

M.L. Rice

Finding YOURSELF
can be THE
hardest PART of
growing up ...



WHO I
AM





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WHO I AM

by
M.L. Rice



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Dedication

For Amy.

CHAPTER ONE

Most people are relegated early in their school life to a specific social group. She's a band nerd, he's a jock, she's a slut, they're losers in the chess club, etc. Others lead a more fluid existence, flowing easily between different social interactions and freely sampling from the buffet of cliques that are to be found in every high school in America. They are respected by all and rejected by none because they don't judge people or try to pigeonhole a person based on their interests or the way they dress. These are the special few who have confidence in who they are, who become successful in almost everything they try, and who will always have the kind of friends that will have their back through any ordeal.

I am not one of these people.

My name is Devin Kelly, and where do I belong? I'm a computer geek, band nerd, bookworm, and loner. I think that about covers it. No, I was never in the chess club. I suck at chess. As a child my days were usually spent alone, taking solace in the faraway lands and people that I found in my books, playing video games, or practicing my beloved trumpet. Books and games let

me escape my dull existence, and band was a great place to meet like-minded people at every new school I was forced to attend.

I spent my early years being moved from town to town, never laying down roots, never having close friends, and never being able to discover who I really was. My father was a communications officer in the United States Air Force and my former homes included bases in England, Florida, Texas, and Kansas. My mother ran her own mail-order, and later, Internet-based business from home. She made kitschy, god-awful Air Force paraphernalia like hand-knit sweaters, coasters, picture frames, and pillow covers that she marketed to the mothers and girlfriends of Air Force personnel. This allowed her to be a stay-at-home mom while also generating income wherever we happened to be living at any given time.

As we moved from base to base I sometimes had a few friends, but military brats don't tend to keep them. We have classmates and people to hang out with, but lasting friendships are rare. Sooner or later one of your parents is transferred to another part of the world. We hug and cry and promise to write every chance we get, but after the first couple of months the texts and e-mails slow and then stop completely as new friends are made in new schools and the old are forgotten.

Living this nomadic life was hard on all of us, but my parents knew that it was hardest on me. They always encouraged me to be more outgoing so that I could at least have fun wherever I was, but I never fit in with the more popular girls, and the so-called friends I did have were merely acquaintances. The only real friendship I ever formed during those years was with Jeremy Hancock. His mother and father were officers stationed together

in England, and he and I were both in the seventh grade. Nerdy little Jeremy used to love coming over to my house after school to listen to Broadway soundtracks, and we'd act out the musical numbers. He would be Guinevere and I would be Lancelot (my voice was lower) from *Camelot*, or we would prance around and vogue as Velma and Roxie in *Chicago*. I've often wondered how he fared in a strict military household being the gentle spirit that he was. I was his only friend and I really thought that he would be the one person I would always keep in contact with, but as with every other friend I'd had in my life, Jeremy faded from my radar after my family's move to Texas and then Kansas.

This is how I spent my childhood. Moving around, wondering if I would meet someone nice at every new school, escaping into fiction and fantasy, and wondering when I would be able to stop, take a deep breath, and discover myself, the real world, and possibly another person to share it with me.



During the early part of the hot Kansas summer between my junior and senior years of high school, my father had a massive heart attack while working on an overdue project at the base and died. It was sudden, and it left my mother crushed and terrified. I, on the other hand, had a strangely cold reaction to his death. We had never been particularly close. He treated me more like an enlisted subordinate than a cherished daughter. He and my mother had been drifting apart as well. They had tried hiding it from me, but no amount of pillows over one's head or blaring radios can block out that kind of fighting.

His funeral was conducted with the appropriate pomp and circumstance. A military detail performed a three-volley salute and, as I already knew how to play the trumpet, I performed Taps myself—a daughter’s last gift to her father. I did shed tears for him, but Mom was much worse off. I think, however, that she was more worried about our future and how we were going to survive than upset about losing the man that she had once loved. After his death she couldn’t bear to keep up her Air Force crafts business, and living on the base was no longer an option, so there was only one viable thing for her to do.

We loaded our meager possessions into our ancient and not very reliable Ford pickup and drove to Los Angeles to be near my mother’s sister and brother-in-law. My aunt worked as a librarian in Beverly Hills and she and my uncle lived in a quaint 1930s duplex in a nearby section of Los Angeles. They were happy to put us up for a while, but after a few weeks of imposition we found a small and decidedly un-chic two-bedroom apartment on the very edge of Beverly Hills itself that we could only afford because of my father’s life insurance. We settled in quickly, and Mom traded in the old Ford for a used Toyota Corolla that she could drive to her new full-time job at the library where her sister worked. It was a sad, dreary summer for us both, and we never let ourselves experience the famous hustle and glamour of Southern California life.

We never went out; evenings were spent in silence watching television together or reading books, and during the day I had nothing to do but stare out of my bedroom window at the street beyond, keeping track of time by the predictable habits of the homeless man on the corner. I often remained lost in thought,

willing myself to not become overly despondent, if only for my mother's sake.

After weeks of solitary apathy and boredom, the day finally arrived that every student dreams about from the time they start school. Well, every student except me. It was time to start my senior year of high school.



I am not the kind of person to easily adapt to new situations or comfortably interact with different kinds of people. What I found on my first day at a non-military-run school, in intimidating Beverly Hills no less, was an abundance of both. It was like nothing I had ever experienced. My ride to school on the public bus was in sharp contrast to the shiny cars being parked by all of the other students. Music blasted constantly in the halls, students wore designer label clothes, and if I had a dollar for every disgusted look thrown my way by gorgeous, bleach-blond, manicured supermodel wannabes, I'd have left school forever to buy my own island. The fact that I was an outsider wouldn't have been more obvious if "Loser" had been tattooed onto my forehead.

I walked, no, *struggled* through the mass of humanity, glancing at the numbers on the lockers, cross-checking them with the one written on the newly printed class schedule that had been mailed to our apartment, and finally reached the one assigned to me. I put away the books and folders I didn't need that day, and as I closed the door I noticed a tall, handsome, and athletic guy with shaggy dark blond hair leaning against the locker next

to mine. He wore stylishly tattered khaki shorts, flip-flops, and an Ed Hardy T-shirt and he was looking at me with a smirk that immediately turned my stomach.

“Um. Excuse me,” I stammered, looking at the ground as I tried to find an opening in the crowd to edge my way past him.

“What in the hell are you wearing?” he asked with a slight laugh.

“What?” I asked, obviously confused.

“I said, what in the hell are you wearing? Is that your grandmother’s shirt? You look like you just helped milk cows or something. Jesus, you look like hell!”

My face immediately flushed red hot and I tried to make my escape, but the throng of students kept me pinned to the spot.

He continued, “You’re new here, aren’t you? I would have recognized an ugly-ass frizzy ponytail like that from a mile away if I had seen you before. Haven’t you ever heard of a hair salon? It wouldn’t help you much, but you could at least *try*. You’re some scary shit!”

I had no idea why he was doing this to me and, as usually happens in these situations, I couldn’t think of a single witty thing to say in my defense so I just stood there humiliated, angry, and on the verge of tears.

“And come on,” he continued, “this is Southern California. It’s ninety degrees outside. Why in the hell are you wearing corduroy pants anyway? You couldn’t be more of a train wreck if you were paid to look like the biggest nerd on the planet.”

“Shut up, Jason!” a girl’s voice said from behind me. “Leave her alone. You’re such a dick.”

“But look at her, Mel! Have you ever seen anything like

it in your life?" He laughed as he plucked at the collar of my obviously uncool denim shirt. I knocked his hand away, but he just proceeded to look at his fingertips as if he had gotten cow snot on them.

"I said leave her alone or I'm telling Mom where you hide your pot."

"You wouldn't."

"I damn sure would, so piss off!"

My tormentor, who I now knew as Jason, glared down at me for a few more seconds, taking his time, and then sauntered off and around the corner giving high fives to other alpha male types on the way.

My head hung in abashed shame and I was unable to look at who had come to my rescue, but a hand gently grasped my shoulder and turned me around as a voice asked kindly, "Are you okay?"

Tears stung my eyes and clouded my vision, but through them I saw Melanie for the first time.

My heart did a funny skip thing that it had never done before and it seemed like there was a rock in my throat that had nothing at all to do with wanting to cry. Whatever I had been planning to say to my savior was gone in an instant. I didn't know what was happening, but I felt that if I tried looking away from her, my eyes would pluck themselves out of my head in their rebellion to keep the contact.

What I saw was a beautiful girl my age, only a couple of inches taller than my own 5'5" height, with round cheekbones, freckles across the bridge of her nose, and a crooked smile that showed genuine concern. Her medium-length brown hair flipped

outward at the top of her shoulders. As I took in her hair, I couldn't help but notice the slightly freckled chest between the top buttons of her shirt.

She smiled sympathetically at me, mistaking my silence for shyness or embarrassment—both of which applied, of course, but weren't currently the main reason. I noticed that her smile crinkled her nose in a way that turned my insides into melted butter.

Realizing I was staring like an idiot, I blurted out, “Devin!” a bit more loudly than necessary, even against the noise of the hallway.

She looked confused “No...I'm Melanie. Melanie Parker. And you are?”

I closed my eyes as the humiliation and fire in my cheeks really set in. “Devin,” I said quietly. “Devin Kelly. Thank you for your help with...um...Jason, I guess?”

Melanie laughed, and her melodious voice soothed my frayed nerves. “Oh yes. Sorry about him.” She glowered and continued, “That's my asshole brother. He thinks he's the hottest thing to ever live and he wants to make sure that everyone knows it. I can't stand him. He's always putting people down and just being...well...a complete asshole. It's a word that's used to describe him quite often, actually. Mostly by me. He could find some way to insult Angelina Jolie if she was stark naked in the kitchen baking him a birthday cake. Don't take it personally.”

I laughed bitterly. “Yeah, okay. Easier said.”

Melanie sighed. “I know, but come on. I'll make it up to you for our family's honor.” She stood up straight, gave a funny little salute, then relaxed and smiled, wrinkling her nose in that fascinating way. “You're obviously new here and I shall take it

upon myself to escort you through these treacherous halls to your first class. So, where are we going?”

Despite the stress from Jason’s bullying, I couldn’t help but smile. “Band. I’m a trumpet player.”

“Nice to meet you, Trumpet. I’m a French horn.” She winked at me, put her arm in mine, and led me to the band hall. I tried my best to hide the fact that I was inexplicably trembling.



It turned out that not only did we have band together, but also English, Biology, Economics, and lunch. This being the case, Melanie made sure to find a seat next to me in each class. She apparently knew almost everyone in the school and, amazingly, was on friendly terms with all of them. Not two minutes would go by before someone would come up to her to ask how her summer went or what she had been up to in general. When a boy dressed all in black wearing dark eye makeup approached her, he asked if they were still going to be getting a group together to go to a Goth gathering called “Bat’s Day” at Disneyland. During Economics a very girly cheerleader came over to tell her that a new surf shop that had opened in Venice Beach was having a huge end-of-summer sale. Then, at the end of band rehearsal, she told a giant circle of her friends about the best performances she had seen during that summer’s Drum Corps International competition. She seemed to be some sort of social chameleon and apparently a brilliant student, from what I observed in class. I envied her.

I told myself that she only sat by me because she felt bad about the way her brother had treated me that morning. I was probably in danger of becoming a pity friend, but if that was the

case I didn't really mind. Being someone's friend of *any* sort was preferable to my usual loneliness, especially in such a strange new environment.

During all of her social interactions I just sat in silent awe at the ease with which she got along with the diverse population. Even when an effeminate and well-dressed boy from the drama club came by to ask her if she was able to see any plays over the summer, she made sure to tell him to check out the new football captain because he was the big, manly type that he was always ogling. Melanie seemed to have no qualms about the way anyone lived their lives, and people obviously loved her for it. This brought me hope. Maybe I had finally found someone who would never have "obligation" friends, someone who might truly enjoy me for my true self.

After my first day of school ended, Melanie actually invited me back to her house to help her work on a new project she was spearheading for the group Student Activists for Environmental Protection. An organization she founded and which, by the way, has now spread to twelve states. My only plans had been to ride the bus home, make a peanut butter and jelly sandwich, and play an outdated video game on my ancient computer.

I asked nervously, "Will your brother be there?"

Melanie looked embarrassed and said, "I really hate that he was your introduction to this school. No, he won't be there. And please don't worry about him. He won't bother you again, I promise. He finds someone new to pick on every day."

I smiled. "Yes, then."



We pulled up to Melanie's house in her red Toyota Prius and my first impression was...perfection. The house wasn't the largest I had ever seen, but it just oozed an attitude of money. It was a two-story Spanish style with an ornately carved wooden door that looked as if it could have been rescued from an old mission. The immaculate front lawn had perfect green grass, gorgeous rosebushes along the walls, and several artistic lawn lamps lining the cobblestone walkway to the front door. As we got out of the car I noticed the hired gardener watering the last of the rosebushes. I assumed that with their obvious wealth they would also have a housekeeper...and I was right.

Melanie beckoned me to follow, and when we reached the front door it opened just as she was about to put her hand on the doorknob. A small Hispanic woman in her early sixties wearing stylish black sandals, khaki pants, and a red apron over a black shirt opened the door and welcomed us home from school.

"Devin, this is Esmerelda. Esmerelda, Devin."

"Hey." I said.

She smiled and offered her hand, which I took shyly. "*Muy encantada.*"

Melanie continued, "Esmerelda has been with our family since my brother and I were born. She's like a mother to me, so..."

Esmerelda cut her off and said in a thick accent, "So that means she has to do what I tell her. Isn't that right, *mija*?"

Melanie looked demure, curtsied, and replied, "Yes ma'am. I obey your every command."

Esmerelda wagged an admonishing finger at Melanie and then squinted at me conspiratorially, "She pretends to be perfect

and wonderful, but *you* do not have to clean that *porquería* that she calls a bedroom.”

“That’s true,” I replied, “but I *do* have to clean the pigsty that *I* call a bedroom, so I feel your pain.”

Esmerelda laughed and seemed impressed that I understood a bit of Spanish. “You have a clever one here, *hija*.” She then leaned in toward Melanie and said behind her hand in a suspicious stage whisper, “Keep an eye on her!” She winked and then announced that she was off to the kitchen to make peanut butter cookies.

I followed Melanie on a tour of the house, first stopping in her upstairs bedroom to drop off our school bags. I was slightly shocked when I saw her bed and found myself wondering what she wore when she slept. Where had *that* come from? Pulling my thoughts back to Earth I looked around and, to my delight, saw that her walls weren’t covered with the usual teenager posters of hot young rock stars, but with signed pictures of theater actors, landscape and architecture photographs from around the world, and a harp seal poster from Greenpeace.

We went back downstairs and wound through the living room, which included the largest flat screen TV I had ever seen in my life, and out to the backyard. If the front yard was a vision, it was nothing compared to this. Every inch of the area was beautifully landscaped, an outdoor bar stood against a wall, chimineas were placed around a small seating area, and expensive-looking lawn furniture was placed in perfect symmetry along the edge of a sparkling blue swimming pool. The pool itself looked as if it belonged to a movie star, complete with a diving board, hot tub, and running waterfall from a wall of volcanic rocks on the far side. To the left of the pool was a small cabana that I assumed was

for guests...except for the fact that through one of the windows I could see a poster of a slutty-looking model sprawled topless on the hood of a Ferrari.

Following my gaze Melanie said, "It used to be for guests, but my asshole brother decided that he was too cool to live in the main house with the rest of the family, so he chose to live in the cabana instead. How Mom doesn't smell the pot smoke from in there I'll never know. Maybe she does and just doesn't care."

"Oh...sorry, I guess," I replied uncomfortably.

"We've since turned his old bedroom into a guest room slash office. It doesn't matter anymore anyway. He has started staying with a stoner college friend who has his own apartment. We haven't seen him at home in days."

"So you and your brother are both seniors in school, but you don't look anything alike. Did one of you start school early?" I asked, trying to steer my thoughts away from having another run in with Jason if he decided to come home while I was there.

"We're fraternal twins, so we're the same age. I look like my dad and he looks like my mom. I've always wanted her blond hair, but he got it instead." Melanie paused. "But I got the brains!"

"I think your hair is wonderful! Better than this dull blond frizz ball I have. I don't wear it in a ponytail every day just because I'm lazy. I do it because it's the only thing that keeps it from going Janis Joplin all over the place. I've been called 'Afro-head' way too many times to count."

"Are you kidding? I'd *love* to have those curls. Mine is so... plain."

I blushed at the compliment and decided to change the subject. I still wasn't used to the whole "someone being nice to me" thing.

“So, what do your parents do, exactly?”

“Well, Dad is a plastic surgeon and Mom works for a talent agency that casts commercials. Mostly kid actors.” Seeing the wide-eyed look on my face, she continued, “I know, I know, we couldn’t be more stereotypically Beverly Hills if we actually had our own TV show. Hollywood-type jobs for the parental units, children that hate each other, and a housekeeper who is more of a mother than the real thing.” She trailed off a bit at the end and I could see that this was a not a topic she enjoyed discussing. However perfect Melanie seemed, her family life didn’t seem to be so.

Feeling slightly uncomfortable, I lightened the mood with, “Well, I think your home is beautiful and I will be really disappointed if I’m never able to swim in that pool.”

She smiled, grabbed my hand—*what was that weird heart skip thing?*—and pulled me back into the house. We went running through the massive kitchen, earning several angry-sounding threats from Esmerelda in Spanish, and ended up in a room that made my jaw drop to the floor. It wasn’t overly large and was furnished with dark leather armchairs and an antique coffee table in front of a magnificent fireplace. Every wall was covered from corner to corner with books on dark mahogany shelves, more books than I had ever seen in any one place that wasn’t an actual public or school library. The amazed look on my face seemed to brighten Melanie considerably.

“Just as I suspected. You like all things literary.”

“Um, yeah. You could say that.” My eyes continued to follow the lines of books around the room.

“What are your favorites?”

I pulled my gaze from the shelves to look into Melanie's chocolate brown eyes and found myself noticing the way her red lips formed an interesting natural pucker. "What?" I said a bit too loudly for the second time that day.

Her nose crinkled as she flashed her lopsided smile and poked me gently in the side. "Books, Devin. What are your favorite books?"

"Oh...uh...I know it's lame, but I can't get over the Harry Potter series. I just love them. I also like Jane Austen, biographies, nonfiction history books, and anything having to do with naval or seafaring stuff."

Melanie looked surprised for some reason and I figured that I had come out as a Grade A Nerd far too early. I could feel my ears getting hot with embarrassment, and I tried to think of something else to say that would make me seem cooler, but her look of surprise morphed into one of excitement.

"You like exactly the kind of books I like!" she exclaimed, bouncing up and down on her toes. "Well, except for the seafaring stuff, I don't know any of that. But I *love* the fantasy and historical genres. Which is your favorite Harry Potter?"

"It used to be *Half-Blood Prince*, but it just has to be *Deathly Hallows* now."

"Me too! What about the Thursday Next series by Jasper Fforde? Have you read those?"

"No, I've never heard of them."

Melanie feigned disapproval and shock, striding to the farthest bookshelf. She pulled *The Eyre Affair* from its place, marched back to me with her chin in the air, and placed the book firmly in my hands.

“You will read this immediately or the diving board is off-limits!”

I laughed. “I promise, it’s at the top of my list.”



Melanie refused to let me take the bus home and dropped me off at my apartment at nine o’clock. I had tried to persuade her otherwise, not only because I didn’t want her to go to the trouble, but because I was embarrassed about where I lived. Her house was a castle compared to our nine-hundred-square foot apartment. Not everything in Beverly Hills is a mansion. When we pulled up to the entrance I snuck a glance in her direction to gauge her reaction to my place, but she just continued to talk excitedly about the project we had worked on that evening to petition the Beverly Hills school board to place recycling bins in every classroom in the city.

At a lull in her enthusiasm, she glanced over at me. “Anyway, I’ll stop rambling now. Thanks for helping with the project.”

I opened the door and stepped out. “No problem. Thanks for the ride.” *For everything*, I thought.

“See you at school?”

“Sure.”

She waited at the curb until I had entered my building. I waved from the window and felt a strange pang of loss as she drove off. It had been a very weird day for me, filled with lows and some surprising highs.

“Hi, Mom, I’m home.”

I got no reply as I walked in and found my mom asleep on the couch, the television showing a rerun of an *E.R.* episode, and

several used Kleenex strewn about on the coffee table. I spread a blanket over her, turned off the TV, walked to my room, and closed the door behind me.

As I sat down on my bed, the only thing going through my mind was a replay of the day's events and Melanie. She made me feel comfortable with her when I had never really been so with anyone else. All of this, and I had known her for a mere thirteen hours. What in the world was up with me?

CHAPTER TWO

My second day at school was still terrifying, but with Melanie there to acclimate me to the unfamiliar new society, I had hope the day would go more smoothly. Before I met up with her in band, I had to go to my locker to retrieve my books. Not wanting to repeat the tormenting scene with Jason, I peeked around the corner of the hall to see if he was around. I saw him closing his locker and waited until he had strutted away before making my way over. As I traversed the crowded corridor, irritation stole over me. Just my luck to get a locker right next to the biggest asshole in the whole school. Then again, without that horrible exchange, I wouldn't have met Melanie. Well, we did have a lot of classes and band together, but who knows if she would have even noticed me otherwise. In my experience, that answer was no. I was either invisible or someone who existed solely to be taunted.

Students were already filing out of the back doors toward the marching practice field when I arrived in the band hall. I dumped my backpack and followed them, trumpet in hand. I hadn't gone far when Melanie, breathless, ran up and put her hand on my shoulder.

“Devin! There you are! Ms. Peacey wants to see you before you start learning the show.”

Instant nerves. “Am I in trouble or something?”

“Oh no, I think that she just needs to audition you to see what trumpet part you should be playing.”

“Shit. I didn’t know I’d have to audition. What if I suck?”

“Oh please, I’m sure you’ll do fine. We’ll have chair tests after marching season anyway. Today is only for which part you’ll play.”

I tucked my trumpet under my arm and smoothed my damp palms down the sides of my jeans. “Will you wait for me outside of her office?”

“Sure!”

“Don’t laugh, though.”

“Devin, I’m not going to laugh. You haven’t heard me play yet. I’m not what you’d call musically gifted. That and I’m totally not a jerk.”

I took a deep breath and walked toward the director’s office. Although I was fairly confident that I wouldn’t make a complete ass of myself, I didn’t know if the musical talent was better at such a large public school than I was used to at the military schools. *Here goes nothing*, I thought.

Later, as I walked out of the director’s office, Ms. Peacey beaming by my side, I saw Melanie and a few other band members standing outside. They looked...dumbfounded, and the smile that had been on my face faltered.

“What?” I asked nervously. I knew that they had all heard me play through the door, and although it felt like I had nailed the short audition piece, I was suddenly worried that my definition

of good playing might be drastically different from what these students were used to.

Melanie broke into a wide grin and began applauding, starting a chain reaction with the other students around her. I grinned bashfully, but a weight lifted off of my shoulders and I breathed a sigh of relief.

Melanie slapped me gently on the back and said, “Were you just messing with me about being nervous?”

“No! I never had anyone to compare myself to other than a couple of beginners in middle school. Am I okay?”

“Devin, you are for real the best high school player any of us have ever heard.” At my look of incredulity, she continued, “I’m serious! I’m going to make you play for me at least once a week to make sure you practice.”

“Thanks, *Mom*.” I couldn’t believe that I apparently had talent and was thrilled my new friend seemed so interested. My chest filled with pride for the first time in my life. I could get used to that.

After my audition we walked outside to go to the practice field. I stepped onto the grass and felt a rush of happiness. The other trumpet players welcomed me warmly, as they had the day before, and I took my place with the students who were also playing the first part. I turned to look back at the other members of the band and saw Melanie wink at me from a curved line of mellophones near the 40 yard line. I smiled back and turned to face the sideline where the assistant director was pointing out the stopping point of the next set to our section leader. The weather was gorgeous and a light breeze blew across the field, stirring up the refreshing scent of damp grass. I nodded to myself in a

satisfied way and knew that things were going to turn out better than I could have imagined.

My first day of band had consisted of filling out forms and getting sized for my uniform. Now that the real rehearsal was starting, I realized the other band students had been rehearsing the music and learning marching fundamentals for two weeks before I had come to school. Somehow I had never been informed about “summer band” even though I had lived in Los Angeles for at least a month prior. Luckily for me, however, I pick up marching very quickly, probably because of growing up watching military drills and parades, and I can remember music almost perfectly after listening to it only once or twice. A seedling of hope sprouted inside me. I had a friend and a place to belong, and it was only the second day of school. Now, if only I could avoid Jason, senior year might not be so bad...



It was a beautiful day in late September and the sun beat down warmly on my shoulders. The soothing sound of breaking waves made me temporarily forget that I was holding a very smelly garbage bag full of everything from tiny bits of unidentifiable plastic to old diapers to sticky soda cans. Melanie had signed up the S.A.E.P. to help out with Heal the Bay’s annual Coastal Cleanup Day and we, along with fellow members Katherine, Christina, Jody, Nicholas, and Phillip, were at the end of our two-hour journey of sifting through the sand next to the Santa Monica Pier. Turning in the now-full bags made us realize how much crap was actually polluting our coastlines, and we all felt a sense of accomplishment for doing some good.

My first month and a half since school started had been just as wonderful as I had hoped, with new experiences almost every day. Even performing this small act of civic duty introduced me to the ocean for the first time, and we had decided that as a reward to ourselves we would go body-boarding while we were all together at the beach.

“Come on, Dev. It’s not *that* cold!” Melanie splashed as I gasped when the waves washed over my feet.

All of our friends were already out past the surf waiting to catch the perfect wave, but even though I love being in the water, I’m a total wimp when it comes to immersing myself in it when it’s as cold as the Pacific Ocean.

“Seriously. You’ll get used to it. I promise.” Melanie held out her hand to me and I found myself walking forward, body board under my arm, ignoring the sharp pain and then numbness that the rising water was causing in my body. I finally reached out and took her hand. I suddenly felt warm all over.

For the next twenty minutes they taught me how to catch a wave just right to be able to ride it all the way back to the beach, and it didn’t take long before I was racing them, able to steer around the swimmers standing in our way. After another hour, we hauled our exhausted bodies out of the water to dry off on the now slightly cleaner beach. Lying on my towel with the sun on my face, I turned to look at Melanie and my new friends. They were laughing and talking about something pointless, but I smiled, knowing that I was now a part of their circle. I felt like I belonged.

That evening I joined Melanie back at her house and, as we had been doing almost nonstop since we met, we spent an hour or so studying for the classes we shared and then devoted the rest

of the evening to working on upcoming S.A.E.P. projects and just talking about anything and everything. She was so easy to talk to that I was beginning to show my natural tendencies toward sarcasm and dry humor. I still felt inexplicably nervous around her at times, but tried my best to shove the wayward thoughts to the back of my mind and just enjoy our time together. My worries that I might be no more than a pity friend had been allayed after only a couple of days. We spent as much time together as we could, and even she mentioned she couldn't remember having formed such a fast and meaningful bond with anyone.

