

THE PENNSYLVANIA STATE UNIVERSITY
SCHREYER HONORS COLLEGE

DEPARTMENT OF HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES

ABERRATION

KATHERINE O'NEILL
SPRING 2015

A thesis
submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements
for a baccalaureate degree
in Creative Writing
with honors in Creative Writing

Reviewed and approved* by the following:

Thomas Noyes
Associate Professor of English and Creative Writing
Thesis Supervisor/ Honors Adviser

George Looney
Professor of English and Creative Writing
Reader

* Signatures are on file in the Schreyer Honors College.

ABSTRACT

This thesis explores the writing process using a critical preface to analyze the work of the thesis, discuss the creative process, and discuss the author's approach to the process. The thesis also includes a full length novel to demonstrate the craft and a bibliography that lists inspiration texts along with research.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter 1	1
Chapter 2	12
Chapter 3	16
Chapter 4	20
Chapter 5	28
Chapter 6	33
Chapter 7	41
Chapter 8	45
Chapter 9	51
Chapter 10	55
Chapter 11	62
Chapter 12	72
Chapter 13	75
Chapter 14	84
Chapter 15	88
Chapter 16	93
Chapter 17	98
Chapter 18	105
Chapter 19	111
Chapter 20	118
Chapter 21	124

Chapter 22.....	128
Chapter 23.....	135
Chapter 24.....	146
Chapter 25.....	151
Chapter 26.....	156
Chapter 27.....	162
Chapter 28.....	167
Chapter 29.....	171
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	174

Chapter 1

The term “aberration” means something that deviates from the norm. In photography it involves the way the light hits the lens creating a false image. While the first definition could have some merit, I had the latter in mind. False or fake images comprise Kendra’s everyday life. In her family, she has a mother who looks frail but controls everyone, a judge father who cannot communicate with his children, a brother who watches SpongeBob all day but absorbs everything around him, a brother who lies about being gay, and a brother who seems to disregard everyone but returns home with a child. Even Kendra follows her family’s model. The reader sees how she feels and what she hides in contrast with how she presents herself to her family. Trent breaks that role. He wears his personality through symbols such as biting his fingers when he feels anxious and the rash on his chest. The opening scene compares him to a prism bouncing off light, but even he does not turn out the way Kendra intends.

This idea extends into the process of developing my thesis. The initial story was much different than the outcome. I went into my first college workshop with a novel excerpt expecting my class to love it. They didn’t. My piece had too much dialogue, my narrator was not compelling, and my scenes were lacking tension. That moment was a turning point. After that first workshop, I took the criticism and cut hundreds of pages. I reworked and reimagined characters and scenarios, and I experimented with my narrator’s voice. This novel that began in high school went through two workshop classes and a year of rewrites and edits to become my thesis. Only two parts stayed the same throughout the process: the names of the characters and Hodgkin’s disease.

Throughout this process I have studied different writing philosophies that have influenced my work. One of the greatest difficulties comes from inspiration. It can be a fleeting

moment in the midst of nothing or develop from intense concentration, and sometimes it feels impossible to keep. Once inspiration strikes there is first the initial “plunge.” As D.H. Lawrence states, “It is to me the most exciting moment—when you have a blank canvas and a big brush full of wet color, and you plunge. It is just like diving into a pond—then you start frantically to swim” (63). According to Brewster Ghiselin, the first steps in the creative process involve the desire for change and need to step away from the established order. There needs to be some dissatisfaction that inspires the need to create. Then the creator must step away in order to objectively see the problem. Ghiselin states, “The first need therefore is to transcend the old order” (14).

I cannot say when I had my “first initial plunge” into this narrative because I have been working on it for too long. However, my desire to complete this as my thesis rather than a more recent story that was perhaps written better stemmed from my dissatisfaction in myself. Ghiselin describes a larger dissatisfaction, relating to social dissatisfaction, but I believe the principal can be applied to the self. The desire to create from a failed piece perhaps gives the work a new life and the potential to become art. That was my blank canvas: reimagining characters I had known for years.

The beginning initially had problems because I was trying to build Kendra’s world without Trent in it. He needed to be the start of the story because until that point she was complacent. She spent more time ignoring her family than facing her reality. In a way, Trent helped point out her unhappiness because she started to see, or try to see, Woodbridge in a more objective light. Therefore, his arrival had to be the start of the story. He initiated her growth as a character, but he also made the introduction more interesting. Hearing Kendra explain her day-to-day activities was boring. My issue was that I was forcing the story because I was trying to

build the world of the story instead of starting with a defining moment. Once I let go of my initial vision, the story began to have a framework.

R. W. Gerard states that ““Out of chaos the imagination frames a thing of beauty”” (237). He suggests that the imagination needs active participation in order for the artist to create. The “chaos” could have two interpretations. There is a literal chaos that involves the outside world. However, there is also an internal chaos involving the subconscious. The subconscious could be regarded as the chaotic part of the mind that stores memory and experience. The subconscious requires extreme effort from the conscious to pull material out of the chaos. The Gerard quotation also suggests that the imagination only creates the framework, or outline of what it takes from the subconscious. Gerard suggests that the brain needs activity in order to create art.

With my own writing, I write best in public spaces such as the library. I surround my mind and body with activity, but it does not involve me. I am still in my own space, observing but not participating. Perhaps this helps trick my mind into chaos because I also write best when my mind is busy with other things such as classes and extracurricular activities. My imagination thrives when there does not seem to be enough time to write. Chaos forces me to concentrate, which seems to help bridge the connection between the conscious and subconscious.

Much of the story stems from my subconscious. However, experience and research definitely plays as large a role in my creative process. William Gass discussed in an interview with Lorna H. Domke about his previous background in philosophy and how it affected his work. He states, “To wander around philosophy is to be in a world where ideas are characters” (57). His connection to philosophy highlights the relationships writers have to other subjects.

When I was younger I wanted to be a meteorologist, and not the person standing in front of a green screen spilling out lies. I wanted to become a hurricane expert with a Ph.D. working for the Weather Channel in Atlanta like Steve Lyons. This obviously didn't happen, but having other curiosities has benefitted my writing because I like to learn. This is why I minored in Political Science and why I enjoyed taking science Gen Ed courses. As a writer, it is important to have passions because the act of writing is a sort of obsession. Stories stem from a cultivation of every sensory experience, and research is one way to gather information.

My own work often begins in research. This particular project combined subjects I was very familiar with and subjects I knew very little about. For example, I grew up with a background in Catholicism. My personal experience helped develop many of those scenes, in terms of the rituals and emotion. However, I ended up having to go to church to make sure my memory was correct because tiny parts of the ceremonies change yearly, and I had not been to church in over five years. I would not say that Kendra's religious beliefs reflect my own, but my experience with Catholicism tremendously helped develop her relationship with the Catholic religion.

Prior to writing this story, I knew very little about photography. I spent a lot of time studying terms and looking up latest camera models and lenses. Most of that stuff did not make it into the novel, but it helped me understand Kendra's character by studying something she loves. Also, having her be a photographer allowed me to include moments of vivid imagery. I might not be able to take the pictures Kendra would, but I was able to create them using my medium, which is language. I also did a college search for Kendra. I knew I wanted her to go to New York City, but I went through several other schools like NYU and Pratt before deciding on Parsons. I chose it because it has a B.F.A. photography program and has opportunities in digital design.

The most extensive research involved Hodgkin's Disease. Chapter 26 is a culmination of this. I have read many stories where the protagonist gets sick. However, I wanted to explore the opposite perspective. Cancer is something that touches everyone's lives in some way, including my own, but I have never been to a Chemo treatment before. This part was exciting because it required extensive research. The first step was deciding which cancer to give Trent. Hodgkin's Disease won because it occurs in teenagers and is curable. I wanted to give Trent the chance to live. I then spent months researching about it. I read articles from different nontechnical sites such as The American Cancer Society website, WebMD, and the Lymphoma Research Foundation's site. I researched about the type of chemo typically used for Hodgkin's and found out the exact symptoms for each. I couldn't envision how the chemo was administered from the descriptions I read, so I found YouTube videos of different patients on their blogs. I read several blogs and forums about people going through lymphoma and what their experiences were like. As for Trent and school, I found Connecticut's attendance policy for kids with long term illnesses. Most of the information I found dealt with kids adapting going back to school. However, because of the way ABVD is administered and people I've known who kept working during chemo, it seemed more realistic to keep Trent in school. He would want to try to continue living normally, and Shay would not be the person to stop him unless he became gravely ill. Most of this research was not used because Kendra is the narrator. She misses Trent's diagnosis and when he gets his port. She sees some of his side effects but misses two months of his chemo treatment. I wanted Chapter 26 to show chemotherapy through the eyes of someone who had never seen it. I tried balancing the research with her emotions without focusing too much on the technical stuff. This chapter succeeded in part because it was through Kendra's eyes.

Another important aspect of research for writers involves reading, which is another sensory experience. Closely studying other works of art is part of the creative process. I argue that every piece I've ever read has influenced me in one way or another. However, two pieces in particular have impacted my novel. The first is *Strange as This Weather Has Been* by Ann Pancake. Pancake's novel interweaves six different voices, two told in first person and four in third person limited. It has a complex overarching political tone as well as authentic emotions. Each character wants something. As well, the research incorporated about mountain-top removal provides a good example of how to incorporate research into a narrative without burdening the reader. The Avery section in particular demonstrates this. Through his eyes, the reader explores the strip mining and the history of what happened in his old home.

One of my biggest challenges was balancing pace and artistic moments. I couldn't have every sentence be loaded with sensory imagery and figurative language because it wouldn't be true to Kendra's voice. I needed scenes to propel the story forward, but in-between these moments I allowed Kendra to express her own artistic visions as a photographer. This is what gives Kendra her unique voice because she is still a teenager and thinks teenage thoughts and worries about teenage stuff, but she is also an artist and sees the world in sometimes strange ways. Pancake does this with her character Bant, who is fifteen. Bant's character uses more figurative language than Kendra, but her concerns are teenage concerns, such as getting a job and hanging out with a boy she likes.

As well, all of Pancake's characters including secondary ones have distinct purposes and desires. For example, the second youngest son Corey develops an obsession with his neighbor's quad. He has a one track mind throughout the story and represents the aggression and love of machines that hurts the landscape. His role is small, but still has intention. I tried to follow that

model with some of my secondary characters such as Catherine. She is a constant source of conflict for her children particularly Kendra and Nick by behaving in ways that follow her strong beliefs, which are often unyielding. She has more depth than Corey, but both characters have a purpose.

Another work that influences me is John Banville's *The Sea*. The novel is dense in terms of its use of language and imagery, and the characters are extremely complex. However, what struck me was Banville's use of place or loss of place. The sea becomes its own character combining loss with memory and connecting the two back to the sea. Irish literature has a strong emphasis on place in part from the connection between location and identity. Irish identity is deeply rooted in location. I think of other novels such as *Nora Webster* by Colm Toibin and the memoir *The Speckled People* by Hugo Hamilton. In these works the setting creates the story. For my novel, I wanted Woodbridge to have an important role in Kendra's life. Woodbridge becomes a symbol of what she is trying to escape and what she is leaving behind. It's not as strong of a force as in *The Sea*, but her school and town are integral part of her identity.

The hardest part to write happened around page 40 at the end of Chapter 7. It was because Chapters 5-7 were working together so well. They almost had their own arch starting with the bump on Trent's nose and ending with an explanation and resolution. I didn't know where to go next. I spend time playing around with some minor tensions, including Kendra as a musician. I spent a lot of time on these chapters, but they demonstrate my aesthetic. One specific example is the piano scene in Chapter 9. Kendra is helping Joe learn a part for a duet, when he suggests that she try the female part.

I try to use dialogue sparingly but have the words capture the voices. Joe and Kendra often speak through body language. They use facial expressions and hugs to communicate. This

scene is important because it shows how the two communicate through music, which in many ways is a physical connection. Music is another form of expression for Kendra who doesn't get to verbally communicate often. Joe says, "Can you sing the female part? I think that would be more beneficial for me." Kendra responds by saying, "No. I'm not trying out for it." Joe and Kendra are very direct with one another. The extent of Kendra's feelings comes from the things she doesn't say sometimes because she often holds back especially from her family. However, with Joe she can say "no." Some of the most profound and literary moments occur in Kendra's mind. The following passage provides an example:

Then the solo part ended, and the piano took over. I was then home. I struck each key with more malice than I knew I had in me, pounding each note into a rhythm that mimicked the drums. I pictured Catherine during all this with her obedient line of followers as we, her family, processed up the aisle to take Communion. Why were all these choir songs about God? The answer was obvious, but even my knowledge about choral history made me feel disgusted. Why didn't Mr. Bronze find other song, more modern ones? Then I heard in my head Catherine's voice ask: if I was religious then why did I care?

The passage starts with short choppy sentences that suggest there is more to be said. Kendra states, "I was then home" before moving into an explanation of what that means. The passage then takes off using clauses to create a rhythm. This mimics the music she plays. My style involves suggesting an idea then trying to define it through comparison. Sometimes Kendra's character gets off track, and the subject returns to her immediate concerns such as her mother and God, as it does in this passage. Questions are a big part of Kendra's voice because she

constantly doubts herself and her beliefs, and here it fits the manic pulsating rhythms of the music. Kendra is consumed by her own thoughts congruently with the song.

What connects much of the first half of the novel with the second is the parallelism. The novel has many parallel scenes. There are two party scenes, two basketball scenes, two “sex” scenes, and several other comparisons like Trent at dinner versus Tiffany at dinner. The parallels show the repetition of the characters’ behavior and emphasize their growth as characters. The second scene sometimes is not very different from the first, but the tone changes. The characters attempt to continue living as always do and cannot because perception is too changed. Kendra explains it best during the second party, “I went to the back porch, and there was Trent, standing outside, alone. I remembered the last party and the conversation about his broken nose and what it led to, so I hesitated because I wasn’t ready to replace those memories.” The first party scene has some intense moments, but the second is lonelier for Kendra. The second time around she doesn’t have anyone to help her cope.

Stephen Spender states, “At the moment when art attains its highest attainment it reaches beyond its medium of words or paints or music, and the artist finds himself [or herself] realizing that these instruments are inadequate to the spirit of what he [or she] is trying to say” (114). I believe this novel will never be finished enough for me to feel satisfied. However, eventually, as an artist I must accept that it cannot ever express what I intended.

With that said, there are edits that need to be made. Right now I have completed a full draft with a story arch that resolves most of the tensions posed throughout the novel. I want the novel to end how it does with Kendra living in the moment knowing it won’t last and accepting that she will have to move on. However, I do not like the timing. I think Kendra needs more time before she can accept these feelings. She needs to pass (or fail) a few more tests including the

ones involving her brothers. I feel like Nick's story arch could also use more time at the end of the novel. He reaches the conclusion that he doesn't need Catherine's approval, but I do not necessarily believe him. A few more scenes could help show the differences between what he says and how he feels. I want a stronger parallel between Nick and Ben. I want Kendra to stop seeing Ben as a villain, which I think she does by accepting the role as Liam's godmother. An actual baptism scene could show how she comes to terms with her feelings against Ben and provide more of a resolution to her relationship with her religion, whether positive or negative. As for Trent, like I said, I want it to end open-ended because their relationship isn't the point. The end is about Kendra. I think having this conversation at Prom is too soon from when they get back together. I would like to move it closer to graduation after Trent's last chemo cycle. I never intended to kill him because that would make Kendra leaving Woodbridge too easy. She needs to move on while having people to leave behind.

Developing this thesis has forced me to ask the question: what is art? D. H. Lawrence describes it by stating that "Art is a form of supremely delicate awareness and atonement—meaning at oneness, the state of being at one with the object" (66). The word atonement stands out. Art tries to capture a subject, but ultimately fails, because art can only represent an object. Perhaps, art becomes a form of atonement by forgiving that it cannot truly capture the object because of the limitations of language. Whether painting, sculpting, dancing, or writing, the language of art only represents the real world. However, the word "supremely" suggests art's awareness and atonement transcends worldly expectation. Through representation, art becomes something greater than the object. By defining art, Lawrence also defines the requirements of an artist. In order to have a "delicate awareness" the artist needs objectivity, which can only occur with the artist's removal from subject. Art's "oneness" fits the producer/consumer idea from Valery.

The producer or artist feels at one with the object during the creation. Then, the consumer or audience feels at one when experiencing the art. The separation between the producer and the consumer is not so distinct, however. There is a connection from the creator to the audience through language. Art is a constant conversation between the past and present. For example, when viewing “The Fall of Icarus” by Bruegel the audience thinks of the Greek myth. Also, when reading “Venus Transiens” by Amy Lowell, the audience thinks of the Botticelli painting. Art does try to capture the world, but it also captures other aspects of art. Both the artist and the audience bring other experiences to a piece of art; this helps art become more than a representation and provides a connection between the producer and the consumer. Art’s “oneness” seems unlimited.

Chapter 2

As I placed my hand on the door knob of Shay's Diner, I realized I didn't have the spare key.

"No, no, no." I shook the locked handle out of frustration before eventually sitting down on the steps below the door. I could've solved the problem easily by calling Joe to come let me in, but instead I began crying. The cause of pain was hard to place. It felt heavy, though, like my chest was in a vice.

I decided I should go home. Joe and Shay had been at the funeral all day, and I did not want to meet Joe's cousin like this. Before I moved, a cool October breeze brushed against me, and I closed my eyes until I shivered.

"You know all the lights off is a good indication that the place is closed." The voice belonged to a stranger, but I knew who it was. Trenton Ferguson was the only stranger in this town. His eyes were faint blue, soft like wet clay, and his curly hair had gold highlights from the sun. He smirked with a sort of confidence any good-looking teenager possessed. The fading light bounced off of him like a prism. This picture wouldn't need a caption. Trent glowed.

"Also the closed sign." He carried a phone charger crumpled up in his left hand. With his right, he reached into his pocket and pulled out a key. "I don't think I'm supposed to let strangers in."

I became aware of my own appearance: sitting on a step outside a locked building, blood shot eyes, staring. I immediately stood up and said, "I'm not a stranger. I'm Kendra."

I realized how dumb that sounded. He didn't know me. I'd have to explain myself, who I was, my relationship to Joe. The idea excited me. I'd never needed to explain myself before, at

least at the basic level. Everyone in Woodbridge knew me or at least knew two important things: Joe was my best friend, and I always had a camera hanging around my neck.

I didn't need to explain anything, though, because Trent smiled at me and said, "I'm Trent. Joe's talked about you all day."

Here would've been a good time for some wit or charm, but I felt like an idiot being caught in this moment of weakness. Whatever Joe had told Trent must've seemed like a lie. Trent's eyebrows folded the skin above his nose, which I noticed was slightly crooked.

"You okay?" Trent asked.

I pressed my tongue to the roof of my mouth as a last line of defense to choke back a sob. I had come to the Diner to talk to Joe because he knew me well enough to sort through the things that brought on this sadness. But I heard his voice in my head telling me to stop being ridiculous. I needed something more than that.

"I don't know," I said.

I sat back down on the step, and Trent followed. I cried lightly this time, making no audible sounds. I tried thinking about my running mascara to stop, but that only made it worse. Trent didn't ask me what was wrong, which I was thankful for because I didn't have an answer or at least one that made sense. If I tried to explain it with one issue, I would've been lying.

Trent slipped his hand into mine as graceful as a glove and squeezed until I squeezed back. Trent's touch stopped the crying, not from the comfort, but from my own embarrassment. How could I cry in front of someone who had much bigger problems than my own?

"I'm sorry," I said. "About your grandma and that you have to be here and I'm sure you've heard this way too many times today." I paused as his hand slipped away from mine.

“But Joe and Shay are good people. The best people I know. Sometimes I feel like they are more my family than my own.”

Trent was looking at me, his eyes still wet clay. “I thought today was going to be the worst day of my life and it wasn’t. It never is.”

He stood up and extended his hand. I took it, and he helped me to my feet.

He held up the key once more. “So I guess I can still let you in if you want.”

The Diner looked strange at night. Shay kept a set of emergency lights on that cast shadows along the floor. It looked like the casing or skin of the place I knew so well: echoes of the people who sat at these tables and at the counter. The pie tray and coffee machines were empty, just as hollow as everything else.

There was a curtain that separated the Diner from the staircase that led to the upstairs apartment where Joe and Shay lived. I called it the pent house. I followed Trent up the stairs to the wooden door which opened into the kitchen/living room. The apartment contained two bedrooms and an office, the latter of which Shay had turned into a small bedroom for Trent. Only one bathroom. Still, the small apartment had fit three people once before.

Joe was sitting on the L-shaped sofa, watching his mom wash dishes when Trent and I walked in.

“Kendra.” Shay seemed surprised but smiled. Shay was the same age as Catherine, yet she looked at least ten years older. Her wrinkles had deeper ridges, and she didn’t dye her hair.

“Glad to see you, dear,” Shay said.

Joe got up as soon as he saw me and, without saying a word, hugged me, hard. All his sadness rolling off in thick pulses. He must’ve felt my own sadness meet his halfway because he pulled away, holding my shoulders. I could lie to anyone but not Joe.

“What’s wrong?” he asked.

Shay and Trent were now in Trent’s new room, rearranging things. Trent was tall enough he could rest his chin on his aunt’s spiky hair if he wanted to.

Joe asked me once more what was wrong and I shrugged it off stating, “I’m fine. It was one of those days. How are you?”

“One of those days,” he said.

There were two sore subjects with Joe: death and fathers. He didn’t want to go to today’s funeral for Trent’s grandma. He feared all those horrible memories of standing around for long periods of time weepy and forced to be social. Joe still refuses to eat lasagna because of all the stuffed containers people gave him and Shay.

He hugged me once more, his thick arms wrapped even tighter. He then leaned into my ear. “So what do you think of Trent?”

I caught Trent look over at us, and I saw the uncertainty in his eyes. I wanted to include him in this friendship.

“I like him,” I whispered back.

Chapter 3

It only took until the next morning for me to feel better, because Nick came home for the first time since he left for college a month and a half ago. He found me editing my portfolio in my room.

“Miss me?” he asked. He had an old duffle bag swung over his shoulder.

Out of all of Catherine’s children Nick was the most of her. We all shared her dark shiny hair, thin upper lip, and soft cheeks, but Nick had those eyes, wide as if always in a constant state of wonder. Truthfully, I did miss him in small ways. Like the drive to school and the little petty fights he and Joe had over music and television and pretty much everything. I missed hearing his electric toothbrush in the morning and listening to him scheme about parties. Little things.

He leaned in for a hug, but I swatted his chest. I had missed him more than I needed to because Barton Community College was only thirty minutes away.

He gave the vindication I expected: that he was busy at school, that he was having fun and that next year I would understand. I also knew he must’ve felt some joy at being away from Catherine and Andre, because he didn’t have to hide anymore. Regardless, it was lonely in the Lafontaine house without him. Kyle spent more time watching *SpongeBob* than anything else. I suppose there were worse things for a ten year old to be doing, but he didn’t provide much company. Andre was either at work or holed up in his study and Catherine spent more time talking than listening. Neither were winning parent of the year.

Nick mentioned that *I* could visit *him*. I couldn’t, though, not without being invited. Nick loved me, but I was still his little sister. Visiting Barton made me sad as well; there was a strong possibility it would become *my* future.

Nick sat down on my bed giving me those hurt, wide eyes. I ended up apologizing for being mad. I always ended up forgiving him quicker than I intended.

“What are you working on?” he asked.

“The portfolio,” I said. “I can’t submit it.”

That was dramatic, but I wasn’t ready to. I wasn’t feeling too confident about the two final pictures. I’d taken both in the last month, which didn’t give me enough time to digest them and test their effectiveness. My tree one looked black against the unnatural purples of a sunset, and a crumpled beer can took up a corner of a close up on a butterfly. Both felt overly metaphoric. I knew I could do better, but the deadline was only a few weeks away. Plus, even if they were better, I probably wouldn’t get in. Even if I did, Catherine would never let me go.

“Are you going to let Mom dictate your life?”

“You’re one to talk Nicholas,” I said. “Are you?”

He gritted his teeth. “This is different.”

But it wasn’t really, not on the fundamental level. We were both lying to Catherine; I wasn’t telling her about applying to art school, and Nick wasn’t telling her that he was gay.

Nick changed the subject. “I’m having a Halloween party in a few weeks and you and Joe are invited,” he said. “You can bring the cousin too if you want.”

“In your dorm?” I had helped him move in. His dorm room barely fit the two people that lived in it.

His eyes darkened, almost evil, and he tried suppressing a smirk. “I was thinking more beach front.”

I immediately protested. Having a party at college was one thing but using the beach house was asking to get caught. Andre would kill us. It had belonged to Andre’s long

deceased mother, and, although we hadn't vacationed there in years, Andre treasured it as if it were a living remnant of our grandmother.

Nick got defensive. "You don't know how to have fun. You worried the parents are going to find out? Who cares? Honestly, Kendra. We both have bigger things to worry about."

I couldn't argue with that. I knew Nick, though. He used his schemes to cloak the stuff he couldn't hide. It would only work for so long before he would have to confront Catherine. The same principle applied to me. We couldn't all run away like the unmentionable.

Sundays, Catherine forced all of us to attend mass, but the numbers in the Lafontaine pew had dropped from six to four. She had tried forcing Nick, but he claimed he wanted "to establish a church community at school." In reality, I knew he wasn't going at all. College was his scapegoat. But not this Sunday. Andre, Kyle, Nick, and I all sucked it up and went to eight o'clock mass, because our church was too small to have a ten o'clock.

I sat in-between Kyle and Nick, going through the motions. Up for the opening hymn, down for the readings, up again for the Gospel. Our new priest kept his homilies short. *Peace be with you*. Everyone awkwardly shook hands, while families kissed on the cheek. Then it was Communion. Kyle and I never took the wine; he didn't like the taste, and I didn't like sharing a cup with strangers. After, when we kneeled, I would pray.

Dear God... That was how my prayers always started, like a letter drafted in my head. *Dear God, things are a mess*. I wondered why I started off so vaguely. Everything was always a bit of a mess. I tried being specific. *Nick needs to talk to Catherine. Joe had a bad weekend. Trent...* I started feeling that lump in my throat. *Trent has lost everything*. I didn't want to talk

about me. I still couldn't put it into words. I then asked for solutions. *I don't believe you think it's wrong, so help Nick find his courage. And have him visit more... Give Joe some comfort from the past... Please let Trent's first day at Woodbridge be okay. Let him have a few classes with Joe and me.* I ended it like a letter. *Thank you. Amen.*

I relaxed, resting my butt on the edge of the pew, fake kneeling. People were still receiving Communion, so I watched my family. Catherine, with her glossy dark hair and eyes closed softly as if she were sleeping, pressed her hands into a perfect triangle. Kyle fidgeted, rocking back and forth on his knees peeking with one eye. Andre rested his forehead on his hands, his back slightly hunched. Nick, however, stared straight ahead, his hands hanging off the back of the pew not clasped in prayer. He never prayed anymore.

Chapter 4

When I got to the Diner on Monday, Trent was on his fifth shirt, third pair of pants, and second pair of shoes. Joe was sitting on the L-shaped couch waiting for the next round.

“We’re going to be awhile,” he said.

