

DIARY OF A FAT GIRL

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DAY 100

This time I'm going to do it. I am. I'm going to lose all this weight. I have to. To put it simply, I'm tired of being "the fat girl." I'm tired of being "the ugly twin." I'm tired of being second-best to everyone. I, Bernadette Rivers, am going to lose fifty pounds before my first day of college. And I'm going to do it starting now. Or rather, after the Star Wars marathon I'm watching. But today, definitely.

DAY 99

Okay, so yesterday wasn't the huge triumph I imagined in my head. It's not my fault, though. I got caught up by intergalactic drama and then Natalie (my best friend) came over right after. I thought it might look a bit odd if I started doing jumping jacks while she gossiped about cute boys, and then I thought it might look even weirder if I didn't have a slice of the pizza she brought with her. It was pepperoni after all, and that's my favorite. Natalie is my polar opposite. She has long, jet-black, straight hair while mine is a blond, curly mess. She is an absolute computer nerd and dreams of hacking into the CIA database one day. I want to be a journalist or editor for a world-class newspaper.

She is uber skinny. I am not. But despite all that, we get along wickedly.

I told Nat about my ambitions. She looked at me in disbelief and asked, "So, no more chocolate then?"

I tried explaining my vision to her. I told her about how I want to be able to fit into jeans of a reasonable size. I told her that I want to be a different person in college. More outgoing and confident. I want to be a bit of a sex goddess, with boys lining up just to be in my presence.

"Oh, like your sister then."

I love Nat, I really do, but I nearly slapped her just then. Olivia is perfect. The sun basically shines out her bum. We used to look exactly alike. My mom would dress us up in identical frilly dresses and matching shoes and everything. Now she's a popular beauty queen airhead, and I'm just me.

"Okay, so... I have a goal too."

This was super-shocking news for me as Nat is about as ambitious as a slug. If I'm lazy then I don't know what word I can use to describe her.

"You want to get fit with me?" I asked her incredulously.

"Oh, God, no." She was laughing so hard I had to take the pizza box away from her. "No, no... This summer... I want to lose my virginity."

I was chugging a glass of juice at that point so I couldn't help but snort and sputter as I stared at my best friend.

"Are you being serious?"

She was. She told me that she was tired of being the good girl. She told me that she wanted to "jump into the lake of womanhood, naked and with abandon" before college. I kept trying to wrap my head around it. Nat is the most innocent, sweet-hearted person I know. She's the kind of person that doesn't get dirty jokes until two days later. She doesn't watch R-rated movies because they "make her feel icky." My God, she has pink, fairy bed sheets.

I don't think I hid my surprise very well because she got quite upset with me after that.

"I don't think you have a right to judge, you know."

She was talking about my brief encounter with Fumbling Fred while on tour with Math

club. I didn't talk to her after that because we had promised each other never to mention this particular individual.

"Fine."

We watched a bunch of old movies after that and I let it go.

13.00

I am currently hiding in my closet. I can hear the quiet *tap tap* of my mom's heels as she looks for me all around my bedroom. "Bernadette! Stop being ridiculous... get out here right now," she says. When I don't answer she gets fed up and calls for my sister. A few moments later I can hear her car revving. I know I'm acting like an immature brat but I really don't feel like trailing behind my mom and sister while my mom does her rounds. Mom owns and runs a makeup company called *Sophie's Cosmetics*. She started it right after Nana died, I guess, in an attempt to carry on living. She sometimes does house calls to rich and bored Californian housewives to show them how to do a smoky eye... or whatever. I used to go with her and Olivia and help her out. She'd call us her "little models" as she did our hair all dramatic. I stopped going sometime around freshmen year. I can't even remember why. I don't know why she keeps asking when she has Olivia. Anyway, I can't go with them today because I am officially commencing *The Burn Project*. By the end of this summer, I am going to be a drop-dead-gorgeous goddess... more delicious than chocolate chip ice cream.

I was watching this weight-loss program on MTV last night and it gave me an idea. I'm going to go run along the coastline. Something about sand is supposed to make the workout ten times harder. I just need to go find my sneakers and I'm off.

17.00

Ended up skipping today's workout. I was looking for my sneakers in amongst all my stuff, but it was an impossible task. I'm not exactly the neatest of people so I have everything from bras and undies to last year's homework scattered on my bedroom floor. I thought it would be tons easier to just borrow a pair from Olivia. Olivia's room looks like a five-year-old's dream. She has pink walls and a bed with a frilly, lacy canopy. She has a proper antique dressing table, like you see in old movies. On top of it are little bottles of perfume, a dozen hairbands and brushes and an assortment of makeup sets.

I opened up her trunk where she keeps her shoes—because her closet is too full with clothes. I was pulling out heel after bloody heel when I found an album. It was a cheap Barbie album that she must have bought years ago. I flipped it open and was surprised to see my smiling face on the first page. At least I thought it was my face. On closer expectation, I realized that it was actually a six-year-old Olivia. I flipped the page and then it was the two of us, faces covered in cake, smiling at the camera. We used to look identical. Duh... we are identical. I kept flipping and it's like we aged with every page. There were pictures from birthdays, beach trips and school events. Over and over again I kept seeing the same thing. Olivia and I might have the same face, but I was always just a little bit bigger. Even when we were little. I paused at one photo and felt my heart tear apart. We were eleven, and it was Nana's seventieth birthday. We went to New York because Nana really wanted to see the Statue of Liberty. I didn't get it then... I mean, why did she want to see it so badly? I realize now that she must have known that she was

going to die. I choked back tears as I stared at the image of me and Nana, sun in our eyes and the statue standing tall behind us. She was wearing a multi-colored headscarf and a sequined top. Her smile was wide even though the cancer must have been so bad then. I tucked the photo back into its plastic sleeve and put Olivia's shoes away. I then went and lay in my bed for a really long time just staring at the glow-in-the-dark stars on my ceiling.

I miss her so much. Even now.

DAY 98

Right now I'm on the bus on my way to meet up with Nat. It's incredibly hot and the bus is completely full. I was lucky enough to bag a window seat so I let my head rest against the warm glass. I close my eyes and watch my eyelids turn red from the sunshine. I'm fighting back tears. They burn hot and heavy just at the surface. I try to find something to concentrate on so that I don't completely lose it on this bus. I end up watching the boy opposite me. He has very black hair and piercings all over. I focus on him the whole trip, making up stories about his life. It doesn't help much. My mind still drifts to last night.

I was quite upset after seeing Nana's photo, so I decided to have a little treat. I grabbed a tub of chocolate ice cream and started in on it as I watched TV. I must have fallen asleep because, when I opened my eyes, Mom and Olivia were home and standing in the kitchen. I don't think they realized that I was awake because they were talking about me. Mom was commenting on the empty tub of ice cream. I think she said something like, "It amazes me how she can put away so much." Olivia was laughing, and I felt myself shrinking away.

"And apparently she's on a diet."

"Not a successful one, obviously."

I didn't want to hear any more. I was just going to sneak up to my room when my mom said, "Seriously, she can't possibly get any bigger, can she? She's never going to be able to accomplish anything if she can't exercise some self-control."

Olivia voiced her agreement, and I heard as they exchanged goodnights while they climbed the stairs. I was left feeling a bit cold inside. I mean, it's one thing when the mean kids at school make fun of you for your weight, but it's something completely different when your mom says something. The worst part is that nothing they said was untrue. It's not the first time I've declared myself to be on a diet. It's not the first time I've told myself that I'd lose weight and get fit. I can't blame them for not believing in me because I've given them nothing to believe in.

14.00

Have just come back after meeting with Nat. When I climbed off the bus, it took me a considerably long time to find her. Not because there were that many people, but because I couldn't recognize her. Nat was wearing the shortest shorts known to man and a monster pair of heels. This was a very comical sight because Nat has about the same amount of grace as a bug colliding into a windshield. She almost tripped twice as she came to meet me. As she came closer, I noticed that she had on quite a bit of makeup and something fascinating was going on with her boobs.

"What on earth are you doing?"

"What do you mean?"

"You look like you just walked out of a strip club... and what's going on with your boobs?"

I must have said that last bit a bit too loudly because a passing elderly couple shot us both the evil eye.

We started to walk as she explained herself.

"You know how everyone seems to mistake me for a twelve-year-old even though I'm eighteen? Well, I figured that I needed a more mature look. I have invested in a water bra." First of all, Nat does not look like a twelve-year-old. She's just really thin and bit short, but that's it. Secondly, Nat is one of the prettiest girls I know. She has large brown eyes and a wicked smile. Her dad is Spanish, so she has a lovely olive complexion all year long. She has no need for artificial cleavage. I told her as much, but she just waved it off.

"You're lucky, Burn. You have a lovely chest. No one could possibly mistake you for a ten-year-old boy."

I'm not sure I understand where all this was coming from. Out of the two of us, Nat has always been the more outgoing and confident one. We were never popular at school, but people liked Nat. She's just the kind of person everyone wants to be around.

"I don't get why you're trying to change."

"Same reason you are." She gave me a very knowing look, like she could see right into my head. "I want to be different at college. It's bad enough that I'm not going to have you with me. I don't want to always be the girl I was in high school. I want to be something different."

We made our way to the beach and kicked our shoes off. There weren't that many people, but a few families were milling around. Nat and I bought ice cream cones and sat down to watch little kids running away from the ocean's waves.

"Tell me about Fred."

I cringed. I didn't want to talk about Fumbling Fred, but Nat wouldn't let it go.

"Come on, Burn. You're my best friend and I'm yours, right?" All the mascara and eyeliner made her eyes look even bigger and more pleading. "You can tell me anything. I just... I just want to know what it's like. I mean... really. I watch all the romances and I read all the stupid teen romances and it all seems a bit... surreal. What was your first time like... for real?"

I fidgeted uncomfortably, and I couldn't look her in the eye. Nat is the only one I've ever told about Fumbling Fred, and I really hoped she wouldn't bring him up again.

I took off my hoodie and lay back on the sand. My shirt rode up a little so that some of my tum was showing. I left it alone because there was no one to see. Nat lay back with me, I guess, understanding that I couldn't look at her face as I told the story.

I met Fred when I signed up for my school's Math club last year. I had absolutely no interest in a Math club, of all things, but then I heard that we would be going to New York as our final destination. The last time I was there was with Nana and, I don't know, I thought that if she were still alive... that would be something she'd want me to do.

Our team sucked. We went to schools in Chicago, Washington DC, and, finally, New York, and each time we competed we never came remotely close to winning. It was our final day in New York, so our club director organized for us to go sightseeing. We were at the Empire State Building when we ran into one of the competing schools; Saint

Something-or-another. Fred was there. He had longish red hair that just about touched the collar of his shirt and these gigantic wacky glasses. Actually, he was quite cute... in a weird, nerdy way. I was surprised when he started talking to me. We'd talked before, but that was about something boring like trigonometry or whatever. When he suggested we ditch the rest of the group, I jumped at the chance.

We ended up walking all over. We took the subway and just kept stopping at random places. We were ridiculously lost, but it was quite fun. He bought me one of those *I heart NYC* shirts and we had milkshakes in this quirky little café. I felt like I was in a movie or something.

When we eventually made it back to our hotel, it was really late, and the night was illuminated by the bright lights of the city. Sneaking in was a laugh. Fred was really tall and a little awkward with his height. He kept trying to look inconspicuous by hiding behind potted plants and the like, but his red hair kept sticking out at the top. I was in hysterics by the time we got to the elevator. We were laughing so hard we were hanging off each other, and then we were quiet and just looking at each other... and then we were kissing. I can't say how it is I went from kissing him in the elevator to kissing him in my hotel room, but next thing I knew, there was Fred and we were alone.

I was kissing him and thinking about how good it felt, and also how weird it was to have him so close. I wasn't even paying that much attention when he started to fumble with the buttons of my shirt. I was more interested in the feel of his hair between my fingers. He fumbled with his own clothes, making silly jokes as he pulled his pants off and then mine. I think that's when I realized what was happening. I could have said no, but I didn't really want to. He was blushing and awkward, asking me to turn the light off. And then... well... it happened. And if I'm being completely honest, I don't get what all the fuss is about.

Afterward, I think he said something embarrassing like, "thank you for that."

Like I'd just offered him a cup of tea or something.

I turned the lights on and watched him button up his jeans and leave. I'm not sure what I was expecting. I mean, it's not like I wanted him to fall to his knees and declare his undying love for me or anything. I don't know... it was just hard to believe that I'd actually had sex. I spent the rest of the night nibbling on chocolate and watching some stupid late-night talk show.

The next morning I saw him just before we got on the bus to leave. I was hoping he'd give me a look of utter lust and longing, or maybe shed a single tear as he realized he'd never see me again. Instead he gave me a tentative wave and got onto his bus. And that was it.

I told Nat all this. I even told her about how, when I got home, I climbed into my bed and cried and cried.

She held my hand and squeezed it tight. She didn't say anything more about Fred that afternoon. Instead she took me back to the bus stop. I had told her about the incident with the chocolate ice cream and she believed that she had all the answers to my problem.

"Dance lessons. You can burn loads of calories while learning something new. I'll even

do it with you so you don't have to go alone."

She took me to a dance studio along the coast called *Davis Dancers*. The sign on the front door showed their business hours.

"Ballroom? Really?" I asked her.

"Ballroom and salsa and samba... we're going to get really fit... together." I looked at my best friend with the all the love I could muster. "And if I happen to meet a cute Latino boy... that wouldn't hurt either."

DAY 97

Today is my first dance class. Mom's going to drop me off a little bit later because she's taking Olivia to vocal practice anyway. She could hardly contain her excitement, and surprise, at the prospect of me actually exercising. We were in the kitchen when she mentioned it to Olivia. Olivia was fixing herself a sandwich before . She competes in beauty competitions, and today she's going to her vocal coach for a last-minute lesson before her pageant tomorrow. She's already highlighted and blown out her hair in anticipation.

"Good for you, Bernie. I hear dancing is a great workout."

I don't know. There was something a bit condescending in her voice. I decided to ignore it.

I was listening to her talk to our mom when she mentioned going to the mall.

"What are you shopping for? I thought you already had a dress for the pageant." Not that I cared. I was just trying to stir the conversation. Instead of Olivia, Mom answered.

"Olivia has a date tomorrow night. We're going to pick out an outfit for her."

For a moment I felt hurt. Olivia and I haven't been close for years. We're too different. When she was ten she got a fully-furnished Barbie dream house. I got a skateboard. When she was thirteen she got boobs. I got braces. Fourteen was the year she got her first kiss. I... well... nothing. That's why I don't expect her to include me when she goes out with her friends, or to invite me to pageant after parties, or anything like that. But... I just thought she'd tell me about a new guy.

"So... who's the lucky fellow?"

Olivia took her time answering me. She cut the crusts off her sandwiches, placed them into her bag and poured herself a glass of juice. All the while, wearing a cheeky smile. I was about to give up on her when she said, coyly, "Liam Sullivan."

My heart sank. No, really, I felt it leaving my chest cavity and falling all the way to my Converse sneakers.

"You can't possibly go out with that asshole!"

Mom strongly disapproves of swearing. She gave me a withering look and told me to apologize to Olivia. I was indignant. She was the one that should have been apologizing. Liam Sullivan has made my life hell for *years*. He is the thorn in my foot. The Darth Vader to my Luke Skywalker.

There was no way to express this at the time, though. Olivia had already turned and walked away. Sometimes my sister is a real airhead. I only hope that the jerk stands her up or something. I feel awful for thinking that, but she can do so much better.

14.00

I stood in front of the studio feeling majorly awkward. I was too scared to go in, so I just sat out there waiting for Nat. I must have looked odd, kitted out in my gym wear (old t-shirt, sweatpants and my favorite Converse) and writing in my journal. People kept going in and coming out of the studio. Everyone I saw fit the Californian stereotype

perfectly. Fit, pretty and thin.

Every time the door opened, I could hear loud Latin music. It's a fast, sensual beat that reverberates from the tips of my toes to my fingers. I found myself swaying a bit.

"Morning, Bernie!"