"Why do you think that is?" I asked her.

"What do you mean?"

"Why do you think we get along so well? I mean, *everybody* likes *you*, but me? Not so much."

"Dev, you're funny. You make me laugh and you make me happy. I don't think you give yourself enough credit. It's been *so* nice to have someone I can really talk to about things other than reality TV or like, OMG, did you see what that girl was wearing?" she said in a convincing Valley Girl accent. "It's nice to have a friend who actually enjoys deep conversations and doesn't care about all the superficial bullshit that happens in high school. You're very real."

I smiled. After a short pause I said, "But, like, OMG seriously, did you *see* what that girl was wearing?"

We both laughed, and then went downstairs for a cup of hot chocolate before going to bed as if nothing major had happened. Inside my heart, though, something definitely had.



The next few days continued as usual with classes, S.A.E.P. meetings, band, and a lot of fun. Melanie and I were starting to be silly more than either of us normally would, but it was a nice change for me to get to act my age. For example, during marching rehearsal we would play pranks on unsuspecting tuba and trombone players by putting Anbesol on their mouthpieces when they weren't looking. Numb lips made playing impossible. During football games we would yell and scream for our team while cursing the referees and opposing players, even though our team was always far behind on the scoreboard. In class we would get in trouble for laughing during tests or lectures, even when it wasn't about anything that we could help. There was a time when Melanie's stomach growled so loudly during a biology test that I could almost feel the vibration from my desk next to her. We were both asked to sit in the hall after that one. It was seriously funny, though. Who wouldn't have cracked up? Or there was the time in English when I was slouching so far down in my seat that my shoes slipped on the floor and down I went, only to get stuck with my head in the seat of the chair and the rest of my body splayed out under the attached desk. Of course, that sent the whole classroom into fits of uproarious laughter, so we weren't singled out for punishment.

Occasionally our after-school and weekend adventures would take us to a local park near her house where we would do homework at a picnic table or take breaks to see who could swing the highest in the playground. My selfish nature always made me want dibs on the swing set, but whenever a child would look longingly at the swings, Melanie was always the first to leap off and offer up her seat. She even found herself recruited as the unofficial swing pusher on crowded days. I would sneak peeks

at the mothers and nannies waiting on the graffiti-speckled park benches, but instead of looking wary that a stranger was pushing their child on the creaky swings, they mostly looked relieved to not have to do it themselves.

Whether it was passing notes during class, lying lazily on her bed procrastinating, soaking in the hot tub, or taking a walk, I was learning more and more about my new friend and why everyone was so drawn to her. She seemed too good to be true and I was baffled at how she could seem as attached to me as I was to her.

“You know, Mel,” I said as we walked around the park on a particularly perfect Sunday, “I just don’t get how you can be so nice to everyone. You love kids, you know everyone at school, and I wouldn’t be surprised if you helped little old ladies cross the street when I’m not looking. Aren’t there people out there that just really annoy the hell out of you sometimes?”

“Of course there are.” She rolled her eyes. “I’m not a saint. I just figure that anyone who’s going to be a prick to other people has more problems in their life than I know about. I think people deserve the benefit of the doubt. What if their dog just died or they’re having money problems or something? Besides, if they’re going to annoy me or piss me off for five minutes or an hour or whatever, I just think, ‘They’re annoying me for this short period of time, but they have to be around themselves twenty-four hours a day,’ and that usually helps.”

I laughed.

“Esmerelda taught me that one, and whatever she says is usually right.”

“Well, you’re a better person than me. The way the kids

treated me in my other schools didn't make me want to see their points of view. I just wanted to kick them in the face."

"Nice." Melanie smiled and put her arm around my shoulders. "But believe me, if I saw someone treating you that way...I *would* kick them in the face."

I beamed at her and stood a little taller as we started back toward her house. "I think I've been a bad influence on you." I elbowed her in the ribs.

"Hey, just because I like to read and want to save the world doesn't mean that I couldn't take out a couple of bastards if I needed to."

I laughed as the thought of Melanie wearing combat boots, holding a machine gun, and smoking a cigar popped into my head. It was...a pretty interesting image.



When we first started hanging out, most of our attention was on school, but I was always pulling her away from her books to go to a movie or disrupting her attention in class by making off-color jokes. You may not think that having your best friend forcefully spit Sprite all over you is a good thing, but when that friend is someone like Melanie, making her laugh that hard is a personal victory like no other.

Despite our antics, school was also more productive and fun than ever before. I was finally able to connect my natural intellect with actual academic success because I was genuinely happy, and that inspired me to do well. I had always been smarter than most of the other kids in my classes—not always with good

results—and I earned good grades, but not as good as if I had really applied myself.

Band was a blast too, and our marching show for the year was to music from the *Lord of the Rings* soundtrack, and that was right up my nerdy little alley.

The only odd thing was that I found myself becoming increasingly jealous over Melanie's other friendships. I had never been an overly possessive person, yet when I saw Melanie chatting with one of her many admirers, a tiny ball of anger mixed with self-doubt, mashed together with vast amounts of confusion, would form in my stomach. We'd be sitting in the economics classroom we used for our after-school S.A.E.P. meetings, and some cute girl or geeky but hot guy would say something to make her laugh or earn her praise, and I'd wish that person was wearing concrete chum-flavored shoes in the middle of a very large and shark-infested body of water. The viciousness of my thoughts shocked me. Where in the world were they coming from? And why were they sprouting up at all?

I guess I was trying to come to terms with the fact that I actually had a best friend for the first time in my life, so being jealous was perfectly natural, considering. Obviously I never told Melanie about the little green monster that had taken up residence inside my chest. Because most of her attention was focused on me anyway, the jealousy only rarely reared its disturbing head.



It was a Friday afternoon near the end of October when I received the first of several unwanted surprises.

“It’s Devin, right?” came a voice from behind me as I waited for my bus to arrive at the stop outside of the school.

I turned around with a smile on my face, thinking it would be one of Melanie’s friends that I had met recently or one of my fellow band members. No such luck. My smile fell.

Jason Parker.

I had somehow managed to avoid his bullets since that first day, and I hadn’t even run into him at his house because he was on the swim team, which required before- and after-school practice, and he was still staying in his college friend’s apartment most nights. I fought to maintain my composure. Maybe now that I was friends with his sister and I had started wearing normal jeans and T-shirts, he would cut me some slack.

“Yeah, I’m Devin.”

Jason approached me, all smiles, and put his arm around my shoulders. Supreme discomfort seized me.

“You’ve been hanging out with Melanie a lot lately, haven’t you?”

I swallowed back nerves. “Um...yeah. I guess. We have a lot of classes together.” This was a major simplification of our growing friendship, but best not to push the issue with a bully. His cordial manner was freaking me out.

“Right...right,” he said thoughtfully. “That’s a bit of a problem.”

A problem? “Why?” I asked, startled.

“Well, you see, Devy...can I call you Devy?” My mouth opened to answer, but I didn’t have the chance as he continued, “I really don’t like you, and that means I don’t want you going anywhere near my sister.”

Alarm sounded like a siren in my ears. I gaped in confused silence for a moment, then gathered up what little courage I had and said, “Well, since you don’t control her life or who she hangs out with, I don’t see how that matters.”

Jason laughed and squeezed my shoulders harder with his arm. I tried to wriggle from his grasp, but he was much larger and taller than me. I was stuck.

“Well, it matters, ugly dyke, because I say so. You will fucking hate life if you don’t back off. Hate it. That’s all you need to know.”

I stood there, completely stunned, and not just by the threat. Did he just call me a *dyke*?

“Get the hell off of me, you psycho!” I rasped. He was practically crushing my shoulder. I’d be bruised the next day. Other students waiting at the bus stop stared, and a large guy that I recognized from the wrestling team began to approach from a few yards away, annoyance on his face.

Jason immediately let go of my shoulder and laughed as if it had all been one big joke.

“Chill, dude! I was just messin’ around with my friend Devin here.” He punched me on my other shoulder harder than appropriate for a friendly jab, and in my ear he whispered, “I wouldn’t tell Melanie about our little chat if I were you.” Without waiting for me to reply, he jammed his hands into the pockets of his frayed cargo shorts and sauntered away, whistling the theme song from *Austin Powers*.

I stared at the sidewalk, shaking inside, wondering why Jason hated me so much and what, if anything, I could do to stay off his radar.



Once home I ran straight to my room and slammed the door. I was thankful Mom wasn't home from work yet because I didn't want to talk with her about what had just happened. The hurt, fear, and confusion that had been building while I rode the bus burst free in a torrent of tears and racking sobs. Why had a few mean comments from someone I knew to be an inconsiderate, arrogant jerk cut so deeply?

I tried to think rationally about what he had said. He didn't want me hanging out with his sister anymore, but why would he care? He didn't like her either, and Lord knows that she didn't like him. Regardless of that fact, what authority did he have to keep me away from her? Melanie had every right to have whatever friends she wanted and she did. With all of the diversity that was drawn to her, why was I so different and why was I the only one being bullied?

Dyke. The word slammed into my memory as painfully and sharply as a punch to my stomach. The nausea came instantly, and I couldn't seem to stop shaking. I curled into the fetal position on my bed, holding away the pain.

Dyke.

It wasn't as if that that particular word was such an insult. I had heard worse in my unpopular life, and I definitely had nothing against gay people. The problem was that being called a dyke to my face was like a rock crashing through the thin crystal shield of my own denial. As soon as I processed the word and its implications I knew the truth.

I was a dyke.

I hadn't been expecting it and had always pushed the nagging little clues and thoughts to the back of my mind, but I couldn't deny it anymore. I was attracted to girls, and I was *very* attracted to Melanie. I suppose I'd known it from the moment I first laid eyes on her as she'd so willingly come to my rescue, but admitting I was attracted to the same sex wasn't some easily accepted revelation, especially after having been raised in a conservative military household where "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" meant "Don't be a homosexual or you'll be beaten to death with a brick in a sock."

Jason saw through me as easily as if I were made of water, but the more I thought about it, the more I figured he was worried about his own reputation. What would his friends say if they knew that his twin sister was best friends with...a lesbian? Did that make her a lesbian too? If she was a lesbian, would that mean that it was possible for him to be gay? It didn't matter that his sister was not a lesbian and that he was most definitely not gay. The implications to his reputation were too much to ignore, and he wanted to get me out of the way.

I knew I couldn't tell Melanie what had happened or what he had said. That would cause too much scrutiny of our relationship on her part. If she really thought about it, maybe she would start to remember all of those times she'd caught me staring at her in class, or the way I always jumped when she innocently touched me. If she knew how I really felt about her, I could lose her forever. That was the worst thing I could think of, something I'd do anything to avoid.



Throughout the weekend our phone rang constantly. Mom left a message saying she was staying with her sister for a few days because of the panic attacks she had started having. Aunt Jessica had forbidden her to spend the weekend at home alone. Well, alone with just me there to remind her about her shattered life, which was awesome (not really), so I had the apartment to myself. This was becoming normal because Mom either trusted me implicitly or just didn't care much about what I did while she was away. Maybe a little of both. Either way, I was becoming more independent whether I wanted to or not.

Melanie also kept calling and leaving messages for me, but I refused to answer the phone.

“Hi, Dev! It’s Mel. Listen, I wanted to go by the L.A. Recycling Center this afternoon to get some hard numbers on how much paper and plastic can be saved if the school board agrees to our recycling proposal. The Los Angeles Unified School District has already implemented the plan and they can tell us how it’s been going. I was calling to see if you wanted to come along. Call me back!”

“Hey, Dev. I went to the recycling center and got the info we need, but I was hoping to get your help in writing out the actual proposal. You’re so good with words. Are you available tonight? Oh, and get a cell phone already, this is L.A. and it’s not the Dark Ages! Call me back!”

“Devin, it’s Mel. I called you yesterday, but haven’t heard back from you. We’re supposed to meet up today for a swim and lunch. I hope you haven’t forgotten! I’m assuming you’re already

on your way over since you're not there, so ignore this message when you get home later! See you soon!"

"Devin, it's Melanie. Where have you been all day? It's seven o'clock and I'm worried about you! You didn't show up for lunch and I haven't been able to reach you! I hope you're not sick or in trouble or anything. Please call me as soon as you get this so I know you're okay."

At eleven o'clock Sunday night a knock at my front door interrupted my brooding. I was still lying in bed and staring at the cracks in the blank walls of my bare room as I had been doing all weekend. I hadn't slept at all and I hadn't eaten anything, so it took the knock getting louder and more persistent to finally pull me out of my stupor. My first inclination was to stay put and ignore whoever was intruding upon my self-imposed isolation. But it might be Mom coming home late from Aunt Jessica's. She was always forgetting her keys and she probably just needed to be let in.

I sat up and blew my nose, hoping that my red and puffy eyes looked like I had been asleep instead of crying for two days straight. I walked to the door and asked, "Who is it?" as I had been taught to do in Los Angeles lest a bad guy be on the other side ready to attack. I expected to hear Mom answer with her usual, "It's Mom, I forgot my keys again." Instead I got a voice that cracked with what sounded like relief.

"Devin! It's Mel, let me in!"

My heart jumped into my throat. I had purposely been avoiding her all weekend, needing to wrap my brain around my

newly admitted sexuality as well as to keep myself separated from the main source of what was causing me the most confusion.

Mel.

I realized too late that falling off the face of the planet might not have been the best plan. I hadn't considered the worry it would cause my friend. Now I just had to suck it up and try to concoct a story that seemed at least mildly believable.

I opened the door and Melanie was inside my apartment in a flash, wrapping me in a tight embrace that would've been awesome if I wasn't in such turmoil. A jolt in my stomach appeared as the warmth of her body pressed against mine. The only difference was that this time I knew what the now-familiar jolt meant, and that caused a second, stronger sensation that made me wrench out of the hug despite wanting to stay wrapped in her arms forever.

"Hey, Mel," I said sheepishly. "I'm sorry I didn't call or answer the phone. I...I wasn't feeling well." Technically the truth.

"Look at you!" Melanie fussed with my hair and inspected my bloodshot eyes. "I'm sorry you weren't feeling well, but I was really worried. I had Esmerelda make lunch for us and when you didn't show up I thought you had been in an accident or wound up in the hospital or something. It didn't help that Jason was home yesterday saying that I wouldn't be seeing you anymore, whatever that's about." Hurt shadowed Melanie's eyes, and the guilt washed over me in waves. Well, guilt and fury at Jason. "I'm sure he was just being a dick and trying to scare me, but when you didn't show up for lunch and I didn't hear from you, I started to wonder if he had heard something I hadn't."

If only you knew, I thought.

“No, he’s just being a jerk as per usual. I’ve just been having...personal issues and I needed to be alone for a while. I didn’t think that...well, I just didn’t think. I’m sorry I worried you. I’m an idiot.”

There was a pause as her brown eyes stared directly into the blue of mine, as if she was trying to decide if my explanation had been truthful or if something else lay just under the surface. I wanted to think she assumed I was having a delayed reaction to my father’s death, and that was fine with me.

Finally she said, “That’s okay, Dev. Just don’t do it again or I swear I’ll kick your ass into the next county.” Melanie smiled to soften the words and stroked my cheek.

Despite my melancholy, the fact that she was so concerned with my well-being, plus her soft fingers brushing my face, sent flutters of joy dancing through my chest.

“I promise I won’t do it again. You’re my best friend and I should know that I can trust you. I don’t care what anyone else says.”

Oops.

Melanie’s expression turned curious, thanks to my last statement, but in true Melanie fashion, she apparently decided to make nothing of it. I appreciated her respect for my privacy. I appreciated the fact that she didn’t try to elicit a more detailed description of what had caused my disappearing act. I appreciated...her.



Melanie took it upon herself to watch over me for the rest of the night and told me outright that we would both be skipping school the next day, which was a *huge* deal for her. She could tell that something had really been bothering me and she didn't want to leave me alone. This turned out to be a good thing. She figured out that I hadn't eaten or slept in two days when I began swaying as I removed ice from the freezer to serve us lemonade. The world had gone white, I murmured something about being sleepy, and then everything faded to black. The last thing I remembered was a spinning room and the pressure of strong arms enveloping me.

Safety.

Peace.

My fuzzy brain assumed it was Mom before I remembered she was still at Aunt Jessica's.

The next thing I knew, I woke up in my bed with the covers pulled up around my shoulders. My room was unexpectedly bright with the light of a new day and my mind swam trying to place my thoughts back together.

Suddenly, I noticed the subtle sounds of breathing near my right shoulder. I turned and jerked fully awake when I saw Melanie lying on her side on top of the covers facing me, sound asleep. My heart raced as I remembered what must have been a fainting spell on my part and realized that Melanie had caught me and put me to bed. It must not have been very easy. She wasn't much stronger than me, and dead weight is hard to handle. My heart swelled.

Despite the number of sleepovers we had shared since becoming best friends, this was the first moment I wished that I had a single instead of a double bed to be closer to her. I know it

sounds clichéd, but she really did look incredibly beautiful and peaceful while she slept. I carefully rolled onto my right side to get a better look. A ray of light from the window fell directly onto her brown hair, making it shine. It was a bit disheveled from a night of tossing and turning, but that only made her more enticing to me.

I eased my left arm out from under the sheets and slowly reached toward her sleeping form, wanting nothing more than to feel the softness her cheek. My hand hovered a mere inch above her skin, but I hesitated. What if she woke up and realized what I was doing? I knew she was an open-minded person in general, but I was terrified that she might never speak to me again if she realized the depth of my attraction. I couldn't bear the thought of losing her. This was more than just a crush. I was in love with Melanie Parker.

Despite my reservations, I moved my hand closer to her face, knowing that I couldn't pass up this opportunity. My fingertips gently stroked her tanned cheek and she only shifted a little. A shiver ran through my body and my fingers continued their journey, lightly brushing over her parted lips. How I was able to resist pressing my own to them I'll never know.

Melanie stirred, and I jerked my arm away and into a false stretch over my head, yawning theatrically.

"Morning, Mel."

"Mpmh morning," she said sleepily and then stretched like a cat that has been lazing in the sun too long.

"I bet I freaked you out last night," I said sheepishly.

Melanie had rolled onto her back, so she turned her head to look at me with tired and worried eyes.

“You think?” she asked sarcastically. “How are you feeling now?”

“Well, I think I need some food. I kind of...forgot to eat this weekend.”

“You *forgot*?” Melanie propped herself up onto her elbow. “Something must have really upset you. I’m not going to pry, but if there’s anything I can do to help...if you need anything... oh please, Dev, just don’t scare me. I’d do anything for you, and I don’t ever want you to go through anything like this again. Especially not alone.”

Mel, if only I could tell you and if only you could really make it better.

“I promise. I was just being selfish and letting stupid stuff get to me. You’re the best friend I’ve ever had and I...” *I love you.* “I’m so glad you’re here.”

Melanie seemed to forget her irritation with me and rolled over to lay her arm across my stomach. She squeezed me into a one-armed hug. The length of her body was pressed against my right side and her head nestled comfortably on my shoulder.

After a moment, Mel stiffened. “You’re shaking, Dev! Are you sure you’re okay?”

“Um...yeah. Food. I...I think I just need food.”

CHAPTER THREE

My heart jumped into my throat when I opened the door and I saw a positively glowing princess standing in front of me. Melanie wore a movie-quality Snow White costume, complete with a red apple in her hand.

“Damn, girl.” My open mouth froze in embarrassment and I had to pry my eyes away from the costume bodice to look Melanie in the face. “I mean...you look...good.” Apparently, I had lost all powers of coherent speech and was becoming more flustered the more I looked. Just great.

Luckily Melanie laughed and said, “Thanks. You look cool too!”

I, however, felt completely inadequate and cheesy in my homemade pirate outfit.

“Maybe I shouldn’t go,” I said nervously.

“Why in the world not?”

“I just feel...inferior, I guess.”

“Inferior?”

“Oh come on, Mel. I’m wearing one of my dad’s old shirts, cut-up used pants from Goodwill, a bandana, and a plastic sword. This is so the opposite of cool.”

"I swear, you have no faith in your friends, do you? If there's one thing I can jam into that stubborn head of yours, it will be some damn self-confidence. Now, listen. It's tradition for the drum major to hold a Halloween party at her house for band members every year. And you are..." She tapped her foot waiting for my response.

"A member of the band."

"And that means?"

"That means I'm—"

"That's right." Melanie cut me off. "That means you're going to the party."

I sighed and said, "I guess there are worse things in life than being bossed around by Snow White."



She had been right, of course. No one cared about my half-assed pirate outfit. While it was blatantly obvious that some of the students came from money because of their elaborate costumes, as if I didn't already know that, others decided that low-tech was the way to go. One of our snare drummers was wearing a bedsheet as a toga, a very large guy from the tuba section had on an ill-fitting cheerleader uniform with water balloon boobs and a horrendous wig, and other people decided that they didn't need a costume at all.

The party was chaperoned by our drum major's parents, so we had to be...maybe not on our best behavior, but at least not running wild through their house. Even the punch bowl that was brimming over with mist from dry ice was being carefully guarded. No alcohol allowed, which was fine by me since I had

never had a drink before and didn't know how it would affect me. I didn't want to embarrass myself at my first party ever.

"This is seriously your first school party?" my friend Katherine yelled over the music after I said as much while ladling punch into plastic cups for Melanie and myself.

"Yeah, I didn't get invited many places at the base schools."

"Well, just wait until the real party at the end of the year. It's usually at the house of someone whose parents are out of town. Older siblings are very good about getting beer and stuff. If you're not falling-down drunk at that one, you're doing it wrong! That party is always epic!"

"Sounds...great!" I said, not really understanding the draw of wild parties or being falling-down drunk in the first place. I gave Katherine a halfhearted thumbs up and started my slow return through the crowd of people back to Melanie.

She was leaning against the far wall of the living room where I had left her and she again stole my breath. I stopped and just watched her for a while. She was laughing, having a good time. It was a minute before I realized she was talking excitedly with Jameel, a good-looking and highly intelligent trombone player that we both spoke with often during rehearsal. My dazzled smile turned into a worried frown, and a strange tightening in my chest made it hard to breathe. I watched Jameel reach out and slowly run his hand down her arm, from shoulder to wrist, in an overt attempt to flirt. She continued smiling at something he'd said and shifted from one foot to the other as she tucked a lock of hair behind her ear.

Immense fury coursed through me. My whole body was on fire. *How dare he touch her like that?* All of a sudden the

heat and anger turned into an almost debilitating sickness as new and disturbing thoughts crashed into my mind. Melanie was a beautiful, friendly, amazing young woman. Who wouldn't want to be with her? Did I expect her to remain single and dedicated only to me forever?

In a few miserable seconds I had glimpsed our future and saw Melanie happily married with a man who got to touch her in ways that I never would, with a baby on her hip, and all the while I would stand on the edge of her life, waiting for her to notice me every now and again. I could only watch in horror as her happy family started to forget me as the years passed.

I blew out a breath and leaned too quickly on the door frame of the kitchen, fruit punch spilling onto my boots and nausea threatening to overwhelm me.

"Devin!" I heard Melanie's voice through the muffled ringing in my ears and in a moment she and other band members were gathered around me, checking to see if I was okay. Slowly the world came back into focus. Melanie, Jameel, Katherine, and a few other people stood in front of me, assessing me, making sure that I wasn't going to fall down. I averted my eyes from Jameel's concerned face. He really was a nice guy and I didn't want him to see the animosity and jealousy in my eyes.

"I'm fine. I'm fine. Seriously." I now added mortification to the emotional roller coaster I had just ridden. Hands continued to hold on to me as a jumble of worried voices filled my ears. "I just got dizzy for a second. It's nothing."

"I've got her." I heard Melanie say as she started walking me toward the front door. "Come on. Let's get you some fresh air."

"That was so frickin' lame," I said as I tried in vain to turn invisible.

“Let’s just get you outside for a while.”

“Whatever.”

Melanie and I sat on a bench on the front porch in silence for a while.

“Are you sure you’re okay?”

“Yes. Fine.”

“Is something wrong?”

“No, Mel. Just drop it!” I said more forcefully than was necessary.

Melanie stayed silent for a minute, but then continued, “You can tell me if something is bothering—”

“Damn it! I said I’m fine!” Anger started to wash over me again. Melanie looked taken aback. She stopped looking at me and sat up straighter. I had hurt her feelings. At first I didn’t care. After all, hadn’t she hurt mine? I immediately knew that wasn’t fair. She couldn’t help being popular and likable. Of course boys were going to try to hook up with her. It was only a matter of time before someone irresistible like Jameel took her away from me before I ever really had her at all. I could either deal with that and enjoy the time we had or walk away from her right now.

I knew that there was no way I could bring myself to do that, so I continued to sit there stony-faced and sick to my stomach.

“Listen, Dev. I don’t know what’s up with you tonight, but I can take you home if you don’t feel well.”

I laughed bitterly. “I wouldn’t dream of taking you away from,” I stopped before saying *Jameel*, “from this party.”

“Now what in the hell is this all about?” I could tell she was getting defensive. “What did I do to piss you off?”

I knew that I was digging myself into a hole, and the last thing I wanted was for Melanie to be mad at me for a reason she

couldn't possibly know. I slumped down and sighed, "Nothing. I just feel like crap."

Melanie still looked uncertain, but said, "Don't take it out on me, then. I'm your friend. Just know that I'm here to listen if you have anything you need to say."

"It's nothing. Don't worry about it. I'm just being a freak as per usual."

"Well, you're my favorite freak and I want you to be happy. What can I do?"

I swallowed hard. My voice cracked as I said, "Just sit with me for a while, okay?"

Melanie's costume dress rustled as she moved closer, put her hand in mine, and rested her head gently on my shoulder.

I closed my eyes and sighed, allowing her warmth to seep into me. For a moment, that moment, everything seemed right with the world.



I had been worried that my two episodes of near meltdown would push Melanie away, but despite my moodiness and angst, Melanie and I were as close as ever. The whole thing seemed to strengthen our friendship. We now had an unspoken bond that drew us together more closely than I had ever been with anyone else in my life. It wouldn't go over well with Jason if he found out, but I didn't care. Unfortunately, he *did* care and, in a completely juvenile way, he decided to let me know what he thought.

I opened my locker one day shortly after my meltdowns to find my books soaked in months-old spoiled milk. Jason had somehow gotten the liquid through the slats the previous

afternoon. I would've passed it off as a random prank were it not for the word "Lesbo" written with a white-out pen on the front of the locker. Luckily I had gotten to school early to help the band director compile an updated phone tree, so no one else saw the offensive vandalism. White-out is easy enough to scrape off a locker quickly, but the smell of rancid milk? Yeah, it lingers. I had to make up a story about leaving an open pint in my locker by accident when Melanie smelled it on my books in our classes that day. I tried to make something good come of it, though, and took the opportunity to permanently move all of my books and school things into my assigned trumpet locker in the band hall. Not only would this solve the problem of trying to avoid Jason in the mornings, as I had been doing every day, but it would also get me to the band hall a few minutes earlier to see Melanie before class started. I don't know why I hadn't thought of it sooner.

