

PROLOGUE

Rain pounding on the roof does nothing to aid my losing battle with insomnia. I toss and turn restlessly in bed, trying to blot out the memories seeping into my thoughts. Finally I am forced to admit defeat; sleep will not come to me tonight.

I abandon the bedroom, leaving my wife still peacefully sleeping in bed. After a quick peek into our son's room, I retreat downstairs to my office, where I then settle into my cold leather chair with a heavy, frustrated sigh. Unfortunately, I am used to this situation, for every time rain falls, lightning flashes or thunder rumbles, I get dragged into a downward spiral through time, back to the stormiest time in my life. High School.

Now I can honestly say that I am a happy person, and, being a psychologist, I know that such a state can be rare in today's population. But during nights like these, when I lie sleepless in bed, I remember all my past mistakes, past characteristics of myself I never really liked, and, most of all, past relationships with unhappy endings. High school is a breeding ground for all of those experiences, and it's really no wonder why, with so many people forced to mix and mingle with each other on a daily basis on one campus.

For in every school, not to mention every society, there are many different kinds of people. There are the jocks, the brains, the druggies, the losers, the popular crowd, and so on. Because of their classifications, you never get to know these people for who they really are; since, for instance, a popular person knows it's completely not cool to hang out with the losers. Or, in another aspect, people develop different personalities to fit their castes, leaving behind their true selves in order to fit in where society or classmates deem they belong. Once this occurs,

you never get to know who is actually behind that face you see every day.

Now don't get me wrong; sometimes it's just fine when you don't get to know someone. We can't be best friends with everybody after all. So we have school friends, friends we hang out with after the final bell rings, and acquaintances, and we don't usually mix these groups together. But even when we want to try, sometimes someone does such a good job of hiding her true self, you can never crack her shell. And believe it or not, popular people hide things too; deep, dark secrets only they know, our not knowing is just fine with most of them. Others, though, want to be heard; no one just takes the time to listen to their soft cries for help, because their so-called friends are so firm in believing they can't be different people than they portray.

I started out that way. I classified people as neatly as one classifies his notebooks, and looking back now I feel really sad about it. I was a jock who occasionally hung out with the popular crowd, since many of the popular kids happened to play sports so our caste boundaries were somewhat blurred. But most of the popular girls were as unreachable as Pluto to me, so I never even bothered to pick up the chase. But there was this one girl...for as long as I could remember I had my eyes on her. Calypso Dawson was every typical guy's dream. You know what they're like; there's one in every class. Two words came immediately to mind when I thought of her back then. Glamorous and gorgeous. She had this long mane of pale blonde hair, like moonlight dusting a wheat field in summertime, and huge blue eyes that were full of life and sparkled when she told one of her stories, which were entertaining even if no one really knew where truth ended and fiction began. To complete the package, she had a slim, athletic figure that still managed to be perfectly

female. If you know what I mean.

But that wasn't why I was so drawn to her, really it wasn't; those physical attributes were just extremely pleasant bonuses. There was something inside her I could never put my finger on, a sort of helplessness and despair that made me want to cuddle her and take care of her. Those moments when her tumultuous inner emotions were revealed didn't come often, but occasionally she would catch me staring at her and her eyes would try to tell me something. However, I made myself dismiss the notion that she could need taking care of by the likes of me, since I never knew much about her other than what she displayed at school for our peers. So that's all I took her to be. And after all, she was pretty; she was popular. Why would she have anything darker hidden beneath, any sort of problems at all? This analogy was probably...no, definitely, my biggest mistake.

Now I, I had problems. I was never the smartest kid in high school but up until the beginning of eleventh grade I had managed to achieve some respectable grades. Then all of a sudden our classes got harder. But school just wasn't that important to me; I couldn't care less what I was supposed to learn and what went in one ear and out the other. Except for art class. I loved art, still do: drawing, painting, finding some meaning in everything I made my subject and being able to capture it on paper. Perhaps that's why I liked Calypso so much. To me she was a half-finished painting, and the real meaning, besides the obvious that it was beautiful, was a mystery and needed countless hours of study and pondering. But I could never find the true Calypso, no matter how hard I looked.

A crash of thunder jars me back to the present, and I shake myself out of my reverie. Then, suddenly, my eyes avert down to cross the vast expanse of desk, over miscellaneous files and sheets of paper, and finally rest on

my laptop, an anniversary gift from my wife. As I stare at it my restless mind finally delivers some sound advice. I often tell my patients that when there's no one to talk to, writing it all down is a great form of therapy. With this in mind, I boot the computer up, open a new document and start to write the first thing I can think of, and I find myself traveling a long, winding sleepless road of memories. They were so crystal clear that they all could've happened yesterday...

CHAPTER ONE

I remember eleventh grade as one of the coldest years on record. We had more rain, and even some snow, in the first three months of school than in all of the year before, and Colorado residents simply had to grin and bear it, and polish their skis to ready themselves for what promised to be a fabulous winter. But bone-chilling temperatures after a wonderfully warm summer vacation didn't make one of the hardest years of my life any easier. That year I had so many storms in my personal life I imagined that if it was possible combine them with the actual weather we would have to build an ark. I was forced to do a whole lot of growing up that year, making myself come out of my safe little shell and face the real world, which no one, not even the popular crowd, was immune to. That year I finally got to discover some missing shades and shadows of Calypso's painting, for better or for worse.

It all started at soccer practice, when gentle summer was already giving away to a rude autumn and school was on everyone's minds no matter how hard they tried to deny it. That year Calypso tried out for the team, and was one of only three girls to make it. I was already in, having played soccer since fifth grade and actually being decent at it, so I had a little bit of a break and was able to watch her and the others try out.

"I can't believe Calypso Dawson is trying to make the team," my friend Matthew Best said to me with a shake of his head.

"I know. She's hot." Troy LaRose, a senior but sort of a friend of Matt and I, broke in simply. "She'll make practices a real pleasure to attend...for once."

"Exactly my point. She'll distract the rest of the team. She's distracted poor Gavin here already."

“Huh?” I snapped out of my thoughts at the mention of my name.

“Told ya.” Matt just sighed and shook his head again, in dismay this time. But Troy was laughing and soon Matt joined in.

“Very funny.” I scowled. “Calypso was not distracting me. I was just...thinking.”

“Uh huh, about what?” Troy moved closer to Matt and me. The three of us were seated outside on the stairs leading up to our locker rooms, watching Coach Williams drill the hopeful soccer team inductees. And Matt and Troy were drilling me.

Think fast, Gavin, I told myself. How to get rid of Troy the quickest... “About how school’s starting next week and all the homework we’re going to have to do this year. It’s a huge year for Matt and me you know.” There. I knew that the very mention of the dreaded word ‘school’ would scare Troy away. He was perfectly capable of getting high honors every quarter, but he didn’t want to try. I guess he deemed his role in high school to be the class clown, driving all the teachers crazy. Meanwhile all the girls loved him, and I could never figure out why. I always thought he was rather obnoxious.

“Ugh. You would think about school.” Sure enough, Troy made a disgusted face and got up, walking back down onto the playing field. “Gavin ruins the fun for everyone,” I heard him say to another kid. But I never reacted to his snide comments, and I easily turned my attention back to practice.

Matt however, would not be so easily deterred. “Come on, Gavin; you can fool Troy, but you can’t fool me,” he began, all the more persistent when faced with my obvious dodging of a touchy subject. Since he was my best friend and all, I usually allowed him to pry. He took full advantage of that. “Now how long have we been friends?”

That was how he usually started prying, by reminding me that he knew me better than I knew myself. Damn him.

“Fifth grade.” An easy thing to remember, since we became friends through the soccer team. He taught me how to play fullback, and to love the game itself almost as much as he did. You know, off the subject, parents and teachers are actually right when they say you meet lots of people by joining a team sport. But that’s just the psychologist in me talking. No students like to admit it when adults are right about something.

“Exactly,” Matt continued, speeding down the tracks of our conversation. “And how long have you liked Calypso?”

“Since before that,” I admitted sheepishly. And, sadly, it was true. I’d admired Calypso from afar since the third grade, when my family moved to Colorado from Washington, DC. She was the first person I saw when I walked into the classroom, with her long mass of blonde hair.

“So... why not just ask her out?” Matt adjusted his seat on the cement stairs.

“I can’t do that!” I said indignantly. “I don’t even know her.”

“You do know that asking someone out is usually a way to get to know someone don’t you?” Matt rolled his expressive hazel eyes skyward. “It’s not that hard, Gav.”

“Mr. Best and Mr. Ward, are you going to join us anytime soon for our scrimmage?” Coach Williams sharply cut in on our conversation, and by the murderous look on his face and the snickers from our teammates I took it that he had been trying to get our attention for quite a while. All talk stopped, and Matt and I leapt off the stairs to join our team on the playing field.

After practice my mom picked me up and took me on what she liked to call our “annual shopping spree.” I

used up most of my summer job money on my usual wardrobe of preppy taste. I had the American Eagle, the Abercrombie and Fitch, sometimes some Gap—the works. But I wasn't a bad prep; you know, the ones who wear their sweaters over their shoulders and dash off to play croquet or polo on Sunday afternoons. I must say; I dressed with style. Looking good was very important to me, because it hid my not so interesting inside. I knew I was a decent looking guy, so why not dress the part? Plus, maybe if I dressed well Calypso would notice me. Calypso always dressed like a girl from a fashion magazine. Matt told me once it was because she did some modeling and received the clothes as bonuses. It figured. All my hard-earned money from slaving away at a local restaurant was spent in a few hours, and Calypso's clothes were freebies.

I guess it was the shopping spree that really made me realize school was just around the corner. Dividing my last days of freedom between practices and hanging out with Matt, the last week of summer passed by uneventfully.

Then on Wednesday, the first day of classes, the rat race started, and everyone knew we wouldn't reach the finish line until June.

I had managed to keep things together the first few days of school, getting comfortable with new classes, learning quirks and habits of new teachers, and getting used to a completely different schedule than I'd had the year before. As a result of that damnable schedule, I ashamedly got a little disoriented, and one afternoon during the first full week of school I walked into history fifteen minutes late.

“Ah, how nice of you to join us, Mr. Ward.” Mr. Jacobs, the teacher, looked up from his desk. “Just make yourself at home while the rest of us finish taking our section quiz.”

Damn it, I thought as I hurried to my seat in the

back row next to Matt. I knew I had forgotten to do something the night before. Mr. Jacobs handed me the quiz with a triumphant grin, seeming to already know I would fail. I could do nothing but fill it in the best I could, cursing myself, and my forgetfulness, all the while.

When all the quizzes had been collected, Mr. Jacobs stood authoritatively at the front of the class.

Automatically I kind of lowered in my seat and focused my stare on the blackboard. I found that this usually worked with teachers; as long as you're staring in their general direction, they think you're paying attention and won't bother you.

"All right class, now we'll go over the answers to the quiz before we start our lecture on the rest of the chapter. Gavin, give us the answer to number one."

So much for my theory. I could feel my face rise several degrees in temperature and my ears turn that horribly embarrassing shade of red as I tried desperately to think of something...anything...that didn't sound stupid. Even under normal circumstances I hate being called on in class, but this seemed beyond cruel.

"I don't know," I finally said lamely.

"Well make sure, Mr. Ward, that you do know the answers next time we have a quiz, or you'll have more to worry about than just your grades," Mr. Jacobs said evenly, but his eyes stared at me with that adult blend of disappointment and anger that was more humiliating than shouting. "Now, who can help Gavin out here and give me the answer?"

Several people called out the answer, and Mr. Jacobs smiled in satisfaction. I dejectedly dropped my gaze to my notebook, still simmering in my embarrassment. Matt gave me a sympathetic smile, and I noticed he didn't offer any answers to the quiz. I didn't know if it was out of loyalty to me, or if he really didn't know them either, but

either way, I appreciated the gesture.

Luckily after that afternoon I didn't suffer any major scholastic mishaps. In fact, I actually looked forward to Thursday, because that morning before classes Coach Williams would have finally posted the list down by the gym, noting who made the soccer team, and omitting who didn't. Even though I knew I was a shoo-in, I went down anyway, to see if Calypso made it.

She was there when I arrived, carefully examined the list for her name. She must've found it, because I heard her exclaim, "Yes!"

"Congratulations." I glanced around to see who said that, and was mortified to discover it was myself.

Calypso turned and smiled this devastating smile, one warm enough to melt glaciers and certainly doing a number on my heart. I managed to hide my feelings for her, as I have trained myself for years, and replied with an off-hand grin, one Matt always told me was sure to make girls' knees go weak if I could look sincere as well as cool. Since he'd had more girlfriends than me, I trusted him.

"Thanks," Calypso said to me. "You're Gavin Ward right?"

"Yeah. I'm on the soccer team too."

"I know; you're really good." Calypso paused, eyeing me carefully. Then her eyes lit up. "Hey, I know you! You live across the street from me."

"Oh yeah, I guess I do." I tried to pretend I just remembered that.

"And you're in my chemistry class too," she continued. "Do you understand the homework?"

I thought of the fierce battle of wills that I had fought with myself the night before, trying to get the chapter questions done. "Yeah, I did most of it," I casually replied. "It's not due until tomorrow though."

"I know, but I don't get it at all!" Calypso's voice

turned dramatic with her usual story-telling tone. “Do you think you could help me out sometime? I’ve seen you in the library eighth period, so I know you have that time free. What do you say?” She smiled that smile again; there was no way I could’ve said no even if for some absurd reason I wanted to.

“Sure. I’ll help.”

“Oh thank you so much!” Calypso sighed in relief. As if to echo her statement, the warning bell reminded us that we had only five minutes to get to home room. “Hey, I gotta go. See you in chemistry!” She waved and dashed off.

I followed slowly, saving the moment when I finally opened my mouth and spoke to the girl of my dreams, however accidental it originally was. And I wondered, what made me suddenly so lucky as to become friends with the girl I had admired since third grade.

CHAPTER TWO

You know, I remember once looking up “Calypso” in a name book my mom had stashed away in our basement. The name had always been an intriguing one to me, since it was one you didn’t hear all that often. It made me want to know why her parents chose it for her. Anyway, I soon found it in amongst the yellowed pages of the book, and I carefully examined its paragraph.

It was a Greek name, meaning “Concealer.” A mythological reference was “the sea nymph who kept Odysseus captive.” That much I knew from having read The Odyssey at some point during my high school career. Unfortunately, discovering the meaning of her name only made Calypso all the more mysterious to me. What could she possibly be concealing? I had to sit back, close the book, and remind myself how silly I sounded. I’m sure Calypso’s parents didn’t pick the name out only to have their daughter to be concealing things for the rest of her life, I thought, shutting both the basement door and the latch to that imaginative part of my brain. They probably just thought it was pretty, which it was.

This had been years ago, probably back in middle school, but for some reason I thought of it that afternoon as I walked down the hall to the library for my free eighth period. For my time to help Calypso with her homework. Butterflies were staging World War Three with that day’s lunch in my stomach, but I managed to look cool and collected as I sat at a table and got out my chemistry notebook.

A few minutes later Calypso entered the library, deep into a discussion with her best friend, Julia Boland, whom Matt had had the biggest crush on ever since last

Christmas. But when she spotted me she stopped, waved, and came right over.

“Hey, Gavin.” She greeted me with that dynamite smile. My mom always told me, use what you know works. Calypso must’ve known that smile worked magic on me every time.

“Hi,” I replied. “Still need help with chemistry?”

“I think I will always need help with chemistry,”

Calypso said wryly, taking a seat in the chair across from me and pulling out her homework. “Still wanna help me?”

“Of course.” I grinned; glad that my own pathetic self was the only one who knew how much that was true. So the two of us, along with Julia, spent a peaceful forty minutes discussing the Periodic Table and compounds. It turned out Calypso didn’t really need me all that much; she was really smart. She only needed help a few times, and I thanked my brain profusely for being able to provide answers I knew were correct, and she even helped me out.

“Well, thank you again,” Calypso said, sounding almost apologetic as she scribbled the last answer on her paper, conveniently avoiding my eyes in the process. “I mean, I get so paranoid about things, like school and grades and stuff. I want to do so well this year...” Then she seemed to catch herself before she fell too far into her sentence. “Anyway, I have to run up to my locker; I’ll be back in a bit. Wait here for me, Julia.”

“So...you’re on the soccer team, right?” Julia asked me as soon as Calypso had rounded the corner.

“Yep,” I said, stuffing my chemistry stuff into my bag. “I have been since fifth grade.”

“I know.” Julia hesitated for a minute. “And Matt Best is on the team too?”

And then I knew exactly where she wanted to go with our conversation. “Oh yeah, he is.” I nodded.

“You know, this might sound stupid,” began Julia,

her lightly-freckled cheeks turning a faint shade of pink, “but I’ve heard some stuff about Matt liking me, and since you’re his best friend and all, I was wondering if you knew anything about it.”

“I don’t know if I’m at liberty to tell you.” I was enjoying the unexpected shift of power. Matt’s gonna owe me for life when he finds out about this, I thought in satisfaction.

“Oh come on, Gavin,” Julia persisted. “Just tell me if he likes me or not.”

“Why don’t you ask him yourself?” I suggested.

“Because...” Suddenly she stopped herself short as Troy entered our fields of vision and sauntered over to our table.

“Hello, boys and girls,” he greeted us patronizingly. He then turned to me, giving me this weird look, one I couldn’t define. And it made me nervous.

“What’s up, Troy.” Julia smiled prettily, and I wondered, how do girls always manage to compose themselves and look their best when a cute guy is in sight? Julia seemed ready to beg me for information on Matt, and just like that she was flashing Troy a big welcoming grin, her eyes all lit up like he was a hot fudge sundae. Girls were so confusing.

“I saw Calypso heading towards her locker; do you know if she’s coming back?” Troy looked at both of us, but the question was directed at me. “I wanted to ask her something.”

Uh oh. I had a bad feeling I knew what was coming, and I didn’t like it one bit.

“Yeah, she should be back any minute,” Julia answered. “There she is now actually.”

“Hey, Calypso.” Troy really could act like a perfect gentleman on occasion, and now he was standing in front of Calypso with his hands behind his back and a shy smile on

his face, much like a six-year-old who really wanted an ice cream cone at the fair but was reluctant to ask his parents straight out for one. “I was wondering...there’s that big new movie playing this weekend and, well, would you like to go see it with me?”

I felt like throwing up. Troy still had the hopeful, innocent look in his eyes, and I wondered how girls always seemed taken in by this display obviously false sweetness and fake manners. Maybe, hopefully, Calypso would be one of the few who could see through it all.

But Calypso bought it! “Sure.” She smiled brightly. “I’d love to.”

“Great,” Troy said. “I’ll give you a call tonight if you want and, uh, we’ll work out more details.” The bell had just rung, signaling the day’s end, and we all exited the library and began to drift towards our lockers with the crowd.

“Okay; here’s my number.” Calypso scribbled the coveted phone number on the cover of his notebook, and with a wave good-bye she and Julia headed in another direction.

“Well I guess I’m just a lucky man, aren’t I?” Troy tossed me a smug little grin that made me want to punch him.

“Yeah right,” I said, praying my next words were true. “She’s not like all the other girls you hook up with. She won’t give you any on the first date.”

“And how would you know?” Troy raised his eyebrows. “I’m the one who’s going out with her, not you.”

How I managed to calm myself down and walk away remains a mystery, but somehow I made it to my locker without pulling someone’s head off his skinny little neck and shoving it in the garbage. I guess I just pictured what Calypso would think.

I didn't bother to ask Troy how his date with Calypso went, but he wasted no time in spreading the word around, and Matt filled me in at school on Monday. Apparently they had had a great time. They went to the movie, had dinner afterwards, and drove around in Troy's brand new Mercedes Benz for a while listening to music.

"Is that all?" I asked sourly, slamming my locker shut harder than I intended. I didn't want to let Troy get to me, but it was so hard.

"That's all I heard." Matt shrugged. "But you know Troy. I'll bet my allowance that a whole lot more happened than that." He rolled his eyes.

"Well be sure to tell Troy congratulations for me." There was more than a touch of sarcasm in my voice; I just couldn't help it. "Now I have to study for that English quiz."

That Monday was not an easy one, but then again, all the days seemed to be getting harder. It seemed that the entire school was in some way out to get me, from Mr. Jacobs and his endless scrutiny to Troy and his endless bragging at soccer practice. I tried so hard to get my homework done, and it still seemed like teachers were just waiting for me to slip up. Before I knew what was happening I was drawing myself into an even deeper protective shell, retreating from the high school drama around me and only letting a few choice people get a chance to peek inside.

Eighth period rolled around, and I took a seat in the library to work on, guess what, chemistry, for our lab was due the next day and I had barely made a dent in the write-up. I worked intently, determined to get everything else off my mind for at least a little while.