I looked up to find a very excited Nat. She was dressed in a slightly toned-down version of yesterday's outfit. In place of the micro-shorts were skin-tight leggings and she had enough sense to wear flats. Unfortunately, the pseudo-boobs were there to stay.

"Are you sure you can dance with those?" I indicated toward her chest area.

"Of course. These babies are going nowhere." She wiggled the pseudo-boobs enthusiastically.

I turned away, slightly embarrassed.

"Burn, you need to relax. Go with the flow of things. Let your body go."

She said this while doing a shimmy and shaking her hair around.

"I really hope Latin dancing involves none of what you're doing right now."

She just laughed and linked arms with me. We walked into the studio, and I took in all the details. The inside was bigger than I thought. I took in the clean, polished, hardwood floor, mirrors along two walls (floor to ceiling) and ballerina bars attached to one wall. It looked like a real dance studio.

Nat lead me toward the receptionist desk, where we needed to sign in. When we got closer, my heart dropped.

"Oh flip, is that Whitney Foster? I didn't know she worked here."

Nat looked pale, like she was about to throw up. She covered her chest with one arm and let her hair fall in front of her face. Whitney hadn't seen us yet. Her head was bent, typing on a computer. Every part of me wanted to turn and leave. I mean, how else was I meant to react? The girl *hated* me in high school. Wait... hate isn't the right word. Hate suggests that she had some emotion for me. She was just...cold. She was bitter, and rude, and mean. I know every school has the stereotypical 'Mean Girl', but Whitney... she was something else. Yeah... bitch is the word I'm looking for.

"I can't let her see me like this." Nat turned her body away from Whitney.

I felt horrible for Nat. It was kind of nice seeing her feel confident about her body. One glance at Whitney though, and all that confidence crumbled.

"It's okay. There's a bathroom right over there. You can... um... take off your boobs... I mean bra... in there."

Nat looked small, like she was going to cry. I felt sad for her.

"Okay, let's go."

We moved quickly across the dance floor. The room was slowly filling up as the Latin dancing time slot drew near. When we got to the bathroom, Nat locked herself in a stall. I leaned against it and talked to her. I was chatting away, talking about last night's episode

of *Big Bang Theory*, then about the book I was reading, and on and on. I pretended not to hear her quiet crying.

I really don't like Whitney Foster. I haven't liked her since the very first day of kindergarten when she kicked sand in my face. I didn't like her in middle school when she gave me the nickname 'Piggy,' and made everyone oink at me for weeks. But the first time I knew I was capable of hate was in high school. It happened a couple of weeks into sophomore year. We had just finished PE, and we were in the changing room. I'd learned a long time ago not to change in the actual changing area. I had changed in the bathroom stalls and was heading to my next class when I heard her.

She was making fun of the new girl. It was Natalie. I didn't know her then. I saw Whitney corner her. Nat was wearing nothing but her underwear while Whitney dangled her clothes in her face. She kept taunting her. Telling her to reach up and take her clothes. Natalie's arms were crossed against her chest. She was backed up against a wall, and all she could do was cry while everyone laughed. Wait... not everyone was laughing. Most girls looked... disgusted or nervous... I think it was only Whitney and her friends who found it funny. Everyone else just watched, too scared to do anything.

Eventually, Whitney got bored. She took Nat's clothes, stuffed them in her bag and left. I remember her brushing by my shoulder. She gave me this look, so filled with disgust, and said, "What are you looking at, Piggy?"

Afterward, when everyone had left, I approached Nat. I give her my gym shirt. I remember her looking at me with such gratitude. It made me feel sick because *I* was too scared to *do* anything.

We became friends shortly after that. We stuck together. Built each other up until we didn't care what people thought of us. Well, at least I thought we didn't care.

When Nat eventually came out of the stall, her chest was considerably flatter. She wouldn't look me in the eye. She just said, "Let's get out of here." Her voice was so small. I shrugged like it didn't matter.

We came out of the bathroom and quickly headed toward the exit. As we were about to leave, a group of about five guys were about to come in. I instantly recognized each of them. They used to be the popular kids at school. The leader of the pack was Liam Sullivan. He didn't even glance at Nat and me. He went straight to the reception desk where Whitney was. The other three guys also brushed past us, not stopping to let us out. Only one paused outside the door, holding it open. It was Warren Grey. He smiled and let us pass before going in himself.

It wasn't a big thing. I don't even know why I'm mentioning it. It's just... it was nice. I didn't expect any one of those people to be capable of doing anything remotely nice.

When we were finally outside, Nat took in a big breath. She was just relieved that Whitney was too preoccupied to pay attention to her. It made me sad, and a little bitter. Why should one girl have all this power over her? What right does anyone have to have power over someone else?

We ended up going to the mall. I felt awkward there, wearing my gym clothes. Nat wanted to go to the arcade, so we did. The dim lighting and loud music was comforting.

We went to our favorite game machines. They are both old. The name on the one machine is faded and peeling while the other is missing a button. We like them because they are foreign, from Japan or somewhere, and every time we score, some random, accented voice makes a fuss.

It felt natural standing there with Nat. We didn't need to talk, though I wanted to. I wanted to ask her why she was so scared. I wanted to know.

I mean, high school is over. We never have to take anyone's crap ever again. Wait... I guess that's what scared her. She probably hates that even though high school is done, she's still the scared little girl that let Whitney Foster walk away with her clothes.

20.00

The day got worse. Nat and I played games for about an hour before she told me she had to get home. She was supposed to be babysitting her little brother, Jordan, this afternoon. Nat has a car, a cute, red mini cooper with her name on the license plate. She got it for her eighteenth birthday, so she's been driving herself places for a while. Unfortunately, my mom doesn't "believe in underage driving," so I had to walk all the way back to the gym just to sit and wait for her for another twenty minutes. By the time she rolled up, I was tired and exasperated.

I realized that Olivia was in the car and my heart sank. I was looking forward to getting home and popping in a movie. But, of course, the world revolves around Olivia, so we were on our way to the mall. Again.

Mom asked me how the dance class was. I didn't want to lie to her, but I didn't want to have to explain what happened either. Olivia, sadly enough, is friends with Whitney. They're not very close, I think, but they do pageants together. Whitney has won Miss Teen California twice in a row. She has a perfect smile, lovely, chocolaty, zit-free skin and a flawless body. I think Olivia thinks of her as competition more than a friend. Still, they hang out sometimes and I don't want her accidentally saying something to her about today.

"We're not going to be long, Bernadette. We already know what store we're going to. So if you want to stay in the car..."

Her voice trailed off awkwardly. I won't lie. It hurt that she didn't want me to come with them.

"I don't mind going in with you two."

Olivia turned to look at me from the front seat.

"If you come with us, you can't complain about us taking too long."

She made me feel about two years old.

Mom stopped the car and we got out. When Nat and I came here we avoided the stores completely. Mom and Olivia strutted through the revolving doors like women on a mission. A mission that didn't really involve me.

I lagged behind as they pointed things out to each other. I envied the easy relationship that they shared. I mean, Mom never offers to take me shopping. Then again, I'm never

asked out on dates, so I guess there's no reason to buy me a pretty dress.

Eventually, we reached the store Olivia wanted; dELiA*s. I watched Olivia's face brighten up as she walked in. They have really pretty clothes. I fingered a rack of frilly, white dresses. Mom was digging through a pile of half-off t-shirts while Olivia pulled out dress after dress. It took her approximately ten minutes to have an armful. The shop assistant looked amused as she helped her get it all in her stall.

My eyes were wandering around the store; not really focusing on anything. Then, I saw it. It was beautiful. It was a navy blue dress. The neckline was low and heart-shaped, and the top of the dress kind of creased up around the chest area. The waist was cinched in and the skirt puffed out a little bit with lace trimming all around the bottom. I touched the dress hesitantly. I pulled it down, expecting it to be expensive. When I checked the price tag, I was surprised to see that it wasn't bad. I thought, what the heck, I'll just try it on. Most people think I'm a tomboy. I don't tend to wear skirts or dresses or things like that. It's more because I don't look good in them than me not wanting to wear them.

I held the dress up against me and for a moment, I started to hope.

I took the dress with me to the changing room. The same shop assistant that helped Olivia was folding shirts outside the stalls. She saw me approaching and gave me a half smile. She had short, spiky, blond hair and tattoos along her arm. She was wearing a short, red dress that I'd seen on one of the racks behind me.

"Oh, you have something else for your sister?"

"No... no, this is for me. Could I have a stall please?"

She looked at the dress and then she looked at me. She did it slowly. She let her eyes travel from me feet all the way up. She was about to give me a tag for a stall when she stopped.

"That dress is not going to fit you."

My face instantly got hot.

"What?"

"That dress is just not going to fit you. I mean... normally I'd give you a tag and just let you figure it out for yourself but that's such a pretty dress. You'll probably just rip it."

I felt myself tense up. My eyes stung. I felt embarrassed and angry and sad all at the same time. She took the dress out of my hands, and I let her. She didn't say anything else. She just hung the dress back where it was and kept folding t-shirts.

I didn't know what to do. Mom was still walking around the store. I asked her for the car keys. I wouldn't look at her. I could tell, from her voice, that she was mad. She said she just knew that I'd get bored and want to leave.

I walked with my head bowed all the way to the car. When I got there, I sat inside and started to cry. I just cried until my chest hurt and there was nothing left inside me. Then I lay down on the backseat and waited for my perfect sister and my perfect mother to take me home.

Day 96

12.00

Nat doesn't want to go back. I understand. She won't say that it's because of Whitney, but we both know it is. Bullies confuse me. Okay, I know what people say. Bullies tend to have been bullied themselves. I get that. I mean, I don't think there's a person alive that survived high school completely unscathed. They follow you everywhere. There's a bully in kindergarten. There's one in your fifth grade classroom and another when you're a freshman. Even grownups have bullies, that rude guy in the office that makes obscene jokes.

But, I still don't think that's a good reason. Just because someone hurt you, doesn't mean you now have the right to hurt someone else. It's an ugly, vicious cycle that just leaves everyone feeling bitter and hollow.

I was feeling... different this morning. I woke up late and the house was quiet. My curtains were drawn so my room was still dim. I lay in bed and stared at my ceiling. Nana put the glow-in-the-dark stickers there when I was about eight. She did all the consolations and everything. She did it because I was sad. Mom thought it was time that Olivia and I stopped sharing rooms. She's always been about "forming your own identities." I didn't want to move out of my room. I didn't want to leave Olivia. It felt wrong, being apart from her. We used to be like two paper dolls stringed together. Without each other, we were incomplete... weaker. I remember crying all night the day I moved in here. I couldn't sleep without the soft hum of her breathing in the bed next to mine.

Sometime in the night, Olivia snuck into my bed. She curled up next to me, and rested her head beside mine. I remember her brushing my hair with her fingers. We fell asleep holding onto each other. She did that for a while. Every night I would fall asleep to her breathing, like listening to the lull of the ocean. Then, after a while, she stopped. She didn't come every night. Then she didn't come every week. And then, just like that, she didn't come at all. How is it possible that I miss my sister when she's right here?

She makes me feel less. Kind of how Whitney makes Nat feel less. My sister doesn't bully me, though. Olivia is the sweetest girl you'll ever meet. Yeah, she can be a little airheaded sometimes, but she's never mean. She never calls me names, or makes fun of me. She's never rude or bitchy. She does nothing. But, I guess that's just it. We live in the same house. We breathe the same air all the time, but we never talk. Not really. She never invites me to parties. She doesn't tell me about her day, or the boy she's crushing on or anything. Sometimes... sometimes I think she's embarrassed of me.

In fact, I know she is.

18.00

Olivia is getting ready for her date with Liam the Creep (hereby known as LTC). Mom is doing her makeup in the living room. I watched how gently my mother touched her face. They look alike. My mom is just a taller, older version of Olivia. Because we're twins, that means she looks like me too. But it's not as easy to see with me. To put it bluntly, they're thin and beautiful and I am fat and... fat and what? I don't know. Not beautiful,

though.

Olivia is wearing a baby pink dress. It's fitted and hugs her waist snugly. She's wearing it with a pair of ridiculously high heels. I don't understand why she's going through all this effort for LTC. When I say he's a creep, that's not jealousy talking. Yes, I'll admit it. I wish it were me getting ready for a date, but no part of me would want it to be with LTC.

"Are you sure you want to go out with this guy, you don't even know him?"

I tried one last time to talk her out of it.

"And you do?" She sneers and it makes her pretty face just a little less beautiful. "You don't even know him."

But that's the thing. I do know him. I know him, and guys like him. He used to be the head of the football team. Tall, handsome, popular and very cliché. He's going to UCLA like most of our old student body. It makes me happy that I picked NYU.

Liam is a jerk. Over the years, I've had my fair share of crap. People called me names. People did stupid, immature things. It seemed to me like Liam, and his friends, were always the instigators. I thought of prom and a hard lump got stuck in my throat. My eyes smarted and I had to look away or a few tears might have escaped. I don't want to think about that right now.

I left Mom and Olivia in the living room and went to the kitchen. I could feel their disapproving eyes burning a hole in the back of my neck as I pulled a packet of chips from the cabinet. I went up to my room and ate my way through it. I don't know why I do that. I don't know what makes me eat so much. It's like there's a gaping hole inside me and only food can fill it. Momentarily.

The doorbell just went off. He's early.

18.20

I went to the banister and looked over it. I watched as my mom quickly smeared lip gloss on Olivia's lips and then opened the door. I have to admit, begrudgingly, Liam looked good. He has curly, blond hair, which he gelled back. All the girls at school were in love with his eyes. They are a cool aquamarine.

He brought my sister flowers. Tulips. I felt my face get hot. Tulips are *my* favorite. Olivia likes daisies.

My mom gushed over them, and put them in water immediately. There was an awkward moment where he was standing at the door, not quite in or out. After a little polite small talk, Olivia grabbed her bag, and they were ready to leave. I let out a breath that I didn't know I was holding. As if he heard me, his head snapped up, and he found me staring at him. He smiled at me and gave me a wink and he placed his hand on the small of my sister's back. It made me sick.

"Have fun."

My mother's cheery voice broke the trance that he'd put me in.

23.00

I wait up for them. I didn't want to go to sleep until I heard the engine of his car in our

driveway. I got up and went to my window. From there I watched him open the car door for her. He walked her to our front steps and, as I watched, he kissed her. She didn't pull away. I watched them for a little bit. After a while I let the curtain fall back into place. I felt like an intruder. I felt sick and bitter. Sick, because my sister was dating a creep. Bitter, because I wished I had someone who'd open doors for me and kiss me under our porch light.

Day 95

07.00

Today is the day that I'm going to change. This is it. No turning back. I'm going to the gym. I'm going to go sign a contract for the summer. There's this place called *The Health and Fitness Center*. It's not too far from the mall, and it overlooks the beach. I've seen it a few times when going to school. It's a gigantic building with a big green sign in the front. It's really hard to miss.

I checked Google and this is what it said:

The Health and Fitness Center hosts numerous specialists dedicated to improving the wellbeing of others. We strive to provide holistic training and physical therapy in order to get you to where you want to be. A combination of a nutritious diet and intensive workout sessions will get you to the finish line. We promise.

I scrolled down the page and at the bottom was a picture of a middle-aged couple. I read the caption below and realized that they are the owners of the center. The guy is tall and really built. He's quite handsome for an old guy. The woman is small and petite. Her torso is probably the size of my one thigh. She has short red hair and he has dark curly hair. They are holding each other in the picture and smiling so hard, their teeth might crack.

So, in about ten minutes I'm going to have my last meal of freedom. I'm thinking a big stack of pancakes with maple syrup and cream. Then I'm going to walk to the center. Yes, walk.

11.30

Okay, that didn't go according to plan.

So, I left home with the intention of joining the center. I talked to my mom about it before I left and she said, "Fine, do it. But you're going to have to pay for it with your own money. I'm not going to buy you a gym membership and then have you not go."

I was disappointed that she didn't believe in me more. I don't blame her. This isn't the first time I've decided to get healthy. The difference this time round is that I mean it when I say I want to change. I'm tired of hating what I see in the mirror. And I do. I hate my body. I could lie and say that "I'm perfectly fine the way I am," but what's the point? I hate every inch of my imperfect self. I hate that my sister is half my size. I hate that I can't shop in the same stores as my best friend. I hate that I never leave the house to do normal things like go to parties and go on dates. I'm fed up and tired. I want to live. I want to live my life while I can.