Other than that incident, senior year was progressing well. Even though I was over at Melanie's house more nights than not, we usually ate dinner in her bedroom because her parents were rarely home, usually working until late in the evening and then having to attend some gala or charity function at night. But I did occasionally have dinner with the whole family.

Well, the whole family minus Jason.

Thankfully, he had completely stopped staying in his cabana (which we had taken to calling the Bastard Bungalow). Melanie told me that he had started skipping school and that he spent most nights smoking weed with his buddies or doing whatever with his new girlfriend—a plastic and vapid-looking brunette who had dropped out of another school the year before. This was fine with me. The lack of concern shown by his parents did surprise me, though.

I asked Melanie about this one night after one of the rare family dinners. She shrugged. “He’s eighteen. I guess they figure he can do what he wants. Plus, they’ve always thought Jason can do no wrong.”

The only person who seemed to have a problem with it was Esmerelda, who considered Jason a son and could see the dangerous path he was treading. He was on the verge of flunking out of school, he had already been put on probation from the swim team, and Esmerelda would burst into tears whenever he would stop by the house to get food or do laundry and ignore her completely. All in all, not a good situation.

But wait—Jason was— “I didn’t know you were eighteen already! Why haven’t you been buying me cigarettes?” I asked, trying to lighten the mood.

“The only reason you’re not getting an antismoking lecture right now is because I know that you’re as disgusted by that habit as I am,” Melanie replied primly. “But yeah, we turned eighteen on June second before senior year.”

“Wow, that’s early.”

Melanie nodded. “When we were five years old and about to start kindergarten, we both got severe measles. The first vaccination we got when we were babies apparently didn’t take and, ironically, we had been scheduled to get a second vaccination the week after we were infected. Normally it wouldn’t be a big deal if it was treated well and we could have just started school a bit late, but somehow I got the complication of pneumonia at the same time and that put me out of commission for about three months.” She shrugged. “Lucky me. We don’t know why it was so bad, but I actually came pretty close to dying.”

“What? How?”

“Apparently there was something a little off with my immune system. Anyway, Mom and Dad wanted us to be in school together, so they held Jason back a year too. I wish they hadn’t so he’d be a year ahead of me, already graduated, and out of my life.”

“Was he always such a...jackass?”

“No. I think Jason started to resent that they had held him back too. He got meaner as we got older, and he blames me for everything. He’s irrational and unhappy and I think he almost wishes that I *hadn’t* recovered.”

That brought me back to the horrifying thought. “You almost...died?” What would I have done without Melanie to ease me into my new life in Los Angeles? I’m pretty sure I would be the same lonely outcast that I was in every other school. No, I much preferred the “Melanie, alive and well” scenario.

“Yep. It left one of my lungs, the left one actually, a bit weak and underdeveloped. It wasn’t a normal side effect, and they still don’t know why it hit me so hard, but...oh well. All better now,” she said with a smile as she patted her chest. “Well, mostly.”

“But wait, you play French horn and march and swim and stuff. Is that hard on your lungs?” I couldn’t strip the concern from my tone.

“Not really. I just can’t run a marathon or play sports or anything like that. I bet I could, actually, I would just get winded too quickly. It’s kind of like asthma, I guess, as far as my limitations. You haven’t noticed how tired and wheezy I get after marching a whole show?”

“Well, yeah, but I get out of breath myself, so I didn’t think anything was out of the ordinary.”

“It’s no big deal. Don’t worry about it. It was ages ago and I

suck at sports anyway, so it's no loss to the world if I don't go to the Olympics," she said with a laugh.

I smiled and found myself pulling her into a hug. It wasn't until my arms were around her shoulders that I realized what I was doing. She didn't seem to mind or find it odd, though, so I just enjoyed the closeness as she hugged me back.

Weird. I'd never understood why knights in shining armor had such an obsession with rescuing damsels in distress until that moment. Finding out that Melanie had a physical problem was like a beacon to my sense of innate chivalry, and I wanted to protect her with every ounce of my being. She was obviously not in any need of protection whatsoever, and generally it was she who saved me from bad or awkward situations, so I just enjoyed the feeling, however misguided, of the tables being turned for once. For someone like Melanie? I could be a knight. No doubt about it.



Diesel fumes swirled around me as I climbed the steps into the waiting bus and trudged toward the two seats near the back where Melanie waited. Our band had just finished marching in a parade in San Diego on one of our football team's off weekends, and we were about to head back to Beverly Hills. The humidity had been horrendous and every band member was now an odorous, damp mass of sweat. The entire bus was starting to smell like what we of the band nerds have termed "Band Funk"—that mixture of body odor, valve oil, and sweat-soaked polyester that hovers around every marching band everywhere. Students were stripping down to their boxers and sports bras without regard for

the members of the opposite sex around them. Males and females alike discarded modesty in exchange for comfort at the earliest possible convenience. Moist undershirts were placed on the tiny ledge next to the bus windows where the air conditioner could dry them off during the ride home, and people finally began to settle into their seats as the spatially challenged strip-fest wound down.

Now somewhat drier and more comfortable, I squeezed past Melanie to my seat next to the window and plopped down with an audible sigh. “Well, that was longer and more unpleasant than I was expecting.”

Melanie chuckled and said, “Yeah, I think I have a blister on my heel from walking so far. I really need better-fitting band shoes.”

“Still, I love these band trips. Whether it’s an away game or a parade or whatever. It’s just fun for me. Makes me feel like a rock star on tour or something.” I paused. “Well, a rock star in a one-hundred-person band with no hot groupies, no money, and an uncomfortably crammed and crappy tour bus with a stopped-up, smelly toilet behind my seat.”

“Damn, you sure know how to make things sound appealing. Sign me up for more!” Melanie said sarcastically.

“Well, it’s nine o’clock and we have two and half hours until we get home. If you want me to go into detail about how my sweaty panties are starting to form a rash on my ass, I’d be happy to oblige.”

Melanie barked a laugh and yelled, “No! No, that’s okay. I’ll just have to make do with the fantasies about the stopped-up toilet. What a charmed life we lead.”

We both laughed until exhaustion set in and I eventually

started to drift off as the movement of the bus and the weariness from a full day of marching lulled me. The lights had been turned off and the small pockets of conversation scattered around us fell silent one by one. I balled a sweatshirt into a makeshift pillow and tried to fit it snugly between my head and the window. Melanie wasn't as tired and started reading her much-used copy of Virginia Woolf's *Orlando* for what I'm sure was the hundredth time.

I awoke an hour later, the bus still rumbling up the highway toward Los Angeles, and noticed that I was no longer leaning to my right against the window, but was nestled comfortably against Melanie's shoulder on my left. To my horror, I also realized that I had drooled a bit onto her T-shirt. From my vantage point I could see she was still reading and hadn't bothered to wake me up or move me even though I was blatantly invading her personal space. I sat up slowly, carefully wiping my cheek and the damp spot on her shirt. "Uh...sorry."

"You *should* be," Melanie teased. "Just kidding, don't look so scared."

"I didn't mean to...you know...sleep on you."

"Dev, it's fine. Really. You can use me as a pillow anytime you want." She smiled sincerely while I blushed furiously.

"So," I said, trying to change the subject, "how much longer until we get home?"

"Only an hour or so. Hey, did you still want to go see that sci-fi movie tomorrow? I got free tickets to the AMC in Century City from my dentist for referring someone to her. Phillip and Christina said that they wanted to come too if we were going."

"Yeah, that sounds fun. Don't we need to finish the Keynote project for the big S.A.E.P. presentation, though?" I asked, glad

that the conversation was moving away from what I had just done.

“Oh, so now it’s Ms. Devin who wants to stay on track, is it? I’ve been a bad influence on you. You work too hard.” Melanie winked at me and jabbed me in the ribs with her elbow.

“Well, look who’s being a slacker now...I’m so proud!” I wiped a pretend tear from my eye as I received another friendly jab.

Melanie continued, “Okay, but remember that on Sunday we’ve promised ourselves to spend the entire day going over that SAT review stuff. I *have* to do well. I mean, I can take it again later this year, but I’d rather just get it over and done with.”

“I know. I promise to not distract you if you promise to help me with the math portion. I really suck ass at math.”

“I promise. And you’ll do fine. You’ve already gotten better since we started going through that workbook.”

I raised my right hand and said, “I hereby vow that whatever I do in my adult life, math will not be a part of it.”

Melanie smiled. “So there’s to be no Devin the Amazing Physicist, Geneticist, Engineer, Astronaut, huh?”

“Yeah, not so much. More like Devin the Homeless, Multiple-Cat-Ownning, Unskilled, Trumpet-Playing Vagrant.”

“Sexy.”

“Yep. I’m gonna be quite the catch. Watch out, world!”

“Oh, I dunno. I think you have more going for you than you know.”

I looked at her skeptically and did my best to dampen the sudden flutter in my chest.

We spent the rest of the ride in silence until the bus pulled up to the back doors of the school near the band hall. Students woke

up with sluggish reluctance, stretched, and then trailed slowly off the bus, picking up stored instruments and either heading to their cars or meeting parents who had come by to pick them up. Melanie had volunteered to take me and our friend Katherine home that evening so we piled ourselves, our smelly uniform bags, and our instruments into her Prius and drove away.

As Katherine waved good-bye from her front door Melanie began the short drive to my apartment. We were both too tired to say much, but Melanie finally asked, “Do you want to come over tonight? I mean, since we’re going to the movie tomorrow anyway?”

I thought it over, and even though I wanted to spend every waking minute with her, I knew Mom was waiting up for me and I started to feel guilty that I never spent time at home.

“I think I need some parental unit bonding with Mom. At least just for the morning. I think she wants to take me to IHOP or something, but can you pick me up on your way to the theater at three-ish?”

Melanie looked uncharacteristically disappointed, but she said, “Yeah, that’s cool. But I expect you to stay over on Saturday. You know, work on S.A.E.P. stuff that night and get an early start on the studying in the morning.”

Yeah, twist my arm, I thought ironically. “Okay, slumber party it is. I’ll bring the sugar-free Red Bull, marshmallows, and Jolly Ranchers if you provide the chips and salsa, and brownies.”

“If Esmy makes her brownies, we won’t get any work done at all. Those things are like crack!”

“Hmm...” I wrinkled my brow in mock deep thought. “You know what? I think I’ll chance it.”



Our football season ended with a whimper with our team breaking the record for number of straight losses in Southern California history. The band, however, received a perfect score at the local marching competition—unfortunately we weren’t placed high enough compared to other bands to move on to the next level. Melanie and I decided to use our newfound free time from marching rehearsal to kick the S.A.E.P. up a notch. We planned a school-wide presentation of the global warming film *An Inconvenient Truth* in the auditorium and even arranged for a guest panel of local politicians and scientists to participate in a Q&A session afterward. It turned out much larger than we had anticipated, with many other schools in the area requesting similar presentations for their students. This also coincided with our desperate scramble-studying for midterm exams and filling out college applications. Melanie and I were overworked and stressed, but always happily in each other’s company.

We took our SATs on the first Saturday of December and felt that we had both done extremely well, so at least we didn’t have to worry about that on top of everything else. Melanie was dead set on getting into Stanford to study environmental science, but wanting to be prepared for anything, she applied to several other schools as well.

I wasn’t quite sure exactly what I wanted to do or where I should go yet, but I knew that it had to be somewhere near Melanie, and nothing made me happier than playing music. Growing up doing little but practicing my trumpet had paid off, and I was the best player in the school. I could think of worse

things than devoting my life to music performance. However, not really knowing much about the schools in California, I simply applied to the same schools that Melanie did, hoping I would get accepted somewhere on a music scholarship.

Mom and Dad had set aside a college fund for me and that would help, but I couldn't afford to go with no financial aid at all. This also meant that I would most likely end up going to a state school rather than somewhere like Stanford. I burned CD after CD of myself playing concertos on my trumpet and filled out one scholarship application after another. Ms. Peacey helped and told me what music schools looked for in their scholarship students. I also composed a short solo piece to include with each packet and surprised not only myself, but also Mom and Melanie at how good it sounded. With Ms. Peacey's letter of recommendation to top it all off, I mailed out every application and tried to infuse good karma into each one.

One rather dull and gray Wednesday during this flurry of activity, I was walking to lunch alone because Melanie had a meeting with the principal about another possible school-wide S.A.E.P. project. As I rounded the corner toward the cafeteria, a large weight hit me hard, squarely in the back, and I flew forward and slid on the rough sidewalk. It took me a minute to catch my breath. When I turned around to see what had hit me, I caught a glimpse of Jason's unmistakable blond hair as he and his friends walked lazily around the corner, laughing. Unfortunately, none of my friends were around to witness anything, and the students who were there just pointed and laughed. I glanced down at my shirt and jeans, stained with dirt and blood. The skin on my knees and palms had been scraped so badly, I was sure I'd have to throw my

clothes away later. Trying my best to breathe through the pain, I limped away from the sneers and humiliation and made my way to the nurse's office.

Soon I was sucking air through my teeth at the biting sting of the alcohol the nurse was using to clean my wounds and wondering how I would explain the incident to Melanie without bringing up the whole Jason issue again. I didn't want her to feel responsible. I had never been prone to clumsiness, but I figured that I could make up as passable a story as any other.

Melanie slid into her seat next to me in biology after the lunch I'd missed. "Principal Dunn is totally on board for the next big presentation. I think we just need to—" Her gaze dropped to the tightly wrapped bandages around my hands. "What in the hell happened to your hands? And your jeans! Are you okay?" she asked loudly as the other students filed in and took their seats.

"Yes, yes, I'm fine. Shh!" Some of our classmates had become curious about our conversation, and I didn't want any more attention that day. "I just tripped outside of the cafeteria."

"Dev, you must've landed pretty damn hard to hurt yourself that badly. The knees of your jeans are ripped open. It looks like you were dragged across the ground or something."

"No!" I snapped before quieting to a whisper again. "No, I just, you know, tripped, like I said. I was jogging to the cafeteria, I tripped on something and, you know, blam. Don't make a big deal out of it, Mel, it was embarrassing enough as it is. Everyone laughed at me. I'm fine! I swear."

Melanie looked at me skeptically. I knew the blood and bandages made a simple trip-and-fall explanation seem

unrealistic, but I stared back at her, somewhat defiantly, until she dropped the subject. As I turned toward the front of the class, however, I smiled at the fact that she had been so concerned about me. I guess every thorn can also have its rose.



“I think I’m gonna puke.”

I laughed and patted Melanie on the shoulder. “You’ll be fine. Since when have you ever been nervous about anything except failing tests?”

“Since I’m supposed to be on national TV and not look like a dumb-ass.” Melanie wrung her hands into a white-knuckled knot and stared at the bright lights that were being set up in her house for her satellite interview.

“Okay, one: you’ve never looked like a dumb-ass in your life, and two: how many high school students are profiled on CNN for the student group they created? You’ll be seen by people all over the world, not to mention on YouTube! You should be proud!”

“You are so not helping.” I could have sworn Melanie turned a little greener. “What if I asked you to do the interview instead? You’ve done almost as much as I have for the S.A.E.P.!”

I swallowed hard. “And pass out on live TV? Don’t think so. Come on, you created the group and it’s because of you that it’s so successful. Look, I’ll take you out for tacos afterward.”

Melanie’s eyes gleamed. “Promise?”

“I promise.” I smiled and took her hand in mine. She jumped a little because of her nerves, but then took a deep breath and seemed to calm down.

The CNN interview was part of a series recognizing high school and college students who were trying to make a difference in the world, and after Melanie's spot aired, the video could be seen playing on every phone and computer in the school. I didn't think it was possible, but she became even more popular and we had a flood of requests to join the S.A.E.P. Letters and e-mails from students in other school districts piled up. Everyone wanted to know if they could create S.A.E.P. groups in their own schools as chapters of ours—the original. The website Nicholas had set up for the group crashed his home server more than once from the increased Internet traffic, and most of the workload had to be divided up among the other students that had joined, both from our school as well as others. The best part? The expanded group and new chapters were run by a central student committee Melanie had created, which freed her for some relaxation and a well-deserved hiatus.

Winter break was just what we needed. We wanted nothing more than to forget about school or getting into a good university or extracurricular activities or the downward spiral of the environment and life as we knew it. It was, after all, the holiday season. The perfect time to indulge in blatant excess and capitalism.



“So what are you and your mom going to do for Christmas?” Melanie asked one day while we sat soaking in her backyard hot tub, reveling in the exhilaration of the hot water contrasting with the cold winter air.

“We’re going to go over to my aunt Jessica’s house for Christmas dinner. Mom is moping around more than ever, though. I guess I don’t blame her. This will be her first Christmas without Dad. Despite their problems, I know that she really misses him.”

“You don’t miss him?”

I frowned. “Not really. I know that sounds mean, but he and I just really weren’t that close. He paid way more attention to his career than to me and Mom.”

“I’m sorry,” Melanie said. “I do understand.”

I nodded. “One time, I was cast in a musical at my elementary school and I actually got the role of Lily St. Regis in our production of *Annie*.”

“Cool!”

“I know. I was *so* excited. I’m usually very shy, as you know, but I love musicals, as you also know”—Melanie rolled her eyes theatrically and received a well-deserved splash from me—“and I admit it: I wanted my daddy to see me in my big stage debut and to be proud. Well, I told him when I got home from school that day and his reply was pretty much, ‘Lily St. Regis? Who the hell is that? Why didn’t your teacher give you the lead? Haven’t I told you to speak up in class and get yourself noticed? You’ll never get anywhere in life unless you start acting like a leader.’”

“Dev, that so sucks.”

“When we finally got to perform and all of the Air Force families were there together, taking pictures and cheering on their own children, my dad was in his office, finishing up paperwork he swore had to get done that night.”

“Nice.” She pressed her lips into a thin line. “I’m sorry. Was he like that all the time?”

"Pretty much. Even last year I got first chair in the school band and had a pretty long and difficult solo during our winter concert." I gave her a sidelong glance. "I might add that I sounded better than I've ever sounded in my life. Other students' parents kept coming up afterward to congratulate me."

"Let me guess, Dad wasn't there."

"Close. He was there. He just slept through the whole damn thing. Mom was as proud of me as she could be and loved listening to me play, but Dad? He just thought music was a waste of time." I paused for a moment, unsure whether to feel sad or angry. "You know, I can't remember a single Hallmark moment from my entire childhood. I guess we just didn't know each other that well. He was the strong military type and I was—am—not."

"But what does that matter?"

"It just does. Or did. I was never outgoing enough, good enough, athletic enough, girly enough, pretty enough, or popular enough. He didn't approve of my interest in music or geeky things, as he liked to call them. He wanted me to be a softball player or president of the student council or a member of the debate team or homecoming queen or all four at once."

"Because I'm sure he was perfect in high school," Melanie said, outraged on my behalf.

"I don't think so. He and I were just...different." Another memory popped into my head. "On my birthday in third grade, I wanted to have a party and just invite the few people I was somewhat friendly with. You know, just a small thing with cake and a game or two. Don't worry," I said, seeing the wary look on Melanie's face, "the party actually turned out okay...this isn't a case of *Carrie* or anything like that, but he didn't approve of my

geeky little friends and wanted me to invite the more popular girls. You know, the snobs who hated me and called me names behind my back *and* to my face.”

“Nightmare.”

“No kidding. Since he had always been popular and a jock, he just didn’t grasp the concept that I didn’t fit in with those girls no matter what I did. Do you know how humiliating it is to be forced to phone up people who you know hate your guts and ask them to come to your party and to have them, predictably, laugh and say no?”

Melanie’s expression softened. “Oh, no, Dev—”

“Yeah, that sucked. So, short answer long, no. I don’t really miss my dad. He wasn’t a monster or bully. He just wasn’t much of anything. I obviously didn’t want him to die, but I don’t feel that much is missing from my life since he did.”

Melanie squeezed my shoulder with understanding. “I know what you mean. I’m not very close to my parents either. I don’t even think they know anything about me. Mom keeps asking why Esmy makes me separate meals at dinner because she keeps forgetting that I’m a vegetarian.”

“Are you serious?”

Melanie grimaced. “Sad, but true. So, don’t worry, you’re not heartless. I get it.” Melanie paused and bit her bottom lip as she studied me. “And for the record, you may not be athletic or girly, but you are definitely pretty enough, smart enough, kind enough, and talented enough for anyone who cares to notice. I wish your father could have seen what I see.”

A lump formed in my throat and I flashed a quick smile before staring at my toes wiggling under the water until I could speak again.

With only a slight tremor in my voice I continued, “So, anyway, Christmas may be a bit bleak this year and I’m not really looking forward to it. I mean, my aunt and uncle are fine. I just really don’t know them that well either.”

“Well, if you want a break, I’m formally asking if you would like to come and have dinner with my family.” Melanie smiled hopefully. “We have a Christmas tree *and* a menorah, so neither holiday can get jealous.”

“And you want a humanist she-devil to join your celebration just to even things out?”

Melanie laughed and said, “No, I want *another* humanist she-devil there *with* me to even things out.”

I smiled and nodded, “Well, maybe I can sneak away for a bit after our Christmas lunch. Anything will be better than hanging around the dreariness that will be our holiday.” I paused for a moment. “Wait, where will Jason be?”

“He’s going on a skiing trip to Big Bear with his friends. Thank God. Even during the holidays I can’t stand him. Why do *you* hate him so much? I mean, I know he was mean to you on your first day of school, but now that we’re friends I think that the worst he would do is ignore you completely. Which is what he has been doing as far as I can tell.”

I paused, wondering how much I could say about Jason’s actions toward me.

Melanie noticed the hesitation and sat up a little straighter. “Is there something you’re not telling me, Dev?”

“Well, he hasn’t completely ignored me.”

Melanie looked confused. “What do you mean?”

“I mean...well, he...came up to me. One day. After school. But it was a couple of months ago, so it’s no big thing.”

Melanie's expression morphed from confusion to concern.

"He just, you know, told me that he didn't like me."

Melanie tilted her head and waited for me to continue. When I didn't, she asked, "So, he just...told you he didn't like you?"

"Yeah."

"Is that all?"

"Well..." I couldn't lie to her now that I had stupidly brought the subject up, but I definitely couldn't tell her everything. "That and that he didn't want me...you know...hanging out with you... and that I shouldn't mention what he said to you or...I don't know what. I guess he...vaguely threatened me."

"What?" Melanie yelled, sitting bolt upright in the hot tub. "Why in the hell didn't you tell me this before?"

"I...I just didn't want to upset you, I guess, or put you in the middle. It's no big deal. He's mostly ignored me ever since, just like you said. I think he was just acting like a protective big brother or something."

Melanie's face was scarlet with anger and her eyes were blazing with a fury I had never seen in them before. "How *dare* he? God, he's such a fucking *dick*. How *dare* he! Protective, my ass!"

"Whoa, Mel! Calm down!" I held my hands up nervously.

Ignoring me completely, she continued, "Why does he give a fuck who I hang out with? He's never had a problem with any of my friends before! What did you say back to him? Did you tell him to fuck off? I *hope* you told him to fuck off. Please tell me you told that asshole to fuck off and die!"

I sat with my mouth hanging open in wide-eyed shock at Melanie's tirade. I had never seen her even mildly upset, let alone completely livid! I had also never heard her swear so much in one

sitting. I started to think that telling her even this much might not have been the brightest idea in the world. I made calming gestures. "It's okay! I told him to leave me alone and that he has no say in the friends that you choose. No worries!"

"And what did he say after that?" She was turning a violent shade of red and I couldn't help but wonder if the bubbles in the water were being caused by her boiling anger rather than by the built-in jets.

"Well, at that point some wrestling team guy walked by and he just left. *Please* don't say anything to him. He's left me alone for the most part, and if you say anything he may take it out on both of us."

Melanie's demeanor became even more frightening as she sat very still and said pointedly, "What do you mean, 'for the most part'?"

Crap. Me and my big stupid mouth. "Oh...it was...nothing. He just poured spoiled milk onto all of my books. It was just a stupid prank, really. I'm surprised he couldn't think of something better. Well, maybe I'm not that surprised," I said with a forced laugh.

Melanie's quiet questioning continued. "That day that you said you left the pint of milk in your locker. That was Jason?"

The edge of my mouth twitched nervously. "As much as I can tell, I assume so. Listen, it was stupid. No harm was done. If that's all his threats amount to, I'll consider myself lucky. It's not as bad as the time when I was in sixth grade and the other kids held me down and cut off chunks of my hair and glued them to my face. Really, Mel, please don't make a big deal out of this. I'd really appreciate you not telling him that I told you. I don't want him any more mad at me."

Fuming, Melanie got out of the hot tub and wrapped a large beach towel around herself. I followed suit. We ran into the house to get out of the cold, but Melanie remained silent. We went straight up to the second floor, taking turns drying off and changing clothes, and eventually ended up sitting on the edge of her double bed in our T-shirts and pajama pants, hands folded in our respective laps and staring at our feet. I was too nervous to speak, not knowing what was going through Melanie's head. Did she know I was a lesbian? Maybe she was noticing the things I had feared that she would notice and would see that her brother knew something that she didn't. Maybe she would decide that she really was better off without me and was deciding how to tell me to leave. My rational mind knew that this probably wasn't the case, but for such a normally logical person I seemed to be overanalyzing and second-guessing everything when it came to my relationship with Melanie.

After what seemed like an eternity, Melanie said tightly, "Fine, Devin. I won't say anything to him about it, but if he says *anything* to you *ever* again, you have to let me know. I won't stand for *anyone* insulting my best friend."

My heart lightened at her use of the phrase "best friend" and especially because of her vehement defense of me and our friendship.

I sighed with obvious relief and said, "I will. But don't worry about it, really. I've been treated worse by other jerks in my life. I'm kind of used to it."

Melanie spun toward me. "Well, you *shouldn't* be used to it, and anyway, that's not the point. You...you mean *so* much to me and...well, I just can't stand the thought of someone treating you like shit. I don't care if it's my brother the asshole or a complete

stranger. I love you too much to see you hurt. Those other bullies are out of your life now and I'll be here for you no matter what. I hope you can see that my opinion of you is...well, you're the best friend I've ever had and nothing will ever change that."

I felt my jaw drop.

She loved me too much to see me hurt.

Those words branded themselves into my memory so that I would never be able to forget them. Although hers was a platonic love, a rush of euphoria washed over me and I knew that I would cherish whatever kind of affection she could give me. We looked at each other for a long time and I noticed a hidden...something behind her eyes. Or maybe I wished there were something hidden there. When my own eyes misted over with emotion I reluctantly looked away, hoping that she hadn't noticed. Her warm hand covered mine, and she squeezed gently as if to let me know that she had meant every word.