This was a public versus private school wardrobe disaster. Trent had gone to private school his entire life and owned only two pairs of jeans and about a dozen polos.

I sat down next to Joe and considered how little effort went into my own outfit: jeans and a top. I was so complacent in my routine that I could spin around, point at something in my wardrobe, put it on, and forget about it. I had never dealt with a change so drastic. Would I be ready for it come next fall?

Trent came out of his small bedroom wearing a blue polo that matched his eyes, jeans, and a pair of gray Sperry’s. I would call this picture “Average Guy” if only for the clothes, but his panic stricken face couldn’t be covered. He blushed as soon as he saw me.

“That’s the winner,” Joe said, standing up. “Tell him he looks good, Kendra.”

“He does.”

The school was only a mile away, but Joe Boyd refused to walk, so we took my truck that had already made it through two previous drivers. It had a dent in the bed from Nick and a duct taped rear-view mirror from the unmentionable. My contribution was a missing hubcap. Joe got shotgun on the grounds that he was “too big” to fit in the back. He used to pull that when Nick drove us. Joe may have had broader shoulders but Trent was definitely taller.

“Jake and Kathy broke up,” Joe said. “I saw it on Facebook last night.”

I didn’t see that one coming. They had been the favorite to win “class couple.” Plus, neither had given any indication they were unhappy.

Joe pulled out his phone. “I texted Alicia this morning, and she said that Kathy has been getting on his case about him going to Barton with her. He apparently wants to go somewhere out of state, and Kathy started crying saying he doesn’t love her and all kinds of crazy shit.”

So this was a college fight. Could we possibly be at that point already? My application wasn’t even finished.

“I don’t blame him for not wanting to go to community college,” I said.

“Nick goes there.” He crossed his thick arms across his chest.

I looked into the slightly crooked rear-view mirror and saw Trent looking out the window. He still had that worried look.

“Nick actually came home this weekend. He said all three of us are invited to a Halloween party.” Trent didn’t respond; he was completely tuned out.

I tried again. “Nick is my brother, Trent. He graduated last year.”

He looked up at the mention of his name. The blue from his shirt had a startling effect on his eyes. They didn’t look natural. “Sorry, what did you say?”

“You’re invited to my brother’s party.”

He then smiled for the first time today.

We fed Trent to the wolves... well technically the wombats. I did have two classes with him, English and Journalism, but they weren’t until later in the day. I tried my best explaining where everything was, but he was on his own all morning.

Prob and Stat was the first period I had to endure with Jake and Kathy. They both left an awkward empty desk in-between them. I knew I would regret it, but I took that middle seat anyways.

“Hi, Kendra,” Jake said first. Kathy sat up a little straighter in her seat.

“Hi, Jake,” I said. Kathy’s jaw clenched. “Hi, Kathy.”

She smiled at me half-heartedly, but her jaw relaxed.

Kathy was the type of person that seemed crafted out of eggshells. We held her in our palms with the tenderness of freshly blown glass. Large doses of Kathy were exhausting. Jake wasn’t much better. He fed off of Kathy’s drama and suffered from what Joe termed “chronic jealousy.”

Still, I felt for both of them having to sit through this class with each other so close. I wouldn’t be able to focus. I couldn’t focus *now*, sitting between them. Everything seemed to be happening all at once, because I knew this breakup was the inevitable split of our friend group.

“Joe’s cousin is here today,” I said mostly to the air.

“Oh, yeah.”

“Cool.”

Our teacher Mr. Feint entered the room and immediately started talking at us about standard deviations. I heard Kathy sigh next to me. It was going to be a long day.

Neither Jake nor Trent was in our lunch, the latter of which I felt terrible about. Luckily for him, the cafeteria had five long rectangular tables with attaching benches, so no one could technically sit alone, even if they tried.

After lunch, Joe walked me to my English class to swap information. I explained how awkward math was. Joe told me I did a good thing by declaring neutrality because Alicia said Kathy was deleting everyone on Facebook who liked Jake's single status. She was a slighted woman on a rampage.

I found Trent in English sitting in the front row. I sat next to him. He seemed much more relaxed than this morning, the panic no longer visible.

"How's your first day going?" I asked.

"Not bad at all. Everyone's been friendly."

I'll bet they have been, I thought. Trent was something new to shake the monotonous year thus far. Our graduating class only had less than two hundred people. Everyone wanted a change. His good lucks didn't hurt either.

"How are *you*?" he asked.

With the heavy emphasis on "you," I knew he wasn't talking about my day. Our first encounter had been pretty humiliating, but something about him prevented me from feeling extremely embarrassed about my outburst. He hadn't said much then or now so I couldn't place exactly what it was. I wanted to figure him out.

I didn't have a good answer to his question, because the heaviness still pressed against my chest. But I felt better than Friday and I certainly never intended to cry in front of him again.

I ended up saying, "Fine." Trent didn't press me.

Mrs. Pitts, who looked more like a stereotypical librarian with her gray hair wrapped tight in a sock-bun and thick framed glasses, entered the classroom. She went back to her desk and passed back our latest quiz.

“I’m thoroughly disappointed with this class,” She said. She slapped mine on my desk. I got a 7 out of 10. “Most of you failed, and those that passed got lucky. Clearly none of you did the reading. Therefore, you’re going to be assigned a—”

She noticed Trent for the first time. She let her glasses fall forward a bit and stared at him for a few moments. Trent sank a little into his seat. Mrs. Pitts then returned to her desk and got on her computer. The room remained still except for the hum from the heater.

“Trenton Ferguson?”

“Yes?” Trent’s voice sounded small.

“You have catching up to do.” She returned to the front of the room. “Four page paper on *Beowulf* due Friday. Now get out your notes. We’re starting *Hamlet*.”

Before choir, Kathy sat in the soprano section, watching the door intently. We could see her through the small window on the door and hesitated. As soon as Joe and I entered the cramped choir room, she latched onto us starting her lament.

“He’s a total d-bag. Like we date all this time and now he’s springing new plans on me that he’s definitely known all along. Like why would he lie to me?”

Joe and I exchanged a glance. We couldn’t take Kathy’s side without losing Jake. And if we took Jake’s side we’d lose Kathy and Alicia. If we took neither side we’d probably lose them all.

Thankfully, Mr. Bronze came out of his dark and always slightly humid office carrying a stack of new music, barking at us to take our seats. I happily took my seat at the piano and Joe sat with the other basses.

I chose the piano because of Andre. He had a scholarly attitude towards music, but I was the only one of his kids that stuck with it. He didn't even bother with Kyle. I loved the piano because it allowed me to participate in choir without singing. I could match pitch alright, but every time I heard my own voice vibrating against the airwaves, my skin crawled. I, unlike Joe, was not my own instrument.

I joined the journalism class at the request of crazy Mrs. Sanders, who said she was in *desperate* need of someone to manage the photography. I didn't want to. I really didn't want to. I'd heard all the horror stories about that woman from Alicia, who was the editor-in-chief of the *Wombat Monthly*. But I never passed up an opportunity to take photos.

Trent took it because he needed another elective. I met him in the hallway and tried warning him on the walk over about what might happen. Mrs. Sanders would be just as excited as the students about having someone new. And she would want to show her staff off. She was too proud of our little paper that continually had typos and misprints. She encouraged all the staff writers to pursue actual careers in journalism and communications.

As soon as we entered the room, she bombarded him. "You must be Trenton Ferguson." Her bug eyes were bulging, and her teeth had an eerie translucent quality.

"I just know we're going to have a fantastic year. I can't wait to see where you fit into our staff." She then motioned for him to follow her. As expected, she was showing him all the "stations."

I went to mine, where my freshmen mentee, Penny sat waiting. She was noisy and had a decent eye for graphics but looked like she was twelve. Mrs. Sanders assigned her to me mostly

so she'd have someone to take my place when I graduated. I didn't mind working with Penny.

She was not a good photographer, but at least she could figure out where to place my pictures.

Alicia came over almost immediately, which was rare. She usually had too much work to do to talk much during this class. She looked frazzled.

"Have you talked to Kathy at all?" She asked.

I told her about math and choir, neither of which constituted as much of a discussion.

Alicia kept biting on her lower lip.

"Well she's pissed at me. Apparently, Jake kept telling her she's too controlling, and she asked me if I thought she was. So, I told her she should let him go to school wherever he wants. And she accused me of taking his side." Alicia always seemed so composed, but she bit down so hard on her bottom lip that when she released, it pulsated. I felt bad. Kathy was Alicia's closest friend.

"She's just hurt," I said. "She'll come around."

If Kathy was fragile glass, Alicia was concrete: secure, reliable, and blended. She worked hard, but she could fit into any mold you put her in.

Penny stopped working on the layout, clearly eavesdropping. I saw her peek over at Trent a few times.

"So that's the cousin," Alicia said.

"He's cute," Penny added.

Mrs. Sanders just finished with the "student interviewers" and was bringing him over our way.

"This is Kendra. She's the 'graphic supervisor.' Oh, show him last month's pic of the mascot."

“I know Kendra,” Trent said, but Mrs. Sanders wasn’t listening.

The picture caught Mr. Wombat with his fist in the air during a pep rally for Homecoming. I liked it for the people in the background. It had a few band members mid-song, one or two cheerleaders with their legs lifted, and a few normal spectators who looked about as enthused as anyone who had Mrs. Pitts. It was a nice, realistic blend. Mrs. Sanders, of course, just liked the pose of Mr. Wombat.

“That’s awesome,” Trent said. “Is there a guy yawning?”

“This is our editor-in-chief and your valedictorian, Alicia.”

Alicia shook his hand. “I’m good friends with Joe and Ken—”

“And this is the assistant to the graphic supervisor, Penny.”

Penny smiled, revealing her braces. Mrs. Sanders then shuffled Trent along to the “sports writers.” Trent looked back at me and made a swirly motion by his temple while pointing at Mrs. Sanders’ back.

“He is cute,” Alicia said. “Thank god Kathy hasn’t met him yet.”

Chapter 5

I came home from school to find Catherine crying in the kitchen. It broke my heart to see her cry. She looked weak enough already, her skin wrapped too tightly around her bones and those glossy child-like eyes. She wasn't actually weak; she controlled much more than anyone else in my family wanted to admit. But when she cried, she hunched her back revealing her spine, and her sobs were like shallow gasps for air.

"Mom." She looked up at me, and I wondered how any of us let this woman tell us no. A small stream of tears framed her cheeks, which were blotchy. I'd call this one "Swollen Sorrow."

I hugged Catherine, wondering what caused these tears this time.

"It's been a year," she whispered.

I slowly pulled away, because this was something I refused to comfort her for. I wanted to feel bad for her, and if I couldn't empathize, I at least wanted to be there for her. But any amount of pity I had melted away when it came to the unmentionable. Had it been a year already since he left?

Catherine never read my body language correctly. Pulling away was an invitation for her to speak. "I just wish I knew where he was. Even just a text now and then." She wiped her cheek with the back of her hand.

The unmentionable had left to be with a new girlfriend named Tiffany, who did not fit Catherine's model of a good woman, because she had a baby "out-of-wedlock." If *he* had impregnated her, it would have been a different story. Because Tiffany had someone else's child, though, Catherine disapproved. She wanted the best for her favorite child. This led to the first big fight between Catherine and her oldest son. Normally, she went along with whatever decision he made. Instead of resolving the issue, he got out. However, the only explanation for his year long

hiatus was that he was an ass. It was hard to blame only Catherine. She had pushed him away, but he chose to disappear.

Catherine continued talking to me, but I stopped listening. If there were one sore subject with me it was him. Hate wasn't a strong enough word to describe my feelings toward our big brother. He had the power to slack off, and still get everything he wanted. He also knew the language to make you feel inferior. In his eyes we were made small. Even away, he still found ways to creep into our lives and cause pain.

"Don't you miss him?" Catherine asked.

Kyle entered the room, and I wondered if he ever thought about the situation. Did Kyle feel like Nick and I did?

"Can I have a snack?" he asked. For being a coach potato, he looked more anemic than anything. He was fragile-skinny like Catherine, and his eyes watered constantly from allergies.

Catherine grabbed him some Goldfish out of the cupboard, and I took this opportunity to leave. I had portfolio stuff to work on. No, I did not miss him.

On Wednesday, I took my first photograph of Trent and decided it constituted as creepy. It was during Journalism, the only class I could legally have my camera in. Mrs. Sanders was having Trent try out each of the stations to help him "acclimate." She didn't want to "cause a disturbance in the system" by placing him in the wrong one. Today, he was with the editors, including Alicia. They sat closest to the window. I didn't think anything of it. The natural lighting was good flooding in from the outside and snap, there he was leaning back in his chair

looking out the window, not paying attention to the editorial staff. If Penny hadn't caught me, I probably would've taken another.

"Do you always take pictures when people aren't looking?" she asked. "Or only people you like?"

I was too embarrassed to think of a response. Maybe, it was too soon to be taking pictures of Trent. We hardly knew each other. If he had caught me, I didn't think I could've explained myself. At the same time, because we just met, Trent became a new canvas for me to work with. Familiarity got old. Pictures of Joe were starting to look trite. It would be worse if Trent was a complete stranger. Perhaps, the in-between stage was the best I could get.

"You like him. Don't you?" Her lips were pushed forward, barely hiding a smirk.

"Of course I do. He's nice."

"That's not what I mean," she said.

I was getting frustrated. This wasn't the first time Penny tried forcing her way into my business.

"You can have guys that are just friends," I said. "Like Joe and me."

"But Joe's gay," she said. "He doesn't count."

I told her to get back to work. She was a stupid freshman. What could she know at fourteen? She didn't understand relationships yet, and she wasn't a photographer either. Creepy or not, I *had* to take those photos. And I didn't delete Trent's first.

On Wednesdays, we had "select choir" after school. It consisted of mostly seniors and juniors, who were considered "elite." I usually had to sing a few songs with this choir, because

Mr. Bronze liked to have one or two acapella pieces in our repertoire. I had asked Mr. Bronze if I could sit those songs out, but he said no. So, I'd lip-sync.

While Joe, Kathy, and I suffered through a two hour rehearsal, Trent went to a basketball open gym, where he would get to meet Jake, who was already on the team. After rehearsal, Kathy followed Joe and me toward the gym.

Trent was standing outside the gym with Jake. Both were covered in sweat, and duffle bags sat by their feet. Jake had his arms crossed, but he laughed at whatever Trent was telling him.

Kathy grabbed Joe's arm. "*That's* your cousin?"

Kathy had a greedy look in her eye that replaced the forlorn longing she lately had whenever she saw Jake. I immediately feared the scene about to unfold.

Jake stopped laughing when he saw Kathy approaching with us. Kathy immediately introduced herself as "one of Joe's closest friends." She didn't include *me* as one of the close friends. Trent wiped his palm against his sweatpants and shook her already extended hand.

"So you play basketball, huh?" That was when I noticed that Kathy was changing her voice. The pitch was lower and slower. She started twisting the ends of her hair around her fingers.

Jake looked between Trent and Kathy, slowly and his body began to tense up, his smile folding into a frown. He clutched the duffle bag strap around his shoulder tighter. Kathy was getting her revenge, but there was no way I was letting her use Trent in this battle.

I looked at Joe, pleading. He then said, "Hey we have to get going. I have shit to do."

We all walked out. Kathy kept close to Trent pushing me back with Jake. I asked him how the practice went.

“He’s good.” Jake indicated Trent. He readjusted his strap and gritted his teeth.

I gritted my own as I watched Kathy giggle while saying her goodbyes. It was *so nice* to finally meet him and that we’d all have to hang out sometime. Her hand brushed his arm before she left. So much for the heartbroken Kathy of three days ago.

“How was Chorus?” Trent asked. He was looking at me, and I understood why Kathy acted the way she did. Exercise made Trent’s skin darker, producing a glow that matched the rest of his features. The tiredness in his eyes gave off a sort of tenderness.

“She’s the accompanist,” Joe said, wiggling his fingers.

“That’s cool,” Trent said. “Do you ever get to sing?”

“She’s actually a really good singer,” Joe said. “Although she’ll tell you otherwise.”

I blushed because Joe was exaggerating and softly said, “I’m not.”

I quickly unlocked the truck and hopped in. I needed to get home; the portfolio was waiting for me.

After I dropped the boys off, I got a text from Kathy asking if Trent were single. I didn’t respond.

Chapter 6

On Thursday, I accidentally asked Trent about his crooked nose by staring at it for too long. We were sitting on the L-shaped couch pretending to work on our *Beowulf* essays. Joe was down in the Diner talking to Shay.

I didn't mean to be rude, but the bump was so slight that I was starting to think I was imaging things. Trent looked up at me, and I immediately returned to my book, not quick enough.

"It broke," he said. He ran his finger along the curve.

I meant to apologize, but instead asked, "How?"

He stared at me intently, and I felt like I was being evaluated. He opened his mouth then closed it before saying, "It's a stupid story."

He looked down at *Beowulf* and started biting his thumbnail. I must have failed Trent's test. I wanted the story to actually be stupid, or at the very least embarrassing. Whatever it was, he couldn't tell *me*. His thumb started to bleed, and he sucked the wound like a popsicle.

"I have no idea what to write about," he said, and I let the nose subject drop.

"Just talk about *wyrd*," I said. "Mrs. Pitts was all about that in class."

Fate. Somehow she managed to incorporate that into every lecture. But Trent had missed those classes. He had still been home, his grandma alive. Now, here he was trying to write an essay on a story he'd never read. He caught me staring again, only this time I didn't look away.

"How are you doing with everything?" I asked.

He sighed and rested his head against the couch cushion looking up at the ceiling. "Ah, Kendra. I don't know how to answer that."

"Woodbridge sucks. Doesn't it?"

“No,” he said. “Being here doesn’t suck. I’m not hung up on how I got here. I do miss my grandma, but... I’m not really sure how to explain this.”

Please try, I thought. Trent started looking down at *Beowulf*, tracing the title with his fingers. *Please try*.

He then said, “Everyone here has a life and a routine that doesn’t include me. It’s no one’s fault and everyone’s been nice. But I don’t fit.”

The apartment door opened and Joe entered.

“Nick texted me,” he said. “Party is next Friday. We’ll need some kick-ass costumes.”

I wished that Trent could somehow leave the room so I could talk about him. I wanted to let Joe know how he was feeling because I wanted to fix it. However, Joe and I were never alone anymore, and I suddenly understood what Trent meant. I wanted to include Trent in our dynamic, but we had been a duo for so long. I was as guilty as the rest of Woodbridge.

On Sunday, Judge Andre Lafontaine was reading *The Woodbridge Gazette* in his study. I knocked on the open door to get his attention.

“Mom said you wanted to talk,” I said.

He looked up from his bifocals. The two wrinkles between his brows were still engraved from whatever he had been reading. He always had the same expression: stoic and serious.

“I want to discuss something,” he said.

I sat in the chair across from him so we were both facing his desk. He took off his bifocals, laying them gently on the newspaper. The glasses left wet indents on the bridge of his nose that he massaged.

He cleared his throat and said, “I know you said you’re applying to Barton, which is fine. Your brother goes there. It’s a decent school. But I don’t want you to settle on a school just because your brother goes there. I think your interests exceed what community college can offer.”

I didn’t say anything. This was not a conversation I expected at seven-thirty before mass.

He folded his hands in front of him like he did when he prayed. “Have you looked into UConn? It’s the same distance as Barton. You could minor in music. They have more art classes available.”

“But, Mom...”

“I would take care of your mother.”

Righteous Andre, with his hard eyes that contained an equal amount of sternness and wisdom. In that moment I almost told him about Parsons because I felt like he could understand.

“Dad...” But I could hear Catherine’s voice carrying from the kitchen, calling us to church. I blamed how early it was for my almost mishap, because, regardless of Andre, Catherine would not understand. She didn’t understand the arts, and neither would allow New York City. I let the opportunity slip by and told him I’d look into UConn.

Dear God, things are a mess... Halloween is this Friday. Please don’t let us get caught. I promise I won’t get trashed if we don’t get caught... Trent feels left out. I paused in my prayer. I wasn’t sure what to ask for. Help him fit in? Could I even ask God to change someone’s feelings? I felt stupid stating the obvious, so I changed the subject. *Give me the courage to click “submit.”* My application was due next Saturday. I was running out of time. *Thank you, Amen.*

I noticed Kyle was following my “fake-kneeling” example this week. His butt brushed the edge of the pew.

On Monday, I felt Kathy’s eyes on me, while I tried taking notes on factorials. I didn’t know what she wanted, but Mr. Feint was moving so quickly today that I needed to pay attention. Once the bell rang, however, she tapped me on the shoulder and said, “We need to talk, later.”

“So do we,” Jake said, but he was looking at Kathy.

She rolled her eyes at him and walked out of the room. He quickly followed her, leaving me to dread whatever Kathy couldn’t tell me in front of Jake.

I found out a couple hours later in the lunch line. Kathy cut in front of some freshmen to stand next to me.

“What are you doing for Halloween?” she asked. We held out our trays to get our pretzel melts and scoops of applesauce.

I knew this wasn’t going to end well. I didn’t have a prepared lie, so I told her about Nick’s party.

“Is Joe going?” She was really asking if Trent was going and why she hadn’t been invited.

“I would’ve invited all you guys, but it’s Nick’s thing.” I grabbed a banana and a milk carton.

“Right. Because I’m *sure* he’d be mad if his *sister* brought her *friends* to it.” Kathy paid for her lunch, and walked past me to go sit with Joe and Alicia. I had broken the vase that was Kathy, and just like that I was on her shit list.

It wasn’t my party. That much was true. However, Kathy wasn’t wrong. If I had asked Nick, he wouldn’t have cared, but I didn’t want Kathy there. Admittedly, I liked the notion of getting away from high school for a night.

After lunch, Joe walked me to English, and I told him what happened. He agreed with me. He wanted to have a night to flirt with guys without being judged. Nick had told him that a few of his new gay friends were coming. Plus, he noted, Kathy was a light-weight, which would annoy everybody.

We got our *Beowulf* essays back. Trent and I both managed solid B’s. I knew according to the “bell-curve,” we were sitting on the better end of things. However, that didn’t stop Mrs. Pitts from telling the class that B’s were mediocre. She said our responses to *wyrd* were shallow interpretations.

“Fate is an obligation to something bigger than you. Something uncontrollable,” she said. “All of you used that as a justification for Beowulf’s actions. You mistake fate for choice. Beowulf always had a choice.”

I looked over at Trent and disagreed with her. I liked to think that Trent chose Woodbridge, but fate forced him here.

In Journalism, Trent finally got to work with Penny and me. Mrs. Sanders spent more time having me show him past photos than actually explaining my job as the “graphic

supervisor.” Penny wouldn’t sit still. She crossed and uncrossed her legs every few seconds and she kept pushing her back up straighter and straighter. The whole time she had her eyes on Trent. Eventually, Alicia needed Mrs. Sanders’ assistance. Mrs. Sanders told Trent that he was left in “excellent” hands.

“So are you going to join our station?” Penny asked. She placed her chin in her palm and leaned her body forward towards Trent.

“I don’t think you’d want me,” he said. “I’m definitely not qualified to be doing either of your jobs.”

He pointed at Penny’s screen. “That header looks professional.” Her lip got caught in her braces as she smiled.

“And these don’t look like newspaper photos,” he said. “They’re art.”

He pointed to the photo from a football game last year. Our guy was being tackled. He tucked the football tightly in the crook of his arm and twisted his torso to try getting away. The best part, though, was his face: closed eyes, gritted teeth. Pain. The tackler’s face was hidden from burrowing into the ball-carriers side.

“This one isn’t even highlighting the player,” Trent said. “It focuses on the violence.”

I couldn’t speak. The words “I love you” would have equal weight to Trent’s analysis of my piece because no one here ever analyzed. They thought the images were pretty or cool, which was OK, but I didn’t take pictures to be pretty or cool. I wanted to tell a story.

“Will you look at something?” I asked.

I showed Trent the portfolio, which I kept on a flash drive. I held my breath, trying to let him experience the pieces without me. I needed him to say they were good because I needed to

submit them tonight. I had waited long enough, and, yet, I couldn't do it without one final validation.

He took his time. The close-ups, blurred backgrounds, landscapes, abstracts, and the few from Journalism. There was one staring into the eyes of a beetle. One I took through a telescope. One of Joe laughing so hard he popped a blood vessel. Andre's glasses sat on *The Wombat Gazette*. Kyle scratched his side, while gazing out the window during his First Holy Communion. There were trees and road kill and broken swing sets. I even went to a local dance recital and caught leaps where the dancers' legs weren't completely straight, and toes were not pointed. The final picture, I took of my own hands playing the piano.

Penny kept interjecting her opinion into each one. "I've already seen that one. It's pretty cool, but I think the one of Joe is my favorite."

When Trent finished, he smiled and shook his head. "You're going to art school right? Joe said you were. Because I think you have to. These are unreal."

"Thanks, Trent." I tried to hide my smile out of modesty, but my spirit couldn't. I needed this, more than my ego wanted to admit.

Near the end of class, Mrs. Sanders stole Trent to discuss "his experience" with my station. Penny leaned over and whispered to me, "He's like perfect. If you don't date him, I'm going to. I get my braces off next month."

Alicia stopped by my locker at the end of the day to discuss the party situation. Kathy apparently told her I purposefully did not invite either of them. Alicia said she understood and actually already had plans with Trevor, the six-foot ten basketball player. She blushed slightly when she said his name. She wanted to make sure that I knew she wasn't upset with me.

“You and Joe always do you,” she said. “Kathy knows that, and it never bothered her when she had Jake.”

She looked over her shoulder then leaned closer towards me and said, “But she’s interested in Trent. I mean everyone is. But I think this is the first time she sees your and Joe’s friendship as a threat.”

That night I submitted my application to Parsons. I didn’t feel the relief I expected. Instead, my anxiety was heightened. There would be no relief until I knew for sure, but I did feel proud. When I told Catherine and Andre good night, I felt almost dizzy from the adrenaline. Deception was becoming its own art form in my family.

Chapter 7

Kathy didn't talk to me for the next few days. On Wednesday after select choir, however, she had no problem following me once again to meet Trent outside the gym.

This time Trent was standing by himself. He had his hands stuffed in his pockets and kept glancing out the window with a panicked expression. He looked exhausted. Jake was close by, laughing with a few of the other players. He had his back to Trent, but I saw him look over his shoulder at Trent, then return his attention to the group. Trent's face relaxed when he saw us, and he immediately started walking our way. Jake glanced over his shoulder again and made eye contact with me. I gave him the filthiest look I could muster.

Petty, jealous Jake. I disagreed with the way Kathy tried to control Jake's future. I didn't like the way she treated Alicia and got upset so easily. I hated that she kept flirting with Trent and that she wasn't speaking to me. But after watching Jake deliberately exclude Trent, I realized I could never be on his side. In the Kathy/Jake breakup, I was team Kathy, if only because she was the lesser evil.

"Kathy, I talked to Nick and he said you can come to the party Friday," I lied. I didn't know what overcame me. Joe was equally as surprised by what came out of my mouth. His eyes grew about twice their normal size. Kathy just blinked at me.

"There will be lots of Barton guys there," I added.

She smiled and said that she would *love* to come. She brushed Trent's arm again as she said goodnight to all of us. If Trent hadn't been around, her response might've been less sweet.

