“I don't want it!” I told her harshly.

She paused before my bed, said in a mouse-whisper, “Okay,” and left. She shut the door behind her.

Sometime later my little sister came in, silently, and sat on the edge of the bed. “Do you want me to leave?” she asked, hesitantly, cautiously, as if expecting me to lurch up and throw her to the ground.

“No,” I said. “No, it's okay.”

“Okay,” she said. And she didn't say anything else. She just sat on the edge of the bed, blankly staring at the wall.

Finally I spoke up. “What do you want?”

She answered slowly, “To be with you.”

“Why?”

She looked over her shoulder. “Because you're my big brother.” A tear speckled her eye.

I leaned up on my elbows, then pulled myself to a sitting position. I opened my arms. “Come here,” I said. She scooted over and I wrapped her inside my arms, squeezing tight, just as I'd squeezed Jena the night before. She cried into my shoulder. I found it odd, that I was the one who should've been mourning, but my little sister, whom had grown distant, was the one weeping. I stroked her back and told her it was okay.

I trudged upstairs with my backpack a few hours later. Dad was in the garage. He didn't say much, then, “You're going back to the campus?”

“Yeah,” I said.

Tentatively, “Are you sure you can handle it?”

“Yeah.”

“Okay. The car's on the curb.”

As I walked away, he called out, “Have a good week.”

I didn't say anything back.

The first day of actual classes (Early Week wasn't considered an ‘actual’ class, since it was condensed) went by slowly. I remember going room-to-room. Everyone was laughing and having a ball, bouncing around, giddy to see each other again, greeting those they'd met at orientation or during Early Week, or just getting to know each other. I found my chair in the far back corner next to the window, where I could star out at the parking lot that breached the View, overlooking the mountainous Maine countryside.

I spent all day Monday and Tuesday, when outside of classes, inside my dorm room. I was either on the computer or staring out the window. I met my roommate, but we didn't really have any deep conversations. To be honest, I think he was a little put off by me. I couldn't blame him. My entire manner existence was highlighted by secluding myself and not talking to anyone. I wasn't in the mood to talk. All I did was sit, ponder, think about the past, think about what had happened.

On Wednesday I drove back down to my hometown for the funeral.

On the way there, as I navigated the winding roads, I felt lightheaded and dizzy, and nearly saw spots before my eyes, contemplating just driving the car into the mountain-face, or tearing it through a guardrail and letting it carry me down to join Jena. I really wanted to. But I kept seeing my little sister. I kept feeling her crying into my shoulder. That thought alone, the fact that she had come to me, the only one able to bring comfort, kept me from killing myself on that road that day.

I didn't go home first, even though I promised my parents I would. They never yelled at me about it, though. Once I pulled off the highway, I had to drive down Main Street to get to the funeral home on the hill. As I drove along, 25 mph, I looked out my left window as I passed the bus garage and saw the pavement where Jena had lain only a few nights before. The pavement was cleaned, all the blood gone, and some kids were playing roller-hockey. Tears welled behind my eyes but I forced them down.

After parking in the funeral home, I went inside and found the director. He told me, "Sorry, we're not open for another hour--"

"Please let me stay," I said.

He almost protested, but I guess he recognized who I was, and backed down. "Oh... Okay. Well. Don't... Okay." He turned and left me in the parlor.

I sat on one of the couches, watching as he put out the guestbook sign-in. He kept looking over at me, as if uncomfortable. When he left the room to prepare in the main reception area, I stood and walked over to the podium holding the guestbook. I took the pen attached to the podium by a chain and opened the guestbook, opened it to a fresh page.

Jena's name was at the top.

I closed my eyes, fighting back the tears. *No. No...*

I still didn't want to believe it. Somehow, it was still a dream. I kept hoping I'd wake up and everything would be okay. I kept hoping I'd wake up to my alarm clock and realize I still had to sit through a Friday class of Psychology. I kept wishing my fiancé was alive—and remembering the baby, I kept feeling my heart break, again and again.

"Hi," came the voice.

I turned. Jena's mom stood there, clutching her purse. Her eyes were bloodshot. "Hi," I replied.

She bit her bottom lip and approached. I closed the book and set down the pen.

The director entered. "Are you the mother?" he compassionately inquired.

She wrung her hands over the leather strap of the purse. "Yes."

He looked over at me, then back to her. "Can I speak with you?"

She nodded and followed him into the other room. I opened the book again but didn't write anything. Their voices floated into the room, hushed and muffled.

Director: "You didn't speak to the coroner, did you?"

Mother: "He called, but... I just haven't wanted to speak to him."

"That's understandable." A pause. "Ma'am, this may come as a surprise--"

"I know," she said. "I know what you're going to tell me."

"You know?"

"Yes."

Another pause. "Usually we let the parents decide what to do with--"

"Let her stay with her mother."

"That's what we did."

"She would like that."

Uncomfortably, "In the other room, the boyfriend, is he--"

"Yes," she said. "Yes, he is."

Another pause. "God. God, I'm so sorry. Does he... Does he know?"

"I don't know. I don't know if he told her."

"God, I hope not."

"Is that my daughter over there?"

My heart melted.

The director didn't answer. "Ma'am? You haven't talked to the coroner?"

"No..."

"We found this on your daughter."

"So?"

"We tracked the sale. It was purchased about an hour from here at a J.C. Penney."

"What is it?"

"An engagement ring."

I shut the book and stepped back, closing my eyes, balling my fists.

My fiancé.

My child!

Footsteps came towards me. She said my name. I didn't open my eyes. A hand brushed the back of my neck, and her hand touched mine. "I think she would want you to have this." I felt the ring drop into the soft palm of my hand.

I swallowed, throat knotting. I opened eyes speckled with tears. "I'm sorry..." I choked.

The woman smiled and shook her head. "No. No. I would've chosen no one else."

I embraced her, and it didn't even feel awkward. She was like a mother to me. She squeezed me and patted me on the back. "Everything will be okay," she said. "Everything will be okay."

I didn't go into the reception area throughout the entire procession. My parents came through and paid their regards, then stood with me for several moments, in the corner of the room.

Dad asked, "Why aren't you with her mother? Beside the casket?"

I didn't want to go in there. "She's family."