CHAPTER FOUR

Christmas morning arrived and Mom and I exchanged gifts in front of a small fake tree we had bought at a garage sale. Mom opened her presents first. I got her yarn for her new and surprisingly successful eBay scarf business and a used DVD gift set of the movies of her favorite actress, Greta Garbo. I received a book of trumpet solos, the soundtrack to the musical *Wicked*, some new shirts and jeans, and a calendar of tall ships. I could tell Mom was struggling with the holiday, so I tried to cheer her up as best as I could by playing some Christmas carols on my trumpet. Later, we relaxed and even lapsed into laughing fits during a mini food fight while making and decorating cookies to take over to Aunt Jessica's, so all in all the morning went better than I could have hoped.

We arrived at Aunt Jessica's at around eleven o'clock, and she and Uncle Sergio were gracious hosts. They had ordered food for the meal from the local organic grocery store and it had arrived ready to eat. They figured that there was no sense in slaving over a hot stove if you could avoid it. Everything was excellent and it was actually nice getting to know my own relatives a little better

in that short time. When we had stayed with them for the two weeks after we first moved to L.A., I had kept myself cloistered in my room most of the time. Now I could tell that they were decent people, and even without my dad there, the feeling of a true family Christmas was stronger than I had ever experienced.

After the surprisingly entertaining meal ended and more presents were exchanged, everyone sat down to watch football. I tried to tough it out for a couple of hours, but in the back of my mind was the knowledge that Melanie was waiting for me to join her. I know it was a bit selfish of me to want to be with her instead of my own newly discovered cool family, but I didn't care. She was my world and she permeated every one of my waking thoughts. The only doubt I continued to have about our friendship was my constant desire to physically connect with her. She would occasionally hold my hand or hug me, but it was always in a friendly way and I wanted...no, I *needed* to touch her in ways that were...well, more than friendly.

This was a painful area because I knew it would never happen. I tried to be content with having her as my best friend and not as anything more. I tried my best to save those wayward thoughts for the times when I was alone, or just before I fell asleep, hoping that Melanie would visit me in my dreams. But sometimes thoughts of Melanie were tenacious, and up they sprouted at the most inappropriate times. You know, like when I'm celebrating Christmas with my family.

The second quarter of the televised football game ended and the boring halftime report began. As I listened to the inane and far too loud blathering of the sports commentators saying the same thing over and over again and wishing for the thousandth time that every network would broadcast a marching band show

instead, I reached my limit of patience and got up to tell my mom that I wanted to go ahead and leave for Melanie's house. I had told her about the invitation a few days before and she hadn't minded my going over there as long as I spent some decent time with the family first.

She was pleased I had finally found a true friend. I had never had one before and she was clearly glad I wasn't the same lonely girl she had always known. I don't know if she suspected my true feelings for Mel, but I didn't want her finding out. I couldn't know how she would react to the news that her daughter was a lesbian. I had time on that front, though, and stubbornly pushed the fear of her disapproval to the wayside.

I approached my mom sitting in a comfy armchair and when I leaned down she kissed me on the cheek. We both smiled, and her face held a glow that had been missing for the longest time. Without speaking a word, I knew things might end up all right after all. After profusely and genuinely thanking my aunt and uncle for the Christmas meal and gift, I made my exit. Mom had agreed to let me use the car since she was spending the night at Aunt Jessica's. The roads were abnormally clear for L.A. traffic and I made it to Melanie's house in no time.

I pulled into the driveway and was greeted by Esmerelda, wearing a gaudy red sweater with yarn Christmas trees sewn all over it, already holding the front door open for me.

"¡Feliz Navidad, mija!" She hugged me. She treated me like one of her own since I stayed over so often. I was sometimes the recipient of her well-meaning, yet stern lectures about cleaning up after myself or eating properly. I appreciated being included and understood why Melanie felt so much closer to Esmy than to her own parents. Esmy took an active role in Melanie's and Jason's

lives, doing her best to mold them into useful and upstanding citizens. Which was one of the reasons Jason's behavior seemed to bother her so much, I'm sure. I sometimes felt she had given up on him, and that was why she had turned so much of her attention onto me instead.

"*Feliz Navidad*, Esmerelda!" I hugged her back. I was about to ask if I was too early when Melanie bounded down the stairs.

"Dev! Presents! Presents presents presents!" she yelled, a huge smile on her face.

I laughed as she skidded into Esmerelda and me still standing on the threshold.

"I'm stealing her, Esmy! We have to open presents!" She grabbed my arm and started to pull me up the stairs.

Stumbling, I looked over my shoulder and said, "Sorry, Esmerelda. Apparently these are some very impressive gifts!"

"You weren't that excited to give me *my* present!" Esmerelda yelled after Melanie as she fake-pouted.

"I'm *used* to giving you Christmas presents! Devin has yet to be initiated to the wonders and pleasures of my holiday generosity!" Melanie called back as we reached the top of the staircase.

My face flushed at her words. The wonders and pleasures of her holiday generosity? A sudden image burst into my mind... Melanie in a short, red, fur-lined skirt and skimpy top with a cute matching Santa hat, doing certain...um...things with her tongue to a candy cane. I tripped over my own feet as we rounded the corner. Melanie noticed my stumble, slowed down, and giggled maliciously as she continued dragging me down the hall. We reached her room and Melanie immediately shut the door behind us.

I looked at her quizzically as I sat down cross-legged on her bed.

“What? Oh don’t look so worried. I just don’t want Mom and Dad to bother us during present time. Don’t worry, I didn’t get you anything embarrassing like skimpy underwear.”

I flushed again, my brain hesitant to let go of the mental image it had created in the hallway, but now it included me dressed in something from Victoria’s Secret. Of course, as soon as I thought of myself in something that revealing, the fantasy crashed to a halt. I wasn’t so comfortable with my body, and the thought of Melanie seeing me in anything less than a bathing suit (which I always wore board shorts over anyway) was terrifying. Her body was so...so perfect that I felt like a stubby little troll next to her. She wasn’t too skinny, like an underfed supermodel, but instead had gorgeous curves that filled her out perfectly and made me want to...well, I’ll keep that to myself for now.

“What?” I replied with my lower lip stuck out in a decidedly put-out way. “You’re offended by skimpy underwear? I guess I’ll just have to take your present back to the Trashy Lingerie store on La Cienega.”

“Oh, *I’m* not offended by them. I just thought that *you* would be. I’ll wear your naughty little gift right here and now!” she said jokingly as yet another inappropriate mental image sprang up, causing me to blush again.

“Is Devin *blushing*? Aww. Okay, I’ll take pity on you, little Miss Prudey McPrude.” she said with a wink. “*This* time.”

Before I could protest the Prudey McPrude comment, Melanie pulled a wrapped box from under her pillow and jumped onto the bed in front of me, watching my reaction as she bounced slightly on her knees.

“Here. Skimpy underwear or not, I hope you like it,” she said as she placed the gift in my lap.

“Well, if it’s not edible panties, I *will* be disappointed.”

For a moment I wondered if I had taken the joke too far, but Melanie laughed. “See? I knew there was a wild girl in there somewhere. She should come out and play more often!”

The box was about the size of the kind you would get from a department store for a shirt or pants and I wondered at the lightness of it. I tore into the penguin wrapping paper and when I opened the box, I found a square envelope wrapped in tissue paper taped to the bottom.

“Mel, I’m sorry, but I will *not* be able to fit my fat ass into any lingerie that will fit inside of a little envelope.”

“Oh, stop being funny and just open it already!”

I pulled out the envelope and held it up to the light while shaking it, making a big show of trying to figure out what was in it just to irritate Melanie further. She was obviously happy about whatever she had gotten me, so when she punched me in the arm, I gave in and opened it. Inside was a postcard of Sleeping Beauty’s Castle at Disneyland. Confused, I turned the postcard over and saw only a few words written in Melanie’s slanted handwriting.

You. Me. Disneyland! New Year’s!

I looked up at Melanie, who was biting her lip in what appeared to be a mixture of excitement and nervousness.

“What’s this?”

“You’ve never been to Disneyland, which is an American travesty by the way, so I bought us Two Day Park Hopper Passes

to both Disneyland and California Adventure for New Year's Eve and New Year's Day! School will still be out and I want you to see the park while the Christmas decorations are still up. It's soooo gorgeous. That and..." Melanie paused with apprehension. "I got us a room at the Disneyland Hotel so we don't have to drive home and then back again on New Year's Day. I hope that's okay."

"Are you kidding me?"

"I didn't want to spoil the surprise by asking you first. I just thought it might be a fun little mini vacation or something. I didn't ask your mom either. I hope she won't mind. My parents don't care, of course, but I just assumed that your mom would be cool with it too." Melanie had started talking faster and faster as I was basically lost for words. I think she began doubting that she had gotten me a good enough gift. "I mean, if you don't feel comfortable staying in a hotel or if your mom doesn't want you to go I can cancel the reservations. I can't really cancel the park tickets, but I can figure out something to do with them. Someone at school could buy them or something, so just let me know if you don't want to go. I can get you something else for Christmas if this isn't what you want. Just let me know if—"

"Mel!" I interrupted. "I love it! I think it's a fantastic idea! Of course I want to go! I've never been on a real vacation in my life! We've only visited my family out here once, like I told you, and other than that we just traveled from base to base." My eyes welled with tears and my smile fell.

"What's the matter?" Melanie asked. "Are you sure you like it?"

"Yes, yes, I'm totally sure. It's just that..." I took a deep breath. "This is the nicest thing anyone has ever done for me. Like

seriously, the nicest thing and...and I couldn't get you anything that even minutely compares." I hung my head and looked at the postcard lying in my hands. "This is all I have for you." I handed her the gift that I had placed next to me on the bed.

Melanie took the box and reached over to tilt my chin up. She looked me directly in the eyes and said, "Dev, before I open this, I want you to know that you could have come in here with a torn-up shoe wrapped in a zip-lock bag and I still would have loved it because it's from you. Hell, you didn't have to get me anything at all! I just wanted to bring a little bit of magic into your life. You've had a really tough year and you've fought your way through it. Your father dying, your mom being depressed, moving to a new city, and I've seen how much you've grown in just the time that I've known you from an introvert into a much more confident and downright kick-ass chick. You've helped me with S.A.E.P. more than anyone else even offered to, and we're becoming a real organization now thanks to your involvement. You've actually got friends in school even though you swore that no one would ever like you. Your grades are the best they've ever been, and I remember how mopey you were for your first weeks here."

"Okay. Getting embarrassed now."

"I just wanted to get you something to congratulate you on making it through. Not only making it through, but flourishing. I'm so proud of you and I want you to be able to go out and just have some real fun. With me there to have fun with you, of course." Melanie smiled and I leaned my head into the palm of her hand as she wiped away the single tear that had slowly made its way down my cheek.

“Oh, just open your damn present, then, you big cheese ball,” I said as I sniffed and wiped my eyes with my sleeve.

“You got it.”

Melanie patted my face and then opened the poorly wrapped box that I had given to her. I’d given her a homemade Harry Potter–style Gryffindor scarf from my mother (to match my Ravenclaw), a mix CD of my favorite Broadway songs, and a book of collected poetry by American women writers that I had found in mint condition at a used bookstore down the road from my apartment.

“Oh Dev, I love everything! How could you think I wouldn’t?” She wrapped the Gryffindor scarf around her neck and opened the book to peruse some of the poetry. After a few minutes of leafing through the pages she stopped, smiled, and read a poem by Emily Dickinson aloud:

One Sister have I in our house,
And one, a hedge away.
There’s only one recorded,
But both belong to me.

One came the road that I came—
And wore my last year’s gown—
The other, as a bird her nest,
Buildded our hearts among.

She did not sing as we did—
It was a different tune—
Herself to her a music
As Bumble bee of June.

Today is far from Childhood—

But up and down the hills
I held her hand the tighter—
Which shortened all the miles—
 And still her hum
The years among,
Deceives the Butterfly;
Still in her Eye
The Violets lie
Mouldered this many May.
 I spilt the dew—
But took the morn—
I chose this single star
From out the wide night's numbers—
Sue—forevermore!

She closed the book gently and leaned forward to pull me into a hug. We held each other in silence and I enjoyed the feel of her strong back under my hands and the pressure of her chin on my neck. When she pulled away, my heart sank at the loss of warmth.

“You’re amazing, Devin Kelly. Don’t you ever forget that.” She smiled and squeezed my hand. “So. What do you want to do until dinner?”

Again, the ideas that sprang to mind were not ones that I could necessarily speak out loud, so I replied, “Do you really think I’d come over without my bathing suit? My vote is for the hot tub!”



I spent the night at Melanie's house after stuffing myself full of a second Christmas dinner with her family. Her mother started chugging the wine at seven o'clock and was drunk by eight. Despite this, the evening was fun and full of loud debate about which films should be nominated for the Oscars or which charities were the most worthwhile. The only uncomfortable part of the night was when Melanie's father (also a bit drunk by this point) decried the rise of homosexuality in the film and television industry. Melanie's mother tried to persuade him that it had always been there, but was more hidden because of societal norms at the time. She seemed more open to alternative lifestyles, but I knew she would never be at the forefront of a gay rights movement. Despite being affluent Los Angeles moderate liberals, an undercurrent of bigotry still ran beneath the surface.

Although I had tried to keep my face passive as he announced his disgust with shows that featured gay or lesbian characters, I noticed Melanie casting cautious glances my way. We had never discussed homosexuality outright, but I knew Melanie was the most open-minded person I had ever met and she was friends with plenty of gay kids at our school. I caught her eye at one point and she made an apologetic face, obviously embarrassed by the behavior of her family. I shrugged and tried to smile back as if it was no big deal.

When we were getting ready for bed after dinner, Melanie tried to explain. "They're really not that bigoted most of the time. Alcohol makes them say things they don't really mean."

"Whatever. I've heard people say worse." I tried to change the subject by starting a halfhearted pillow fight, but it was clear we were both sort of going through the motions. At least I knew where Jason's prejudice came from. Fathers probably told their

sons a lot of things they wouldn't tell anyone else. Had to make sure their boys wouldn't succumb to any undesirable way of life. There'd be hell to pay if they found out that they had fathered a homo! They could handle any situation life might throw their way, but please, oh please, don't let there be a fag in the family!



The next morning I awoke and headed back to my apartment. Aunt Jessica was dropping Mom off that night, but I wanted to tidy up the kitchen before she got back. She didn't need any more work after what I knew had been a trying holiday. As I approached the front door, I noticed a large colorfully wrapped box with a card taped on top waiting for me. I couldn't, for the life of me, think of anyone who would send me a Christmas present. Well, no one that I hadn't seen the previous day anyway. An inexplicable wave of extreme unease washed over me and I approached the box cautiously.

The envelope on top had my name printed on it in a messy scrawl, and I nervously picked it up and opened it. The card featured a small white Persian kitten wearing a too-large Santa hat and inside were written the words: *Merry Christmas DIKE! Love, Melanie.*

Jason had obviously decided to play evil Santa before heading out to hit the slopes, and I was the unfortunate recipient of his "generosity." Despite the ice that suddenly formed in the pit of my stomach, I wryly thought how stupid he was to think I would fall for such an immature prank. If Melanie was going to act completely out of character and viciously insult me, she'd damn sure at least spell *dyke* correctly.

I should've just thrown the box away, but morbid curiosity got the better of me. I carefully tore the wrapping paper and opened the shoddily taped cardboard. I stood well back in case something dangerous sat inside ready to spring out, but when nothing happened I peered over the edge to see what was inside.

The urge to vomit hit me instantly. Inside lay a dead and very bloody tabby cat that had been hit by a car or had seen the wrong end of a fiercely swung baseball bat.

I closed my eyes and turned away, fighting tears that were stinging my eyes. I stumbled inside the apartment and sat on the couch for a few minutes, stunned and trying to collect myself. As soon as I could, I walked calmly to my bedroom to find the shoe box in which I normally kept my nicest oxford shoes. I stopped by the hall closet to pick up my mom's gardening gloves and spade, knowing what I had to do. Melanie could never know about this particular incident.

CHAPTER FIVE

My heart thumped as Melanie and I pulled up to the parking valet for the Disneyland Hotel in the early morning of New Year's Eve. I had always wanted to visit the park, but had never had the opportunity. After the unfortunate incident with Jason's Christmas present, I'd distracted myself by delving head first into the Disneyland website to find the best things to see and do. It gave me something else to concentrate on besides the pity I felt for the dead cat as well as for myself. I was now fully informed about what the parks had to offer and eager to get started on my first real vacation, short as it was going to be.

After checking into the hotel, Melanie and I ran to the entrance gates and waited for the park to open. She had assured me that getting there right at opening was the only way to go, especially during the busy holiday season when the lines promised to be long. When we were finally admitted into the park we passed under the tunnel to Main Street and I noticed Melanie watching me, gauging my reaction. What she saw must have been a look of pure childlike wonder and overwhelming excitement. I had seen pictures and videos of Disneyland, but being there in person was something else altogether.

The Christmas decorations were still up and the street sparkled with ornaments and lights. Children, teenagers, and adults alike wore Mickey ears and broad smiles, rushing down the street to be first on the ride of their choice. The smell of fresh waffle cones, popcorn, and cinnamon permeated everything, even at this early hour, and I felt like I had stepped back in time into a utopian world of color and happiness. Yes, I cheesed out a little and became a two-year-old, but I couldn't fathom a more perfect place than where I was at that moment. I also couldn't imagine experiencing it with anyone other than Melanie.

"Well, what do you think?"

"Mel, this is awesome. This is just...so cool!"

Melanie laughed, and I shrugged at my inarticulate description of my feelings.

We continued toward the center hub and only stopped briefly to have our picture taken in front of the castle. Melanie yanked me toward what turned out to be Critter Country. She swore that the best thing to ride first was Splash Mountain, so as to avoid the never-ending line that would form later in the day. It was also unseasonably warm for winter, even in Southern California, so a water ride didn't seem as offensive as it would have if it were colder.

Mel was right. Splash Mountain was the single best start to a day at Disneyland.

As we exited the ride, dripping wet and laughing hysterically, Melanie commented on the transparency of my white shirt by quipping in a false Southern accent, "Why, Miss Devin Louise Kelly, I do believe you wore that color on purpose to garner the depraved attentions of all of these nice people!"

I continued laughing as we walked, but reddened and tried

in vain to cover up the front of my soaking shirt as a group of middle school boys who had heard Melanie's comment gawked as they passed. Melanie giggled at my shyness and teased, "Oh come on, flaunt it, girl!"

"I don't have much to flaunt!" I replied.

"Oh please, what you have is just perfect." Melanie stopped suddenly, looking slightly embarrassed, then continued more quickly, "I mean, I have too much in...*that area*... and I'd be glad for what you have any day."

I looked at her incredulously and she finally said, "Right. Okay, so let's go ride the Matterhorn before that line starts overflowing too."

Melanie grabbed my hand and pulled me along in her wake, walking briskly toward the large snowcapped mountain near the center of the park. It wasn't the most efficient plan as far as park coverage, but it seemed to work in our favor. When we approached the ride, the line was still fairly short. We queued up and waited for a brief time, and when it was our turn to board our bobsled, I realized with a jolt that the seating arrangement in each car called for two people to sit together in one seat, somewhat... intimately. Since Melanie was taller, she sat in the rear, leaving me to squeeze into the small space between her legs. I tried my best to play it cool, as if having her practically wrapped around me was the most normal and innocent thing in the world. After all, everyone else had to do it, and I had seen several ride vehicles embark on their short trip with other squealing and laughing girls in the same situation.

As Melanie settled herself in, she looked at me with a nervous smile and a small twitch in the corner of her mouth. Figuring she must be uncomfortable, I sat down and tried to position myself

as far forward as I could, not wanting to intrude too blatantly into her personal space. However, her knees were still pressed firmly against my hips and I had to tear my concentration away from the fact that I was seated squarely between my gorgeous friend's thighs.

We buckled ourselves in and I soon found that it was almost impossible to keep from sliding back against her during the turbulent ride. As the coaster continued its journey through the steel mountain I realized that trying to restrain my backward progress was a futile endeavor, so back I slid to rest firmly wedged between Melanie's legs. I couldn't turn my head around to say I was sorry, but I knew that it was probably for the best. Drawing attention to my self-consciousness would only emphasize the fact that I found the situation to be something more than harmless fun. Much to my surprise, however, as soon as I relaxed a bit Melanie wrapped her arms around me, holding tight and laughing as we sped around hairpin turns, dropped down sudden dips, and eventually coasted to a stop at the end of the ride. I stood, a mixture of relief and disappointment inside my gut as I stood and exited the bobsled. Relief that she had found nothing suggestive in what we had just experienced, and disappointment in the knowledge that this was the end of one of the only opportunities I would ever have to be in such a provocative position with her.

We spent the rest of the day running from ride to ride until we had to head back to the hotel before dinner to take a short catnap. Melanie had told me that we'd need to be wide-awake at midnight to watch the special New Year's Eve fireworks. The parks had started to get increasingly crowded and we knew, during the rest of the evening, it would be a fight to get into any attractions at all.

Melanie had reserved a basic room with double beds at the hotel, but it overlooked the Never Land pool and was nicer than any hotel room or apartment I had ever stayed in. Not only that, but sharing a hotel room with Melanie, despite how many times we'd spent the night at each other's houses, made me feel like we were play-acting at being a couple. My own imagination, maybe, but the impression felt completely right. I gave myself a little leeway to bask in it while I could.

Melanie drew the curtains to block the lingering sunlight and we both lay down in our respective beds. I had already discovered that Melanie tended to fall asleep as soon as her head hit the pillow whereas I always took a while to drift off. I guess that's the difference between someone with a clear conscience and no concerns as compared with a more worried person, namely me. After twenty minutes or so, I rolled onto my left side to look across at her, and sure enough, her breathing was slow and steady. She was lying on her right side facing me, and some of her hair had fallen across her face. I longed to smooth it aside with my fingers and brush my lips across the perfect skin of her cheek.

I took my time gazing at her relaxed features in the dim light, pretending that there might be a time when she would love me the same way I loved her. If that time ever came, nothing in the world could hurt me again. A smile formed on the edges of my lips and, just then, Melanie awoke and looked directly at me. I knew that I had been caught staring and the grin on my face must have looked out of place and suspicious. Luckily, Melanie just smiled back at me sleepily and yawned. "Did you get any sleep at all?"

"No." I replied. "I guess I'm still too excited. I can sleep later tonight."

Melanie suddenly looked nervous again, as she had on the Matterhorn, but tried to cover it up with another yawn as she sat up and rose to her feet. To my surprise she approached me since I had yet to move from the bed, and she brushed the frizzy strands of hair from my face, much as I had wanted to do with hers only a moment before. I looked into her eyes and noticed a look of determination had replaced the nervousness. Her warm hand remained on the side of my face and she began gently stroking my forehead and along my eyebrow with her thumb. I almost moved my own hand to cover hers, thinking for a crazy moment that I could press her palm to my lips. But as soon as I formed the thought, she moved her hand away and I was left with only the lingering sensation of her soft touch.

“Well, c’mon then, lazy. I’m starving!” she said with a dramatic clutch at her stomach.

I sat there for a few seconds before moving. Had I imagined that whole intense moment between us?



She had made dinner reservations for us at the Blue Bayou, situated inside the Pirates of the Caribbean attraction. It was dark and inviting, and if you tuned out the occasional screaming child it felt as if you were sitting in a fancy open-air restaurant somewhere in the backwoods of Louisiana. We took our time eating and enjoyed the quiet, the excellent food, and each other’s company. It did seem to me that Melanie was getting more fidgety and silly as the evening progressed, however. During dessert I asked her what was up, but she just laughed and said she was just having a great time, excited about New Year’s.

We spent the rest of the night before the fireworks waiting in line for Space Mountain, riding the train around the park because our feet hurt too much to walk anymore, drinking espresso mochas to stay awake, and splitting a heavenly churro sundae while seated cross-legged, staking out our place in front of the castle for the New Year's show. As midnight approached, loudspeaker announcements let us know that the festivities would begin shortly.

"So, a new year is about to start. How do you feel?" Melanie asked in between bites of ice cream.

I clumsily wiped the stray cinnamon off of my lips and answered, "Well...I can honestly say that this has been the hardest and the best year of my life, so I have mixed feelings."

"The hardest I understand, but the best too? Glutton for punishment, are we? I have to remember to bring my whip next time," she replied with a smirk.

"You know what I mean." I mock glared back. "Losing my dad and uprooting my life to the terrifying world of Beverly Hills was difficult." I paused, not wanting to sound overly sentimental and also not wanting to give too much away. "It was the best year of my life because...well, because I met you. There. I said it. So sue me for sounding schmaltzy."

I laughed to take the emotional edge off the statement, hoping that I didn't sound too pathetic.

To my relief, however, Melanie smiled. "Me too. I mean, I'm sorry you lost your dad. Of course I am. But I can't help but feel a bit guilty because I'm glad it brought you out here. Will you promise me that whatever happens we'll always stay best friends?" Her inexplicable nervousness had returned, and I couldn't figure out why.

“Yes! Of course! I mean, what could happen that would make me not want to be *with* you?” The lights in the park dimmed suddenly in preparation for the fireworks. Thank God, because a deep heat suffused my cheeks after that Freudian slip. It was true, though. Nothing would make me want to ever leave Melanie’s side. It was the thought of her wanting to leave that kept me up at night. Despite how open Melanie was, I couldn’t help but worry...if she ever found out my true feelings for her, would she be the same person with me? Or would our friendship as we knew it be over?

Apparently Melanie missed my unintended sexual innuendo and replied, “Good. Now then, let’s celebrate the new year at the happiest place on Earth!” The crowd around us had all begun to stand and we joined them.

The prerecorded message then began over the speaker system: “Ladies and gentlemen, boys and girls, in just a few ticks of the clock we will ring in the new year together.” And then later, “Please join us as we count down to the new year!”

The countdown began and Melanie reached over and took my hand. I glanced at her, but she was staring at the castle while yelling out the numbers with the rest of the mass of people, waiting for the first fireworks to light up the sky. I continued the countdown myself and when we all reached “One!” in unison, bright white streamers of light shot straight upward and the celebration began. A fully orchestrated choral version of “Auld Lang Syne” started to play and everyone, Melanie and I included, sang along and swayed happily, occasionally letting out an “Ooooh” or “Wow!” in between words. When the song ended, a medley of Disney music took over and the fireworks continued for another five minutes.

When it was over and everyone around us was hugging and cheering, Melanie turned to me and saw that I had tears in my eyes.

“Did you like it?”

I couldn’t find my voice to answer right away and I couldn’t think of words to describe the way I felt anyway, so I pulled her into a tight hug and whispered simply, “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.” We held on to each other for a few seconds more and then she took a deep breath and broke away. “Come on. I have another surprise for you.”



It took a while to work our way through the throng of people out of the park and back to the hotel. When we arrived at the room I went into the bathroom to take a quick shower and change into my pajama pants and T-shirt. When I came out, Melanie was standing in front of the table in the corner and she was biting the corner of her lip with nervous excitement.

“What are you doing?” I asked.

“I told you I had another surprise!” She moved to her right so that I could see what was on the table behind her. There was a bottle of champagne chilling in one of the hotel ice buckets, and next to it sat a plate of strawberries.