"This seat taken?" A voice interrupted my mental calculations. Startled, I looked up to see Calypso standing there with a hesitant smile on her face.

“Huh? Oh, no...sit down.” I managed to gather my wits like I was shuffling papers and shoving them haphazardly in a binder. “What’s up?”

“Not much,” Calypso sighed, for a split second looking so sad it was all I could do not to leap across the table and hug her. Then in the blink of an eye she smiled that famous smile again, and the sadness vanished behind its brilliance. “There’s still soccer practice today, right?”

“Yeah, Coach Williams said we have a lot of work to do before facing Christian Academy tomorrow.” I mimicked our tough coach, and Calypso laughed.

“He always thinks we need more work,” she said. “Even if we win the World Cup he’d tell us to work on our passing and make us run fifty laps.”

“No kidding.” I found myself becoming more like, well, myself again around Calypso. There was something about her that urged you to open up, if only to leave you wishing she’d do the same for you.

After practice we walked home together. I usually walked home in the afternoons after mom dropped me off at school in morning on her way to work, the reason being that although I had gotten my license over the summer, I had no car of my own. It was only a mile or so walk though, and it was a nice cool off after practice. Matt never failed to offer a ride, but since he lived in the opposite direction, I declined unless the weather was crappy. Being that Calypso and I live across the street from one another, it seemed like the logical thing to invite her along on my journey.

The sky was clear blue, mirrored only in her eyes, and the wind carried a chill with it as we headed down the sidewalk, talking easily about school, the new videos on MTV, about anything really. Anything superficial that is. Once I slipped and asked her a personal question; I think it was what do your parents do, innocently thinking their jobs

would be more interesting than what mine had for a living. She closed right up then, and remained that way until I dropped her off in front of her house.

“Today was fun,” she said, smiling again, but I knew better than to fall for it that time. “I’ll see you tomorrow, okay?”

“Sure. See ya.” I watched her as she walked inside, and I couldn’t help but notice how cold her house seemed. Not temperature wise, but unfriendly. I must be imagining things; I chided myself, and without another thought headed across the street to my own house.

“Hello, Gavin,” my mother greeted me, bursting through the kitchen doors with a pot of spaghetti in her hands. “Wash up for supper; it’s ready.”

“Kay mom.” I dropped my bag on one of the counter stools and did as I was told.

“So how was practice?” she asked me as I sat at the dinner table next to my nine-year-old sister, Ivy.

“Long,” I answered, helping myself to some spaghetti. The smell of mom’s homemade meat sauce made my mouth water. “But Coach actually thinks we can give Christian Academy a run for their money tomorrow; he says this team he has now is the best team he’s had in a long time.”

“That’s terrific.” Mom smiled warmly.

Our mom had had it tough those past five years, after the divorce from our dad and his move back to DC. He was a big government worker there, but we hardly ever heard from him except to receive the generous child support checks, so it didn’t matter.

But mom, I think, did a great job of raising Ivy and me on her own. She was a lot stronger than most people were that I knew. And picturing some of the girls in my class trying to raise two kids by themselves, well, it made me want to laugh. Responsibility did not run high at

Richard Milton High School, where trust fund babies and spoiled, over-indulged only children, like Troy for instance, ran amuck through the halls.

“Yeah, I think we may actually do really well this year,” I agreed.

“Can I come watch you play?” Ivy looked over at me with adoring green eyes. I must say, it was great having someone who idolized me. It really boosted a self-esteem that was sorely lacking.

“Well sure, if mom takes you,” I consented.

“We’ll see, Ivy,” broke in mom. But from the look on her face I knew she was going to have to disappoint my sister again. She worked such long hours all week at the bank, and then did most of the housework on weekends; life must not have been easy for mom, but she did it all anyway, I assume to prove her independence from dad and his money. I can’t say I blamed her.

After dinner I made myself ignore the TV’s seductive calls of brand new sitcoms and walk up the stairs to do my homework. Throwing my bag on the bed, which likely hadn’t been properly made since my Aunt Margaret came to visit last Christmas, I paused, trying to remember exactly what work I had. I really should start using the assignment pad I bought, I thought ruefully, switching my lamp on and rummaging through my bag. Ah yes, math homework. My least favorite subject.

I pulled out my math book and headed for my desk. Shoving a box of pastels and some tubes of paint out of the way till I found my calculator, I opened my notebook, took a deep breath, and looked at the first problem. Right away I stopped; it was impossible to concentrate on a stomach that was wonderfully full of mom’s spaghetti and meat sauce. My entire body longed to crawl into bed and just fall blissfully asleep. My eyes began to drift towards the walls, becoming lost in the rendition I had done of Van Gogh’s

Starry Night, and store-bought prints of Monet landscapes. It just wouldn't do.

Finally, out of habit, I reached into my lower desk drawer and pulled out a bag of Reese's Pieces. I normally eat pretty healthy, for soccer and all, but when I need to buckle myself down to do homework I can't do it without that sugar rush. Munching contentedly on the candy, I began to stumble through my math.

Darkness had descended when I finally finished, and before attacking history I took a break. Glancing out my window, I saw the streetlights outside the house just coming on. The warm orange glow illuminated Calypso's house. I could see a few lights on inside, but all seemed quiet and still. It occurred to me that I hardly ever saw anybody enter or leave the house besides Calypso. Feeling more than a little ridiculous about where my mind was going, I shrugged off the nagging feeling that something just wasn't right about that. Her parents probably work these incredibly cool jobs, I thought, and they leave for work real early and come home real late. And hey, maybe that was why she didn't want to tell me what they did. It was probably top secret! Satisfied, for the moment at least, with my deductions, I returned to my work. But I guess I knew that I was fooling myself even then.

CHAPTER THREE

The final buzzer rang loudly across the playing field, and the Richard Milton Wildcats erupted in cheers, hugging their teammates as they reveled in a victorious first game of the season. Matt had scored two goals on his own, and Christian Academy only made one goal altogether, on their home field no less. Everyone was ecstatic.

“Great job, man,” I congratulated Matt as we headed into the locker room.

“Thanks.” Matt was sweaty and his face reflected exhaustion, but he was grinning hugely. “I can’t believe I scored two goals. It was like a power trip or something.”

“And my beautiful girlfriend assisted you on one of them.” Troy came up from behind us and patted Matt on the back. But there was a sting in his comment aimed directly at me. I could tell with his piercing green eyes staring challengingly into mine.

“Oh, she’s your girlfriend now, huh?” Matt’s smile faded as he glanced at me. We all knew exactly who ‘she’ was.

“Yeah, pretty much. I mean, we haven’t said it in such technical terms, but I have another date with her next weekend.” Troy shrugged nonchalantly. “It would’ve been sooner, but I have a busy social life, as I’m sure you both well know, so the poor girl has had to wait.”

“So she didn’t give you what you wanted the first time?” I shot back before I could stop myself. I felt like a tea kettle left on the burner too long, whistling loudly in frustration and anger and not being able to do a thing about it except wait for someone to come to my aid. That

someone was Matt.

“Yeah, Troy, what do you want with a junior anyway?” my best friend asked.

“The usual,” Troy said with a smile. “And no, she didn’t give me anything on our first date, but that’s okay. I’m sure I’ll get whatever I want next weekend. I’ve never had a girl who wanted it as badly as Calypso. She was practically begging it from me last weekend, but I decided to be a gentleman and wait.”

“Well good for you then,” I said, biting back sarcasm. At least, I tried to bite it back. “I’m so proud of you.”

“Thanks, Gav. Coming from you, that means a lot.” Troy threw me one last evil grin and sauntered away.

“That dick,@ Matt muttered after him. AHe really knows the right buttons to push. I don’t know why you don’t beat the shit outta him.”

“Because it’s just not worth it,” I sighed. “He’ll still be as obnoxious as ever.”

“That’s for sure,” agreed Matt. And no more was said on the subject as we finished getting ready to hop on the bus back to our school.

I walked outside into the overcast Saturday afternoon to climb back on the bus, when Calypso headed over to meet me.

“Hey, Gavin.” She smiled, but the dynamite in it seemed to have lost some of its spark. She was probably just tired.

“Hi,” I said. “Good job today.”

“Oh, thanks.” Calypso looked as if she were embarrassed. “I didn’t do that much, really.”

“No, you did great. That was a perfect pass to Matt for the goal.”

“You know what? You’re good at flattery,” Calypso laughed, and finally she became normal again in

my eyes.

“That’s not true!” I argued, smiling before I could stop myself. “Why would you think that?”

“Oh, no reason.” Calypso played innocent. “Hey, are you walking home from school again?”

“I always do,” I replied.

“Great. I’ll walk with you.”

“Okay.” I was surprised. What did Calypso want from me? Friendship? A relationship? I was so confused.

So of course I turned to me trusted confidante and advice expert for help, leaving out names as I whispered my story to him during the bus ride back. No eavesdropper would ever figure out whom we were discussing, thankfully. I couldn’t stand the thought of everyone knowing my personal life.

“She probably wants to be your friend, if you can believe it,” Matt said simply when I finished relaying the events prior to our discussion.

“But why? Why would she suddenly want to be friends with me?” I persisted.

“Who knows? I didn’t take a course on women. I learn from experience, and I haven’t had an experience like yours yet, thank God.” Matt shrugged. “Just please, Gav, promise me you won’t overanalyze this. Whatever happens, happens.”

“Right.” I nodded. “I mean, affirmative, Sergeant Best.” I gave him a snappy salute. Matt, the army brat, just laughed. He knew I was teasing. Guys do that.

Somehow after winning our game life began to fall back into its proper place again, and I felt more open than I had in a long time. Maybe it was the two quizzes I aced in English and chemistry, maybe it was my now daily walk home with Calypso; whatever the cause, the shell that had been encasing me started to wear off, and not without a little help from my friends. I actually started talking to

people again, and not getting so worked up over things like school or homework or what Calypso wanted from little old me.

Or maybe it really began when I started my painting for art class. I decided to attempt a landscape with oil paints for the first time ever, and being that Colorado is famed for its stunning scenery, even in the surrounding area of our town, during my free periods I was allowed to go outside and paint. Richard Milton High was built on a large hill over-looking the town, with the Rocky Mountains rising to the heavens in the distance. Every time I saw them I felt so small. But it was a wonderful feeling, that those mountains were so awe inspiring, and that awe is exactly what I wanted to capture on my canvas.

So there I would sit nearly every day, upon one of many large boulders that stood next to the road where the buses lined up every day, an easel in front of me, my palette by my side. From there I could see beyond the neatly tailored playing fields, and the huge new track, and out to the mountains that were already, I noted, white at their peaks. I squeezed a small amount of paint onto my palette, and worked diligently to get the exact color blue of the clear mid-morning sky.

“What are you doing out here?” a familiar voice asked one Thursday. Sure enough, when I glanced up Calypso stood at my side, looking over at my work.

“I’d ask you the same thing,” I countered, praising myself for my composure. A pounding heart is easy to conceal.

“Oh, I’m just heading into school,” Calypso said, looking away and brushing an errant lock of hair behind her left ear. I could tell she was embarrassed, and even a little nervous. Girls tend to play with their hair when feeling any type of unwanted or unexpected emotion. “I had... I had an appointment,” she continued, and then hurriedly changed

the subject. “That looks really good, Gavin.”

“What, this?” I gestured towards my painting. “I only just started a few days ago. That’s why I’m out here. Mr. Truman gave me permission to spend my free painting, since it gets dark early and all.”

“I didn’t know you were an artist.” Calypso sat down on the rock next to mine, tucking her knees up under her chin so that she looked like a little kid. An image of my sister, Ivy, suddenly flashed in my mind. Young, pretty, and innocent. “You sure picked a great place to paint. I love the view from here. It’s so wild and free and beautiful. I wish I could sit out here for my classes; I’d get A’s no problem.” She looked around, then back at me.

“Well, I like to draw and stuff,” I said in response to her earlier comment. “See, I like finding or creating meanings and emotions in everything. Like those mountains. They’re so massive, and everything around them is so small. It’s kind of like they were put there to watch over us.” Then, realizing I had gone off on something that was probably stupid to Calypso, I shut up and began intently figuring out the shadow on a particular mountain.

But Calypso seemed to understand. “Yeah, I think that’s why I love it out here so much. It makes me feel safer, seeing those mountains, even if everything else around me is one big whirlwind of emotions.” She paused in her musings, and I knew she thought she’d said too much. So she did what anyone who wanted the spotlight off her would’ve done. “Now tell me, Gavin. If you like finding meanings and emotions in everything, how come you hide your own emotions so well?”

I hadn’t expected that. My brush halted its progress and I sat there, dumbfounded. “I...I don’t know. I said I liked finding that stuff in other things, not myself. I’m not very good at myself yet.”

Calypso laughed, but it wasn't a mean laugh. Rather, it was one that made me feel better. "That's okay. I know pretty much what you mean." She looked at me carefully, as if giving me a test I had to pass. "Can you find meaning in people too?"

"Sometimes," I replied. "It depends on how much material I'm given." I found myself staring right into her bright blue eyes, and the sensation knocked me off my feet and wrapped me in a sound embrace at the exact same time. For she was looking right back.

"That's what's so great about you, Gavin." Calypso abruptly broke her gaze to look off at the mountains instead. Her next words were spoken so softly I had to strain to hear her. "I hope you know you're really something special."

"Um, thanks." I was more than a little embarrassed. Those damned ears of mine were turning red again; I could feel it. Maybe she'll think it's from the cold, I hoped desperately.

She didn't seem to notice. "I wish I could be more like you," she continued, her voice as far off as Pikes Peak. "You might hide your emotions, but when it comes right down to it, you're not afraid to just be yourself."

Then she too realized she might've said something stupid, though I didn't think it was, and suddenly stood up. "Well, I should get inside. I'll see you at practice, okay?"

"Yeah, sure. See you later." I watched her vanish inside the red brick building, then with a troubled mind returned to my work. I must say, I made the landscape stormier than it should've been that day. That's another thing about artists. Not only can they find the meaning of another object or person and put it on canvas, but their own feelings and emotions blend in there too. And right then I was wondering what could've been going on inside Calypso's mind.

“Wow, breakthrough conversation with first and only love.” Matt was visibly impressed after I gave him a brief account of what had happened earlier that day before practice. Since we didn’t have to be there until three thirty, it gave us a good half an hour to just hang out after school, catching up on the latest Agossip@ and helping each other with homework.

“Not really breakthrough,@ I admitted, feeling my ears turn red yet again. Alt’s just...she said I was something special.”

“In like a friend way or ‘I love you’ way?” asked Matt.

“I don’t know. I can never tell with Calypso. She says one thing and it has like thirty different meanings.” I shook my head. “She’s as confusing as a Picasso.”

“There you go again,” Matt teased, “comparing everything to art.”

Since my theory on Calypso being an unfinished painting would seem stupid to practical, no-nonsense Matt, I just shrugged.

“Anyway, just keep being friendly towards her and junk. I think the last thing she needs is another guy putting moves on her. She’ll open up eventually. Now, did you get number four on our English homework?”

“Yeah, here.” I absent-mindedly handed Matt my study guide.

“Thanks.” He scribbled my answer on his paper, but I didn’t notice or care. I was too busy thinking; and not so much about Calypso either, but more about my painting.

The mountains at that moment looked really weird. Dark, thick gray clouds were just gathering at the peaks, and when paired with the brisk wind that blew across campus the sight promised an impressive storm. Maybe even a thunderstorm, although thunder and lightning were rare occasions in October.

AHey guys.@ Troy's snide voice slashed through the air, and he came up from behind us already wearing his practice gear. "Working hard?"

"Until you got here," I said through clenched teeth.

"Hi, Troy." Matt just sighed resignedly, putting away his English binder and handing me back my sheet. "Is it time for practice?"

"Nearly. That's why I came over here, to make sure you didn't forget or something and Coach will have to make you sit out our next game. We couldn't survive without our best player, right Matthew?" Troy laughed. Not a gentle laugh like Calypso's but one filled with mockery. It made my stomach roil.

"Well, thanks for the reminder." Matt smoothly ignored the barb and stood up, grabbing his book bag and waiting for me to follow suit.

"You're welcome." Troy smiled insincerely. "You know; if I didn't have such an organized mind, I'd swear I'd forget things too. I mean, I have so many things going on this weekend. Like tomorrow night I have that date with Calypso, and it's the second date so we all know that's going to be special. And then I'm trying to convince her to go with us all to a concert Saturday, but you know her father. I'm not sure how well that will go over..."

"That's wonderful, LaRose," Matt cut in sharply, sensing I was ready to attempt bashing Troy's skull so that it would cave into his brain. "But as you so nicely pointed out to us, we have to get going. See you later." He led me off before I could add my own colorful commentary.

"I hate him!" I exploded as soon as we safely reached the deserted locker room. I was so rarely a violent person, but something about Troy brought that nasty side out in me, and once it revealed itself it took a whole lot to cool it off. "He's treating Calypso like she's nothing more than two legs to get between. She doesn't deserve that!"

“No, probably not,” Matt agreed somberly. “But let’s face it; we can’t do anything about it, so it’s best you just forget about the asshole and hurry up before Coach Williams fries us both for dinner.”

I shut up, but I didn’t forget about it. There was no way I could. Especially while watching how sweet and innocent Troy played around Calypso all during practice. But the glares of evil satisfaction he threw my way like poison darts pierced inside of me, and Matt was right. There was nothing I could do about it.

CHAPTER FOUR

After practice I came out of the locker room to find Calypso standing there, casually leaning against the wall and leafing through a spiral notebook.

“Hey, Gavin.” She smiled, closing the notebook and putting it in her bag. “You walking home now?”

“Yeah, I have to get home for dinner,” I answered, trying to make the desperate attempt to smooth my unruly black hair appear casual. “Coming with?”

“I always do, don’t I?” she countered with a giggle that made me laugh as well. Without another word we fell in step and began the walk home.

“So, what are you doing this weekend?” Calypso instigated conversation, for once, as we walked, the rhythm of her voice contrasting with the raspy crunch of dry, colorful leaves under our feet.

“Working,” I replied. “My boss called me in, ‘cuz it’s Columbus Day and all, and she thinks it’ll be busy.” I wasn’t exactly looking forward to working, but it would be nice to have some spending money again.

“Where do you work?” she asked.

“Down at the Blue Mountain Restaurant. I’m a waiter.”

“That’s a really nice place.”

“Yeah, I’ve worked there for two summers.” I paused, figuring out how to continue along the path of our pleasant conversation. “Do you have a job?”

“Oh, no.” Calypso averted her eyes down to the

ground. “My dad has this idea in his head that if I’m home when he is, we can be a family. He likes me to stay in the house, help with dinner, do my chores, and not have any fun whatsoever, because unfortunately, when he is home it’s at night when all my friends are out doing stuff. He leaves early in the morning, comes back late, and I have to be already home waiting for him with dinner in the oven.” Then she gave a rueful laugh. “I’m the popular girl at school with absolutely no social life outside of it! I guess I’m lucky dad let me play soccer this year; we had so many huge fights about it before he finally caved. He’ll never go to any of our games though, I can tell you that.”

That was probably, no definitely, the longest I had ever heard her talk, at least to me, so it took a moment to recover. I guess though, that I didn’t recover quite as much, or else I wouldn’t have made the terrible blunder that came next. “What about your mom?”

The second I asked that horrible, horrible question I was more sorry than I’d ever been in my entire life, because I had to watch that tragically sad look wash over Calypso again. My heart went out to her, but she closed herself off from it almost before I could blink.

“She...she died, a year or so ago,” she finally spoke, her voice completely devoid of emotion and her face composed. The pain and sadness had been there for that barest instant, and she tucked it away so smoothly it astounded me. “My mom that is. Of cancer.”

I’m so sorry, Calypso, I said, feeling helpless.

“Yeah, me too.” Calypso was silent for a long moment. “I haven’t spoken about it to many people. I mean, it happened a while ago. I should be over it by now.”

“You’ll never get over it,” I softly contradicted. “See, my dad and mom got a divorce a few years back, and he moved back to Washington, and my family still isn’t

over it. We just have to move on.”

“But it’s hard to!” At the vehemence in Calypso’s voice I glanced over, only to see her eyes shiny with tears she seemed to be trying very hard not to shed. “She was the only one I could ever talk to.”

It was then I remembered reading the newspaper a while ago, the obituary of Mrs. Dawson. How could I have forgotten such an unbelievably important thing?

“Hey, you can always talk to me.” I tried to be of some comfort to us both. “I might not totally understand what you’re going through, but sometimes you only need someone to listen.”

“Thanks, Gavin.” Calypso smiled. “You’re the most understanding guy I’ve ever known.”

Then why are you with Troy, I silently asked. We said good-bye and she disappeared into that cold house, and I turned to enter mine. It might not have held a much larger family than Calypso’s, but it sure felt a lot warmer.