That's what was running through my head over and over as I walked to the center. I was sweaty and breathless by the time I got there, but determined. When I stepped through the automatic doors I was taken aback. I wasn't expecting it to be so big and... professional-looking. The entire bottom floor of the building consisted of health stores. Most of them sold stuff like supplements and food replacements. There was a stall that looked like all they sold were nuts and berries. I looked around and discovered stores for gym equipment, clothes and the like. It was like a jock's wet dream.

It took me forever to find the main office. I had to climb to the fourth floor (because, of course, there's no elevator) to meet with a consultant. On my way up, I saw a squash court, an Olympic-worthy swimming pool, cycling machines, weights... they had everything you'd expect them to have.

When I reached the fourth floor I had to book a consultation slot with the receptionist. When I signed in she gave me "The Look." It's the same look the shop assistant at dELiA*s gave me. It's the same look everyone gives me. The look that effectively says, "You don't belong here".

She was popping her gum as she told me to take a seat in front the little cubicles where the consultants were. I was the only other person in the reception area but apparently I still had to wait. I plugged in my iPod and scrolled through my playlist. I picked a song with a loud bass so I could ignore the receptionist with her stupid gum.

I let my eyes drift shut as *Over My Head* by The Fray filled my head and made me stop thinking for a little bit. I was actually starting to drift to sleep when a voice interrupted me. It was loud enough that I could hear it despite the headphones. I sat up straight and pulled one plug out. The voices were coming from the main office to my right. Even the receptionist stopped popping her gum and turned to listen.

"Just tell me why?"

"Because I said so!"

The voices were both male. And they sounded pissed.

"You said I needed to get a job this summer, that's what I'm trying to do."

"You can't work here. That's final!"

"Give me a reason why. Give me a reason, or give me a job."

"The only reason I want you to get a job is so that you learn some fucking responsibility. You can't just come in here and expect me to hand you one. I have to deal with your lazy ass at home, no way am I dealing with it here. Sorry, your application has been rejected."

Next thing I knew, Warren Grey was barging out of the office. He stopped when he saw me staring. He took a breath, run his hand through his hair and took a seat opposite me.

"It sucks that you won't be working with me, Warren. I was really looking forward to it."

The receptionist twirled her bleached hair around her finger and batted her eyelashes at him. It went unnoticed as he pulled out his phone and started texting.

I looked at the posters above his head, and then at him. I thought of what I read on the Internet. The freaky fitness couple who started this place are his parents. It makes sense. He looks like a taller, younger version of his dad. With his head bent, his messy dark hair fell enough to hide his face from me. But I knew behind it were dark, almost black, eyes.

I didn't realize I was staring at him until the receptionist coughed loudly, pulling my attention away.

"You can go in now."

The consultant's office wasn't really an office. It was more of a blocked-off cubicle with

no windows or anything. The consultant's nametag read "Greg." The first thing I noticed about him was his sheer size. He took up most of the room.

He shook my hand. His hands were massive.

"So, what can I do for you today?"

I asked him about a summer package. I asked him what was available.

"The HFC believes in a holistic approach to weight loss and fitness. We don't offer any half packages. If you want to use our facilities then you have to attend counseling with a nutritionist. That's an added cost. Obviously."

He wrote down a bunch of figures on a notepad and explained what packages I could do. I stopped listening the second I saw the price.

"Uhm... Isn't there anything... uhm... cheaper?"

"If you want the best, then you're going to have to pay for it."

He spent another ten minutes talking to me about the nutritionist on hand and the machines I could use if I signed up. I think he realized that he'd lost me because then he just handed me a bunch of pamphlets and led me out.

I was feeling disheartened and wondering if I should just give up on joining a gym when Warren approached me. I noticed that he was sitting right in front of the cubicle. He must have heard everything we talked about.

"Hi, I'm Warren Grey. I think I can help you out."

I'm not sure what surprised me more. 1) Despite the fact that we'd gone to school together since middle school, he didn't know who I was or 2) he thought *he* could help *me*.

He followed me out down the stairs as he talked.

"I want to be your trainer."

His face was serious. He wasn't joking.

"You don't even know me."

"I don't have to know you to know I can help you."

He opened the door for me when I reached the exit. I looked at him. At first glance, he looked confident in what he was saying. But the way he was looking at me, I could tell he was desperate.

"This is because your dad won't give you a job, right?"

His cheeks flushed pink.

"Well... yeah... whatever. I can help you with everything this center could, and I'll do it at a quarter of the price."

I looked at him skeptically. Even that much was still a lot. It would clear all the money I'd saved for university.

"How exactly would you help me?"

We stopped at a bus stop and sat down on a bench. The sun was beating down and I watched people doing their mundane errands. Someone was walking a dog. A couple were pulling on wetsuits, ready to hit the waves. When I looked at Warren, I realized his hair isn't black like I previously thought. It is more auburn. Then I realized his eyes aren't all that dark. They're a warm brown with gold flecks.

"My parents started this place before I was even born. I know the ins and outs of everything they do. I swear, by the time I'm through with you, you won't ever be the same."

I was skeptical. I was scared that this was just another elaborate plan for him and his friends to humiliate me. Again.

I watched the bus turning the corner, heading our way. I was about to tell him no, but then I saw the pleading in his eyes. I figured that he must really need a job if he's this desperate.

"Okay."

I couldn't believe what I was agreeing to.

Warren smiled. His smile is magnificent. It transformed his whole face, and sent a swarm of butterflies loose in the pit of my stomach.

"Great... okay. We're going to do this!"

He held up his fist for a fist pump. It dawned on me that I had just made a deal with a mega jock.

I gave him my number as the bus stopped in front of us. I was on the last step up the bus when he thought to ask me for my name. I don't know. I could be imagining this, but I swear his face fell when I told it to him.

15.00

I've just had lunch and am now relaxing in my room. I had only four slices of pizza and a glass of milk. A major improvement if you ask me. The house is quiet. Mom's at work and Olivia... I have no idea what Olivia is doing.

I made myself a little motivation. I hung an A2-sized piece of cardboard on one of my walls. On it I have cello taped the number ninety-five. I have ninety-five days before day one of orientation at NYU. I watched a program on MTV called *I Used to be Fat*. It's basically about a bunch of teenagers that decide they want to lose weight before the end of the summer and the start of college. Their trainers give them gigantic cardboards which count down the days they have left. Every part of me wants to be like the people on that show. I want to step out of the fat suit that is my body.

I want to be able to say, I used to be fat.

17.00

I just got a text from Warren. It says:

So amped to be working with you this summer. Let's make something amazing happen. What's your address? Will meet you at your place at 06.00 am, sharp. Be ready.

Six in the morning? I mean... really? What the hell can anyone do at six in the morning?

I'm nervous and excited at the same time. I'm going to tell Nat, and ask her what to do. I just hope this isn't a massive fail. This is the first time I'm actually *doing* something about my weight. I'm ready to take charge.

Day 94

12.00

Well...that was...interesting. I'm lying on my bed right now, listening to music. I've got a *Death Cab for Cutie* album on repeat. I'm so bloody tired. Even lifting my head to write is taking an extreme amount of effort.

Warren was true to his word. The doorbell went off at about five fifty-five in the morning. I stuffed my head under my pillow, and tried to pretend it wasn't him, but then my phone went off. I have an extremely loud rock song as a ringtone so there was no ignoring that.

"I'll be down in a minute," I said, groggily.

I threw my phone on my bed and fumbled around in my closet for something to wear. Fifteen minutes went by and I was still undecided as to what to put on. Warren rang the doorbell again and I was worried my mom would wake up. She's not the best morning person.

Eventually, I settled on a baggy pair of track pants and a graphic tee. It was absurd of me to care what I looked like. I never do. I had to physically restrain myself from doing my hair or doing something stupid like putting on lip gloss. I quickly brushed my teeth, sprayed on a little deodorant and went down the stairs to open the door.

Warren Grey is a god. I'll admit it. Even at flipping six in the morning, he still looks like he just walked out of a GQ advert. His hair was damp, probably from his morning shower, and tousled in places. When he walked by me to come in he smelled of something fresh and kind of earthy. I couldn't quite put my finger on it. I might have remained holding the door open and staring at him like an idiot if it weren't for his pissed-off expression.

"When I say six, I mean six. I don't mean six fifteen or six twenty. I mean six."

I tried to apologize but he cut me off.

"I don't want this happening again. If it does, the next couple of weeks aren't going to be very pleasant for you."

I could already tell that he's going to be a drill sergeant type. Around his neck was a silver whistle. I cringed at the idea of him using it on me.

"Okay, first thing we got to do is sort out your diet for the next couple of weeks."

He had a large duffle bag swung over his shoulder. He went into our kitchen and dumped it on the table. I watched him curiously as he unzipped it and took things out. Half the stuff I couldn't name if someone paid me. He brought me different types of veggies and fruit, nuts, health bars and premade meals. When he was done emptying out his bag, our whole kitchen counter was covered with food.

"My God, you didn't have to get me all this stuff. It must have been super expensive."

"Don't worry about it." He gave me a sheepish grin. "Half this stuff came out of my pantry."

Warren moved to open our pantry and I held my breath. I watched his expression morph as he took in what was inside. His eyes actually bulged out. I felt a little indignant. I'm sure our pantry resembles the pantries of most American families.

"This is *not* going to work."

He pulled out a box of my favorite cereal and bag after bag of chips. He dug in deeper and found my family's stash of chocolate. Then came the Twinkies, cupcakes, candy, cookies and donuts. He piled it all on the floor around his feet. I was shocked when I realized that most of the food on the floor was the stuff my mom got for me. Not Olivia.

He moved to the fridge and I had to choke back my protest.

Ice cream, cream cheese, whipped cream and cake joined the collection on the floor.

"No wonder you need my help." He chuckled to himself.

I felt my face go hot.

"I know I need help, okay. I don't need you being rude about it."

I turned my back on him, and went to sit in the living room. I heard him packing and putting things away in the kitchen. He joined me in the living room after a bit.

"Look, I didn't mean to hurt your feeling. I only want to help you."

He sat down on the couch next to me. The cushions sagged under his weight and I noticed how broad he is. The muscles in his arms tensed as he folded them across his wide chest. Even I probably look quite dainty next to him.

"I know that." I tried, and failed, to stop staring at his arms.

"This journey isn't going to be easy. There're going to be times that you'll really hate me. You're going to want to hit me, and that's okay." Something told me that hitting him wouldn't do much. I could put all my strength into a punch and he probably wouldn't feel a thing. "But I want you to know that I'm here. I'm invested in you. I'm going to see this through to the end."

I smiled all through his speech. I wondered how many people he'd said the same thing to.

"You ready for this, Rivers?"

I nodded my head and he shook my hand.

"Then let's get started."

When we returned to the kitchen I saw what he had done. He put all the junk food into a black bin bag and placed it the door. I noticed that the food that was previously on the counter was now packed away in the fridge and in the pantry. When I took a closer look, I saw that there were little orange stickers stuck on some of the food.

"The food with the orange stickers is the food that you can have. Nothing else." He explained.

I felt my jaw drop. Was he trying to starve me? He brought a lot of food with him, but not nearly enough if that's all I can have. He must have seen the look on my face, because he gave me a reassuring smile and pat on the back.

"It's only for a few weeks. I need to jump-start your metabolism, so I don't want you eating any carbs for that time. After that, we'll reintroduce carbs and starch into your diet."

He pulled out a printed sheet of paper from his duffle bag and used a magnet to attach it to the fridge. On it I saw meal plans for the next three weeks.

"You don't honestly think I can survive on this do you?"

I was more than skeptical. At the bottom of the page was a list of foods that I should avoid at all times. Chocolate was on it.

"No, no you can't be serious."

He laughed like I was making a joke. I think he's the kind of guy that just likes to smile and laugh a lot. It's annoying.

"It's not forever, Rivers. You'll see. By the end of the three weeks you should already be seeing results."

An image of a slimmer, prettier me filled my head. It was all that stopped me from ripping the page off the fridge and telling Warren to leave.

"Okay. What now, Grey?"

He smirked when I called him by his last name, imitating him.

"Now we weigh you."

I swear. It was like my world crashed around me or something. I started shaking my head as he whipped a scale from his stupid bag.

"No, no. We don't need to do that, do we?"

I could already feel a blush creeping in. I loathe my fair skin sometimes.

"We need to know where we're starting so we can figure out where we want to end."

He looked at me expectantly. "I don't have any plans today. I could stand here forever."

I pulled off my sneakers and tried to mentally prepare myself. I hadn't weighed myself since middle school. I made a point of accidentally dropping my mom's scale down the stairs when I was about thirteen. She didn't bother getting a new one, knowing I'd probably accidentally smash it with a baseball bat.

I stepped onto the scale, never once looking down. I focused on Warren. I looked into his eyes instead of the number on the screen. He stared right back. The scale made a beeping sound and he broke eye contact to look at the number.

"242.5 pounds," he said it so matter-of-factly that I thought I didn't hear him right. I looked down at the scale and saw the unmistakable number. It's funny how a number can instantly make you feel like shit. All I wanted to do was fold myself into a tight ball and bawl my eyes out. I couldn't exactly do that with Warren in the room.

"I know it seems impossible right now but that number is going to go down. It will. You just need to think of the end goal."

He pulled out a notepad from the bottomless duffle bag and wrote down the date and my

weight. I hated knowing that he now had it down on paper. It made it feel more embarrassed for some reason. It's not that I think he'll tell all his friends. I don't think he's that kind of guy. No, it's just... it's such a personal thing that he now knows about me. I feel like he just saw me naked or something.

He flipped the notebook shut and put the scale back in his duffle bag.

"We'll weigh you every Friday, I think. It's always best to weigh yourself at the same time every time."

I imagined being woken up at six every Friday from now on. Not too excited, to be frank.

"Now that that's done, let's get going."

I was startled as he started heading out the door, bag full of junk food slung over his shoulder. I was hoping that today would be just a consultation kind of thing. I didn't think we'd actually work out. He waited for me impatiently as I put my sneakers back on. I took my time deliberately. I was so nervous thinking about what he had planned.

Warren was the best swimmer at our school. He won countless trophies and medals and titles. I'm sure he's got a free ride to university because of it. Even though swimming is a solo sport, the swim team members were quite close. They worked out together almost every day. I remember watching them run around the football field during lunch on some days. Warren was the leader. He was always in the front. Everyone behind him would be panting and breathless and he'd be running backward telling them to "man up and get it over with."

I had a feeling that whatever he planned wouldn't be easy.

And it wasn't.

Warren led me to his car which was parked in front of my house. He drives a beast of a car. It's a proper black pickup with tinted windows and shiny exterior. The truck was so large it made me feel tiny. He tossed the junk food and duffle bag in the back and opened the door for me. No one has ever done that. I said thank you as he offered his arm as support for me to pull myself up to the passenger seat. He shut the door behind me and went over to his side.

"This is a very... manly car."

He chuckled and patted the dashboard.

"I rebuilt the engine by myself. It took me forever to find all the parts, but it was worth it. It purrs like a kitten now."

He started the engine to show me. He smiled like a proud father as it started. I've never understood what it is about cars that get boys so flipping excited. But I guess boys could ask the same question about shoes or shopping or whatever.

We drove in silence for a while. I looked at the time. People were getting ready to go to work. There'd be traffic soon.

"What are you going to do with all the junk food? You're not going to throw it away, are you?" I was about to launch into a speech about starving children in Africa, but he beat me to it.

"Of course not. I'm going to drop it off at my church later. They'll find people to give it to."

Satisfied that we weren't contributing to world hunger, I sat back against the seat. The window was open and a cool breeze blew into the car. It sent my hair flying. I tried, and failed, to get it under control.

"You don't have hair like your sister, why is that?"

I didn't expect him to ask about Olivia, but I should have. Every guy in a ten mile radius knows about Olivia, and wants to father her perfect little children.

"We do have the same hair. It's just that I leave mine the way it is while she blows it into submission every day."