"You were part of her family," he said. "I talked to her mother. She told me about it."

I closed my eyes. "What're you going to do?"

He grabbed my shoulder and squeezed. "I'm really proud of you. You know that?"

"Dad-"

"No. I know that Jena was... I know she was pregnant."

"I'm sorry... We only did it once, and-"

"No, no, no. *Listen*. It's okay. You and Jena... You guys were meant for each other."

"But we're not together," I said coldly. "And no amount of sentiment can change that."

Destiny came through the line and approached me. I acknowledged her presence with a nod. She hugged me; it was awkward, but I hugged back.

"I'm so sorry," she whispered in my ear. "I'm so sorry."

"It's okay," I said. "Thanks for coming."

"Yeah," she breathed. "Yeah, no problem."

Alex and Hope, despite having gone off to college, showed up. Alex embraced me as a friend and said, "If there's anything I can do-"

"You've done enough," I said. "Thanks for coming."

Hope appeared behind him. "I'm sorry. I really am. I know... I know how much she meant..."

"Thanks for coming," I said.

We talked for a little bit, nothing deep. I kept hearing people crying in the other room. Why wasn't *I* crying?

Hope said, "I'm sorry for... For how I've treated you. Okay? I know it was wrong."

"Don't worry about it-"

"No. No. Because I *do* feel bad. I feel really, *really* bad. I was shallow."

"I forgive you. Don't you Christians know what forgiveness is?"

"Some of us," she said with a smile. And then she kissed me on the cheek. "Thank you."

Cameron approached from out of the corner of my eye and wrapped an arm around my neck. "Hey, Man," he said. He didn't say anything else, nor did he have to.

Before he left, I said, “Thanks, Man. Really. Thanks.”
“You’re like a brother to me,” he said.
Caleb came, but didn’t visit me at all.

The funeral hall cleared out. Mom and Dad and my little sister left. Alex and Hope had to return to their college. Cameron and Caleb left. Destiny had to go to Wednesday night church, and Jena’s mother was leaving as she found me still standing beside the podium, the guestbook open. “Are you going to sign it?” she asked. Her voice was shaky, as she’d been crying all night.

“No. No, I don’t think so.” I closed the book.
She almost said something, but didn’t. “See you tomorrow.”
“Okay.”
She bit her upper lip and departed.
The director came into the room. “I’m about to close the casket.”
“Wait,” I said. “Wait. Okay? Can I have some time... You know.”
He nodded. “Yeah. I’ll be downstairs. Just... get me when you’re done.”

She looked the same. She looked identical. But at the same time, she looked completely different. There was something missing, something gone, and that something was her. That something was not an ‘it’, but a ‘who.’ It was Jena. I looked down upon a body, looked down upon closed eyes and a slit for a mouth. I looked down upon wavy chocolate hair. I looked down upon nimble fingers and a small nose. I looked down upon the one who’d I held in my arms, the one whom I had kissed, the one who had smiled largely as I slid the ring onto her finger.

I fell to my knees beside the casket, my forehead touching the lip of the polished wood.

I tried to speak but all that came were muffled, hurried, choking breaths.

When I finally stood, I moved my hand upon her stomach, and pulled back the sweater, exposing the soft skin of her—its—abdomen. There was a stitched incision in the stomach, and I placed my hand upon it, shivering at its frigid coolness. Within here, I knew, was my child. *My child.*

Tears watered my eyes. I looked up to the empty silence. A clock ticked in the other room.

I hate you, I thought. I hate you. I hate you. I hate you. I hate you. And then I voiced it to the heavens, to the One whom Alex and Hope and Destiny all pledged loyalty to. *“I hate you.”*

And I left the funeral home and the casket.

I didn’t go home. I went to the park, to the gravel drive, and stopped the car. I sat inside for an eternity, then felt compelled to open the door and step out. I walked around to the hood and sat down atop of it, looking up and staring at the stars while wrapping my jacket around me. They twinkled down at me, almost smiling upon me, but I didn’t smile back. A soft wind rustled the trees. I kept hearing the rain that wasn’t there. I kept feeling myself embracing her in the downpour. I kept seeing her inside the car. I kept hearing her: “Don’t leave me, okay?” *I won’t. “Do you promise?” Yeah. I promise.*

I got back into the car and started the engine.

The moonlight slivered over the hood.

“@&#\$ you,” I growled to the creator of those stars.

The next day I found myself standing on a small knoll of grass surrounded by eroding tombstone. The sun held high and the air was chilly. Everyone wore black and crowded around the six-foot grave surrounded by roses and daisies and lilies. When I saw the flowers, I thought of meeting in the school parking lot. The preacher spoke on Heaven, and said, “She’s with God and the angels now. She is before the Throne, worshipping the Creator.”

Why would she worship Him? Why would she worship the One who took her—and her baby?

The preacher continued, “She lives in a state of eternal bliss...”

No. She doesn’t live. She doesn’t experience anything.

She’s gone.

And she’s still gone.

Nothing will change that.

I was at school for Friday and went to classes. The school pretty much empties out on the weekends, as it is a small college and most of the residents live less than an hour or two away. I didn’t go home. I didn’t want

to go home. I didn't want to be anywhere near it. I stayed in my dorm room all day Friday. Mom kept calling but I didn't answer the phone. My roommate kept asking me what was wrong but I just kept throwing off his questions. Finally his concern became too irate for me to handle so I left the dormitory altogether, walking the grounds. A bunch of girls smiled and waved at me but I didn't return it. I found myself standing at the View again. I sat down on the bench and thought of Jena. All weekend I returned to the bench and thought of nothing except Jena. I remembered everything we'd done, from the very day I met her in modern literature to Thursday when they laid her to rest in the earth.

The good friend who had met me at the View before Jena's death came and quietly asked if he could sit down. I scooted over, and like I had done before, I patted the bench. "Sure."

He sat down and let out a thick-coated breath. "I may be treading holy ground—"

"It's all right."

He clicked his teeth, nervous, and said, "Why were you gone? Wednesday and Thursday? I mean... If you don't want to answer, then—"

"Have you ever had a girlfriend, Matthew?" I asked, cutting him off.

"Yeah. Sure. I have one right now. In my hometown."