“Gavin, Gavin!” Ivy ran to me as I came in the door.

“Hey, Ivy.” I grinned, forgetting my troubles for a moment. “What’s up?”

“I got a hundred on my spelling test.” Ivy proudly held up the sheet with twenty words and a big red “100” scribbled on the top.

“Wow, that’s awesome!” I praised her. “We’ll have to celebrate this. How about after dinner we head into town and buy some ice cream?”

“Yea!” Ivy was off and running to tell the even better news to mom. It wasn’t often Ivy and I spent any real time together, so she loved every minute of the occasions we did. To tell you the truth, so did I.

“I see Ivy told you the good news.” Mom came into the living room with a smile on her face.

“Yeah, she’s pretty proud of herself. Is it alright if I

borrow the car and take her for ice cream later?"

"I guess so," conceded mom, "as long as you pick me up some of that chocolate almond crunch! Supper's almost ready, and I told Ivy she could call Sara, but tell her to make it quick before she misses out on my famous fried chicken."

"Will do." I leapt up the stairs two at a time and knocked on the door to Ivy's room. "Dinner's almost ready!" I said when she answered. I heard her winding down the conversation, so I retreated to my own room and set my bag on the bed. I had a lot of homework that night, but after today I could feel any determination I made myself have so far ebbing away like low tide. I probably wouldn't get it all done, and I didn't really care. There were always free periods tomorrow. I would have plenty of time then.

The days had begun to fall into a regular rhythm as they became shorter and shorter, and autumn settled in. I cherished that regularity, and divided my time between school, soccer, and other things, among those work. Friday after school I went straight to the Blue Mountain, where I was to work right up until closing.

"Good to see you back, Gavin." My boss, Mrs. Roberts, greeted me as I entered through the back door. "I'm glad you could help out."

"No problem," I replied.

"It's going to be very busy tonight; we're booked for about four hours straight, so you'd better be ready."

"As ready as I'll ever be." I smiled wryly, pulling my uniform from my bag. I might've been able to get away with wearing the black pants to school without committing fashion suicide, but the turquoise polo shirt with our logo on the front? No way in hell.

"That's the spirit!" Mrs. Roberts said with her fist in the air. "Now get out there."

Actually for the first couple hours it wasn't so bad.

I was in a cheerful enough mood to strike up conversations with regulars and tourists alike, mostly elderly people during that early time. It started to get busy around seven o'clock, the dinner hour, so I switched from chatty to efficient mode to keep service running smoothly. And then I received a big surprise right as I glanced at the clock to despairingly read that it was only eight fifteen. For there, just sitting down at a table, was none other than Calypso. And she was with Troy.

I must've stood there for a few moments, my mouth agape, until my co-waiter, Danielle O'Brian, nudged me and jarred me back to the unwelcome reality.

"What's wrong, Gavin?" Danielle asked, laughing. "You look like you've seen a ghost."

"No, just a jerk-off guy with the girl I'm in love with." I had hoped to make it sound like I was joking, but Danielle saw right through it and looked at me with sincere sympathy.

"That's tough," she agreed. "Especially because it looks like they're at one of your stations. I'd wait on them for you, but you know how Mrs. Roberts gets if we switch tables."

"Thanks for the offer, but I have to make it look like it doesn't bother me anyway." I took a deep breath and headed over.

"Well, well. Look who's waiting on us tonight." I saw past Troy's fake surprise as he watched me come over with hawkish eyes. "What a treat! My good friend Gavin is serving me and my lovely girlfriend."

"Hi, Gavin." Calypso smiled nervously at me. Her eyes met mine, but I immediately looked away. I was furious.

I took their drink orders as civilly as I could, but on my second trip over to their secluded, romantic table any pretense of politeness a waiter should have melted away

like the candle wax. “What do you guys want?”

“Now is that any way to treat your customers?”

Troy chided teasingly, his words stinging into my skin. “If you keep on being so rude to us I might just have to think about reducing your tip.”

“Oh no. Such a tragedy that would be.” I rolled my eyes. “Unfortunately for you I don’t want your money anyway, Troy. Now what’ll it be?”

“Man, that guy is awful.” Danielle had heard the whole conversation and confronted me about it back in the kitchen. “I can see why you have the ol’ kill the world look on your face.”

“I do not.” I scowled. “You wouldn’t understand Troy anyway, because you don’t have to see his face all the time in school. You go across town to that fancy Christian Academy, and right now I wish I did too.”

“Believe it or not, there’s one in every school.”

Danielle shrugged. “Don’t you know that no matter how different schools may be, there are always losers, popular dream girls, and normal people who don’t really fit in anywhere, like you and me. To tell you the truth, they’re the ones with the bigger problems. They have more of an image to keep up for all their adoring fans.”

Danielle’s honest words stayed in my mind the rest of the night, and somehow Troy didn’t bother me anymore, no matter how cutting he was trying to make his words. His knife was dull, and Calypso’s sorrowful gaze healed any superficial words he might’ve given me.

But really, did he have to kiss her right while I was reciting the goddamn dessert menu?

It still amazes me how cruel people can be towards each other, and more than ever I was convinced that Troy was not only dating Calypso to improve his social status and his chance of getting laid, but to get back at me. He still hated me because I got the position he wanted for

soccer, fullback, and he was stuck being a halfback. Even after two years he still bore a grudge; at least, that's how I took it. He didn't hate Matt the way he despised me, although that seemed to be changing as Matt got more and more attention for his soccer skills. But little did Troy know, Calypso wasn't the type to give him what he clearly wanted, or so I fervently hoped.

The image of their lip-lock remained with me the rest of the long holiday weekend and into Tuesday. Strolling through the hall of Richard Milton High, I imagined truly deviant scenarios to get Troy back. And sitting in class, half-listening to Mr. Barton discussing the mysterious Boo Radley in To Kill A Mockingbird, I thought about what I would say when I saw Calypso again. Or what she might say to me.

But Calypso wasn't in school that day, which I didn't find out until I walked into chemistry class. I wondered, did something happen to her? Was she sick? There was only one way to find out.

"Hey LaRose, what happened to Calypso?" I confronted the enemy on my way to French class.

"What are you talking about?" Troy looked honestly taken aback.

"I'm talking about why she isn't in school today."

"How the hell am I supposed to know? I haven't seen her since Friday."

"Was she sick or something?" I persisted, the vague feeling that Troy was hiding something descending upon me like a weighty thundercloud.

"I told you, Gavin; I don't know." Troy backed off, his mouth closed in a tight frown. "Why don't you call her or something? She'll probably talk to you more than she talks to me."

And that was the best news I could have possibly heard out of Troy's mouth.

CHAPTER FIVE

It seems more than obvious to me now, as I look back on those tumultuous high school years, that I relied way too heavily on Matt's help and advice. I've since learned to listen to rely on myself, but it wasn't an easy feat to accomplish. And I wasn't even aware of the problems that lie in not trusting oneself when I asked for my number one confidante's counsel that day before practice.

"Sure, give her a call," Matt said off-handedly, trying to be agreeable for me I'm sure. "Ask her why in God's name she would ditch practice when we have a big game in two days."

"But what if she doesn't want to talk to me?"

"Didn't you just tell me that Calypso talks to you more than anyone?" Matt countered. "I'm sure she'll tell you why she missed school, if nothing else."

"I probably won't even get that out of her," I muttered. "Maybe I should just forget about it and leave her alone."

Matt just stared at me with his dark hazel eyes wide open for several seconds; then without a word he grabbed my arm, hauled me to the steps and sat us both down.

"What's wrong?" I asked him, puzzled.

"Gavin, you know I think you're a cool guy and all, and I'm glad to be your friend; but seriously man, can you hear yourself talking?" Matt asked with more than a touch of incredulity.

"Yes, I do. Get to the point," I said impatiently. If I was going to brave the unknown and confront Calypso, I

wanted to get it over with.

“My point is, you sound like such a freakin’ girl!”

“I do not.”

“Yeah, ya do. Just chill out and use some logic instead of getting all emotional on me,” said Matt. “I like helping you, but if you’re not going to listen there’s just no point.”

I paused, letting his words sink in. He was right, damn him, and I told him so.

“I promise I will not turn girlie on you, Sergeant Best,” I solemnly said, snapping him a salute. “And I will gladly listen to your advice as long as I continue to ask for it.”

“Then I guess I have nothing to worry about,” Matt laughed and saluted me back. “Now correct me if I’m wrong, but it’s time for practice.”

Coach Williams decided that day to give us hell, working us so hard I thought my legs would just admit defeat and drop me to the ground. Matt and I staggered wearily out of the locker room together, only for Matt to come face to face with the last person in the world he would have wanted to see him in such an exhausted condition.

“Hey, guys.” Julia smiled at the both of us, but there was an extra spark in it meant only for Matt. She hadn’t come alone; two of her and Calypso’s friends, Emily Foster and Sadie Campbell, stood a short distance away, whispering and giggling amongst themselves. Sadie caught my eye and smiled, and I returned the gesture, though my attention was focused on my best friend having his dream come true.

“Hi,” Matt answered. For once in his life he actually appeared nervous and flustered as he made a valiant attempt to straighten his shaggy brown hair, but he looked to be trying his hardest to be cool and calm. He

failed with flying colors though; everyone could tell how badly he wanted Julia. And that seemed to give her confidence.

“I know the homecoming dance is still a couple weeks away and all,” Julia began, looking shyly away from Matt, “but I was wondering if you would like to come with me. I mean, if you don’t already have a date or anything.”

“Yes, I do...I mean, I don’t have a date.” Matt’s eyes lit up happily even as he stumbled over his words. “I’d love to go, with you.”

“Wow, you don’t see this too often,” Sadie stage-whispered to Emily. The two of them had been creeping closer and closer, until they stood right outside the action. “A girl asking a guy to homecoming, and Mr. Cool Matthew Best red in the face.”

“As long as they finally hook up, who cares who did the asking?” Emily looked as though the weight of the world was lifted off her shoulders. Together she, Sadie and I watched Matt and Julia walk off together, deep in conversation. This, as I became aware of right away, left me alone with the two girls. My gut couldn’t help but clench.

It’s not like I had anything against them, on the contrary. It’s just...Sadie and I had dated a few years ago; you know, one of those real awkward middle school relationships that dissipates in a few months. Sadie thought we should take it further and sleep together, because, according to her, basically everyone else was already having sex by then. I, however, wasn’t thrilled about upping the ante. Not just with her, but with anyone. So we broke up, and I have, unfortunately, to this day remained a virgin. But anyway, since then we hadn’t really spent all that much time together, so I couldn’t blame myself for feeling uncomfortable now.

Sadie seemed to be sensing the awkward vibes as

well. She smiled nervously and tucked a strand of dark blonde hair behind her ear. Emily, bless her, broke the silence that had ensued.

“Well I for one thank God that’s over and done with!” she said with a dramatic sigh of relief. “Julia’s been talking our ears off for days trying to figure out the perfect plan to ask him out.”

“No, kidding,” Sadie agreed. “But isn’t it great to witness true love?” She always had been the wistful dreamer, and her words uncomfortably reminded me of happier days when we had been good friends.

But there was no way I’d let her know that. “It depends,” I said with a nod. “But in this case; yeah. You don’t know how long he’s liked Julia. Practically forever!”

“We figured.” Emily might’ve been the more dramatic one, with the exotic look of her half-Japanese heritage to pair with her personality, but she could also hone things down using her seemingly innate sense of logic. “Sparks flew whenever their eyes met.”

Another, lengthier, pause ensued; the time had come to get some information. “By the way...do either of you know why Calypso wasn’t in school today?” I asked casually. “She missed a big practice.”

“Um, I’m not sure actually,” Emily looked thoughtful. “She was supposed to go with us all to that concert Saturday, but I’ve haven’t heard from her since before her date Friday with Troy.”

“Well, you know Calypso,” Sadie put in, tossing me an annoyed glare that confused the hell out me. “She probably needed the rest of the weekend to recover from her frequent romps with Troy-Boy.”

“Yeah, I don’t know what she could possibly see in him.” Emily made a disgusted face as if she were biting into a lemon.

That threw me off balance even more, but I shoved

the comment into the back of my head for later pondering. “Well...thanks anyway,” I said. “I’ll see you girls later.” I grabbed my bag and headed for home. And Calypso.

So there I stood on Calypso’s doorstep, sure I didn’t want to have such a potentially important conversation on the phone; sure of what I wanted to discuss, but completely in the dark about the results. Finally I reached up and knocked on the door, then stepped back and waited.

The door opened, and there stood Calypso. She was pale but more beautiful than I had ever seen her, the lights from inside encircling her like a holy spirit. I’d never been especially religious, but she looked like an angel standing there in the doorway.

“Gavin, what are you doing here?” Calypso asked in surprise.

“I...I came to see what was wrong. I mean, why you weren’t in school today.” My speech tripped from the get-go and never had a chance to sound like I wasn’t scared to death. “Coach was pretty mad because it was a big practice.”

“I know.” Calypso’s eyes were downcast. “I just...I wasn’t feeling well today; I think it was a twenty-four hour thing. I hope Coach will still let me play in the game.”

“He will,” I assured her, knowing full well that Coach’s policy was to sit out players if they missed a practice close to a game. “He thinks you’re a great player; even if it’s against his policy he’ll consider playing you because he wants to win so badly.”

“Look, I’m really sorry about Friday night.” Calypso unexpectedly changed the subject, searching my face with her gaze. “It wasn’t my idea to eat there; it was Troy’s. I know how much he gets to you, and I don’t blame you for it. He acts like a real jerk towards you.”

“Can I ask you something?” I began haltingly.

“Why do you like Troy?”

Calypso didn't say anything for a long time. She shut the door and stood outside with me in the evening turning more than just chilly with the warm sun half-under the mountains already. Motioning for me to come over, she sat down on the porch steps. I did the same.

“I don't really know,” she said finally. “He's real sweet to me, and he seems to care about me.”

“You're lying.” I looked her square in the eye. No answer from Calypso, which inspired me to travel further down that road. “You know, I used to see you as absolutely perfect. You're beautiful, popular; everyone likes you. I never imagined you could be just like the rest of us commoners. But you are, Calypso. Everyone has problems. I just wish you would share yours more often. Maybe then you can solve them and become more like your character.”

And I realized then that that was exactly what the Calypso I thought I knew was: a character, merely an imagined life she used to disguise the truth that I don't even think she knew anymore.

“I know things are different than the way I portray them at school,” Calypso said with a weary sigh. “I don't want people to know what my life is really like. People see me as what I want them to, and that makes me happy.”

“Does it?”

“Well...no. I guess not.”

“Then tell me this. What makes your problems so bad that you can't tell someone about them?” I asked her. “I know when I'm upset I try to talk about it, especially to Matt, and it really does make me feel better. It's hard, because I'm a lot like you in that sense but I...I try.”

“But no one can help me with my problems, Gavin!” Calypso cried. “That's just it. I've been carrying them for so long it's almost like I'm used to them. They've

become a part of me even as I've tried to banish them. I like my life at school, where for at least a little while those problems don't exist." She paused, clearly deciding how to continue. "And you ask why I like Troy. I don't, but he's the only one who cares for me, like as a boyfriend."

"You know that's not true either. You can have your pick of guys," I argued. "I know lots of guys who would love to go out with you, who are a lot better for you than Troy."

"How would you know what was better for me?" Calypso asked darkly, but when I only returned her comment with a bland stare, she sighed. "Okay, okay; see Troy...well, he's popular." Calypso was trying very hard, for once, to have someone understand her. I could read it in her desperate eyes. "I figure that if a popular guy, one who could have his own pick of girls, likes me, then I'm okay."

"But Calypso, he doesn't like you for you," I told her gently. "He likes you for what he thinks he can get from you."

"I know." Calypso took a deep breath, and I saw her shudder.

"Here, take my jacket." I took off my coat and draped it around her slender shoulders.

"Thank you." Calypso tried to smile, but she trembled so and gave up. I knew there was more to her story that she wasn't telling me, but I also concluded that there was no way I could get her to reveal what was bothering her. "Anyway, I'm breaking up with Troy. I thought I needed his kind of caring, but it didn't work out that way. Oh, and just so you know, back when we played Christian Academy, I could hear every word he said about me to you and Matt in the locker room."

I felt so awful when she said that, like someone had punched me in the stomach, because I remembered Troy's demeaning words about her. "Calypso Dawson." I met her

gaze. “If you ever, ever need to talk; I’ve told you before and I’ll tell you again; I’m here. I’ll listen.”

“I know.” Calypso smiled, for real this time.

“Maybe one day I’ll actually take you up on your offer.”

CHAPTER SIX

Needless to say, Calypso wasn’t in school the next day either. Every time I saw Troy I kept imagining all these horrible acts he could’ve committed towards her. Finally, as I observed him talking and telling some outrageous story at lunch to his friends, I knew I’d had enough imagining and decided to attempt confronting him one more time and weasel the truth out.

“Okay, I’m asking you one more time; what did you do to Calypso?”

“I didn’t do anything to her. It’s the other way around,” Troy said scornfully. “She called last night and broke up with me. Said she didn’t need the kind of relationship we were in right now, or some bullshit along those lines.”

“Well, she told me she was going to do that. Now what did you do to her that made her think that way?”

“I was just doin’ what you’re supposed to do on a date, and what she was practically begging for I might add, then suddenly she got all upset and ordered me out of the house.” Troy looked right into my eyes, but they didn’t settle there for more than an instant before darting quickly away.

“What’d you do then?” It took all my willpower not to charge at him like some psychotic bull and give him what he deserved just then.

“Nothing. I left,” he replied, and stood up to use packing a book into his bag as an excuse to avoid making eye contact again.

“You make me sick, Troy. I don’t believe you.”

“Well that’s your own fucking choice then, isn’t it, Gavin?”

I could say nothing more, for Troy stalked off in an angry storm cloud out of the cafeteria.

I thought of doing the usual and running to Matt for advice, but somehow I knew he couldn’t help me on this one. I had to think of a solution on my own. I had to talk to Calypso again, and try to find out what she wasn’t telling me.

The rest of the school day was hell. My thoughts were all muddled, and, damn them, they interfered with a pop French quiz; I knew even before I was finished with it that I failed. And yet, I didn’t care, because all I could think about was Calypso sitting at home, alone with her own thoughts. I knew how destructive such a situation could be. I imagined myself as the only one who could save her; I had to be her hero.

“If he did something to you, Calypso, just tell me,” I pleaded. “You have to, so I can help you, and Troy can get what he deserves.”

“He doesn’t deserve anything.” Calypso had welcomed me when I showed up at her door again after school. I’d even skipped practice for her, which I knew I’d pay for later, but now her eyes were as cold as the air that was now faintly sprinkled with mid-autumn snowflakes. “I told him no, he kept persisting, so I just gave up and let him have what he wanted, okay?”

“And you didn’t like it,” I finished.

“No.” She wasn’t quite meeting my eye, but that one word was enough to set off the alarm bells in my brain. I leapt on her answer...I needed to.

“Calypso, that’s rape!” I cried. “If you didn’t want to have sex with him, and he made you do it, he raped you.”

She was dead silent for a moment, so still I almost thought she had frozen in the icy air. Then she leapt to her feet, eyes blazing like neon. “Yes! Yes, he did rape me, the bastard! I kept trying to push him away, Gavin, you gotta believe me; he just kept...kept going!”

“It’s okay, Calypso.” Shocked by her violent reaction, I had never seen her so angry, I rose and put my hand on her arm, as much in restraint as in comfort. “It’ll be okay. I’ll help you; we’ll all help you.”

“No, you don’t understand.” Calypso shrugged my hand off her and shook her head vehemently as she backed away. “I know sex is all a guy wants, so before Troy that’s what I gave them. Willingly. They walked away happy; I was left miserable but not knowing exactly why. Then came the rumors. You must’ve heard them all talking about me. First I was pregnant, but then I had a miscarriage, then no! It wasn’t a miscarriage; it was an abortion for God’s sake! All rumors, all because I try to give a guy what he wants!”

“Not all guys,” I said, but so quietly she didn’t hear me.

“Then I finally realize that maybe, just maybe, I’m better than that, only now I’m with Troy who’s all over me like static electricity or something. I kept telling him to slow down, I didn’t want to be like that anymore, but it was too late, he said. He knew my reputation, so I’d better give it up before he starts telling everyone how I come on so strong, but I’m really just a tease. First a slut, now a tease!”

I didn’t know what to say, so I played it safe and remained silent. Calypso took that as a sign to continue.

“All that ever happened before was that people talked about me behind my back. I tried not to let them all know how much it hurt. I kept a brave, smiling face, kept

my perfect image. But this time...this time...it's too late."

She ended on a sob and collapsed back onto the porch steps, her head buried in her arms and sobs raking her throat so that she shook like a leaf caught in a hurricane.