He smiled.

"It must be weird being a twin. I mean weird in a nice way."

"It was."

"Was?"

I pretend not to hear him and look out the window. I remember when Olivia and I used to do our hair the exact same way. Every morning before school we'd sit in front of our vanity mirror and choose which color bands and clips we wanted that day. We would take turns styling each other's hair. She was always gentle as she brushed mine. My hair has always been curlier, more untamable. But she knew exactly how to get it how I liked.

It's strange. I can't remember when we stopped being us. I can't remember when we stopped finishing each other's sentences, as if we shared one thought. I can't remember when we stopped depending on each other, needing each other to feel whole. When I was little I used to think we shared a heart. They say twins can feel each other's pain so I thought that meant Olivia's heart was my heart, and my heart was Olivia's heart.

I'm not that stupid anymore, thank God.

Warren parked his truck and I realized we were at the beach. He got out of the cab and before I could open my door, he was doing it for me.

"What?" he asked me when I stared at him.

"Were you like born in the sixties or something, Grey?"

I teased him, and his cheeks turned a bit pink, but secretly I was pleased.

I like to think I'm a bit of a feminist. I think it's important that men and women treat each other equally, and with respect. But there's something sweet about a guy that opens car doors for girls. Even if it's for a girl that he's not interested in or friends with.

"So, we'll start off slow today since it's your first workout. Let's just jog down the beach."

I followed him until we were right next to the water. The sand was damp and easier to run on. I started jogging, slowly building up momentum. At first, it wasn't a big deal. I was thinking how easy it was. Ten minutes later I had to stop because it felt like my chest was on fire.

"You can't stop now. We've barely even started."

Warren turned so that he was running backward in front of me. He was saying words of encouragement, but I didn't want to hear it. I wanted to wipe the smile off his face. It seemed abnormal that I was so damn breathless, yet he was carrying on a conversation.

"We're going to run for another thirty minutes, and then we'll move on to the next thing."

I groaned in response.

It felt like years went by as I kept going. I wanted to stop so badly. My breathing was strained, and I was sure my face was a very unattractive shade of red. Sometimes I'd start walking and Warren would shout and tell me to keep running.

"This is what you signed up for. Don't you dare give up now!"

It was a little scary, actually. I started to feel bad for the swim team that had to put up with this.

We made a U-turn and started running back in the direction we came. It was starting to warm up so Warren, jogging next to me, pulled off his T-shirt. That's when I fell, face first into the wet sand.

"Rivers, are you okay?"

No, I was not okay. I felt like my heart had just burst into a thousand pieces. Partly to do with the jogging, but mostly to do with Warren's toned chest. It was like someone painted his abs on him, they were so perfect.

"I'll survive."

I stayed flat on my stomach on the wet sand. The dampness felt amazing against my hot face. I wasn't sure whether I felt hot because of the jogging, or because of Warren. He leaned down and pushed my hair away from my face. His fingers against my face were electric, and I felt my fragile heart doing summersaults. I like to think that it was just the surge of endorphins from running that caused that reaction.

"Okay, we'll take a short water break and then keep going."

He handed me his bottle. It felt cold in my hot hand and I was grateful. When I placed it to my lips it occurred to me that his lips had been there too. That caused a bit of a reaction in my heart again.

"Wow, you really are warm."

He placed his hand against my cheek. I unconsciously leaned into it. He has nice, strong hands. I've never noticed a boy's hands before. I chastened myself for thinking about him like that. I need him to be my trainer. I need him to help me get fit. Crushing on him will do me no good. I pulled my face away from his touch, and told him I was okay. I then stood up to prove it to him.

"Okay, we'll take it easy from here."

That was a colossal lie. After that we did what felt like a thousand push-ups and lunges. Then he whipped out this stretchy thing from his duffle bag. He put it around each of my ankles and told me to side walk along the beach while stretching it. I almost fell about

half a dozen times. While I walked, he talked.

"I know this feels awful, but just think of what it'll feel like when we reach our goal. This pain will be nothing in comparison."

I didn't understand the "we" business. I was the one whose thighs were on fire. By the time we made our way back to where we started, I felt lightheaded. I could feel the bile rising and it took everything inside me not to vomit all over Warren's Adidas.

"See, that wasn't that bad. Today was a good start."

I almost slapped him. There I was, chest on fire, feeling like my legs were about to detach from my body and he was telling me it "wasn't that bad."

I was feeling quite bitter as we made our way back to his car. By that point, the warm feelings I thought I felt for him were quickly dissipating.

"Let's get you home."

We left the beach just as it was starting to get hot. I now understand why he wants to work out so early in the morning. Unfortunately, we didn't miss the traffic. To avoid any awkward silences, I switched on his radio. A fast house song I had never heard started blasting from his stereo. He started nodding his head to the beat. I was afraid he's start fist-pumping and let go of the wheel.

"You like this kind of music?" I asked him.

"Yeah... this dude is awesome."

I'm not a music snob or anything, but I tend to prefer music where I can actually hear what the singer is saying. I like indie rock, and alternative bands, because their lyrics tend to be poetic. I think I have a song for every time I've ever felt alone or sad or bitter. I like music that sits in your heart and makes you feel like crying and dancing at the same time.

Warren turned the volume down a bit and turned toward me.

"Tomorrow I won't bring the truck, and we can jog to the beach. That will give us more time to do other stuff. Bring your iPod. Music always helps me with my workout."

I didn't realize that we were at my house until his truck stopped. I was kind of fixated over the fact that I'd be running this distance the next day.

Warren got out of the cab, walked over to my side, and opened the door for me again. Before I could thank him, he was moving toward the bed of the truck. He pulled out a backpack and swung it over his shoulder.

"I have a few more things for you."

I opened the backdoor to the kitchen, already suspicious of what he was going to pull out. When we walked in, Olivia was standing by the stove stirring something. She still had a clay mask on, and her hair was piled on top of her head with rollers sticking out at odd angles. She was wearing her Minnie Mouse PJs and... yes... her retainer. Her eyes looked like they were going to pop right out of her skull when she looked over my shoulder and saw Warren. I had to fight back a laugh.

"Uhm... morning, Olivia. Nice seeing you." Warren looked like he was fighting back a

laugh too.

"Hi, Warren. I didn't know you were Burn's trainer. Uhm... I'm just going to go upstairs now."

She took the pot off the stove and dashed upstairs. I couldn't help it anymore; I just started giggling, and then laughing out loud. Warren couldn't hold back a chuckle either.

"That was... interesting. So, show me your bedroom."

My heart did an annoying flip. The thought of Warren Grey in my room was oddly exciting.

"It's this way."

He followed me up the stairs and to my room. I smiled as I passed Olivia's. I could hear her on the phone and Warren's name came up a couple times.

I hesitated over opening the door, afraid of what he would see. In my rush I had deposited half my wardrobe on my bedroom floor. That, on top of its normal state of chaos, meant my room was a disaster.

Warren didn't comment when he stepped inside. He had to skip over a pile of sweaters and a pair of sneakers just to get in. He dropped the backpack on my bed and unzipped it. He pulled out a couple of free weights, a skipping rope, yoga mat and a deflated balance ball.

"You can borrow these for the next couple of months. I expect you to be working out in your own time."

I stared at the equipment, not sure what to even do with it all.

"Where's your iPod?"

I pointed to it on my desk. It was sitting next to my journal and I had to hold my breath as Warren approached it. Luckily, he was only interested in the iPod.

"I'm going to download some epic workout music for you. You'll see it will help with the run tomorrow."

I highly doubt *Eye of the Tiger* is going to help me run any better or faster but I didn't say that. He pocketed my iPod, grabbed his backpack and headed back down the stairs. I said good-bye to him as he left through the backdoor.

Moments later Olivia came bounding downstairs with her hair and makeup immaculate. Her face fell when she realized he'd already left. She gave me the evil eye when I couldn't help but giggle.

Day 93

01.00

I'm at Nat's house, getting ready for bed. I'm camped out on a blow-up mattress next to hers. I'm fighting the need to fall asleep. Nat is out like a light, and she's snoring softly. Last night we had a movie night. Nat's parents went to the theater (because they are the kind of people that got to the theater) and left us to babysit Jordan. He's a cute kid. He's turning ten, has chubby cheeks, and freckles all over. We coaxed him into bed early with promises of chocolate pancakes for breakfast. I regret that promise, because I can't have any.

Last night was an act of strength that I didn't know I possessed. When I got here, Nat had already laid out every kind of chocolate related treat you can think of on the kitchen table. Nat absolutely loves sappy, sad, romantic movies. She prepares for them with the concentration of an athlete preparing for a game. She always has her chocolate treats, two boxes of Kleenex, and her favorite fluffy blanket. I guess she must have forgotten my pledge to fitness.

"You know I can't eat any of this, right?" I asked her.

She gave me a sheepish grin, and started digging around in the fridge.

"Don't get your panties in a twist. We have loads of healthy stuff in here."

She pulled out a block of cheese, some grapes and celery sticks. I have never been as hungry in my life as I was right then.

"You can't expect me to be able to concentrate on the movies if you're munching on Oreos and I'm stuck with celery."

Eventually, because she's my best friend, she relented and put the junk away. We decided to make a veggie casserole and I told her about my workout with Warren. After about twenty minutes of me telling her all about it, all she could ask me was, "Do you think he has a girlfriend? I've never seen him with one. Maybe... hm... he could be a prospect."

She had a faraway, glazed look. I was kind of hoping she had let go of the whole "losing my virginity" thing. I didn't know how to put into words what I was feeling. You think that it won't be a big deal. You want it to happen, you make it happen, but then when it does... you're just not the same. It's the knowledge that there's someone out there who now has a little piece of you. You can never get it back.

Maybe I'm worrying about nothing. Nat has a tendency of getting bored very quickly. The girl is a genius, but she never finishes the projects she starts.

We ended up watching *PS I love you*, *The Greatest*, and *The Notebook*. I will never do that again. I wept through every movie. It didn't help that Nat was equally as emotional. By the end of the last movie, my eyes felt raw. My heart was heavy, and my nose was red from all the Kleenex I went through.

I had to half carry Nat up the stairs to her room because she had fallen asleep in the middle of *The Notebook*. I got her into bed, thinking she was asleep, but when I turned she asked, "Do you think anyone will ever love me like that?"

She looked so sweet with her big puffy eyes and wrapped up in her pink blanket.

"You're perfect. Someone is going to see that and love you like you deserve to be loved."

She smiled, yawned and turned to her side. Nat *is* perfect and someone *is* going to love her. Me? I'm not so sure.

13.00

It was a rush trying to get home in time to meet Warren. Luckily, we were meeting at seven and Nat's dad drives by my house on his way to work. He agreed to give me a ride in exchange for babysitting. I left Nat cuddling her blanket and fast asleep. The house was quiet when I met Mr. Delgado by the door. He was tapping his foot impatiently.

"Morning, Bernadette. I hope Jordan wasn't any trouble last night."

He told him no and we headed to his sleek black Mercedes. It was a bit weird riding in a car with him. It dawned on me that even though I've been friends with his daughter for years, we've hadn't spent more than ten minutes together. He's a nice enough man. He's tall and thin, with thick dark hair that's starting to gray. I never see him because he's always so busy. He's a mechanical engineer and owns his own construction company. I only ever see him in passing when he gets home from work and I have to leave. Usually he's carrying a bunch of documents and diagrams.

Nat adores her dad. They do loads together. The one time I came over and they were building a replica of some bridge he was commissioned to make. Nat gets her genius genes from him. The fact that he went to MIT is the main reason why she's going there. She's had MIT memorabilia covering every inch of her room since I can remember. There was never a question of where she was going to go to college.

I chose NYU by myself. My mom didn't go to college, so there was no pressure from her. I wonder what it's like to have a dad like Nat's.

The car ride was quick, so I had enough time to change before I was supposed to meet Warren. I was standing at my doorstep stretching when he ran around the corner. He was already sweating so much that his shirt stuck to his skin. He must have run from his house to mine. I can't ever see myself being that dedicated to fitness.

"What are you waiting for? Let's get started."

He handed me my iPod and shot off running. I lagged behind as I selected the playlist he made me. He called it *For Burn*.

The first song was a fast house song by an artist I'd never heard of. Not exactly my taste, but I'll admit the fast beat did help distract me from the fact that I was dying. Most of the songs on the playlist had a fast beat or a low bass. I concentrated on the lyrics rather than my burning chest. I'd lost sight of Warren and was finding it hard to keep going.

My body was screaming for me to stop, but I wouldn't let myself. I kept a mental picture in place. I saw myself three months from now. I saw myself slimmer, and healthier, and happier.

By the time I got to the beach I could do nothing but fall onto my back. The sand was warm against my skin. I tilted my head toward the ocean and saw Warren. He was waist

deep in the water. I watched him for a while. He was jumping the waves, letting them crash behind him. I marveled at how defined his back and shoulders were. He turned and saw me watching.

He made his way toward me. The water was dripping down his abdomen and legs. He ran his hands through his damp hair and gave me that easy smile of his.

"I thought you would never make it." He laughed and extended his arm to help me up. I ignored it and picked myself up. "By the end of the summer you should be able to keep up with me."

"By the end of summer I should be able to beat you."

He smiled again. "I'd really like to see that."

The beginning of the workout was about the same as the day before, except he added more of everything. I was just about to die or vomit, or both, when he tied a thick piece of rubber around my waist. The rubber band was attached to a long piece of rope which he tied around his own waist.

"I want you to make me move."

He planted his feet deep in the sand, and indicated for me to start walking. At first I thought it would be easy. Warren is a big guy, but I thought if I put all my weight into it, I could move him easily. After ten minutes, I was still in the same place, red in the face and breathless. He was wearing a cocky grin that was extremely annoying.

"Come on, Rivers! Don't be such a girl. Move me, dammit."

I swear I put everything I had into it but... nothing. Warren Grey is a brick of a man. I was still charging forward when he started to move back. I fell flat on my ass.

"You see? It's not that hard."

I was fighting the urge to cry when he came toward me to help me up. I ignored his outstretched hand, again.

"I told you. You're going to hate me sometimes, but that'll just make you want to fight harder. That's all I want from you, to fight."

He extended his hand again, and this time I let him help me up. I know this isn't supposed to be easy. And I'm ready to fight. I'm glad I have Warren rooting for me, even if he is extremely annoying.

14.00

I did a stupid thing. I did a very stupid thing. I blame the lack of sugar that I'm currently experiencing. Obviously I'm going through withdrawal symptoms that have taken over my ability to think reasonably. I also blame *The Notebook*. Damn movie made me feel deprived of love, and messed with my head. Those are the only logical reasons as to why I did what I did. I promised myself I would never do it.

Shit.

I looked up Fumbling Fred.

I didn't plan on doing it. I was just Internet surfing and thinking about the movies Nat and

I watched. I went on to Google and found some images from *The Notebook*. I love the bit before they sleep together for the first time. The rain is falling and she asks him why he never wrote her. Then he kind of stares at her for a bit and says, "I wrote you three hundred and sixty-five letters. I wrote you every day for a year."

That part killed me. I started fantasizing. I asked myself: will I ever meet a man that would write me not just one letter, but hundreds?

Then I started thinking about Fred. I've buried him deep into the shadows of my mind. Every time I think of him my heart hurts. I've spent so long just trying to forget, but now I don't want to. I want to know why he picked me. Out of all the girls on that trip, he picked me. Did he do it because I looked desperate? I want to know. I want to know how many other girls he slept with. Was I the only fat girl?

Mostly, I want to know why he didn't stay with me. I wish he had held me and fallen asleep with me. I wish I had woken up to see him still there. I think it wouldn't hurt as much if he had done that.

So, I was Internet surfing and I decided to look him up on Facebook. I didn't know his surname so I searched the name of his school. I found a group dedicated to the graduate from his school. It took about twenty minutes for me to realize he wasn't in the group so he probably wasn't on Facebook. I should have just given up then but I something inside me wouldn't let go. I typed his name and his school's name into Google. The first option that came up looked the most promising. The minute that it took for the page to load was maybe the longest minute of my life.