"What's her name?"

"Kayla."

"Have you know her a while?"

"About all my life," he said.

"Really?"

"Yeah," he said, grinning. "She's amazing."

The sun was setting behind us, casting the shadow of the mountains over Maine. "How'd you get together?"

His eyes sparkled as he spoke. "It was August. We had gone car shopping that day, and I took her to the doctor for a lung check-up. She has some problems with her lungs, has had to be in the hospital a few times. By then I knew... I knew we were always going to be 'just friends.' You know? I had pretty much given up on there being anything between us. That night we went to a Vacation Bible School at her church and when we got back to her house, she and her mom got in this big fight, and her mom completely embarrassed her in front of me. She was so upset... And since my car was at the church, she had to take me back... So we got back to the church building and it was almost midnight. We get out of the car, and I can tell she's really bothered by what had happened. I gave her this giant bear-hug and told her everything would be all right, told her I would always be there for her. I started walking and she just *lost* it. She was crying, falling against the car, so I walked over there and pulled her into my arms. And wiping the tears from her face, I asked her to 'be my girl.' She cried more, because she was so shocked, so happy."

I let his words sink into me. What did I feel? Frustration. Anger. And even resentment. "That's a wonderful story."

"I know. I love her so much—"

"But you were wrong," I said gravely, standing. I didn't look at him. "It's never going to be all right."

Mom got some phone calls from some Professors near the end of the week, and they told her that I had been skipping class. I kept avoiding her calls, but then she called from my sister's cell phone and caught me off-guard. She didn't yell or anything. She was understanding about it. She just asked me to come home. "We missed you last weekend." I told her I didn't feel like coming home; I didn't want to be around any of that stuff anymore. I wanted to be as far from her as possible. I almost felt wicked—sometimes I wanted to forget Jena and all the times we shared, all the feelings we'd experienced, all that we had together. It was these times that were most difficult to bear, for I would go to a secluded spot on the campus and sometimes cry. Part of me, too, I think, lived in constant denial.

How comes nothing ever works out? How come we're left to our own little games and chivalry, left to fight for breath on this godforsaken planet? How come whenever a touch of cool air touches our tongue and breathes even a *whisper* of relief, it is snatched away? Day after day I grew colder and colder towards the people around me. I didn't go into the dormitories unless I had to sleep, and I missed almost all my classes. Often I wandered off campus and walked through the mountains. Sometimes I committed suicide, wondering if I could actually do it. I contemplated what lay on the other side of death—anything at all? Heaven and Hell? For just a brief moment I thought of Jena in Hell and I wanted to rip God to shreds. But I calmed down and returned to the campus. The college was threatening me with scratching my enrollment. What did I care?

"Come home," Mom pleaded. "For the weekend."
"Mom--"
"We're worried about you. I talked to your roommate..."
"You don't even *know* my roommate, Mom."
"I called your room and he answered. He told me you're never around. He says you just run off and don't come back till nightfall. You're not handling this very well--"
"How the @\$#% do you want me to handle it?!"
Silence on the other end.
I drew a deep breath. "Look. I'm sorry."
"It's okay," she said quickly. "Just come home. Please? We all miss you..."
"Fine," I said. "Fine. I'll come home."
"And try to go to class?"
"Sure," I said. So I went to class the next two days.

I parked on the curb and walked up the driveway. Dad was in the garage working on the van. His radio was blasting, so I frightened him with I nudged him in the side. The look of fright wore off and he abandoned the van to embrace me as a prodigal son. He washed his hands of oil and led me inside the house, telling me how empty the house had been without me. "The dog hasn't been the same since you left."

We went out and were trying to find a place to eat.
My little sister said, "Let's eat at Applebee's."
"No," I said. "Not Applebee's."
"It's ½ price appetizers," Mom said.
"Fine," I said, not wanting to stir up *any* conflict. "Applebee's is fine."
We were seated. Right next to the high-top where Jena and I had sat.
The same waitress who had waited on us that day so long ago came by. She remembered me and said, "Hey, how are you? Where's that cute girl you were with?"
I set my menu down, stood, and walked out of the restaurant.
I pulled a half-smoked cigarette from the dispenser and put it into my mouth, drawing from it gently. Dad pushed open the door and saw me. He opened his mouth to tell me to drop it but didn't. Instead he sat down on the curb beside me. I sat down with him and drove the cigarette butt into the asphalt.
Dad reached into his pocket and pulled out a pack of Camel's. "Want one?"
"I didn't know you smoked."
"I just started. Don't tell Mom. She'd have a fit."
I managed a smile and took one. He lit it for me and we sat on the curb with our cigarettes.
"We shouldn't have come here," Dad said. "I'm sorry. I don't know what we were thinking--"
"It's okay," I said. "It's just... It's just really hard to bear. I mean... I'm having a hard time with it."
"And why shouldn't you?" He flicked some ashes onto his shoes. "You loved her. God, you loved her. I could see it. You got her pregnant. But you were going to marry her. You even had the ring. You proposed to her."

"I didn't know that you knew about that."
"Oh, I find out about these things. Her mom talks to me."
"How is she doing?"
He sighed. "I don't know. About the same as you, I wager."
"I should visit her," I said. "Or send her a card. Or something."
"You're like her son, you know. She speaks very highly of you."
"I was her son-in-law. You were right. I asked Jena to marry me. Foolish? It was only three months--"
"No. Not foolish. I believe in love at first sight. And I think you believe in it, too. Even more so."
"Yeah."
We continued smoking. Mom and my little sister were ordering the appetizers.
"Destiny keeps calling. She wants to talk to you."
"I don't really want to talk to her."
"But you should. You really should. I know she's really annoying and cynical at times, but... But she really likes you."
"All she wants to do is save me."
"I think she learned her lesson."
"People like that don't learn lessons. They're too narrow-minded to learn anything."

"She just wants to go to a haunted house with you on Sunday. Can't you do that? It's not even church."

"Fine. I guess."

"It'll give you something to do."

"I said yes."

He smothered his cigarette. "Are you going to come inside and eat with us?"

"We're right next to the table where me and Jena sat on our first date."

He bit his lip. "I'll get a box for you."