My eyes widened. “Melanie, the perfect angel, brought alcohol for two underage high school students to drink?” I said, brightening up.

“Yes, I did. It’s New Year’s, after all! We have tons of the stuff at home. Mom and Dad will never know it’s missing.”

I crossed my arms and smirked at her. “I never knew you

were such a rebel. I *have* been a bad influence on you! Where did you get the strawberries?"

"I packed them in my bag and hid them in the refrigerator when you weren't looking this morning."

"Excellent." I paused, waiting. "Well?"

"Well what?"

I couldn't help but laugh. "Well...start pouring, you lush!"

We set up an impromptu picnic on top of Melanie's bed and poured the champagne into the hotel glasses. I found that strawberries and sparkling wine actually did go well together, like it says in all the books, and I was enjoying myself immensely. We started drinking at around twelve thirty, and by one a.m. I was starting to feel the effects of the alcohol. Melanie and I became increasingly goofy, giggling uncontrollably at the smallest and most insignificant things.

With a slur I asked, "So, where did you get the idea for this... this champagne and fruit thingy?"

Melanie answered more slowly and deliberately than usual, trying to make the words clear. "I saw it in that movie, *Pretty Woman*. It seemed like a good idea and I wanted to celebrate the start of a new year properly. I'm usually at home asleep or I'm with friends who just want to drink and watch the bands on the New Year's Eve TV shows." She paused. "So, have you ever had alcohol before?"

"Not much. Just a sip of wine here and there. Although my dad used to offer me some of his soda and when I'd take a big swig I'd realize that he had whiskey in it. He thought that was hilarious. I learned to smell any drink he offered after that." I watched Melanie laugh. "What about you?"

"Some, but not much. Mom drinks all of it before I get

the chance! Ha!” Melanie laughed loudly at her own joke until someone banged on the hotel room wall.

“Shhhh! You’ll make the neighbors mad!” We paused and then burst into gales of hysterical laughter all over again.

After we calmed down and the giggle fits faded, we began to feel mellow. The strawberries and champagne were gone, and we were leaning back against the pillows we had placed in front of the headboard. I felt more carefree than I had in a while, and I tilted my head over to rest it on Melanie’s shoulder and thought, again, about the champagne surprise.

“So, you got the idea from *Pretty Woman*, huh? What does that make me? Your two-bit lady of the night to do with as you please?” My eyes were closed and I grinned at the thought.

Melanie was quiet for a moment and then sat up suddenly. As my head lost its support I wobbled before catching my balance and sitting up straight.

“Oh, sorry.” She turned to face me. “But I have something to tell you. That’s one of the reasons for the champagne, actually. I may need it to...”

She paused and I stared at her blankly.

“Remember that you said you would be my friend no matter what?”

“Of course, Mel. You’re the best friend I’ve ever had.”

Melanie looked as if the words stung.

My nerves kicked in as her uncharacteristic anxiety started to rub off onto me. “Why? What’s going on? Am I not a good friend?”

“No! I mean yes, you are. You’re an amazing friend! That’s why I’m asking. What if...what if you found out something about me that you didn’t like?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about, Mel. I like everything about you. I love you!” The words were out of my mouth before I knew that I had spoken them. My eyes widened and my fuzzy thoughts snapped back into sober focus. I quickly tried to smooth over my features, hoping that she would interpret the comment as innocent despite how much I truly meant it.

Melanie sat for a moment, her eyes misting, and then said in a quiet whisper, “That’s just it, Dev. I love you too. I love you more than anything or anyone and I...I just wanted you to know.”

I waited for her to say something more, but when she looked down at her hands folded in her lap I knew that she had said the thing that she had been dreading all day. My heart began to beat more and more fiercely, wondering if she meant what I thought she did. Would she be so afraid of me walking out on her if she had just meant the love of a best friend or sister? Would she be sitting mere inches from me on the verge of tears?

The longer I sat there in silence, trying to rationalize every part of the conversation and trying to stifle the hope that was blooming in my chest, the more upset Melanie became. Probably thinking that her worst fears were coming true. I realized as she began trying in vain to fight the tears running down her cheeks, that she had just bared a hidden piece of her soul to me. A piece that she thought would end our friendship, out of disgust or unease or anything else.

Even if I was wrong, I decided that if she could take such an obviously terrifying step, then it was time for me to do the same.

“Hey. Hey, don’t cry,” I said softly. I reached out and tilted

her head up and made her look me in the eyes. She sniffed and I said, “Nothing you can say or do will ever scare me away.”

“Maybe...maybe you don’t understand what I just told you,” she said with a tremor in her voice.

She looked as if she wanted to say something else, but I abandoned all doubt and inhibitions and leaned forward, taking her face gently into my hands, and I kissed her.

The world swam and my body soared and all sensation was concentrated on the feel of her soft lips pressed firmly against mine. At first she remained motionless in what I assumed was shock, but the spell soon broke. She wrapped her arms around me, holding the back of my head, and returned the kiss wholeheartedly. She kissed me fiercely and desperately, squeezing me tighter and tighter as if she felt that I would float away. I moved my arms to embrace her as well and we tried to pull each other closer somehow knowing, without really knowing, that it would never feel close enough. It was the first real kiss for us both and, although it was clumsy and awkward, I’d have sworn there had never been a kiss in history that meant more.

Our passion heightened as we began to explore each other’s lips and I thought I would die from the elation in my chest. My body felt on fire, and I was afraid that I would ignite us both in an immolation of pure desire.

Melanie pulled away after a moment, leaving my lips cold and bare.

“Wow, Dev. You too?” she asked breathlessly.

A little low on oxygen myself, I replied, “Ever since I first laid eyes on you. I was too afraid to tell you.”

“I know how you felt,” she said sheepishly. “I was so afraid

of losing you, but I just...I just couldn't stand one more second of you not knowing. I had to risk everything to get this off my chest."

"Well, I'm glad one of us had the guts to say something." I smiled genuinely. "And that's one of the many reasons that I love you. You'll always be the brave one, and I adore everything about you."

I leaned forward and pressed my lips against the side of Melanie's neck. She gasped. I trailed feather-soft kisses down toward her chest and she trembled beneath my fingers. I pulled back, hoping I hadn't gone too far. Thankfully, though, Melanie took the opportunity to push gently on my shoulders until I lay flat upon the bed. As she pressed her body against mine, the doubt and sadness that had plagued her only moments before had been replaced by a new, wicked twinkle in her eyes.

CHAPTER SIX

I awoke the next morning to a stream of sunlight shining directly onto my face through the small crack in the curtains. I squinted and went to move my left arm to shield my eyes, but I realized it was being held down by something. Confused, I turned, and adrenaline shot through my body. Melanie lay on my shoulder facing me, her leg draped over mine and her arm stretched across my stomach.

Euphoria exploded in my chest as I remembered the events of the previous night. Because we were new to the whole intimacy thing, we hadn't taken it very far but had merely basked in the physical closeness we'd both been secretly craving. I still couldn't believe Melanie really did love me the same way that I loved her. It didn't seem possible. The fact that someone as wonderful and perfect and amazing and beautiful as her could have feelings for someone like me was baffling.

I realized with relieved modesty that we were still clothed under the sheets, but I started to feel the twinge of a bruise on my lips and sensitive spots on my neck and chest where Melanie had explored. I grinned stupidly remembering what she had done to

cause the soreness. I also knew that when she awoke she'd have the same marks and aches as I did, and the thought made me giddily happy.

Her face was too close to mine to see properly, but her mouth was slightly open and her hair was more mussed than it usually was in the morning. I shifted slightly to pull my arm out from under her and she made the most adorable little sound I've ever heard—half sigh, half protest. If my heart had been full of Melanie before, it was now close to bursting. Once my arm was free I leaned over and placed the softest of kisses on her cheek. Her forehead furrowed for a moment, but her features soon relaxed, and she rolled onto her back.

Her eyes drowsed open and she slowly focused on my face. When she recognized me and saw that I was leaning over her, smiling, her eyes widened. I knew she had just remembered the details of last night, as I had done not so much earlier. For a split second, my smile faltered. Could her confession of love just have been the champagne talking? And just like that, a more heart-rending fear grabbed me.

What if she regretted what she had said and especially what we had done?

It would be the end of our friendship for sure.

She would never be able to look at me the same way after last night.

Needless to say, relief flowed through me when Melanie's lips lifted in an embarrassed, but very pleased smile.

"Hey," she said, blushing for the first time I could remember.

"Hey," I said back, the stupid grin fully restored to my face.

"Um...that was some night."

“Yeah, it was. You’re...you still mean what you said, right?”

“Yes! Of course!” She hesitated. “You do too, don’t you?”

“Oh yeah. Every word. Every kiss.” This time it was my turn to redden. “That was cheesy. Sorry.”

Melanie reached up to cup my head in her hand and pulled me down into a gentle and loving kiss. Although it was softer and more delicate than the contact of the night before, it still sent shivers down my spine.

We stayed in bed curled around each other for another hour or so, but finally Melanie said, “Dev, I could stay here forever, but we do have tickets to the parks for today.”

“Don’t care.” My voice was muffled because I had my lips pressed to the back of her neck.

In a singsong voice she replied, “But we haven’t ridden Tower of Terror yet! C’mon! Tower of Terror! Oooooooh.”

“Mel, I’ve been fighting my hormones by not pouncing on you every day since we met. You can’t expect me to want to give it up so soon!” I pinched her butt as I said it.

She yelped and swatted at me playfully. “I’ll let you hold my hand!”

I sighed dramatically and said, “Okay, fine. I’ll go back to this *magical* land of yours. It’s okay...I *guess*.”

“Oh, stop being such a drama llama.”

After another long kiss, we got up reluctantly, showered (separately), got dressed, and headed over to California Adventure to complete what had turned out to be the single most important and blissful couple of days in my entire life. Melanie was true to her word and held my hand whenever she could, regardless of how many people were around. The confidence she exuded

in everyday life apparently included not worrying about what people thought about two girls holding hands in public. On the contrary, she positively glowed with pride and happiness.

I, on the other hand, darted furtive glances at passersby, looking for any signs of disapproval. I didn't see any, but I still worried. Even with my annoying self-consciousness, however, the feeling of being loved and knowing that I had someone to love back filled every ounce of my being, and I bounced on happy clouds until it was time to head home to Los Angeles.



The traffic was predictably terrible on the drive back, but that gave us time to talk.

"So what do we do now?" I asked.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, do we keep all of this a secret? Are you going to tell your parents?"

Melanie paused for a moment. "Why? Do you want to keep us a secret?"

"Well, it's just that I'm not so sure everyone is going to be as happy about it as we are."

"Oh, Dev, I think that you don't give people enough credit. I'm friends with all sorts of people at school. I don't care about their sex lives or how much money they have or what religion they are or anything stupid like that."

"*You* don't, but I've seen some real ugliness in the past, and I'm just concerned about how we'll be treated."

"This is California, though. It's not like we're a red state or

anything. People are pretty open-minded here, at least in the big cities.”

“Not everyone is open-minded.” I paused, wondering if I should even bring it up. But I had to. “Even your dad complained about gay people at Christmas, remember? And that’s not even mentioning Jason’s very obvious opinion.”

“Oh, screw Jason. He has no right to judge me or tell me how to live my life. It’s not like he can change anything anyway. He can’t stop me from loving you and he can’t make me not be a lesbian...Wow...I’m a lesbian. I hadn’t really thought about it like that before...Cool! Anyway, he can’t make me not be a lesbian, so even if he says something I’ll just ignore it like usual.”

“The thing is...he actually scares me, Mel.”

“What? Why?”

I’d opened the door on this one. Still, I hesitated, measuring my words. “I never told you because I thought I’d run you off... but that second time he confronted me, he called me a dyke. And obviously that’s the real reason he didn’t want me hanging out with you.”

Melanie drove on without speaking, and I could tell that she was trying to keep her anger in check. Finally she said, “Well, I can handle Jason, and if it worries you so much, then I won’t tell anyone. But just so you know, I’m not ashamed of you. I’m not ashamed of us. If it were up to me, I’d barricade myself in the principal’s office and shout out over the school’s loudspeaker, ‘I love Devin Kelly! Devin Kelly is super hot! Devin Kelly is a fantastic kisser! I want Devin Kelly to jump on top of me and—’”

“Okay! Okay!” I interrupted before she could make me blush harder. “I get the point!”

After a minute or so of silence I bit back a smile and asked, “I’m a fantastic kisser, huh?”



We pulled up to my apartment at ten o’clock and sat in the car just out of range of the light of a street lamp.

“So...” I said, not wanting to leave Melanie’s company.

“So,” she said, not wanting to let me go. “I hope you had a good time.”

I looked at her with incredulity. “Um...yeah, you could say that!”

Melanie’s face lit up and we leaned toward each other hesitantly, not knowing if physical contact was allowed out in public.

“Oh, screw it.” I leaned across the seat and kissed her firmly.

When I pulled away Melanie’s lips followed mine back until she could stretch no farther. She released a little groan as we broke contact, and I saw feverish need in her eyes.

“Geez, Mel,” I said, unable to hold back a giggle.

“Well? I just want to...you know. I’ve wanted to do that for such a long time!”

“I know. Me too. But I do have to go see Mom. She’ll want to know about the trip. And no,” I said, forestalling her, “I’m not telling her about”—I gestured my hand between us—“this. Not yet anyway. I don’t know how she’ll react.”

Melanie looked a little sad at this, but I told her, “Listen, I know we’ve both been wanting this for ages, but the whole relationship thing, not to mention lesbian thing, is all very new to me and I need to internalize it before I run around waving a rainbow flag. I need to have time to...you know...feel my way around.”

Melanie smirked and made a decidedly evil face. It took me a moment to catch up with her train of thought, but when it clicked I rolled my eyes and smiled despite my mock outrage.

“Naughty!” I said as I wagged my finger at her. “Anyway, I’ll call you tomorrow. I really can’t begin to thank you enough for what you’ve done to me. *For* me, I mean!”

Melanie smirked again.

“Even without...last night. This little trip is still the nicest thing anyone has ever done for me and I had the best time of my life. So thank you.”

“You’re welcome.” Melanie squeezed my hand. “I love you.”

A huge smile broke out on my face. “I love you too.”

I got out of the car, tightness forming in my chest as I separated myself from her and the physical distance between us grew. I walked up the stairs to my apartment and when I opened the door, I heard Melanie’s car pull away and I had to stop myself from looking back. Mom was eating microwave popcorn and watching a police car chase on the news.

“Hi, honey,” she said, as I sat down on the couch next to her. “So tell me, is Disneyland really the happiest place on earth?”

I nodded and couldn’t stop the smile that formed on my lips. “Yeah, I’ve never been so happy in my life.”

Clueless, Mom beamed at me. “I’m so glad you found such a good friend like Melanie.”

If she only knew.



I called Melanie as soon as I woke up. I had dreamt about her all night and couldn’t wait to see her again. We had one more week until school started again, and now that Melanie and I were, you know...me and Mel, I wanted to make every second count. Esmerelda answered the phone and told me Melanie was still asleep, but she’d received strict instructions to tell me to come over to the house if I called. I thanked her and immediately jumped out of bed to go see my girlfriend. The fact that I had a girlfriend suddenly hit me and I felt like singing and leaping around my bedroom like a lunatic.

Mom was in the kitchen making coffee when I bounded out and headed for the front door.

“I’m going to Melanie’s,” I hollered.

Mom came around the corner and peered at me, leaning her head against the doorjamb. “So early, Devin? You two just spent the last two days joined at the hip.”

I gulped.

“We have to get started on a new S.A.E.P. project before school starts, Mom. That’s all.”

Her skeptical look told me she didn’t believe a word of my lame explanation, and I tried my best to look innocent. But I knew that she suspected something.

“Well, you’ve hardly been home. But tell Melanie hello and that I fully expect to see her here for dinner in the next few days.

Since you haven't told me all the fun details about Disneyland, I'll just have to grill Melanie for the information."

I bit the insides of my cheeks to avoid smiling. "I'll let her know."

When I arrived at Melanie's house, Esmerelda was there to meet me at the door as usual.

"*Buenos días*, Devin." She positively beamed at me.

"Morning, Esmy." Wow, she seemed inordinately happy to see me.

"Melanie is in her room. She thought you might be coming by," Esmy added with a wink. I'd never seen her do *that* before.

With an awkward smile, I edged my way past her to the stairs, glancing back over my shoulder to see her gaze following me upward, the enormous grin still on her face. Odd.

I knocked quietly on Melanie's door and heard no response. She'd expect me to enter anyway, so I opened the door and found Melanie sound asleep on her back, her head turned away from me. The dark curtains were drawn and very little light streamed through, making the walk to her bed a shadowy maze because of the clothes and shoes strewn all over the floor. Within seconds, I banged my knee on the edge of her desk, hissing a sharp intake of breath at the pain. Off balance, I tripped over the backpack Melanie had taken with her to Anaheim and landed stomach-first with a bounce on the edge of her mattress, winding up on my knees next to the bed. Melanie sprang upright into a seated position.

"I don't want to go to OU!" she yelled, her bleary focus barely on me. I immediately broke into laughter, and that pulled her out of her dream state. She blinked a few times, then said, "Devin! You're here early!"

"I'm sorry," I said, trying to calm my fits of giggling. "I called when I woke up and Esmerelda said that you wanted me to come over."

"No, that's okay. I did want you here. I do!" She smiled and gave me her hand to help me up off of my knees. "I had a terrible dream about not getting into Stanford. My parents tried to send me to the University of Oklahoma! Ok-la-ho-ma!"

I laughed again, knowing that Melanie's academic aspirations were something she took very seriously. "Don't worry, Mel. You'll get into any school you want. And by the way, you're a total nerd for dreaming about that."

"I know, but guess what?"

"What?"

Melanie pulled me forward and placed feather-soft kisses along my jawline, making me shiver. "Mel! This is your house! What if Esmerelda walks in?"

"She won't care. She understands," she said between kisses.

It all started to make sense. As my breathing hitched I asked, "Is that why she looked at me funny this morning?" Much to my disappointment Melanie stopped kissing her way toward my lips and looked abashed.

"Promise you won't be mad, Dev."

"Okay, but...what did you do?" I asked nervously.

"Nothing bad, really! But...well, you asked me not to tell my parents..." At my stricken look of fear she added, "And I haven't! I won't. But...I did tell Esmy."

"You what?"

Melanie grabbed both of my hands in hers and pleaded, "I

couldn't stand not telling anyone! I'm just so happy! Besides, she knew something was up."

For a second, embarrassment overtook me. I covered my face with my palms. "Oh my God."

"No, it's okay. I can't hide anything from her. She can read a lie from a mile away! When she asked me what had changed, I just had to tell her."

I ventured a grimace at Mel. "Well? What did she say?"

"Obviously she was stoked. I think the fact that I've fallen in love with someone she adores made her day! She knows you make me happy and she actually told me to treat you right and to not let you get away."

I warmed from the compliment. "Fine, but she's not going to tell anyone, is she?"

"Not unless I tell her she can. She knows that this is something I'll have to tell my parents myself. They always ask me when I'm going to find a boyfriend, and I just pretend school is too busy for me to think about a relationship." She rolled her eyes. "Boy, are they in for a surprise!"

"Weird, isn't it?"

"What?"

"The fact that we're...well...*girlfriends*. When I kiss you I think, 'Wow, I'm kissing a girl!'"

Melanie giggled. "Is that bad?"

"Oh, hell no! I wouldn't have it any other way. It's just... interesting," I said.

"Well, let's see just how interesting we can make it," she said, leaning back and pulling me on top of her.

"Mel," I protested.

“Shh. Just kiss me.”

I obliged.



I spent the remainder of winter break with Melanie. We were inseparable. We'd trade off spending the night at her house and at my apartment. At her place, we'd lock ourselves away in her room, timidly exploring the limits of our attraction, while at my apartment, we'd stay up into the wee hours eating takeout Chinese food and pizza and watching old romantic comedies with Mom. I think she might have caught Mel and me sneaking clandestine hand-holds every once in a while, and, okay, I did tend to sit rather close to Melanie. But Mom never said anything. I knew that I'd have to tell her sooner or later, but I think the cowardly part of me hoped she'd figure it out on her own and save me the trouble.

By the time the second semester of my senior year rolled around, Melanie and I were madly in love, to the point that we lamented the times when our class schedules separated us. All in all, though, I knew that this was going to be the happiest five months of school I'd ever have, thanks to Melanie. I would never be able to truly thank her properly for the difference she had made in my life. But I planned to show her my gratitude every chance I got.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Acting as if nothing had changed between us while we were in public proved more difficult than I anticipated. Even without blatant displays of affection, it seemed that the lovelorn looks we snuck at each other during class did not go completely unnoticed. The first person to catch on was our gay friend from the drama club and S.A.E.P.

As we ate lunch alone at a corner table one day, Melanie said simply in between bites of cheese pizza, “Phillip knows.”

My head jerked up. “What do you mean Phillip knows? How can he know? Did you tell him?” I sounded frantic.

“I didn’t say a word! He can just tell. He has that...gaydar thing or something. It was actually funny. He just walked up to me last period and said, ‘Okay, out with it, girl,’ and I said, ‘Out with what?’ and he said, ‘Out with *you*!’ and I said, ‘What do you mean?’ and he said, ‘Please. Don’t think I haven’t noticed you and Devin making googly-eyes at each other ever since school started back up. So talk. I want the dirty details!’”

“Oh no. What did you tell him then?”

“Well, I didn’t go into ‘dirty details,’ if that’s what you mean, but there was no use trying to deny that you’re my

girlfriend now. He knows better. And besides, if there's anyone we can trust with something like this, it's Phillip. He's as gay as the day is long and knows not to say anything around other people if we don't want him to."

"Okay then, but don't tell anyone else! The next person may not be as open-minded."

Melanie rolled her eyes. "I won't. But it's not because I don't want to!"

"I know, I know. Just bear with me for a little while." I lowered my voice. "I guess we need to be a little more careful about how we act around each other. People aren't as blind as we think they are. Lord knows I want to throw you up against the lockers and furiously...you know...between every class, but maybe we need a little self-control. At least at school." I smiled and flicked condensation from the side of my cup of soda at her with my finger.

"Fine. If I promise to stop batting my eyes at you here, will you promise to make it up to me in full later?" she asked innocently.

I grinned back wickedly. "What do you think?"



The rest of January passed in a blissful haze. Classes were going really well, I was enjoying the symphonic music of concert band, and the orchestra had invited me, Melanie, and a few more of the better wind instrument players to join them for their contest pieces. I was madly in love, and Jason had dropped out of school completely. Apparently he had been asked to play his guitar in a heavy metal band started by one of his loser friends

and he swore to his parents that they were going to make it big. The adult Parkers hadn't agreed with his decision, but doting on him like they did, they had promised to support him monetarily until he could support himself. I never saw him anymore and had therefore received no more threats or pranks. Melanie and I were thrilled at the turn of events.

As far as our relationship was concerned, a few more people at school had noticed the change in our behavior, but they were open-minded friends from band and the S.A.E.P. No one seemed to have a problem with it and many even pulled one or both of us aside to tell us how happy they were to see us together as a couple. Knowing the way gossip spreads around teenagers, I was pretty sure that most of the school would know soon anyway. Judging by reactions so far, I started thinking coming out might not be as difficult as I'd expected.

Bolstered by the congratulatory nature of our friends' reactions, I decided that I really did need to tell Mom before the news reached her some other way. The prospect of her disapproval scared the hell out of me, but she was my mom and she deserved to know the reason for my happiness. I told Melanie one day at the end of January that I planned to come out to Mom that night. I had it all figured out. I was going to make pasta for dinner and give her a glass of wine or two, just to make sure she was nice and calm. Melanie offered to be there with me for comfort and strength, but I knew that this was something that I needed to do alone. She wished me luck by giving me a full and knee-trembling kiss in the girl's bathroom as I was about to catch the bus for my ride home.

When I arrived at my apartment I saw Mom's car parked out front. This meant that she was already home from work, ahead of

schedule. Darn, so much for pasta and wine. I could think of no excuse to delay our talk.

I climbed the stairs, trying not to imagine myself as the proverbial dead man walking, and reached for the door, my hand trembling. I turned the doorknob and took a deep breath before I stepped inside. “Hey, Mom.” I smiled. “Do you have a few minutes to talk?”



“Well?” Melanie asked when I met her in the band hall the next morning.

A broad smile spread across my face and Melanie said, “So it went well?”

“It did. Turns out she already knew.”

“How did she know?”

“Well, I guess we just weren’t as secretive about it as we thought. I mean, she’s known me my whole life, obviously, and she saw the change in my moods and personality. Being around you makes me a completely different and happy person. Obviously that’s hard to hide. That and I think she noticed the way we sat so closely together on the couch.” I laughed.

“So she’s fine with it? I don’t have to worry about being hunted down and having my head mounted on the wall?” Melanie asked with apparent relief.

“Not at all. I mean, I think she’s a tad bit uncomfortable with it. She said she’s never known a lesbian before, not outright anyway, but that anyone who makes me this happy and treats me so well is okay in her book. She asked me not to...you know...

make out with you around her or anything, but I forcefully told her that would *not* be a problem.”

Melanie laughed, and then we had to take our seats as the band director entered the room. I watched Melanie in the French horn row across from me, and she had a relieved smile on her face. I knew that I had been scared to come out to my mother, but I hadn’t realized how the possibility of Mom’s disapproval had affected Melanie. She wanted my mom to like her, obviously, and not consider her a “bad influence.” I wondered if I would be as lucky with her parents. My joy plummeted to my feet and a heavy rock of anxiety formed in my stomach. What would I do if Melanie’s parents hated the thought? Would I be allowed at their house anymore? Would they punish Melanie?

I ordered myself to stop with the pessimistic thoughts, that everything would be fine. I mean, Mom’s fairly conservative, and I had been worried that she wouldn’t approve. But it wasn’t a problem. Melanie’s parents were Hollywood socialites who mingled with a diverse cross-section of society. They were more likely to be liberal on the gay issue, despite what her dad had said at Christmas. Men were usually much more comfortable with the idea of lesbians than gay men, right? I took comfort in this thought, starting to trust that the hardest part was over. Now that I knew Mom wasn’t going to kick me out of the house or something else equally awful, anything else would be easy.



Later that week, while snuggled up together in Melanie’s bed after a fruitful S.A.E.P. meeting where Melanie had spoken with

student reps from other high schools about their own chapters, I asked Melanie what we were going to do after we graduated.

“What if we don’t get into the same university? My SAT scores were really good, and my grades have definitely been even better than usual this year, but I just don’t think it’s possible for me to get into Stanford.”

“Oh, I don’t know about that. Your entrance essay was really excellent. I think they’ll take notice. You’ve had such an interesting life, and from what I hear they tend to like things like that...as long as you can prove to them that you’re devoted to learning. Your essay showed that you are, so try not to worry. Besides, there’s no guarantee that I’ll get in either.”