As soon as the truck doors were shut, Joe let me have it.

"Are you crazy?" He was pissed, especially after our conversation the other day.

I started getting defensive. “I felt bad. Alicia has plans with Trevor, and Jake is a douche.”

“Did you even ask Nick?” Joe always saw through me.

“He’s not going to care,” I said, which was true. Joe had no right to be this mad.

He crossed his thick arms across his chest and remained silent the rest of the way back to the Diner. He didn’t wait for the truck to completely stop before exiting and slamming the passenger door.

“That was nice of you, Kendra,” Trent said. He was looking at me through the duct taped rear-view mirror. I wanted to photograph his eyes. I wondered if a camera could capture that wet clay that made you feel as if all the wrongness in the world could be momentarily forgotten. I might later regret inviting Kathy, but I didn’t right now.

Thursday night, the *four* of us went to get costumes. We were all a bit skeptical about what we should wear. This was college. We didn’t want to look like some goofy high school kids. But I didn’t want to be a slutty cat, either.

Joe apologized for getting so angry, and all was good with the world. I texted Nick. As expected, he didn’t care, and he asked me whether I wanted vodka or rum. I went with rum and instantly had a costume.

I already had black boots and a black tank top, so all I needed was a bandana, striped leggings, and a plastic sword. I drew the line at eye-patches. That would definitely be too goofy.

Kathy went with a slightly sluttier approach: mermaid. We searched the thrift store, Party City, and Walmart before finding an acceptable (and cheap) “tail.” She already had a bathing suit

top. Her hair was pretty short, so we also found a red wig. Instant Ariel. She claimed our costumes were perfect because the party was by the sea.

Joe followed the theme and decided to go with “Drunken Sailor.” Trent, however, proved to be much harder. His heart was not into his own costume search, but he was very helpful to the rest of us. He found my sword and Ariel’s wig. He also helped Joe sort through the stack of sailor costumes until he found Joe’s size. But he had zero enthusiasm about what he wanted to be. Desperate, Kathy and Joe started looking through the racks at Party City. Trent was standing back, staring at the costume wall.

“You’re going to have to pick one,” I told him. “Not that Trent Ferguson isn’t a great guy, but he’d make a pretty lame costume.”

He gave a half-hearted smile. Something was wrong. He started biting on his thumbnail.

“You’re already going to think I’m lame,” he said. “I don’t drink.”

I thought about what he said the other day, and I realized the weight of Trent’s insecurities. But what amazed me was how he balanced his need to fit in without compromising his integrity. He worried about what he wore, yet he still wore polos every day, and he was trying out for basketball despite the team treating him like an outsider. He didn’t say “I don’t like to” or “I never have;” he said “I don’t,” meaning he wouldn’t.

He was still biting on his thumb. I didn’t have a title for this one. It wouldn’t need one. I reach up and gently pulled his hand away from his mouth.

“I don’t think you’re lame,” I said.

“Perfect idea,” Joe said. He was holding a trident and a crown. “Triton.”

All Trent needed was swimming trunks and a tank top and we were all ready to go.

Chapter 8

“Don’t have sex,” was Catherine’s parting advice Halloween night. I decided to get ready at Shay’s, because I knew Catherine would’ve expanded the lecture had she seen how I transformed my black tank top into a crop top. I told her we were going to Kathy’s for the night.

Kathy the slutty mermaid was already at the Diner. She wore a push-up bikini that doubled the size of her boobs. My own chest was feeling pretty flat in comparison. Joe and Trent both looked great. Trent had blue and white striped swim trunks and one of Joe’s old white tank tops. I got dressed in the bathroom and everything felt wrong. My bandana made my forehead huge, and my stomach felt bloated. I tried pulling my tights up higher, but that made it worse. It was stupid to crop my tank top, and stupider not to.

“Arrgh, you be lookin’ hot me matey,” Joe said. I wanted to cover my face with my stupid bandana.

It took us an hour to get there, which made the initial excitement quickly drop. Joe made a playlist to try and keep us pumped. However, Trent started dosing off, despite Kathy’s efforts to flaunt her mermaid boobs.

When we finally arrived, it looked like we were at the wrong house. There was no noise. I didn’t know whether to knock or not, so we stood outside shivering for a minute before Nick opened the door to greet us. He was also dressed like a pirate.

On the inside the party was most definitely happening. There were about twenty people crammed in the tiny house. Nick had two Gatorade pitchers of jungle juice, and the fridge was stocked with beer. He also had my bottle of rum. I had no idea who he got all this alcohol from, but he did well.

He even decorated the place with cob webs and some fake light up pumpkins. There were two bowls filled with candy, but the real excitement was in the living room with the black lights and music.

Nick directed us towards the kitchen, where his roommate Michael, dressed like an old guy, was playing bartender.

“Check out the sibling pirates,” he said.

One shot for being sibling pirates.

Nick then introduced Joe to his friends Tyler and Adam, who were dressed like Adam and Eve. They both talked very fast and seemed to have an extra interest in our Triton.

One shot for gay pride.

Another shot for sibling pirates.

I was ready to dance. I grabbed Triton before Ariel and made my way to the dance floor. There were a lot of zombies dancing at the moment, and Mario and Luigi were making out on the couch. Trent and I were terrible dancers. I could keep a beat but my body didn't move very gracefully. Trent didn't either, however, so it was all good. Ariel eventually scooted in, which pushed me over to Joe.

One shot for being best friends.

Another because we really mean it.

After that I lost count.

Another sailor took interest in Ariel, and I lost track of her. I lost track of Joe and Nick, as well. The room was getting too hot. I grabbed Triton and pulled him onto the back porch that overlooked the ocean.

The cool air was perfect. I spun around, and Trent had to catch me from falling. I kept my hands on his chest until I felt balanced. I then noticed his crooked nose.

“Tell me how you broke your nose,” Drunk Kendra said. She was much more insistent than Sober Kendra. She poked Trent when he didn’t answer.

“You don’t want to hear it,” he said.

“We’re friends right? And friends talk. But you keep hiding shit.” The words were coming out more aggressively than I intended. “Please, Trent. You can tell me.”

I traced my hand along his exposed arm the way Kathy did. His eyes watched my hand.

Then he told me, and he was right; I didn’t want to hear it.

His dad was an alcoholic, he said, which explained why he didn’t drink. He said he had seen what it does to a person. It happened on a Saturday morning, when Trent was fifteen. His mom had died when he was a baby so he was alone. His dad had been drinking all night so Trent had locked himself in his room. He would push his dresser in front of the door, because recently his dad started getting aggressive. The mornings were usually okay, though, so the next morning Trent put his dresser back and went downstairs to make himself breakfast. But his dad was up, and he was still drunk. He seemed to not recognize Trent at first because he looked scared. Then he got angry because he knew Trent had been hiding, and he charged. He got in one hit before Trent hit him in the gut and got away. He said he heard the bone snap before he felt it. That it actually took a few minutes before he felt any pain. His dad died only a few months later, he said.

My head was spinning. His dad was an alcoholic, and I was drunk. I felt tears coming. Drunk Kendra couldn’t control her emotions with logic. She reached over to kiss his crooked

nose, as some sort of compensation for her drunkenness. But she missed, and her lips landed on his cheek. She then leaned against the porch railing for balance.

“I meant to kiss your nose, but I am drunk,” Drunk Kendra said. “And I have to pee.”

I opened the door and went inside, leaving poor Trent alone with his confession.

Thankfully, it was dark. I started to cry as I stumbled through the crowd of dancers and up the stairs to the bathroom. I didn't see Nick or Joe in my drunken stupor. They had both disappeared. There was a line outside the bathroom with some guy screaming.

“Get out.” His pounded the door with his fist. “You've been in there for twenty minutes.”

I pushed him aside and said, “Use the downstairs one.”

He started yelling at me, so I pointed my sword at him.

“This is my house.” I waved the sword at the line. “All of you go downstairs, now.”

The door was unlocked, and Kathy sat slumped over the toilet, sobbing. Her wig lay in a ratted mess next to her, and one of her bikini straps broke. I pried her off the toilet, and she fell back against the tub. She began crying my name and saying, “I'm not good enough. I'm not good enough.” She started saying Jake's name, but she was crying too hard to articulate what she wanted.

I helped her to her feet and dragged her to the nearest bedroom, which thankfully was unoccupied. I made a nest for her on the floor using the comforter and took off my bandana before passing out on the bed, boots still on. My head felt like it was swimming in the pillow, sinking lower and lower. *Sorry God*, I thought.

When I woke up, the sun was just starting to rise, and the party-goers lay stretched across the floor of the living room like a carpet. I tiptoed around these strangers and went outside to sit

on the beach. The cold air felt refreshing, but my shame already masked my hangover. I stared right into the rising sun, wishing it could swallow me and erase last night.

I heard a light cough behind me and turned to see Trent, who sat down next to me. I wanted to crawl out of my skin. I wished my makeup wasn't smeared or my hair so greasy. Neither of us said anything for a minute. He kept his eyes glued to the sea.

"I'm sorry," I said. My voice cracked because my throat was so dry. "I'm sorry for how I acted."

"I'm not mad," he said. He still wasn't looking at me though, and he started biting on his thumb.

I looked at his nose. The bump looked like a marble. "I'm sorry about what happened to you."

He stopped biting his thumb and turned to me. From the sunrise, his eyes were red. "Kendra, I have never told anyone that story."

He let that thought hang for a moment before continuing. "Not even my grandma. I lied about it. I said I walked into a door. She didn't believe me. She knew her son was an alcoholic, but she didn't call him out on it. She let me lie to protect him. I guess to protect both of us."

He rubbed his eyes with his fists and then stared back out into the sea. This wasn't about me, and I had been selfish the entire time. This was Trent's story, his grief, and his willingness to share was something I was lucky for.

I slipped my hand in his and squeezed until he squeezed back.

I don't know who leaned first. Perhaps, we moved together. It wasn't magnetic, or a pull. We collapsed until our lips brushed so lightly: the way the wind drifts the sand. And I thought, *of course*, because it was always coming to this. Because Penny had been right; Trent and I were

never meant to be just friends. It terrified me. We didn't know each other that well, but I felt sure that this was right. I kissed him again and, when he kissed me back, I forgot myself.

Chapter 9

Nick kicked everyone out by ten o'clock, but we stayed to help him clean up. Well, Joe, Trent, and I did, while Kathy fell back asleep on the couch. She was in a rough state. She puked a few times in the bathroom this morning, and her makeup was smeared all over her face giving her raccoon-eyes and two black parentheses on her checks.

Joe dragged me upstairs and pulled me into one of the bedrooms, shutting the door behind us. He asked me to guess what happened to him last night. When I said I had no idea, he sighed an octave too high for his voice and motioned for me to come closer.

“I lost my virginity,” he whispered.

I was sure I didn't have the proper reaction because my emotions seemed off. Of course I felt shocked, but there was something else that complicated this situation. I expected maybe some Catholic judgment to creep into my thoughts, but that wasn't it. It was more like Catholic guilt because I was excited for Joe, but I was also jealous that he could lose his virginity without the moral consequences imposed by hundreds of CCD classes. The only word I could manage was, “Who?”

“I don't think I can tell you.”

That basically answered my question. If it were anyone but Nick, he could easily have told me.

“What are you going to do?”

Joe and Nick had always been close. Nick texted him even more than he texted me. If this were a random hookup, I doubted their friendship would survive, but meaningful sex wouldn't be much better. How could Nick have a committed relationship without confronting Catherine? I

couldn't imagine Joe trying to hide his relationship. He had always been open about his sexuality, since we were kids.

Catherine even knew Joe was gay, but she pretended to forget and remember, whenever it seemed convenient. He was my gay friend when I went to Shay's because she knew I wasn't having sex with him, but he was straight when he came to our house because we lived in "a house of God."

"I don't know," Joe said.

I hugged Joe. I feared the outcome of this situation because best friends and siblings should never get together. Friendships like Jake and Kathy could potentially destroy a group of people, but Joe and Nick were the two people I cared about the most. It created impossible circumstances if things went wrong. Then I remembered this morning on the beach, and the way Trent smiled at me, and my stomach knotted so tight I hiccupped.

"Trent and I kissed," I said.

He pulled away and held me at shoulder length. "About fucking time."

This was not the reaction I expected. Had I been obvious? I hadn't even known.

Joe hugged me again and said, "He doesn't talk a lot, but every time he does it's about you."

I pressed my lips together to keep from smirking.

I managed to get Nick alone in the kitchen and tried my best to bring up what happened without letting him know I already knew.

"Did you have a good night?" I asked. "I didn't see much of you or Joe. You both seemed to disappear."

Nick didn't take my bait. He turned his back to me to pick up a beer can, so I couldn't see his reaction.

"That's because you were focused on other things," he said. "I think Trent's a great guy by the way. I approve."

One point for Nick, but I wasn't ready to give up. I then asked if something were wrong, claiming that he was "acting funny." But he wasn't. Nick's eyes were as bright and innocent as ever. Not a trace of guilt or secrecy. He didn't even flinch at my accusation and blamed it on his hangover. He then said that we should leave before Catherine got suspicious.

We did leave, and I carefully watched the goodbye hug between Nick and Joe that lingered for a few seconds longer than it should have. For the first time Joe let Trent sit in the front. Kathy immediately fell asleep, and I tried my best to focus on the road and not on Trent sitting so close to me. This morning everything seemed so perfect, but the glow of a sunrise had long passed. I knew the kiss couldn't have been an in the moment thing, especially after my conversation with Joe, but I had no idea what came next. What were any of us going to do after this weekend?

I dropped Kathy off first. She said "thanks," her first words of the day, and she seemed to slide up to her front door, barely moving her feet off the ground. I felt bad for her, and wondered how much of the night she remembered.

When we got to the Diner, Joe immediately got out, which I was thankful for. I didn't want to be my brother; I didn't want to leave something this important to doubt. Trent and I sat without saying anything for a few moments. I decided to take the lead, but Trent beat me to it.

"I like you, Kendra," he said. "I think you're kind and beautiful and talented, and you've made me feel welcome here."

The intensity of his eyes made me feel fragile because they were seeing something that I could never see. I wished that I could see the world with as much strength and appreciation as he did. I would call this one “Esteem.”

“I like you too, Trent,” I said. “I want to know you better.”

We kissed, this time with less grace. Our noses bumped, and he kissed my teeth as I smiled. In spite of the current difficulties in my life, this was a significant turning point towards my happiness.

The greatest achievement, however, was that we didn’t get caught. I managed to slip by Catherine with minimal interrogation. I spent the remainder of my Saturday sleeping off the hangover. God had answered my feeble prayer despite me breaking our contract.

Chapter 10

It was basketball tryout week, and Trent's anxiety was the worst I'd seen it. He had worn all his finger nails down to the point where he was chewing on his fingers. He also fidgeted more than usual. In English, his legs shook the desk so much Mrs. Pitts called him out on it. Joe said he wasn't eating much either. He kept saying he wasn't hungry.

"I should've started running or something sooner," he told me after the first tryout. "I'm more out of breath than I should be."

Joe also said that Trent started sleeping on the couch because his room was too hot at night. Joe was getting annoyed because he could hear Trent talking in his sleep.

Joe was having his own frustrations with my brother. Nick was texting him, but not about anything important. Joe claimed that he didn't want to be the first one to bring it up. Anytime *I* texted Nick, he'd wait about four hours to respond. Eventually, I gave up, because it was taking too long to gracefully jump from "I'm good. How are you?" to "I heard you had sex with my best friend."

I was worried about Trent though. I understood what basketball meant to him, that it provided a connection to his past life and allowed him to feel like he belonged in his new one. Jake had said that Trent was good, but apparently there were eighteen kids trying out for twelve slots. Plus Trent was the new guy. The coach would be more likely to put a kid he knew on the team over Trent, or at least that was what Trent kept insisting. He said sports were political. Maybe that was the case with Trent's previous private school, but at Woodbridge the team usually only had ten players tryout. The coach was probably happy to have options.

For me, the week showed how fast news spread in Woodbridge. Kathy once again had cornered me in the lunch line.

“Did I... did I do anything embarrassing?” she whispered.

“No.” It was, perhaps, a lie, but it seemed unnecessary to upset her over people she didn’t know.

She relaxed her face and held out her tray for applesauce and mystery meat. “So are you and Trent like a thing?”

“Yes?” I felt my face flush.

She nodded. “Jake wants to talk. He said he regrets us breaking up. But fuck him, right? It’s because I went to a party with new guys. I don’t know what to do.”

And I didn’t know what to tell her.

During Journalism, Penny and Alicia both asked the same question, but I didn’t know what constituted “a thing.” Yes, we both expressed our interest, but nothing was defined. However, that was okay. There was baggage that came with being public. I glanced over at Trent, who was once more circling the stations. Mrs. Sanders had designated him as “The Circulator.” He met my eyes and lifted the corners of his lips in a soft smile that gave me all the assurance I needed. So, I didn’t answer Penny and Alicia. Instead, I asked both of them what made them ask.

“It’s the way you’re looking at each other,” Alicia said.

“Yeah,” Penny said. “You’ve both always looked at one another, but today it seems like you’re sharing a secret.”

Even Mrs. Sanders pulled me to the side at the end of class to ask about it.

“I’ve heard rumors,” she said, “that you and Trent are dating.”

She revealed her translucent teeth, which made it hard to focus on what she was saying. I tried looking at her bug eyes, but she kept fluttering her eyelashes. I could see Trent out of the corner of my eye gathering up his stuff, slowly, waiting for me. I wondered if he were eavesdropping. I decided not to answer her. Instead, I smiled and shrugged.

It was also Joe's tryout week for the big solo in our upcoming concert. While Trent went to basketball, Joe and I stayed in the choir room rehearsing. The song was called "The Triumph" and was actually a duet between a soprano and bass with some "Oohing" from the choir in the background.

By Thursday, he had the part nailed, but still he asked, "Can you sing the female part? I think that would be more beneficial for me."

I knew what he was doing. "No. I'm not trying out for it."

"Oh come on. Think of how adorable it would be if we sang together."

"It's a soprano solo. Let Kathy sing it."

"Standing in the alto section lip-syncing doesn't actually make you an alto. Besides, the highest note is only an F."

An F was high enough. Joe, however, stood with his arms crossed, refusing to sing another note unless I tried. I took a deep breath and sang for the first time in this choir room. The piece started with the soprano, alone. I tried focusing on the sound of the piano and less on my own voice competing with it. I sounded shaky and my adrenaline made the pitch a bit sharp, but then Joe joined in, and my voice settled because I wasn't alone. His tone was warm and passionate, and I let it guide me. And no one was here. It was just me and Joe. My voice relaxed, and I hit the piano keys softer so I could actually hear the words coming out of our mouths.

"The drum resounds a pray for thee. We sing for faith, great love, now free."

Then the solo part ended, and the piano took over. I was then home. I struck each key with more malice than I knew I had in me, pounding each note into a rhythm that mimicked the drums. I pictured Catherine during all this with her obedient line of followers as we, her family, processed up the aisle to take Communion. Why were all these choir songs about God? The answer was obvious, but even my knowledge about choral history made me feel disgusted. Why didn't Mr. Bronze find other songs, more modern ones? Then I heard in my head Catherine's voice ask: if I was religious then why did I care?

It took me a few seconds to realize I had stopped playing. Joe was staring at me with his mouth gaping. I looked at the clock. It was already 5:30.

"We should go," I said. "Trent's probably waiting for us."

"Don't let me stop you." Trent was leaning against the door with his bag swung over his shoulder. I nearly gasped.

"I'm not actually trying out," I said. "We were just practicing."

I stood up and gathered my music. I was so flustered that I dropped it after nearly tripping on the bench. Trent picked it up for me, but I couldn't look at him. There was no way I could sing in front of a crowd of people if I was this embarrassed being caught by someone I trusted. Joe looked so disappointed that I felt guilty.

As we walked to my truck, Trent slipped his hand into mine and said, "You should try out." His palm felt clammy but soft. "It's good to break out of a routine. Maybe it'll even inspire you."

He then lifted my hand to kiss the knuckles. I traced my thumb over the jagged edge of his nail. Pushing forward. That was what this year wanted to be about. It wasn't enough to sit behind the keys of a piano or to submit an application.

On Friday, we spent English discussing Act IV of *Hamlet*. Mrs. Pitts placed a strong emphasis on Aristotle's idea of "the tragic flaw." I knew what my next essay was going to be about. She said that Hamlet's inability to act ultimately caused his own destruction. She then gave away the ending, saying Hamlet was so renowned that we were stupid not to know the conclusion.

I initially compared Nick to Hamlet. I wanted him to be brave, for himself and for Joe because if he didn't act soon, he would be hurting the wrong person. But I realized that in my life, I was placing the title of "tragic hero" on someone else to avoid confronting my own tragic flaw. I was Hamlet, while Joe and Trent were like Laertes by taking charge of their destiny. I shouldn't have felt comfort knowing my application was somewhere in cyberspace far away from the reach of Catherine because I had about a month before I would know. Waiting to tell Catherine and Andre would not make it any easier. Even if I got rejected, how would I explain my sudden sadness?

I didn't want to be Hamlet. During Choir, I was the first to raise my hand to try out for the solo. Kathy's was second, but she lowered hers as soon as she saw mine. Mr. Bronze said my name twice; both sounded like a question. I nodded and looked to Joe whose hand was also raised. He had his lips pressed together tightly, trying to keep his smile contained. I didn't have time to think about what I was doing, didn't have time to talk myself out of it. Next thing I knew Joe was standing by the piano and Mr. Bronze queued me in and the music on my hands matched my lips. I listened for Joe above all the other notes to focus as the choir joined in with their "Ohh's." When it was over my hands shook so violently that I had a hard time playing anything else the rest of rehearsal.

But Joe and I got the part. No one else even tried out. Maybe we had intimidated the class, or maybe no one else had really prepared for it. Either way the best feeling came later when I told Trent on our walk to Journalism that we got it.

Trent did not seem surprised. He squeezed my hand and said, “I knew you could do it. You are a lot braver than you give yourself credit for.”

For once, I thought, maybe I was.

Joe and I bummed around the choir room after school. It was the final day of basketball tryouts. By 5:30 Trent would know if he made it or not. I was feeling nervous for him. This week had been so hyped up on tryouts that my adrenaline was spent. Joe provided a good distraction. He brought up gossip about Alicia and Trevor, who were about to become official. Also, Jake and Kathy were apparently trying to “work things out.” I didn’t foresee it going far because the main issue in their breakup, college, wasn’t going away.

Around 5:20 we made our way over to the gym. I tried discreetly peeking through the small windows in the doors. It looked like the coach was talking to them all in a large group. That had to be a good sign. Then the doors finally opened. Trent was the first one out.

We didn’t have to ask if he made it. Trent was radiating happiness. I couldn’t quite describe the hold that took over me at that moment. The emotion didn’t have a word but it landed somewhere between feeling empowered and happy. All three of us had conquered today in some small way. I looked at Joe and then back at Trent, and I almost cried. Trent then kissed me, and I realize my entire body was shaking.

Chapter 11

My parents found out about Trent about a week behind my classmates. I hadn't deliberately tried to keep it a secret, but at the same time, I was in no rush to explain it to them. Neither understood the concept of "talking to someone." They'd assume we were official and would want to meet him and ask questions and pretty much shatter the entire framework. I was worried that Catherine would start monitoring my time spent at the Diner, which anymore went unobserved. We could never hang out at the Lafontaine house. We'd be stuck watching *SpongeBob* all night with Kyle. So I didn't say anything, yet still, word had spread.

Judge Andre Lafontaine spoke to me first about the subject. He called me into his study one evening after school. He wasted no time getting straight to the point.

"So this boy you're seeing. I looked into his case."

He paused for a moment. "Legally his situation is surprisingly clean. No custody battles or child services involvement. Even when his grandmother took custody, his father was willing. Granted, he died about a month after."

I didn't say anything. Trent was so private about his past. He was hesitant about opening up, and yet Andre had no problem doing a quick background check, as if that determined Trent's character.

"You probably think I've overstepped my boundaries," he said. "But I have my reasons."

I still didn't say anything. Yes, Andre had leaped over the line. The look on my face must've been telling because he sighed and took off his glasses momentarily to massage the indents on the bridge of his nose.

"You can't mention any of this," he said. "But I've looked into his case for a while now because Shay came to me for advice once his grandmother became ill. Trent's father cut her off

after her sister died, but she heard rumors about the father's alcoholism and even his abuse. Shay basically wanted to know as much information as she could, and I don't blame her. I've seen enough cases with victims of abuse who get shuffled from home to home and eventually snap..."

I cut him off. "Trent is a good person."

He let his glasses slide down the bridge of his nose and looked at me over the rim. "I trust your judgment, but I just want you to be careful."

I nodded, but he continued looking at me intently. I wasn't sure what else he wanted me to say.

"Are you going to tell me what's been bothering you?"

"What?" I wasn't sure what he meant. He couldn't possibly know about my application.

He leaned forward slightly. Unlike Catherine's bright eyes, Andre's dark ones were hard, all-knowing and intense. "I know something is wrong, and I know it's not about Trent."

Keeping my face composed, I said, "I don't know what you mean."

He leaned back in his chair. "I suppose you kids will tell me when you're ready."

You *kids*. Plural. Was he talking about Parsons? Or did he know about Nick?

Catherine cornered me next and expressed how hurt she was that I had not told her. I tried explaining how the situation was so new that it wasn't worth mentioning yet. Although this wasn't a complete lie, the real reason I didn't tell her was because of what she said next.

"You should invite him to church on Sunday."

The stark contrast between what my parents found important was aggravating. At least Andre's apprehension, even if it was absurd, came from his concern about me.

"He's not Catholic, Mom," I said.

"So? He's Christian isn't he?"

“Not practicing.” I knew that much to be true. He might not even be baptized for all I knew, and quite frankly it didn’t really matter to me.

But it did to Catherine. Her wide eyes made me shiver from their cold vacant stare. She suggested he come over for dinner then sometime, but I knew this conversation wasn’t over.

The dinner got scheduled a week later on a Thursday. Trent was excited because he said I never talked about anyone in my family besides Nick. I tried preparing him the best I could because the evening was going to be awkward. I warned about the types of questions Catherine might ask and how Andre would be judging his character. Kyle would probably not talk.

However, Kyle seemed to take an interest in the idea of Trent. One morning before school he asked, “So your boyfriend is coming over Thursday?”

“We’re not actually boyfriend and girlfriend yet,” I tried explaining. “But, yes, Trent is coming over.”

“Does he play *Mario Cart*?” There was a spark in his eyes.

“I don’t know. If not you can teach him.”

His face lit up, which made him look so much like Nick, it hurt.

On Wednesday night, I called Nick to tell him about my predicament.

“I can’t give you much advice,” he whispered. He was apparently “studying” in the library.

“Come on,” I said. “You’ve brought girls home before.”

“Yeah, but Catherine knew them prior, and we obviously weren’t serious.”

“Trent and I aren’t serious either.”

He snorted into the phone. “I used a lot of those girls as decoys once I realized that I was gay. I didn’t give a flying fuck what happened when they came over. You actually give a shit.”