I met Destiny at her house and she offered to drive. Danielle was tagging along, the creationism girl who had been a pain in the joints while we were working on the creationism-evolution debate. I said Hi to her, but she didn't say Hi to me but I didn't care. I rode shotgun with Destiny. She kept talking about things her church was doing, and when I asked if we could change the subject, she—amazingly—said O.K. I asked what this haunted house was like. She said, "It's one of the most bloody and scary and graphic ones in the state."

When we pulled into her church, I felt my bowels curl. "Wait a minute—"

"Relax," she said, pulling into a parking space and shutting off the car.

I felt like a dog who had been unknowingly led to the vet. "What about the haunted house?"

"This *is* the haunted house," she answered. "Now come on."

I opened my door and stepped onto the pavement. A big glowing sign was hanging in front of the youth wing of the church and it read: "HELL HOUSE: IT'LL SCARE THE HELL OUT OF YOU!" I muttered under my breath, "Oh God..."

"What was that?" Destiny asked as Danielle joined us.

"Nothing," I said. "How much does this cost—"

"I've got it covered," she said. "What're friends for?"

The line was incredibly long. We had to wait in the back for nearly half an hour before the man at the door took our cash and let us inside. There were signs all over the walls making sure we knew that what we were about to experience wasn't just for fun, but was a warning.

I wanted to slap Destiny across the face. But I resisted. Didn't have the energy.

As we began the tour, we walked over a hole in the floor covered with Plexiglas; there was a reddish mist underneath and hands pressing against the glass, crying out for help, unable to escape. I stopped and stared down at them.

"Keep moving," Destiny urged. "This is just the beginning."

The Hell House was divided into scenes showing peoples' sins and the penalties for them (Hell). The first scene involved a school shooting, a kid who was deranged. A demon kept whispering into his ear, "Kill them and kill yourself... What else is there?" So he shot a bunch of the kids then put the gun to his head and pulled the trigger. Blanks were used, of course, but it was horrifying just to watch the kid fall. Then the room was bathed in a hellish maroon glow and the demon grabbed him, kicking-and-screaming, and dragged him behind a curtain, saying, "Hell is where *you're* going!"

We kept walking.

Someone behind us muttered, "They pay so much attention to all these sins and forget the fact that Jesus never mentioned this stuff. He was more worried about being judgmental and condemning—exactly what's going on here."

I looked over to Destiny to see how she reacted. Her face was scrunched like a bow-tie.

The next exhibit was even chillier. A girl took some pops at a rave scene and was raped; she got pregnant and a demon was telling her, "God's punishing you for your sin! Look at you! You're such a horrible person!" She slits her wrists in desperation and the demon, maniacally laughing, yanks her shrieking into the fiery abyss.

As we walked, I asked Destiny, "Are you sure that's what it's like? I mean, demons and all?"

"Yeah, we're sure," she said. "It's in the scriptures."

"Oh."

The guy behind us who had been muttering said something to himself again: "Straining at a gnat and swallowing at a camel... Whatever happened to mercy, compassion, forgiveness, acceptance?"

Destiny's brow furrowed again.

"Don't like that guy, do you?"

She said, "Some people just don't get it. God has laws. We have to obey them all."

The next exhibit was just around the corner as the tour group led us.
“Oooh,” Destiny said, tugging at my arm. “This one is good.”

The boy in the hospital bed leaned up on his elbows and screamed, “Why did this have to happen to me?! Why did I have to get AIDS?!”

A demon behind him muttered, “This is the punishment for your homosexuality! This is what you asked for. Now you’ll burn!”

The boy cried out, “No! No! I was born this way! I swear, I was born this way!” He died.

The lights in the room burned blood-red. The demon grabbed him. “Now join all your homosexual friends where you belong! A lake of fire and torment!”

The tour guide led us onwards. I was mortified.

Why did Christians always have to be so... hateful?... towards gays.

I didn’t know much about Jesus. But I knew He was loving, not condemning.

And I know that those he condemned weren’t the notorious sinners, but the religious elite...

The next stop was another hospital room. A girl lay upon a bed, crying, legs spread, blood everywhere. She was sobbing and crying out, “Why did this have to happen to me?! Why did my baby have to die?!”

A demon behind her replied, “Your baby died because of your sin. You knew having premarital sex was wrong. God took your baby because of your sin! And now He will take your own life!”

Suddenly the room was bathed in red light and the demon grabbed the girl.

That’s when things got crazy.

Suddenly the girl became Jena. Jena was screaming as the demon dragged her and her baby into Hell. She was screaming, screaming for someone to help her, and then she screamed my name. I saw the terror in her eyes. I saw the fear written all over her face. I saw her arms reaching out for me. I heard her crying my name as if salvation were found in my name and none other.

What happened next is hard for me to piece together. All I remember is a blur of faces, my throat swarming with tears and rage. I remember throwing open a back door and being yelled at by a security guard. I remember stumbling out the back and falling down beside a fire hydrant, vomiting everywhere. I remember falling onto my side and screaming. I remember rolling into a fetal position, the tears drenching my shirt as Jena’s blood had drenched her own. I rocked back and forth in the chill, people in the line staring at me. Two people crawled out of the line and ran towards me. They knelt down. Alex and Hope. Hope looked at me in shock. Alex hopelessly stared at me.

Destiny was running towards us. “What happened?” she called out. “Is he all right?”

Alex looked up at her. “What happened to him?!” he demanded.

She stopped short. “How should I know? He just ran out like a banshee and-“

Hope grabbed my hand and wrapped it in hers. “It’s going to be okay...”

The tears weren’t slowing. I heard them all arguing. All I heard was Jena’s screams. Screaming my name.

Destiny eventually ran off. Hope sat on the fire hydrant, looking the other direction. It took several tries, but eventually Alex enabled me to stand. My breathing was ragged and enflamed, and my cheeks burned like roses. My hair was saturated with dirt from the ground and my face was streaked with tear-laced mud. He hugged me and said, “Come on.”

We walked to the parking lot and sat on the hood of his car. Hope came along, too.

I stopped crying for a little bit and just shook my head.

“@\$% her,” I finally said. “@\$% her. @\$% all this.”

Alex glanced over to Hope, but she just gave a blank-faced stare.

“What happened?” he asked me.