I made a noise like I didn’t believe that at all.

“Well, even if I do and you don’t it just means that we’ll have to do some sort of...long-distance thing.”

I hugged her tighter.

“I know,” she said, “I don’t want to be apart from you either, but no matter what happens I promise we’ll make it work. No distance can stop me from loving you.”

“Thanks. Me too...but with you.” We both giggled. “Anyway, I think I have to go anywhere where I can get some financial aid. I’ve applied for a music scholarship at every school. I just hope I’m good enough.”

“Oh, you’re good enough. I love listening to you play. I play like a high school band nerd, but you play like you live for it. I think you could play professionally with some good training.”

“I do like it more than just about anything else. But anyway, to change the subject, I know you want to tell your parents about us, but I’m...I’m just really nervous. I don’t have a good feeling about it.”

Melanie paused. “Is this because of Jason? You know he’s hardly ever around anymore. From what the grapevine tells me, he spends more of his time stoned out of his mind than rehearsing or playing gigs with that collection of tone-deaf assholes he calls a band. I don’t know why Mom and Dad still give him money. If I did something like that they’d cut me off without a cent and tell me to screw my head on straight. It’s so not fair.”

“Yeah, but you’re worth more than ten thousand Jasons, and you’re going to make the world a better place while he’s just a waste of space. And yes, it is somewhat because of Jason. If you tell your parents, they’re sure to tell him, and we both already know that he’s not particularly on board with the idea.”

“I don’t care. He can’t do anything about it.”

“I don’t know. He scares me. I think he can be dangerous.”

“Oh, he’s all bark and no bite. But you know that I’ll respect your wishes. All I ask is that you start thinking about the possibility of me telling my parents. They’re going to figure it out eventually and I don’t think they’re going to care. The only person whose opinion I respect is Esmy’s, and she’s already given us her blessing.”

“I promise that I’ll get some courage, somewhere. Just... don’t do it yet.”

“I won’t.” Melanie snuggled in closer to me and we soon fell asleep in each other’s arms.



I reached the much-coveted age of eighteen on February second, and we celebrated by going over to my aunt and uncle’s house with a small group of my best friends, Mom included. The

evening was filled with music and BBQ in their backyard and it was undoubtedly the happiest birthday ever. I had never had so many friends show up at a party before, and when Mom told me to check the driveway at the end of the night, I didn't know what she meant. Until I looked. She bought me my own car! It was a used, but still fairly new-looking, red Toyota Corolla with a large bow placed on top, just like in those cheesy commercials. She said since I was going off to college soon, she wanted to be sure that I'd drive home to visit as much as possible.

I hugged my mom extra tight, and I made sure to take mental snapshots of all the beaming faces around me, knowing I could hold on to this moment when things got me down. When the party was over, Melanie and I thanked my aunt and uncle and said good-bye to our friends and then went home with Mom to relax in front of the television for an hour or so before heading off to bed. In the privacy of my room, Melanie reached into her ever-present backpack.

"Close your eyes," she said, her hand still hidden.

I made a dramatic sigh and did as she asked.

"Hold out your hands. Oh, don't be so scared, I promise it's not a spider or something." Knowing about my almost debilitating fear of spiders, she playfully wiggled her fingers in my palms as if they were arachnid legs. I squeaked involuntarily, and as she laughed I opened my eyes to glare at her.

"That's not funny, Mel! I'm the birthday girl. You totally have to be nice to me today!" I play-pouted.

"Okay, okay, okay, I'm sorry." She continued giggling, so I continued to glare. "Phew. Okay. I'm done. Now. Please close your eyes and hold out your hands again."

I looked at her with uncertainty, but eventually did as she asked. This time I felt a solid square object in my palms and opened my eyes to see a blue box wrapped with a perfect white ribbon from Tiffany and Co. My eyes went momentarily out of focus because never in my wildest dreams did I ever think that I would be the recipient of something in the famous blue and white box. A sudden flash of images popped into my head of the scene from the movie version of *Annie* when she is presented with a similar gift and inside is a new, unbroken locket from Daddy Warbucks. With trembling hands I slowly loosened the ribbon and pulled off the lid. Inside was a sterling silver necklace chain with a Tiffany 1837 dog tag–style pendant hanging from it.

I was utterly speechless.

“I wanted to get you something special since turning eighteen is such an important birthday. I also know better than to get you something too girly, so...fancy dog tag it is.” She shrugged happily.

“Mel, it’s perfect. I can’t believe you keep doing this.”

“Keep doing what?”

“Every time I think you’ve been the nicest you could possibly be to me, you go and do something even nicer.”

“I just want to show you how much I love you. Now shut up and put it on.” She smiled, obviously pleased with herself, and fastened the chain around my neck.

I thanked her in a very physical way.

Afterward, it took me forever to go to sleep because of the excitement of the day, but when Melanie rolled over to stretch her arm and leg across me, I was at peace and fell swiftly into happy, soothing dreams.



For Valentine's Day our school held an informal costume ball. Everyone knew it was the precursor to the senior prom, except that all students were invited to attend instead of just members of the senior class and their dates. Melanie and I debated about whether or not to go. She, of course, wanted to go as a couple and parade me around on her arm as the dashing young knight to her regal princess, whereas I wanted to go out to a movie and then order a pizza at home. We ended up compromising and bypassed the ball but went to a production of *As You Like It* performed by the all-female cast of the Los Angeles Women's Shakespeare Company and then to dinner at a late-night diner where our friends met us after they left the dance.

At the end of the evening we went back to Melanie's empty house. Esmerelda had taken a rare trip down to San Diego to visit her cousin, and Melanie's parents were at a Valentine's Day fundraiser for some local orphanage and were sure to be gone until the wee hours of the morning. If history proved anything, they would come home drunk and sleep until well beyond noon the next day. This happened so often, I had no idea how they were able to work and make money at all.

As we entered Melanie's dark house through the garage, she told me to wait for her in the kitchen. Confused, I did as I was told and soon Melanie returned. She carried a lit candle in an old-fashioned candleholder and said nothing as she drew me along behind her up the stairs. However, as we reached her door she turned to the right to face the door to the bathroom instead. She remained silent, just looking at me. I felt the faintest tremble in her hand just before she turned the doorknob.

My first thought was that the room had somehow caught on fire. Then I noticed tiny candles in small glass holders burning softly on every surface in the room. Melanie's bathroom was about the size of my whole bedroom and included a large Jacuzzi tub as well as a separate shower. The majority of the candles flickered lazily around the tub. Shadows danced on the walls, a sweet and relaxing fragrance hung in the air, and in the dim light I could tell that the bathtub was full of steaming water topped with a mound of bath bubbles. A bottle of champagne sat chilling in a bucket next to the tub alongside two glasses, and Brandi Carlile's voice drifted dreamily from an iPod connected to a set of portable speakers near the sink.

I realized that my jaw was hanging open stupidly and I snapped it shut, looking at her with wide-eyed amazement.

"Well? What do you think?" she asked, an uncharacteristic waver in her voice.

"Mel, this is...this is beautiful! I don't know how you think of these things. I haven't done one special thing for you, and here you are just...just blowing my mind over and over again."

Melanie smiled shyly and said simply, "You're worth it."

I pulled her into a tight hug and she said quietly in my ear, "You don't have to...you know...get in with me...if it makes you uncomfortable."

Although baring my body completely and soaking in a bubble bath with Melanie would definitely take our physical relationship to the next level, I could think of nothing else in the world that I wanted more. I pulled away from the hug to plant a trail of kisses down the side of her neck and was rewarded with a soft moan from her parted lips. A foreign feeling of boldness overtook me and I pulled her soft, form-fitting sweater over her

head. Melanie gasped as the chilly air from the hallway made contact with her body. I dropped the sweater to the floor, eager to free her from her remaining clothing. When everything was discarded I took my time in tracing every inch of her back and stomach with the tips of my fingers, the effects of the chill obvious on her skin.

Melanie shivered and whispered, “I’ll take this as approval?”

I answered without words, putting my lips to use elsewhere as I kicked the door closed behind me.

We heard Melanie’s parents come home at around two a.m. while we were in bed continuing the adventure we had begun in the bathtub. We remained as quiet as possible, obviously not wanting them to come up and check on us, but soon the house grew quiet. We both exhaled relief and smiled in the darkness, feeling naughty and sneaky.

If I had imagined myself baring myself completely to Melanie only a month before I would’ve been a self-conscious wreck. However, the romantic environment Melanie created made me feel completely safe, and I knew that I would do anything in the world to please her. Instead of dwelling on the doubts I had about my physique, I was able to revel in the smoothness and intriguing reactions of her body while at the same time enjoying the surprising responses of my own. Melanie obviously had no problems with the way I looked and, in fact, seemed just as entranced with my body as I was with hers. Despite our clumsy lack of experience, every second was bliss and every touch was new, stunning, and beautiful.

We tired ourselves out by four a.m. and lay in a sweaty tangle of sheets, breathing quickly and still latched onto one another. I

suddenly laughed out loud. Melanie seemed to understand and began to giggle herself. Soon we were laughing uncontrollably until our stomachs hurt. When the fit subsided, we drifted into an exhausted but satisfied sleep and didn't wake until the afternoon of the next day.

CHAPTER EIGHT

February turned into March and our relationship was as passionate as ever. How we got any homework done, I'll never know. The other chapters of the S.A.E.P. had gotten off the ground so quickly that a countywide committee had formed to work on new projects. This gave Melanie time to take a step back and just oversee the groups without having to do all of the work herself. Concert band didn't take up too much of our time because, unlike marching season, we didn't have after-school rehearsals or football games to attend and only had to practice at home every once in a while. This left more free time than usual to spend alone with each other and we made every second count.

At the end of March we got to go on spring break, and for the band students that meant it was time for the annual band trip. I'd never been on one with my base schools, so I didn't know what to expect. I was amazed to learn that every year, most high school bands took a trip to a music festival somewhere in the U.S.: Disney World or Disneyland, New York, or even skiing in Colorado. While there they would attend music clinics and perform for tourists or even band judges and composers.

Our band director decided on San Diego, where we would

perform at and get to run around in Sea World. Many of the students were extremely disappointed with this choice, considering we lived so nearby. Most of them had already visited both the city and Sea World. But it was new for me and, because we didn't have to fly down, we were free to drive instead of having to cram onto another smelly band bus. The only catch was that the band needed more parents to fill in as chaperones since several of the adults who had planned on going decided that they had better things to do. The idea hit me that Mom would probably enjoy a little vacation, even if it included having to watch over wild high school kids. When I asked her if she would be interested she positively lit up.

Mom, Melanie, and I piled into my Corolla for the drive down a day early so that we could make more of a holiday out of it. Our first stop was in Long Beach so that I could tour the Aquarium of the Pacific and stay for one night aboard the famous ocean liner turned hotel/tourist attraction, the RMS *Queen Mary*. Mom and Mel both knew of my love of all things nautical, but not until they saw my glazed eyes and my giddy excitement as I ran about the decks of the art deco steamer like a five-year-old on a sugar high did they truly appreciate the depth of my obsession. They humored me while I pointed out different parts of the ship as if I had lived there my entire life and spouted off random facts that I had learned from all my reading. We shared one small interior stateroom that night and in the morning began our drive south.

When we reached San Diego, we joined up with the band at a hotel near Sea World. Melanie and I shared a room with two of our friends while Mom had been paired with another, very tired-looking single mother of an extremely rambunctious sophomore

tuba player. That day we spent our time at the hotel, swimming in the pool, playing sand volleyball, and running around being a general nuisance to the other visitors. Normal teenage stuff. At night we all took the buses to a cute little seaside shopping area where we bought T-shirts and candy and split up to eat dinner at one of the many local restaurants.

After getting back to the hotel, despite the curfew set by Ms. Peacey and the assistant director, we ran up and down the halls having water balloon fights until the other guests finally complained to the hotel management and the harried chaperones had to spend the better part of an hour getting all of the students corralled and back to our respective rooms. When the four of us were finally locked in for the night I decided that I just couldn't go to sleep without my usual good-night kiss from Mel. Under the very believable guise of needing her help to brush a stubborn tangle out of my frizzy hair, we closed ourselves in the bathroom to wrap around each other. Afterward, we decided it might be wise to place a pillow between us while we slept just in case we unconsciously fell into our nighttime habit of spooning each other.

The next day was easier for the directors and chaperones because we got up early and went directly to Sea World. We spent the morning warming up and rehearsing in a backstage room, then at noon, we got to perform in a pavilion outside for anyone who cared to stop by and listen. We actually drew a pretty good crowd and, much to my surprise, I received a standing ovation for my trumpet solo in our final piece.

With our performance over we were free to roam the park at will until closing. Melanie had been there before and took me to the best shows first to make sure I wouldn't miss anything.

Mom had really connected with her roommate and they spent the day walking around together, keeping an eye on the students, and learning that they were both widows of husbands who'd had heart attacks. I was glad to know that I had unwittingly brought them together. I hoped they'd keep in touch.

Although I loved the rides and especially the animals, I admit watching the extremely cute women in their Sea World wetsuits was a trip highlight. I mentioned this to Melanie (out of earshot of our friends who were with us) and she smiled and nodded vigorously. I watched one of the scuba divers cleaning a tank and decided, then and there, someday I'd get certified myself and put my water-baby tendencies to better use.

We spent the next day at Sea World too, but the day after that, the band went home while Mom, Melanie, and I spent an extra two days in San Diego to go to the famous San Diego Zoo, Old Town, and the San Diego Maritime Museum. By the time the trip ended, we were all exhausted, but we agreed that it had been tons of fun and a good bonding experience for the three of us.



With spring break over, the annual band contest in the bag (we won top marks), and only prom, the end of the school year, and our college acceptance (or rejection) letters to look forward to, we decided now was as good a time as any to tell Melanie's parents about our relationship. We planned it on what turned out to be a foul and rainy Sunday night at the end of April. I looked out the window at the uncharacteristic L.A. rain and hoped that wasn't a bad omen for what was to come.

Melanie had asked me to be with her for the big event, so

I ate dinner with the family, barely able to swallow as I tried to hide my nervousness. Like I had planned to do with Mom, Mel lubricated her parents with red wine before the discussion began.

Finally, the moment arrived.

Mel told them that she wanted to share some news and asked them to take a seat in the living room after dinner. We had already discussed the whole thing with Esmerelda and she made sure that she remained nearby to lend whatever support she could.

Once everyone was seated, her parents fidgeting in the two armchairs and Melanie and I on the couch facing them across the coffee table, Melanie began talking first about her college plans. Sadly, Melanie had done all of the research and applications to schools on her own. Her parents were under the assumption that she would be going to UCLA because that's where they had gone and they had never asked her if she wanted to go anywhere else. They had grown her college savings enough so that it would fund her education all the way through her doctorate if need be and maybe they figured that that was all they had to do for her. I suppose they didn't feel that their parental duties extended to moral or emotional support. That's why it seemed perfectly reasonable for Melanie to want to have a sit-down discussion with them about her future.

Her plan of attack had been to transition from the fact that she would most likely be going away to college instead of staying in L.A., to the idea that I would be coming with her wherever she went. Since we had applied to the same schools, she figured that even if she got into one and I didn't, surely I would get accepted into another school somewhere within at least an hour or two drive.

Trying to keep the conversation light, she began, “So. I need to tell you guys something and I really hope that you’re understanding about it. I need your support and I want you to know that this is really important to me.”

“What is it, Melanie?” her mother asked, focused more on her wineglass than the question.

“I’ve decided that I want to go to Stanford, but...”

Melanie’s father interrupted, “Oh, is *that* what this is about. I was afraid you were going to tell us you were gay or pregnant or something!” He laughed raucously. “You scared your mother and me to death!”

I could literally feel the blood drain from my face and I felt like I was going to pass out.

Melanie faltered. This was not what either of us had anticipated. “Uh...well, yeah. No. I mean...this is about...”

Mr. Parker’s laughter subsided.

Melanie looked helplessly past her parents at Esmerelda standing in the archway to the foyer. Esmy smiled back kindly and motioned for her to continue. “Well, what I meant to say was that I’ve decided to go to Stanford, but even if I’m not accepted, I’m going to go somewhere where Devin will be nearby.”

Melanie’s parents stared blankly and then, as one, turned their heads to look at me. I yearned to shrink and disappear into the couch cushions, but tried my best to sit up straight and look friendly, yet dignified.

“Mom...Dad...” Melanie took a fortifying breath. “I’m a lesbian. And Devin and I are in love.” She reached out and gently held my hand while I tried not to crush hers.

The silence in the room seemed to stretch on for hours as

both parents sat immobile, expressions of growing displeasure and disappointment on their faces.

I opened my mouth to say something that I hoped would be reassuring, when all of a sudden we heard the front door open in the foyer beyond. The sound of the pouring rain grew louder as whoever had arrived stepped inside and then was muffled just as suddenly when the door clicked shut.

Esmerelda looked over her shoulder to see who it was and I saw her eyes widen before she shot a look of fear at Melanie. Before she could say anything, Jason Parker sauntered into the room, dripping wet and looking like hell. His eyes were bloodshot and he had a few days' growth of stubble on his cheeks. It was obvious to everyone in the room that he had been drinking and was also high on some drug.

My worst nightmare.

The elder Parkers barely even noticed Jason's disheveled appearance before turning their attention back to us. Jason had made eye contact with them first and then followed their gaze to Melanie and me sitting silently on the couch. He slowly looked down and saw my hand in his sister's. Out of the corner of my eye I noticed Esmerelda take a small, protective step into the room, as if to better position herself between the couch and what she perceived to be a threat to us.

"What's going on?" he slurred.

Melanie's parents looked at each other and then her father said, "Melanie has just told us that she's a lesbian, Jase." All eyes continued to bore into us. This was going so much worse than anything I had imagined that I couldn't fathom how anything else could go wrong. My whole body shook with tension.

Jason's eyes flashed fire at me and he took a menacing step forward. Esmerelda jumped in front of him and said, "Sit down, Jason. Now!"

Without taking his empty, angry eyes off of me, he easily swept her aside with his arm, knocking her into a large antique cabinet with a force that made both Melanie and me wince. The glass and porcelain inside rattled and I heard a few pieces shatter. Esmerelda appeared to be uninjured, but the hurt and shock in her eyes broke my heart. Melanie stood and stepped in front of me. "Jason!"

"Get out of the way. You don't have to protect this dyke," he growled.

"How *dare* you! How *dare* you speak about her like that!" Melanie yelled back.

"She's corrupted you, Mel! I knew it from the moment I first saw her! She's an ugly fucking dyke who's trying to ruin your life!" Jason looked from Melanie back to me. "Get the fuck out of our house, you little whore!"

Melanie's parents stood.

Mrs. Parker held out her palms. "Jason, calm down! This has come as a shock to all of us, but I really don't think that kind of language..."

"Shut up, Mom!" Mrs. Parker looked taken aback. "How can you stand having such a perverted piece of shit in your house! You're all such fucking idiots! If you don't get her out of here I will!" Jason stalked toward me.

I scrambled to my feet behind Melanie's protection and said with a quavering voice, "Jason, I know you've never liked me, but I really do love Melanie. I'm a good person, whether or not that drugged up, bigoted mind of yours can see it."

“Get the fuck out of my *house*!” He screamed the last word and lunged toward me. Melanie slowed him down, but he pushed her aside as I leapt backward over the couch. I heard Mel hit the coffee table with a sickening thud and noticed as she sat up that there was a trickle of blood on her forehead.

Rage roared like an inferno inside me and I screamed, “What are you going to do, Jason? Kill me like you killed that poor cat you left on my doorstep at Christmas? Are you really going to hurt your own family?” I motioned toward Melanie, still dazed on the floor with her head in her hand. She was trying to look at me. I hadn’t told her about the cat, and she now looked horrified.

Esmerelda had gathered herself again and she ran across the room to grab Jason by the arm, trying to pull him away. She was much smaller than he was and it didn’t do much good, but I took the distraction as a chance to edge my way around the room and head for the front door. Melanie’s parents still stood dumbstruck and ineffectual, and hadn’t made a move to help Mel or stop Jason. Melanie stumbled to her feet and wobbled back and forth. I looked at Melanie’s parents, wild-eyed and terrified, pleading silently for them to do something to control their son.

Something shook Mr. Parker out of his shock and he stepped around the coffee table and grabbed Jason’s other arm.

“Let me go, Dad!” yelled Jason.

“Son, calm down! You’ve been drinking and you’re overreacting. Look what you did to your sister.”

Jason, being younger and more athletic than any of the adults in the room, crouched down, pulling Esmerelda and his father with him, and then stood suddenly and threw both of his arms backward, pushing Esmy and his dad off balance. His father

fell backward over the coffee table next to Melanie. Mrs. Parker screamed and knelt by her husband's side. Jason spun toward me and I bolted for the door. He crossed the room in a flash and the force of his body colliding with mine knocked me down. I stumbled into a nearby low table, keeping me from landing on the ground, but Jason grabbed me around my neck and yanked me upright.

He turned me to face him, squeezing my neck so tightly that I began choking. I must have been turning purple. Panicked, I clawed at his hand with my fingernails, but it did no good. His grip was like a vise. In the back of my mind, I registered someone screaming for him to let me go and felt his body vibrate as something struck his back and arm repeatedly, but his mean eyes never left mine.

As the room started to darken in my vision, he said with quiet fury, "I don't ever want to see you near my family again. If I do, I *will* kill you." He shoved me away and I gasped for air, nearly falling to the floor.

Before I could get a decent breath, he gripped my upper arm and dragged me to the front door. A pained gasp tore from my throat as the door opened and a rush of cold wind hit my face. In a split second, I was thrust outside, the icy rain soaking through my clothes. Jason dragged me, stumbling, down the walkway I had once so greatly admired to the edge of the street. Melanie was right behind Jason, still crying and screaming for him to let me go. Their parents and Esmerelda brought up the rear, yelling words I couldn't make out through the rain, Mel's screaming, and the fear roaring in my ears.

When we got to the street, Jason threw me forward as hard

as he could and, still wheezing, I landed face down sprawled on the curb.

“Get the fuck out of here!”

I got to my knees but made no effort to leave because I couldn’t stop coughing. I fought to catch my breath. Jason leaned forward and slapped me across the face as hard as he could, sending me rolling off of the curb and into the street. A loud shriek and bright lights exploding behind my eyes combined, and I wondered if the noise had come from me or from Melanie. I was curled up in a heap of sodden pain and misery and the world spun as I grappled to regain my senses.

Melanie was by my side in an instant, wailing and pulling at me to stand up. My vision was fuzzy, as were my thoughts, but I could hear her mumbling nonsense phrases about everything being okay. She kept saying she was sorry. Behind her I could see Jason reaching out to pull her off me.

His vicious glare pierced me. “I said get the fuck out of here! Now!”

I finally stumbled to my feet and regained a bit of my balance. I watched as Melanie struggled to get free from Jason’s grasp, and I said nothing.

Nothing.

I turned and ran as fast as I could away from her, away from her family, away from the pain. I heard a scuffle behind me and Mr. Parker’s voice booming through the sound of the rain and I knew that he had finally overpowered his son. I also heard Melanie, now unrestrained, chasing after me, yelling my name, and begging me to stop. I was not, however, in my right mind. I was filled with terror and confusion and hurt and pain and I had

no coherent thoughts other than my inner voice telling me to run and to keep running until the pain stopped.



Eventually Melanie's voice faded, and all I could hear was the rain, the splashing of my shoes in the sidewalk puddles, and the all too familiar L.A. sound of an ambulance siren wailing in the distance. I kept running, crossing streets without looking for cars, slipping in mud and falling, getting back up again, and running more until the stitch in my side and my ragged, gasping breaths finally made me stop. When my breathing had stabilized I took my first real look at my surroundings. I had unknowingly headed toward my apartment and realized, with shock, I was over halfway home.

I stood in front of a gated apartment building, suddenly freezing. I replayed the last hour's events in my head and an overwhelming grief settled upon me. I sat down on a small bench, shivering in the rain, and buried my bruised and aching face in my hands. I wept with abandon. The outcome of what was supposed to be a trying, but ultimately freeing coming out had turned into a full-on battle, complete with casualties.

My worst-case scenario.

I couldn't wrap my head around the multitude of emotions bombarding me. I was full of hate and anger toward Jason, saddened by the lack of love and support in the Parker household, fearful for Melanie's safety, worried about our relationship, and brimming with rage and humiliation about the way I had been treated.

When the shivering and cold became unbearable I got up.

I found the nearest bus stop just as the bus pulled to the curb. It drove me the rest of the way home and I disembarked and walked the last block to my apartment. Sitting on the bus had made the overworked muscles in my legs seize up, and climbing the stairs to our front door was agony. I couldn't even let myself in because I had left my key at Melanie's house.

Melanie.

Thinking of her shot a sharp pain through my chest, but I tried my best to ignore it and knocked.

Mom opened the door, and her eyes widened with horror. I must have looked worse than I thought, as bad as I felt inside. She hastily pulled me over the threshold. "Oh my God, Devin! What happened? Were you mugged?"

"No, I'm fine."

"You are *not* fine. What happened?"

"I just want to clean up and get warm. Then I'll tell you everything."

Mom hesitated. "Are you sure you don't need to go to the hospital, or—"

"No. I promise."

Mom reluctantly agreed and I headed to the bathroom.

When I caught my reflection in the mirror I jumped. My hair had come out of its usual ponytail and the loose, frizzy curls were plastered to my face. The places on my neck where Jason's fingers had dug in had already turned a nasty shade of purple, my eyes were bloodshot and swollen, and you could almost make out the entire red handprint from where he had slapped me. Not to mention my cut hands and elbows, the blood trickling out of a large, swelling cut on my lip, and my torn, muddy clothes.

I sighed and began the painful process of stripping down.

My muscles screamed, my bones ached with cold, and every movement reminded me of exactly how I had been lowered to this pitiful state.

A hot shower brought life back into my limbs and soothed some of my aches, but the heavy anguish in my heart only seemed to grow with each passing second. When I returned to the living room in a pair of clean pajama pants and an Air Force sweatshirt, Mom was waiting for me with a cup of hot cocoa and a worried but determined expression on her face. Still, she didn't push. I sat down next to her on the couch and gratefully drank the cocoa as she pulled a blanket over me. I leaned against her chest as she put her arm around me as if I were a little girl again.

Instead of asking me what happened, she just ran her fingers through my wet hair and hummed the tune to "Puff the Magic Dragon" softly. It was the song she used to sing when I had nightmares as a child. My face screwed up as I tried to fight the tears that burned my eyes, but I couldn't hold back. I cried inconsolably, releasing all my frustration and sorrow in a flood of pitiful wretchedness.

When my throat was scratchy and I had gained some semblance of composure I quietly told Mom about what had happened at Melanie's house. Repeating it was like living through it again, and by the end, even though I felt all cried out, I wept again.