I sighed. The only friend I’d ever brought to my house was Joe, and he hardly ever came over. What would Trent and I do? Where would we sit? It was going to be much harder to just hang out and act natural knowing Catherine would be looking over her shoulder at us. At the Diner, Shay was around, but she was working, and even when she did pop up, she wasn’t spying or treating us like children.

“I need to tell you something,” Nick said.

“Yes?” I tried not to sound too eager. This was it. I had been waiting weeks for him to finally admit what happened on Halloween.

He paused for a long time before finally saying, “Next week is Thanksgiving break, so I’ll be home on Wednesday. We can talk then.”

I was disappointed, but at least this was a step in the right direction.

Thursday night I picked Trent up from practice. Something was off. He shuffled toward the truck and struggled to pull himself up into the passenger seat. I noticed the bags under his eyes, which were swollen like bruises. He looked exhausted.

“Is everything okay?” I asked.

He shrugged. “I’m just tired. I haven’t been sleeping much.”

He attributed it to the upcoming scrimmage on Saturday. The coach had been pushing them. He also admitted that he had continued sleeping on the couch even after tryouts because his room got too hot at night.

“I thought sports were supposed to relieve stress,” I said.

He leaned his head back against the seat and closed his eyes. “I’ll feel better after the scrimmage.”

I wanted to take him home and call off the stupid dinner, but Trent protested.

“I’m fine,” he said.

He didn’t seem fine. When we got to my house, I parked the truck in the garage, and as soon as he got out, he started coughing. We waited in the garage for a minute until it stopped. Towards the end it sounded more like gasping. I rubbed his back in a circle and hoped that he wasn’t getting sick.

“I’m fine,” he said again.

Trent followed me to the foyer. I tried seeing the house through his eyes. I watched his gaze linger on the crosses and framed prayers on the walls. The house looked menacing rather than welcoming. It reminded me of Confession.

Catherine got him first. She came from the kitchen with extended arms. Trent’s arms awkwardly bent around her skinny body. As she pulled away she caught Trent staring at the senior pictures along the staircase. She started gushing about how nice mine turned out and that she couldn’t believe I was eighteen already, but Trent wasn’t looking at the pictures of Nick and me.

“Who’s that?” He pointed at the unmentionable.

“Oh that’s my oldest son, Ben,” Catherine said. She struggled to keep her voice calm. “He’s... away right now.”

I rolled my eyes, which did not go unnoticed by Trent. Catherine quickly shuffled us into the kitchen where Andre and Kyle were both waiting. Andre shook his hand, and Kyle avoided making eye contact.

My family looked at Trent the same way they had looked at the unmentionable's girlfriend, Tiffany, the first time he brought her home. She had worn her dyed crimson hair down in an attempt to cover the vine tattoo crawling up her neck. Kyle and Andre had gaped at that tattoo, while Catherine had attempted to avoid looking directly at her, as if to ignore it. The men in my family were staring at Trent with the same sort of curiosity, but this time Catherine was too.

Catherine started the dinner by asking Trent to say grace. I objected, but Trent looked at me with those soft eyes that emanated kindness and said it was fine. I wondered how often he actually meant that word. He didn't say the "Catholic grace." Instead, he gave thanks for being invited for dinner and for the food we were about to eat. He never actually addressed God.

She had asked Tiffany to say grace. The unmentionable had prepped her, but she fucked up the last line saying, "From thy *bosom* of Christ the Lord." I had watched Catherine wince, but she didn't break her prayer position.

Catherine started asking Trent more generic questions like how he was doing in Woodbridge and if he liked the school. She was warming him up before more personal questions, which Andre initiated.

"What do you want to do after graduation, Trent?" he asked.

I sat up straighter in my chair. I didn't know the answer to this one, and I should have.

"I kind of want to be a chef," Trent said. "I've applied to a few places."

Why hadn't this ever come up before? I never tried to pry things out of Trent, but this seemed like a perfectly normal thing to ask. However, even the word "college" felt scary.

Maybe I was afraid of bringing up the subject because it was like a gaping hole in front of all our

lives affecting everyone from Jake and Kathy's breakup to my Parsons application. Joe still didn't know what he wanted to do. Nick was *in* college, and he had no idea.

"What's your top pick?" Andre asked

"Probably Johnson and Wales," Trent said. "It's a good program and not too far."

"You should probably start your Barton application, Kendra," Catherine said.

I exchanged a look with Andre and then Trent. Trent's eyebrows pushed together over his crooked nose, but he didn't say anything. Andre continued eating.

She grilled Tiffany, too. Asked her what she did, how she spent her free time.

Tiffany had hesitated. Perhaps, the unmentionable told her not to mention her son. Perhaps, it came from her own intuition.

But she didn't lie. She said the words, "I mostly spend time with my son."

I felt sick to my stomach. Perhaps I should listen to Andre and apply to a school like UConn because Barton wasn't even a last resort; it would be a failure. I loved Nick, and I had never thought he wasn't smart enough to go somewhere more prestigious. But my brother had no direction, no hidden passions. It was okay because Barton was the type of school some people attended only one or two years before they figured it out and then transferred. It was the cheapest way to filter through English 101 and basic Calculus before declaring a major. However, that idea, of wandering aimlessly in search of something, I would never be able to experience because I knew what I wanted. Attending Barton was like being trapped in a glass box. I could see out of it, but could not escape.

The conversation then moved on to basketball. I stopped eating at that point.

On the surface I would've called this picture "Lafontaine Pleasant Evenings" because we were all smiling and being polite. But I would've preferred to photograph underneath

the table to catch Trent crackling his knuckles, Kyle sitting on his hands, and me clenching my fists. I could not see what Andre and Catherine were doing, but I imagined Andre's hands looked like mine, and Catherine had hers clasped on her lap with her legs crossed and her ankle tucked behind the other. I'd call that one "Sitting Comfy."

Catherine hadn't said anything in response to Tiffany. She moved on to something else and continued delicately slicing her food. I remember looking around the room; everyone was looking down as if focused on a silent prayer. Except Ben. We made eye contact, and I knew then that everything was about to change because he looked worried. This was a new face for the unmentionable.

Kyle kept staring at Trent with the same amount of intensity he had when watching *SpongeBob*. He kept shifting his weight back and forth. His eyes flicked at every movement Trent made. I remembered what he had said the day before and knew he had to be dying to ask. I took the initiative.

"Kyle wanted to know if you play *Mario Kart*," I said.

"Oh yeah," Trent said. He looked at my little brother and smiled.

"What's your favorite course?" Kyle asked.

"Rainbow Road."

Kyle's eyes grew wide. "Me too. Most people hate it. Do you want to play?"

"Kyle," Catherine scolded.

"No, I can play a few rounds," Trent said.

Trent had succeeded in winning over at least the youngest member of the Lafontaine household.

After a few rounds of *Mario Cart*, I took Trent home. As soon as we got into the truck he said, “You’re living a double life, Miss Lafontaine.”

I tried not to look at him, but he wasn’t giving up.

“Why haven’t you told your parents about Parsons?”

I got defensive. “Why haven’t you mentioned that you want to be a chef?”

“You never asked,” he said.

The guilt made me feel more nauseous than I had at dinner. I looked over at him. The dim lighting from the street lamps highlighted his dark circles. His face looked hollow.

“I had to cook for myself growing up,” he explained. “It started off as survival, but it became something important. It proved that I could take care of myself. After that, I experimented and started getting pretty good at it. I actually worked in a restaurant until my grandma got really sick.”

“You should tell Shay,” I said. “I’m sure she’d let you help in the Diner.”

He nodded. We were parked outside the Diner now, neither of us ready to move. It was my turn to speak.

“They don’t understand,” I said. “Catherine thinks photography is a hobby, and Andre has a vendetta against New York City.”

I started fidgeting with the heat so Trent placed his hand on my knee. I felt tears coming, and automatically pressed my tongue to the roof of my mouth. Trent didn’t say anything, which I was thankful for. I placed my hand over his.

“What about your older brother Ben?” he asked.

I tried my best to sum up the unmentionable’s situation. “He left Woodbridge a year ago with his girlfriend, and none of us has heard from him since.”

Trent didn't respond. He was waiting for the real answer, the "why I never mentioned I had another brother" answer.

"He was Catherine's favorite," I said. "We were constantly compared to him, especially Nick. He got good grades and always had a girlfriend and made extra Christian efforts. But it was all an act. He actually smoked weed and would sneak out of the house on Fridays to have sex with his girlfriends and party. I didn't care what he did, it was just Catherine put him on this pedestal as if he were a model we should've been following. Plus he was mean to us, even Kyle."

Trent turned his palm over and laced his fingers with mine.

"He was the one that should've been able to stand up to Catherine. And he didn't. Instead, he ran away. What hope does that give me or Nick?"

Trent squeezed my palm. "It sounds like he had more to lose."

"I guess." But I wasn't sure I agreed with him.

"Do you think he'll ever come back?" he asked.

I saw the concern in Trent's tired face and wanted to lean over to kiss him. I wanted to forget about Ben and my parents and not worry about whether the dinner went as good as it could have. I didn't want to share past Kendra with Trent. I wanted right now.

But I answered him before we kissed. "Yes. When he needs something."

Chapter 12

On Saturday, Shay was already at the scrimmage when Joe and I arrived. She had dropped Trent off early to warm up with the rest of the team. We went over to talk to her for a few minutes. There weren't a ton of students standing in the student section, but we saw Kathy and Alicia, who were here supporting Jake and Trevor. The coach was Mr. Deeds, the seventh grade math teacher. He looked like Howie Mandel with his dark brown soul patch and bald head. He had a vein near his temple that would pulsate throughout the game.

"I talked to Coach Deeds," Shay said. "He said Trent will be starting, so make sure you get plenty of good pics."

Joe and I left to sit with Alicia, while Kathy went and sang the National Anthem. She had a crisp, clean tone that was perfect for the anthem. It wasn't gimmicky or overdramatic. Her pure tone didn't fit her dramatic personality. I snapped a few photos, but I couldn't catch her not making a perfect "oh" shape. Mr. Bronze would be pleased with her choral conduct, but it provided me with no flattering photos for *The Wombat Monthly*.

"Nick texted me last night," Joe whispered.

He showed me the text, and I skimmed through it. Nick apologized for being so distant lately, claiming that he'd been really busy with school. He had been thinking about Joe a lot, and he wanted to see him to talk about "things." He mentioned that he was coming home on Wednesday and that he hoped to get together.

I asked Joe how he felt about it, and he shrugged.

"We'll see."

I took some photos of the cheerleaders mostly for my own pleasure. I caught a few wobbles and anxious smiles as they lifted the same girl over and over. They were too nervous and shaky for any of the pics to be used. I didn't want to embarrass them.

I took one of Trent as his name was called. His demeanor was surprisingly calm, but serious. I zoomed in on the frame. There was an intense look in his eye that masked any anxiety he may have been feeling. Alicia's man, Trevor, the six foot-ten giant, jumped for the ball and easily won over his opponent. Trent then had the ball.

The kid guarding Trent was short and bulky. Trent was quicker. He blew past the defender on the first play and pushed off the ground for a left-hand layup. I caught a frame as Trent released the ball; it hovered above the tips of his fingers. The defender had his hands on Trent's hips.

The ball went in, and Trent fell to the ground. Jake helped him up, and the ref blew the whistle. Ever since Jake and Kathy had their talk, Jake had taken an interest in being Trent's friend. Trent said Jake was nice, so I let it go.

Trent made each free throw with more grace than any of the cheerleaders. His wrist flicked delicately as if he were dancing.

The Wombats kept the momentum of the first play. By the end of the second quarter we were up by twenty. Trent had scored fourteen points and had a shit-ton of assists. At half-time we sat down, and I had Alicia look through my photos to see if any would fit with this month's edition.

"When's your brother having another party?" Kathy asked.

Joe stiffened next to me. I told Kathy I hadn't heard anything but that I'd let her and Alicia know. Joe sucked in his breath until his face turned a shade of pink, then exhaled slowly like he was breathing through a straw.

The game resumed with Trent still playing point guard. About a minute into the game things took a turn. Trent was on defense guarding his stocky opponent when he ran into another defender's pick. It was a clean play, but Trent immediately doubled over and started coughing, which turned into wheezing. He clutched his hand against his chest. Coach Deeds called a timeout.

One of the sophomore point guards took Trent's place. Coach Deeds made Trent sit for most of the third quarter until the gap closed to only a six point difference. The vein in his temple was bulging when he finally let Trent back in.

We held the opponents off for the rest of the game, but Trent was definitely holding back. He didn't try blowing by his guy again, and his defense remained more reserved. He also seemed more out of breath. His chest heaved in between plays. When the game ended, I could hear his breathing from the stands.

Trent didn't seem concerned, because he was smiling again. They had won their first game. I hoped that now he could relax.

Chapter 13

Mr. Bronze refused to cancel Wednesday's after school rehearsal even though it was the day before Thanksgiving. He claimed that the select choir's performance was "not up to the standards of an elite choir." He said if we didn't start showing commitment, our part of the program would be cut. We still had about three weeks until the concert, so no one seemed concerned. Besides, he threatened us every semester. It annoyed me because it meant I had to wait two more hours until I saw Nick.

I'd been anxiously awaiting the "Joe conversation" since we talked on the phone over a week ago. Waiting for Nick seemed to be bothering Joe as well because he wasn't acting like himself. He had been quieter all week, only speaking when people talked to him. Joe was usually the type of person wanted in social situations because he made small talk less awkward. However, this week he remained silent, especially to and from school, looking out the window the way Trent often did: anxious and tired. Trent said they had both been sleeping on the L-shaped couch. I imagined Joe probably wanted to be around someone as a distraction.

I tried bringing it up a few times. I had asked if he had heard from Nick and if he had decided to meet up with him. He had said that Nick continued texting him, like everything was normal, and that he didn't know what was going on. I didn't press the issue because nothing could be solved until Nick came home.

And now he was home, while we were stuck in rehearsal. Trent had basketball, but they got out early. He was waiting outside the choir room when we finished. I could see him through the window, scratching his chest with his bag hanging off his shoulder. He looked less tired today, and when he smiled at me, it was easy to forget that someone like him could get worn down.

Nick was waiting for me in my room when I finally got home. He was sitting on my bed sifting through a pile of miscellaneous photos I kept in my nightstand drawer.

“Took you long enough to get home,” he said. “Were you hanging out with the boyfriend? He’s all Catherine has talked about since I got here. I almost told her I met him, but that would’ve compromised the whole beach house operation.”

I grabbed the photo out of his hand. It was one of Joe from about three years ago. He had longer hair back then and still had braces. He was looking off into the distance with his mouth wide open. The picture cut off at his elbow, but his pointer finger protruded from the bottom left corner, pointing toward the ceiling. I didn’t remember where we were.

“So what’s this big secret?” I asked.

“Doesn’t even say ‘hello.’” He paused for a moment as I shoved the photo back in my drawer. “Actually it involves that weekend at the beach.”

I sat down on the bed next to him and waited.

“Well, I sort of... I hooked up with someone.”

I asked the obligatory “who?”

“Joe.”

I smacked Nick in the arm. Nick winced, but I knew I had faked my surprise convincingly. Now I could ask the questions I wanted to weeks ago.

“Nick, what are you doing?”

He shrugged. “I don’t know. It just happened, alright?”

I sighed, and he tensed up. Seeing him flinch gave me a sick sort of satisfaction. I didn’t want this conversation to be easy for Nick because he had caused Joe pain.

“Has... has Joe said anything?” he asked.

I wasn't going there. “Have *you* talked to him?”

“Kind of...”

“Nick!” I smacked his arm again.

“Look, I wasn't sure how I felt after it happened, but lately I don't know. I can't stop thinking about him.”

So this was Nick's dilemma; he *liked* Joe. A random hookup might ruin their friendship and make me lose my sanity, but it wouldn't have to involve Catherine.

“If you want to be with Joe you're going to have to tell her.”

Nick was looking at the floor. “I don't even know if Joe feels the same way.”

I couldn't say how Joe felt for sure, but the incident was definitely still affecting him. His downtrodden looks whenever anyone mentioned Nick's name, his quiet sulking this past week. Joe was feeling *something*.

“It doesn't matter,” I said. I held Nick by the shoulders. “If it's not Joe, it'll be some other guy. It's inevitable, so why not get it over with because I think if you talk to Joe, there's a possibility of something.”

“I know,” he said. “I don't want to hide a relationship.”

I released his shoulders because the sweetness in his face melted into something foreign. It wasn't Nick I was seeing; it was the unmentionable. But this passed, and those bright eyes returned.

He opened and closed my nightstand drawer. “Have you told them about Parsons?”

Now it was my turn to stare at the floor.

“You know,” he said. “That's going to be inevitable, too.”

During the middle of the Macy's Day Parade, Andre called me into his office "to discuss things." I was not surprised that the topic was once again UConn. He had asked if I had done my application. I told him I was still looking into it, which was a complete lie. I hadn't even looked at the homepage let alone start an application. If Andre knew I was lying, he didn't say. Instead, he continued staring at me weird, like the last serious conversation we had.

"Either of you ready to talk yet?" he asked.

This time, instead of playing dumb, I shook my head.

We ate our Thanksgiving meal around three in the afternoon, which was an awkward time because it forced us to skip lunch and made us hungry later. The phone rang while I was setting the table. Our kitchen phone still had a cord and no caller I.D. It was a telemarketers dream because Catherine preferred it over the cordless. She always ended up talking to them for a few minutes. She claimed that it was more Christian to take everyone's calls without the bias of screening. Andre, however, hated it. He switched the rest of the house phones to cordless and connected the caller I.D. to the T.V.

I answered the kitchen phone at Catherine's request, but the person immediately hung up. Catherine needed to get rid of this stupid phone.

Kyle entered the kitchen and tugged on the sleeve on my shirt. He looked almost frightened. His nervous eyes reminded me of Catherine's face the first time she gave me the sex talk. "Did you talk to him?"

"Who?" I asked.

He considered for a moment, but then scratched his head. The glaze returned to his eyes.

“Nevermind.”

Nick then entered the kitchen looking strange. He had combed back his dark hair, which he usually wore spiked, and his clothes looked like they came straight from Trent’s wardrobe: khakis, polo, boat-shoes. Nick hated dressing up. He told me he wore pajamas to the dining hall. His senior year, he considered jeans “overdoing it.” Was he trying to “look” gay? I hoped not because this seemed like a terrible way of convincing Catherine that being gay wasn’t a choice.

“Alright, let’s eat,” Catherine said. “Kendra, dear. Would you please say grace?”

The five of us took our places. The sixth chair was empty.

“In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.”

Dear God, I am begging you—

“Bless us, O Lord—”

To open Catherine’s heart—

“And these Thy gifts—”

Against her fifty-one years of resolute Catholicism—

“Which we are about to receive—”

And give Nick the courage—

“From Thy bounty through Christ our Lord—”

To finally stand up to her.

“Amen.”

We passed the food in a counter-clockwise rotation. I focused on Kyle. He struggled lifting the mashed potato bowl, and Nick had to help him scoop meat onto his plate. His eating

wasn't much better. He looked awkward cutting his meat with a butter knife. His hands were too small, and the knife not sharp enough.

Andre asked Nick about school. He said that he was doing good and studying hard and all the crap parents want to hear. Catherine started gushing about Trent and how polite he was and how nice. I didn't feel the need to say anything. I was glad that she was so fond of him, but she hardly knew him. He was like a fixation, and I was afraid that she was creating a false image of who Trent was. Trent would never be able to break her expectations once she made up her mind because she was so stubborn.

Kyle was still struggling with his meat, and Andre eventually had to cut it for him. Kyle picked at his roll, while he waited. I felt bad for him. He seemed old enough to use a real knife.

We passed the food around for a second time, and I noticed that Nick had stopped eating. He was twirling the mash potatoes with his fork, and his legs were shaking. He waited until there was a lull then unbuttoned the top button of his polo and cleared his throat.

“Mom. Dad. I need to tell you something.”

Was now the right time? Was there ever a right time? For a second I wanted to leave the room, but I knew I had to stay. Nick needed support.

“I'm gay.”

Silence. Andre wasn't even looking at Nick. He was focused on the hundred pound woman cutting through her turkey in a swift and steady rhythm. Nick waited. Kyle wasn't paying much attention. I wasn't sure he knew what “gay” meant; he was only in elementary school. He did stop eating once he noticed the silence. The only sound was Catherine's knife scraping across her plate. I was holding my breath because it felt like all the air had been sucked out of the room.

Catherine looked up and seemed alarmed that we were all staring at her.

“Why are you looking at me like that?” she asked. “He’s obviously joking. Not funny, by the way Nicholas.”

“I’m not.” Nick’s voice was no louder than a soft hum.

“I’m not an idiot, Nick.” Catherine put down her fork. “You’ve had several girlfriends. Thanksgiving isn’t the time to be pulling pranks on your mother.”

“I’m not joking, Mom. I’m trying—”

“Enough!” She was losing her composure. “If you continue antagonizing me, you can leave the table.”

“I’m not antagonizing you. I’m trying—”

“I know you’re not gay.”

“Catherine.” Andre reached for her hand, which she pulled away.

“I’m seeing someone,” Nick said. It didn’t matter if it were true or not because Nick was aware that Catherine knew Joe was gay. Once he said Joe’s name, she could no longer deny it.

Now Catherine was the one holding her breath. I didn’t need a physical picture to remember this one. Catherine looked helpless sometimes, especially when she cried. But here she was the edge of defeat, and she knew it. She was barely hanging on to her cloak of control, almost yielding to panic, but not quite. I’d call this one “No Air.”

“Joe Boyd,” Nick said.

But then she did something no one expected; she laughed.

I looked at Kyle, who looked petrified, with good reason. Her laugh changed into something frantic, almost maniacal. Kyle slumped down in his chair, his butt hanging off the edge. He kept his arms wrapped tightly around his stomach as protection, but I wanted to cover my ears. That forced sound coming out of my mother sickened me.

Now Nick stood up, and for once he didn't have Catherine's doe-eyed innocence. For once, he looked fearless.

"This isn't funny, Catherine. You can't hide from everything you don't want to hear." He threw his napkin on the table. "I am gay, whether you want to fucking accept it or not."

Her laughter stopped. Nick had broken two rules.

"Language," Catherine said. "And don't ever call me by my first name again."

This was Nick's limit. He left the table and headed toward the front door. Andre and I both called for him to come back. He did, for a moment, to get one finally dig.

"I now understand why Ben left. This house is a tomb." He turned into the foyer and slammed the front door shut. I quickly followed him.

I had to run to catch up to Nick. I regretted not grabbing a coat. The cool air cut through my sweater and made it hard to breath. The sun got caught behind a cloud and turned it into a red, pulsating blister. It was the perfect day for photography. I wanted to stop and capture that cloud and escape from my family and stay, just for a moment, in this stasis because the world through a lens was far more beautiful sometimes. But I didn't stop, and I caught up to Nick a block before Main Street.

"Nick..." I was out of breath.

He continued walking. "You know, I'm starting to think Ben was the smart one in all this."

"What?" I stopped moving for a second. I'd never heard Nick say anything even remotely nice about the unmentionable.

Nick rounded the corner onto Main Street, and I followed.

“We can hate him all we want, but he’s not so different. All of us grew up lying about who we are. At least he got out, and at least Catherine misses him.”

“Nick...” I grabbed his arm, but he tugged it away.

“I’m not satisfying her denial,” he said.

He picked up his pace. I stopped again and shivered, feeling the wind pulling on my hair.

“Where are you going?”

He stopped and turned to face me. He still looked like Nick, even with his hair slicked back and wet eyes. He was upset, for sure, but he wasn’t broken. If anything, he looked determined.

“To talk to Joe,” he said.

Chapter 14

Black Friday morning Catherine and Andre woke up like nothing had happened and went Christmas shopping. Catherine left me a note asking me to watch Kyle for the day. He was already in position in front of the TV by the time I woke up. I got each of us a bowl of cereal, but I ate mine at the kitchen table, staring at the five other empty seats.

A few minutes later, I received a text from Nick asking for me to bring his stuff. He said that he'd be staying at the Diner the rest of break. I assumed the conversation with Joe went well.

I ended up taking Kyle to the Diner. Much to my surprise, he got up as soon as I suggested that we go. I packed up Nick's crap into his tiny car. We would have to walk back, but today was much warmer than yesterday. I let Kyle sit in the front seat of Nick's car, and he started asking me questions.

"So Joe is Nick's boyfriend?" Kyle asked.

"I'm not sure," I said. I figured it was better to be honest to him. I felt like it was important for him to grow up in a way, so he could understand not only people, but also his own family better. In order for that to happen, he needed to know the truth.

"Nick is going to stay at Shay's the rest of his break," I said.

"He's not going to disappear like Ben, right?"

I sucked in a breath. What Nick had said about the unmentionable was still bothering me because I hadn't considered his situation in relation to Nick's problems or even my own. Situationally, we were similar. We were trying to find a way to be ourselves in the midst of the lies we told. We all had fake exteriors. But I couldn't put Nick or myself in the same class as him.

I told Kyle, “no,” but it didn’t feel like a good enough answer. However, Kyle had already moved on to a different subject.

“Is Trent going to be there?” he asked.

“Yes.” I smiled at that because I hadn’t really talked to him since Wednesday.

When we got to the Diner, Kyle immediately went and sat by Trent on the L-shaped couch. Trent looked exhausted. He’d had basketball practice this morning and was still wearing his sweatpants with the buttons along the sides. He was scratching his chest, and he smiled when Kyle sat next to him. But then that cough returned. His entire body seemed to rattle.

When I asked if he was feeling okay, he said, “There’s nothing worse than the practice after Thanksgiving.”

He squeezed my hand and returned his attention to Kyle, who was giving him tips on “Rainbow Road.”

Nick and Joe came out of Joe’s room, holding hands.

“Did you bring my stuff?” Nick asked.

I didn’t answer. I kept looking at their hands interlocked so casually, as if it had happened a hundred times before.

“We’re trying this out,” Nick said. He looked much happier today. His eyes had their spark again, and his hair was back to normal. But there was still some sadness in his expression that hadn’t quite gone away.

Joe didn’t need to say anything. If his smile were any bigger, he wouldn’t have a face. I’d call this one “He’s Back.”

Kyle and I stayed for most of the afternoon. We left the apartment in much better spirits. However, before we could leave the Diner, Shay pulled me into the corner behind the counter. Kyle propped himself up on one of the stools and scanned the crowd, vacantly.

“What the hell is going on?” Shay asked in a muffled tone.

I started to explain about Catherine’s reaction, but she interrupted me. She wanted me to start from the beginning. Joe hadn’t told her that he was even interested in Nick. I tried my best to explain the PG version of the party. Shay was the only adult I would’ve felt comfortable discussing sex with, but I left out that part of the story because it wasn’t my virginity that was lost Halloween night. That was Joe’s story, and he had the only right to tell it. So I said they hung out a lot that night and started “talking.” I couldn’t read Shay’s reaction to what I said. She didn’t seem to blink the entire time, and her lips rested together, poised but immobile. When I finished, she shook her head a few times, but made no comments about Catherine.

Instead, she said, “Just be safe. All of you. Use protection.”

I thought of Trent and blushed. I couldn’t look her in the eye.

“I mean it, Kendra,” she said. “There’s a box of stuff in the bathroom under the sink.”

This was the biggest difference between Catherine and Shay.