"I never heard anyone talking about you," I said softly. It was true; I never heard many rumors around school; they usually came to me through Matt. And then it dawned on me. Matt probably hadn't told me anything pertaining to Calypso because he knew I wouldn't like it, let alone believe it.

"Well it doesn't matter anymore!" Calypso declared. "I'm going to be the hottest rumor around once again, only this time it isn't my fault." She paused and pulled me down next to her, her face and those perfect coral lips so close to mine that my heart began to pound. "You can't tell anyone, Gavin. Please. Not even Matt. This remains a secret between you and me, okay?"

"But Calypso," I protested, "Troy has to get in trouble."

"No; don't you get it? No one will ever believe he raped me. Then not only will I be a slut, I'll be a liar and a bitch as well, and everyone will hate me. It'll be worse, so much worse, than before, and that already hurt so much." Her eyes, still looking earnestly into mine and making my entire body ache with longing, filled with tears. It was a sight I'd seen so little, if at all, since third grade, but now far too often for my comfort. "And on top of that I had to deal with my father's constant pressure on me to be the perfect, dutiful daughter, and my mom dying. It's just too much, Gavin. I don't know how much more I can take!"

"All right; I promise." I sighed heavily, knowing it was wrong, but I just couldn't betray Calypso's trust. I was all she had, and as much as I hated myself for it, I secretly enjoyed that position.

"Thank you so much. The only reason I've been

able to stay home for these past few days is because my father's been away, and he'll be so mad when he gets back.

He was bad before my mom died, but since then it's just gotten worse and worse. He's real horrible sometimes. You'd never imagine..." and then she broke off sharply like the snapping of a pencil, refusing to say more.

"I don't know what to say."

"I know; no one does." Calypso put her head on my shoulder. "But thank you anyway for at least trying."

I waited for her to move, fearing she was going to; when she didn't I put my arms around her and drew her close. Hoping she mistook my trembling for cold and not for the desire it really was, I ran my fingers through her thick hair like I had dreamed of doing for so long. And it felt so damn good.

I don't know how long I held her; I wish I could have for forever. But dusk was rapidly falling into darkness, and soon my mom's car pulled in our driveway across the street.

"I can stay if you need me to." I hesitated to leave Calypso alone again when she was this upset.

"No, go." She smiled gently. "I'll be fine. I'll see you in school tomorrow; I promise."

"Okay. Good night then." I left her sitting on her porch steps, feeling more confused than ever, but most of all, bitterly disappointed, because logic was slowly creeping in passion's place, and it knew there was nothing I could do to help her.

CHAPTER SEVEN

There's an old saying that came often to my mind in those days: things get worse before they get better. And it's true, at least for me. After that dreadful day when I failed my French quiz and God only knows what else, I tried to turn myself around and get back on the track I started on at the beginning of the year. I knew I had succeeded when I not only raised my hand in Mr. Jacobs' history class, but also offered up the correct answer. His surprised smile pleased me more than I could've ever imagined. And I hopefully told myself that maybe things were finally looking up.

This was especially my hope with the whole Calypso saga. That day at her house I took to be the worst day, when I really felt like either the world was ending or Calypso was in big trouble. Then I saw her beautiful smiling face in school the next morning, saw her catch my eye and wave, and prayed to whatever God existed out there that that was it. I didn't think either of us could handle another disaster.

I did get in trouble for missing practice, so I joined Calypso on the bench that afternoon, huddled in blankets to defeat the raw stinging of wind and cold rain, and together we watched our team pound Aspen High into the grass. But neither of us really felt like celebrating.

“Sorry you can’t play today,” Calypso said to me as we observed Matt faking out at least three defenders before easily scoring a goal.

“Hey, it was worth it.” I shrugged. “Soccer isn’t the only thing in life.”

“It sure isn’t,” agreed Calypso. “And...I just wanted to thank you again. Before you and I became friends I thought the only way a guy would like me was Troy’s way. But you really do seem to care about me.”

I didn’t think it’d be wise to tell her I secretly had loved her forever, though with all my heart I wanted to. Instead I nodded. “I do care about you, Calypso. You’re a great girl, and you have to realize that.”

She smiled wryly. “I wish I could believe you.”

“You have to believe me.”

Calypso didn’t answer. Instead she turned her gaze towards the game, but her eyes were really looking miles away. “How’s your painting coming?” she finally asked.

“Good. Mr. Truman said it’s one of the best in the class. I still have a lot of work to do though. The shadows don’t look right.” I knew I was babbling, but I had to fill Calypso’s sad silences with something. And art was the only “something” I really knew.

“I want to see it sometime.” Calypso finally looked at me. “Will you show it to me?”

“Of course,” I said firmly. “You’re probably the only person I’d show it to. Matt thinks art is a waste of time, and he makes fun of me every time I compare something to art. He just can’t see it the way I can I guess.”

“You see things a lot different than anyone else, and not just art,” Calypso agreed. “I’m sure anyone else would’ve judged me from what I told you, but you’re still my friend, no questions asked.”

“How do you know they would judge you if you don’t give them a chance?”

“Because people are cruel. Even friends without even meaning it. I remember little remarks Emily and especially Sadie would say to each other about me being such a slut, though really they should talk! Sadie definitely has some kind of vendetta towards me; I just acted like her words couldn’t hurt as bad as she wanted them to. But anyway, Julia’s been the only one’s who’s stayed loyal.”

“She and Matt seem perfect for each other,” I had to laugh. “They’re both extremely loyal friends!”

We didn’t speak much after that, instead just enjoying each other’s company on the bench while action occurred around us, a whirlwind of emotions like Calypso had spoken of before.

After the game we joined Matt and Julia for pizza, Julia praising wonderful Matt for that “spectacular” goal. Matt looked proud as a peacock, and I couldn’t blame him. Not only did he have a pretty, openly adoring girlfriend, he was a strong candidate for MVP of the Richard Milton Wildcats that year. Troy wasn’t speaking to him anymore.

That was how Troy was brought up actually. Matt was joking about him being jealous. Then a change came over Calypso. Before she was happy: talking, laughing with us. At the mere mention of Troy a cloud passed over her face. And I was the only one who really knew why. There was no way I could tell and betray her confidence though. Not when things were going so well between us. But still I knew there were things she wasn’t telling me, probably because she didn’t know how to explain them.

Everyone, not just me, noticed Calypso’s abrupt personality change. At school the next morning Matt asked me about it.

“I can’t tell you,” I replied with a shrug. “She doesn’t want anyone to know.”

“Come on, Gavin!” Matt begged shamelessly. “I’m your best friend.”

“I know, and you always will be. But for once I have to get through this on my own. I don’t think even you could give me the right kind of advice for this.”

“Try me,” challenged Matt. But I didn’t fall for it and remained stubbornly silent. Finally he sighed in exasperation. “Fine,” he said, raising his arms in defeat. “I won’t bug you about it. I need your help on the math assignment anyway. How the hell do you do this stuff?”

I helped Matt the best I could with his homework until the bell rang, signaling for me to get to my home room down the hall. After trading the usual words of parting with Matt, I left.

Home room, although the most necessary part of the school day because without it you’d fall asleep first period, proved that day to be a part I’d wish to avoid as much as I could, even if it meant returning to my safe little shell.

For Sadie Campbell was in my home room, and for the past few years we’d exchanged no more than casual hellos and how’s it goings. But that day was a different story.

“Good morning, Gavin.” Sadie gave me her most charming smile. “How are things?”

“All right.” I regarded her, suspicion rising. I knew from experience that when she used that sugary tone of voice, she wanted something. But what exactly she wanted, well, I had no idea.

She quickly revealed the answer, but in a much less straightforward manner than I had hoped.

“So...you and Calypso have been rather close lately,” Sadie said, wagging her eyebrows knowingly. “She even dumped Troy Boy for you; very impressive.”

“We’re friends,” I evenly replied. “She was smart enough to leave Troy for her own sake.”

“Well, I can’t say I blame her for that.” Sadie’s voice grew softer; reminiscent of the dreaming girl I’d

always known her as. “I had my own little adventure with Mr. LaRose, and I don’t think I have to tell you that that boy is hornier than a convict on a conjugal visit.”

I laughed. “That definitely went without saying, but thanks.”

Sadie giggled too, then in a heartbeat her eyes became like sharp arrows, and I felt my stomach clench as they pierced through me. I’m not ashamed to say that I was more than a little intimidated by her, especially when she opened her mouth to speak again.

“Anyway, Calypso’s a lot better off with you. If I remember correctly, you’re not exactly the Troy Boy type. Maybe being with you will get her to cease those naughty little bedroom habits of hers. Or maybe not,” she finished ominously, her voice laced with coyness.

“I told you; we’re just friends,” I repeated a bit more testily than before.

“Yeah right.” Sadie voiced her disbelief that was mingled with disgust. “Calypso’s never ‘just friends’ with any guy. She claims she just does what guys want, but we all know that’s bullshit. Calypso wants it just as much, if not more, than any male who walks the halls of any high school. If she hasn’t gotten into your pants yet, she will; don’t you worry. Just like she got into Troy’s.”

“That’s not true!” I growled. “Calypso was...” Then I stopped myself, a scant instant before I revealed her secret. I forced myself to lower my voice, to act cool and calm. “Did it ever occur to you that Calypso could possibly be Troy’s victim, not the other way around?”

“Aw, did she come to you with some pitiful little tale of how Troy Boy connived her clothes off her, and she could do nothing to stop him?” Sadie had a tragic hero face on that made bile rise up my throat.

“And the tale has as good a chance of being true as any,” I countered defensively. I felt like Sadie was

attacking me, not Calypso. Maybe she was. I've never claimed to understand females.

Now Sadie laughed, a harsh, brittle laugh that hardened my defenses ever more. "You really don't know, do you, Gav." She shook her head and smiled, almost sadly. "Though, you always were so trusting of people. It's a charming quality, really it is, but you're in for a lot of disappointment. Calypso Dawson is nothing but a manipulative little whore with a flare for acting and story telling. Why do you think she latched onto you? You're gullible and naive enough to believe her, that's why. Troy may act like a sex-starved gorilla, but he would never, ever force a girl to fuck him. He only goes for the ones who are willing, just like your lying little girlfriend."

Something inside me snapped; its sharp echo reverberated in my ears. Right then I didn't give a damn who else was in the room, or how good a friend Sadie had once been. All that mattered was defending Calypso.

"Why are you so determined to destroy a supposed friend of yours, Sadie?" I asked wickedly. "Is it maybe because when you attempt to unmask Calypso you hide your own little, oh...what did you call them, bedroom habits? You're the manipulative little whore, Sadie dear, if protecting your sorry self is the reason why you go about befriending people."

Her eyes widened in something close to shock, egging me on. "You're wasting my time, not to mention your own, by running your mouth about Calypso behind her back all the time, and it makes you a bitch as well."

Without a word Sadie fled from my voice, retreating to her desk and burying her head in her arms. Embraced in mean satisfaction, I returned to finishing my math homework, ignoring the open-mouthed stares of everyone else in my home room.

My fellow classmates caught a glimpse of a

different Gavin Ward that morning. Maybe they thought the devil possessed me; maybe they guessed I was in love with Calypso. Whatever conclusion they drew, I no longer cared. I had done my duty, and even if my outward appearances returned to Anormal, something remained changed inside. And it was all due to Calypso.

That afternoon, Matt came begging once again, this time desperate for the gritty details about my confrontation.

“Hey, I heard about you and Sadie.” He had an eager, unpunished puppy-dog expression on his face when I walked into history.

“Why does that not surprise me?” I asked dryly.

“Julia told me that Sadie came up to her and Emily all crying and stuff, and she said you called her a whore and a bitch because she supposedly talked about Calypso behind her back.”

“I did. She did.”

“I know; I heard all the rumors,” Matt admitted sadly. “But you were deaf to them. You always thought Calypso was perfect, and I didn’t want to be the one to open your ears for you.”

“She still is perfect, but in a different way,” I insisted, and tried to explain further. “I’m gonna make you mad, but I’m using an art analogy. A painting of Calypso started out for me half-finished. I had the literal meaning to add to it: it was a beautiful picture. But now I think I know the real meaning, and it’s still as beautiful as before, even though it’s looked at a little differently. Now I just have to finish it.”

Matt was silent while he pondered this theory. Then suddenly his face cleared, like sunshine after a storm, and he chuckled. “For once I can almost see what you’re talking about,” he informed me just as the bell rang. With a grateful smile I slid into my seat and vowed to banish all thoughts of Sadie and Calypso from my head.

CHAPTER EIGHT

True to my word, I didn't give Sadie any further thought as that Friday slid into the weekend. Calypso was in my mind a little more than I would've liked, but I guess long before that I accepted that she would forever be there, no matter how hard I tried to banish her.

It was right around mid-October by then; however, the thermometer gave readings that usually accompanied December. Though snow had fallen in little more than a few showers, frost blanketed the faded grass every morning when I awoke, and the days themselves were little warmer.

Calypso and I were still walking from school together every weekday, but our steps were much more hurried as we tried our best to outrun the cold. Trust me, it doesn't work.

I woke up later than usual that Sunday, recovering from a late-night movie fest with Matt and a few other friends at his house the night before, and took a moment to brace myself before peeking out the window. Sure enough, about half an inch of wet, slushy, nasty snow had fallen that night; just as the Weather Channel had predicted, so I guess I wasn't too surprised. Funny though, how snow in October just wasn't all that astonishing. The strange car in the driveway on the other hand, that was unexpected. I wondered who Mom could have had visiting at eleven

thirty on a Sunday morning, and reluctantly decided that the only way to find out was to get up.

So my surprise was more than excusable when, after making myself shower and look somewhat presentable, I headed down the stairs to find mom sitting, all alone I might add, in the living room, calmly reading the paper.

“Mornin’ Hon,” she said, glancing up for the barest moment.

“Good morning.” More than a little confused, I plopped down next to her on the couch and got straight to the point. “Um, whose car is that in the driveway?”

“Hmm? Oh, that’s yours, dear.”

I froze in mid-reach for the sports section. “What?”

Mom finally tore her attention from the editorials.

“Do you not like it? Matthew helped me pick it out, and he assured me you’d love it.”

“What the hell are you talking about, mom?” I asked, my heart racing the Kentucky Derby in my chest.

“Don’t tell me you haven’t given it a look-over yet.”

Mom smiled, looking as excited as I felt. “Come on, let’s check it out.”

I put on my coat like I was moving through mud, and followed mom out into the snow-covered wonderland. And there it was: a beautiful black Honda Civic coupe, sitting snow-free in the driveway next to mom’s still-covered Camry. I turned to gape at mom, who was holding a set of keys out and laughing at what I’m sure was a stupefied expression on my face.

“Where did this come from?” I asked, taking the keys from her hand.

“I think circumstances require a thank-you first, don’t you?” teased mom.

“Thank you so, so, so much, mom!”

“You’re welcome. And you might want to thank your father too when you get a chance. He finally sent me

the money for your birthday, a few months late.”

“A few,” I agreed, twisting my face. My birthday was in May, and I’d about given up hope on getting a gift from dad. I stepped towards my car, not quite believing she was really truly mine. “This is incredible,” I said.

“Open it up; look inside,” mom urged.

I did, and was even more thrilled with the inside. Tan leather seats, CD player, and even a sunroof. The mileage was on the higher end of the spectrum, but since it was a Honda that didn’t matter so much. When I sat in the driver’s seat I really thought I’d died somehow in the night and gone to a beautiful snowy-white heaven filled with black Honda Civics. “Matt helped you with this?”

“Oh yeah, he was in on it all along,” mom said.

“He was a great help; so he should get a thank you too.”

“Don’t worry, I’ll make sure he gets one.” I shut the door and turned to mom, doing something I really didn’t do often enough. I gave her a hug. “And you get another one. Thanks mom.”

Later that day the sun came out, and snow dripped cheerfully off the rooftops as it melted away. After I called Matt and thanked him profusely, after shoveling the driveway clear and getting the snow off mom’s car, and after making both mom and Ivy a spectacular brunch, if I say so myself, of French toast and scrambled eggs, I did what any new owner of a fabulous car would do. I went right outside in the surprisingly warm afternoon with a bucket of soapy water and a towel. I admit, it didn’t really need a washing, but I couldn’t help it. I’d had the car less than a day and already it was my girl.

I was intently scrubbing away at the back window when I felt the little hairs on the back of my neck rise, and instinctively I turned around, only to find Calypso crossing the street towards me. I hardly ever saw her on weekends, except for when we had a soccer game, so her arrival only

brightened my already brilliant day.

“Hey.” I greeted her with a smile.

“Good afternoon.” Calypso returned the gesture. She looked so pretty, so much like a little girl, in a thick pink sweater and blue jeans I wanted to run up and pull her into an embrace, but of course I didn’t. “Is this yours?” She gestured towards the car.

“Yeah.” I was sure the broad grin on my face looked stupid but for the moment didn’t care. “A belated birthday present from my mom and dad.”

Calypso walked around it, eyes wide. “This is awesome,” she said. “Should I be feeling stupid for not saying happy birthday?”

I laughed. “I think you’re safe, as my birthday’s actually in May. Do you have a car?” Calypso’s house had a two-car garage, so I never really saw cars entering or leaving.

“If I did, do you think I’d be walking?” Calypso said with a giggle. “No, I don’t even have my license. I got my permit on my birthday back in July, and I think I’ve been behind the wheel a total of three times since. I don’t think my dad wants me to have that freedom yet.”

“Well you know what this means,” I began excitedly. “I can give you rides now. No more walking out in the cold for us!”

Her eyes lit up for a moment before they faded just as quick. “I couldn’t ask that of you,” she said shyly, looking down at the asphalt.

“Why the hell not? It’s not like I’d be going out of my way to pick you up and drop you off.”

“Well, if you’re sure...”

“Of course I’m sure,” I told her. “Hey, how about as soon as I finish up we take it for a spin. Will your dad let you?”

“He’s not home, so yes,” said Calypso, laughing.

“Here, let me help.”

Let me tell you, there’s nothing sexier than a beautiful girl washing a car, even if it wasn’t summer and she was in a sweater and blue jeans instead of a bikini. Nothing that is, except for that same beautiful girl sitting in the passenger seat of your new car licking a chocolate ice cream cone. I really did die and go to heaven, I thought; and I am more than okay with it.

“So listen,” Calypso said while we waited at a red light, “I hope you don’t hate Sadie too much after what happened Friday. I really think she was trying to save you from my wickedness or something.”

“I don’t need to be saved,” I said stoutly. Thrown off guard, I hit the gas a little harder than I wanted to when the light turned green, and I sheepishly forced myself to calm down to add, “she was definitely a bitch; but no, I don’t hate her. I just think she needs to do some serious thinking about friendship as well as what makes her happy.”

“Bah. Happiness is relative, which makes it far too difficult to figure out.” Calypso finished off her ice cream cone with an emphatic crunch. “Besides, if kids in high school were supposed to figure out then what really made them happy, there’d be no unhappy adults would there?”

“You’re right, but it can’t hurt to search yourself a little. One should always find something to improve about himself, or herself as the case may be.”

“So what are you doing to improve yourself, Gavin?”

“I’m trying to speak up in class.” I grinned. “And prove to Mr. Jacobs I’m not a complete idiot while I’m at it.”

“Yeah, he’s such an ass, isn’t he?”

By the time we arrived back at home the sun was setting behind a gorgeous canvas of pinks and purples and

reds. Calypso and I bid each other farewell, and I reluctantly said goodnight to my car as I headed inside. Time to tackle the homework, I told myself. But when I really sat down after dinner, Reese's Pieces at hand, all I could think about was what a wonderful afternoon I'd had with Calypso. It was all fun, for once. No serious discussions, no tears, no wondering if she was going to be okay. If only it could've been like that all the time.

The warm, happy feelings remained with me the rest of Sunday and into the school week. As promised, I gave Calypso a ride to school, although I was a little disappointed that a car made the journey half as long. I'd liked the time we spent together on our walks. We parted ways, she heading for the library to do some last minute research on a paper, and I for my locker. Matt was waiting when I got there.

"Good morning!" he said cheerfully. "How's your new baby?"

"I love it; it's awesome Matt," I told him honestly. "Thanks again for helping my mom out."

"Oh, it was fun. Although she did sniffle a little as she signed the papers, saying how she hardly knows her only son anymore, and how she has to go through the best friend even to find out what kind of car he likes."

"Well, she'll just have to deal I suppose."

"Yeah, I told her my mom doesn't even know who my best friend is, but I don't think she appreciated that little joke."

I laughed. "No, probably not. Well I have to finish up that French homework I didn't get to last night. Do you have it on you?"