Words weren’t forming. They just rolled off my tongue. They came as sorrow-soaked whispers. “I just want her back, Alex. I just want her back. That’s all I want.”

He wrapped an arm around my shoulder. “I know, Man. I know.”

“I just want her back...” And I cried into his shoulder.

Chapter Ten

Of all the things I've believed in
I just want to get it over with
Tears form behind my eyes
But I do not cry
Counting the days that pass me by

I've been searching deep down in my soul
Words that I'm hearing are starting to get old
It feels like I'm starting all over again
The last three years were just pretend
- Michelle Branch, *Goodbye to You*

Dad convinced me to at least *attend* my classes, said it would make things easier. It didn't, but I obliged and went anyway. I sat through science and math and English classes. Sometimes I did my work. Sometimes I didn't. The professors were worried about me; looking at my High School transcript, they couldn't understand it. I had graduated top of my class, and yet I was skirting on failing all of my classes.

One of my professors grabbed me and asked, "What's going on? Talk to me."

I turned my shoulder to him. "I'm fine," I muttered.

"No, no," he said again, grabbing me. "Look at me."

I wrenched away and hollered, "Why the @\$%# would you care?"

He stared at me blankly as I stormed from the room.

Mom called a few days later. "Jena's mom... She was found dead in her home."

I didn't say anything at first. "How?"

"It wasn't suicide. It looked like... Like she died of grief. It's what we're being told."

I became a walking zombie. I didn't know what real sleep felt like. At night I would lie in my bed and stare at the ceiling, just *remembering*. Remembering Jena and all the times we had together. Remembering what it felt like—that feeling of fulfillment, completion, holistic well-being. Remembering her smile, her laugh. Remembering what it felt like to hold her. Sometimes, perhaps driven by exhaustion, the memories became near-realities, and I could almost feel her breath, feel her smooth and tingling skin, smell her lavender hair. When this happened, and I realized it was all a farce, I would make my way out of the dorm room, stagger down the hall, enter the community bathrooms, and finding a stall, I would proceed to empty out my stomach with gurgling and gasping sounds. I would fall weak-kneed to the tile floor and just hover over the toilet as my face contorted and tears slid down my face, burning like sulfuric acid.

One of the nurses on campus drew me out of one of my classes and said, "Come with me." She took me to the nurse's office. Sitting me down, she said, "The professors have been worried about you. They told me what's been going on. Do you want to talk about it?"

"No."

The nurse nodded. "Okay... I hope you don't mind, but I called your parents..."

"What is this, a @\$%&*! nursery school?"

She didn't stop. "They told me you've suffered a recent loss. Someone very close."

My eyes glazed over. "I'm fine."

"I'm not here to dive into your personal life, okay? I'm a physician, not a psychiatrist."

"Then can I go?"

"You're deprived of sleep. Your actions, your attitude, your physique screams this."

"So what if I haven't been able to sleep well?"

"I'm going to give you some medicine," she said. "Is that okay? It'll help you sleep better."

"Fine. Sure. Whatever."

She tossed me a bottle. "That'll knock you out pretty good. The first few nights may be rough."

"Rough?"

“You’ve been deprived of sleep, so when you go out so quickly, you might have some nightmares.”

“Wonderful.”

“But you’ll feel *much* better come morning.”

“Thanks,” I said, sliding the pills into my jeans pocket. “Now can I go?”

“Yes,” she said, opening the door. “Thank you.”

After brushing my teeth and taking out my contacts, I sat down on my bed and held the bottle in my hands. My room mate was out with his girlfriend, so I was completely alone. I unscrewed the cap and withdrew a pearl-white cap. Swallowing it down, I made a few hacking noises, screwed the lid back on, and took a swig of Diet Mountain Dew from our refrigerator. I crawled underneath the covers and stared at the ceiling as I always did. Except this time my eyes were closing.

We were in the alley. She was crying, and I wrapped my arms around her, kept telling her everything would be okay. As she rubbed her tears onto my shirt, I kept saying, “We’re going to get married. And get a house. And make a family. It’s all going to be perfect. *Perfect.*” She looked up at me with watery eyes and smiled. “Perfect,” I said again. “Absolutely perf-“

She was smiling as blood trickled down her mouth and ears. She opened her mouth to talk, revealing a chasm filled with mucus-laden blood.

I threw her back in terror and stumbled to my feet.

Suddenly we were in the middle of the road, and she was shaking in spasms. I saw myself huddling over her, tears gushing. I saw her body lie still and heard my soft cries: “Wake up... Wake up... Wake up...” as I rocked back and forth on my heels.

Then I was on the curb, surrounded by the police as the medical examiners were pulling out a body bag. As they picked up Jena’s body to put it in the bag, her head rolled to the side. Her lucid eyes stared at me and she asked, gravely, “Why did you leave me? You promised you wouldn’t leave me!”

I awoke with a start, screaming: “*I didn’t leave you!*”

My room mate rolled awake, knocking over a stack of movies. He gawked at me. “Dude! Dude!”

I leapt up from my bed, chest heaving. “I didn’t leave you!” I shrieked. “I didn’t #@%&@# leave you!”

My room mate stayed in his bed, staring at me in shock.

I kicked open the door and rushed into the hallway, Jena’s words echoing inside of me.

Why did you leave me? You promised you wouldn’t leave me!

I ran down the hallway, submerged in darkness, wan moonlight coming in through the window at the end of the hallway.

My room mate ran out of the room, wrapping his robe around him. He called out my name.

I blasted into the stairwell and raced down them, exploding into the lobby. The lobby monitor saw me and said, “Quiet it down, would-“

I rushed past him and out the door, into the cold night air.

The monitor ran after me. “Wait! You can’t go out! It’s past curfew!”

My room mate shoved him out of the way and ran out the door after me.

The monitor didn’t leave the lobby. “You guys get back here!” he yelled. “I’ll call Security!”

My room mate yelled over his shoulder, “Go to Hell.”

I stumbled up a grass hill slick with yesterday’s rain, then collapsed against a tree, pressing my face into the trunk and clawing the bark with shaking fingers. My room mate crawled up the hill and came to rest beside me. He didn’t say anything, just let me cry into the tree. Finally I let go and leaned against the tree, breathing deeply. I wasn’t going to take anymore of that god-awful medicine.