She then hugged me, hard, the same way Joe always did. I turned my head to keep her spikey hair out of my face.

“You have a hard job,” she said, “looking out for all these boys.”

Shay pulled away, and I focused on the wrinkles wedged between her cheeks and mouth. They softly divided her features. Her forehead bended like waves, and the corners of her eyes crinkled like tissue paper. I hugged her this time.

On the way home Kyle asked, “What does Shay want us to use protection for?”

I almost laughed because I didn’t know how to answer his question. How much did my little brother absorb from his surroundings? Everyone around him seemed to talk freely as if he weren’t there. But how much did he *understand*? With a mix of religion, public school, and three older siblings, what could a ten year old make of terms like “protection” and “gay” and even “Communion?” I wanted to keep him away from CCD classes, school, and the mixed messages the Lafontaine family sent. I wished that I could protect him from the complicated feelings that came with living under Catherine’s roof. I wanted things to be different for Kyle.

“Shay means that you need to be careful in life,” I told him.

He nodded and didn’t say anything else the rest of the trip home. As soon as we got back, he went into the living room and turned on *SpongeBob*. Everything was back to normal, but the house felt empty.

Chapter 15

Trent's layup picture ended up making it in *The Wombat Monthly*. Trent was working with the sports writers to make sure they got all the basketball details "perfect." Mrs. Saunders hovered over them and kept saying how thankful she was to have Trent as a "fact checker." He kept scratching his chest and attempted to look interested whenever Mrs. Sanders addressed him. Every time she looked away he mouthed "help" in my direction.

Penny had gotten her braces off and was flaunting her new smile. She didn't look older without the braces. If anything, her constant smiling made her appear naive.

"Are you going to show him our progress?" she asked.

It was weird to think that in six months, she would be in charge of the photography. I wanted to believe that I cared about the state of our little newspaper once I left, that I had trained Penny enough to at least, despite the misprints and proofreading errors, produce good visual effects. But I didn't care because I was ready to move on. Once I finished the final edition in June, the *Wombat Monthly* would never concern me again. Seeing Penny, though, with her goofy smile and knowing she still had three years of high school made me feel incredibly guilty.

"You need to start taking some of the pictures," I said.

"Okay." She once more flashed her new teeth.

On Sunday afternoon, Trent and I found ourselves completely alone. The Diner closed at one on Sundays, and Shay had gone Christmas shopping. Joe was hanging out with Nick at Barton. They were having a "study" day.

We were supposed to be doing the same. Mrs. Pitts had finally assigned the *Hamlet* essays. We had to pick four characters and explain how their “tragic flaws” created their downfall. Because she didn’t want us to make the same mistake we did with *wyrd*, she would not let us use Hamlet as a character. She said Hamlet was “too easy” and “fostered predictable interpretations.”

However, Trent tossed his book aside after five minutes of pretending to pick his characters.

“I already read Hamlet at my old school. I didn’t like it the first time.” He scratched his chest and moved closer to me.

“Well if you’ve read it twice tell me which characters are ‘A’ worthy,” I said.

“Laertes for sure.” He pushed my book onto the floor.

“And King Claudius.” I was now sitting on his lap.

“Definitely Polonius.” He hesitated, letting the space between our lips soak up the air. He brushed a piece of hair away from my face and then kissed me.

“I’ll let you pick the last one.” He scratched his chest then wrapped his arms behind the small of my back. I wrapped mine around his neck.

“I took your advice about talking to Shay,” he said. “She’s going to have me work as a line cook on the weekends. Once basketball is over, she said I could maybe work a few days after school.”

“That’s great, Trent,” I said.

How did this happen to me? It was too easy being with Trent. We had let our feelings guide us from the beginning. We didn’t have to succumb to overpowering emotions; it developed

organically, more like rain than a lightning strike. What bothered me was the smoothness. There was no struggle, and sitting on his lap, I didn't feel like we were "just talking" anymore.

"Are we... a thing?" I asked. "Like an official 'we're dating' sort of thing?"

I tried reading his expression: the soft curve of his lifted eyebrows, that marble bump along the edge of his nose. Those eyes would need a bigger lens to capture all the different shades of blue, all the pain and kindness that he couldn't hide.

What surprised me were his red cheeks. I didn't know if blushing was a good sign.

He pulled his arm back to bite his thumb before saying, "I already told the basketball team."

He paused for a moment to gauge my expression then continued with, "Some of the freshmen think you're hot so I said you were my girlfriend."

He pulled his arm away again, this time to scratch his chest.

"Is that okay?" he asked.

I didn't respond. Instead, I kissed him, not longer than a couple seconds, but it felt like something new. Our lips met again, this time with more intent. His hand slid under my shirt, the fingers skimming the surface of my back. Then the gentleness was gone replaced by this new feeling that I couldn't name. My shirt slipped over my head. His soon followed, and our bodies pressed together.

I felt his hands fumbling with the button on my jeans, and I pulled away. Panic overpowered whatever urge I felt before. My first thought involved my underwear; I forgot what pair I was wearing. The second, however, stemmed from eighteen years' worth of Catholic guilt. I had told myself when I was about fifteen that whenever this day would come, I would know

what to do. Catholic or not, I would know whether it was okay for me to have sex. But now, in the moment, I had no idea.

“Sorry.” He was breathing heavy.

He looked up and his blue eyes were flames. I ran my fingers through his curly hair, and a part of me wanted to initiate it again. But his strained breathing drew my eyes to his chest, and I noticed the swelling: blood pooling in the places he’d scratched too hard. I noticed blood on my own chest.

Trent looked down. “Shit.”

I hopped off him to let him go to the bathroom. I watched him examine the wounds in the mirror. He continued digging his nails into his inflamed skin.

“Stop scratching.”

“I can’t.” He clenched his fists along his side. “My skin feels like it’s on fire.”

I went to look for something to help. Shay kept her medicine in a cabinet above the kitchen sink. I found some Benadryl and Band-Aids.

Trent swallowed the pills without water, so at least I knew his throat hadn’t closed.

“This has to be a turn on,” He said.

I traced my fingers down his arm, and he started coughing almost as if I somehow instigated it.

“You should probably get this checked out,” I said. “It seems like you’re allergic to something.”

Trent sat down on the bathroom floor, and I got him a glass of water. After a few sips, his breathing returned to normal. I joined him on the floor.

“I didn’t mean to take things so fast,” he said.

“I have to work some things out before...”

“I understand, Kendra. I haven’t... I haven’t either.”

Maybe it wasn’t my Catholic guilt. Maybe it was *human* guilt.

Trent continued to explain his situation. “I didn’t really date at my old school. Most of the kids had a lot of money. It’s hard relating to people who have everything. I’m not trying to make you feel bad for me. I’m just saying that I wasn’t close to anyone at that school.”

“You don’t feel that way here, do you?”

“You’re different, Kendra.” His voice expressed the same tenderness as when he first told me that he liked me.

“You notice things, and you listen,” he said.

He then reached out to squeeze my hand. “And you’re beautiful.”

I realized I was still half naked and had blood on my chest. I stood up and grabbed a wash cloth from below the sink. I soaked it in warm water for a few seconds. Trent groaned a little as he stood up.

“Here.” He took the wash cloth and gently wiped the dried blood off my skin. He rested his other hand on my elbow.

“I’m really embarrassed about this,” he said.

“Don’t be.”

That feeling came again, but nothing else could happen today. Trent’s rash prevented us from having to deal with any real consequences, but a scary thought crossed my mind; would I have kept going if Trent didn’t have one?

Chapter 16

Shay scheduled Trent a doctor appointment as soon as she saw the rash. He got out of school early Monday so he could be back in time for basketball. After school, I dropped Joe off and went home, hoping to go through some of the photos I took last week.

SpongeBob was on with a zombie Kyle lying on the couch. Andre's study was closed, but he was probably still at work. I went into the kitchen and found Catherine crying. She didn't see me right away, so I almost turned right around. Of course, I didn't because it would be morally wrong to not let Catherine express her feelings since this was the great Lafontaine tragic flaw: the lack of communication.

"Patty Daniels has leukemia," she said.

Her body was hunched over. She kept her elbows propped on the counter, holding up her head.

"Who?" I didn't know a Patty Daniels.

"You know Patty. She was a Eucharistic Minister for years. Volunteers during election polls. She's a strong republican advocate. Don't you remember the time your friend Jake's dad ran for county commissioner on the democrat side, and she told everyone he used to steal her lawn ornaments when he was in high school? He lost that year. She was always eccentric but so passionate about her beliefs."

I had no idea who Patty was.

"It's just... so sad."

She pulled a tissue out of her pocket and lightly dabbed her eyes.

"How old is she?" I asked. I thought her age might help me figure out who she was.

"Eighty."

A noise came out of my throat that sounded almost like a scoff. However, Catherine blew her nose at the same time, masking the sound. I didn't know what to say. This didn't warrant tears even from Catherine. Yes, it was sad, but Patty, whoever the hell she was, had lived a long life. Everyone got sick at eighty. Catherine was using Patty as a decoy.

"I'm sorry about Patty," I said.

I placed my hand between her shoulder blades. I could feel her spine.

"Do you want to talk about what else is bothering you?" I asked.

She stood up straight, pulling away from my hand. "I don't know what you're referring to."

"Nick, Mom."

She dabbed her eyes again, smearing her mascara. "What about Nick?"

I pinched the side of my leg to keep from rolling my eyes. She was impossible.

"Have you talked to him?" I asked.

"He's at school, studying. Finals are coming up. It's a stressful time." She crumpled the tissue in her hand.

"But he's been to Woodbridge."

I stopped. I had crossed a line in sibling code. I could tell by the change in her face from concerned mother to something that had little compassion. Her eyes became hollow and unreadable. I'd rather her be yelling at me.

"With Joe." It was no louder than a whisper.

"Look you two need to talk. Not just about Joe but—"

"You spend a lot of time with Joe Boyd." Her eyes were still vacant.

“You like Joe, Mom.” I was pleading now because this could be my only chance to convince her.

“Not if he’s corrupting my children.” She rolled the tissue between her hands until it was wrapped in a tight ball.

“He’s not. Nick knew long before any of this happened. He’s wanted to tell you for years.”

“You knew about this?”

I ruined it. She wasn’t seeing the big picture, and I couldn’t make her.

I watched her crumpled tissue drop to the floor. She raised her hands to shield her face and began to cry, harder than before. Her body convulsed with each sob. I went to hug her and she clung to the back of my shirt.

“I’m going to lose all my children.”

It didn’t matter that I hadn’t heard from Parsons yet. The dream was already slipping away. Or Catherine was. I wasn’t sure if my big brothers had paved the way for me to leave home or had screwed up any hope I had of leaving Woodbridge. Either way, right now, holding a sobbing Catherine in my arms, I was cursing them.

I got a “B plus” on my *Hamlet* essay. Mrs. Pitts wrote one word on it: better. Trent got an “A minus,” with the word “almost.” We started reading *Brave New World*, which she warned had subject matter that she hoped we would “handle as mature adult readers, who can analyze the content critically.” Basically, she was trying to prevent us from laughing at the “orgy porgy”

scenes. From what I gathered from the first few chapters, there wasn't anything new or brave about this world Huxley created.

Choir was not going well. The closer we got to the concert, the more critical Mr. Bronze got. We were lucky if we got through two songs during the fifty minute rehearsal. During Wednesday's afterschool rehearsal, he kept us forty extra minutes. Trent fell asleep waiting for us on the bench outside the choir room. Mr. Bronze also started critiquing my solo, which started getting worse and worse because of his commentary. He complained about my dynamic level, timing, emotional resonance. It eventually got to the point where I was overthinking the notes, the very core of singing. I sometimes went flat and sharp within the same system. Once Joe started singing, my issues usually dissolved because I would back away, let him take the lead. It was no longer a duet.

Basketball wasn't going great for Trent either. He was still starting, but his energy didn't last long. Coach Deeds started subbing the sophomore point guard after the first quarter. They hadn't lost a game yet, but Trent said a loss would probably bench him completely. On practice nights, he'd fall asleep as soon as he got home, and that cough only seemed to be getting worse. He was still waiting for his bloodwork from his doctor appointment, which created even more anxiety than tryout week had. The tips of his fingers were starting to bleed.

The Sunday before concert week I made a desperate prayer for all of us.

Dear God... Let Trent's bloodwork reveal the problem so it can be fixed... Let Joe and I make it through this week without any tears... Let Nick find love and companionship with Joe, and let Catherine find solace in his happiness... Let her forgive him.

This prayer felt too commanding. I added a "please" before my "amen," hoping that could make up for it. God had to understand that frustration made everything harder to express.

Kyle tapped my arm. I leaned over, and he asked what I prayed for.

I told him, “The people I love.”

Chapter 17

My prayer didn't work. Trent was the first victim. I picked him and Joe up for school on Monday. He looked like he hadn't slept in days. The dark circles under his eyes seemed to pull on his eyelids forcing them shut. He was barely squinting. When we got to school, I pulled him aside at his locker.

"Are you okay?" He looked at me, and his eyes were unrecognizable. It was like a bulb went out.

"I'm tired," he said. "The itching has been keeping me up, and I have another appointment tomorrow."

"Did you get the results from your bloodwork?"

Trent fumbled with the lock on his locker. "My white blood cell count is low. I'm getting a CT scan tomorrow after school."

"What does that mean?"

He was focused on his lock, but his hands were shaking. "They don't know what it is. It's probably nothing. Just a precaution."

He slammed the lock against the metal locker. I grabbed ahold of his hands and squeezed until it hurt.

"Probably nothing," I said.

I needed a new prayer because I couldn't consider the alternative, that something serious could be wrong. Not to Trent. He'd had enough bad things in his life.

"What time is your appointment?" I asked. Tomorrow was the concert, and admittedly, I had some selfish concerns.

"Don't worry," he said. "I'll be back in time for your concert. I wouldn't miss it."

The next victim was me. Mr. Bronze gave me a reason to cry right before our ten minute break during the afterschool dress rehearsal. We had one really big number right before our solo that had an extremely involved piano part that asked for at least three hands. There was no other accompanist, so I was left with the task. On some of the harder sections, I'd leave out a few of the middle notes that my hands physically couldn't reach. That, however, wasn't my biggest problem; it was the page turning. Mr. Bronze did not believe in page turners. He didn't want to sacrifice one of the students to do the job of the accompanist. I did my best, but dress rehearsal always created more pressure than the actual show. My hand slipped while turning one of the pages, and I hit one wrong note out of the five my hands were supposed to be playing. It was during an instrumental part, too, so it didn't mess up any of the singers' pitches. Yet, Mr. Bronze stopped the song.

"What the hell are you doing?" He yelled at me, marching up to the piano with his hands in the air.

"Are you seriously going to ruin a song for the entire ensemble? Have you practiced? The show is tomorrow!"

He dismissed us for break and told me to get it together.

I was used to Mr. Bronze's behavior. He always told us that we sucked towards the end of the semester, and dress rehearsal was punishment enough to make all of us consider quitting. Never, though, had he humiliated me, personally. He always said he was lucky to have me because he could focus on conducting.

Mr. Bronze started to approach me as everyone dispersed, but I ignored him. I was spending my ten minute break in the bathroom, crying. The tears didn't last long, but I felt like

shit. Humiliation tears were the worst because I'd have to go back out there and potentially face the same ridicule.

I got a text from Joe that called Mr. Bronze a "fuckface." It didn't make me feel much better, though, because our duet was next, and I hadn't sung it correctly since I auditioned.

The day of the concert, I floated through my classes in a fog. During Prob and Stat, Jake mentioned a party over winter break. I tried my best to fake some enthusiasm, but I didn't pay attention to any of the details. In English, Trent had to tap me on the arm after Mrs. Pitts called on me twice. I couldn't focus. I didn't sleep much the night before, and now my stomach was churning.

Mr. Bronze gave us a thirty minute lecture during choir on how poorly dress rehearsal went. He said we were wasting our time if we were going to give a mediocre concert. I think he was trying to motivate us, but it only made my urge to throw up stronger. He tried using the remainder of the class to go through the pieces "one last time," but we only went over two before he threw his music on the floor and locked himself in his dark office.

In Journalism, Penny told me she was coming to take pictures for the newspaper. While I was proud of her for taking the initiative, I did not want this event recorded. Alicia told me that she and Trevor were also coming to the concert, and I got a headache. I didn't want people there; I would've preferred if we sang to an empty auditorium. I hated Joe for making me tryout. I had been content playing the piano and pretending to sing.

At the end of the day I told Trent how I felt. "I can't do this. It was stupid of me to try out."

"Hey." He held me by my shoulders. "I've heard you sing it. It's beautiful."

“I haven’t done it right since I tried out. I mess something up every time.”

He slid his hands down my arm and squeezed my hands. “You’re thinking too much. You already have it in you, so let it happen.”

Our call time was at five, so we had enough time to go home, eat, and put on our choir attire while Trent went to his appointment.

Joe had it easy. The choir boys got to wear tuxedos with bowties. They were warm under the stage lights, but at least the guys looked classy and normal. The choir dresses had collars up to our clavicles and went all the way down to the floor. The material was double-lined, three quarter sleeved, and black. We looked like nuns going to a funeral. We did have one girl my sophomore year try to wear pants by claiming that Mr. Bronze’s uniforms were sexist. However, Mr. Bronze said that the uniform followed “professional choir practices,” and the case was dropped. I would’ve preferred to play the piano in pants, but because I “sang” a few acapella pieces with select choir, I had to wear what everyone else did.

I picked Joe up at 4:45. He had combed his hair with gel so that it stayed smooth.

“I have a present for you,” he said.

He reached into the inner pocket of his tuxedo jacket and pulled out a small silver pin. It was tied eighth notes, and pieces of silver were turning black from wear. Joe started fastening it to my nun dress.

“My stepdad gave this to me before our seventh grade concert. He said it’s a good luck charm.”

I traced the pin with my fingers. His stepdad had died after that concert.

“I’ve had it for every concert, but since this is your first solo, I decided I would share its luck.”

I pressed the tongue to the roof of my mouth. I didn’t know what I would do without him. It hurt to think that our lives could be separate in less than a year.

“Mr. Bronze can suck it, Kendra. You’re the one who leads this choir, and you’re going to kick ass tonight.”

The concert started promptly at 6:01. Mr. Bronze always gave the audience an extra minute to find their seats before we filed onto the stage. I took my seat at the piano and adjusted the music.

I scanned the audience and found Nick sitting with Shay. No Trent, no other Lafontaines. My prayer had not worked.

I saw a flash in the crowd. Penny had forgotten to turn it off. I imagined her fumbling to fix her mistake, her cheeks flushed. I should have told her checking the flash was rule number two behind make sure the lens cap was off.

What could Penny get out of photographing music? A still photo would only capture the visual, but it was the feeling that mattered the most with music. All other senses, sight, taste, touch, and even sound moved on unless the camera managed to catch the moment, and even then something was lost. There wasn’t a word that described how frustrated, disappointed, nervous, and powerful I was feeling as Mr. Bronze raised his arms to begin, so I let my fingers pound those keys because the only emotion I wanted to remember from this concert was the relief that came once it was over.

When it was time for the solo, I scanned the audience trying to find Trent. He was still not sitting with his aunt. I looked for my parents, but they, too, were hidden among the shadowed faces. I traced the pin and looked at Joe, who nodded at me. I took a deep breath. Mr. Bronze wasn't going to get to yell at me this time, no one would. It was a duet, which meant Joe and I needed to carry each other as well as ourselves.

I started the song, and this time, I sang it right.

When the concert was over, the relief felt even more gratifying because I had earned it. I had persevered through Mr. Bronze's shit.

Nick came back into the choir room to see us.

"That solo was the best part of the whole thing." He hugged each of us.

I watched him interact with Joe. He seemed happy with his bright smile and joyful eyes. But his body language was wrong. He kept his arms across his chest almost shy like he was shielding himself from Joe.

I walked out of the choir room and headed toward the main entrance into the auditorium. Here, I ran into Trent.

"You were so good," he said.

He kissed me, hard. My teeth were digging into my upper lip, and my nose felt like it was going to snap against his. I couldn't breathe. When he finally pulled away, he wouldn't look at me.

"I didn't see you sitting by Shay," I said.

"I sat by the door, in case I started coughing." He kept his eyes focused on his hands.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing."

“Trent.” I reached to take his hand.

“It’s nothing.” He pulled his hand away and finally looked up at me. His eyes were bloodshot.

“I’m tired. That’s all. Your solo was great.” But his words were detached from his body, like he was reciting rather than expressing.

I didn’t get the chance to press him further because the rest of my family found me. Kyle handed me a rose and wrapped his thin arms around my waist. I hugged his shoulders.

Nick walked by holding Joe’s hand. Even though, he didn’t look our way, the way he sauntered by with his chin held high confirmed my suspicions; he wanted Catherine to see. Catherine did notice and watched them walk together until they left the building. She then turned back to the group like nothing had happened.

God wasn’t granting me any of my prayers because these two weren’t making amends anytime soon.

The crowd was starting to thin, and I realized that Trent disappeared in all this mess. I texted him, asking where he went, but he didn’t respond.

Chapter 18

Wednesday morning before school, I waited for Joe and Trent outside the Diner. It was an unusually cold day for December. The truck engine was making a whine that sounded pinched and desperate. Joe came out of the Diner, alone, keeping his head down against the wind. He climbed into the front seat.

“Where’s Trent?”

Joe buckled his seatbelt, avoiding eye contact. “He’s not coming to school today.”

“What? Is he sick or something?”

“I’m sure he’s fine.”

He sighed a few times before saying, “I have something to tell you.”

I didn’t want him to finish because I wasn’t prepared to hear bad news.

“Nick asked if he could spend winter break at the Diner.”

“Oh.” This wasn’t the news I was expecting, but it wasn’t any better. Nick was disappearing, maybe not from me personally, but from our family. How was this any different than what the unmentionable did?

“I told him he could,” Joe said. “As long as it was okay with you.”

It wasn’t okay, not because he was spending time with Joe, but because he was being stubborn. And so was Catherine. Neither was going to budge. I told Joe it was fine.

School felt weird without Trent, but it didn’t make sense. I spent many years without Trent at Woodbridge High. Even this year, I got into a routine before he arrived, but now the halls seemed scary familiar. How often had I walked these halls like a zombie, not noticing the people or things in it? It was poor photography skills, getting trapped like this. Trent seemed to

bring a fresh perspective because I could at least pretend to see it as he would. I could try to be objective. Today, however, everything looked gray.

I texted him periodically throughout the day, but I didn't get a single response.

Later that night I tried calling him, but his phone went right to voicemail. I sat on my bed for twenty minutes debating how much of a crazy girlfriend I was willing to be before I called their landline. I decided landline was less creepy than randomly showing up at the Diner.

Shay answered and passed the phone off to Trent.

"Hello?" He sounded hoarse.

"Hey. What happened to your phone?" I didn't mean to come off as aggressive, but I was hurt from being ignored all day.

"Sorry. It broke last night." He paused. "I dropped it."

This only made me more upset. He should have told me that. He could've sent a Facebook message, told Joe, anything. At the same time, I felt stupid that I had agonized over not talking to him for one day. What was I going to expect if we stayed together through college?

I changed the subject. "How are you feeling?"

There was a long pause before he answered. His breath created a rattle in the phone that resembled static.

"I'm okay," he said. "Sorry. I was sleeping before you called. Can we talk more tomorrow?"

That was the extent of our conversation after being ignored all day. I flung my phone on my bed, and it bounced once before hitting the carpeted floor.

On Thursday, I picked Joe and Trent up at the Diner. Trent didn't look like Trent. His hair was a bit disheveled, and he had borrowed Joe's Wombat sweatshirt, which complemented his basketball sweatpants. This was the first time he hadn't worn a polo to school. The bags under his eyes were swollen, and his eyes looked grey. He didn't talk much on the way to school. He mostly stared out the window like he had when he first got here.

I asked Joe about it as he walked me from lunch to English. He brushed it off, saying Trent was allowed to dress like the rest of Woodbridge every now and then, but I could tell Joe knew something I didn't. He couldn't lie to me. I let it go, only because the bell rang.

Mrs. Pitts gave us a creative assignment to complete over winter break. We were to take a scene from *Brave New World* and write it from the perspective of one of the lower castes. She claimed this was her Christmas present to us.

Before Journalism, I went to meet Trent outside his locker as I did every day, but he wasn't there. I waited for a few minutes

When I got to class, Trent was sitting next to Penny. Mrs. Sanders was busy with Alicia and the other editors, so she didn't notice I was late.

"I think Mrs. Sanders had nowhere else to put me today," he said. "I'm not much help to either of you."

"You can help me pick a picture of Kendra," Penny said. "Mrs. Sanders wants to do a segment on the concert. I only took pictures during her and Joe's solo."

"I'm flattered Penny," I said. "But it's important to take pictures of everything during an event because it gives you more to choose from. You never know what Mrs. Sanders will want, plus only taking pictures of your friends or people you know limits the paper. We want more people to feel included."

That was me: only taking pictures of Joe and Nick. It took years to feel brave enough to capture people I hardly knew.

I watched Trent click through Penny's photos. His face didn't change. He rested his chin in his palm and bit the tips of his fingers until one started bleeding. He then pressed his thumb against the wound but kept his focus on the pictures.

"This one." He chose one where I had my mouth open and fingers arched in positions that looked natural. I gave Penny her props for capturing a moment that wasn't ugly because most singing faces were.

Trent then got up and went to ask Mrs. Sanders if he could use the restroom.

"Are you and Trent okay?" Penny asked.

"What?"

"Well, you two didn't come to class together, and you always do."

Maybe I should've been creeped out by her observation, but instead it gave me some hope that she had the potential to be a decent photographer. If she could notice the details, then perhaps she'd be able to keep the newspaper graphics interesting once I left.

"Please tell me it's all good because you two are like perfect." She flashed that toothy grin, and I wanted to give her good news.

I smiled back, but truthfully I didn't know.

I cornered Trent at his locker. "What's going on?"

"Nothing." He was fumbling with the lock again.

"You didn't wait for me before Journalism."

"I was at the nurse." He finally got it open and pulled out his backpack.

This along with the broken phone excuse could be valid, but the issue was Trent's delivery. I was beginning to feel like Andre, when he knew something was wrong and his kids wouldn't tell him. It was not okay for Trent to act like this.

I went to Shay's afterschool to tell Joe about our conversation. Joe didn't say anything. Instead, he took me into Trent's room to show me Trent's phone that sat in a rainbow of wire and glass on his dresser. There was no way he just dropped it.

"He threw it at his wall," Joe said.

The wires seemed to sparkle around the glass clusters. My head was spinning.

"Joe, what's going on?"

He pulled me into one of his long hugs. It wasn't comforting. I was terrified by all this secrecy, not just from Trent. Nick and Joe were just as guilty. The men in my life were making me feel small.

"Let him tell you when he's ready," Joe said.

I picked Trent up from basketball around five-thirty. He fell asleep on the mile long car ride back to the Diner. It scared me because this was becoming a habit. When we got back I shook his arm gently. He looked surprised to see me. He reached out his hand and traced the lines on my forehead.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

This was my opportunity to get Trent to talk. I didn't want us to be the kind of couple that hid things from one another. I didn't want to be like my family.

"I'm worried about you," I said.