"Yeah, sure." Matt handed over his sheet. I knew his homework would be absolutely perfect. After spending a year and a half living in Paris when he was younger, Matt spoke French as well as any native. It was wonderful

really, how the two of us worked together and helped each other out. That way, if one of us forgot, or didn't understand, any of our homework, the other likely had it. A damn good team if I say so myself.

Lunchtime rolled around, and we grabbed a seat at our usual table with several other friends, including Julia, Emily and Calypso. I was just about to taste the rather suspicious looking ham and cheese sandwich when I felt a tap on my shoulder. I turned to see Troy, of all people, standing there behind me.

"Ward. I hear you got yourself a set of wheels," he said with a mocking grin.

"Yeah; it's no Mercedes, but I suppose it'll do." I rolled my eyes.

"Well why don't you drive yourself over to my party Saturday after the game. Oh, you're invited too, Best."

"Gee, thanks." Matt covered up a laugh by biting heartily into his sandwich.

Troy extended the invitation to the others at our table, ending with Calypso. Even those who had no idea what happened between them could probably pick up the tension that gathered between them like fog in a valley. "You're welcome to come as well, Calypso," Troy said finally, attempting a smile. I almost had to give the bastard credit. Almost.

Calypso replied, "You know my dad won't let me, but thanks for the invite anyway."

"Well, thought I'd try. See you around then."

"See ya."

So... Troy had invited us all to a party. I'd never been inside his house before, but Matt had driven me past it once. It was huge. I think the east wing had a west wing which contained the atrium and indoor pool, or something like that. Mr. LaRose was a co-owner and vice-president of

operations of a huge ski resort about an hour north of town, and Mrs. LaRose was a defense attorney. Needless to say, that family was loaded, and along with the money came the sparkling social life. Troy's parents were hardly ever home on weekends, giving Troy all the freedom he desired. His parties had become quite legendary over the past few years.

Even though Calypso wasn't going to be there, I found myself excited about going. It'd been quite a while since I'd been to a 'real' party, and I almost felt cool for being invited to one at a popular senior's house. I guess I should've known better.

CHAPTER NINE

As exciting as soccer games were, our game that Saturday night as well have been a pre-show. We won...of course. Matt and I paired up for a really cool looking goal, and Troy scored one as well, so by the time the buzzer rang the Wildcats were all in great moods.

“It’s too bad you can’t go to Troy’s tonight.” I caught up with Calypso as we all headed towards the locker rooms.

“Yeah, I asked my dad, just for kicks, and he said no. Sometimes I can get him to give in, other times I might as well be bashing my head against a brick wall.” Calypso shook her head ruefully, but then turned to smile that brilliant smile at me. “Well, try to think of me tonight while you all are having fun.”

“I think I can manage to do that,” I said, then took a deep breath as a daring thought sprang into my head. “Did you maybe, um, want to get together tomorrow and work on the chemistry homework? I thought it’d be easy, but I looked it over this morning, and it looks like a method of torture or something.”

Calypso laughed. “That’s nothing new for me! Sure though, that sounds great. I’ll come over around two, okay?”

“Okay.” We had reached the locker rooms by then,

and turned to go our separate ways. “See ya tomorrow.”

“You bet.”

“Ooo...do my ears deceive me? Does Gavin have a homework date with the lovely Mademoiselle Dawson?” Matt sprang on me the second I walked through the doors.

“Shut up!” I hissed. I glanced this way and that to make sure no one, no one being Troy, had heard Matt’s rather loudly spoken statement. “It’s not a date.”

“Sure.” Matthew only laughed. “Well, ready to party the night away, man?”

“Almost,” I replied.

After a quick change in the locker room Matt and I headed to his house, which was fortunately in the same neighborhood as Troy’s so we could walk. I would be spending the night at Matt’s after the party, so neither of us had to worry about being stuck as a designated driver.

Matt’s house wasn’t as large as Troy’s, but it was beautiful nonetheless, at least in a stark, formal kind of way. I always felt a little awkward going there. His dad, a senior officer at the Colorado Springs military base, was everyone’s image of his position: gruff, strict on routine, and a little sexist; and he had absolutely huge muscles to boot. I tried to put all that superficial stuff aside, but no matter what I always felt like I was being tested every time we conversed. Matt’s mom, meanwhile, was a writer of romance novels, and could often be found buried amid mounds of paper and books in her office. She would become so engrossed in her work she’d forget to make dinner, much less keep tabs on Matt, so Mr. Best probably felt he had to be two parents instead of one. All I can say is, thank God they stopped having children after Matt!

“So, you two are going to party at the LaRose’s.” Mr. Best stood in Matt’s bedroom doorway, arms folded across his chest and a perfectly honed stare aimed directly at his son.

“Yeah, dad. It’s with the whole soccer team, and some other people from school,” Matt said as he pulled out a sweater from his closet.

“And when can your mother and I expect you to return?”

“The curfew is one o’clock, if I remember correctly.” Matt was the only guy I knew who could talk to his parents in that semi-sarcastic manner. “Gavin’s spending the night here too, just so you know.”

“All right, boys,” Mr. Best said with a curt nod. “Just don’t go too crazy over there. I’ve heard all about the parties at the LaRose house.” He gave me one last calm yet thoroughly searching look, then turned on his heel and marched away. I couldn’t help but breathe a sigh of relief when he was out of earshot.

“Intimidating as always isn’t he,” Matt said with a laugh. “Let’s go raid the fridge before heading out. Don’t wanna drink on an empty stomach!”

We took our time eating hamburgers grilled with the Best’s George Foreman grill, and after cleaning up our mess we started on the walk to Troy’s. The night was clear and so bitterly cold it hurt the insides of my nostrils when I breathed and tears formed in my eyes. Matt and I walked as fast as we could without breaking into a run. Snow crackled in annoyance under our feet, hard-packed on all the sidewalks by snow blowers. Finally the LaRose mansion, set by itself atop a small hill, came into sight.

Most people had already arrived; there must’ve been about fifty or sixty party goers altogether. Music pierced the icy air and throbbed in my ears while we headed up the sidewalk. Once we got to the door, Matt and I just looked at each other. “Shall we?” Matt said finally, reaching up to knock.

“Ward! Best! Ya made it.” Troy was as genuinely jovial as I’d ever seen him when he answered the door. He

had a red head girl hanging on one arm, a yellow plastic cup of beer in the other hand, and the wide goofy smile of someone who'd already hit the kegs a few times. "Come on in, guys. Jason over there is collecting the money, four dollars a cup, and yes that means free refills. Gregg's got the cups and the kegs in his control. If you're lookin' for something a little stronger, Ben and Andy are manning the bar in the kitchen. Tonight we've got Jell-O shots in blue and red, and some vodka and orange juice or Seven-Up while it's available. That all costs extra though."

Wow, I thought. No wonder Troy's parties were so famous. Smiling seductively, the red head collected our coats while Troy wandered back over to the kegs.

"Beer pong!" Matt enthused, spying the large crowd gathered around in Troy's kitchen. "Wanna play?" I shook my head. "Well, I'm gonna. You'll be all right?"

"Yep. Go have fun, Sergeant Best."

"Oh don't you worry, Officer Ward. I will."

Matt wove his way through the crowd to participate in his favorite party game, leaving me to wander about. For lack of anything better to do, I joined Jason and Gregg, paid my fee and received my own yellow plastic cup of beer. I wish Calypso was here, I thought to myself, taking a sip of the lukewarm liquid.

"Hey, hey, Gavin!" A female voice broke into my thoughts, and for a heart-in-my-throat moment I thought she had come after all; but when I turned to see it was Emily and Julia, with a reluctant Sadie a few steps behind.

"Hey, girls," I said with a smile. I paused for a second to examine the fact that Emily's long silky black curtain of hair was for once up; it was all piled on her head in some sort of intricate pattern I could never decipher, but it looked great. Then, becoming aware of my spacing out, I turned my attention to something else. "Matt's over playing beer pong, Julia, if you're looking for him."

“I saw,” laughed Julia, pulling her own thick, dark brown hair up into a simple ponytail to help beat the heat of many bodies in a confined space. “And I figure I’ll let him have his fun with the boys for a while before I kidnap him. How come you’re not playing?”

“I don’t prefer to have to compete for a drink,” I replied, holding up my cup. “But maybe I’ll go a round or two later.”

Sadie by then had managed to drift away from her friends, whom I suspected dragged her over in my direction. Emily noticed though, and rolled her eyes.

“She didn’t want to come tonight,” she explained quietly, leaning in closer so that her body brushed up against me and I could smell the girlie Bath and Body Works scents the female sex uses to lure guys in. “She’s afraid you’re going to humiliate her again.”

“She really likes you, Gavin,” Julia added just as softly. “You hurt her.”

My happy mood ebbed away as fast as the keg was emptying. Embarrassed, I took a long gulp of beer and welcomed the bitter aftertaste in my throat.

“We don’t mean to upset you, Gav,” Emily hastily spoke up. I could feel her hand running up and down my arm, and I rather liked the sensation. “We really like you too. We just...thought you should know.”

“She started it,” I protested weakly. “She was egging me on, trying to get me to say something. I just...I snapped, okay?”

“Okay. I don’t blame you.” Julia patted the arm that Emily wasn’t hanging onto. “But, try and talk to her at some point and just let her know you didn’t mean to embarrass her.”

“But I did.”

“That’s beside the point.”

I was beginning to feel exasperated, and more than a

little confused. They were basically asking me to lie to Sadie and apologize, when I really didn't feel sorry for my words. Maybe in the way I delivered them, but at least now she knew a little about what Calypso had to put up with.

Julia, fortunately, sensed my frustration, and smiled. "We'll leave you alone about it, Gav. I just thought you should know how she felt."

"Okay." Anything to get out of this conversation, I thought; and I was more than relieved when the two girls began discussing what they were planning on wearing to the homecoming dance next Saturday. I had no real input towards the exchange of ideas, so I just listened and gave my opinion when Emily asked me whether her date would think she was too slutty if she went strapless. Trust me Emily, I said to myself with a laugh, guys rarely think a girl looks too slutty; especially a girl as good looking as you.

The night wore on, and before too long the wonderful sensation of being drunk floated about my mind. I usually wasn't comfortable at parties, being the quieter type who preferred small groups of people, but that party at Troy's was different. Maybe it was the better quality beer; maybe I was enjoying having a flirtation with Emily. I don't really know. All I do know is that my happiness evaporated in a smoky haze when two guys, Troy's chums from the senior class, sauntered over to stand in front of me. From then on, everything went all to hell before I could so much as move to stop it.

CHAPTER TEN

I was in the middle of a conversation with Emily, I don't remember about what, when Patrick and Brian interrupted. "Well would ya look at this? Who would've thought shy little Gavin Ward would turn out to be such a ladies man," Patrick said with a sneer. "Hello, gorgeous." He turned his attention to Emily, who threw poison daggers with her eyes in his direction, whispered a soft "good luck" in my ear, and walked a short distance away to eavesdrop.

I knew Patrick; he was on the soccer team last year, and we had talked a few times. I had always thought him to be a nice, smart guy, his one flaw being that he regularly associated with Troy LaRose.

"What are you talking about?" I asked him, trying to focus on his face. It was a little blurry in the dim lighting.

"Well, first you fuck Calypso Dawson; now you're moving onto the hot best friend." Brian, a virtual stranger, laughed and clapped me on the shoulders in what I assumed was a congratulatory manner.

"I still don't know what you're talking about."

"Oh, don't play the dumbass with us, Gav," Patrick scoffed. "You and I both know you're smarter than you look. The whole school knows how you managed to steal Calypso from Troy, which he still can't admit to by the way."

“Although he does admit that such a fantastic feat really wouldn’t be all that hard to begin with,” put in Brian. His beady little blue eyes, glazed over by copious amounts of alcohol, regarded me with a mixture of pride and amusement. “Calypso’s the easiest fuck in the entire school.”

“I remember my own experience with Ms. Dawson.” Patrick put his hand to his chest as if he were reciting a sonnet. “It was about a year or so ago, and she acted all cute and wore these pants that showed off every curve in her hot little ass...”

“All right, shut up,” I interrupted, trying very hard to resist punching Patrick in his smug little face. “You guys are full of shit.”

“Oh are we?” Brian laughed. “Come on, Gavin. Did Calypso come up to you acting all sweet and innocent, luring you in by batting her big blue eyes?”

“She really liked it when we fucked in her bedroom,” Patrick said reminiscently. “She always had the door open; said that the possibility of her dad coming home to catch us turned her on. I went along with it.”

“And why not? Calypso’s a slut, but not without reason,” Brian added. “she’s without a doubt the best lay I ever had.”

I saw red. Great flashes of red like lightning. My fists automatically clenched, and I moved in for the kill, when all of a sudden a strong arm held me back.

“All right, guys. We’re all drunk here.” Matt’s amiable voice slowly filtered through the storm raging inside me. “Let’s just part ways and forget this whole conversation ever happened.”

“Why?” Patrick demanded. “We were just having a little chat with Gavin here, comparing notes about Calypso Dawson.”

“Have you fucked her yet, Matt?” Brian asked,

nudging Matt knowingly with an elbow. “She’s good, let me tell you.”

Matt was such a diplomat; only I noticed the fire kindle in his hazel eyes. “There’s no need to be harassing Gavin about his friend Calypso,” he said tightly, trying to usher me away without being too obvious.

“Friend? Yeah right!” Brian’s voice rose so that even more people turned in our direction. “Calypso’s a friend to no one or nothing but herself and those raging hormones of hers.”

That did it. The beer and his words all collided in my stomach and churned uneasily about, and when they mingled with the storm of red in my mind there was no stopping me. I broke free from Matt’s restraining arm and lunged at the guy closest to me, who happened to be Patrick. Before anyone even moved I landed a punch right on his jaw. His howl of surprise and pain woke everyone up though, and before I knew it I was being held down by Matt and several others, while Troy and his other friends moved in to restrain Patrick and Brian.

“And you deserve a whole lot more, asshole!” I hollered as Matt dragged me by my shirt away from the fray.

Icy cold air blasted my face; Matt had brought me outside onto the deck to cool off. Neither of us said a word as I took several deep breaths of the painful oxygen. Stray snowflakes floated around me, catching on my eyelids, and I blinked them back in disgust. Snow in October. Again. But that news even didn’t compare with the cold realization that began to sink in. I had just made a fool of myself.

I hated the person I had just been back there.

“Sucks, doesn’t it?” Matt said sympathetically, reading the expression of self-contempt on my face. I nodded, the lump in my throat swallowing words. “I used to do that all the time: mouth off, get in fights.

Remember?" My friend chuckled, thinking of his colorful past, which had cooled down only in the past year or so. "Then I realized; there's just no point. Guys like Troy and his buddies aren't going to stop being assholes because you punch them in the face a few times."

"Am I completely wrong about Calypso?" I grated out. Despair numbed my entire body and froze my blood, and my teeth chattered like wind-ups. "Why is everyone saying all this stuff if it's not true?"

Now it was Matt's turn to be speechless. He avoided my gaze and stared instead at the snow-covered railing my bare hands were now holding onto as if it were a life preserver.

"I've been more of an idiot than I thought."

Matt opened his mouth to reply, but he never got his words out; all of a sudden Sadie burst through the French doors and onto the deck, charging like a maddened bull.

"And you say I'm the slut!" she cried. "I knew you liked Calypso all along, even when we were dating, and now you're letting Emily hang all over you?"

"Well I..."

Whap! Sadie's open hand met my cheek in a resounding slap. I just stood there, mouth open, while Sadie glared and my cheek protested, stinging horribly.

"I hate you," Sadie said finally, breaking the icy silence. Still I could say nothing, and she waited a moment, as if hoping for an argument, then stalked back inside.

Much to my dismay, tears formed in my eyes, not from the physical pain, for it was already fading, but from the emotional roller coaster my heart just went through. Matt, if he noticed, said nothing about them, but instead patted me assuredly on the back. "I think it's probably time to go home," he said. When I nodded in reply, he added, "I'll get our coats and meet you out front."

I hated walking back inside that house, but luckily

Patrick and Brian were nowhere to be seen, and neither was Sadie. Julia and Emily came right over though.

“Are you okay, Gavin?” Emily asked, looking earnestly into my face. For the first time I noticed her eyes. They were this smooth velvety black color, like ink from a really expensive pen, and as pretty as the rest of her.

“Yeah, I’m fine. Umm...Matt and I are heading home, actually.”

“He told us,” Julia said, looking rather distressed with her brown eyes peering over at me in concern. I could see her hesitate in saying something, something I probably wouldn’t like. I was right. “I’m sorry; I’m just worried about you. You look awful,” she finally blurted out.

I managed a half-hearted laugh. “Thanks.”

The rest of the night was a blur, a combination of a heavy hangover, a splitting headache, and a strong desire to forget all about those who tried to hurt me, both physically and mentally. I crashed at Matt’s house in the spare bedroom, but left early in the morning before my friend stirred. I could hear Mr. Best grumbling to himself in his study as I silently drifted past, but didn’t dare go in to say good-bye for fear of interrupting him and making him angry.

I remember although the sun was behind thick, dreary cloud cover that morning, the daylight still burned painfully into my eyes and I had to dig through the glove compartment for my sunglasses. The weather would be like this when I’m miserable, I thought darkly, turning into my driveway. All I wanted to do was sleep. So that’s what I did, carefully walking up the creaky stairs, past the closed doors of my mom and sister’s rooms, and finally burying myself under the mounds of covers on my bed.

“Gavin?” a voice said through an irritating knocking on my door.

I tried to open my eyes, but the first time was

unsuccessful. It felt like my eyelids were made of sandpaper. Finally I managed to get one open a crack, and my gaze went to the clock on my night stand. It read two ten.

“Are you awake, Gavin?” My mom opened the door a crack.

“Yeah.”

“The girl from next door, Calypso, is here. She says you’re supposed to be studying together.”

Damn it, I thought. I had no desire to see anyone, not even Calypso. Or rather, I realized, especially Calypso.

“Can you tell her I’m sick?” I mumbled, already falling back asleep.

“Are you sick?” Now mom came fully into the dark room with the shades still pulled down and her only son still in bed, who was refusing to get up for a pretty girl. My eyes remained closed, but I felt her cool hand on my forehead, and for just a moment thought how nice it would be to be six years old again.

“I’ve just got a headache, mom. I’ll be fine.”

Mom brushed the hair off my forehead and let out a soft laugh. “A little too much of the good stuff last night?”

How could I not laugh at my mother saying such a thing? “You could say that,” I agreed.

“All right. I’ll turn that pretty girl from our home. Shall I deliver a message?”

“Just tell her I’m sorry, and I’ll see her tomorrow.”

“Will do.”

I spent the next half hour deciding whether or not I really was sorry. My thoughts conflicted so much I could no longer slip back into blissful sleep. Damn Calypso, I kept thinking angrily to myself; damn her for making me her puppet, and what’s worse, for not even realizing she was doing it.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

I gave Calypso a ride as usual Monday morning to school, but we didn't talk. I was still angry with myself, both for a suspicion of being duped by her, and for doubting her words. The conflict was slowly tearing me apart inside, but I managed to emit none of that to my friends. Even when I saw Patrick in the hallway that morning I ignored his angry glares.

By that afternoon I decided that the best course of action would be to ignore Calypso, ignore everything about her and everything I felt for her, and eventually it would all go away. With that resolve, I put on a much more cheerful facade at practice. Matt noticed, and commented on it.

"Well you're in a good mood today," he said as we worked on our passing together. "I take it you're over Saturday night?"

"I guess," I replied with a shrug. "At least...if not thinking about it is getting over it."

"Sometimes." Matt nodded seriously. "And in your case, Mr. Think Way Too Much About Everything, it's the best thing you can do. So anyway, do you have a date for Homecoming yet? 'Cuz Julia and I were hoping you and your date could maybe go out to dinner with us beforehand. It would be fun."

“I’d make plans without me and my mystery date,” I said wryly, kicking the soccer ball only a little harder than I had intended. “I don’t think I’m going. I haven’t even asked anyone yet.”

“Aw, ya got all week,” protested Matt. “You’ll find someone.”

“Maybe.”

I tried to put Matt’s words out of my head after practice as I drove Calypso and I home, but I couldn’t. The sad thing was, I had once looked forward to Homecoming; and now it looked like I wasn’t going after all.

Calypso had given up trying to make conversation, sensing my mood I suppose, and was singing along to the All-American Rejects’ “Swing, Swing” on the radio. She knew all the words. “Swing, swing, swing from the tangles of my heart is crushed by a former love; can you help me find a way to carry on again?” My spirits couldn’t help but lift at the sound of her voice; her talent shone with the sweet simplicity of the song.

“I didn’t know you could sing.”

She glanced over, looking surprised that I had spoken.

“Well, I guess acting isn’t my only skill,” she said with a laugh. “Although neither could get me very far in life!”

“I bet it could. You could go on American Idol or something. Seriously.”

“That would be the day!”