“It’s freaking freezing out here,” my room mate said. “Do you want to go inside, Man?”

“I just want her back,” I told him weakly. “I don’t care about anything else. I just want *her.*”

“Come on. Let’s go inside.” He stood.

I didn’t join him. “She’s all I’ve ever wanted. How come she had to be taken? How could He had to take her?”

“What? No one took her. It was just an accident.”

“The people who ran over her... They were never found.”

“There are lots of horrible people.” He sat back down. “I know that doesn’t bring her back-“

“It doesn’t.”

“-but I just want you to know... You’re not alone. There are millions of heartbroken people all over the world. Don’t think you’re alone.”

“We’re all alone,” I told him. “We’re all #@%&#\$@ alone.”

My condition continued to grow worse. I flushed the pills down the toilet, as the dream didn’t leave me. I kept going to classes, but I couldn’t even function. I couldn’t concentrate. I had a talk with the Dean one afternoon, and he convinced me to go to a hospital for a check-up. They gave me some medicine that would enable me to sleep without dreaming, a new drug of some sort. That helped. But it didn’t alleviate the longing, the desire, the yearning I felt, every minute of every day, just to hold Jena, alive and breathing, in my arms.

I began to blame myself:

“What would’ve happened had I held her for just ten more seconds?”

“What would’ve happened had I not bought the engagement ring?”

“What would’ve happened had we gone down the alley a different way?”

“What would’ve happened had we stayed at the ice cream parlor?”

“What would’ve happened had I never met her at all?”

I convinced myself that I was responsible for her death.

Why did you leave me? You promised you wouldn’t leave me?

I had killed Jena.

Anger and resentment began to infiltrate my personality, began to characterize me as a person. I wasn’t nice to anybody. I didn’t smile or laugh. I didn’t acknowledge anyone. If someone tried to speak to me, I rudely shoved them away with my words, or gave them a bitter cold shoulder. Whenever I saw a guy and a girl holding hands or taking a walk together, I thought of me and Jena, and a quiet rage burned inside of me. I couldn’t contain it. Sometimes I wanted to kill myself. Other times I wanted to kill everyone else.

My birthday party didn’t go too well. I wrote about it earlier, when it actually happened. To sum things up, Mom and Dad found reason to become even more concerned. I know they sought outside conference—they went to a counselor and asked if the response was normal. I believe the counselor told them, “Periods of intense yearning are normal, and usually accompanied by the anger, resentment and agitation that your son has been experiencing. It’s not uncommon for the mourning to feel almost *guilty* for what has happened.” Mom asked if things got better. “Yes. They always do. The mourners move on. The mourners are able to cope and continue with life. Sometimes it takes a few months, other times a few years.” Mom said these were my college years. “There’s not much I can do for you. We have to let your son fight through this one himself.”

Christmas was approaching. I came down for a weekend and saw the police leaving our house. My dad saw me and his heart melted. “I need to speak with you,” he said, bringing me into the house. He sat me down at the kitchen table. “You saw them come by, right?”

“Yeah.”

Mom was in the other room assembling the Christmas tree and my little sister was organizing the ornaments.

Dad spoke low. “Do you remember that night?”

Stoically, “Yes.”

“Do you remember who was driving the car?”

“No.”

He cursed under his breath. “The forensics team working on the case... They had some leads and followed through, and they interrogated a suspect who admitted to... Admitted to...”

“Who was it?” I demanded.

A pause. “I can’t... I can’t tell you.”

“Why not?”

“Because... Because you know him.”

My eyes burned. “*Who?*”

“They’re not charging him. It was dark. You said she backed into the street...”

“*WHO?*”

The day before Christmas the telephone rang. I didn't answer it. Mom picked it up, came upstairs, and handed me the phone. "It's Cameron," she said.

I took the phone and cradled it to my ear. "Hello?"

"I need to speak with you."

"Okay."

"Not over the phone. I need to speak with you in person."

"Today?"

"I can't today... I'm in Louisville... I'll be home the twenty-sixth."

"The day after Christmas."

"Can we meet? I *really* need to talk with you."

"Sure," I said. "Want me to drive over to your house?"

"Meet me at the park," he said.

The doorbell rang the next morning. My little sister ran and opened it. Caleb stepped inside. He hugged and kissed her, then waved and Mom and Dad. When he saw me, his smile fell. A barrier that could not be breached had been raised between us, raised by some invisible force. I didn't care, though. I turned away and sat down beside the tree as we passed out presents. Mom and Dad bought presents for him and he bought some for them, too. His family never celebrated Christmas, they thought it was a sin, something about idolism from Jeremiah, if I hear correctly.

Caleb opened his gifts and smiled and found himself in family pictures.

I kept thinking of Jena being there with us. Our first Christmas. My fiancé.

Caleb asked me, "What'd you get next?"

I didn't respond at first, thinking only of Jena, then, "#@\$% you." I threw my present down and left the room, going out onto the snow-slick back porch. I was freezing but I didn't care. I just had to get out of there. I leaned against the wall with my feet going numb and just let the tears slide down my face before freezing into icicles and dropping into the ashen snow.

Dad asked me later that day, "Did he bother you?"

"What? Caleb?"

"Yeah."

"No. No, he didn't bother me. It's just... She should've been here. She should've been with us."

"Son-" He tried to wrap an arm around me.

I stepped away. "It doesn't matter. Because it's all pointless, isn't it."

"Son-"

"Do you still spend all your time on prayers for your family? I hope you see it's a @%!\$#*% waste of time."

I met Cameron at East Park as we had arranged. I sat in my car, wrapped up in a winter coat, and was cold even with the heat blasting. He appeared coming down the street, bearing the elements. I got out of my car and met him on the road. "What'd you need to talk to me about?"

His face was rosy from the cold. "I thought you should know."

"Know what?" I asked.

There was a certain urgency to him. "They told me not to tell you-"

"Tell me what?" I demanded. "Tell me *what*?"

He quickly answered, "I know who killed her. I know who hit her."

I said nothing, waiting. Snow fell all around us.

"He didn't mean to-"

"CAMERON!"

"Caleb," he breathed. He drew an even bigger breath. "Caleb hit her."