This was the wrong thing to say. He retracted his hand and unbuckled his seat.

“I don’t want you to worry about me.”

He kissed me on the cheek, so quickly I thought I imagined it, and left my truck.

Chapter 19

Friday night was the big rival game against the Brighton Bobcats. Our student section was packed tight. I had to keep my elbows pressed against my body to take photos. Half the guys had their chests painted Wombat yellow and green. A few girls painted their stomachs but were kicked out because their sport bras were considered “obscene.” The Bobcats even brought a small student section, but they left the paint home.

The game started exciting. Trent came out strong, shooting a three pointer in the first thirty seconds. The bleachers shook from the standing students. It wasn't going to be this easy, however, because thirty seconds later the score was tied. The teams were back and forth throughout the first quarter. Trent made every shot he threw into the air. Coach Deeds kept him in at the start of the second quarter, and the Wombats started pulling ahead.

I caught one of Trent near the three-point line. His hands flicked the ball forward like a yo-yo. The defender guarding him stayed crouched, ready to pounce several seconds too late. The ball went in, and we were up by ten. Immediately, the Bobcats called a timeout.

I looked at the photo of Trent and forgot for a moment that anything was wrong because he looked so natural, as if his power and grace required the same effort as breathing. Then I heard Trent's cough and a cold numbness crawled over my skin. I watched him stand next to Coach Deeds and nod his head. He kept one hand clutched to his chest.

The Bobcats started with the ball but missed their shot. Trevor caught the rebound and passed the ball to Trent. He dribbled down the court, slowly, using more control than speed to get around his defender and pass the ball to Jake. Jake swung it to the sophomore guard, who tried to pass the ball to Trevor. The opposing forwards were trying to compensate for Trevor's height by double-teaming him, so the ball ended up back in Trent's hands.

It was the same picture as before: the defender crouched too late to stop him, Trent's feet floating. My camera revealed the small beads of sweat gathering around his neck. But this time the ball bounced around the rim twice before flopping out, an easy rebound for the Bobcats because the Wombats never thought he'd miss it. The game took a turn after that The Bobcats scored on that run and then again after stealing it off Trent. He tried to stop his opponent, but the guy plowed over him below the hoop. No foul.

Coach Deeds then took Trent out, and the Bobcats caught back up.

At halftime, the student section thinned out, and we sat down. Joe was talking across me to Alicia and Kathy, and I realized this was the first time we had all been dating someone. This thought didn't make me feel good because moments like this were fragile. Kathy and Jake had failed once before, and I could feel Trent slipping. Alicia would have to deal with the college fight like everyone else, and while I wanted Nick to be with Joe more than anything, their relationship was causing a wedge in my family. But here at this basketball game, my three friends could laugh and enjoy the game because in this moment the picture was perfect. I couldn't capture this one because I was in it, but for me this frame had already faded.

"Kendra, are you okay?" Alicia asked.

I didn't have to answer. Penny had found me. She wore a yellow ribbon in her hair and had the school's digital camera wrapped around her neck. She squeezed into an empty spot in front of us.

"Your man is so good," she said. "But I only took one pic of him. I got lots of Trevor, though." She winked at Alicia.

When the team came back out, we stood again. I watched Penny, the way she held her camera and hardly looked at the subject she was capturing. She pointed and clicked. I noticed her

yellow ribbon twisting around her curls and snapped a picture of that. I was wrong about her noticing things. She needed more practice than observing upperclassmen's love lives. I didn't know how to teach her this, though. Did she see that Trevor had to wear a T-shirt under his uniform because it rode up in the back? Did she see the way Jake rubbed the bottom of his shoes with spit? Did she see that Trent was in pain?

By the end of the third quarter we were down by ten, and Mr. Deeds took Trent out for the first two minutes of the fourth, giving him a serious pep talk. I stopped taking pictures.

After those two minutes, Trent's face developed an intensity that scared me. I had seen him passionate; I'd seen him determined. But this look had more menace, more desperation as if nothing else mattered. He stole the ball from a Bobcat, two seconds after it was passed back in. He scored a layup, and the stands shook. The Wombats continued the full court pressure. Jake stole the ball this time and scored. We were down by four.

One minute left. Trent passed to Jake, who dribbled it back toward Trent. They crisscrossed and Trent got the ball. He shot... but this time the defender was ready. He smashed into Trent, hard, knocking him on his back. The whistle blew.

The sophomore guard helped him get up, and he took his position on the foul line. He coughed lightly twice, and then turned his head toward our student section. He scanned the crowd until he found me. I gave the thumbs up, and for a second I thought he smiled.

Dear God, let him make this one.

He flung the first one in before I had time to hold my breath. The bleachers shook so hard that I almost fell on Penny in front of me.

Trent stepped back up to the line to shoot again. He took his time, taking a few dribbles, and spinning the ball in his hands. I closed my eyes.

The student section erupted. We were down by two.

Thirty seconds left. The other team dribbled down the court, passing back and forth trying to run out the clock. Trent intercepted one of the passes.

Ten. Trent dribbled down the court. Nine. Passed to Jake. Eight. Seven. Six. Jake dribbled around trying to get it to Trevor below the hoop. Five. He passed it back to Trent. Four. Trent took one dribble to sidestep the defender. Three. Trent shot the ball. Two. The ball spun through the air. One. It reached the rim.

He missed.

Silence filled the student section. The Bobcat student section took over for us. They stomped and yelled and hugged one another. Trent sank to his knees with his head in his hands. Jake had to pull him to his feet. He slumped through the handshakes, not making eye contact with anyone. He immediately went to the locker room, leaving his water bottle on the bench. Trevor grabbed it for him.

“I’m going home with my mom,” Joe said. “It’s time you two talk.”

I watched the crowd clear the stands. There was some heckling from the Bobcat student section, but our vice principal kicked the guys out before things got too rough. I imagined them taking it outside, our students’ paint covered bodies shivering while they defended our team. Trent was the last player to leave the locker room. By then, I was the last person still in the gym besides the janitor.

Trent didn’t see me and was walking toward the exit. He stopped when he heard me speed walking towards him.

“You had such a good game,” I said. “You guys played so hard.”

I placed my hand on his shoulder. He turned toward me, and his eyes were filled with tears.

“I quit,” he said.

“What?” I dropped my arm. I didn’t understand.

“This was my last game.” He held the gym door for me.

“What? Why?”

The lobby was empty; it looked so peaceful without students cluttering it. I tried picturing what the two of us looked like in this quiet space, disturbing its temporary tranquility. Did I look as crazy as I felt?

“Just take me home. I don’t want to talk about it.”

I pulled on his bag. “I’m not taking you anywhere, Trent, until you talk to me.”

“I don’t want to do this here.”

“Fine.”

We both went outside. Tonight had the type of cold air that sucked out our breath. New air struggled to refill our lungs because it burned. Trent started coughing. We climbed into the truck, and I started the engine, not moving yet. I wasn’t wasting this opportunity.

“Tell me what’s going on.”

I waited while his breathing calmed. The puffs of warm air coming out of his mouth clung to the windows like frost. He looked at me, and I saw that he was crying.

“We need to break up,” he said.

Trent transformed into a stranger. He was no longer the glowing teenager I met on the steps of the Diner. Some part of him had faded. Those blue eyes were broken and cruel.

“Why?” My voice sounded small. I needed to hold back my emotions because I needed to know what caused Trent to come to this conclusion, for his sake and my own.

“It’s... It’s not working.” He wasn’t looking at me anymore. His entire body was shaking.

“Trent, talk to me. Please.”

“I don’t want to talk. I just want it to be over. I want it all to be over.”

“Trent, I love you.” The words spilled out like vomit, and I knew that he wasn’t going to say it back.

He stared at me now, and I wished that I could take it back. Desperate girls say things like this to keep their men. This wasn’t me. Whether I meant it or not, I wasn’t the type to beg.

“I’m not moving this truck until you tell me what’s wrong,” I said. “And I don’t want a vague answer like ‘it’s not working’ because that’s bullshit.”

He looked down at his hands and said, “I have Hodgkin’s Disease.”

I knew it had to be something bad, but those words meant nothing.

“I don’t know what that is,” I said.

“It’s cancer.” It was softer than a wisp of air puffing out of the car heater, something that could easily have been misheard.

He grabbed my hand and traced it over the swollen lymph nodes in his neck, next to his armpit, over his chest, down to his groin. My hand started shaking in his.

“Trent, you don’t have to go through this alone. I’m here for you.”

He let my hand go. “I’ve been on your end, Kendra. With my dad and my grandma, and I am not putting you through that.”

The moon peeked through the clouds and cast a shadow on Trent, so that he looked like a ghost. It was hard to see his face.

“I don’t care. I want to be with you, no matter what.” I was pleading now.

“I don’t want to be with you, Kendra. Not like this. It’s what’s best for both of us.”

I didn’t know what else to say. I could promise to stay and offer my support, but I couldn’t stop Trent from leaving me. If he needed this space, I had to give it to him. It was hard, though, because his words bruised my fragile control.

It was time to go. We rode back to the Diner in silence. The moon tucked back behind the clouds, and the world disappeared. As soon as I put the truck in park, he unclicked his seat buckle with one hand on the door handle.

“Trent.” He stopped and looked at me with his wet clay eyes, which filled me with a sort of ache and tenderness. When the ache started overpowering the tenderness, I leaned over and kissed the cancer spot on his neck. “This isn’t the end.”

I didn’t look at him as he exited the truck and shut the door.

Chapter 20

A part of me opened. *Broke* open. So hard, I felt the snap. I couldn't cave into that feeling, not in front of the Diner, so I held it.

I drove past my house. Catherine had put Christmas candle lights in all the windows, and they blinked like stars. I imagined her prying Kyle away from the TV to finish his homework. She would pass the senior pictures on the wall, and maybe she'd pause and think about her children, and maybe then she'd cry. I didn't want to be home.

I made it two streets over, and I couldn't hold it anymore. I let out a scream that rattled my chest and crescendoed until all the air was pushed out of my body. Then I pulled into the United Methodist Church parking lot because I could no longer drive. I cried, harder than I ever had, and the control I learned to master leaked. I realized that I would never get that back; that part of me had died.

I texted Andre that I was staying at Kathy's tonight. I didn't know where I was going at first. I wanted to be alone, but at the same time, I needed someone. Not to comfort me, or share my pain, but to ground me. I needed to be pulled back to prevent from unraveling. I kept the windows down as a numbing agent, something physically painful to make me focus. My tears remained steady, coating my eyelids like mascara, and it was so cold that I swore they were frozen. But they weren't. I could blink, forcing the stream down my cheeks.

I knew I was heading toward Barton. When I got there, I looked in the broken rear view mirror, but I wasn't focusing on my appearance. I stared at the worn out piece of duct tape the unmentionable had used to repair it. I wondered why my family never actually fixed it. I decided not to look at myself because I was afraid it might deter me from finding Nick.

The campus was quiet. It was the Friday of finals week, so most people had already left. I followed two girls into Nick's dorm building. They were discussing how fucked up they were going to get tonight because they "failed at life." It was already ten-thirty. I wondered if they were actually going out or were going to drink in the dorm together. I hoped I got a roommate like that, one that would get drunk when we were having a bad day. Like Joe. What if I didn't find my Joe in New York? Or worse, what if I did, and then I lost the real Joe? These thoughts were too much given my current situation. I pressed my tongue to the roof of my mouth, but it didn't help.

Luckily, made it to Nick's door without anyone seeing me. I knocked a few times before someone answered.

"Who is it?" The voice didn't belong to Nick. It was probably his roommate Michael.

"Kendra," I said.

As Michael opened the door, he said, "Long time no see pirate girl." Then he actually saw me, and I was thankful I didn't look in the mirror. "Oh shit. You okay?"

"Kendra?" Nick was walking down the hallway. He looked at me like he was afraid for me.

He asked Michael to give us a few minutes. I noticed Nick's duffle bag packed on the floor.

"You really aren't coming home, are you?" I asked.

"Look, this is for the best," he said.

"Don't tell me that," I said. "Everyone needs to stop telling me what they think is best because you're wrong. You're all wrong. It's not going to make anything better."

Nick placed his hands on my shoulders. "What happened?"

“Joe didn’t tell you?”

“Tell me what?”

“About Trent?”

Nick shook his head. Joe had honored Trent’s privacy even from his boyfriend. Or maybe, he was trying to protect me. Either way I told Nick. Then I cried, somehow harder than before, only this time Nick held me and said that everything was going to be okay. Eventually, I stopped because my head was spinning. It was like being drunk without the temporary exuberance to make the fall worth it. I crashed out of nothing.

Nick said some things that made sense. He believed this wasn’t the end and that Trent would need me now more than ever. I agreed, but it wasn’t enough to make me feel better. While the breakup and the cancer hurt as separate demons, they were not the sole reasons I was losing it. It was far more complicated. Something I couldn’t put into words and didn’t want to. It was the day Trent and I met all over again. But this time, he wasn’t there to pick me back up.

Michael came back about an hour later and pulled a bottle of rum out from his sock drawer. He poured three shots.

“One semester down,” he said.

I woke up at seven o’clock with a splitting headache. It stemmed from a combination of crying and alcohol. My tongue felt like a dry bar of soap. Nick had slept on the floor. He was breathing heavy, almost snoring. Michael was lying on his stomach with one of his arms and legs hanging off the side of the bed. The thought of either of them waking up made me feel anxious, so I left their dorm room and drove home.

My house was quiet. All the lights were off. Catherine had put the fake Christmas tree in the foyer next to one of the crosses. With no lights, the artificial tree looked pathetic. It was worse than a dead Christmas tree; it was dull. The dusty angel watched over her dying, paint-chipped servants. The plastic leaves didn't help the situation. Catherine hated real needles. They made her and Kyle sneeze. I heard shuffling in my parents' room, so I locked myself in mine. I wasn't ready to talk.

I attempted to go back to bed but ended up staring at the ceiling for two hours. I decided I needed to do something productive. I took medicine for my headache and started working on some photo edits. This lasted about a minute before I found myself on Google. I tried searching "Hodgkin's Disease," but looking at the name made me cry. I looked at my phone and had a long text from Joe saying that Trent was an idiot and that they got into a big fight over the breakup. Nick also texted me to make sure I got home okay. It seemed unfair that he got to spend break in the Diner while I was trapped here. I couldn't go to the Diner, and they couldn't come here.

I stayed hidden in my room until I felt strong enough to tell Catherine what happened. I knew there would never be a perfect time. There was no such thing. However, when I found her in the kitchen, I knew something unrelated to Trent was wrong because Catherine stared at me like she didn't recognize me.

"What is this?" She was holding an opened letter.

I had no idea what she was talking about. She then started reading it. "We are pleased to inform you that you've been accepted for admission to the B.F.A. Photography program at Parsons New School of Design." What is this?"

"I got in." At first that was all I got out of the letter. I did it. I was good enough. I didn't have to go to Barton. I could pursue photography. Parsons thought I could do it. I forgot about

why I came downstairs because at least in this moment the bad stuff was impossible. I had a future, and the present melted away. This feeling didn't last because the look on Catherine's face reminded me that this was the moment I had been dreading for months. There was no escaping. Catherine was holding my future in her hands like a dishcloth.

"How is this possible?" she asked. "You didn't apply here."

"I did apply to Parsons," I said. "Clearly."

"No you didn't. You only applied to Barton."

"No. I only applied to Parsons."

I knew what she would say next: that I *had* to have applied to Barton because that's what we discussed and that Parsons made a mistake because I was going to Barton. I wasn't going to let her.

"I'm sorry," I said. "I wanted to tell you, but I didn't want you to be upset, and I didn't think I was going to get in. I mean I wanted to, but it's so competitive."

"You're not going."

That took me by surprise. The letter must have unraveled her because she was never this direct. She pushed the foot pedal on the trashcan and dropped my letter into the garbage. I immediately fished it out.

"Leave that in there." Catherine reached for the letter, but I pushed her arm away.

"No."

Her mouth hung open like she didn't understand the word. She reached for the letter again, and I hid it behind my back. I felt like we were in Kindergarten.

"You're not wasting your life on a hobby," she said.

It was bad timing, this letter, because I wasn't myself. "Because you are such a great role model. The only job you've ever had is micromanaging our lives."

It worked. Catherine closed her mouth and fluttered her eyelashes. I knew she would cry over this.

"You don't get a say in this. I am eighteen years old. I don't need my mother's permission to go to college."

"And who do you think is going to pay for this, then?" Her voice cracked.

"I'll find a way. I don't care if I have to pay back loans until I'm fifty. You don't have any power over this. But if you do this, if you make this a fight, you will lose me just like Ben and Nick."

I stormed out of the kitchen. Kyle was up now and watching *SpongeBob*. I hoped he would always watch *SpongeBob*, even when my parents told him he was too old for it.

I didn't cry. Instead, I read the letter over and over again, each time smiling a bit more. I grabbed my phone, and the smile faded because I didn't know whom I should call.

Chapter 21

I didn't talk to Catherine for three days. Andre tried to call me into his office a few times, but I told him that I wasn't ready to talk. I still hadn't told either of them about Trent. The longer I put it off, the easier it was to validate my silence. Kyle switched over from *SpongeBob* to *ABC Family* Christmas movies. He knocked on my door whenever a good one came on, but I ignored him. Christmas was in a few days, and I didn't want to associate it with the way I was feeling. It had the potential to ruin Christmas for me, so I wasn't going to celebrate.

Christmas Eve mass I went through the motions. The church was packed from what Catherine called "The Nominal Christians." These people went to church only on Christmas and Easter. I shook many of their hands, but I didn't utter a single prayer. Didn't even draft one in my head, and when I went up for Communion, I didn't take the bread. I side stepped and went straight for one large gulp of wine, hoping the strangers would get me sick this Christmas, so I wouldn't have to leave my bed.

Kyle watched me take the wine and paused for a moment, which clogged up the line. Andre tapped him on the shoulder, nudging him along. He decided to go for the wine, and I watched him purse his lips in disgust. Andre smiled a little and tussled Kyle's hair. As I was fake-kneeling, I found my hands folded over the back of the pew like Nick did. He was at the Diner tonight with Joe, Shay, and Trent. How could this be Christmas Eve? There was no joy in this ceremony, no joy in my heart. I couldn't pray today. Maybe not ever again because what sort of God could give Trent Ferguson cancer?

On Christmas morning, I could no longer avoid Andre. He was waiting in his study, wearing a thick red robe over his pajamas. He was one beard and about thirty pounds away from being Santa Claus.

“Why didn’t you tell me?” he asked.

“I didn’t think you’d understand.”

“I know. But talking about it could have made it easier to get used to the idea. Now you’re expecting us to jump on board with our only daughter living in New York City without ever having left Woodbridge. You’ve never been anywhere on your own. If you think I’m against art then you’ve hurt my feelings. But New York City is an entirely different lifestyle.”

“What about Mom? She told me it was a hobby, not a career.”

“I could have talked to your mother. Prepared her better.”

Here we were Christmas morning arguing about college and Catherine, and there was no Nick, no unmentionable, and Trent...

Andre looked alarmed when I started crying because it didn’t happen gradually. The broken bits exploded. I wanted to explain, but all that came out was, “Dad.”

Andre was an awkward hugger. His arms were stiff, and he kept his grip loose. I clung to him.

“What’s going on?” It was Catherine.

I felt Andre shrug. I pulled away from him and looked at both my parents. They stared at me with wide almost frightened eyes, and I realized how terrible they were at parenting. They had no idea how to communicate with us. I had to take the lead because I might not have both their undivided attention like this again.

I let it out in one sentence: “Trent broke up with me because he has cancer.” The reaction was instantaneous. Catherine started weeping, and even Andre had tears in his eyes. Kyle walked in on all of us, so Catherine took him aside to explain what was happening.

I went through the motions, mostly for Kyle. We did the presents and ate brunch, but none of it felt like Christmas. I tried to remember the day's roots, as the birthday of Jesus, but I wasn't feeling spiritual. Jesus made me resentful. Catherine told me that God would help me get through this. I tried explaining to her how I felt.

"How could one person have to suffer through so much?" I asked. "An orphan shouldn't get cancer."

Her smile attempted to show wisdom, but it felt condescending. "At least he can get medical treatment. He can beat this thing. There's a plan."

"That's not the point." I knew arguing with her about this would be futile, yet I continued anyways. "If God is so controlling over our destinies, you would think there would be a quota of grief."

"God only gives what people can handle."

I didn't believe that.

Right before I went to bed, Kyle handed me his *Mario Cart* game.

"Trent can have *Mario Cart*. Although I'd rather watch *SpongeBob* when I'm sick."

I hugged my little brother. "You always watch *SpongeBob*."

I let Kyle go, and he motioned for me to come closer. "Kendra, I have a secret."

He looked down the hall towards Catherine and Andre's room then whispered to me, "Today, Mom answered the phone that has the string, and the person hung up."

"You mean the cord?"

He put his finger over his lip and shushed me. "Yeah. And the person hung up, but the name showed up on the T.V. This happened at Thanksgiving, too."

He paused. "It was Ben."

“You didn’t tell Mom?”

“No because he hung up. That would hurt her feelings.” He looked at me with those big eyes. “Should we tell her?”

I thought about Ben’s relationship with Catherine. All those years of favoritism. I imagined her welcoming him back with open arms letting the lost year slip by, a forgotten memory. If he came back, Catherine would pretend things were normal, and Nick and I would fade into the background.

“No, don’t tell her,” I said.

“Is he coming back?”

I didn’t know how to answer.

I spent my last hour of Christmas looking through some old photos from the beginning of the year. I had some great ones of Joe at the football games, and Jake and Kathy winning Homecoming King and Queen. But then I found the first picture I took of Trent in Journalism, and I covered my mouth with my hand. What hurt most was how different Trent looked. He wasn’t sick yet, or at least not showing symptoms. His bright features still glowed. He looked out the window in a daydream, as if he were content. I knew the picture was deceiving. He was trying to fit in while grieving over his grandma at this time. He wasn’t any happier then, but on the outside he pretended to be.

I threw my camera in my drawer on top of my Parsons letter and all loose photos from the last few years of my life. I needed a break from my memories.

Chapter 22

Jake decided to throw a New Year's Eve party. I almost didn't go because Joe texted me to warn that Trent was going. But I hadn't seen Joe or Nick at all over break, and I needed to get out of the Lafontaine house. Kyle did his best to entertain me, but video games and *SpongeBob* could only work for so long. Catherine and Andre also attempted to cheer me up. Catherine made elaborate breakfasts every morning and baked a new batch of cookies every few hours. They were making me sick, so I started throwing them away in the garage garbage. Their disappearance, however, only encouraged her to make more. Andre took me to the mall one day. He followed me around, but I was faking my enthusiasm. I traced my fingers against the clothes on the racks, without looking at them. He eventually asked if I wanted anything, indicating a pair of pants I had brushed my hands over. I told him "no," and he finally let us go home. I appreciated their recognition of my sadness, but I hated feeling like a victim. I had to go to this party.

Jake's house was right on the district's edge about twenty minutes away from town. I planned on staying the night but the only thing I packed was the half bottle of Bacardi from summer that I hid below the floorboards under my bed.

I drove the truck separate from Nick and Joe. Even with the music cranked up all the way it didn't feel like I was going to a party. The empty seats felt so spacious that if I reached my arms into the nothingness it would swallow me.

Jake's house was tucked in the woods at least a mile away from anyone else. Both his parents were political activists and traveled a lot, which worked out in all our favors because the seclusion was ideal for parties. I parked behind Nick's car because it was the only open spot. The lawn was packed. Jake wasn't trying to hide the party. Lights poured out of every window, some

flashing. I stepped on the front porch and felt the house shake. I took a swig out of the Bacardi bottle before entering.

It looked like Jake had invited the entire school. I saw people I expected like the basketball team, Kathy and Alicia, and some of the junior class. But then I noticed underclassmen, even some freshmen, whose names I didn't know.

There was dancing going on in the living room, so I started looking for Joe there. He loved drunk dancing. I didn't find him, though. Instead I ran into Trent, and seeing him was as bad as I had imagined because it was like nothing changed. We made eye contact, and he smiled. I wasn't ready to talk, though, so I left the room.

Joe and Nick were drinking jungle juice in the hall. Joe was already a few cups deep, and his eyes resembled fingerprints on glass. Talking to him was disappointing. I thought I had wanted fun and light conversation, but so much had happened that I hadn't discussed with him that my words felt forced. It wasn't Joe's fault because we were at a party, and I doubted he sensed anything wrong. The jungle juice was his Soma like the alphas in *Brave New World*.

"I'm going to get another drink," he said.

Nick looked out of place. He kept glancing around the room, occasionally sipping his drink, but he wasn't having fun.

"You look bored," I said.

"I'm not bored," he said. "I don't fit in."

"But you grew up with most of these people."

He took a sip out of his cup. "It's hard to explain, but you'll get it next year."

I almost told him about Parsons but stopped. It had been three weeks since I heard. Three weeks of Hell that Nick spent happy. I was excited to see Nick, but I was also angry. Like the beginning of the year, his absence had been unnecessary, so I didn't tell him.

"How was Christmas?" he asked.

"Lonely," I said. I took a swig out of my bottle.

Joe found us again. He grabbed my arm and said, "Penny is here."

I found her in the kitchen taking a shot with Jake.

"What are you doing here?" I asked. She had straightened her hair and wore eye makeup. For once, she didn't look twelve, and that scared me because she had too much high school left to start all this. When did I have my first drink? It had to be sophomore year, but I had older brothers. Fifteen was too young. It was too soon to start lying to your parents because it made bigger lies easier, and soon they had no idea you were applying to college in New York City.

"Oh my god, I ran into Trent." She already had a drunk voice, whiny and slurred. "Please tell me it's not true. You guys were like the perfect couple."

"Wait you two broke up?" Jake asked.

Both their expressions were coated in drunkenness and pity. The combination was unattractive, and as Penny hugged me, I felt lonelier than I had all break. Kendra needed to switch to Drunk Kendra fast.

I took three gulps from my bottle, and none satisfying. There was no burn. The rum slide down my throat, silky like milk. The aftertaste was root beer, and the sweetness made me nauseous. I needed more than this. I wanted to swallow an ice cube covered in fire. I took another swig and nothing.

I tried finding Joe again, but Jake had followed me into the hallway.

“What the hell happened to you and Trent?” He leaned close to me, too close. His breath smelled like cinnamon and piss.

“We broke up,” I said. I tried taking a step away from him, but he leaned against me. I could *taste* his breath.

“He’s a real prick. He gets to date Kendra Lafontaine and start on the basketball team and what does he do? He quits.”

Trent hadn’t told them. How could he have not told them? Jake put his hands on my shoulders.

“You understand, Kendra,” he said. “The urge to leave. You don’t want to stay here and get stuck like everyone else. We’re bigger than Woodbridge.”

Before I knew what was happening, Jake pinned me to the wall and kissed me. I shoved him, but he didn’t budge. If anything it made him more insistent. When he tried slipping his tongue into my mouth, I kicked him in the shin, and he released me. I looked around. I didn’t see Kathy.

I needed air. I went to the back porch, and there was Trent, standing outside, alone. I remembered the last party and the conversation about his broken nose and what it led to, so I hesitated because I wasn’t ready to replace those memories. It was flurrying, and from the porch light the bits of snow looked like insects, fluttering up and down with the wind. The sight made me cringe, but I went outside.