We pulled into my driveway then, and the two of us stepped out of my car. Calypso hesitated in walking across the street.

“Listen, I know you’re not really talking to me anymore, and I don’t know why, but whatever it was I did, I’m sorry.”

“You didn’t do anything, Calypso,” I told her; a

little dishonest I'll admit. "I just haven't been in the best of moods lately. I think I'm still hung over from the party."

"Yeah, I heard about what Sadie did." Calypso looked away, her cheeks turning the same color pink as the western sky. "Emily couldn't stop talking about how much fun you were though. She was surprised."

I laughed. "She was a lot of fun too."

We fell silent, trying to think of something else to say. "Well, I gotta go inside for dinner," I said finally. "I'll see you tomorrow morning?"

"You bet," Calypso replied. "Night Gavin."

"Good night."

The next morning the weather appeared to have done a three sixty. I awoke to the sun blazing through my window shades and the sound of snow dripping merrily off the roof. It was that morning, I suppose, when I took the theory that lack of sunshine depresses people seriously, for I felt actually happy as I walked outside and saw Calypso heading towards me; much happier than I had felt in seemingly a long time.

My mood improved throughout the day, the highlight easily being when we all got our quizzes back in Mr. Jacobs' history class. Ten out of ten, and a little note scrawled from Mr. Jacobs himself: *Marked improvement, Mr. Ward.* I couldn't help but grin broadly as I read it. That'll show him, I thought with satisfaction.

Practice was canceled, a miracle we all happily declared upon hearing the notice, so Calypso and I got home early that afternoon. The sun golden still shone brilliantly, though already pretty low in the western sky, and a warm breeze stirred through trees half-naked of leaves. As I watched her go inside her house, I decided that evening I would do some work on my car. So later on, after dinner, I ventured outside well armed with mom's hand

vacuum, a garbage bag, Windex, and plenty of paper towels. I turned the radio on in my car and began to work diligently. It's amazing how dirty a car can get in such a short period of time when owned and ridden in by a bunch of teenagers. The vacuum crackled in loud complaint as I made it suck up mud and dirt from soccer cleats.

I didn't notice Mr. Dawson's car pull into his garage across the street, but as I started washing the Civic's windows I couldn't help but catch the sounds of a rather loud argument heating up. And, I realized quickly, it was coming from the Dawson's.

"You never let me do anything, dad." Calypso's distinct voice, musical even though sounding extremely irritated, caught on the breeze to greet me in my driveway. "But this is only Homecoming. You have to let me go."

"I'm trying to keep you home where you belong," an equally annoyed male voice responded. "Like you said; it's only a dance."

"Oh, you know what I meant." There was a dangerous pause. "Mom would've wanted me to go."

"Damn it Calypso Marie! Don't use that against me." Her father was shouting now, and, embarrassed, I tried to ignore the battle. I went back to vigorously scrubbing my rear window; but try as I might, my ears would not close themselves off. "You're just like your mother," Mr. Dawson continued, more quietly now, but his voice laced with bitterness. "She loved dancing, parties."

"It's not my fault she died, dad," Calypso said earnestly. "You keep making it seem like I did something wrong."

"I'm looking out for you."

"No, you're trapping me inside the house; you've kept me inside since she died. You're punishing me for her death!"

"You ungrateful bitch!" I flinched at the fury in Mr.

Dawson's voice. "Here I am, killing myself at the office so that I provide for the two of us, and you complain that I don't let you go to some stupid high school dance."

"You worked just as much before she got sick," Calypso interrupted. I could almost picture her folding her arms across her chest, glaring with steely blue eyes at her father. "And during. And after she died. You almost didn't make it to her damn funeral!"

"Get out of my sight!" roared Mr. Dawson. "Just go do whatever the fuck you want. Move out even, but don't you dare come crying to me when no one wants you! Christ, it would've been a hell of a lot easier on me if it was you who died instead of her!"

Did he just say that? I dropped the roll of paper towels in shock. What kind of man would say that to his own daughter? The evening air fell silent again, and I retreated back inside the car to fiddle with the radio station. I turned it up louder when I reached a song I liked. Just in case the arguing started up again. I didn't want to hear anymore.

So you could imagine the uneasiness that settled in my stomach when, stepping out of the car once again, I looked up to see Calypso standing there, looking determined not to cry.

"I saw you out here," she said by means of explanation. "Did you hear any of that?"

There was no point in lying. I nodded wordlessly.

"He's not usually that bad," she continued, leaning against the back door of my car. "He had a bad day at work, and then I started hounding him about Homecoming. I really did want to go, only now that he's more or less given me permission it doesn't seem so exciting anymore. I don't even have a date."

That surprised me. "I thought guys would be lining up to ask you out," I said before I could stop myself.

Calypso let out a laugh that died quickly. “No, I’m no good anymore, remember? Guys are afraid to ask me out after I dumped the most popular guy in school.”

“I wouldn’t be.” Can I get any more stupid; I cursed myself. These things, sentences, were just coming out of my mouth before I could even realize what I was saying.

“Really?” Calypso’s eyes met mine, and they sparkled in the fading light like stars. Star light, star bright, first star I see tonight, I thought. Wish I may... wish I might. What do I wish for most?

“Would you like to go to the Homecoming Dance with me?”

“Yes!” Calypso said, smiling. “Thank you, Gavin.” With that she threw her arms around me, hugged me close for one wonderful moment, then broke away. “I guess I should get back inside. Homework to do, you know.”

“Yeah, me too,” I agreed. “So you really wanna go with me?”

Calypso laughed. “Of course! I’ll see you tomorrow morning, okay?”

Wow, I said to myself, returning to work. I think I just got my wish. So why didn’t I feel happier about it?

CHAPTER TWELVE

Matt was thrilled for me when I told him the news the next morning at school. “That’s great, Gav!” he said, clapping me on the back. “So did you want to go get dinner with me and Julia beforehand?”

“No, that’s all right,” I replied. “I wouldn’t want us to intrude on your romantic date and all.”

“Bah. Romantic my ass.” Matt made a disgusted face, as if he shunned the very word. But reading the look in his eyes, I knew better. It was the look of a man in love.

I didn’t get to tease him further though, for the warning bell rang and we all scattered for home room. I was okay with going there again, for no further incidents had happened. Sadie just ignored me now, looked right through me as if I wasn’t even there. She deserved it, I told myself firmly. And...I guess I might’ve deserved the slap she gave me. So we’re even.

The rest of the week went by much the same. Matt and I went shopping together Thursday after practice to pick out dress shirts; he informed me that Julia and Calypso had already done the shopping thing and picked out their dresses the day before. “I can’t wait to see Julia,” Matt told me as we stopped for refreshments at McDonald’s. “She’s

going to look so hot. Calypso too.”

“Do you know if Sadie and Emily are going?” I asked him, downing my Coke in a matter of seconds. I didn’t mind shopping all that much, really, but it was a business, and it wore me out.

“Yeah, Sadie’s going with some senior. One of Troy’s friends.” Matt rolled his eyes. “She’ll never learn I guess. And Emily is going with that Mike kid from our English class.”

I pictured Mike: tall, kind of lanky, with unkempt brown hair and blue eyes framed by glasses. For some reason I couldn’t picture the glamorous Emily ever going with him anywhere, even though he was a nice enough guy and we’d talked on several occasions. The image of the two of them didn’t sit well with me; but then again, it could very well be just be an upset stomach from drinking soda too fast.

Friday night I couldn’t sleep. I had spent the evening with Matt and several other friends from the soccer team, but we all went home earlier than usual. I lay in bed, tossing and turning, my hyperactive mind imagining all the horrible things that could go wrong at the dance. Calypso would regret saying yes to me, and she’d go dump me for another guy, Troy maybe. Or, worse, she wouldn’t even come; she’d rather stay home in her room than be seen at the dance with the likes of me. But most of all I couldn’t help but repeat Brian and Patrick’s words, as well as Sadie’s, over and over in my head. Finally I gave up the fight, admitted surrender, and threw back the covers.

Switching the light on, I searched my room and dug up the only thing I could possibly do to soothe the nerves: I had brought my painting from school home for some finishing touches, and that night seemed like the best possible time for me to do that. I got all my paints ready, set my canvas up on an old easel I had stashed in the closet,

and got to work.

The whirlpool of emotions swirling inside me seemed to magically transfer themselves to my brush, and the longer I let myself paint, the more they siphoned out. I focused my energy on getting that one shadow right, or making the cloud up there just a little bit fluffier. Time ticked by, but I didn't even notice the light from outside growing steadily brighter.

When I reached the point where adding anything else to my landscape would be harmful rather than beneficial, I stepped back and admired my work. It was complete. After more than a month of painting, I could finally say Afinis!@ And it really did look good, though it'd probably be a long time before the oil dried completely. Smiling in satisfaction, I looked over at my bedside clock.

"Six fifteen!" I gasped in surprise. I had just spent the entire night painting! I realized though, that it was worth it, for a peaceful, soothing tiredness washed over me as I put my supplies away. Finally, I could let myself sleep, if only in preparation for the emotional hurricane later on that day.

Sure enough, by that afternoon I was now not only nervous, but also tired enough so that my eyes felt all dry and scratchy and a vague headache took up residence and didn't even think about leaving after I took three Advil. But now matter how exhausted I felt, my legs just wouldn't let me sit. I paced back in forth in my room, trying to rid that horrible feeling of tiny balls of steel wool bouncing around in my stomach. Not even staring into my favorite painting, one of Monet's water lilies, could help.

More out of that nervous energy than hunger, I dug through my desk drawer and pulled out my stash of Reese's Pieces. "Matt's right," I laughed ruefully, tossing a wonderfully chocolaty handful into my mouth. "I really am a girl."

I had just swallowed my second handful, still so out of it that when a loud ringing suddenly filled the room it took me two full rings to realize it was the phone. Luckily by then my mom had answered it by then, and when she didn't call right up to say it was for me, I returned to my daze.

“Gavin?”

“Yeah, mom?”

“It's for you.”

Mystified, for it had taken mom several minutes to tell me, I picked up the receiver in my room. “Hello?”

“Hey, Sport. Long time no talk to.”

All thoughts of Calypso and the impending dance took a temporary nosedive into hiding as I tried to work out what to say in this unexpected situation. “Hi, dad.”

The man cleared his throat, and made his next words come out sounding very jovial. “Listen; I'm so sorry I haven't been in touch lately. You know how it is in Washington. Everyone wants a piece of ya and they never give ya a moment's rest!”

“It's okay,” I lied. “I got your money from my birthday. Thanks.”

“You're welcome, Sport. What'd ya use it for?”

“Mom bought me a car. A Honda Civic.”

“That's great.”

Silence. Father and son, who hadn't even seen in each other in over a year, were at a complete loss for words.

Finally dad cleared his throat again. “So...your mother tells me you have a dance tonight.”

“Yeah, Homecoming,” I answered.

“Do you have a date?” pressed dad.

I felt a momentary stab of anger at his nosiness. Like you really care, I thought bitterly. You didn't even remember my birthday for five freaking months! But the fury faded as fast as it came. After all, he was my father, by

birth if not by action. He had as much a right to know as anyone. “I’m going with this girl from my class, Calypso Dawson.”

“Oh, that cute blonde girl from across the street?”

“Yeah,” I said, wondering how he knew that.

Dad laughed and answered my unspoken question.

“I can remember you making eyes on her when you were ten years old. Matt had just moved into town that summer, and he was teaching you how to play soccer in the front yard. Then Calypso walked out and I saw you nudge Matt and go, ‘look, it’s her! That girl I was telling you about’ and you sounded so excited.”

Remembering vaguely, I smiled. “This is the first year we’ve really started talking. She’s on the soccer team.”

“Well now, she sounds like a keeper. Don’t let her get away from you if you can help it.”

Laughing now, I replied, “I’ll try not to, dad.”

We spent a good fifteen minutes or so just catching up, and then I told him it was time for me to get ready. He bid me goodbye and good luck, and promised to call again as soon as he could. I doubted that one, but nonetheless appreciated the fact that he did call...for once.

I dressed in my black pants and new dark green shirt that mom praised me on for buying. Alt goes so well with your eyes, Gavin honey,@ she declared when I reluctantly showed it to her the night before. So there I stood in front of the mirror, scrutinizing my reflection. A guy of average height with carefully gelled black hair, a face too pale, and green eyes too wide and anxious stared back. Did I look okay? Good enough for Calypso? It’s too late to worry about all this now, I thought with a sigh. I guess this is it.

Crossing the street in the fast-descending twilight, I knocked on Calypso’s door and waited. Mr. Dawson, to my surprise, answered.

“Good evening, Mr. Ward,” he said, smiling and offering his hand. Could this simply dressed, almost geeky looking man be the same guy I heard yelling such horrible things at Calypso, I wondered, shaking the offered hand. “Calypso will be down shortly; you know girls. Gotta get those last minute touches perfect.”

“Yeah,” I laughed shakily.

“I didn’t want Calypso to go tonight, mostly because I thought she was planning on going with one of her random jerk boyfriends, like that guy...what was his name? Tom?”

“Troy,” I offered.

“Yeah, that’s it.” Mr. Dawson continued chattily, letting me inside the well-lit living room and shutting the door. “But I’m glad she’s going with you. You’re a lot better for her than that punk.”

“Um...thanks.”

“Daddy, stop embarrassing Gavin.” Calypso’s voice floated down the stairs. I looked up, and there she stood, looking so beautiful I felt my breath catch in my throat.

She was wearing a long black dress, flowing like silk to the floor, with thin straps. Her hair fell all down her back and shined in the lamplight, except for by her face, where it was held back with two small silver barrettes. Being a guy, my eyes couldn’t help but pause for a moment to take in the generous amount of perfect cleavage the dress proffered.

“Hey, Gavin.” She joined me in the doorway, took my arm, and smiled up at me. I think I smiled back, but I couldn’t be too sure. I was too far into the fog by then.

“Have fun, kids,” Mr. Dawson called as we walked out to my car.

I managed to get us to school without crashing the car, and we found a parking spot without too much

difficulty. Walking quickly to escape the frosty cold air that had set in, we made it to the gym entrance and I held the door for her like a proper gentleman. I felt quite proud of myself.

“I’m glad you asked me, Gavin.” She smiled warmly as we walked into the decorated gym together. “Otherwise right about now I’d be sitting home bored to death.”

“Don’t humor me,” I said as I rolled my eyes. “I’m sure you would’ve gone with someone else.”

“Maybe.” Calypso shrugged off-handedly. “But I wouldn’t be having as good a time as I am now, with you.”

“You’re good at flattery.” I remembered when she had once said that to me and used it on her. She just laughed.

It turned out that Calypso was a good dancer, so we spent a lot of time on the dance floor. I was only average at such a skill, but she guided me through and I managed not to step on her toes or make a fool out of myself. Since the music was actually pretty good we were both able to finally relax, forget about past disturbing conversations, and just enjoy each other’s company. However, little did I know it would be the only time we would have fun that night.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The clock was striking nine when Calypso and I stopped to take a break from our dancing. We sat at a table with our cups of punch and were soon joined by Emily and her date, Mike. The four of us engaged in casual conversation, nothing really in particular standing out because what happened immediately following will be burned in my mind forever; it made everything that had been going so much better take a drastic turn for the worse.

“Well look at this,” an angry voice said from behind us. We turned simultaneously to see Troy standing there, his face marred by a deep scowl. “If I had known that you really were breaking up with me for this prick I would’ve tried harder to keep you,” he continued harshly.

“Troy, I don’t want to start anything.” Calypso tensed up nervously in reaction, her hand latching onto my arm under the table with a grip so hard I could see her knuckles turning white. But Troy didn’t listen. He never did.

“I bet you put her up to all this, didn’t you?” He turned towards me. His eyes were ablaze with malevolence; I couldn’t help but shrink away from him. “You probably made her break up with me, because you knew we were together and you were jealous!”

“Jealous of what?” I retorted. “You two might’ve been going out, but you didn’t care about her; all you cared out was getting her clothes off!”

“How could I not care about that?” countered Troy. “She was begging me to take them off from the get-go!”

There was a pause, as Calypso and I absorbed the fire of his words. “You...are...a liar!” Calypso finally spoke, her voice hoarse with restrained emotion.

“Yeah, right.” Troy sneered. “You want to see a liar, Calypso my darling, go look in a mirror. You know quite well that all you are is a rotten little slut, and that’s all you’ll ever be because you have to jump from one guy to another just to get what you want. Well I hope you’re satisfied, Gavin. You have a number one slut to screw before she moved on to her next victim.” What that final, cutting blow he turned and stalked away.

Alarmed, I glanced at Calypso. She was sitting there, absolutely still, but I saw her eyes filling with tears of hurt as well as what was surely embarrassment. Troy’s voice had rose several notches as he delivered his speech, and not only had Emily and Mike heard every word, but several interested observers were still eagerly watching the aftermath.

“You know he was just saying that, because he knew you were right and he was just trying to defend himself.” I tried to comfort Calypso, my labor of love these past few months. But my words slid off ice.

“I don’t need your goddamn pity anymore, Gavin,” she said, calmly carefully placing her words, yet her tone was cold as a glacier. “Just leave me the hell alone!” With

that she leapt out of her chair and strode angrily out of the gym, leaving me there: hurt confused, and filled with heartache and desperation.

The desperation was what finally launched me into action. Calypso had to be found before it was too late, and something inside was telling me it was nearly too late already. So I gathered my thoughts together as best I could and left the gym. I had a good idea where she might've gone. I just had to hope I was right.

Outside it was clear and cold, with millions of stars twinkling merrily to the beat of the music. I headed around to the front of the school, rubbing my arms as I thought regretfully back to my jacket, sitting next to Calypso's inside the gym. All I wore was the long-sleeved dress shirt, and my shivering body let me know it. I kept on though; sure enough, Calypso was seated on the same rock she had been when watching me paint, during our first breakthrough conversation all those days and weeks ago. She had said how much she loved it out there. It made sense for her to go to the place she liked best. I told myself that my deductions proved how well I was getting to know her, for better or worse.

"Hey, Calypso," I spoke to her, my voice catching on the wind and sounding softer than it actually was.

She didn't answer. I got so close to her I could see the goose bumps congregating all up and down her bare arms, and again I wished I hadn't been so stupid as to forget our jackets. Suddenly, just as I got next to her she rose to her feet, and before I could blink her face was a breath from mine. My heart leapt into my throat before crashing down to my frozen toes because, although she smiled, her brilliant blue eyes glittered with a sort of madness I had never seen before.

"All guys want from me is sex, and they're willing to do whatever it takes to get it because they know it's

worth their time,” she iterated intently, using this breathy, seductive voice. “And you’re a clever guy, Gavin. Smarter than many give you credit for, including yourself. I bet all this time you’ve been sucking up to me, pretending to be my best friend, just so you could get laid too.”

I gaped at her words. “That’s not true!” I declared, my own voice sounding as if someone was choking me with a hand mightier than God’s. But I wasn’t lying. Not entirely.

“Are you willing to place money on that bet?” Calypso asked with a gentle yet simultaneously wicked laugh. I opened my mouth to protest, but before I could get a syllable out she framed my face with her slender, cold hands and fused her lips to mine. They were so soft, and tasted like fresh strawberries from her lip-gloss. I meant to stop her, really I did, and put an end to her tirade; but let’s face it. I was a sixteen-year-old guy with raging hormones, and I’d wanted Calypso for going on eight years. The odds were well stacked against any sort of resistance.

She seemed to sense the very second I surrendered; her kiss deepened, her arms wrapped around me and ran up and down my back. I let out a moan and pulled her close so that her body, all warm and yielding, pressed into mine. Filling my hands with her thick hair, I knew this had to be paradise.

Calypso pulled away for a heartbeat and laughed again. “I told you so,” she said, and with that her lips were again on mine, and one hand was reaching in between my legs.

It couldn’t, just couldn’t, go on; I wanted it to so badly my soul ached. Pull back, Gavin, I ordered myself through the dizzying sensation that continued rising to catastrophic levels as Calypso continued to rub me. Another moan escaped my throat. I could feel her skin on my fingertips, something I’d longed to experience for so

long but had so far been only limited to in my dreams. And still...I drew back.

“Calypso,” I said gently, prying away her hands to hold them in my own before I changed my mind. “I can’t do this. It’s not right.”

She froze, staring at me with a stunned expression. Then, unexpectedly, those shocked eyes filled with tears, and those became rivers that cascaded down her face.

“Oh, Gavin,” she whispered. “I’m so sorry.” Her body began to convulse with sobs, and I pulled her tightly back into my arms, holding her and stroking that beautiful long hair as she cried longer and harder than I had ever seen her. My heart broke for her, and I couldn’t move to pick up the pieces.

The tears began to subside, and finally she was calm in my embrace.