The first thing that came up was his picture. It was of him holding a small trophy and pulling a funny face like it was too heavy to lift. I stopped and just stared at that picture for ages. It must be a recent photo. He didn't look like he'd changed much. He still had the flaming red hair but it was cut short. He looked taller, maybe buffer, but that could have just been the photo. The heading above it read; *National Chess Champion Fredrick Charles*.

I read a bit of the article. The reporter gave a short bio. Turns out he lives in Dallas Texas with his mom and two sisters. The article gave a short history of his previous accomplishments in chess. It looked like he was some kind of nerd celebrity. I kept reading but it didn't say much about him. It didn't say anything about what he likes or does for fun (besides chess). It didn't say if he had a girlfriend or what university he's going to or what he wants to do with the rest of his life. I just... I just wanted something. I just want to know the person I lost my virginity to.

I typed his full name into Google and crossed my fingers. I had to skim through a couple of pages of results but then I found it. He still has a profile in his school website. I skimmed it and found his e-mail address. I wasn't sure what I was doing but I found myself writing him an e-mail.

cc:

Subject: Remember me?

This is probably the most awkward e-mail I have ever written in my life. I've just been finding it hard to forget you, as pathetic as that may sound. You probably don't

even remember me. We met during Math club last year and we... well... we slept together. On the last day before we left. I'm not all together sure why I'm writing this. I guess I'm just curious. I want to know who you are, you know?

Anyway, I hope you e-mail back. I hope this is really your e-mail and not some random person. If this is a random person, I apologize.

Bernadette Rivers

Day 89

The past couple of days have been a test of my overall endurance and patience. It seems like every day, the workouts get harder. Warren wants me to see results as soon as possible. I think he's afraid that if I don't, I'll give up. Today, like every other day, he made me tie the rope around my waist again and try to move him. Of course, I failed and he said something like "Come on, Rivers! Just do it!" as if he's advertising Nike or something. It really got on my nerves because I was tired and hot and just plain pissed by that point. I pulled the band off me and threw it at him, and then I stomped off. I was planning on walking home but he followed me, grabbed my hand and spun me around.

"Bernadette, I know this sucks royally. I know you keep asking yourself 'why me?' Why do *you* have to do all this work? Why do *you* have to try so fucking hard? I get it. You think I don't, but I do. I'm here for you. You get frustrated, I'm right here." He placed my hand on his chest. "You want to hit someone. You hit me. You want to cry on someone. You cry on me. I'm not going anywhere."

I wanted to cry, right there. I wanted to lean against him and weep. I didn't though. Instead, I pulled my hand back and smiled at him tentatively. I couldn't manage to say anything but a small "Thank you."

He drove me home but stopped me from getting out the car.

"I can't train you tomorrow morning." My heart started beating really fast. I was so scared he was dumping me for being an overemotional brat. "I've got something to do. Is it okay if I pick you up in the evening? Like, maybe six?"

I nodded my head, so relieved. Then he dropped a bombshell.

"That doesn't mean you're off from working out in the morning. I've organized for you to join a running group. A few women from HFC go running every morning at seven. You can meet them at the beach."

I froze up. Working out with Warren is no big deal. I feel surprisingly comfortable with him. But every part of me was screaming 'no' at the idea of working out with a bunch of super skinny fitness Barbie's. I tried to protest but Warren wouldn't hear me out.

"It will be fun. You might actually have some things in common with some of them. It's always easier to get fit when you have someone to do it with you."

"But that's what I have you for."

"Just go with an open mind. It will be good for you."

I blew out a puff of air and got out the car.

"What are you doing tomorrow anyway?"

Warren wouldn't look at me. His cheeks turned pink and he stared at the steering wheel.

"Uhm...just...a class."

"What kind of class?"

"It's not important, Rivers. Just drop it."

I let it go and waved him off as he backed out of our driveway. Warren Grey isn't anything like I thought he would be. He's got all these layers to him. I find myself wanting to peel back every one and see him like he sees me every day.

14.00

I hate to admit it, but after e-mailing Fred I checked my inbox every day, twice a day. Sometimes three. I'd accepted that he just wasn't interested in responding, but then I checked my inbox today.

To: burnitdown@yahoo.com

cc:

Subject: Re: Remember me?

I'm so sorry about the late reply. I hardly use this e-mail anymore. Of course I remember you. What kind of question is that? I remember every second of my time with you. I'm really happy you contacted me. Surprised, but happy. How are you?

Fredrick Charles

I stared at my laptop for a very long time. I had to give myself a pep talk before sending him my IM address and cell phone number. I read and reread the e-mail. So, he remembers me? Butterflies were flying in the pit of my stomach, and it scared me. That feeling is dangerous. It gives birth to hope, and hope is dangerous. The truth is, no one that I want is going to want me while I look like this. It doesn't matter if I have a pretty face or a "great personality." Guys just don't give a shit about stuff like that.

Day 88

06.30

I was so tempted to sleep in. Waking up this early is just unnatural. But I could just see Warren's face if he found out that I didn't go to the running club.

I made myself breakfast. Two rashers of bacon and a boiled egg. Doesn't sound like much? Yeah, that's because it really isn't. Warren says that I won't have to count calories forever. He says that eating healthily should be a lifestyle, and not something that feels forced. In two weeks I'll be able to have cereal again. I'm so excited for that, it is ridiculous. Okay, I'm going to go now. Hopefully it isn't the train wreck I'm imagining in my head.

11.00

I'm sitting in the pantry. I just ate a box of donuts. I have icing sugar all over my running pants. My stomach hurts, and all I want to do is crawl into a tight ball and not move for a while. My eyes are burning and there's a sob stuck in my throat. I feel like I'm twelve years old again. I just... I just can't believe that after all these years... here I am again.

So, I met the running club at the beach. It was just a handful of older women. They were stretching with iPods plugged in their ears, not paying me much attention. I was starting to stretch too when someone came jogging toward us. At first I didn't recognize her. She was bigger than I remember, and when I knew her, she was a brunette.

"Cassie? Cassie Lee?"

She ran up to me and gave me a bear hug.

"Bernie? I can't believe it's you. It's been forever."

Cassie Lee used to be my friend back in middle school. Believe it or not, I had quite a few friends then.

"Where have you been? I thought you moved," I asked her as we began a slow jog down the beach.

"I did. I went to high school in Florida. My dad got a job there. I'm sorry I never said good-bye."

She gave me a sheepish smile. She had dyed black hair that was cut super short. She was wearing an eye-brow ring and lots of eye makeup. She looked so different. The Cassie I remember was shy and sweet and wore pastels. This Cassie was just... different.

"Why didn't you say good-bye? You just left without a word."

I remember being distraught. One day she was at school, and the next she was gone.

"You know why, Bernie."

By that point, the other women in the group had overtaken us. We were jogging so slowly we were practically walking. I stopped Cassie and faced toward her.

"I do?"

She looked uncomfortable. She started playing with the rings on her fingers.

"Don't you remember Ms. Daniels?"

The name knocked me back for a second. I felt a piece of myself shatter.

"Yeah... yeah I do."

I wanted to start running again, but I stayed still. I wanted to hear what Cassie had to say.

"I told my parents. I told my parents what she did and... well, we moved. Not so much because of her, but because my mom wanted me to start somewhere new, you know?"

"You told your parents?"

My mind was reeling.

"Yes, didn't you?"

I shook my head, no, and Cassie moved toward me. She hugged me, and I lay my cheek against hers.

"What she did to us... it was wrong. You know that, right?"

I nodded my head. I didn't trust myself to speak.

I've never talked about this before. Since seeing Cassie I can't stop thinking about it. It's like I buried these memories deep inside me, and now they are starting to resurface. It happened in middle school, eighth grade. Nana had died that summer. My mom wouldn't leave her room. She'd lock herself in there for hours. Sometimes I'd hear her playing soft, sad music but she wouldn't talk to Olivia or me.

I started eating... a lot. I used to eat a lot of junk food before that, but I took it up a notch. I'd grab whatever I could from the fridge and pantry, pull the covers over myself on my bed and just eat until my stomach couldn't take anymore. I don't know how much weight I gained that summer, but it was a lot. When I went back to school people made fun of me. I think that's when Olivia and I started to drift apart. I was angry and sad and lonely.

One day, after PE, Ms. Daniels approached me. She was the girls' PE coach at the time. She had shoulder-length brown hair, tanned skin and brown eyes.

I was sitting on a bench in the locker room. She came and sat down next to me. She was nice to me. She told me that I shouldn't let the other kids get to me. She told me that I could do whatever I set my mind to, and I shouldn't let anyone tell me anything different.

It felt nice. I liked the attention.

She asked me if I wanted help to lose weight. I said yes because she was a teacher and you always do what teachers tell you to do.

That week, every lunch period, I'd go to the football field. While everyone else was having lunch, I walked around the field. Over and over again until lunch was finished. Sometimes she'd come out and watch me walking. I felt proud. I thought... finally, I'm going to be skinny and perfect. That's what I would say to myself as I walked. *Skinny and perfect. Skinny and perfect. Skinny and perfect.*

Ms. Daniels asked some other girls to join me. She asked all the fat girls in my grade. There were about six of us: Cassie, Lilly, Anna, Matilda, Kelly and me. She called us "The Fitness Club." We started walking during lunch and after school. Once a week we'd

go to her office. We'd stand in a line with our shirts rolled up and wait for her to measure us. That's how she'd tell if we'd lost weight or not. Sometimes she got angry. We weren't losing weight fast enough. She thought some of us were cheating and eating badly at home.

So she gave us food diaries. Every day we had to write down everything we had to eat. She told us to be honest. We'd then have to show her at the end of the week. She'd tell us to skip meals. She said that we were eating too much and that we should be losing so much more weight. It felt like nothing was good enough. What had felt good and inspiring started to feel wrong and horrible. I'd get so scared to show her my diary. Even more scared for her to measure my stomach.

She started doing things to inspire us to do better. She asked Whitney to come to her office once. She pulled up her top and Ms. Daniels measured her perfectly flat stomach. I think she said something like, "This is what you should want, girls. This is perfect."

Another time she asked us to bring her our baby photos. I brought her a whole stack of photos ranging from when I was a baby to maybe eight years old. She picked a picture of me from when I was six. She said, "Don't you want to be this skinny again? Don't you want this for yourself?"

I only get how twisted that was now. She told me, at twelve, that I should want to look the way I did when I was six years old. Who the fuck tells a twelve-year-old that?

Ms. Daniels left at the end of that year. Middle school was over, and all the girls in the club were going to different high schools. Before we left, she called us into her office one more time. She told us to follow her into the locker rooms. Inside, she told us to take all our clothes off. I remember looking at the other girls. I wanted to scream at them not to do it. She couldn't force us.

But they were already unbuttoning their shirts and taking off shoes.

Ms. Daniels looked at me.

"Bernadette? Is there a problem? Do you want to say something?"

I should have said something. I should have walked out of that door, but I didn't. Instead I pulled my shirt over my head.

We stood in front of her in our underwear.

"Now turn around and face the mirror."

We did as she said.

"You are all fat. You are. Don't let anyone lie to you. I'm the only person that's been honest. I wanted to help you. Now you all have to help yourselves. You all have to get healthy. You could be beautiful if you only lost weight."

Her reflection in the mirror was looking at me.

I watched her turn and leave.

We stood there for a long time, all of us afraid to say anything. I think it was Cassie that grabbed her clothes first. I watched as, one by one, each girl put her clothes on and left. I stayed there, in my pink training bra and underwear. I couldn't stop hearing her voice.

You could be beautiful. You could be beautiful. You could be beautiful.

I stopped eating after that. I just decided to stop. I would leave home early so I wouldn't have to eat breakfast. I never walked around the football field again, but I wouldn't go to the cafeteria either. If my mom packed me lunch, I would just dump it in the trash or give it to someone. I lived on diet soda. They gave me enough energy to survive the day.

Sometimes I let myself have dinner, but it was always half the portion I would normally have.

I lost weight, at first. It made me feel good about myself. But it didn't last long. The weight just stopped coming off. I thought if I ate less... but no. I used to wake up every morning and the first thing on my mind was food. Every second of every day. Food. I was living a ghost of a life.

I remember the day I decided to stop starving myself. I was in our study, doing homework. I couldn't focus on what I was reading. The words were all blurred in front of me. I started looking through all the books on the shelves. We have a bookcase that covers one whole wall, from floor to ceiling. Nana used to keep her books there. She kept every book she'd ever bought or been given.

I brought down her favorite book, *Jane Eyre*. It was her favorite because her mom gave it to her. It had an exquisite leather cover with illustrations of vines and flowers. She read the book so many times; the binding was starting to fall apart. I was going to go get it rebound for her birthday. She died before I could.

I flipped to my favorite part of the book, the part where Mr. Rochester proposes, and between the pages was a note.

Hi there, my Bernie. I'm so sorry I'm not going to be there for you. I wish I could have been there for your first kiss and your fist date. I wish I could have been there for your prom and graduation. I would have clapped the loudest. I wish I could have been there for your wedding and everything else after that. I want you to know that wherever I am, I'm loving and missing you. Keep my books. They brought me light in some of my darkest times. Add to them, and think of me when you do.

Love you always,

Nana

I cried so much that I smudged some of the words. I tucked that note in the frame of my mirror so that I would see it every day. It's still there.

I almost forgot. I almost forgot all that.

I'm happy I saw Cassie. For so long I thought I was alone. I thought that I was the only one that went through something. Cassie and I forgot about running and sat on the beach and talked. She told me about how she had to go to a rehabilitation center for a year because she developed an eating disorder around sophomore year. She told me how she kept in touch with a couple of the girls from the club, and they also went through stuff like that. Kelly told her that she used to drink chlorine to make herself vomit. She kept doing it until it screwed up her kidneys.

We didn't blame Ms. Daniels. Not really. Of course, what she did to us was horrid but it's

not like she forced me not to eat. She didn't tell Cassie to stick her finger down her throat. She might have lit the match, but we let the fire burn.

17.30

I wrote a poem. Sometimes writing poems makes me feel better. It's like taking all the bad things and weaving them into something beautiful. I wrote one about what happened with Ms. Daniels. I felt a lot better after writing it. As I wrote it, I promised myself that the whole donut incident would never happen again.

We Were Twelve

I'm breaking myself
I start with my heart
Extract it out of my chest
It beats diligently in my hand
I fear I don't know what to do with it
It's so fragile
I place it at my feet
Then it's my mind
I dissect it
Trying to find the root
The reason why I feel hollow
All the time
That's where I find you
Sitting in a glass box
It's not very strong that box
You're slamming your hands against the glass
Screaming
And I'm twelve again
Standing in your office
You're telling me what I already feel
Did you just say fat?
Yes, yes you did
Now I'm drowning
And I miss my heart
I seem to hurt more without it
And I can still hear you screaming

And I can hear myself crying
But I have no voice
Where is it?
And I make a promise
I'm going to break that glass
I'm going smash it open
And I'm going to say to you what I should have said before
But for now, I've moved on to my body
I tear away skin from flesh
I am raw and beautiful
I see the invisible string attached to my rib cage
I know where it leads
It connects me to the other girls
The other girls that you broke down
I'm finding it hard to fight it
The wave that's crashing over me
It's an invisible weight that holds me down
So that I can't fight
And now I'm wondering if they feel it too
Maybe it's just me
Maybe I'm the only one that equates happiness to my weight
Or maybe not
I degrade myself to bone
Wipe my blood away
Now I am perfect
Yes, I'm pretty now
Perfect, pretty bone
We were just twelve.

22.00

I am watching *90210* out of sheer boredom. I am also munching on sunflower seeds as a snack. Warren came and picked me up at six. Actually, it was five fifty-five. The boy is very serious about punctuality.

I expected him to pick me up in his normal jock wear but he had on dark jeans, a black

tee and a grey cardigan. The outfit made his brown eyes stand out. I continued to wonder what "class" he had gone to. The way he was dressed, I started to assume that "class" was actually code for "hot date."

"Why aren't you ready?"

He looked annoyed as I met him in my driveway. I was wearing tracksuit pants and a baggy shirt. The same thing I always wear to workouts.

"I am ready."

"No, you're not. You're going to need a towel."

"A towel for what?"

"We're going swimming."