“Having fun?” I asked.

He looked up at me, and I could see the worry starting to grow in his face, making a home along the smooth edges. The bump on his nose was blending. But his eyes were still bright

like light through stained glass. He was definitely sober, which made me relieved. He was still Trent. He didn't completely lose himself in the madness.

"I was ready to leave when we got here," he said. His fingertips were too irritated to bite, so he bit the inside of his cheek. "I thought I wanted to come, but I was wrong."

"Me, too," I said.

It was silent after that. I shivered because my drunk-blanket was non-existent. I could still taste Jake's mouth. Between that and standing in the cold with nothing to say, I didn't want to be here anymore. I bumped my leg against the railing and felt my keys dig into my skin. I pulled them out.

"Will you take me home?" I showed him the keys. "I can't drive, but I don't want to stay."

He hesitated.

"Please, Trent." I traced my fingers down his arm, and when I got to his hand, I opened his palm and pressed the keys into it. He closed his fingers over them.

I texted Joe to let him know we left. I didn't want to risk running into Jake by searching for him.

The drive home started quiet. It was weird having Trent drive me. The roles were usually reversed.

"I start chemo on Wednesday." He said it so casual, like he was commenting on the weather. But then he looked at me and blushed. "Sorry, I can't stop thinking about it. I thought the party would be a distraction."

I wondered if he ever talked about this with Joe. I hoped so because he needed someone, even if it wasn't me. Waiting for chemo. I'd give anything to trade places with him. "I'd be terrified."

There was a lull for a while. Drunk Kendra could usually keep a conversation going, but the drunk I was in wasn't liberating. I felt powerless.

My thoughts returned to the incident with Jake. "You didn't tell the team why you quit."

"I asked Coach Deeds not to." He clenched the steering wheel.

"But they think you abandoned them."

He didn't answer. Sitting in the passenger seat reminded me of all the trips Nick and I made together. Nick had abused our vehicle by spinning out and slamming on the breaks. Trent drove like he was holding a sleeping baby.

"What about school?" I asked.

"What about it?"

I had a thousand questions about school. Had he told his teachers? When was he going to tell everyone else? What would he do about absences? Would he even stay in school or had he looked at cyber schools? I didn't want to fight, though, so I let the subject drop.

The ride home was quicker than the ride there. Trent parked the truck in my driveway, and we both got out.

"You can take my truck," I said.

"I'll walk back to the Diner." He tossed me my keys.

"Trent, it's freezing."

"It's not that cold out."

I place my hand on his chest to stop him and felt a hard lump on his right pec.

“What is that?”

He pulled away and looked at me with the same cold eyes that told me he didn't want to be with me. The numbness lifted, and the leak started spilling out whatever feeling I had left.

He pushed past me. I tried grabbing his wrist and missed. “Please don't walk.”

“It's not going to kill me, Kendra!” He turned and disappeared.

I left the truck in the driveway. It was almost midnight, so I used the front door. My family probably went to bed hours ago. The foyer lights were off, and I made sure to close the door quietly.

“Look who's staggering home?” The light switched on, and I let out a yell. I saw the dark haired man standing there and thought I was hallucinating.

“Amateur move, kiddo,” Ben said. “Never use the front door.”

I heard Catherine say my name. She came in the foyer followed by Andre. She must not have noticed my current state because she embraced me and started crying. She kept saying how happy she was and how happy our family was going to be. Judge Lafontaine was not as emotional. He stared at me and crossed his arms. I told him that Trent drove me home. I thought he might ground me, but perhaps he saw how miserable I felt because he let me go to my room. I didn't bother getting ready for bed. I passed out fully clothed with all my makeup on. I would sort out everything in the morning.

Chapter 23

Ben was home. I woke up to that thought. I didn't see him again right away, but his presence was all over upstairs: the extra toothbrush, the smell of his cologne, the bags in his old bedroom. It was like no time had passed. I didn't know how to describe how I felt about this, but I knew it wasn't joy. It seemed more like a mix of confusion and bitterness.

Andre called me into his office before breakfast. He had his laptop set up.

I thought he was going to confront me about being drunk, but instead he said, "Let's accept your offer. I'll pay your deposit fee."

I wasn't expecting that. I'd never been more grateful for my father. Despite all the times he let Catherine boss us around and the moments he didn't stick up for us, he wasn't always bad. Andre had good intentions. But the real question was: had Catherine changed her mind?

As if he could read my mind, he said, "I'll talk to your mother."

So Catherine had no idea. The actual process was anticlimactic. A few clicks, and I was officially in. Perhaps this moment would've been more meaningful if I had told other people about it or if Catherine knew what we were doing. Instead, it was another secret.

I watched the way Andre looked at Ben, like he didn't trust him. Ben's absence affected Andre much differently than Catherine. He seemed upset for a bit, but then he took down the picture of Ben in his office and never mentioned his name again. That was when Nick and I started referring to him as the unmentionable. If Nick looked most like Catherine, Ben was Andre, at least in appearance. It was his eyes. He did not have that bright doe-eyed Catherine appeal. His were hard like Andre's, but without the wisdom.

Ben wasn't alone, either. A three year old boy, who called him "Papa," followed him around the house like a shadow. His name was Liam, and I knew he had to be Tiffany's son. However, she didn't seem to be in the picture.

Catherine's response was predictable. All was forgiven. She acted like he never left. She talked about present day things as if he already knew what he missed in the last year. I heard her say the words "Parsons" and "ridiculous." I hoped Andre knew what he was doing.

Kyle's expression matched Andre's. I tried getting him to talk about it because I knew Catherine and Andre wouldn't.

"I get what's going on," he said. "I don't like how everyone is pretending that everything is normal."

"It's easier to pretend," I said. "But you don't have to."

I felt for my little brother. He was wiser than a kid who watched *SpongeBob* all day should be. It seemed like he was having his childhood stolen.

"I'll miss you when you leave," he said. "You promise you'll come home sometimes, right?"

I hugged him. I knew I would come home sometimes, but I didn't feel capable of promising anything. I didn't want to let him down.

Classes started again on Tuesday. Nick was still off for another week, so he dropped Joe and Trent off at school. I tried to imagine him hanging out at the Diner, waiting for school to be done. I wondered what he would do with all that time. I was also mad that he was doing it. I

didn't want to have to drive Trent, but I was starting to feel replaced. At the end of the day the trio would get to hang out at the Diner, and I would have to go home.

I dreaded Prob and Stat. I had no desire to see Jake after what happened. Even if he apologized, I doubted that he told Kathy. When I got there, though, I realized I was wrong about the latter part. The tension in the room resembled what happened a few months ago. Jake and Kathy had their backs turned against each other with the awkward empty desk waiting for me. Neither said hi. I hoped that Kathy didn't think I had any interest in him. Later she found me in the lunch line.

"I thought we were friends," she said. It came out like a hiss.

"Look Kathy, it's not what you think. Jake forced himself on me. I had to kick him to get him off."

"I know a vengeful person when I see one. I heard about you and Trent, and I know who broke up with who."

She succeeded in finding the right insult to hurt me. "You don't know anything about that, Kathy."

She made a sound that was supposed to be a laugh, but it was forced, more like she was being choked. "It's people like you that suck. You act all innocent and nice, but deep down you're just a bitch."

Joe tried to calm me down on the walk to English. I explained to him the whole story, from Penny to my car ride home. He said he would talk to Kathy. Apparently, she and Jake had gotten into a big fight right before the party started. Joe thought that this might be the actual end for them. I felt nothing from this because their breakups were now a routine, and this time I didn't care if I remained friends with either of them. In a few months I would never have to see

them again. I wasn't "bigger than Woodbridge" as Jake had put it; I was beyond it. My problems surpassed their pettiness.

I also told Joe about Ben's homecoming.

"The prodigal son is back," I said.

"Does Nick know?"

I was frustrated by Joe's response. Why the fuck should I tell Nick? It didn't affect him. I was the one home dealing with it. Nick could hear the news then go about his day without ever having to see Ben. I realized my resentment was starting to shift between brothers, and it scared me. Perhaps, Nick was right; perhaps he wasn't so different from Ben. Then I thought of Parsons, and the guilt came back. I didn't want to follow my brothers' example.

In English, I sat next to Trent because even though I didn't know where we stood, I wasn't going to change my usual routine for him. I wanted to prove that I wasn't disposable. He said hi.

We turned in our creative assignments. I ended up writing mine the night before. I chose an Epsilon man or clone or whatever because I had little pity for the upper levels of the caste system. Even the Deltas had some advantages. I had my Epsilon accidentally get covered in red paint, so everyone mistook him for a Beta. At the end, he snuck into the factory that made Soma and drank so much that he tripped into a tub of it and drowned.

Towards the end of class, Trent didn't look right. Mrs. Pitts called on him, but he responded, "I don't know," before she finished her question. She looked a little stunned, but she asked someone else. His face turned grey, and he kept rubbing the tips of his fingers together. At the end of class I waited to leave with him.

Once we were out of the classroom, he grabbed my hand and whispered, “I’m having a panic attack.”

“What?”

He squeezed my hand and started breathing hard. “Take me somewhere empty. Please.”

I snuck us both into the auditorium. Trent sat down on the floor despite the hundred open seats. I crouched next to him because he was still holding my hand. He rubbed his thumb over my knuckles, and closed his eyes.

“I’m going to be okay. I’m going to be okay. I’m going to be okay.”

He clasped his other hand underneath mine, so it was sandwiched between his. I noticed how many hangnails he had; most of his fingers were swollen. His hands started shaking. Small beads of sweat gathered around his hairline, slowly dripping down his face. It didn’t seem like his incantations were working.

“Tell me something, Kendra. Anything.”

Ben was the first thing that came to mind because it was recent. But it wasn’t something positive. Then, I remembered what I’d been dying to tell him. Something I hadn’t told Joe yet. “I got in to Parsons.”

He smiled, and his breathing steadied a bit. He started taking longer breaths, and the color returned to his face. Another minute and it was like nothing happened. I realized I was now the one shaking.

“Sorry. I used to get panic attacks all the time, but I haven’t had one in years.” He looked up at the clock. “You’re going to be late for choir.”

He started standing up.

“Shouldn’t you go to the nurse or something?” I asked.

He shook his head. "It's over."

He started to leave, but I stepped in front of him. "Trent, wait."

Tomorrow was Wednesday, his first chemo day, and I knew it was a longshot, but I couldn't help from offering. "I'll go with you for your first treatment, if you want."

He didn't look at me as he said, "Thanks, but Shay will be there."

"I know but—"

"I meant what I said, Kendra." He pushed by me, and I wondered why I was still trying.

I skipped school on Wednesday, Chemo Day. I didn't even set my alarm, and no one checked on me. I should've gone. I had nothing to distract me, sitting at home all day.

I stayed in my room until noon. When I got downstairs, I heard the TV going and saw Liam's little head pop up from the cushion. He stared at me with big round eyes; they were creepy. I had forgotten about Ben. He was in the kitchen making lunch and seemed amused by me.

"You don't even try to hide it," he said. "You openly don't give a shit."

Catherine could pretend he missed nothing, but this past year created a rift that he couldn't close with his presence. He was too far removed from my life. However, now was my chance to hear his story. Perhaps, then he wouldn't be so smug.

"What happened with Tiffany?"

"Things don't always work out." He wasn't letting me off that easy. "You of all people should understand that by now. I heard about your boyfriend."

I clenched my jaw. "He broke up with me because he has cancer."

“If it wasn’t cancer it’d be something else. You’re going off to school soon. See, that’s my point. You’ll feel a lot better if you just accept that the breakup was inevitable.”

His eyes challenged me to speak, no encouraged it. He wanted me to fight back.

“You’re a terrible brother,” I said.

He laughed. “I wasn’t trying to be a good one.”

“Yeah, well.” I didn’t have a good come back. “That sucks because we could’ve used one.”

“You both seem to be getting through just fine. From what I heard, Nick has a little boyfriend, and you made it into the school you wanted in the Big Apple of all places. Doesn’t sound like you needed me at all.”

He brushed by me to bring Liam his lunch. I then asked the question that was bothering me about his return, and I was not proud of how spiteful it came out. “Is she dead? Is that why you have her son?”

I instantly regretted it. He turned toward me, and his eyes turned black. “She’s not. But I wish she were.”

The pity I felt for Ben surprised me. The lost year between us was a two-way street. Ben, Nick, and I were all suffering.

Thursday was the first really warm day of the year. The sky was the faintest of blue, one step up from white. It was far too nice a day to be wasted on school, or on sadness.

I wasn’t sure if Trent would be there. From what I read online the side effects could be as minimal as fatigue or as vicious as the stomach flu. When I saw him standing at his locker, he

looked like he had the later. His skin was the color of seaweed, and he looked like he was falling asleep standing. But, he waved to me as I passed and even smiled briefly.

In English, I felt like we were speaking a secret language.

“How are you?”

Something twinkled in those glossy eyes of his. “Oh I’ve never been better.”

“One to Ten. Ten being the worst,” I said.

He revealed six fingers under his desk.

I didn’t see him again until Journalism. I asked one to ten again and this time he gave me a five. Yet, somewhere in the middle of class the number must’ve gone up again, because he puked in the garbage can next to one of the sports writers. The poor girl looked horrified.

Everything stopped. All the stations turned to see what was happening. I automatically stood up.

“Oh my God, Trent!” Mrs. Sanders ran across the room in her heels, her arms spread for balance. “You need the nurse.”

“I’ll take him, Mrs. Sanders,” I said. I couldn’t help myself. Seeing him in pain overpowered my ego.

“Okay,” she said. “I’ll let her know you’re coming.”

I carried the waste bucket in case it happened again and led him out of the room.

“I lied.” He was panting. “I feel like at least a nine.” He stopped moving to look at me. “It’s like I don’t even care if I’m alive.”

Before I could respond he grabbed the waste basket from me and puked again. I rubbed his back, tracing the protruding ribs on his skinny body. I focused on the golden curls I once entwined my fingers with. I couldn’t imagine him bald.

When we got to the nurse's office, he took the basket from me. He didn't even say thanks. He slipped into the office, and I stood, frozen, until the hall monitor yelled at me to return to class. I didn't know how to go back. I didn't want to talk to Penny about it, or even hear about it. I wanted to hide.

Word spread after he threw up in Journalism. People started hating me after that, especially Kathy. I thought that she might sympathize when she heard the truth, but instead she told people we broke up because I couldn't handle it. I tried ignoring them. I had accepted my offer to Parsons. In a few months none of these people would matter, but I could feel myself slipping. Trent was still hanging on to his hair and those stupid polos, but he lost the spark in his eyes. He started missing Thursdays after chemo.

At home Ben was still there with Liam, and the move seemed permanent. He went to church on Sundays and ate meals with us. He found a job as a receptionist at the dentist office, and Catherine watched Liam during the day. I didn't know how to warm up to this kid. I didn't trust Ben's presence, so I ignored both of them.

The cycles started. Every other Wednesday Trent got chemo, and I started skipping sporadically, especially Thursdays because seeing Trent after chemo hurt too much. Mr. Bronze eventually yelled at me. He pulled me into his dark office one Friday and said that the choirs suffered when I wasn't there. He said my grade was also going to suffer if I kept this up. I told him that he needed to find a new accompanist at the end of the year, so he might as well start now. Then I went to see my guidance counselor and dropped choir. Joe was pissed.

I tried defending myself. "I don't give a fuck about choir, Joe."

This set him off. “You think I do? Huh? You think *that* is that most pressing thing on my mind? But it’s what we do, Kendra. It’s what we’ve always done, and we have to do those things.”

“Why? What’s the point?”

“You can’t stop living when something bad happens.”

I rolled my eyes at him. He then brought up Journalism. “Alicia said that Penny has been taking all the pictures for the paper.”

I could’ve told him that I was trying to encourage Penny, but that was a lie. The truth was I stopped bringing my camera to school, and I knew it had nothing to do with Penny. I didn’t feel like taking pictures of this place anymore.

“I know what it feels like, Kendra.”

“No you don’t because your stepdad didn’t leave you. You lost him. I didn’t lose anyone. I was *let go*, and now I get to watch him slowly disappear.”

“Yeah, but my dad did.”

I stopped talking because I had broken the rule. His father was an off-limits topic. Joe kept staring at me like he didn’t know me.

Things changed then. I tried for a bit longer to wake up in the morning with a sense of purpose. I’d hang my camera around my neck, and tell myself that today I would do something meaningful. But then someone would whisper behind my back or I’d see Trent and the whole fragile system would crash. Joe and I went through a lull after this. Without choir, we hardly saw each other. Nick called and texted me, but I didn’t answer. I had been crushed like a crystal ball by a fist, so I shut off. I lost days at first, then weeks. Then January was gone. Then February. I

noted Ash Wednesday only because it was a chemo day. Cycle after cycle until I was so dizzy that all I could handle was sleep. The individual days became dreams.

Chapter 24

“Wake up princess.” Ben turned on my bedroom light. It was seven in the morning on a Sunday.

I pulled my covers over my head. I had no desire to go to church. “I don’t feel good.”

“That’s what you said last week.” He yanked my covers off. “I’m not buying it.”

Ben’s permanent residence was becoming a nightmare. Everyone else left me alone. If I slept through dinner, Catherine left me a plate in the fridge. If I said I was sick, I didn’t have to go to church, or school, or anything. Andre stopped calling me into his office, and Kyle started playing more video games in his room rather than share the TV with Liam. We all had our own space, but Ben wasn’t settling. He tried forcing us to eat dinner together regularly. He encouraged Kyle to play with Liam. I even watched him hide Andre’s glasses to get him to come out of his study. But I received the worse treatment. He taunted me about everything from Parsons to the shoes I wore. I just took it, pretending he wasn’t there, and that was what aggravated him. He wanted engagement, and I wanted rest.

“Stop feeling sorry for yourself,” he said.

He started to leave, but I grabbed the tissue box off my nightstand and threw it at him.

“You’re a fuck face,” I said. “Why won’t you leave me the fuck alone?”

He picked up the tissue box like it was something precious. He looked surprised but also amused. “We all have shit, Kendra.”

“You don’t get to judge me. You don’t even know me.”

“I’ll judge you all I want because you’re being a selfish little brat. We all have shit. My son is downstairs. Yes, *my* son because his mother *abandoned* us.”

“You abandoned us!” The sound that came out of my mouth startled me. I didn’t realize my voice could have so much power. It rattled my chest. All the resentment I let build over the last year had cracked. “You don’t get to come back here like everything is fine. We are all fucked up because of you. Because you left us in this lonely fucking house.”

He placed the tissue box on the desk. “I didn’t cause any of your problems.”

I stood up. “You’re the unmentionable one. The big black hole in the family. Catherine cried over you for an entire year. Andre couldn’t even say your name, and I hated you for making it so hard to leave without being a villain. You were supposed to be my big brother and protect me and instead all these years you let Catherine try and mold us.”

For the first time Ben looked small to me. He had no smirk, no witty comeback. His shoulders slumped in defeat. I felt like I was yelling at Nick.

“You want to know why I came back?” His voice was trembling. “Because it was best for Liam. We needed a fresh start, and I needed help.”

I took a step toward him. “You’re a coward. I told Trent you’d only come back when you needed something.”

“Just stop.” There they were, the scary eyes, like burning coal. “Your life isn’t so bad, honey. So grow up.”

I slapped him.

Ben held his cheek and then did something weird: he smiled. It wasn’t a happy one. Instead, his lips were saying, “I deserved it.” He then left the room without saying a word.

I sighed. It had been so easy to shut off from everything, but the ache in my chest from Ben was satisfying because I realized that he had changed. I wasn’t ready to forgive him, yet, but I knew that someday I could. And our fight had lifted me from my dream.

Dear God... The Lafontaine pew was kneeling before mass began. I'm not asking for anything. My prayers are futile.

I was ready to go through the motions. I sang when I was supposed to and answered with the appropriate responses. During the opening prayers, I looked at the glass windows, representing saints with yellow faces. I let Kyle hold the book for the readings, and he lifted it up to his chin so I could see. But I was busy watching Liam, who was holding on to Ben's pant leg and sucking his thumb. Then it was time for the Homily. The priest made eye contact with me right before he began, so I listened even though I had not heard the Gospel.

"The Gospel refers to three symbols," he said. "Wheat, death, and service. In order for wheat to grow, the seed must fall to darkness, to the unknown. In a sense, it has to die in order to create. So is faith a complete surrender to God, a willingness to trust in the blindness. We all must die, but to live your life only for yourself is a form of death in life. To find fulfillment is to serve others and God. These are the spiritual movements. You must be willing to let go and live for others all in the service of God."

I could feel my heart pumping, each contraction heavy before pushing the red up to my head. My head was swimming in it. I wish I had listened to the Gospel because it was speaking to me. And I disagreed with most of it. I wasn't trusting in the blindness. I refused because that was Catherine's way, and she wasn't listening to the entire message because, while she did service for God, she missed the most important one: living for others. I was failing in that, too. I had died sometime in January and left no one to mourn but myself.

“Each day is a gift. Find a purpose. Do not just go through the motions. And live for Jesus Christ.”

Thank you, God.

I ran straight to the Diner after church. It was closed, but I remembered the spare key this time.

Joe came out of his room when he heard the door open. He squinted at me and blinked a few times, confused. The last time I was here was sometime before Christmas break.

“Kendra?”

“I’m sorry, Joe.” We both started walking toward one another. “I’ve been going through the motions these last two months because it was easy, and in all of that I forgot my purpose as your friend. You know me better than anyone, and I was stupid to think you couldn’t understand how I felt.”

We embraced, and it sucked the silence off my skin. I was getting a lot of things wrong lately, but Joe was my constant. Without him, I was blind.

“Don’t you ever fucking do that again,” he said.

I knew the apartment was empty when I got here, but I now consciously realized it.

“Where are Trent and Shay?”

Joe kept hugging me. “I don’t want to tell you.”

I pulled away. “Don’t shut me out now.”

He sighed. “He had a slight fever this morning so they went to the hospital. I think he’ll be out of school this week, but he should be fine.”

There was that f-word again. But being alone with Joe was good. It reminded me of old times, although, the feeling was new because we weren’t those same kids anymore. Too much

had gone by. We tried catching up. I told him about me slapping Ben, and he applauded me. He then said that he went to chemo with Trent.

“It’s indescribable,” he said. “It’s like watching paint dry inside someone you love.”

“What does that even mean?”

He shrugged.

Chapter 25

Shay had been letting them take her car during the day, but since Trent did end up being out for the week, I drove Joe to school. The truck no longer felt so big.

“How’s Nick?” I asked.

“Good.” He answered too quickly, like an automated response.

“What’s wrong?”

He hesitated. Out of the corner of my eye I saw him wring his hands like Trent sometimes did.

He finally said, “I’m feeling less like a friend in this boyfriend thing and more like a boy.”

“What do you mean?”

“I don’t know.” He paused. “He comes to the Diner all the time, but he hasn’t invited me to Barton in weeks, and when we talk on the phone it’s always like lovey. He never asks about my day.”

“Have you told him how you feel? Because he’s an idiot at reading people.”

“I don’t want to get in-between you two. He’s your brother, and I’m your best friend. It’s a dangerous mix, and I knew that going in.”

I let the subject drop, but I wished I could do more to make Joe feel better. I could always try to casually mention the issue to Nick, but he was good at brushing off subtlety. If he was using Joe for the boyfriend status to get to Catherine, however, then our mix would become poison.

In Journalism, I brought my camera to class even though I had no new photos. Penny had the layout opened on her computer, but she was busy trying to text someone without Mrs. Sanders seeing.

“That layout is terrible,” I said. “Why are you using an orange font? And that photo needs to be cropped.”

She jumped a little and dropped her phone.

“And put that away,” I said. “Don’t be that girl.”

“Where have you been?” she asked.

I could’ve asked the same thing because Penny was different. She had gotten her belly button pierced, which she now showed off more than her brace-less smile, and the tips of her hair were dyed blue.

“Do you want to take over my position when I’m gone?”

She pressed her eyebrows together, looking both confused and annoyed at me. “Yes?”

“Then start listening to me.”

I called Nick later that night. I didn’t bring up Joe in this conversation because I first owed Nick an apology. I had ignored him for too long. I expected him to be mad, but he wasn’t. Most of our conversation revolved around Ben. I tried explaining the change in him, but more importantly I wanted Nick to understand how quickly Catherine forgave him. If Nick came home, there was hope that she would “forgive his sins,” and maybe learn to accept them.

“He is the favorite,” Nick said. “Catherine would forgive anything he did.”

On Friday, Joe suggested that we look at prom dresses for me. He said Alicia already found hers. The boutique was on Main Street a few blocks from the Diner. On the way over I asked about Trent.

“I have a feeling he’s going to shave his head soon. Probably this weekend,” Joe said. “It’s been falling out in clumps.”

I didn’t realize the last time I saw him would be the last time he had hair.

The lady working behind the counter was new. Her hair was yellow, and she had skunked half of it black. She looked like a bumblebee, which appropriately matched the flower tattoo on her neck. It reminded me of Tiffany’s.

She helped us sort through what she called “the latest trends” and threw in a few “classics.” None of them looked like me, but I didn’t want to offend her.

“Are you her date, honey?” she asked Joe.

He hesitated for a moment. “No.”

I tried on one of the “trendy” dresses. It had an open back and floral print. It looked more Easter than prom. Joe made a gagging gesture with his finger.

“Did you ask Nick?” I asked.

He sighed. “He said he doesn’t want to go.”

I was disappointed in Nick. Even if he felt “out of place” at high school events, this was important to Joe, and that meant sucking it up.

“Then why don’t we just go together?” I asked. Going with your best friend seemed like an even better alternative because at least there’d be no pressure. We’d just have fun.

“Because you’re going with Trent.”

“You’re crazy,” I said. Trent and I barely spoke anymore, which is what he wanted. Prom wasn’t going to happen.

I continued trying on dresses, and Joe forced me to critically analyze how I felt in each of the dresses. He wasn’t letting me float this experience. The pink one made my boobs look obnoxious. The red one was too loose. I then tried the “classic” look.

I looked at myself in the mirror and saw the pretty blue beads circling my waist like a belt holding up pounds and pounds of wavy fabric that swallowed my legs and feet. It was an ocean, and I was a fish without a swim bladder, floundering around, sinking. I looked up at my face, but all I could see were my dark waves of hair, hanging just past the bottom of my boobs, feeling heavier than the dress.

“Alicia got a big one like this. Apparently, Kathy tried talking her out of it because *she* wants one, but I don’t know how you’d move in that thing.”

I wasn’t listening to him. I was trying to picture Trent bald. Trying to see his exposed flesh reflecting the light. “Joe, I want to donate my hair.”

I turned to face him.

“I’m sad, Joe. I feel so empty, and it’s not just Trent. It’s everything.”

“I know,” he said. “It’s like you’re losing everything, and you care, but you don’t, and it leaves a void.”

“Exactly.”

I had been so Kendra-centric that I hadn’t noticed Joe’s suffering. The Nick situation must be affecting him worse than he admitted. Plus he lived with Trent. It was cancer every day.

He ran his hands over the ends of my hair. “Let’s do it, then. For us. For Trent.”

“I love him, Joe.”