“Are you gonna be okay?” I asked her with quiet urgency.

She let out another laugh, rueful this time, and freed herself from me. “Yeah, I guess so. This is just the first time I’ve ever been rejected, and the first time I ever really liked what I was doing with a guy. With you.”

“You never liked it before?”

“No.”

“So...why did you...”

“I’ve told you. Guys want it, so I did it.”

I was both floored and flattered at the same time. But even then the logical part of me told me in that stern “I know what’s best for you” voice that there was no chance for us. Things were far too complicated. I also realized that if I had had one ounce less resistance inside me as she had me in her grip, I wouldn’t have been able to stop Calypso. Even after all that had happened, I still wanted her. More than anything.

But I hid my desire as I had for years before and put

a comforting arm around her. “Come on, dear one. I’ll take you home.”

We managed to retrieve our coats from the gym without anyone of consequence seeing us, and afterwards walked together slowly to the parking lot, each absorbed in our own thoughts. “Can you imagine the talk going on now about me?” Calypso finally broke the thick silence. “I bet Troy’s putting his big mouth to use, and soon everyone will find out that the villain in perfect Calypso really does exist.” Her voice sounded so bitter, so defeated, that it frightened me to the very core.

“Calypso, you’re wonderful, certainly not a villain for trying to find someone who cares for you. Just know that I care for you, more than Troy or anyone else, and I will always be here for you. So promise me you won’t give up now.” I stopped walking, put my hands firmly on her shoulders, and looked into her eyes. “Show all of them that you don’t care what they say, because in your heart you know it isn’t true, and nothing can change that.”

Silence hung in the air for a good full minute before a barely audible reply came from Calypso. “I promise.”

We were silent the entire car ride home. Bidding her good night at her front door, I watched her walk into her house, then retreated into mine.

Mom was still awake, watching the news on TV. She looked up when I walked in, eyebrows lifting in surprise.

“You’re home early,” she remarked after a glance at the clock.

“Yeah, the dance sucked so, uh, we decided to split.”

Mom searched my face carefully, looking for signs of trouble, but I maintained a deadpan expression and revealed nothing of the turmoil churning inside me.

“Well, I’m sorry you didn’t have a good time,” she

said finally. “Ivy’s asleep of course, so be quiet going upstairs.”

“All right. ‘Night mom.’”

“Good night, Gavin.”

I retreated to bed, but once again sleep eluded me, the second night in a row. My mind wanted to travel all these roads of memories and thoughts and desires, and all my body wanted to do was sleep. One thought though conquered all the rest, and unfortunately as I began to think it I felt sick to my stomach, for once again my being was divided.

Did Troy really rape Calypso? My heart longed to believe her, but that damn restless mind of mine was doubtful. I began recounting her extraordinary story-telling abilities and her star role in the class play last year. Maybe she was willing, like Troy and Sadie and all them declared. Then she made up a story for me that she desperately wanted me to believe, why I don’t really know, and acted it out to perfection.

That’s ridiculous, Ward, I told myself. Calypso was raped, raped, and you don’t think she’s telling the truth. Who do you think you are?

Disgusted with myself, I rolled over and faced the wall. I had had enough thinking for one night. But all through the long, long night Calypso haunted my dreams: the feel of her lips and her soft skin, the sight of her bitter, vanquished tears; I slept fitfully.

After Saturday night’s dramatic turn of events I was completely taken aback by Calypso that Monday morning. She had a brand new, more than a little revealing outfit on; her hair was cut to well above her shoulders, and she was all smiles and laughter. It seemed like she had done a complete three sixty back to her old ways. All I could do was shake my head in dismay. That wasn’t a good sign. But Calypso wouldn’t hear of it.

“Gav, don’t be ridiculous,” she scolded with a flirtatious smile. I noted her use of “Gav” instead of Gavin, which she had always called me before; the use of my full name always had made me feel a little more special.

“I’m not being ridiculous. I’m worried about you.”

“Well you don’t have anything to worry about,” she said, her eyes looking everywhere but back into mine. “I took what you’ve been saying into a lot of thought, but it turns out everyone’s siding with me, and they think Troy’s a complete asshole. Which he is of course. So I don’t have anything to worry about anymore.”

“That’s great, Calypso,” was all I could bring into words as I stared at the old Calypso come back from the dead. Her speech was great in theory, but I knew her now, and I could see right through that too bright smile.

“Looks like you worked some magic with Calypso,” Matt commented before history that day. “She’s back to her old self and then some.”

“Don’t you see?” I protested. “She’s just hiding that something’s really wrong. That’s the way it always starts out, but she can’t even look me in the eyes anymore. That proves it.”

Matt regarded me for a second, then spoke up somewhat hesitantly. “Listen. I know you’re not into taking my advice anymore, but don’t you think you might be overacting just a little bit this time? Calypso really looks better. Why can’t you just let it go and be happy for her?” He didn’t let me reply, heading for his seat as the bell rang, and leaving me absorbed in thought.

Maybe Matt was right. Maybe Calypso did some major thinking about what had happened, and finally felt the camaraderie of her friends sticking up for her, so now she’s starting afresh. And maybe I was stupid to exaggerate every little thing, so I should just sit back and hope she really was okay. Maybe she really didn’t need me anymore.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

It's funny, but with all the scenes flashing through my head as my fingers dance ritualistically over the keyboard, the one that sticks out most in my mind is the day I had looked up Calypso's name. "Concealer" is the meaning I recalled. And I think back to when I laughed off any link between the person and the meaning, which was something that I didn't normally do. Eventually, too late, I am forced to acknowledge that people have a funny way of becoming their names. Calypso fit hers to a tee.

As for back then, when Calypso shoved me so carelessly out of her life, I finally came to realize that I had been absolutely, completely blind when it came to her. I dismissed any rumors, even when they were rudely thrust in my face, and, what's worse, became the hypocrite I had always despised. Loving her, wanting her, made me gave up everything I had ever believed in. Where I would normally search for meaning I rashly ignored, because I knew I wouldn't like it. That and I guess I really didn't

know any better.

But I finally learned to know better; I finally felt like I could get a handle on the real Calypso, that I could help her, save her even. After all she had put me through I still wanted to be her hero, and that was perhaps the saddest part of all. I was so frustrated I felt like slamming my head into a wall, but that would only bring more pain, not solve any problems.

Watching Calypso carrying on, animatedly discussing the dance with Julia eighth period, I didn't know what to think anymore. All I knew was that all my hard work in trying to crack Calypso's shell, as well as my own, was wasted. She didn't say one word to me the entire period, didn't even look my way. It was clear she didn't want my shoulder to cry on anymore, and that hurt. Even today I still can feel the hurt from her abandonment. I probably will forever.

Coach Williams had given us another unexpected day off from practice; after school Calypso was nowhere to be found, so I drove home alone for the first time in a long time. For being such a short journey, it was thoroughly depressing. I felt like I had lost a girlfriend, but really she had just been, well, I'm not sure what she had been. But it no longer was the case.

Much to my surprise, mom's car was sitting patiently in the driveway, running, when I pulled in. Ivy already had the front door open while I walked up to the house, and she greeted me with shining eyes and flushed cheeks.

"Guess what, Gavin." She grabbed my arm and tugged me inside.

"What, Ivy?" My lips couldn't help but twitch upwards in answer to her bright, excited smile.

"Mommy is taking me to pick out a puppy!"

I looked over at mom, standing in the kitchen

doorway with a grin on her face. “A puppy?” I echoed. “Really?”

“Really,” mom replied. “It’s been almost two years since Lady died, so Ivy and I decided it’s time to have a pet in the house again.”

“And now that you’re home you can come help us pick one out,” added Ivy.

I agreed to go, but the entire car ride I had conflicting thoughts, as usual, about the whole deal. I guess I still felt loyalty towards Lady. She had, after all, been mine. Lady came to the family right after dad left, when I was about eleven and Ivy four. Then, two years ago, the energetic young Labrador ran out into traffic and was struck by a pick-up truck. Luckily she died instantly; she was never in any pain. But I had vowed to myself not to get another dog after her, at least not for a very long time. Like when I had kids of my own or something.

We ended up at a house with about a dozen small kennels in the backyard, and were greeted by a middle-aged couple as we got out of the car.

“Hello, you must be Mrs. Ward,” the man said with a smile.

“Yes, and these two are Ivy and Gavin, my kids.”

“Nice to meet you.” He grinned at both of us, but turned his attention immediately to Ivy. “So you’re here to pick out a puppy, little miss?”

Ivy nodded vehemently, looking too excited for words.

“Well we’ve got three litters back there all weaned and ready to go home today. Come on and take a look.”

The dogs all started barking enthusiastically when we went around back. I noticed right away the breed they specialized in: Siberian Huskies. My heart gave a little tremor in suppressed excitement; I had always loved that breed.

Ivy headed right for a pen with five puppies gamboling about, and laughed gleefully as she watched them play.

“You can go right on in.” The man opened the pen for us, and mom and I stepped back to let Ivy inside.

Watching my little sister play with the puppies, I felt an unexpected, and wonderfully soothing, sense of contentment. Maybe it is time to get another dog, I thought. Pets make everything better.

“I want this one, mom,” Ivy called through her giggles. One puppy had put her front paws on Ivy’s leg as she kneeled, and was happily licking her face.

“She’s a beauty,” the man said, “and an excellent choice. You can pick her right up and bring her out here if you’d like.”

Ivy did just that, and I examined her selection. The puppy was pure white, except for two black slashes above eyes of ice blue. She really was beautiful.

Mom took care of the paperwork and the payment, and Ivy and I took the puppy for a walk before making her get in the car. “What are you going to call her?” I asked my sister.

“I don’t know yet.” Ivy looked thoughtfully at the puppy, prancing about on the end of the leash we’d brought with us. It had been Lady’s leash, but I was okay now with letting the new puppy have it. Life goes on, I thought, in every aspect. And life would go on without Calypso. I’d just have to get used to it. Maybe Julia or Emily could find me a girl. I thought of my and Emily’s time together at the party, but the image faded as fast as it had burst into my head when mom came back to the car.

“It’s official; she’s all ours,” she announced. “What do you think, Gavin?”

“I think it’s fabulous,” I answered, and was more than a little surprised at how good it felt to smile. “I didn’t

think I wanted another dog, but it'll be fun.”

“I know a name for her,” Ivy said excitedly, letting the puppy hop in the backseat before clamoring in after her. “Zoe.”

“Zoe is an excellent name,” mom told her as she started the car. “And I’m sure she’ll be happy in her new home.”

When we got home I offered to take Ivy and Zoe to the park. Ivy was ecstatic, not only because of the puppy but because I was taking her somewhere in my new car. I didn’t complain about dog hair once, even in the privacy of my own head; I was quite proud of myself.

Ivy and I were having a great time teaching Zoe to fetch, the puppy’s energy and strength already incredible as her breed promised, when something quite unwelcome in my happy little world butted in and made me pause.

“Hey, Gav.” The fire was absent from Troy’s voice, and his eyes as well. He looked almost sad, his voice dull and defeated. A large part of me felt huge satisfaction.

Instead of answering right away, I turned to my little sister. “Hey, Ivy, why don’t you take Zoe over by the swings for a little while, okay? I’ll be there in a minute.”

“Will you push me really high?”

“Yep. Promise.”

“Okay.” Ivy scampered off, Zoe on her heels, and I redirected my gaze to my enemy.

Troy was watching Ivy and the puppy. “That’s a cute dog,” he commented, setting down the basketball he had brought with him and putting his hands in his coat pockets.

I nodded, too angry to make stupid conversation. “So what’s up?” I said. “Are you going to apologize for being such a jerk-off at the dance? Or perhaps you’d like to say something about raping Calypso?”

Troy glanced around nervously, but no one else was

around to hear my attack. "Listen to me, Gavin." He lowered his voice to a brusque whisper. "I don't know what bullshit Calypso's been feeding you, but I am not a rapist."

"Why would she, why would anyone, lie about such a thing?" I countered.

Troy regarded me a moment, and I swore I saw a gleam of sympathy in his eyes. "Gavin, who first used the word 'rape,' you, or her?"

My heart skipped a beat. I thought back to that fateful evening, and there was no denying it. "Me."

"And she took it from there."

"Yeah."

"Thought so. That's how she gets everyone, including me. I had begun to think that I really had raped her, but I didn't. I know that for certain. I might've been the physical initiator, but that was just playing into her hands. She had been suggesting the same thing in so many words that night.

"And now look at me, Gavin," he continued, in a tone of voice that was laced with frustration. "Suddenly I'm the outcast because everyone's saying I did all these horrible things to Calypso, including yelling at her during Homecoming. I'm ruined because of her, because for once in my life I didn't want to sleep with a girl; but she, well...changed its mind."

"What?" I couldn't believe what Troy had just iterated.

"She frightened me, to tell you the truth."

Remembering the maddened look in Calypso's eyes before she threw herself at me after the dance, I could believe Troy's sheepish confession without hesitation. But the rest? I felt so overwhelmed I could hardly get a thought straight in my head, except for one thing. Troy was right about something else: he was ruined. Calypso had made

sure that the entire school was on her side.

“Look; you have to see it my way, Gavin.” Troy broke the silence that had ensued. “I had an identity at school as, well, a ladies man. I kind of liked that identity, at least until it got taken away from me. I knew girls talked, so I figured the more girls I get with, the more girls will want to.”

“But that doesn’t accomplish anything, except that you have a lot of girls.”

“Yeah, I know. And in case you didn’t know, I wasn’t the only guy to sleep with Calypso. Just ask Patrick and Brian and God only knows who else, and they’ll gladly tell you all about it. Again. I’m not saying that to justify myself, but she created her own soap opera.”

It all boiled down once again to identity. The case system apparent throughout our school...every school. Danielle sure was right when she said that the popular people had more problems. But when you become friends with a popular person, or any person, you help carry their burden. It becomes a part of you, whether you like it or not. So I couldn’t let myself believe that Calypso was guilty, even if a part of me saw the evidence staring me in the face. In all honesty, I believed that both she and Troy were wrong. But would anyone, even Troy and Calypso themselves, ever know the truth?

“Well, I’m glad you tried explaining what happened,” I finally said to Troy. “You’ve been nothing but an asshole to me for as long as I can remember. When did you suddenly come to hate me so much?”

Troy hesitated before answering. “I don’t hate you, honestly I don’t. You’re a cool guy. I guess back in junior high I started getting, well, jealous. I made it seem like it was just because you got the fullback position for soccer. But really I wished, and only sometimes I might add, that I had an identity more like yours. Mine wore thin fast, and I

really do feel bad about Calypso by the way. I was wrong for coming off as such a jerk at the dance, even if I feel my anger is justified.”

“Oh come on,” I had to laugh. “You wish you were more like me?”

“Sure.” Troy shrugged reluctantly. “Your life is so simple. You don’t ever get talk about cruelly behind your back, since everyone likes you.”

I opened my mouth to protest, when I felt a tapping on my shoulder. “Gavin?” Ivy said timidly. “Zoe fell asleep.”

Sure enough, the puppy was passed out in Ivy’s arms, a peacefully snoring white fluff ball of fur.

“Well, I think it’s time we head home anyway,” I told her. “I’m almost done.”

Troy reached out and scratched Zoe between the ears. “She’s a cute puppy,” he told Ivy, smiling.

“Thanks.” Ivy beamed up at him. “Her name is Zoe, and we just got her today.”

“Well aren’t you lucky.”

“Yeah, but we have to take her home now ‘cuz she’s tired.”

“All right.” Troy nodded. “Well, see you tomorrow, Gavin.”

“Sure. See ya.”

“He was nice. Who was he?” Ivy asked as we walked back to the car.

“Oh, just...my friend Troy,” I replied thoughtfully as I unlocked the passenger door to let Ivy inside.

My friend. I never before would’ve even considered saying that about Troy, but somehow it felt right. Maybe we’d never be close, like Matt and I, but we did have a common bond of sometimes wishing to be like the other.

At school the next day I had a pop chemistry quiz,

which I was sure I failed, so my day got off to a rough start. It only got worse. I realized, in class, that I had forgotten to do my French homework. I was in trouble with that one too, needless to say. I felt like crawling into my locker and staying hidden until summer vacation. If only it were big enough.

“Gavin, you’re falling to pieces right before my eyes!” Matt was only half-joking as we sat down at our usual table for lunch.

“It’s just been a bad day,” I sighed, looking with distaste at the day’s hot lunch option. Hot dog and potato nuggets. The nuggets were okay, but the hot dog? I didn’t think so.

“Yeah, no kidding.” Matt tried to look at me with concern, but really he was too busy watching the doorway, waiting for Julia to walk through it. Now Matt a good friend and all, the best a guy could have, but it seemed that since Julia entered his life he was more interested in her than me. Not that I could blame him. I guess I’d been absorbed in my own little world for quite some time. I probably hadn’t been all that interesting of company.

“So, do you get that English assignment?” I asked Matt as he turned his attention back to tackling his lunch.

“Do I ever?” Mat said wryly. “Believe me, if I was as good in English as I’m supposed to be, I would be set for the rest of high school and probably college as well.”

“What do you mean ‘supposed to be’?”

“Well, my mom is the big writer and all. It’s in the genes; or at least that’s what everyone’s been telling me.” Matt shrugged. “Hey look; here come the ladies.”

I turned and saw Calypso and Julia walking into the cafeteria. Julia smiled, waved, and headed right over to our table. However, Calypso was stopped at another table when a couple of guys called her over. I immediately recognized them as Patrick and Brian, and felt an icy dread

cascade over me like I had walked under Niagara Falls. What the hell did they want with her, I thought.

The sound of Julia's bag thumping onto the table jarred me back to my friends. "Hey guys," she greeted us. "Sorry we're late, but we stayed and asked Mr. Barton about that English assignment. I mean honestly, can it get any more confusing?" Her voice went up several notches, clearly the sign of an eminent panic attack.

"Julia, it's just an English assignment." I almost laughed at the look on her face but covered it up with a cough. "It's not anything to get all worked up over."

"Easy for you to say," Julia grouched. "You never try at anything except soccer and art. I, however, am supposed to be a smart, academically motivated girl who's on her way to Stanford in two years. This one assignment counts huge in our midterm grades, and if I don't do well my whole average will go down!"

Well. She showed me. And she was right; I didn't try.

We fell silent, eating what we could of our lunches, when Calypso finally came over to join us. "Welcome back, Calypso," Julia greeted her friend as she sat down next to her.

"Sure." Calypso wasn't pulling her 'everything is wonderful' act anymore. She looked distracted, and clearly upset, about something.

"What's wrong?" Julia stopped eating and appeared instantly alert; her best friend radar that I swear Matt also had kicked right in.

"Oh, nothing." Calypso's eyes narrowed into blue poison daggers, piercing through no one in particular as she glared off into space. That was the first time I had seen her look so...furious.

Julia caught it too, but chose not to pressure her. Instead she turned back to her hot dog, and Matt and I

followed her example.

I had finished my lunch, appetite long gone, so after I brought up my tray I knew I had to split the cafeteria. I couldn't look at Calypso anymore without feeling a range of emotions so intense and confusing I could sense a heart attack coming on. So I grabbed my bag and told my friends I had some work to do in the library. They said farewell, though Matt signaled he wanted to talk with me later.

Instead of the library I went to my locker to grab my math book. Then I sat down with my back against my locker, pulled out a sketchbook I always carried with me, and opened to a fresh page. I was trying to draw a tree, no tree in particular, but after a few minutes I was ready to admit defeat. Nothing came out right; every line seemed hasty, scribbled, and not making much sense. Life my life perhaps. I just couldn't concentrate, for once, on art. My mind was miles away. Or, more likely, still in the cafeteria with Calypso.

I had managed to finish the basic outline and was shading in a section of bark when I heard someone coming up the stairs. Looking up, I saw none other than Calypso herself heading towards her locker. She didn't see me, for I was way down on the opposite end and she was by the stairs, near Matt's locker. But I couldn't just go back to my sketch like it was no one. I kept watching, for she was like a movie and had me hooked.

The one thing most noticeable was her anger. She slammed her locker shut and yanked her bag up by one strap, throwing it on her shoulder in one motion. It was then she saw me.

"Oh. Hi." She looked away, reminding me of Zoe that morning when I'd caught her red-handed chewing on one of mom's slippers.

"Hey," I replied. "Why so angry?"

"You wouldn't understand." Calypso glared at me

as if we'd never shared a more important conversation other than "hey, what's up?" in our entire lives. Or shared more than conversations.

"Sometimes it helps just to talk about it," I told her.

People always expect someone to understand everything they're thinking, like you were God or something, knew all and told all. But most of the time we can't understand, or we can't know how something felt, because we'd never been in that kind of situation before. I really don't think total understanding is as important though, in some circumstances, as simple empathy. Just listening to someone recite their problems helps them feel better, because when she talks out loud she can sometimes find solutions on their own. If not that, then maybe you can find some universal bit of advice that will at least give her something to think about other than the hell she's been going through.