My blood ran cold.

"No. You never said anything about swimming, no."

"What? Can't you swim?" he said with a hint of a smile.

"I can... but... I don't want to. Can't we just go to the beach for our normal workout?"

"It's going to get dark. Come on, Rivers. Don't be such a baby. Swimming is an amazing workout."

It wasn't the idea of swimming that had me freaking out. It was the idea of swimming with Warren Grey. The thought of having to wear a bathing suit in front of him was excruciating.

He leaned back against his truck and pulled out his cell phone. I took that as him saying he was done talking about it. Swimming it would be.

I quickly climbed up to my room and packed a bag. I didn't even bother putting in my bathing suit. I hadn't worn the thing in about two years. The probability that it would fit was about the same as Hugh Jackman calling and confessing his undying love to me. I just stuffed a pair of shorts, a shirt and a towel in the bag.

Only when we were on the road did I realize that Warren was taking me to his house. I thought we were going to a gym or something. The thought of swimming with Warren at his house made me feel all the more uncomfortable.

"Are your parents okay with me swimming in your pool?"

He looked surprised by the question.

"They don't really care about me having people over. They're not even home right now."

Dear God. Me and Warren, alone and wet. I think I started to blush.

Warren's modern design house looked like it had been cut out of a *House and Home* magazine. From the front yard you could see a three-car garage, three fountains (not just one, but three) and three large, rectangular sections of the house. Two sections were painted gray and one red. Warren opened the door for me. It was huge and looked mega heavy. The inside of his house was breathtaking. The foyer was large and spacious with marble floors. They had a long, spiraling staircase that lead to, what I presumed were the

bedrooms.

Warren took my bag off my shoulder and led me through a series of dark hallways. It was so dark that I almost tripped over something. Warren took my hand in his and continued to lead the way. My heart started to beat faster. I was grateful for the darkness. I wouldn't want him to know how much his holding my hand affected me.

"Almost there."

He opened a door and light washed into the dark hallway we were just in. We entered another section of the house. There were plush couches, beanbag chairs and a large television to my right. To my left was a stairway and a small kitchen area with a fully-stocked bar, refrigerator and stove.

"Is this the family room?" I asked him, indicating toward the television.

"Nope. This is my part of the house."

He handed me my bag as he stepped into the kitchen. It seemed odd. It doesn't matter how rich you are, it's really weird to give your son "part of the house." I wanted to ask him if he ever sees his parents. It looked to me like he cooks for himself, and hangs out alone in that wing of the house. I wanted to know if he gets lonely sometimes but, then again, Warren Grey is not the kind of guy that gets lonely.

"Would you like something to drink?"

I nodded my head and he brought me a bottle of water.

"If you go up the stairs and turn to your right you'll find the bathroom. You can change in there."

I followed his directions but I opened the wrong door. Instead of the bathroom, I found his bedroom. It's not what I expected. I thought he'd have a typical boy's room with half-naked women on his walls and the smell of sweaty gym socks in the air. Warren's room is way neater than mine. He has plush cream carpeting and dark red curtains. His room is huge so he has a king-sized bed with red and gray pillows and a black duvet. There was a stand with a bunch of polished trophies on it, and bookshelves with textbooks and CDs and things like that.

I figured his mother decorated.

I was about to leave when I noticed the most obvious thing about his room. The wall opposite his bed was covered in black and white photos. I tentatively stepped into his room to take a closer look. He had photos of his friends, photos of random things like a flower on the pavement and a little girl on a swing. They were lovely. Some were blurred and out of focus and others were so detailed, it was like I was there inside the photo.

It occurred to me that he wasn't in any of them. That, I guess, must mean that he took them. Imagining him with a camera snapping away made me smile for a moment. Then I saw it. My sister. He had taken a photo of my sister. She was right there, right in the middle. She was wearing a pretty red dress with a daisy in her hair. The wind was whipping her hair in her face and she was laughing at the camera.

It made me feel bitter. Of course, of course he likes her.

"Rivers, I haven't got all day. Get your ass down here."

I jumped and quickly got out of his room. I didn't want him to think I was some kind of creepy stalker.

I quickly changed and ran down the stairs. He was waiting impatiently by the sliding glass door leading to his backyard. I had to stop and catch my breath.

"Come on, it's getting late now."

I followed him through the doors. It had gotten a bit dark and I had to grab a bit of Warren's shirt as we walked around the house to his pool. He fiddled with a power box on the side of the house. The bottom of the pool illuminated.

It was beautiful. The water was bright blue, proper aquamarine. The pool was huge, maybe the size of our backyard. Warren indicated for me to get in. I was hesitant at first, dreading the cold water. I dipped my toes in and realized that it was pleasantly warm. I slid into the water as gracefully as I could manage, and felt the water rippling around me. It felt nice. I hadn't swum in a really long time.

I looked over at Warren. He smiled as he pulled off his shirt. I'm starting to think that he's fully aware of the hypnotic power of his ab muscles.

I slid deeper into the water as he begun to unbutton his jeans. It felt awkward to watch him. I was looking away when he dived into the water. I didn't turn around until I heard the splash. I could see him swimming toward me, and I shivered at the thought that he could see me too. I tried pulling my shorts lower over my thighs but it was useless.

He stopped in front of me, smiling brightly.

"You really love the water don't you?" I asked.

"I feel like myself when I'm swimming. So calm. Nothing but the water around me."

"Is that what you want to do? Compete?"

He looked away from me. I could tell that he was deliberating what to say.

"No, I never liked competing."

Hearing Warren Grey admit to not liking swimming competitions was like hearing Michael Jordan saying he isn't all that into basketball, or Tiger Woods saying golf isn't really his thing. Mind-blowing.

"But you were so good at it."

"Being good at something isn't really incentive to do it forever. I love swimming. I really do. I just didn't like competing. I didn't like that swimming became something I *had* to do, you know?"

"I guess I get that. You didn't care about winning. You just wanted to swim."

He looked at me with warmth.

"Yeah, exactly. No one really gets it when I say that."

Butterflies fluttered in my stomach. The way he was looking at me... like I could really see him... it made me feel... wow. Then he ruined it.

"Ten laps, freestyle, back and forth."

"Ten laps? Really? This pool is huge."

"Make it twenty. We're only warming up, Rivers."

The smile I thought was cute became annoying almost instantly.

I started swimming. I think I was on lap three when I couldn't take anymore. I stopped mid-stroke and panicked when I couldn't feel the ground below me. But then Warren was behind me, holding me up.

"Stop struggling so hard, Rivers. Just calm down. Relax."

His strong arm anchored me to his chest. I forced myself to calm down and stop kicking. I leaned back against him and lay my head on his shoulder.

"Good. Just relax. I want you to trust me, okay? I'm not going to let go of you."

He started to move away from me and I panicked again.

"Relax. You trust me, right?"

I nodded my head and he continued to slowly move away from me, but he kept his arm behind my back.

"Lean back until you are lying flat on your back."

I did as he said. I was lying on my back, the sounds of the world were silenced by the water. I looked up and saw the first stars start to appear. It was the most relaxed I'd felt in a long time. I started wondering if Nana could see me. She used to love stargazing. Sometimes I'd find her lying on a picnic blanket outside. She used to lie so still, you'd think she was sleeping.

"Use your arms to pedal yourself back and forth. Then when you're ready, start kicking."

His voice was muffled but I heard him. I did what he said. It was nice, staring up at the stars as I swam.

It didn't take me too long to finish the laps. Warren was sitting on the steps leading into the pool.

"Not too bad, huh? Now give me twenty more."

I swam until it felt like my arms and legs were going to fall off. When I got out of the pool, Warren was waiting with my towel. He wrapped it around my shoulders.

"You did really well today. You should be proud of yourself."

He patted my back and lead me back inside.

"You can go dry up in the bathroom and I'll drive you home."

I climbed the stairs quickly. I hated that he had seen my pale, lardy thighs and all those other not-so-attractive bits of me.

Warren's bathroom was almost as big as my bedroom. He had a huge shower with glass doors, a white standalone bathtub, and full-length mirrors along one wall. Everything was white or chrome and new-looking. I avoided looking at the mirrors as I pulled off my wet

clothes. Every part of me was tempted to get into that shower, but I didn't think Warren would be okay with that.

I put my tracksuit pants and T-shirt on, and I was about to leave when I saw a hairdryer poking out of one of his cabinets. My hair was falling in wet curls down my back, making my T-shirt damp. I put my bag down and pulled out the dryer. It didn't take me too long to dry my hair but, because I didn't have a brush on me, it was even thicker and curlier than before. I attempted to braid into a single plait but failed so I let it go. I was hoping Warren wouldn't notice.

I went back down the stairs and found him lying back on the couch with his eyes closed. He had changed into a hoodie and track suit pants. The boy could make a rubbish bag look designer.

"Okay, I'm done. You can take me home now."

He opened his eyes and just stared at me for a while.

I ran my hand through my hair self-consciously.

"I'm fully aware that my hair looks spastic right now, no need to comment."

"No... no it's not that. Your hair... it's really stunning."

Warmth radiated through me.

"Uhm... thank you."

He got up off the couch and grabbed his car keys.

"Let me get you home. You're going to need some sleep for tomorrow."

23.30

I fully intended on going to bed. Warren texted to let me know that he'd be at my door at six in the morning, sharp. I took a shower and was drying my hair when I glanced at my computer. A little icon had popped up letting me know I had an IM. My heart was beating fast when I opened the chat. I just knew it was Fumbling Fred.

My breath caught when I saw his picture pop up on my desktop. It was a picture of him in his school uniform with two other guys. He was laughing in the picture, which made him look younger and really cute.

Fred007: Hi, anyone home?

BurnRivers: Hi.

Fred007: I didn't think you'd reply.

BurnRivers: Why? I'm the one that contacted you.

Fred007: Yeah, I know. I'm still finding it hard to believe that you did :)

BurnRivers: Is it weird that I did? I mean, if this is awkward for you. It's okay. You don't owe me anything.

Fred007: Of course it isn't. I've wanted to contact you for so long.

BurnRivers: Why didn't you?

BurnRivers: You don't have to tell me I guess.

Fred007: I don't know. I didn't think you'd be interested in talking to me.

BurnRivers: Why not? :)

Fred007: Because...I just assumed that you wouldn't. I'm just... I'm not the greatest when it comes to girls.

Fred007: I have two sisters, so you'd think I'd be better at it :)

Fred007: I'm happy you e-mailed me.

BurnRivers: It's funny. I've been going over what Id's say to you if I had the chance but now... I don't really know.

Fred007: I guess we could start with the basics. How are you? What are you doing with your life, how's your summer so far... etc.

BurnRivers: I'm okay. Going to NYU in the fall. Summer is going surprisingly well. I've been trying to get fit, so that's taking up a lot of my time.

Fred007: You're going to NYU? I'm going to Columbia :) What are you studying? I'm going pre-med. The "getting fit" thing kind of failed for me. I've been telling myself to go to the gym for years now.

BurnRivers: You're going to be in New York? That's... that's some coincidence. I'm studying journalism. I've never been so excited for summer to end.

Fred007: I'm so sorry but I have to go now. I'm volunteering at a hospital this summer. I don't do much but hang out with the patients, but I have to be there on time. Need to get in a good night's sleep. I really hope we can talk again. Seriously. I'm happy you e-mailed. :)

Now I have a thousand butterflies having a dance party in my stomach. I'm just going to read the chat once more and go to bed.

Day 87

11.00

I only fall asleep at about one in the morning. I didn't mean to. I found myself reading my chat with Fred over and over again. Every time I closed my eyes, all I could see was his face leaning down over me. Kissing me. Touching me. It was a bit difficult to relax and fall asleep. I should have, though. Warren doesn't mess around when it comes to punctuality. I woke up to his insistent knocking.

Today was weigh day. When I opened the kitchen door, he was standing there holding a scale.

"Morning, sunshine."

He had way too much energy for six in the morning. I let him in and he set the scale down on my kitchen floor.

"How was the running club?"

I blanked for a moment. I forgot all about the club. I racked my brain for something to tell him and came up short.

"Uhm... well..."

"You didn't go, did you?"

He looked so disappointed. I hated the way he was looking at me. As if I'd betrayed his trust or something.

"I did go. I just... I didn't work out as hard as I would have if I was with you." I didn't work out at all, actually, but that was as close to the truth as I wanted to get just then.

"Okay... I understand that. I was hoping that you'd take working out as seriously without me as you do with me, but discipline takes time."

"I'm sorry."

"Don't apologize to me. This is your life." He gestured to the scale. "It's not me that has to get on there."

I pulled my sneakers off and stepped on the scale tentatively. Like before, I focused on his eyes instead of the numbers. The beeping sound went off, he looked down and smiled.

"Not bad, Rivers. Four pounds is a good start."

I leaped at him. I almost knocked him over as I crashed into him.

"All right, all right."

He laughed and I felt his chest reverberate under my cheek.

"I'm happy you're happy. Just think of how much more weight you can lose with a little bit more effort."

When we went to go work out, I gave it my all. For the first time, the burning in my chest felt good. At the end of the workout, I sat down on the warm sand and just looked up at the sky. There weren't any clouds, and the sun was bearing down hard. Warren sat down

next to me and offered me his bottle. We sat in a comfortable silence. His steady breathing matched the lull of the ocean in front of us.

"Why are you doing this? I mean... it's not like I'm paying you all that much."

He leaned back so that he was balancing on his elbows. I gave him back his bottle and he took a swing.

"Truth is, this is kind of fun. I never really got the whole personal fitness thing. My parents are completely obsessed with it, and I just didn't get it. But now... it's like we're in this together. We're a team, you know? I want to see the look on your face when you look down at the scale and see the number you want. I want to be with you when you buy the clothes you've always wanted to wear. I want this for you."

"I want this for me, too. I'm waiting for the day that I don't feel like an alien in my own skin. Sometimes, I look in the mirror and it's like I don't even know the person staring back at me. I don't know how I let myself get to this point."

"The past... it doesn't matter. What's happening right now is what matters. You're taking your life into your hands. You're treating yourself better. That's more than I can say about a whole lot of people."

I smiled. I didn't think he'd understand, but he did. He took me home and promised to see me tomorrow morning. I fought the slight feeling of loss that overtook me when I watched him leave. I seem to be failing to not crush on this guy.

20.30

I just finished watching *Vampire Diaries* with Nat over the phone. I'm not the biggest fan of the show. I get more entertainment from Nat's responses than anything else. She gets really caught up. At some point I had to pause the show because she went on a ten minute rant. It went something like; "I mean... seriously. You want me to believe that she has two, not one, *two* steamy-hot, immortal dudes falling over themselves for her? I mean, get real. What's so damn special about her? All she does is get herself into stupid situations where she's like 'Oh, come save me, oh!' Plus, her hair has absolutely no volume."

True, the whole thing is pretty farfetched but I get why people are into it. I can only imagine what it would be like to be with someone who only wants you, forever. No insecurity, no trust issues. How would it be to be completely secure in the knowledge that a man loves you more than anything or anyone?

Nana had a book of poetry that she absolutely treasured. The pages were bent and creased from all the times she read it. I looked all over our study, but I couldn't find her copy anywhere, so I went to the bookstore to look for it. I was in Barnes and Noble, failing to find it, when I came across some poetry by this guy called Frank O'Hara. I absolutely love him. I feel like sometimes, when I write poetry, I'm like a little kid playing dress up. I have a long way to go. I'm only scratching the surface, only opening my heart half way. Frank O'Hara's poetry is seamless and beautiful. I was reading a poem called *Having a Coke with You*. There's one line that just grips me. It goes;

and the portrait show seems to have no faces in it at all, just paint

you suddenly wonder why in the world anyone ever did them

I look

at you and I would rather look at you than all the portraits in the world

I wish I had a man that would say that to me. Okay, maybe not that line exactly, but something like it. I wish I was in love. I wish my life was an over-dramatized television show, or a cliché teen movie. I want the guy that will stand outside my house with a boom box. I want the man who will spin me around until I was dizzy and all I could see were the stars above me.