Mom was crying too by the time I had finished the story. She demanded we press charges against Jason for assault, but I wouldn't even consider it. It was beyond her reasoning to understand why, but I just told her that I didn't want to do anything that would show Melanie's family in a bad light. I was eighteen and she couldn't force me to do it, so she dropped the

subject, but not after a good long time trying to persuade me otherwise. I loved Melanie and I didn't want to create any more of a rift within her family than I already had.

For the rest of the evening I remained cuddled against Mom or watched TV while she made me chicken soup for a late-night snack. She had already called the school and left a message at the office letting them know that I wouldn't be in the next day. I was too ashamed of my weakness, too embarrassed about being the cause of such a horrific scene, to see Melanie or anyone else so soon. I'd talk to her in a few days when I went back to school to see how she felt about me now that everything had gone so horribly wrong. I could only hope Jason's cruel words and her parents' disapproval of us hadn't changed things...

CHAPTER NINE

I resumed school on Tuesday, still bruised and humiliated, and as I walked down the hallway I received many sympathetic looks. I figured I must look terrible, or that the news of what had happened already had leaked and spread through the entire student population. I tried my best to avoid eye contact with anyone, but every now and then someone would come up and say something like, “Devin, I’m so sorry about what happened.” or “I’m sure everything will be fine. Let me know if you need anything.” Rather than make me feel better, these words of consolation made my embarrassment run even deeper. The only thing worse than what actually happened was knowing that everyone else knew about it.

At the door to the band hall, I took a steadying breath before walking in. I was trying to brace for both the barrage of sympathy as well as my first encounter with Melanie since fleeing from her house in terror. To my surprise, however, everyone looked at me with pity but didn’t say anything, and when I looked over at the French horn section I saw that Melanie wasn’t there. Confused, I scanned the room, looking to see if she was talking with friends

in another section. I didn't see her. I figured she was just running late and took my own seat as first chair trumpet.

By the end of rehearsal, my worry had heightened. Melanie hadn't shown up at all, and that was most definitely not like her. I was getting up to leave for my next class when the band director, Ms. Peacey, came over and put her arm around my shoulder. All I could think was, *Oh no, the teachers know about this too?*

But of course they did.

"How are you doing, Devin?" she asked with genuine concern in her voice.

"Um...okay, I guess." I replied shyly.

"I know how close you and Melanie are. This must be very difficult for you."

"Yeah...It...it isn't fun."

"No, no, I don't suppose it is, but you're my star musician and I want to know if there's anything I can do for you or for Melanie. Listen, will you give her this card for me? I want her to know that I'm thinking about her and that the French horn section won't be the same until she gets back." She handed me a sealed purple envelope with Melanie's name written in beautiful script on the front. The *i* was dotted with a quarter note.

I said nothing, but took the card and turned around and left the room. My head was spinning. Why had she asked me to give a card to Melanie? It was almost as if Ms. Peacey had no clue what had happened to me.

Wait.

Had something happened to Melanie too?

My heart dropped into the pit of my stomach, and my thoughts turned frantic. Had Jason hurt her? Had he done

something even more drastic and put her whole family in danger? Or worse?

I sprinted to the main school office and asked to use the phone, realizing for the hundredth time that I really was the only person in the U.S. without a cell phone. I called Melanie's number and got her voice mail. I left a message asking her to call the office and have them deliver a message to me about what had happened. I called her home number next. No answer. Unsure what to do next, I told the secretary that I wasn't feeling well and bolted from the office, not caring about her shocked expression.

I very rarely ditched school, but I was distraught and knew that I'd be useless in class anyway without knowing what had happened to the person I loved most in the world. I ran to my Corolla in the parking lot and, after what seemed like ten years, I arrived at her house.

Now that I was there, I realized if Jason was still inside, he might very well make good on his promise to kill me for showing up again. But I didn't care. Finding out what happened to Melanie took precedence over everything else.

I briskly hurried to the front door and rang the bell. Heart in my throat, I waited...and waited...ringing and knocking again and again, but no one answered. I ran around to the back of the house, thinking someone might be in the backyard, but when I jumped to look over the fence, no one was there. Agitated, I returned to the front yard, not knowing where to go next. I noticed the elderly neighbor across the street squatting to pick up the newspaper on the front walk.

"Excuse me!" I yelled, a bit frantically. Startled, the man jumped and peered at me warily. I jogged across the street. "I

didn't mean to yell, sir. My name's Devin Kelly and I'm friends with Melanie Parker across the street. I haven't seen her in a couple of days and I was wondering if you've seen or heard anything that might help me find her."

A look of sympathy softened his features. "It was a big deal here in the neighborhood. I'm surprised that you haven't heard anything about it."

"What? What was a big deal?"

"Apparently two days ago, when we had that rainstorm, something happened to young Melanie and an ambulance had to be called. My wife and I heard yelling so we came outside and watched under our umbrellas as the paramedics loaded her up, about a block down"—he gestured—"and took her to the hospital."

I felt sick inside; it must've shown on my face.

"I'm so sorry to be the one to tell you. I figured most of her friends would know by now."

I concentrated on each breath, willing myself not to hyperventilate. All I could remember was running away and Melanie's voice calling out after me to stop. Come back.

Panicked, I hadn't stopped. I hadn't come back. I ignored her, and barely even noticed when I didn't hear her voice anymore.

Oh no.

She ran after me for the entire length of her block, which was way more than she should have done with her weak lung, especially in that freezing rain. Now she was in the hospital injured...or worse...and it was all my fault.

"Are you all right? Do you need to sit?" asked the neighbor, taking a tentative step toward me.

I shook off my horror. “Yes, I...I’m fine. Do you happen to know where she was taken?”

“I don’t. I’m sorry.”

“Thank you for your help.”

I walked in a daze back to my car and drove home. Mom was at work and I immediately got online to find the number for the nearest hospital—Cedars-Sinai. I called and with equal parts relief and anxiety, I learned Melanie was indeed a patient there. In two minutes, I was out the door and back on the road headed toward the hospital.



I’ve never liked hospitals and as I burst through the doors of the Intensive Care Unit the mingled odors of antiseptic and bleached linens hit me like a slap in the face. I approached the staff desk and Darren, a burly nurse the size of a Hollywood club bouncer, checked his chart for Melanie’s room. Two people at a time were allowed for visitation into the ICU. According to him, only one person was currently checked in. A ball of ice formed in my stomach as I wondered which Parker was there. I imagined a wild-eyed, camouflaged Jason crouched behind a rolling tray laden with beeping equipment and bedpans, lying in wait to ambush me as I walked into the room. Then again, I figured a hospital was the safest place to be if he did decide to attack me again. The nurse told me to wash my hands at the cleaning station and proceed to the room at the far end of the hall, which pulled me from my imaginings. A far more real feeling of dread descended upon me.

Ever heard of a Dolly Zoom? Or the Vertigo Effect? Being a film buff, I have seen many horror or suspense films that use this technique. Basically, the camera lens zooms in on an actor while the camera itself simultaneously moves away, which creates the illusion of stretching hallways or paths. I felt exactly like that as I began my slow journey to Melanie, lying in a hospital bed suffering from who knows what.

At the door, I paused to garner strength before raising my hand to knock. Before I could do so, though, the door opened and Mrs. Parker jolted to a stop, clearly startled to see me. She recovered quickly and shut the door before I could see inside. With disdain she asked, "What are you doing here?"

"I heard Melanie was in the hospital. I wanted to see if she was okay. Nobody has told me anything."

Mrs. Parker eyed me critically. "She's fine."

"Good. But why didn't anyone call me?" My eyes welled with tears. "What happened to her?"

"That's none of your concern anymore." Seeing the hurt on my face, she attempted a softer tone. "Listen, we're sorry about what happened to you because of our son. None of us wanted that to happen. But, at this point, we all think it's best that you forget about Melanie and move on with your life."

Flabbergasted, I could think of nothing to say.

"Jason has been dealt with and won't bother you again. We're quite ashamed. I hope there are no hard feelings."

"No hard feelings?" I repeated, disbelief in my tone.

She nodded. "We were always...fond of you."

I couldn't believe what I was hearing. *No hard feelings* after being brutally attacked by Jason? *No hard feelings* after being

dismissed from Melanie's life? *No hard feelings* because they'd always been *fond* of me?

I replied as politely as I could despite the sting of disbelief, "I would really like to speak to Melanie. Please."

"I'm afraid that's not possible, Devin." Her voice had turned cold again.

"Why not?" My anger and frustration began to simmer.

She glared. "I've already explained that we all, Melanie included, think it best that you forget about all of this. We don't feel it's appropriate for you to be around our daughter anymore."

"With all due respect, Mrs. Parker, I would rather hear this from Melanie." I tried to push past her. She blocked me and we grappled briefly until I gave up and stepped back. We stared each other down, neither of us wanting to give way. In a brainstorm moment, I glanced down the hall and said, "Jason!"

The ruse worked. Startled, Mrs. Parker looked to see if her son was coming down the hall and I dodged past her, pushed the door open and caught a glimpse of a bed-ridden, deathly pale Melanie. Oxygen tubes snaked through her nose, an IV dripped liquid into her veins, and she had something wrapped around her chest. Her eyes were closed and I could tell that she was in a drug-induced sleep. She wouldn't even know that I'd come by.

"Mel!" I cried, but before I could run to her side, someone clutched the collar of my shirt and hauled me backward into the hallway.

Mr. Parker had joined his wife. He kept a firm hold on my shirt and hiked his chin toward his wife. "I said go!"

Mrs. Parker straightened her back, spun on her heels, and

stormed out of the ward. Other visitors gawked at us curiously, and the burly nurse started toward us to calm the commotion. Mr. Parker lifted a palm as if to say everything was under control. Darren looked skeptical, but left to go back to his station. Mr. Parker released my shirt and turned me toward him, his expression gentler.

Tears of anger and pain stung my eyes and I wanted nothing more than to run from the Parkers, the hospital, all of it. “What in the hell? Seriously!”

“I’m sorry. Please”—he gestured down the hall—“let’s go to the waiting area for a moment. We need to have a talk.”

I hesitated, but did as he asked, hoping some logic would come out of the conversation. If I could make him understand how much Melanie meant to me, maybe he’d allow me to visit her.

We sat on the couch in the empty room. When I opened my mouth to make my case, he interrupted with, “Look, Devin. There’s something I need to say and I don’t think you’re going to like it much, but I have to clear the air.” I swallowed hard and concentrated on a torn corner of fabric on the couch.

“First, I want to apologize for what happened.”

“Yeah, Mrs. Parker already tried that.”

“Be that as it may, the thought of an attack like that coming from my son or anyone in my family—” He paused, pressing his lips in a thin line. “I will understand fully if you decide to press charges. We won’t stand against you, and we’ll tell the police exactly what happened. If he goes to jail”—he shrugged—“so be it. He needs to realize that there are consequences to his actions.”

“I just want this to be over. I’m not pressing charges.”

Mr. Parker exhaled a breath I hadn't realized he'd been holding. "I promise he won't bother you again."

I nodded.

"Now. On to the more unpleasant conversation—"

"Mr. Parker, what happened to Melanie? Is she going to be all right?"

"I'm not going into specifics right now, Devin. This is a private family matter."

"But—"

"Melanie will recover eventually, but she will have a long road ahead. Which is what I need to talk to you about."

"Okay." Anything to help Melanie.

"As I'm sure you're aware," he paused to level his composure, "our family is in crisis. My wife has been—"

"What?"

He shook his head. "No, it's not important. What matters is that Jason has a multitude of...issues, including rampant drug abuse. Now Melanie's ill. Very ill. I now have to ask that you not contact her again."

I waited, expecting to hear "this week" or "until she gets back on her feet," but it appeared he meant "Please don't contact her again...ever."

I blinked. "I don't understand."

He looked at me with compassion that wasn't quite genuine. "Devin, I'm not saying it's your fault. But since Melanie met you, she has spent all of her time...with you. She put you above her college ambitions, even came out as a lesbian, of all things. And Jason has gone off the deep end. Not to mention my own failings as a father."

I glanced away, because that part was true.

“Don’t attempt to speak to Melanie again.”

“But why?”

He sighed. “So I can concentrate on fixing my family. So we can all move past all this...unpleasantness.”

Unpleasantness? I sat dumbfounded. My vision blurred. My hands and feet tingled until I could no longer feel them. My heartbeat raced. The man’s son attacked me, and now he was preventing me from seeing the person I loved? Unpleasantness? *Really?*

Mr. Parker squeezed my shoulder. “This may seem harsh, Devin, or abrupt, but believe me when I tell you, it’s for the best.”

The best for whom? I wanted to ask.

“Let Melanie forget all of this. You’ll just be a reminder of what this whole ordeal cost her.”

My stomach contracted.

Mr. Parker lowered his chin and pinned me with a stare. “I know you don’t want to hurt her any more than she’s already been hurt.”

He claimed they didn’t blame me for what had happened, but I was the one being punished. I thought back to the blank looks he and Mrs. Parker had given me when Melanie told them about us, about Jason’s tirade and history of escalating abuse, about her family’s drunken bouts of homophobia. Mostly, I thought about Melanie’s near-lifeless body in the room around the corner.

He was right. Mr. Parker was totally right. Although her family had never been perfect, their steady decline had most definitely occurred when I entered their life. My fears and doubts about my own self-worth had come true in the most devastating manner possible. I had to get away.

I stood, and with my heart being shredded into a million agonizing pieces, I walked out of the hospital and out of Melanie Parker's life. For good.



When I arrived home, Mom was already home from work. Clearly, I couldn't hide my despondent state.

"Devin. What happened now?"

I told her what Melanie's parents had said.

"That's it." Mom snatched up her purse and headed toward the front door of the apartment.

"No, Mom." I blocked her exit. "Please, just forget about it."

"How can you say that?"

"Because...Mr. Parker was right. Melanie's life was great until I came into the picture."

"Oh, honey." This seemed to upset her more than anything else. She grabbed my wrist gently and pulled me to sit down next to her on the couch. I felt ashamed, worthless, dead.

Mom pointed a finger in my face. "You have more worth than anyone I've ever known, Devin Kelly, and don't you forget it."

The words felt good, but I rolled my eyes. "You have to say that. You're my mom."

"No. I don't have to say that." She squeezed my hand. "This hasn't been the easiest year for either of us."

"Mom, you don't have to—"

"No. Just listen." She waited. I didn't interrupt. "It makes me livid thinking you'd internalize anything those people said to

you. You're everything to me, and you're everything to Melanie too." She pulled me into a tight embrace, and the tears I couldn't hold back dripped on her shoulder. "I am going to speak with the Parkers. I know you don't want me to, but I'm still your mother, and no one will talk to my daughter the way they did to you."

My heart swelled. Feeling slightly better, I followed Mom as she stood. Without another word, I hugged her as hard as I could, then let her leave. The lengths to which Mom would go to defend me? I'd never been more proud. And I'd never felt closer to her in my life.

CHAPTER TEN

Despite the renewed bond with Mom, I still couldn't help but feel as if the entire ordeal with Melanie had been my fault. I desperately wanted to see Melanie, wanted to ignore what her father had said, but I wasn't sure if she was even awake and functioning, much less if she wanted to see me again.

Both Mr. and Mrs. Parker had made it seem like my disappearance had been a family decision.

I returned to school the next day, knowing that every chair in which Melanie normally sat would be empty. This time, when people came up to console me, I knew that they were talking about whatever had happened to her and that they didn't know anything about what had happened to me. Unfortunately, no one knew specifics, only that Melanie was very sick and wasn't receiving any visitors, so I was still unable to find out her exact condition. I smiled politely when approached, but I never talked to anyone. I felt as if a piece of my soul was missing, and if I opened my mouth to speak, the last fragments I had would escape into the ether, leaving me a hollow, miserable shell.

Throughout the week, people eventually stopped trying to get me to talk. Every day after school I would call Melanie's hospital

room, hoping that her parents would be out and she would be awake to answer. This never happened. Every time the receiver was picked up on the other end I would hear the high, girlish voice of Mrs. Parker or the deep growl of Mr. Parker. Without saying a word I would hang up. It became my masochistic daily ritual.

Finally, on the following Sunday while Mom was at the grocery store and I was home alone, I heard a knock on our door. It was well past noon, but I was still in my pajamas and my hair stood out in a wild mess of tangles. I knew I must look terrible, but I didn't care. Lethargic and apathetic, I shuffled to the door, but when I looked through the peephole, hopeful excitement filled me. Esmerelda stood on the other side of the door, nervously turning her small beaded purse over in her hands.

"Esmy!" I cried as I threw open the door and pulled her into a hug.

"Hola, mija." She hugged me back.

"What are you doing here?" I looked over her shoulder, irrationally hoping that Melanie had made a miraculous recovery and had come along.

"I am not supposed to be here. But I wanted to tell you not to listen to Mr. Parker when he's being an idiot."

"Wait. What's going on? I'm sorry, come inside first. And I want to know about Melanie before we talk about her parents." I led her into the apartment and settled her on the couch while I got her a glass of lemonade.

As she sipped, I said earnestly, "Please tell me how Melanie's doing. I can't get anyone to talk to me. I feel like I'm dying inside. Esmy, what's wrong with her?"

Esmerelda patted me on the knee and pulled out a tissue to

dab at her own wet eyes. “Now Devin, before I tell you this, you must promise me that you won’t take the blame. We all know whose fault this really is.”

I didn’t want to deal with the blame issue. “Please, just tell me. I can’t stand not knowing.”

Esmerelda sniffed a few times. When she started to speak, her accent sounded even thicker from the emotion she was holding back, “Well, you know that Melanie has a weak chest from her sickness as a child.”

“Yes.”

“I have never seen her so upset in all the time I’ve known her. After Melanie chased you, trying to get you to come back, she started to fall behind.”

Guilt stabbed me.

“She turned around to come back and almost made it home, but she collapsed onto the sidewalk a few houses down. Mr. Parker had stayed behind to control Jason, but Mrs. Parker and I ran to where Melanie was lying in the rain, coughing and gasping for air. She was holding on to her chest.” Esmerelda paused, clearly trying to maintain her composure. She looked off into space, reliving the painful memory. “It was horrible. Such fear in her eyes. She had pushed herself beyond her physical limits and her left lung completely collapsed.”

“I knew it was my fault.” I felt sick.

Esmerelda shushed me with a hand on my knee. “Mrs. Parker was screaming for help, Melanie was turning more and more blue until she eventually lost consciousness. Luckily a neighbor heard the screaming and called nine-one-one.”

I covered my face with my palms and squeezed my eyes shut.

“Are you sure you want to hear all this, *mija*?”

“Yes. All of it. Every word.” I needed to.

Esmy sighed. “After Melanie arrived at the hospital and had been stabilized, the doctor told us that the paramedics had saved her life by removing air from her chest cavity with a needle. He said that if this hadn’t been done it could have been much worse.”

I swallowed. “What does much worse actually mean?”

Esmerelda winced. “It means her lungs could have completely collapsed, or she could have had brain damage because of the lack of oxygen, or...I can’t say the worst thing.”

I could tell that all of the color had drained from my face. I shivered, on the verge of losing consciousness myself. The knowledge that I had almost killed my best friend and the love of my life was too much to bear.

“So...so how is she now?” I asked as my voice cracked.

“Awake. But they are going to keep her in the hospital for a few more days. She had a tube placed in her chest to make sure that the air was removed completely so her lung could heal and work again. So far it is going well. The doctor expects a full recovery.”

I exhaled with obvious relief.

“Anyway, I knew you’d want to know. That’s why I came. I’ll do whatever I can for you, Devin. You’re like a daughter to me too.” She blew her nose again.

Unable to contain myself, I cried yet again.

Esmerelda pulled me into a motherly hug and said, “The whole world has gone crazy, Devin. No matter what I say I can’t get either of those stubborn burros to see sense. Melanie loves

you more than I think even she knows. She has no idea what her parents said to you, and now she's wondering why you haven't come to see her."

"They won't tell her?" I asked, outraged.

"No, but I will try."

I banged my fists against my thighs. "I can't stand that this all happened because of me. It's my fault, and I want to see her, but I won't be able to handle it if she blames me for everything."

"*Mija*, you know her better than that."

"Yeah, but I don't want to get her into any more trouble by disobeying her father either! I hate myself for this!" I realized that I was yelling when Esmerelda's eyes widened. "I'm sorry, Esmy, I'm just so...so *frustrated*!"

"I know, Devin. I know. I have tried to talk to them, but no one is listening. Just know that Melanie does want to see you, and she's angry with her parents. She misses you so much and she cries all of the time since you haven't visited. I will find a way to talk to her tonight. I promise. Just give me some time."

At that point Mom arrived home and paused, taking in the scene. I was still blubbering, but I introduced Mom to Esmy and tried to explain how good she had been to me and Melanie from the very beginning. Mom looked differently at Esmy and asked me to go to my room while she and Esmy sat down for a little chat. Something about the steely glint in Mom's eyes told me she was ready to go on the warpath. A surprising hint of hope sprang into life in that part of my chest that had, until now, felt completely crushed.



The next morning before school I repeated my fruitless habit of calling Melanie's hospital room. This time, however, instead of having to hang up on the Parkers, the morning nurse told me the patient in that room had been released from the hospital. I hung up, and with my breath held I called her cell phone. It rang four times and then went to voice mail. I dreaded calling the Parkers' home phone because of the higher probability of having to hang up on her parents again, but the desire to talk to Melanie overshadowed my fear of them.

I dialed and the phone rang five times. I happened to know they rarely used their home phone, thanks to cell phones, and didn't even have caller ID. The Parkers weren't screening my call. I was about to give up on the seventh ring when I heard a click and a faint voice that I knew all too well.

"Hello?"

My heart jumped into my throat. "Mel! Mel, it's me! Please don't hang up!"

A startled, "Oh!" came from the other end of the line with more strength than when she had answered. With a slight waver in her voice she said, "Christina, it's so good to hear from you."

Confused I replied, "No, Mel, it's Devin! I understand if you don't want to talk to me, but..."

I was cut off with, "Yeah, Christina, I'm okay now. My parents are right here taking good care of me."

I finally caught on. "I get it. When can we talk? I have so much I need to say to you." I choked up and stopped speaking before I burst into tears.

"Well, I won't be going back to school this year. My teachers have all agreed to send my work home to me so I can graduate

as planned. Anyway, my doctor is about to get here for my daily check-up, so I'll chat with you later. Thank you so much for checking on me."

I didn't know what else to say and I was still trying not to cry so I stayed silent. Melanie said at last, "I miss you guys too. I'll see you soon I hope. Bye." I heard another a small hitch in her voice as she hung up.



The end of my senior year was supposed to be one of the happiest times of my life and I walked through it like a mindless zombie, just floating through the halls and taking my tests by rote before graduation, all of the emotion having been burned out of me. Every time I accidentally let a little feeling in, grief overwhelmed me. Only our closest friends had gotten to speak to Melanie directly, and she'd apparently told them what had really happened that night. But having them know I'd been the victim of a hate crime didn't help boost my self-confidence. My friends were sympathetic and tried to talk to me about it, but since I wasn't talking, they eventually stopped, except to pass on the occasional message from Melanie letting me know that she was thinking about me and would try to contact me soon. Eventually the real story spread through the whole school, and soon everyone knew about not only our relationship, but also about Jason's attack and Melanie's near-death experience. This made my last days at school mortifying. I looked awful, equal parts embarrassed by and apathetic about my appearance. The dark circles under my eyes had deepened, the bruises on my neck

were still healing, I had lost four pounds, my hair was frizzier than ever since I didn't have the energy to tame it, and my eyes were perpetually bloodshot. Every day felt like battle on the front lines, and every time I thought I would never cry again, my tears would return in a torrential rain of despair.

I hated myself for my weakness.

The stereotypical teen angst just angered me, making me cry more.

I drove home alone every day to an empty apartment that just invited brooding.

But not on Friday.

When I got home I found my mother waiting for me, literally pacing back and forth in the living room. She froze in her tracks at the sound of me opening the door, then rushed toward me holding out three different envelopes. Her hand shook, and her eyes were wide with apprehension and excitement.

Without saying a word I took them from her and saw that each letter was from a different university in California.

I took a deep breath and decided to open the letter from Stanford first. I had no expectations about getting accepted there, so I figured that I'd get it out of the way. I also knew Stanford was where Melanie would be going, and I didn't want to think about that situation any more than I had to. There was no way her father would let her go to the same college I was attending. When I pulled the letter out of the envelope and read it, I felt a mixture of relief and disappointment.

I hadn't been accepted.

Mom was watching me intently, so I shook my head and placed the letter on the coffee table. She turned her eyes to the next letter in my hands. This one was from San Diego State.

I eased the paper from the envelope, scanned the words, and a small grin formed on my face. Accepted.

Mom noticed the smile and pulled me into a congratulatory hug.

I said, “Well, at least I know I’ll have *somewhere* to go to school this fall. Let’s check this last one. Now that the pressure’s off.”

The last letter was from UC Berkeley. I sat on the couch and tore open the end of the envelope. A somewhat thicker set of papers fell into my hands. I unfolded and read it, my eyes widening with every sentence. I flicked a glance at Mom. Concern furrowed her brow, but she let me finish without interruption. I actually had to reread the same lines over and over, but when they didn’t change I finally looked up at Mom in dumbfounded silence.

“Well? What?”

“I’ve just been given a full music scholarship to Cal!”



Mom spent the next two hours making a list of all the things I would need for school, excitedly talking about how proud she was and anticipating road trips to visit me in Berkeley. At eight p.m., a phone call roused her. She spoke briefly, then hung up, turning to me warily.

I had the surreal thought that the full scholarship had been a dream. “What?”

“Are you ready for some other news?”

“Sure,” I said hesitantly.

“Okay, then. Let’s go.” She grabbed my hand.

“Mom! Wait, Mom. Where?”

“Esmerelda and I have been planning to sneak you in to see Melanie the first time the Parkers were away for an evening. That was Esmerelda on the phone.”

My heart leaped and I followed her out to the car, not quite sure of what I was going to say to Melanie after all this time, or what she might say to me. I felt nauseous with the anticipation of it.

We pulled into the driveway and Esmerelda had the front door open before the car had even come to a complete stop. This was the first time Mom had actually been to this house, and I could tell she was as intimidated by the grandeur of it as I’d been the first time I saw it. Esmy led us inside, hugging us both. When she released me, she said, “Melanie is waiting in her room.”

I hesitated.

“Go!” Esmy and Mom said in unison.

Laughing, Esmy and Mom turned toward the kitchen to chat over a cup of coffee, no doubt.

I climbed the stairs that I knew so well as if I were climbing the steps of the gallows. It was as if my life was about to be cut short, unless, hoping beyond hope, my girlfriend was up there waiting for me with a reprieve. Fearing what I was about to hear—and see—made me pause at the door before knocking. She had heard me approach, however, and the door swung wide. Before I knew it, a crying Melanie was holding me in her familiar arms. At the feel of her, the scent of her, I burst into tears as well, mumbling about how sorry I was, and that everything was all my fault.

Neither of us wanted to let the other go, but we had a lot to

discuss. She stepped back from the embrace and held me at arm's length.

"Devin, I have one rule for today. Only one."