"Oh God-" I muttered, the world spinning.

Cameron pleaded, "I'm sorry. Don't tell him I told you-"

I fell against the wooden fence, knocking snow off the timber boards. "Oh God oh God oh God..."

Cameron grabbed my coat arm. "You can't tell him-"

I closed my eyes and saw her staring at me. And then I saw her getting hit by the car, head bashing into the windshield, body somersaulting. "Oh God-"

He repeated my name over and over. "Please don't tell him, please don't tell him..."

My eyes opened, glowing in a sublime sea of hatred. "He killed her. And he left."
 He said my name, urging me to calm down.
 "He killed her and ran. He just left here there to die."
 Cameron grabbed my coat arm again.
 I ripped away. "Get your #%\$&*!@ fingers off of me!" I stormed away, got into my car, and drove home, leaving Cameron all alone in the falling snow.

When I got home, I saw Caleb's car parked out on the curb. I opened the door to go inside, mind reeling, and ran into Caleb and my little sister, dressed up in coats, scarves, gloves and wool masks. My little sister said, "Hi," and Caleb just stared at me. I didn't answer her, just stared at Caleb.

"Where are you guys going?" I asked, amazingly serene.
 Caleb refused to answer. He averted his eyes.
 My little sister piped, "We're going to the park to take a walk. Do you want to come?"
 "No," I said quickly. "No." I shoved past, knocking Caleb into the wall.
 My little sister turned around. "Are you sure?"
 I walked upstairs. "You go on ahead. Maybe I'll meet you there."

They left the house. Mom and Dad were downstairs watching television; I could hear the station coming through the air ducts. I walked into their bedroom and opened the closet door. Kneeling down, I pulled out the safe and quickly put in the combination. I wasn't supposed to know it. The safe opened and I pulled out some papers, then withdrew what I was looking for. I shut the safe and stood, holding it in my hands.

A firm voice: "What're you doing?"
 My back was turned towards him. "Why didn't you tell me?" I demanded.
 "Son," he said. "Put it down."
 "You should've told me," I repeated, turning it over and over in my hands.
 "Put it down," he said again, louder.
 I turned around, my face contorted in rage, awash with the shadow of malice. "You care more about *him* than you do about *me*."
 He looked at the object in my hands. "Son... Son... No... You don't understand..."

Mom heard the gunshot. She raced upstairs and burst into the room to see Dad's body sprawled over the bed, a bloody hole sheared into his chest. She shrieked, falling to her knees, tears pouring down her face. I turned the 9mm over and over in my hands, the barrel warm.

She screamed at me, "*What'd you do?!?! What'd you do?!?!*"
 I looked over at her, saw the tears bloating her face. "He stabbed me in the back."
 "*What're you talking about?!?! You killed him!!!*"
 I raised the gun, pointing it at her.
 She fell against the wall, choking. "*No! Please! God! No! No!*"
 "There's only two more bullets," I told her. "And I need those." I left the room.

I'm down in my room right now. This journal is over. Things didn't work out as I expected them to. But if there's one thing I've learned, they never do. The gun is sitting on the desk right next to me. I can hear Mom screaming upstairs. Why did he have to care more for the murderer than for the victim? How can a father be like that? He wasn't my father. He's changed. Mom has changed. My little sister has changed. Everyone has changed. I'm the only one who's sane.

I have the gun. I can change all that.
God, forgive me.
 Jena, this is for you.
I never left you. I never left you. I never left you.

See you soon.

Epilogue

Official Police Transcript, January 2, 2006:

Arnold Tornbee: The recorder has been activated. Please state your full name.

#858: My name is Jennifer Dawn Ryan.

Arnold Tornbee: How old are you?

#858: Sixteen years old.

Arnold Tornbee: Do you understand why you are here?

#858: To testify to the events happening on December 26, 2005.

Arnold Tornbee: That is correct. Now. Can you tell me what happened that day?

#858: Caleb came over to hang out for a little while. We just... We went sledding in the backyard a little bit, then we decided to go to the park. We thought it would be pretty... As the sun was setting... With the creek frozen over and the fresh snow still falling... It was his idea.

Arnold Tornbee: Did you see your brother Bryan Grant Ryan before you left?

#858: We ran into him as we were walking out the door. He didn't look right.

Arnold Tornbee: Right?

#858: He looked disturbed. He didn't look like my brother.

Arnold Tornbee: You say disturbed? Can you elaborate on that?

#858: He was always just the quiet kid who always made you smile and laugh. Ever since his girlfriend, Jena, died, he had been changing. It was the grief. That's what made him change.

Arnold Tornbee: His grief over his girlfriend's death?

#858: He loved her. He wasn't really happy until he met her.

Arnold Tornbee: So he went from being nice to mean?

#858: It's more complicated than that. He went from being my brother to being someone else. He didn't laugh or smile anymore. He was always angry, always yelling, always cussing.

Arnold Tornbee: By the tone of your voice, I'm guessing he didn't cuss too often?

#858: Before the accident, hardly at all. But afterwards he would cuss out my parents and teachers.

Arnold Tornbee: Teachers at his college?

#858: Yeah.

Arnold Tornbee: Did you ever spend time with him? Alone?

#858: Only a few times. He grew detached from everyone else. Secluded himself. Dug himself a hole and stayed there.

Arnold Tornbee: The grief?

#858: Yes.

Arnold Tornbee: Did he ever display any maliciousness towards you or anyone in your family?

#858: No. Never. Like I said. He was changing. Something snapped that day. Something went wrong inside his head. I was told you read his journal?

Arnold Tornbee: Yes.

#858: What did it show? He was going more and more crazy. That's what it was.

Arnold Tornbee: When did you first run into your brother on your walk?

#858: It had been getting darker and darker. We were walking the path at East Park that runs along the woods. We were holding hands and laughing. I don't remember about what. And that's when he showed up.

She clung to Caleb's arm as he laughed. She had forgotten the joke, but just hearing his laugh made *her* laugh. Besides, it kept the cold away, and-

They came around a corner and Caleb stopped walking.

She looked at his face; the smile and laughter were gone. She followed his gaze.

He stood there, two arms dangling before him, both wrapped around an object pointing at the ground.