23.00

Olivia is grating my cheese, majorly. She walks around the house with the phone practically glued to her ear talking to LTC. He calls in thirty-minute intervals. She always starts blushing and talking in a whiney voice. I feel bitter and sick. Bitter because I want to feel like she feels right now, and sick because my sister is dating a jerk. Every time I think of them together, my stomach twists. She deserves better.

I tried talking to her about it yesterday but she just shut me down. Maybe I'm just overreacting. My sister isn't me. He might treat her so much better than he treated me.

Day 86

10.00

Fred007: Morning :)

BurnRivers: Morning to you, too :)

Fred007: What do you have planned for this morning?

Fred007: I'm about to head off to my shift at the hospital.

BurnRivers: I've just come back from my workout. I don't have much to do during the day.

Fred007: Maybe you should get a summer job. The money will definitely help when we head off to college. What did you do?

Fred007: The working out, I mean.

BurnRivers: That's a good idea. I think I might just do that. Oh, I do loads of stuff. Mostly cardio exercises. My trainer is no nonsense.

Fred007: Why are you training anyway?

BurnRivers: Just want to be healthy, you know? I want to be better. I'm tired of making excuses.

Fred007: Good for you. I mean it.

I'm waiting to ask him. I'm waiting for him to explain to me what happened in New York. I'm not sure how to start the sentence. Should I just be like, "Hey, well... why did you sleep with me then ditch me?" Nothing he'll say will change anything. So why am I talking to him?

18.30

Today was absolutely mortifying. I mean, seriously up there on my list of most embarrassing experiences ever. I decided to take Fred's advice and look for a summer job. I know people that are working this summer to earn a little spending money for stuff like textbooks and whatever else. So after ending my chat with Fred, I showered and looked for an outfit that said, "look at me. I'm trustworthy." I settled on loose black pants and a button-up white shirt.

My mom dropped me off at the mall on her way out of town. I sat next to her in the front seat of the car. My mom constantly smells of powder and Channel No 5. She likes styling her blonde hair in a tight bun at the base of her neck. Today, she was wearing a grey power suit with a low-cut red top and black heels. I remember when Olivia and I used to play dress up. We would try on her dresses, even though they hung off us at the time, and slip on her heels. Sometimes she'd let us get into her makeup. I remember red lipstick, pink powder and Channel No 5.

I looked at my mother in the driving seat. We're not close, but I know she loves me. I'm her daughter. Maybe... maybe I should have told her about Ms. Daniels. It's too late now. There's no point in scratching open old wounds. I just... I wish I had said something back then.

Anyway. She dropped me off at the mall and I began the impossible task of finding a job. I wanted to work in a clothing store. I figured that was my best option. I had my résumé printed and ready to hand out.

The first store to reject me did so gently. The store manager gave me some crap about not accepting people under the age of eighteen. I'm eighteen in a month. She waved me off with a "sorry" and "try again next year." I knew it had nothing to do with my age the moment she set eyes on me. She gave me the same look that the secretary at the HFC and the woman at dELiA*s gave me. *You don't belong here.* That's what she was really saying.

I tried a couple more clothes stores after that. I tried a store that sold surfer chic clothes. They told me I "don't fit the look." I tried a store that sold Goth gear. They had chains with vials of fake blood hanging from the counter. The girl behind the cash register had dark purple lipstick and black-rimmed eyes. She gave me the once over and told me to try the McDonalds around the corner.

I gave up after that. I stomped out of the mall, eyes wet and face on fire. It dawned on me that it would take forever for people to start looking at me the way I wanted them to. Four pounds is a big deal for me. It really is. But the managers at those stores don't know that. They don't know me at all. They look at me and they see labels stuck all over me. To them, I am ugly. I am lazy, and undesirable. That's all they could see.

I'm tired of caring. I've spent my whole life caring. I'm not going to lie. It's not like there's a switch in my head that I can flip so that I suddenly won't be hurt by stupid, ignorant people. It sucks that people put so much value in the way someone looks. It's like my whole identity is tied to the size of jeans I wear. Well, fuck that. No really. I'm saying fuck it to wanting to be perfect. I don't want to wither away to nothing. I don't want to look like the girls on TV, or in the magazines. I want to look like me. Just better.

I decided to walk home. I was nearing my house when I passed a small studio. I paused because the display outside it caught my eye. The place was called *Picture Perfect*. They had a huge poster out front. I stopped because I wasn't expecting to see what I saw. The poster was of a woman. A very beautiful woman. The photo was in black and white. Her skin was pale and perfect. She had long, dark hair that fell over her shoulder and down to her waist. She had tattoos along her leg. They twisted around her ankle and calf, all the way to her hip. The tattoo was the only color in the photo which made it look unusually beautiful. What was the most shocking, what made me smile, was the fact that she was curvy.

Oh, and she was naked.

She was covering all her vital parts but she was still naked. She was probably around the same size as me, maybe a little smaller, and she was naked. On a store display window, for everyone to see. There was something so beautiful about it. It made me want to do a little dance right there on the pavement. I guess that's what they wanted when they shot the picture.

I stood there until someone opened the door. A woman carrying a load of camera equipment stepped out. She turned toward me and sucked in a breath. She was the woman in the photo.

"Could you lend me a hand, dear? My car's right there."

I hurriedly took half her load and helped her pack her car.

"Thank you, dear."

She smiled at me and was opening her door. I couldn't just let her drive away.

"Uhm... this is weird but, thank you. Thank you for shooting that photo. You are so beautiful and I want to be just like you. No... wait... I don't." I paused and smiled genuinely. "I want to be like me. I want to get to a point where I can show everyone who I am, like you did. I thought I was alone and then I saw this photo and you don't know me but I feel like I know you now. So, thank you."

The woman stood there patiently as I gave my short rant. Her eyes lit up and her cheeks flushed pink. She reached out and pulled me into her arms. I noticed that she smelled like jasmine and honey.

"I'm so happy I could do that for you. That's the whole point of art, isn't it? It's throwing our hearts in people's faces and hoping they'll understand them."

I nodded, understanding entirely.

"I'm Renata Mayham." She shook my hand gingerly. "I own the studio."

"What is it exactly?"

"I teach photography, so this is where I do it."

I noticed that she was maybe my mom's age. Her dark hair was graying slightly. She wore a long, yellow gypsy skirt with a pale blue blazer and thick, black combat boots.

"I didn't even know you were here. I walk by often and I never noticed it."

"Yeah, I just opened a couple of weeks ago. I think you would have noticed the half-naked woman." She winked and I laughed.

"This is kind of random, but would you be looking for any employees? I mean, like an assistant or something?"

"Well, I wasn't planning on hiring anyone." My heart fell as I braced myself for rejection. "But I could use a helping hand. Do you have a résumé with you?"

I quickly dug in my bag for it and handed it to her.

"It's not very impressive. I've never done anything like this before, but I know how to work a camera, and I'm punctual, and I won't let you down."

"I'm sure you won't. Relax; I won't need you for anything too drastic just yet. As I said, I just opened."

"Thank you, again."

She smiled and looked down at my résumé. "You're very welcome, Bernadette."

"Call me Burn."

Renata called about an hour after I got home. I'm going to start work on Monday. I'm ridiculously thrilled and optimistic. I called Nat and we picked out my outfit over the

phone. Renata is so cosmopolitan-looking. If I show up in my Star Wars T-shirt and sweats she might regret hiring me. I really want this to work out.

Day 85

We used to go to church on Sundays. My mom was really religious. Even when Nana was diagnosed with breast cancer, she still went. The first time Nana went to surgery, my mom knelt in the hospital chapel for hours. When Nana had to have a mastectomy she asked our church to pray for her. The day she died it was like my mother's faith died with her.

I'm not sure I believe in God.

I think I do. I mean the alternative is too hard to bear. All this pain in the world, it has to be for something. I like to think that my life is already written in some cosmic journal. Every day I'm alive, the page turns, and I'm coming closer and closer to exactly where I'm supposed to be. I believe in God because I don't want to think my nana is just gone.

My nana was an actress. Not the kind you see on television, but theater. She was breathtaking. She could get a whole audience to hold their breath in wait of what she would say next. She was stunning. I remember when she played Lady Macbeth. She let Olivia and I back stage. I watched her get her makeup done. They put bright pink blush on her cheeks and gold glitter in her hair. She sparkled in my eyes. She let me sit on her lap as they curled and pinned her hair. I told her I wanted to be just like her when I grew up, and she told me she wanted me to be just me.

I was with her when she died. I found her sitting in the yard on a lawn chair. She was buried in a bunch of blankets even though it was a warm night. I pulled a lawn chair to her and lay down with her. Her face was so pale in comparison to the red scarf wrapped around her head.

"What are you doing out here, Nana?" I asked her.

"Watching the stars."

I looked up and saw that the sky was perfectly clear. The stars looked beautiful against the opaque sky. I looked at the stars and listened to Nana's shallow breaths.

"Look, Nana, shooting stars."

I stared in wonder as specks of white moved across the black backdrop.

"Those aren't stars, baby. They're birds."

I looked closely and she was right. A flock of white birds were moving slowly above us. There was something special about that moment.

"I hope God makes me a bird, Bernie. I want to fly. I want to glide through the sky and feel the clouds on my face."

"If God makes you a bird, will you come visit me sometimes, Nana? Please."

"If God makes me a bird, I won't know who you are." She laughed softly and then started to cough roughly. I waited for it to pass.

"Then I'll ask God to make me a bird, too. Then I'll fly with you."

"I'd really like that, Bernie."

She reached out and held my hand. Her skin felt leathery against mine.

"Don't leave me please, Bernie. Stay with me for a while."

"I won't ever leave, Nana."

I held her hand for hours. I didn't let go even when I felt it go cold in mine. I didn't let go even when my mom came out the house and started screaming. I didn't let go when the ambulance man tried to pry me away from her. I never wanted to let go.

Day 84

20.15

I woke up with red eyes and a headache. My face was flushed and I felt like shit. The last thing I wanted to do was work out with Warren and then go to work. It took a great deal of energy to meet Warren outside.

He was jogging in place when I came out the door.

"Morning, Rivers. We're going to kick it up today. Hope you're ready."

He took off running before I could reply. I stretched a little and started to jog slowly behind him. My iPod was in place, and I shuffled through the songs Warren gave me in search of something to help me stop thinking. None of the songs in his playlist were what I was looking for. I went back to my playlists and chose *We are Young* by Fun. It's the kind of song you play when you want to jump around your room mindlessly. Something about the beat makes me want to tilt my head back, sing along and cry at the same time.

I concentrated on the lyrics, and the burning in my chest, and it numbed the pain in my heart a bit.

When I caught up with Warren, he was already setting up for our workout. He had two surf boards lying next to each other on the sand.

"I can't surf to save my life. I can barely swim."

"I know, but I'm here to teach you."

I instantly felt nervous about getting into the water. Even if I was capable of standing on the board for longer than two seconds, I doubt I could swim against the current. I trusted Warren, but death by drowning, and possible shark attack, weren't what I signed up for.

"Come on. Tell me you're not even a little bit excited."

Honestly, I've always wanted to learn how to surf. I never tried to because I just figured it wouldn't be possible.

"I'm going to teach you how to stand up first. We won't actually get into the water until I feel comfortable that you can handle yourself out there."

He showed me how to paddle and stand up on the board. It looked very simple when he did it but when I tried, I could barely get up. I started feeling frustrated again. I hated that I couldn't do something as simple as stand up.

"It's okay, Rivers. It's going to get easier. It's amazing what you'll be able to do as the weeks fly by, and the pounds start falling off."

I was grateful when we abandoned the boards and did our normal workout. At the end, I sat down by the shore and let the water caress my feet. Warren was on his back looking up.

"How's the diet going?"

"It's not as bad as I thought it would be. I'm not hungry or anything but there is that voice in my head that tells me I *need* to eat that chocolate bar, and I *need* to open that bag of

chips."

"I think, for a long time now, you've been dealing with your feelings by eating. The hardest part isn't the working out or the diet. The hardest part is telling yourself you're worth it. You have to believe that you deserve to be happy."

"Do I?"

"You do. At the end of the day, it doesn't matter what I think, or what anyone else thinks. It's your body, and it's your life. You're the one that has to like what you see in the mirror."

"You're quite insightful for a mindless jock. You've been holding out on me."

He pushed me gently and smiled.

It took me about an hour to quickly shower, change and meet Renata at *Picture Perfect*. I had been texting Fred, and he sent me a message wishing me luck.

Have fun today. She'll absolutely love you. You know... if you don't do anything silly, like burn her studio down.

I smiled as I read it again before going inside. The studio was just a huge room with hardwood floors and desks and chairs randomly placed. There were huge, framed photographs on the wall like you'd expect in a gallery. There were two doors that led out the studio. One was to Renata's office and the other was a darkroom. The place smelled faintly of ink or something like it.

Renata was sifting through a pile of pages at a long table at the front of the room. She was wearing a long, red gypsy skirt with rainbow wedges and big gold earrings. Her long hair was braided into a single plait which she'd twisted on top of her head.

"Burn, great. I really need you over here. I've got ten customers coming in about ten minutes. I need you to organize and staple these pages so I can give each of them a handbook."

I dumped my bag near the table and started sorting through the pages. While I worked, Renata took out a black box with Polaroid cameras. She placed two on each desk.

"I'm actually not a fan of these cameras. They don't produce the most unique kinds of photos, but they're good for beginners. I don't want them to get too caught up by the technical side of things."

She took a camera out of the box and snapped a photo of me working. I watch the picture come out of the camera and she shook it for a bit.

"Here you go, you can document your first day."

She gave me the photo and I tucked it in my bag without looking at it.

"This group is only starting today, so we're going to take it slow. I'm not going to need you to do anything particularly interesting. Could you maybe organize my office? I can't find a thing in there."

Renata's office was a mess. It looked like a small tornado swept through it. It was worse than my room, and that's really saying something. It took me all day just to organize the

pages she had lying on the floor. I could hear her talking to the group outside, but I wasn't really paying attention. I put on my headphones and listened to music as I started to file for the first time in my life.

I was listening to *Transatlanticism* by Death Cab for Cutie. Ben Gibbard has the sweetest, most heart-wrenching voice ever. I started singing along softly.

Renata opened the office door and I felt instantly embarrassed. I was worried that I was singing too loudly and everyone heard me.

"I absolutely love that song." She smiled. "I'm wrapping up for the day. See you tomorrow?"

So, my first day was actually pretty okay which is a relief.

04.00

I just had a very interesting dream. I'm trying to wrap my mind around it.

It started off very innocently. I was in New York with Fred. We were on one of those merry-go-rounds with the horses. He was on one in front of me and I kept losing sight of him. I would reach out my hand, trying to touch him, but before my fingers could brush his shirt, he would blur and disappear. Then he'd appear again but even further away.

The merry-go-round stopped, and I tried to get off, but I fell. I kept falling and falling until I landed on a hotel bed. The sheets were super white and fell over me so that I was sinking into the mattress. I felt like I couldn't breathe, but then a hand wrapped around my wrist and pulled me out. I sucked in a breath as Fred pulled me to him. He opened his mouth like he was going to say something but instead Ben Gibbard's voice came out. He was singing *Transatlanticism*, and staring into my eyes like he was trying to make me understand something. He leaned in and kissed me. I closed my eyes and the song ended. I pulled back but Fred was gone and in his place was Warren. He smiled and wrapped his arm around my waist. Suddenly the bed was gone and we were at the beach. It was dark and the stars were shining too bright above us.

"Dance with me."

"But there's no music."

As I said that, *Make Love to Me Forever* by Snow Patrol started playing so softly I thought it was in my head. We were dancing in circles, and I rested my cheek on his chest. We stopped and he pulled me down onto the sand on top of him. His lips grazed my ear as he whispered, "Make love to me forever".

And then I woke up, slightly out of breath.

Day 83

15.00

I'm writing this during my break. I've been doing nothing but sorting out Renata's office for the past three hours. She gave me a more concrete schedule for the week. I'm going to work here from eleven to six from Monday to Wednesday and Friday too. Thursdays I'll come in early, which is perfect because those are the days Warren has a class anyway.