"Yeah?" I asked, sniffing.

"You will *not* say that this is your fault *ever* again."

"But..."

"Devin, I mean it."

I paused and then nodded with my head toward the ground.

"Okay. That's settled." She kissed me softly on the forehead and then led me over to sit on her bed. I opened my mouth to speak again, but she stopped me by saying, "No, I'm going first. First of all, obviously, my coming out didn't turn out the way we had hoped." She winced. "Seeing the way Jason attacked you..." Her voice cracked. "I can't bear to think about what my...my *family*," she spat the word out with vehemence, "did to you. I am just so utterly ashamed."

"Mel, I—"

"Devin, when I was lying on the concrete in the rain, waiting for the ambulance and right before I lost consciousness, all I could think about was dying without ever getting to apologize to you. Then I woke up in the hospital and waited for you to visit, but my parents just kept telling me that you wouldn't be coming. That's it. You wouldn't be coming."

I started to protest, but she stopped me.

"I know you tried to see me, Dev. I know you were there. Esmy told me everything that happened while I was...out of it. I don't know what I'd do without her."

"I know the feeling."

Melanie smiled. "So here's the immediate problem, I'm not

really in any danger at the moment. I have to go for check-ups every couple of days to make sure everything is healing normally, but my parents are keeping me out of school anyway. I assume it's partly so that they can keep me away from you."

My brows furrowed in hurt and anger.

"But let me tell you this right now because I don't want you worrying about it like I know you will. They will *not* be able to keep me away from you forever."

"It already seems like forever."

She paled. "Which brings me to the tough part. They're sending me to live with my grandmother in Boston—"

"What?"

"I know, and I have to go because they have threatened to withhold my college tuition fund, and I have no money of my own. That...and I really need them to trust me."

This confused me.

"Once they know that they can trust me, I can start working on their stupid bigotry. Someday they'll realize that, yes, I *am* gay, but despite that, I'm still the same good person I've always been."

"They should know that already!"

"I know. And maybe if I show them they'll come around." She paused. "But as for us, I just need to know that you still love me, despite my family and despite everything that has happened. They can't stop me from loving you." She seemed to cower a little. "Do you still want to be with me, Dev?"

Her lips quivered and she looked at me as if she feared that I would tell her I couldn't take her away from her family, or that I couldn't forgive what they had done to me. Instead of answering with words I couldn't seem to find, I leaned forward and kissed

her with all of the desperation I felt after worrying that she could die or that she would abandon me. She responded in kind and I didn't think anything could ever pull us apart.

Eventually we had to, if only to catch our breath. I smiled. "I hope that answers your question."

Melanie pulled me down onto the bed and snuggled into my arms like a wounded animal. I made sure to hold her gently so as not to hurt her chest even though I knew that she craved more.

After a slow inhale and long exhale, Mel's voice muffled in my chest as she spoke again, "There is one more thing, Dev. I got in to Stanford..."

My heart leaped and I kissed her cheek, then pulled back to smile at her. "Congratulations! And, guess what?"

Her brows raised.

"I got a music scholarship to Cal! We'll be right next door to each other! See? Everything will work out! They can't keep us apart while we're away at school!"

Instead of sharing in my excitement, she let out a heavy sigh. "Oh, Dev, I *am* happy for you, don't get me wrong. I need to finish telling you, though..."

I pulled back, concerned.

"I got in to Stanford," Melanie said, "but I can't go."

My ears buzzed. I swallowed thickly. "What do you mean? Why not?"

Her lips twisted to the side. "My parents are footing the bill and they want to keep me on the East Coast. I also got accepted to Boston College, and that's where they're making me go."

"Why?"

"They're worried about further health issues and they want Grammy around to keep an eye on me. Dad also has a lot of

friends and colleagues at the Boston Medical Center who can treat me. I don't have a choice."

"Well, that's...that's far, but like you said, distance just means that we'll have to do a lot of video chatting or something until we graduate and can be together." I tried to smile even though I knew she couldn't see it.

"It's just going to be so hard, Devin. I thought I was going to die being away from you for two weeks. I just don't know how to change their minds."

"Mel, I promise you that no matter what happens I'll wait for you. I don't care if it takes four years or forty. I love you, and there's nothing that I wouldn't do for you."

"Thank you, Dev." Melanie let out a deep sigh. "This is really going to suck."

"I know. We'll figure it out. They won't break us. I'll get a part-time job and fly to Boston whenever I can." For once I felt that I needed to be the strong one, but the effort felt foreign and awkward.

"There's one more thing." Melanie said as she lifted her head. "I'm leaving the day after graduation."

I counted in my head. The prom was this coming Sunday and our graduation ceremony was the weekend after that. I swallowed hard, knowing that after all our recent time apart, my more permanent separation from Melanie was only a week away. I swallowed hard. "Will I get to see you again before you go?"

Melanie shrugged weakly. "Dad is pretty strict about where we are these days. I don't blame him, with all that happened. He only left me today because Esmerelda agreed to follow his instructions to not let me see or talk to you."

"I'm glad she didn't listen."

“She’ll never have to listen to him again. As soon as I leave, she’s retiring and moving away from this house. I’m glad for her. She did promise to keep trying to intervene for us if she can, though. Along with your mom, of course.”

“Yeah, that friendship was unexpected.”

“I heard she went to the hospital to stand up for you.”

“Yep, she did.”

“I think she and Esmy are planning to keep those guns blazing while I’m gone. Maybe he’ll come around. I think he will.” We snuggled in silence for a moment, then Melanie sighed and said, “Anyway, I promise you this is temporary. Just...just wait for me, okay?” She sniffed and hugged me tighter.

I was glad that she cared enough about her family to give them the benefit of the doubt, and I didn’t want her to lose that because of me. I trusted Melanie implicitly and I knew that if she said that she could make it happen, it would. She was my soul mate and I knew in my heart that we just had to ride out the storm before we reached the smooth waters.



We lay there holding each other in silence for a long time, feeling the seconds and minutes tick away from the time we had left together. All too soon, Esmerelda called up to let us know that the Parkers were expected home at any time. One of the hardest things I’ve ever done was uncoil myself from around Melanie’s warm body and stand in the doorway of her room, lost and alone.

Melanie got up and stood in front of me, kissing me lightly on the lips. “We can do this, Dev. We’ll figure something out.

Maybe I can get a job and make enough money to transfer to Stanford on my own in a year or two.”

“A year or two?”

“I’ll do whatever I can. We just have to be strong. We can do it, Dev. Just trust me and trust Esmy and your mom.”

Esmerelda called up to us again and I knew I had to leave.

Melanie said, “I’ll contact you when I can. Be patient over the summer, and when school starts I’ll be able to talk to you all the time. I just have to do this for my family or I’m afraid we’ll never be able to fix the damage. Please don’t give up.”

“I’ll never give up on you. You can’t get rid of me that easily and you know it.” I smiled, but Melanie knew me well enough to see the fear behind the facade. I kissed her one last time before turning around and heading downstairs to my mom, who was waiting for me with a sympathetic look on her face. Esmerelda hugged me on the way out and said, “Don’t worry, Devin. Your mother and I are going to do whatever we can to help fix this.”

CHAPTER ELEVEN

As I crossed the stage and received my diploma at our graduation ceremony the next weekend, I looked out into the sea of faces staring back at me. The students, in their black gowns and square hats, looked at me as if I were a particularly interesting specimen in a lab. I could hear my mom, aunt, uncle, and my few closest friends yelling and clapping for me, but the auditorium was otherwise quiet and still. I tried my best to hold my head high as I walked back to my seat. I knew that our classmates missed Melanie too and that everyone was curious about what had happened to me in the weeks since Jason's attack. I hated being the center of attention. Especially for such a painful reason.

Toward the end of the ceremony we were told to move our tassels from one side to the other and throw our hats into the air as the orchestra played "Pomp and Circumstance." While the rest of the student students joyously threw their hats up as high as they could I solemnly took my own hat off, tossed it up a few inches, caught it, put it back on, and walked outside to meet my relatives.

It had been a weak ending to my school experience. Years of

loneliness and escape into music and fantasy, punctuated by the happiest year of my life, ending with a complete social crash and emotional downfall. I had gotten a taste of friendship, belonging, and even true love, and now that I was alone again I felt lower and more pathetic than I'd ever felt at any point in my life.

During the first few days after graduation I barely left my room and just sat in the dark listening to depressing music by Simon and Garfunkel. I knew that I was brooding and eventually I even started to annoy myself with how pathetic I was becoming. It was at this point that I mentally slapped myself in the face and vowed to do my utmost to be the stronger and more independent woman that Melanie had taught me to be.



Mom and I drove up to Berkeley at the end of June so that I could attend the freshman orientation program. I learned about the school, their customs, where my off-campus housing would be, and how the class registration system worked. I also met with a School of Music counselor who approved my class list for the upcoming semester.

Mom had stayed in a motel while I stayed in a dorm room with another freshman girl. She was nice enough, but I knew that we would never see each other again once school started. I was pretty sure that I would keep busy with work, school, practicing my trumpet, and band while she was more likely to rush for a Greek sorority and end up puking in the bathroom after a night of binge drinking with the frat boys.

I also learned more about what kind of financial burden I would be under. I was privileged enough to have the scholarship,

which meant that my tuition would be mostly paid for, but there were plenty of other expenses to worry about. Luckily, Mom and Dad had started a college fund for me when I was born, and his life insurance would certainly help, but I didn't want to be too much of a drain on Mom. I approached the music department and was offered a job as a part-time music librarian. The extra money would help pay for the rest of my time at school and, I hoped desperately, plane tickets to Boston to visit Mel.

When I got back to L.A. I found a postcard waiting in our mailbox. I smiled when I saw a picture of the tall ship U.S.S. *Constitution* on the front, and when I turned it over every square inch of the back was covered with Melanie's perfect small handwriting. My heart raced at this first contact with her in over a month. She wrote:

Love of my life,

I'm in Boston now. It's okay here, but it'll never be great without you. Dad's doctor friends are nice and I like the Boston College campus. Grammy is amazing and it's so good to see her, but I don't know how much she believes the happy front that I'm putting on. She was always able to see through me. I've heard her talking to Dad on the phone at night and she doesn't seem happy about something. I don't think she knows about us, so she's worried about why I'm so sad. I'm afraid that she thinks I'm in more physical pain than I'm letting on. Anyway, I'm still going along with Dad's wishes to not use a cell phone or computer to contact you while I'm here because I want him to know that he can trust me. Well, postcards don't count because they're old school,

right? I've been talking to Esmy and she said that she and your mom have been in touch. Maybe they'll be able to beat some sense into Mom and Dad. Just be patient and know that you're in my thoughts every day and I can't wait to see you again, whenever that may be. Oh, and congratulations on your scholarship! I wasn't able to really tell you when we last talked. I'm SO proud of you!

*Love and a million kisses,
Mel*

A rush of happiness swept through me. I took comfort in the fact that Mom and Esmy were on our side, trying to keep everything together for us. Mom had become really good friends with Esmy and spoke with her almost daily, but she wouldn't tell me what they talked about.

In the meantime, I wrote Melanie back and sent the letter to the return address on the postcard and sent it in a business envelope from Mom's library in case anyone was screening her mail. I let her know how much I appreciated the postcard and updated her on my visit to Cal. I shared my excitement and, of course, I assured her of my undying love and told her I was already saving money to visit her in Boston within a few months of starting school.

The day I loaded up my Corolla, whom I had dubbed Thelma to go along with my middle name, Louise, was bittersweet. Mom, Esmy, and my aunt and uncle had all seen me off. Watching Mom cry in my rearview mirror choked me up, but I made myself think of all of the pain I was leaving behind and all of the adventure waiting for me. Mom had offered to be my chaperone up to school

to help me get settled, but I had refused, wanting to experience freedom and self-reliance and even anxious uncertainty on my own. I knew that the time for me to become my own woman was at hand and that if I could do this alone, I could do anything.

I still had to fight bitterness, anger, and loneliness every step of the way, but I made a promise to myself that I wouldn't let the homophobic attack and rejection by Mel's family taint the rest of my life. Repeating these thoughts in my head helped me pass the long hours until I finally reached my destination.

The lush greenery of the campus foliage embraced the beautiful white buildings with their distinctive red roofs, and above it all towered the famous Campanile, its carillon bells ringing joyously as if to welcome me home. *This is it*, I thought. *A new beginning. There is no Melanie to help me make friends this time. No Mom to comfort me when things get tough. I am Devin Kelly. And I can do this.*

Classes didn't start for another two weeks, but students walked across campus, backpacks slung over their shoulders, blue and gold Cal shirts as far as the eye could see. I smiled for the first time in what seemed like forever, knowing that I would soon be a part of this world. I had never felt completely comfortable in school, but at Cal, I saw a diverse and open society of knowledge-seekers that pulled at me like a Siren. I felt like a completely different person than the insecure and terrified girl I had been on that first day of my senior year of high school. Whatever else may have happened because of her, Melanie had changed me to my core. She had opened my eyes to the wonders of the world around me and had opened my heart to people. Without her I would never have been able to take this life-changing plunge alone. *Whatever you're doing over there at Boston College, Mel,*

I hope you know that you have changed me for the better and I will always love you for it.



As I was moving into my dorm room at Tellefsen Hall, my roommate entered. Her hair was blond and slightly shorter than shoulder length, she was almost exactly my height, and she had the fit physique of a swimmer. Her name was Emilie and, as this off-campus dorm was solely for those of us in the Cal Marching Band, I found out that she was a French horn player. Unlike me, however, she wasn't a music major, but was intent on studying kinesiology to become a professional sports athletic trainer. We had a lot in common, and in less than twenty-four hours I had made my first friend at school. My hopes continued to rise. I just tried to avoid the sight of her French horn case situated against the wall.

I had come to school early to take part in the mandatory fall training program for marching band members. We attended a three-day clinic at UC Davis before returning to the UC Berkeley campus to complete the program as well as to participate in the University's standard Welcome Week. While at the clinic I learned to march in the style of the "Pride of California" Marching Band and found that, although the vast majority of my fellow musicians weren't music majors, they were all talented and loved being a part of the band just as much as I did.

Emilie and I became even better friends during the clinic, which was fortunate seeing as we would be living together, and she had allayed my fears about possible homophobia when she introduced me to Tim, her best friend, piccolo player, and obvious

homosexual. Whenever she caught me looking depressed, she would try to cheer me up with bawdy humor and, because she was so easy to talk to, I decided one day during a break at marching fundamentals practice to tell her what had happened between Melanie and me that year. To my intense relief, she never even blinked when she found out I was a lesbian.

“So, wait a minute,” she said while we were sitting on the sidelines for a much needed water break, “You’re telling me that this chick’s parents actually banished you?”

“Yep.”

“That’s messed up. Especially after what their son did to not only you, but to their daughter! They should be buying you flowers, sending you two on a month-long cruise, and begging for forgiveness. What assholes! I assume you were pretty upset.”

I laughed bitterly. “Yeah, you could say that. Although to be just a tad bit more accurate I’d call it devastated or utterly destroyed. I mean, I’ve been able to function, but that pain...” I shuddered. “I really thought that I had killed her. It still hurts, you know? Some days I think that I’ll be okay and the pain lessens a bit, but then something will remind me of her and back it comes like a knife in my chest. It’s really sad, but my favorite time of the day is early in the morning, just as I’m waking up when I’m on that thin ledge between dreams and being fully awake. At those times I don’t remember what has happened, Melanie is still with me after my dreams, and I’m happy. It just seems like any old morning on any normal day.”

Emilie shook her head in disbelief. “I don’t understand how they could blame you for it.”

“Mel’s family has some major issues. It’s sad really. Jason is such a fuckup, her dad has had his head up his butt for so long

that he's only now finding it again, and her mom is an alcoholic. The one good thing going for that family—Melanie—has to be swept under the rug and reduced to an embarrassing afterthought because of bigotry! I can't *stand* the way they treat her!" In my frustration I balled up my empty water cup and threw it with vehemence at the nearby trash can, but it bounced off the side and hit a trombone player in the head.

"Sorry," I said to both the trombone player and Emilie as I sighed and looked down at my crossed legs, my shoulders slumped.

"There's no need to be sorry. You have every right to be mad. I tell you what. If her dad ever comes around here, I know he won't—but if he *does*, Tim and I would be happy to kick his ass for you."

I smiled and laughed genuinely. "I don't think that will be necessary." I paused for a moment and then said, "However, if her brother shows up, I give you my full and unreserved permission to remove whatever appendages from his body you deem appropriate. I think you know where to start."

Emilie laughed and we stood as the drum major's whistle called us back onto the field.



On Friday at the end of the week, after days of learning and rehearsing our pre-game show, Emilie, Tim, several of my fellow freshman, and I decided to take a proper tour of the campus so that we would be able to find our classes when they started. A senior band member volunteered to play tour guide for us and we headed out before the sun started to set. I had already walked

around the campus several times both during freshman orientation and during my few spare moments away from band, but I had never paid attention to what kinds of classes each building held. I noticed as we walked around that most of the new students had finally arrived and there were other tour groups wandering about, each containing a cluster of freshmen led by an older Welcome Week counselor. Most were fresh-faced and eager and I knew that I might look the same on the outside, but as we strolled under the distinctive London Plane trees lining the Campanile Esplanade I realized with a rush of near-debilitating sadness that I wanted more than anything for Melanie to be there with me. I wanted her to see everything that I was seeing. To experience this new life with me. My mind and emotions had been otherwise engaged and distracted during the long and intense week with the band, but now that I was free to truly see the beauty and excitement around me I knew that I would always feel alone without her.

With her apart from me I felt like I was living my life in two dimensions. Colors weren't as bright, sounds seemed flat, and any happiness I felt was muted by a persistent layer of bleakness. I knew, as time went on, my depression would grow tiresome to my new friends, so I made a point to try to keep a smile on my face when I was around other people and to save my melancholy for the privacy of my own head.

As I walked behind our group in my sullen reverie, the Campanile tower on my left and a beautiful view that stretched all the way to San Francisco on my right, a sudden flash of... something stopped me dead in my tracks. It wasn't anything I had seen or heard. It was more like a thought that told me that I needed to stay in one place. Confused, I looked around to see if someone might have called my name. Only one other Welcome

Week tour was nearby and they were assembled at the base of the Campanile across a small road with their backs toward me.

Time slowed as my eyes stopped scanning them and came to rest on the brown hair of a girl at the back of group. Her head was bowed down while everyone else's faces were pointed skyward toward the top of the tower, following the tour guide's lifted finger. As I watched, she slowly lifted her chin and started to turn, as if sensing my gaze on her.

My hands went numb, ice formed in the pit of my stomach, and my heart dropped right through my body to the walkway beneath my feet. It seemed like a year passed before she finally faced me. Our eyes locked. I froze completely in place. She stood at least twenty yards away from me, but even at that distance, I could recognize the smallest feature of Melanie's face.

We stood there staring for what seemed like an hour. As the shock began to wear off, a million questions poured into my mind at once. The foremost being what in the hell was Melanie doing on a freshman tour of the campus at Berkeley?

Her exquisitely beautiful face was almost blinding after so long an absence. In contrast, I had been at marching rehearsal all day and, although I was wearing a new Cal baseball cap, my ponytail was large and frizzy because of the humidity, and my dirty Nike shorts and Cal Band T-shirt were anything but stylish.

Melanie, on the other hand, positively glowed in her casual jeans and a fitted graphic T-shirt, but she had a look on her face that I recognized from the times she would take an exam at school. Concentration mixed with determination and overlaid with flashes of total confidence.

To my exhilaration, she began a slow walk toward me. Her face was set in such a way that I couldn't read her intentions. As she neared, I had to fight the unexpected urge to take a step back or run. I wasn't afraid of Melanie, but I honestly didn't know if I would be able to hear her voice without breaking down. I didn't know if she was there because she wanted to see me or if there was some bad news that she could only deliver in person. My paranoia almost always wins out over hope or logic.

Melanie stopped only a foot in front of me.

Every emotion that I had felt from the time I first saw Melanie raced through me and across my face and, above all of the pain and sadness and hurt, was an overwhelming feeling of intense, heart-rending love.

Without saying a single word she stepped forward and pulled me into a kiss unlike anything I'd ever felt before. The entire world disappeared and I melted into her, forgetting about all of the suffering, forgetting about the onlookers around us, forgetting that anything else in the universe had ever existed except the two of us.



A mere minute and an entire eternity passed before we broke the contact and she stepped back. She said in a whisper that I could barely hear, "Hi, Dev."

I answered with a marked tremor in my voice, "Hey, Mel."

"I...I wanted to surprise you. I got your address and schedule from your mom and was going to find you tonight. I hope that's okay."

I blinked. “Um, yeah. That’s okay!” A slow smile lifted my lips as the true weight of having my girlfriend here began to sink in. “Well, holy shit.”

“That’s eloquent!” Melanie beamed back at me.

“You know me. But seriously, what in the world are you doing here? Does your dad know? Why didn’t you tell me? How long do you get to stay?”

“Come on, we need to sit down for this.” We sat on the nearest bench and Melanie took my hands in hers. “Yes, my dad knows I’m here. I didn’t tell you ahead of time because I wasn’t sure myself if I could come until just recently. I flew in this morning and wanted to surprise you, and finally...this is the big one, Dev. I get to stay as long as you want me to.”

I stared at her in disbelief. “What do you mean you get to stay as long as I want you to? Don’t you have to get back to Boston for the start of classes?”

Melanie grinned widely and said, “I’m a student here. I get to go to Cal with you!”

“What?” I asked, dumbfounded. “How?”

“Well, it’s in no small part due to the actions of Esmy, your mom, and even my Grammy. The short version is this: Esmy has been talking to Mom and Dad nonstop since all of this happened. She can be really persuasive when she wants to be. They both know how badly they’ve screwed everything up and have started to come to terms with their obvious failures in the parenting department. I think Mom’s rehab is helping her put things into perspective too.”

“I doubt that they could have had such a huge a change of heart so quickly.”

“No, you’re right. They still have a long way to go, but with everyone reminding them of all this crap at every turn they’ve started to back down. Your mom has been talking to them too because she wants them to see you guys as real human beings.”

I nodded. “My mom kicks ass.”

“Yes. Yes, she does. Anyway, I eventually told Grammy about what had happened and she let my dad have it. It was awesome! She told him that no son of hers was going to deny her only granddaughter the happiness she deserved, especially since she herself had been the victim of anti-Semitism and bigotry growing up.”

“It sounds like I need to meet this amazing woman!”

“You will. And she’ll love you. Anyway, last week I told my dad that I would not be going to Boston College and would be moving back to California, even if I had to take a year off of school to do it. He wasn’t at all happy, but at Grammy’s insistence he was able to pull a few strings with some of his colleagues here and get me late admission. I got accepted here too, after all.”

“Well, I can’t complain about all that, but it still sounds like they still blame me for everything and don’t want you to be here with me.”

“They never really blamed you, Dev, they were just too blinded by their own faults to see what was really happening around them. They were mortified by what Jason did and didn’t know how to handle it, so they lashed out at the easiest target. I think they really do feel bad about everything that happened.”

“I highly doubt that.” Suddenly the immensity of what she had just told me struck home. “So...you get to stay here? With me? For our entire time at school?”

“Devin, I get to stay with you forever. And I’m not easy to scare off, so don’t even try.” She smiled and squeezed my hands.

I pulled her into my arms, shaking with joy at the unexpected news. I saw Emilie and Tim out of the corner of my eye. “Well, I guess I should introduce you to my roommate, then.”

As Melanie and I walked toward my new friends, she held my hand so tightly that it seemed she feared I would fly away.

CHAPTER TWELVE

We curled into each other under the sheets the moment we entered my dorm room. The bed was a twin, of course, but we were so entwined, it didn't matter. We shared another set of apologies back and forth.

"Well," I said finally, "I think we can blame everything on Jason."

"True."

"How will he take all of this when he finds out?"

"I don't give a crap." Melanie snuggled deeper into my arms. "Everyone saw what a miserable wreck I was without you, and they finally saw Jason for who he is. He stayed in rehab all summer, and then they sent him over to live with a cousin in England. From what I hear he's doing better, but he's no longer a part of my life." She shook her head. "I know he's my brother... my twin, for God's sake...but I'll never forgive him for what he did to you. I still have nightmares." She shivered.

"It's okay. It's over."

"Anyway, Mom and Dad made a deal with him. As long as he stays in England and continues treatment they'll foot the bill and help him go back to school."

“That’s good, I guess. But you definitely got the worse end of the deal. When I saw you in that hospital bed, thinking that you were going to die—” I choked up and stopped talking.

Melanie stroked my bare back with her soft fingers. “We’re together now. That’s all that matters. The world is ours.”

I sniffed back threatening tears. “I still feel bad that you never got to go to Stanford because of me.”

“Please. Ol’ Cal has a society and environment program in the College of Natural Resources that fits exactly with what I want to do. I was so dead set on Stanford, I never really looked at the programs elsewhere.”

“That’s awesome!”

“I know. It’ll kind of be like the S.A.E.P. on a much larger scale. I have it all planned out.”

“Of course you do,” I said, laughing.

“I want to get my bachelor’s degree here and then go to Stanford for the interdisciplinary graduate program in environment and resources so that I can eventually get my doctorate, then work with environmental nonprofits or government agencies to save the planet.”

I stared at the top of her head with a blank expression, and then said lamely, “And I’m going to...play the trumpet.”

After a moment we both burst out laughing. When the laughter had subsided I asked, “Why didn’t you join the marching band, Mel? You don’t have to be a music major.”

“I’m not really allowed to play anymore. The doctors don’t think that my lungs can handle it. After what I went through... that day...I don’t want to chance it.”

“I’m so sorry.”

She shrugged. “I was never anywhere near as good as you

anyway. You're enough of a musician for both of us, I think. You just have to promise me that I can be your groupie when you become a super-famous trumpet player."

"Hmm...we'll have to see about that. You'll have to fawn all over me and tell me how sexy I am."

"Yeah," she said, moving her body over mine, "that won't be a problem. No matter what happens next, we'll never be apart again."



Some people are respected by everyone, confident in who they are, and succeed in everything they try.

I am not one of these people.

But...I am lucky enough to be in love with, and loved by, someone who is. Without Melanie, I'd be the same shy, uninteresting, depressed little girl of my past.

She made me who I am today.

Her name is Melanie Parker, and she is my everything.

My name is Devin Kelly...and I am hers.

About the Author

M.L. Rice was born and raised in the plains of Texas. She graduated with a degree in Radio/TV/Film from the University of Texas at Austin where she was a proud member of the Longhorn Marching and Basketball Bands. After college she moved to sunny Los Angeles, where she currently lives with her wife and three cats. She enjoys scuba diving, hiking, kayaking, swimming, spending too much time on video games, going to the theater, and playing in Disneyland. She volunteers for various nonprofit organizations, travels whenever she can, collects and plays multiple instruments including the trumpet, cello, and great highland bagpipes, and is also a member of the U.S. Coast Guard Auxiliary.

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