He hugged me. "I know you do."

Chapter 26

Andre was the first to see my new hair style. He was sitting in his office with the door wide open.

“Hi, Dad.” He looked up from his newspaper, pushing up his glasses that hung on the tip of his nose with his forefinger.

“It looks nice short,” he said.

“Thanks.” I smiled and headed toward the kitchen.

Catherine and Kyle were working on his math homework. She didn’t get the hair at first. She was appalled that I made such a drastic change out of nowhere.

“She did it for Trent,” Kyle said. He said he read a story in school about a girl who got cancer and lost all her hair. I needed to stop doubting his perceptiveness.

This made Catherine cry. I told her Joe shaved his head, and then Kyle said he wanted to. This made *me* cry. I knew Catherine would never let him, but his empathy suggested there was hope for him in spite of my family.

“Does this mean you two are back together?” she asked.

I shook my head and said, partly to myself, “Don’t get your hopes up.”

On Sunday after one, Joe texted me: *I’m running errands with my mom today, and Trent needs a babysitter. It’s about time you two made up.*

I left immediately. I decided to walk because the sun was out. I could smell the sweet openness of spring through the chilly air. I tried imagining little buds on the trees sprouting up

into leaves, while the ground thawed enough to grow grass long enough to need to be mowed.

None of spring seemed possible. All I saw was winter, endless bare branches and thick coats.

Shay and Joe were on their way out when I got there.

“He might not admit it,” she said. “But this is what Trent needed. You kids never cease to amaze me.” She hugged me until it hurt to breath.

“Plus, the short look is in.” She pointed to her own short spiked hair that she had as far back as I could remember.

“Thanks, Shay.”

Joe placed a hand on my shoulder. Bald looked good on him, almost like he’d done it his whole life.

I didn’t realize how nervous I was until I stood at the bottom of the stairs looking up at the little wooden door. These stairs always brought good memories. Joe and I used to slide down them on pillows when we were little until Shay would yell at us. They symbolized my escape all these years from the Lafontaine house. But today, the fading carpet was a broken road. I nearly slipped on the first step. What if Trent didn’t respond? What if it only pissed him off? When I reached the top, I kept the brass knob, cold and smooth under my hands, still. Taking a deep breath, I turned the knob and stepped through.

I hadn’t been as prepared as I thought to see him like this. Though he had looked sickly for months, now he could now pass as nothing other than a cancer patient.

“What did you do...” his voice trailed off. He walked toward me, stopping right before our toes touched. His bald head reflected the light. He gently pinched the tips of my hair rubbing his fingers together.

It was like he was noticing me for the first time. I never felt more like a stranger. He had been gone for so long, melting away from my life. Now here we stood with a lot less hair, waiting for the other to say something, anything that could bring a sense of normalcy back into our lives. I knew I'd have to be the one.

“You look even more handsome,” I said. I reached up to rub his head. It felt slightly lumpy like a sponge, like it could breathe for the first time.

He then kissed me. He caught me off guard enough for me to fall into it. His lips were somehow softer than I remembered like plums.

“Trent.” I pushed him away from me. I wanted this so badly that I couldn't risk having it taken away again.

“Kendra.” He held out open palms. “Please.” It was his eyes that did it; the broken crystals that cameras couldn't catch had me holding his hands and kissing him back.

Next thing I knew I was up against the wall and he was kissing me, hard. I had nothing to grab onto, just his bald head and a gnawing feeling in my brain telling me I needed to breathe. Trent wasn't letting go. He pressed his lips against mine so hard I could feel the inside of my teeth slicing my upper lip. The last time he kissed me like this was my choir concert. I wasn't even in choir anymore. His hands were buried in my short hair, pulling on the roots.

Just as quickly, it was over, and my entire body was shaking. Trent was hunched over with his face buried in his hands, sobbing. I placed my hand gently on his back and wrapped the other arm around him. He latched onto me, his face resting on my shoulder.

I didn't know how long he cried. It could have been a minute; it could have been twenty. I closed my eyes and my heart fell into the rhythm of his sobs. He finally pulled away, and wiped his nose on his wrist. His eyes were a soft pink.

“I feel like I’m already dead,” he said. “I don’t even recognize myself anymore. It’s like all of me is gone.”

“I still see you, Trent.” I held his pale face in my hands, and wiped his tears with my thumbs. “You’re still the person who comforted a stranger on the steps of the Diner.”

“I got accepted to Johnson and Wales.”

“That’s good news.”

He rolled his eyes. “I have to defer enrollment for a year to ‘recover.’”

“Then go next year.” I understood that he was probably frustrated, but he was allowed to defer, which meant his dreams would still be waiting for him.

“That’s not the point,” he said. “*You* get to go off to college in the fall and I’m stuck here. When I miss a day of school I feel like I’m going crazy. This past week was my worst nightmare. If I miss an entire year... I’ll lose my mind.”

He started pacing through the kitchen with his hands clutching his head.

“I don’t want to stop because then it wins, and I’ve already lost so much. I mean, I never even got to try working at the Diner. I got sick and everything stopped. It’s like I can’t hold on to anything.” He was now shouting at me. “I just want to have one thing and then I lose and I lose and I lose.”

He started breathing heavy and grabbed the back of a kitchen chair to steady himself. He then looked up at me and said, “You brought the best out of me, and all the panic, all my anxiety was calm when you were there. I knew I’d be okay and even when I couldn’t control it, I knew. I didn’t know what would happen with us going to different schools, but I wanted to try because you meant everything. And I couldn’t even keep that.”

“You pushed me away. That doesn’t mean I left. I’m still here. You never lost me.” I grabbed both his hands.

“I lost you the moment I found out that I have cancer.” He let go of my hands. “I’ve told you, Kendra, that I couldn’t keep you like this. The guilt and pain that comes from your end is worse than mine. I can’t keep you tied up when you have bigger plans than me. I wanted what’s best for you.”

“If you care about me, you’ll let me decide what’s best for me.”

“If you care about me, you’ll go.”

I would do anything for Trent, but not this. I couldn’t go back to feeling numb. I kissed him softly until he kissed me back. Then I was pulling him to his room, and he was following.

And it was happening. The condoms were under the sink, and my clothes were on the floor, and I was ready. He struggled with my bra strap because his hands were shaking. I gently pulled them off and unhooked it myself. I traced my fingers over the bump on his chest.

“It’s my port,” he said. “It’s where they inject the chemo.”

I kissed him until my lips hurt, and we were lying naked next to one another, waiting. There was no panic this time. His hands were warm and his lips were compassionate. Fifteen year old Kendra was right; I did know.

Everyone warns that it hurts the first time, and it did for about a minute. Then it was okay. It was just us with less hair and clothes, and the part of me that broke was healing. When it was over we laughed, hard, until Trent got the hiccups, and my eyes filled with tears.

The reaction was inappropriate, but it was liberating to laugh until it caused pain, to love until we let go. We put our clothes back on and he held me in his arms, tracing my spine with his fingers. He asked if I would go to chemo with him this week. I didn’t have to think about it

because I would do anything for him. I said yes, and he kissed the top of my head before falling asleep.

Chapter 27

It was chemo day. I didn't sleep at all the night before. I kept dreaming that I was taking the chemo for him but was allergic to it. My hands swelled up the color and texture of oranges until I couldn't feel my body.

Trent went through his "chemo routine." He was wearing sweatpants and a button down shirt, for comfort and easy access to the port. He ate a piece of toast with peanut butter, and then spent ten minutes brushing his teeth and flossing to prevent mouth sores. Finally he packed a cooler with Captain America ice pops.

"What are the popsicles for?" I asked.

"The doxorubicin," he said.

The out-patient facility that administered the chemo was located right next to Mercy Hospital about thirty minutes outside of Woodbridge. We took my truck. Trent chewed on ice cubes along the way.

Before we got out, he said, "Getting chemo is very boring. I promise. It seems scary, but once it starts it's just tedious." He grabbed my hands. "But I want to prepare you because technically I'm a pediatric patient. I usually get my own room, but there will be kids, little kids, and that never gets easier."

No warning could've prepared me for it. We entered the waiting room to check in, and all I saw was Kyle replicated about a dozen times. Most of the kids had no hair, and a few had oxygen tubes wrapped around their faces. But the worst part was their parents, putting on a brave face. But the masks were wearing thin. I could see decades added on to people not much older than me. There was one kid in a wheel chair that started crying. The shriek was sharp enough to cut through our bones. We were probably only in there ten minutes, but it felt like hours.

Eventually, a nurse took us back into an exam room. I sat in a little chair beside the exam table. The nurse immediately took his weight and blood pressure.

“You lost a little bit,” she said. “Have you been feeling nauseous?”

“I’m nauseous now,” he said. “I know it’s in my head.”

“That’s very common. We can give you something to help you relax.”

He shook his head. “I’ll be okay.”

“How have your bowel movements been?” The nurse asked.

He blushed and looked down at his feet. “Fine.”

“Alright, let’s check your blood cells. Then I’ll go get some anti-nausea drugs for you.”

Trent unbuttoned his shirt, revealing the golf ball sized lump below his collarbone. The nurse sprayed some shit on the bump then pushed a needle into the center and extracted Trent’s blood. He didn’t even flinch.

“I’ll be right back,” she said. She carried the tube of blood out on a little tray.

“Are you okay?” I looked up at Trent. He seemed so calm and composed. Not an ounce of fear hidden in his blue eyes and here I was freaking the fuck out.

I got up out of my chair and sat next to him on the examination table. He held my hands, rubbing his thumbs on my palms. I was overwhelmed, but it was more than that. I felt like I was a spectator watching from a different room. Or maybe more like a ghost.

The doctor then came in, and I hopped off the examination table.

“Hello there.” He extended his hand to me. He was a middle aged man with a beard and dusty gray hair. “I’m Cal Durcan, Trent’s oncologist.”

“I’m Kendra.” I shook his hand.

“Ah, the infamous Kendra. So nice to meet you.”

“Here’s some nausea pills,” the nurse said handing him two pills and a cup of water.

“And this is for home.” She gave him a jar filled with white pills. “Take this once every twelve hours for forty-eight hours after you get home and you shouldn’t have any nausea at all.”

“Thanks,” he said and he swallowed both thumb sized pills with one gulp of water.

Dr. Durcan took Trent’s temperature, and then spent some time typing on his baby laptop.

“You shaved I see,” he said. “Everything seems to be normal. Nellie will be around in a minute to get you started. Do you have any questions beforehand?”

Trent shook his head. Dr. Durcan shook my hand again and left the room.

I immediately asked Trent why I was so infamous. It seemed silly that I fixated on that, but it seemed even weirder that the oncologist knew who I was. Trent and I were hardly speaking during the first half of his chemo.

“You were easy to talk about,” he said. “My family made me think of illness, which made me panic. Memories with you were bright. It hurt sometimes, but I tried remembering that light.”

I felt better because it was like I had been there.

Nurse Nellie came in about ten minutes later. She was an older stout woman with freckles and a large smile.

“Hello, there.” She also shook my hand. “You must be the girlfriend.”

“Kendra.” I raised my eyebrows at Trent, whose face flushed.

Nurse Nellie put us in a private room, which looked more like a cubicle. The walls were a tan color that made Trent’s skin look even paler. There was one window with white blinds and a little TV in the corner, facing Trent’s recliner. I sat in a plastic chair next to him.

“Alright,” Nurse Nellie said. “Let’s get this show on the road.”

The chemo was called ABVD. The “A,” Adrian-ism or doxy-something, held the nickname the “Red-Devil.” This was the one that caused all the side-effects seen in movies: the nausea, hair loss, mouth sores. The nurse explained it all to me as I watched her push the drug into his vein out of what looked like a turkey baster. It was redder than blood. I gave Trent one of the Captain America popsicles to block out the taste of the drug.

“What does it taste like?” I asked. I tried keeping my voice calm.

“Cherry,” he said. “Which is surprising since half the pop is blue.”

Nurse Nellie chuckled. “This one has a great sense of humor.”

“But seriously,” he said. “I don’t know. It’s hard to describe. Kind of like metal.”

I kept my eyes on the nurse, who wore thick blue gloves and a protective coat. I tried not to think about the implications of that, how she had to take heavy precautions from something she was pumping into Trent. Push, push, push. The red poison mixed with his blood, until the turkey baster was completely empty.

The B and the V drugs were transparent and given the same way as the Red. Nurse Nellie told me their names, but I forgot as soon as she told me. No ice-pops were necessary for these. I didn’t feel like I was in a chemo center during B and V. The situation started to feel ordinary, almost boring like Trent said. He talked with Nurse Nellie, while I watched the turkey baster empty. For all I knew, the liquid could have been water.

The last looked like jelly. *Dacarbazine*. The name stuck out; it sounded like a character from *Beowulf*. The liquid was clear, like B and V, but it wasn’t administered the same. It hung in a bag where it would drip slowly into his port over the next hour. Nurse Nellie left us alone, during this. Each drip seemed to suck Trent’s energy. His eyes started becoming glossy.

“I’m all drugged up,” he said, letting his eyelids rest together.

“How do you feel?” I asked. He half smiled and lifted his palm up toward me. I took his hand, which felt so hot and smooth compared to my cold and dried out winter hands.

“I love you, Kendra,” he whispered. I sucked in a small amount of air like a hiccup.

“Is this the drugs talking?” I asked.

He shook his head back and forth, slowly. He squeezed my hands once then closed his eyes, drifting someplace else.

Trent looked so peaceful in his sleep, almost too peaceful, like death. That thought made my chest tighten, but the gently rise and fall of his consoled me. He was handsome in his peace. The wrinkles on his forehead relaxed, and the purple bruises below his eyes lifted. I knew he wasn’t hurting, and I wished he could always have this calm. But he couldn’t. He would eventually wake up and experience the painful aftermath for days. He’d miss school tomorrow and barely make it through on Friday. Then he’d rest all weekend and wear polos again on Monday and maybe a hat because he was bald now. Maybe he’d even feel good by Friday. But the cycle would continue; it always did. Over and over we repeated until the routines were etched in our skin like tattoos outlined with blood. But in his calm I saw his strength. He could beat this; not just cancer, but chemo.

I pulled out my phone and turned on the camera. The lighting was poor, but I needed this moment even if all I had was too small a lens to give it a proper frame. This was a part of Trent’s life and mine no matter how painful. And it was here, in this little bland room with one window, that Trent, while an IV pumped him with toxins, told me, for the very first time, that he loved me. I never wanted to forget that moment.

Chapter 28

Nick's car was parked in the driveway when I got home later that night. When I entered the kitchen, I found that, for the first time in over a year and a half, we were all home. Andre was sitting in a chair, lounging with his fists resting on the table. Kyle sat on his hands, his small body hunched forward. Catherine's hands were folded on the counter. She kept her eyes glued to them, and I realized that she was praying. But the strangest sight was Ben and Nick, who stood next to one another like twins. Liam sat on the counter between them, swinging his feet. I'd call this one "Lost Years."

Ben then asked me if I would be a godmother for Liam. He said that he wanted Liam to be baptized. They all looked at me, and I saw that I was the missing piece in this frame. I said yes without thinking, but I didn't know if I wanted that. I didn't think I'd be a good godmother, but it was impossible to say no in front of all of them. I couldn't be the one to break us further.

The moment didn't last. They immediately dispersed, once I agreed. Andre disappeared into his office, Ben took Liam to bed, Nick went to his room, and Kyle returned to the TV. It left me alone with Catherine, but she was looking at me tenderly. I didn't recognize that expression.

"Your father and I talked about Parsons," she said.

She then wrapped her arms around me, but she wasn't crying.

"I'll miss you," she whispered. Then she gave me a kiss on the cheek. She said that Ben was lucky to have such a good sister.

Later, I got Nick alone in my bedroom. He was apparently going to be the godfather.

"Did you and Catherine make up?" I asked.

"No," he said. "I thought I needed Catherine's approval in order to be with someone. But I was wrong. I don't need her or anybody."

“What about Joe?”

He was looking out the window at the dark sky. “I told you we were going to give it a try. We did.”

I was disappointed. My family was finally back together, but it didn’t feel fixed. My brothers had changed, but it didn’t seem enough. It was baby steps in the right direction. The slow pace would never be enough to make us whole. Nick and Ben somehow made me feel small and important congruently; I loved and hated them so much all at once.

Trent returned to school after two weeks off, and things changed for both of us. He took his hat off at the door and walked sandwiched between a bald Joe and a short-haired Kendra. Everyone stared, not just at Trent. We defused some of the blow. I’d call this one “Curvature of Field” because no one seemed able to focus. They stared and blinked, and we become new students, a false image.

Kathy approached me in the lunch line for the first time in two months. “Kendra, I am so sorry.”

I told her it was okay, but it wasn’t. I didn’t forgive her, and I doubted I ever would. However, for the sake of high school I could suck it up until graduation. I forced a smile, but she wouldn’t take her eyes off my hair.

“Jake and I broke up for good,” she said.

I gave her an appropriate response.

“No, it’s okay,” she said. “I want to go to Barton and I’m sick of him making me feel guilty for it.”

On the walk to English Joe told me that he was going to take her to Prom. He said Jake had asked someone else, and he knew that she was upset about it.

“Plus, I decided I’m going to Barton, so I might as well stay friends with her,” he said.

I hated that idea. I didn’t want Joe settling with mediocre friends, never leaving this place. And I didn’t want him to be around Nick. He deserved better than dealing with that. Barton was too small a campus to completely avoid him. If I had my way I would take him to New York with me.

Joe knew me enough to sense my concern, but he only addressed part of it, which I was thankful for. I wasn’t ready to start considering how this transition would affect our own friendship.

“Don’t worry, Kendra,” he said. “Nick and I were friends once. Maybe we can go back to it.”

In Journalism. I soon found out that Jake had asked Penny to Prom. She was sitting on the edge of her chair avoiding eye-contact for a few minutes before she finally admitted the news.

“What did you say?” I asked.

She shrugged. “I want to go to prom.”

It was hard not to lecture her. Penny still seemed so young, and Jake could crush her. It would be like squeezing an egg. However, the next day, Penny came to Journalism with her hair about eight inches shorter. It hovered just over her shoulders and she pulled a piece back from her hair with a pin.

“I did it for Trent, of course,” she said. “But I mostly did it for you. You’re like a sister.”

I started to cry, and she held me in her tiny arms. I couldn't scold her. I wanted to protect her, but I couldn't any more than I could myself.

Prom court had been listed that day. Alicia, Kathy, Joe, Jake, Trevor, and Trent all made it, and I was glad because it would allow one last triumph for my friends before we fell apart for good. Penny told me that I should've been on it, but I told her that it was good that I wasn't. I wasn't a queen, not here.

"I want you to remember something, Penny," I said.

She looked at me, and I saw her world in front of her, still empty enough to build who she was, to build her life. But her life was like my own. We were in similar places, just different times. We had the outside world ready to leak into Woodbridge, and while we made and would continue making mistakes in this place, we had the hope of moving on. This was not our peak. I hoped that I had left her with enough tools to someday realize this.

"Photographers," I said, "live just as much in the moment as the objects they capture. We're just not the focus."

Chapter 29

Trent and I rode to Prom in my truck. It was just at Woodbridge High. The junior class had decorated the gym to cover the Wombat posters with streamers and lights. I had peaked on it the day before to get some pre-Prom photos. It wasn't transformed or elevated. It was like covering the gym in Band-Aids.

Trent was the most relaxed I had ever seen him. He didn't bite his fingernails or fidget. It was thankfully a non-Chemo week, and he feeling good. We were planning on meeting everyone in the parking lot to get some pictures before going inside.

He stopped me before I shut off the engine. "I was wrong. I couldn't do this without you."

I wanted to kiss him, but he was looking down at his lap. He had more to say.

"In two months things are going to get better," he said. "My chemo cycles will be done. No more cancer. No more school. It can be just us this summer."

He paused. "But in August you have to leave. You have to move on."

"I want to be with you, Trent. Haven't I made that clear?" This couldn't be the same pattern. I was too weary to fight again.

"That's not my point." He held my hands, tracing his thumb over my painted nails. "I'm not breaking up with you. I love you. But we could break up, or my cancer could come back, or who the Hell knows. I can't predict what will happen, and I don't want to because regardless of what happens you have to leave."

Leaving. That word was becoming an expletive. I didn't want to be known as the person who left.

“I don’t want to be like my brothers,” I said. “I don’t want to run away and forget about everything I’m leaving behind.”

“You’re not like them, Kendra. You’re not running. We’re *letting* you go.”

I wasn’t sure if that made me feel any better, but he was right. I was leaving on good terms. I just hoped that I had given enough of me to sustain those I left behind, especially Kyle. I hoped that I had been a good enough sister.

“This isn’t the end,” he said.

I smiled because I had told him that once, and it proved true. He leaned over and kissed me.

Joe was already there with Kathy. He had on a white tux that looked too pure against the concrete backdrop. His hair was growing back. Little stubs were sticking out.

Alicia approached me as soon as she got there and whispered that she got into Yale. She didn’t seem happy though. She said it was a secret for now, and by the way she looked at Trevor, I could predict what caused her anxiety. I asked her about his plans.

“He got into Eastern,” she said. “It’s not that far, but who knows. I’m trying not to think about it.”

Penny soon arrived with Jake. She was wearing the blue gown I had tried on at the boutique. She had it fitted and hemmed so that it did not swallow her. Instead, she was a princess.

I took pictures of all of them, mostly when they weren’t looking. Penny looked nervous in all of hers, glancing at Jake as if she were unsure what to make of him. I caught one of Kathy and Alicia hugging. I couldn’t fit Trevor’s entire body into the frame, so I cut off his legs. He was a floating tower. Joe’s candid ones showed his mouth wide open, never looking at the

camera. Trent's were the best I ever got of him because his eyes almost looked right. The closest a lens could get to wet clay.

Trent took the camera from me. "Let me get you."

He held the camera clumsy with shaky hands and awkward angles. But when I looked at the photos, I couldn't believe my smile. In spite of everything, I realized that I was happy. I had Parsons and people I loved and a month left of high school. Maybe they were temporary, but today I glowed. And this light, the refracted sliver that our eyes failed to remember, I knew, for now, it would be enough.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Anderson, Sherwood. *Winesburg, Ohio*. New York: Viking, 1960. Print.
- Banville, John. *The Sea*. London: Picador, 2005. Print.
- Baxter, Charles. *Gryphon: New and Selected Stories*. New York: Vintage, 2012. Print.
- Carver, Raymond. "Feathers." *Cathedral: Stories*. New York: Knopf, 1983. Print.
- Gass, William, and Lorna H. Domke. "An Interview with William Gass." *The Missouri Review* 10.3 (1987): 51-67. Web. 6 Apr. 2015.
- Gerard, R.W. "The Biological Basis of Imagination." *The Creative Process*. Ed. Brewster Ghiselin. Berkeley and Los Angeles: California UP, 1980. 236-259. Print.
- Gerkenmeyer, Sarah. *What You Are Now Enjoying: Stories*. Pittsburgh: Autumn House Press, 2013. Print.
- Ghiselin, Brewster. "Introduction." *The Creative Process*. Ed. Brewster Ghiselin. Berkeley and Los Angeles: California UP, 1980. 1-21. Print.
- Lawrence, D.H. "Making Pictures." *The Creative Process*. Ed. Brewster Ghiselin. Berkeley and Los Angeles: California UP, 1980. 62-67. Print.
- Pancake, Ann. *Strange as This Weather Has Been: A Novel*. Emeryville, CA: Shoemaker & Hoard, 2007. Print.
- Pancake, Breece D'J., and James Alan McPherson. *The Stories of Breece D'J Pancake*. Boston: Little and Brown, 1983. Print.
- Spender, Stephen. "The Making of a Poem." *The Creative Process*. Ed. Brewster Ghiselin. Berkeley and Los Angeles: California UP, 1980.113-126. Print.

Valery, Paul. "The Course in Poetics: First Lesson." *The Creative Process*. Ed. Brewster Ghiselin. Berkeley and Los Angeles: California UP, 1980. 92-105. Print.

ACADEMIC VITA

Katherine O'Neill
kao5129@psu.edu

Education

Penn State Erie - The Behrend College May 2015
Bachelor of Fine Arts in Creative Writing
Minor in English and Political Science
The Pennsylvania State Schreyer Honors College

Experience

Lake Effect Literary Journal Fall 2012-Present

- Served as a Fiction Editor for Penn State Behrend's international literary journal
- Read submissions sent from all over the world and selected the best works to be published
- Attended the AWP writing conference in Seattle

Penn State Behrend's Learning Resource Center Fall 2012-Present

Writing Tutor

- Worked 5-7 hours every week during lab shifts
- Read over students' papers checking for grammar, content, and correct citations

Composition Support

- Worked closely with a rhetorical composition class, ENGL 015 and ENGL 004
- Met individually with the professors to go over class lessons and writing problems such as common grammar mistakes, paragraph fluidity, and thesis statements
- Attended peer review sessions and led the class in debriefs about certain writing topics

GRE Prep Class Fall 2013-Present

- Taught a weekly GRE review session that went over the types of questions on the GRE and strategies for preparing for the test
- Took weekly quizzes with the class for Reading Comprehension, Sentence Equivalence, and Text Completion and went over answers for the quizzes and answered any questions students had about the GRE

Undergraduate Teaching Assistant Fall 2012

- Attended all Introduction to Comparative Politics, POLYSCI 003U, classes
- Met weekly with the professor to discuss course materials and the progression of the class
- Developed a study guide for the country of Ghana and held review sessions before finals week

- Chautauqua Writing Conference** Summer 2013
- Attended the Chautauqua Writing Conference at The Chautauqua Institute, NY on scholarship
 - Participated in workshops, panels on fiction writing, publishing, and readings

Awards

- The President's Freshman Award** Spring 2012
- Maintained a 4.0 G.P.A. while enrolled full time as a freshman
- The Evan Pugh Scholar Award** Spring 2014
- Placed in the top 0.5 percent of the senior class
- Katey Lehman Award for Fiction, First Place** Spring 2014
- Smith Fiction Award, First Place** Fall 2014
- Corey N. Farrell Nonfiction Award, First Place** Fall 2014
- SCCC Short Fiction Awards for College Writers, Honorable Mention** Spring 2015

Activities

- Dance Team** Fall 2011-Present
- Team captain for the 2013-2014 and 2014-2015 seasons, which included choreography, holding tryouts, and leading the team in exercises and during games
 - Performed during all home basketball games during halftime
 - Organized the yearly Becky Decker Dance/Cheer Competition, where all proceeds benefitted the Kanzius Cancer Research Foundation
- Omicron Delta Kappa Honors Fraternity** Inducted Spring 2013
- Participated in 20 hours of community service projects such as refereeing the First Lego League competition
- Choir** Fall 2011-Present
- Member of the Penn State Behrend Chamber and Concert Choir
 - Participated in Singing City in Pittsburgh, PA
 - Sang Beethoven's 9th Symphony with the Erie Philharmonic Choir
- Study Abroad** Summer 2014
- Studied abroad in Ireland for four weeks with Penn State faculty
 - Took 9 credits in English and Art
 - Studied the culture and history of Ireland while visiting significant locations
 - Interacted with Irish writers and artists

- Stayed in a variety of locations including Trinity College, The National University of Ireland, and with a host family in southern County Cork