"Bryan?" the girl asked. "Bryan? What are you doing?"

He had no expression as he raised the gun, facing it at the two of them. Color flushed from their faces; the girl wanted to collapse.

Caleb didn't say anything. His heart turned colder than the icy world around him.

The girl croaked, "Bryan... Bryan, put down the-"
 "Get out of here," Bryan said quietly. "Just go home."
 "No. Bryan. *No.*"
 He glared at her. "Get the #\$%@ out of here!"

Arnold Tornbee: You didn't leave?

#858: No. No, I couldn't. He wasn't right in the head. I could see it in his eyes. He was crazy. He wasn't thinking. I kept trying to talk him out of it. He wouldn't listen.

"Bryan," the girl said. She said his name again, then, "Don't do this. Don't do this. Don't do this."
 Caleb's heart pounded, ribs expanding with each beat.
 The brother looked at his sister. "I don't want you to be here for this."
 "What's wrong with you?" the girl cried, stepping forward.
 His finger brushed the trigger. "Don't come any closer!"
 She raised her arms in the air. "Bryan. Bryan. I'm not going to hurt you, I just want to-"
 "This isn't about *you*," he growled. He moved the aim of the gun to point at Caleb's forehead. "It's about *him*."
 The girl wanted to scream. "What the @\$% is wrong with you?!"
 "He killed her!" he shrieked. "He @\$%*& killed her!"
 The girl shook her head. "What are you talking about?!"
 "He @\$%&!@ ran her over with his @\$%&*& car!"

Arnold Tornbee: Did you know about your father at this time?

#858: No. I had no idea.

Arnold Tornbee: And then what did your brother do?

#858: He shot him.

Her scream blended with the echo of the gun blast. She jumps back as a tide of broken bone, blood and brain matter wash over her. The corpse hits the ground, lying on its back, and his limbs are twitching, muscles contorting. She falls to her knees, shrieking, the blood warm against her. Her brother lowers the gun and is left to hear only the screams of his beloved sister.

Arnold Tornbee: I know this is rough. I understand. But we need to go on.

#858: I can go on.

Arnold Tornbee: I can give you some time.

#858: No. No. I'm okay.

Arnold Tornbee: All right. Then what happened?

"I'm sorry," he said, slowly moving the gun to press against his temple.
 She rocked back and forth on her heels. "*Oh God! Oh God! Oh God!*"
 "I love you," he said. "I'm so sorry. I love you so much."
 She cried out his name, just as Jena had cried out his name. She pleaded for him to stop.
 "I'm sorry," he said. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. Oh God. Oh God, I love you."

Arnold Tornbee: Did you believe him?

#858: With all my heart. That was my brother talking.

Arnold Tornbee: So your brother didn't hurt your boyfriend?

#858: That wasn't my brother. That was someone else.

Arnold Tornbee: Who was he when... When he did it?

"No..." she cried, sobbing. "*No... Don't do this...*"
 "I'm sorry," he said, looking at his sister covered in Caleb's blood. "Oh God, I'm so sorry..."
 "Bryan!" she shrieked. "Bryan!"
 "I can't live like this anymore."

#858: My brother pulled the trigger. He knew what he was doing. He was sane right then.

The gunshot swept over the snow-white park. His body fell into the snow, the gun sprawled out in his hand. The snow tinted red and melted under the steaming blood gushing from the exit wound in the back of his skull. The girl screamed and cried amidst the two bodies and clouds blocked the moon's light.

Hurt: Johnny Cash

I hurt myself today to see if I still feel.
I focus on the pain, the only thing that's real.
The needle tears a hole, the old familiar sting.
Try to kill it all away, but I remember everything.
What have I become?
My sweetest friend, everyone I know goes away in the end.
And you could have it all, my empire of dirt.

I will let you down.
I will make you hurt.

I wear this crown of thorns upon my liar's chair,
full of broken thoughts I cannot repair.
Beneath the stains of time, the feelings disappear.
You are someone else... I am still right here

What have I become?
My sweetest friend, everyone I know goes away in the end.
And you could have it all, my empire of dirt

I will let you down.
I will make you hurt.

If I could start again a million miles away,
I would keep myself.
I would find a way.

Note from the Author:

Four hours ago I had a completely different ending to this story. Yet as I worked on Chapter Ten, I was inspired to change its course completely. One of the greatest struggles in this work was the issue, “How to finish it?” I didn’t know what kind of affect I wished the work to have on you (the reader). Part of me wanted you to leave this book thinking, “Yes, there is hope in the world,” and another part of me wanted you to feel confused, bewildered, hopeless, depressed, and uncertain. I decided to go with attempting to leave the reader with a feeling of uneasiness.

Throughout all of my fiction, there is always the conflict of romantic desire and romantic tragedy. A few days ago as I was walking to my Jeep, I was contemplating this. “Why is this so? Why is it like this? How come I can’t ever have a happily-ending romance?” In *Starseed*, Ross Keppler’s girlfriend doesn’t remember anything. In my work *In the Name of Rome*, Manias is unable to return to his family. In *The Sons of Mars*, Marcellus’ beloved is killed by barbarians. In the currently most-popular of my works, *36 Hours*, Austin learns of his tragic loss just as the last few pages are coming to a close.

Why?

As I got into my Jeep, the answer came to me: “This is all I know.”

I directly identify with the character of this story. While our histories are almost completely different in many ways, I can relate to him easily. I know what he feels. I know what he goes through. I know how much he has desired romance. Many of the writings came straight out of my own day-to-day journals. At this, some might begin to take fright; my room mate asked, “Are you going to kill someone if your next romance doesn’t work out?”

No. Don’t worry about it. I am simply trying to capture what can be seen as the hopelessness of romance.

It is so fleeting, so hard to catch, so rare.

And once you have it, it can be taken away in a heartbeat, leaving you broken and decrepit.

In Public Speaking this semester, upon introducing myself, I elaborated on my fears: “I used to fear always being alone. Never having a family. Not anymore. I discovered that what I fear the most is having a beautiful and wonderful family—and then it being taken from me, especially by the hands of another.”

I hope I have captured the emotions of Bryan Grant Ryan well. In some ways, we can all relate to him.

And may your (and my) fortunes be better.