But apparently Calypso didn't share my theory. "Oh come on, Gavin," she scorned in exasperation. "You guys are all alike. I bet right now you're thinking you made a mistake turning me down Saturday night, and you're pretending to be all sweet and understanding again to get a second chance. Well you had your chance, buddy, and you blew it, so looks like you're stuck screwing yourself!"

There was nothing I could say to redeem myself; I was so stunned by her furious remarks. And when I didn't reply, Calypso seemed to take it that she was right and stormed away, a blonde tornado ready to destroy anything that crossed her path. Including me.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

After that I gave up. I threw away any ideas of becoming friends with Calypso again, for evidently she wasn't just avoiding me anymore, she truly despised me. So instead of putting all my efforts in a girl who hated me, I took Julia's words into serious consideration and decided to actually concentrate on my schoolwork again. Now I know I had said I'd do all that at the beginning of the year, but well, it had kind of slipped as I slid down Calypso's water slide of drama. So anyways, my first task was to tackle the dreaded English assignment.

Our mission was this: we had to think of a character, anyone our minds could imagine, and put him or her into a scene in To Kill A Mockingbird. We had to decide what purpose this character had, how he would change the story, and what would happen once the character stepped onto the scene. Now I was an artist, not a writer, but that assignment actually sounded kind of cool, not like

the dozens of boring discussion guides we'd done so far that year.

So Matt, Julia and I met after school in the library before soccer practice, ready to get cracking on the assignment. Even if it wasn't a group activity, doing it with friends was a big help. We fed off each other's creativity and knowledge of the book. The three of us spent a peaceful hour at the computers typing, and had mostly gotten the assignment done by the time we had to get to practice.

During our time together I noticed something. Julia really was a great girl. Sweet, smart, genuinely caring and interested in helping others. Matt was a lucky guy, and I was happy for him. I just wished, for a moment, that my relationship with Calypso could've been like that.

Julia stayed and watched practice, a tough one because we had a big game coming up against our arch rivals, Eagle Ridge High. They'd beaten us the previous year three to two, and we were determined to take the bragging rites away from them. Afterwards, Matt and I went out, just the two of us, to the local pizza parlor and had a normal conversation again, since he no longer had to be exasperated with me for being caught up in a Calypso fantasy.

"We have that big math test tomorrow, right?" Matt asked me, digging into his second slice of pepperoni pizza with zest.

"Yeah. Did you study?"

"For once, yeah; I did. Julia convinced me to give the notes a once over, or two. She has a way of getting you to do things."

"I noticed," I laughed. "You're a lucky guy."

"I know," agreed Matt, smiling widely. "And really, it's about time. All the other girls I've dated pale in comparison to Julia."

“Aw, someone’s falling in love,” I teased.

“Shut up.” Matt’s face turned as red as the pepperoni.

“Yes, sir.” I nodded firmly.

Matt sighed, and I caught him staring dreamily into space. If I didn’t know any better, I’d had sworn he was becoming an old softie, but Matt was way too much of a, well, tough guy, for that. Having been raised on so many different military bases with his parents his entire life; Matt had been forced to deal with every kind of situation possible, and in a variety of different environments, not to mention different countries, cultures. As a result, he was much more mature and knowing than most guys who’d been born and raised in Colorado. The overwhelming majority of guys in our school were spoiled, rich preps who couldn’t imagine life outside the safety of their upper-middle class society and are secretly afraid of that cold, mysterious Real World. Myself included.

The rest of the week was so busy that I hardly had any time to think about Calypso, which surprised me when I actually did stop to think about it. I was painstakingly editing my English assignment, due on Monday, as well as studying for math, chemistry, and history; and I was practicing extra hard for the big game against the Eagle Ridge Warriors that Saturday. In fact, it barely even registered that Friday, November first, that she wasn’t in school. When it sank in though, during our last practice before the big game when Coach Williams was having a fit about her absence, a strange feeling of dread sank into my body. Sure, she could have just had a cold, or the flu, which had recently been going around school. And really, why should I have even cared; but for some reason I couldn’t shake the nagging sense that something wasn’t right.

Matt caught it too. Since Julia was Calypso’s best

friend, she shared a lot of her frustration over Calypso with him. It turned out that she hadn't been mean to just me, but to everyone. Julia was getting so frazzled she wasn't even speaking to her anymore, after saying some really harsh words during an argument. So Matt came to me for help. A real switch.

"I haven't talked to Calypso all week; you know how much of a bitch she's been to me since Homecoming." I responded to his interrogation with a shrug after practice. "It does worry me though, that she's not in school today. That's not a good sign."

"Yeah, we're worried too, Julia and I. Calypso hasn't said a word that could possibly tell us what's wrong with her." Matt's brows were crinkled together in concern.

"Well she's certainly not the talking type," I agreed with a wry smile. "I used to practically force a hello out of her, but it didn't help even when she did talk. In fact, I think it made things worse."

"Is she depressed or something?" Matt persisted.

"I told you; I don't know," I said. "But maybe I will head over to her house and check up on her. If she doesn't throw me all the way back across the street that is."

True to my word, after I got home I headed across the street to Calypso's house. I stood in their driveway, and a really weird sensation washed over me. That same cold feel of the house, only more intensified, like stepping into a freezer room when it's a hundred degrees outside of it. I knew Mr. Dawson wouldn't be home, because Calypso told me he worked really late. In fact, I would've assumed no one was there, until I saw a light on in one of the upstairs rooms. So I went up the walk, onto the wide front porch, and knocked on the door.

I knocked three times; each time no one answered. Since Mr. Dawson was absent, I tested the door handle and found it unlocked. Then a question of morals sprang to my

attention. Should I enter, or just go home? I was all set to turn and leave, when that feeling gripped me righter, a wet blanket of apprehension. Somehow, it was pulling me inside. I had to find out why.

“Here goes nothing,” I said to myself. Taking a deep breath, I turned the handle, and before I knew it I was looking inside Calypso’s house.

“Calypso...you here?” I called. “It’s me, Gavin. Why weren’t you in school today?” I paused, waiting for an answer that didn’t come. The house seemed so cold, so lifeless. Even though I was wearing my new winter jacket, I shivered.

It’s just like this because no one’s home, I scolded myself for being so freaked out. And now you should just walk right out and pretend you never entered their house without permission. What they don’t know won’t hurt them.

But for some reason that peculiar force made me walk deeper and deeper into the house, past the living room, which didn’t feel very lived in, and into the kitchen.

And that’s when I spied it.

An empty bottle of Absolut vodka was sitting forlornly on the counter next to an empty bottle of prescription medication.

A tidal wave of sick terror flooded my system and rudely pushed me down, gluing me in place for seemingly an eternity, though it was probably no more a couple of seconds. I made myself resurface. I had to think.

I thought about calling my mom.

I thought about calling Matt.

I thought about running away from that cold, cold house as fast as I could and never looking back.

But then I thought about Calypso; her unique beauty, her huge blue eyes turning to someoneYto meYfor help. With those eyes in mind, I headed up the longest

flight of stairs in my life.

The light was still on upstairs, turning out to be coming from what was obviously Calypso's room. It looked empty when I first glanced at it, and relief made my knees tremble. Maybe I was jumping to conclusions after all. Calypso really had changed her attitude; she was no longer sad. She made it past the danger point.

I had just turned to walk out, when something on the bed caught my eye. A piece of paper. It was probably nothing, but I had to look, just to make myself feel better.

To Whom It May Concern, it read on the front that was folded forward to see. That had my attention. I picked it up and unfolded it.

The top read the same phrase in Calypso's distinct, perfect handwriting. Then the letter began:

I just wanted to let everyone know that I tried my best. I really did. But I just couldn't do it anymore. I couldn't be the person I had created any longer; she took over my entire life, and the scariest part was that I had wanted her to. My real life had been too much to bear for a long time, as long as I could remember. I couldn't stand the thought of going through it alone. But mostly I couldn't stand myself, the person my stream of lies had created. And after Homecoming it all came crashing down. Not only had I been cruel to the two people in the world that truly cared about me, Gavin and Julia, but I shut everyone else out as well. This was my real problem; I didn't want to be a burden anymore, to anyone. So I made my choice to leave. This way, I won't be in pain anymore, and no one will be left trying to figure out what's wrong with me, because so much was wrong with me not one piece

could be fixed. But if anyone gets this letter, I just want to let you know that I tried.

Calypso Dawson - 3:24pm

I don't want to tell you what I found next, but I guess I have to. Calypso was lying on the floor in the doorway to her bathroom; oxygen was no longer entering her lungs. And her heart was still.

All I could think was that she had signed it at 3:24pm. A half an hour before I got there. If I had just realized something was wrong sooner, and maybe skipped practice like I had done before, it wouldn't have been too late. And now she was gone.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Though it was the last thing I wanted to do, I headed back down the stairs, found the number to Mr. Dawson's office, and with shaking hands called him up. I didn't tell him any details, for I didn't think I could voice my discovery just yet. So instead I said, "Mr. Dawson, this is your neighbor, Gavin Ward. I took Calypso to Homecoming last Saturday. Um, I think you should come right away. It has to do with Calypso, and it's an emergency."

Somewhere inside the body of a Vice President of a huge company Mr. Dawson felt the tone in my voice and became a father. He said he'd be right over, and sure enough, ten agonizing minutes later he came bursting through the door.

Without a word I handed him Calypso's note. He took off his glasses and began to read, while I watched him grow paler and paler, till I thought he might pass out. Then his eyes averted to my face asked me a question, and I answered.

"She's upstairs."

Mr. Dawson leapt up the stairs, and I heard him cry out in anguish when I saw what I had just a short while ago.

The evening seemed to last forever. I remember Mr. Dawson calling for an ambulance, and for the police. They sped down our cul-de-sac, lights flashing, and why, I thought. She's already dead.

After the ambulance carried Calypso's body away, the police began questioning me. I told them everything I knew in this hollow, monotonic voice, speaking through the cold numbness that had settled into my body.

Finally I was allowed to leave. The police had read Calypso's note and decided I wasn't involved in any sort of foul play, and they dismissed me from the premises.

My own house was dark. Empty. Mom was working late, as usual, and Ivy had left a message on the machine saying she was spending the night at a friend's house. I was alone, but at a time when I least wanted to be. I dialed Matt's number, but he wasn't home either. His father told me he had gone on a date with Julia.

In sheer desperation I called up the one person I thought had as much right to know about what happened as me, and who would likely be stuck at home on a Friday night as I now was.

"What's up, Gavin?" Troy sounded mildly surprised when I spoke into the receiver.

"I have some really bad news," I began, drawing a shaky breath. I realized then how utterly terrified I was.

"Can you come over?"

"You can't tell me over the phone?" Troy asked

doubtfully. But I learned once again that tone of voice could be very persuasive. I managed to convince Troy that it was serious enough to have to reveal it face to face.

In fifteen minutes Troy was knocking at my door. I let him in, and we sat in the living room. I had managed to light a fire in our fireplace, but even the cheerful crackling of flames and the warmth that radiated from it could not rid me of the chill that had settled in my body. I felt like I would be cold forever.

“So...what’s wrong?” Troy finally broke the tense silence.

I knew of no easy way to tell it, so finally I just blurted out the truth. “Calypso’s dead, Troy; she killed herself.”

If my expression with I fist saw Calypso was half as bad as what Troy’s was when he heard the news, I’m surprised I didn’t drop dead myself. His face was ashen, his eyes staring at me in absolute shock.

“This is some kind of sick joke. Right?” His voice caught on his words. I solemnly shook my head no.

“How? Why...”

“Combined alcohol and prescription pain killers,” I answered quickly, my own voice sounding so hollow it scared me even more. “And...I’m not really sure why.”

“Does Matt know? And Julia, and...”

“No. Matt’s dad said he took Julia out to dinner.”

“Well, we have to find them,” Troy said, leaping out of his chair.

“You’re right; we do,” I agreed. “Come on; you drive, and we’ll check all the restaurants for Matt’s car.”

It might’ve sounded desperate, but we really truly were. In all my life I’d never seen Troy, or anyone, look so upset. We didn’t speak to each other, but somehow I felt comforted to know I wasn’t the only one bearing the pain anymore.

We finally spotted Matt's silver Subaru Imprezza parked at the Olive Garden. Luckily they hadn't been seated yet, since it was so busy, and they were waiting in the lobby.

"Hey guys. What are you doing here?" Julia looked up in surprise as we headed over to them. I honestly don't know what shocked her more, that Troy and I were there or that we were there together, but that was the least important thought in my head at that time. They had to know what happened.

"It's Calypso," I began, and then Troy took over because my voice failed me.

"She committed suicide."

Those three tragic words rang through my head the entire weekend and into the new week, when it was announced on the loudspeaker when Calypso's funeral would be. The entire school, it seemed, was stunned by the news. It was horrible enough to imagine somebody dying in an accident, but to know that the deceased person took her own life, and to know that we might've been able to do something to stop her...well; that was almost unbearable.

The soccer team had drearily played through the game against Eagle Ridge High that Saturday, our hearts far away from the playing field; so far, in fact, that we didn't really seem to notice, or care, when we lost. Coach Williams seemed just as upset as us about Calypso, and he canceled practice for a few days: Monday because no one really had the spirit to play soccer without one of our best teammates, and Tuesday because of the funeral.

I hadn't planned on going to the funeral, but Matt, Julia, Troy, Emily and even Sadie all ganged up on me and convinced me to go. So promptly at two thirty, right after school, we all walked the three blocks together to the funeral home. Emily was at my side the whole time, not saying a word, just being there, and squeezing my gloved

hand with hers in an offer of comfort. None of us spoke really; we all knew our feelings couldn't be placated by any words. No one knew what to say anyway.

That was pretty much what the whole funeral was like. Everyone tried to think up nice, consoling words to say, when they themselves knew we couldn't be consoled. To me it all felt fake: fake, forced smiles, fake cheery hellos and don't-worry-it'll-all-be-okays. The gathering at Calypso's house afterwards was even worse, except now people were trying to comfort each other between taking bites of finger foods. Matt and I left as soon as it was politely possible, feeling for the closest base. My house.

"Well, that's over and done with." Matt slumped onto the living room floor with a sigh, loosening his tie from around his neck. We had all dressed up for the occasion, false fronts hiding our wrecked insides.

"Yeah, I guess," I agreed, though not really believing it. The aftershocks wouldn't be over and done with for a long, long time.

"I still can't believe she did it," Matt said, idly scratching between Zoe's ears. The rapidly growing puppy had crawled over for a visit, and now she laid her head on Matt's lap, her huge blue eyes darting between us in concern. "She looked so much better last week. You said so yourself!"

"I also said I thought she was hiding something," I told him. "But then I figured that even she couldn't be that good an actress."

"Wonder what set her off..." Matt let his question hang in the air like fog in the deepest, darkest valley.

"I think I know." I thought back to that day in the cafeteria, when Calypso stormed over to the table and looked so furious. Patrick and Brian had stopped and said something to her, but I never bothered finding out what. I told Matt what I remembered.

“Maybe.” He grimaced, probably remembering that eventful party. “All I know is, this all is hard enough on me, and I barely knew her. You must be devastated.”

“I am, mostly because I knew she was hurting so much inside, and she opened up to me, then shoved me away when I got too close.” I carried Matt’s train of thought. “I feel like I should’ve tried harder to get through to her, but I don’t know what else I could’ve done.”

Matt opened his mouth to reply, when suddenly there was a knock at the front door. I met my friend’s eyes, and they mirrored my confusion. Then I shrugged, got up, and answered the knocking. And the last person I would’ve ever expected to see was standing on my doorstep.

“I found this among Calypso’s things,” Mr. Dawson said gruffly, handing me a cream-colored envelope with my name scrawled across it. I noticed her handwriting right away, and my heart gave one wild leap. “And...I thought you might like to have it.”

“Thank you; I would.” I took it from his hands, and he offered me a small smile.

“Thank you, Mr. Ward,” he said after a pause, “for being there for my daughter in her last days, and taking her to the Homecoming dance. She was always talking about you whenever I saw her, which was unfortunately not often enough. Nothing but wonderful things to say.”

That floored me even more, enough so that I could barely say goodbye before shutting the door and returning to an impatiently waiting Matt.

“What is it?” Matt eagerly dashed to my side.

“A letter from Calypso.”

He caught my expression. “I’ll leave you alone to read it. I should get home anyway.”

“Thanks, Matt.” I smiled gratefully at my friend. “For everything.”

“Hey, no problem.” He threw me a jaunty grin,

gave Zoe one last pat and exited the house, leaving me alone to be with Calypso one last time.

Dear Gavin:

I just wanted to let you know that I'm going to try. I really mean it this time. I'm going to find me, who I really am. I can't act anymore; it's so tiring. Someday I'll tell you the truth about my father, and why I started escaping in the first place. And maybe, when I'm me again, you'll like me, and we can be together. I promise I'll be better. You're the only person who's never liked the person I created for myself, but liked rather the one I know I can be inside me. So no more lies, no more games. I love you, I have since the day I really looked into your eyes for the first time and saw someone who really wanted to help. Now I'll let you help me.

Love, Calypso

I hadn't been able to show much of any emotion since I entered her house that day she died, creating a barrier of numbness around my heart. But that letter broke open the dam, and before I even knew what was happened I was collapsing to the floor in soul-wrenching sobs. My Calypso, whom I had loved for so long, had finally decided to make things right in her life, only it was far too late. I noted the date scribbled across the top; it was the day I had asked her to the Homecoming dance. That night, at the dance, we had kissed, and I had turned her offers down. Did I have a part in her demise? Did Brian and Patrick? Maybe we all did.

No, there was no maybe there. We all played our part. Calypso just didn't want to act in the production anymore. She wanted out, and instead of helping I had said no. How had I said no to someone I had loved? The mere

thought made the tears flow all the faster.

By the time my crying slowed down dusk had cast deepening shadows across the floor; the streetlight outside was glowing faintly and eerily through the front window. I wearily lifted my head from my hands and let my thoughts barricade the tears. I thought back to the painting I had done, which I had labored for so long on. It was just as I had done with Calypso, trying so hard to paint a picture of her that I wanted to see, to believe in. Little by little I had tried to complete that painting, but now it would never get finished. No matter what she had promised, what she had really thought, I would never get to know the real Calypso. No one would; her entire personality might have been a total act.

Zoe by then had come over to console me, and set to the business of licking the salty tears off my face. I couldn't help but laugh. "Zoe!" I said. "Cut it out." She barked in reply and scampered off, and I followed. She was blatantly telling me that life goes on, and now it was time to play.

Looking back now with my psychologist's eye at this story that I've spent most of the night typing and reliving, I can see that in many ways suicide was meant to happen. There's no way a person can survive knowing that they're constantly treading a dangerous line, a line between the life they don't want anyone to know about and the life they portray. The stress would be unbearable. If there wasn't so strict a caste system, people might not feel such a need to conform to fit their social orders. People should just be who they are, no matter what everyone else thinks.

Even though it was too late for Calypso Dawson, after her death I started to apply some of that reasoning into Gavin Ward's life. I tried to open up more, to let people know when I was upset, and to take their advice and snowball it into something real, not just one of those false

don't-worry-it'll-all-be-okays. That was the true metamorphosis from the naive Gavin at the beginning of that fateful junior year, to the more aware, more knowledgeable Gavin that I am today.

There was only one thing I wished I knew more, and unfortunately there was nothing I could do to help my situation. I longed to know why Calypso killed herself. It always seemed such a drastic, dramatic, and certainly final, decision. But then again, Calypso had always been a dramatic person. She was an actress, and had to be so.

It's not until this moment, as I save and close my narrative, that I can finally have a sense of just what was going through Calypso's mind as she washed down her pills with alcohol. Calypso wanted to kill the phony, to exorcise the demon she had created of her own free will but didn't want around anymore. And the only way she could was killing her real self along with it. She had sacrificed her own person, whoever it was, to assassinate the intruder. It had gone that far; I don't think even she realized how far down that winding, icy road she had traveled until she had the bottles in hand. There was no other escape. But now Calypso could rest; the exorcism was a success.

Suddenly tiredness creeps up through my tired fingers and journeys around my entire body, soothing me like a hot shower after crying my heart out onto the floor. I turn off the computer and the light, and head upstairs into bed. My wife stirs and wraps her arms around me as I gather the covers up. "Good night, Emily," I whisper into her black silk curtain of hair, and she smiles.

Just before I fall asleep, one last thought settles in my mind before sinking in to rest; maybe Calypso really was an angel, like I had pictured her as on the porch that night so long ago. Maybe she was sent here to save those who still had a chance to open their eyes and receive the light, and therefore achieve the happiness she herself could

never have.

THE END