Needless to say, today's workout was super awkward. I could hardly look into his eyes without picturing him on the ground with me on top of him. I desperately don't want to crush on him. It seems like the perfect way to get my heart smashed in pieces. Fat, loser girl falls for steamy-hot jock guy. It's like the beginning of a country song or something.

Warren is smart, intuitive and passionate. He's sweet and serious, and just simply awesome. A guy like that can have anyone he wants.

I'm just going to shake the thought of him and me together out of my head. Instead, I'm going to focus on the warm breeze wafting through my hair and the awesome song that I'm blasting in my ears. That reminds me of the conversation I had with Fred this morning.

Fred007: What kind of music are you into?

BurnRivers: I love alternative rock bands. I don't have a favorite band or singer or anything, though.

Fred007: You ever heard of Death Cab for Cutie? I love their style.

BurnRivers: Heard of them? That's like asking if I know who Paramore is. I am convinced I'm going to marry Ben Gibbard one day. The man is like a poetic genius.

Fred007: Pretty sure he's already married.

BurnRivers: All's fair in love and music.

Fred007: Funny :) I've been listening to some Good Charlotte these days. I think you'd like them.

BurnRivers: Okay, I'll check them out if you check out Regina Spektor.

Fred007: I've heard one of her songs. I don't think she's quite my style.

BurnRivers: You have to give it a chance. I've never heard a voice like hers.

Fred007: I know someone who sings a bit like her. Our lead singer has awesome range.

BurnRivers: You're in a band? That's so cool. What are you called?

Fred007: Yeah, me and my three best friends. We're called Ground Zero. I play the lead guitar. Jared is on drums, Nathan is on the keyboard and Lil is our vocalist and on bass. We're indie rock all the way.

BurnRivers: I've always wanted to learn how to play the guitar. How did you guys start playing?

Fred007: We were all in chess club together. One day we were just like, hey why not? I could teach you some time, if you want. :)

BurnRivers: Yeah, I would really like that.

He sent me a link that led to his band's website. The first thing that popped up was a picture of the band. My eyes focused on Fred first. He looked really quirky and cute. He had on black skinny jeans with red suspenders hanging from his hips. He wore a white button-up shirt with a red bowtie. His hair was definitely longer and slicked back. He was leaning against a graffiti wall, his elbow on his guitar case.

I realized his eyes are green. I hadn't noticed that before.

I examined the other members of the band. The lead singer was annoyingly pretty. She had short, spikey red hair. In the photo she had crimson lips and heavy eye makeup. Her skin was flawless, not a single pimple, and I hated her for it. She was super skinny and wore tiny red shorts, a ripped up T-shirt with an 80's-looking band logo and fishnet stockings. She wasn't smiling.

The other two guys in the band stood to the right of Lil. I assumed Jared was the one with drumsticks in his pocket. He had a shaved head, tattoos from his forearm to his wrist, and he wore all black. Nathan looked older and more sophisticated in a red blazer, black pants and tweed hat. His blond hair reached his shoulders, though.

They all looked really cool, and nothing like the kind of people you'd expect to find in a chess club.

Some of their songs were available on their website. I fell asleep listening to them. I have to admit, Lil's voice is amazing. It's sweet as honey one second, and then cuts like razors the next. I wondered who wrote the lyrics because they are amazing. I could totally see myself becoming a major fan.

Day 82

20.30

I've just been round to Nat's house. I'm borrowing her guitar for my Skype call with Fred. He was serious about teaching me how to play. I'm super nervous. It's not like a date or anything, but it's the closest I've come to one.

When I got to Nat's house, her bedroom was in disarray. Shopping bags littered the floor, and her clothes covered every inch of her bed. I found her knee-deep in jeans in her closet.

"None of these fit right." She muttered to herself. "I look like a ten-year-old boy in all of them."

"What's all the fuss about? You look awesome in jeans, you should know that."

"I've got a semi-potential date this weekend."

I was in shock. It's not that I didn't think Nat could find a guy. She's gorgeous. It's just that I've always known her to be too shy to approach a guy.

"With who? Where'd you meet him?"

I cleared a space on her floor and sat down next to her while she folded new tops and dresses.

"His name is Ryan. He works at the little café near the mall. You know... the one with the cool art." I nodded. "Well, I was in there the other day and he just started talking to me. He asked me if I wanted to go to a bar with him."

I looked at my friend's sweet, happy face and my heart twisted. On one hand I was so glad for her. She deserves a cute guy flirting with her. On the other hand, I didn't like where this was going. For so long it had just been the two of us. I didn't want us to change and drift apart. It's so easy to let a friendship fade. I should know... that's what happened with me and Olivia.

"Are you sure this guy isn't a crazy axe murderer? Or a sex offender? "

"He's perfectly harmless. He's training to be a pastry chef, for goodness sake. What's he going to do, feed me to death? It's just one date. And it's probably not even a date date. He just wants me to see some band he likes."

"I think it's a date date. Ooh, you have a date!"

I started singing about kissing and trees and she wacked me across the face with a sequined top. I fell back laughing, and rested my head against the discarded pile of jeans.

I helped Nat decide on the outfit she wants to wear. It was weird watching her obsess about it. Normally, Nat is very chilled about the way she looks. She's the kind of person that can go a week wearing alternating versions of the same outfit. She likes baggy jeans, cartoon T-shirts and brightly-colored Converse shoes. Now she seems to like tight, low-cut tops and short skirts.

The outfit we decided on is actually not too obscene. She's going to wear a short, fitted black dress. The bodice is tight and corset-like with lace along the top. The bottom kind

of puffs out a bit and stops mid-thigh. On me, that dress would have looked absurd but on Nat... well... it didn't. I try not to compare myself to Nat. It doesn't do anything for my confidence, so I just don't do it. I know I'll never look like her. I could starve myself for weeks and months and years, and I still wouldn't look like her. I know that. But there's still a little voice in my head. That voice is dangerous, and I stamp it right out when it decides to creep out.

I said good-bye to her and now I'm sitting in my room holding her guitar and waiting for Fred to come online. I'm glad that the guitar is covering me up so Fred won't be able to see all of me. It's stupid. The boy has already seen me naked, but I don't want him looking at me and thinking... and thinking I'm fat. I don't want him looking at me like the girl at the store, or the receptionist at the gym. It would just kill me.

23.00

As far as virtual semi dates go, that was quite fun. My video chat with Fred was nowhere near as horrible as I imagined. When his picture popped up I think I was smiling the biggest of smiles. His hair was a bit of a mess, and he was wearing a plain black t-shirt with a green checked blazer. I noticed he was sitting on his bed. He was leaning back against his pillows and I thought it a bit intimate. I might have blushed.

"Hi," he said first.

"Hi."

For a few seconds we just sat and smiled at each other. Then he coughed in his hand and reached beside his bed for his guitar. He was using a sleek black guitar. It looked quite used, like it had seen a lot of concerts.

"I'm going to warn you. I love music, but I'm quite useless at it. I can't sing so don't even make me try, and it's probably going to take me a super long time to catch onto this."

"That's okay. We have nothing but time. We can take it slow."

He smiled and I decided I liked his smile. I liked it a lot.

He showed me a few chords. It wasn't so hard and I was relieved. The camera quality wasn't great, but I could make out his fingers and what they were doing.

"You're doing great. You're a better student than you give yourself credit for."

"Nope, you're just a good teacher."

He was. He was very patient and didn't mind repeating things for me. After an hour of playing my fingers were red and hurt like hell.

"I think that's enough for one day."

He started to pack up his guitar but I stopped him

"Don't go yet. Play me something."

I thought he might have been blushing, but I couldn't tell.

"I'm really not that good."

"Don't be modest. You are. I listened to your band's music. Your guitar skills are epic."

"You listened to our music? Did you like it?"

"Like? More like love. Wait... we're veering off topic now. You're just trying to distract me. Play me something."

He looked sheepish as he positioned himself better on his bed.

"Fine. Just for you."

I recognized the song quickly. He was playing *Velocity Girl* by Snow Patrol. When he started singing... oh my... He has such a sexy voice. Low and gentle and velvety like chocolate. I let my eyes close as I listened.

And then a bitter thought planted itself in head. Why didn't he want to stay in my arms? When he stopped singing I said a hasty good-bye and logged off. I wonder if I'll always feel this sadness when I think about my first time. It feels like it's etched into my heart, or something, and nothing I can do will ease how I feel.

Day 81

07.00

I'm about to head to work. I woke up early so I could get in a quick workout with my weights. My arms felt stiff after about half an hour, but I worked through it. I'm starting to enjoy that burning sensation. It means I'm really trying.

I had the same mundane breakfast I've been having every day this week; scrambled eggs with a cup of mushrooms and half a tomato. After next week I can start eating stuff like bran flakes or oats, fruit and bread. I especially miss sugar in my tea. It's hard, and I'm tempted to just give in and just have a little sugar, but I know where it will lead. It's a slippery slope. If I justify that sugar then it won't be long before I tell myself a slice of bread won't hurt. It won't, but the butter I have on it, and the sausages I fry up to go with it, will. If I give in on one thing then I know I'll just give in altogether.

Some people think it's possible to become addicted to food, and maybe it is. That's not what's going on with me. Admittedly, I do tie my emotions to food, which is unhealthy, I know. But to say I'm addicted seems like a cop out. It seems like surrendering to something outside my control. I don't eat because I feel like I have to; I eat because I don't know what else to do. I do it because I don't think I can be anyone but the fat girl. The ugly twin. It's been my identity for so long that I don't know how to play a different role. I don't know how to let myself.

20.30

I've been itching to write all day. So I went to work like usual. I was unpacking the Polaroid cameras when of all people, Warren walked in. At first, I thought that he was looking for me, but then Renata waved him over and gave him a warm hug. His expression was simultaneously confused and reproachful as he stared at me.

"You work here?" he asked me.

"Just started."

He nodded, took a camera, and joined the other students.

Turns out Warren won't work out with me Thursday mornings because he's been taking Renata's class since the beginning of summer. I couldn't figure out why he didn't just tell me he was coming here. Renata spent the first fifteen minutes of class describing different ways of using Photoshop to enhance pictures and I couldn't take my eyes off him. He looked so... engrossed. I'd seen him look like that before. He wore the exact same expression when he was competing. I saw him concentrate just like that as he was sizing up his competition, getting ready to jump onto the icy water.

Most of the other people in the class just sat back and listened to Renata talk, but he was taking notes. He filled up two pages in those fifteen minutes.

"Okay, everyone, please take all your belongings. We're going to the beach. When we get there feel free to explore and capture whatever you feel you should. Let loose with your cameras and try to avoid taking pictures of the same obvious things."

Warren held back as everyone started filing out.

"Renata is super cool, isn't she? I would love to have her as a boss."

"Yeah, she's pretty chilled. I didn't know you were into photography..."

"I didn't know you were, either."

"I'm not really. I'm glad I'm getting to learn something new, but I never thought of photography before I got the job."

He nodded and held the door open as I left the studio. The walk to the beach wasn't a long one and we were staring out at the glistening ocean after a few minutes. Warren and I kicked our shoes off, picked them up and joined the rest of the group. Renata's hair was blowing in all directions. She pulled a pair of dark glasses out of her gigantic backpack and put them on.

"Go, my angels, bring me back art!"

She pulled up her long gypsy dress and started walking along the shoreline, letting her feet get wet. I was at a loss as to what I should do.

"Want to help me out?" Warren asked tentatively.

"Sure, what do you want me to do?"

I regretted agreeing to help him when he told me to go dig through the recycling bins. I looked around me to make sure no one was looking before sticking my hand into the glass recycling bin. I found seven empty Coke bottles like he'd asked for. I washed them out at a tap and met him up at the harbor. He was leaning against the railing and wasn't looking my way as I approached him. With the sun shining behind him and the wind ruffling his hair, I was struck by how handsome he actually is.

He turned toward me as I approached. He had a bunch of little, colored bottles in his hands and a rainbow of colors danced against his shirt as he moved.

"Great, okay." He put the bottles of dye at his feet and took half the Coke bottles from me. "I need you to empty out the dye in each bottle then fill them up with water."

I did what he said. Dye dripped on both our hands as we worked silently. He took the filled bottles out of my hands and positioned them in a row in front of him on the railing. I wasn't sure what he wanted to do until I saw the light passing through the bottles. He'd made his own rainbow.

"Warren... this is beautiful."

He smiled sheepishly and stepped back to look with me. I watched him lift his camera, crouch low and take about a dozen photos from different angles. He took some with Renata's Polaroid, then the rest with a digital camera he brought with him. I looked beyond him at everyone else in the class. Most of them were taking pictures of the ocean, the sun or the harbor in front of the ocean. It seemed Warren was the only one to try something different. He passed me one of the Polaroid photos and I saw what he wanted me to see.

"You're really talented. It's weird I didn't know this about you."

He blushed slightly and shrugged.

"No one really knows I'm into this stuff."

"Why not? I thought you said you really like photography?"

"I don't know... I guess because everyone knows me as the swimming jock, so I kind of just play into it. I don't think anyone in my life would understand there's more to me. Very cliché, I know."

He laughed hollowly and started emptying out the bottles.

"Is this what you want to do?"

"More than anything." He paused briefly. "I want to study photojournalism."

"That's so cool; I want to be a journalist. I can't wait to travel and see all the different cultures around the world. I want to see life through other peoples' eyes."

"Exactly! That's exactly right. Taking a picture is like capturing a moment in time forever. It's like... you can tell a whole story in the one moment. Everything that makes up a person can be right there for everyone to see."

"So... honest."

"Yeah." He smiled. "Photos are honest."

We sat down together, and I let my legs hang over the edge of the harbor.

"Where are you going to study?"

There was a brief silence and I thought he hadn't heard me.

"I... I don't know."

"You didn't apply anywhere?"

"No... I did. I got into UCLA for a business degree. That's what my parents want from me. I'm their only child so they want me to take over the business one day. Keep the legacy alive, you know?"

"But that's not what you want?"

"No. I also applied to the University of Cape Town in South Africa for a Bachelor of Arts degree. I didn't think I would get in, but I got my conditional acceptance before the start of summer."

"Warren! That's so exciting! Wow."

"You think so? I mean... it's so far away and it's a completely different culture and system. There's no way my parents will go for it."

"You haven't told them?"

"No, I have. They just didn't listen. They know what I want, but they just don't care. They think I'm acting out or something, but that's not it. It's my life. I should get a say about what I do with it."

He sounded unsure as he said that.

"There's no point in trying to please them. It'll just give you grief later when you're stuck

doing something you hate."

"I don't know what else to do." He ran his hands roughly through his hair, leaving tufts sticking out at odd angles.

"You could go to UCLA and do the business degree, just until you get your final acceptance from UCT. Maybe you could take photography as an elective, or join a club. That way you can show your parents you gave it a go but it wasn't for you."

"Maybe... yeah... I could do that." He looked out toward the rising and falling sea as he thought it through. "It's my only option right now."

"Maybe, in exchange for my wisdom and insight, you could lay off on the drill sergeant act today?"

"Not a chance." His laugh was a nice thing to hear after all the seriousness. "However, I think you deserve a cheat."

He got up and disappeared in the crowd of people walking to and from the beach. He returned moments later holding two small containers.

"One scoop of perfectly organic frozen yogurt." He gave me the container and a plastic spoon before letting his legs dangle next to mine.

He got me strawberry yogurt. I had tried it once before and loved it. There was a fresh strawberry sliced up and placed on top of the scoop. After weeks without sugar, that scoop looked like the most delicious thing in the world. But I was afraid to eat it. Out of the corner of my eye I could see Warren digging into his, but I couldn't bring myself to do it. There was no writing on the container so I had no way of knowing exactly how many grams of sugar were in it, or how many calories it amounted to. I was afraid that if I let myself enjoy it then the work of the past two weeks would mean nothing. I knew myself; I wouldn't be able to just stop with one scoop. Soon I'd be wolfing down two more and then the chocolate ice cream at home and Olivia's cereal, my mom's donuts... it was a slippery slope.

"What? You don't like strawberry? I should have asked." Warren looked apologetic, and I tried to explain what was going on in my head.

"That's silly. You should give yourself a little credit. You're not going to throw away all your hard work because of a scoop of frozen yogurt."

"You don't understand."

"I think I do. You can't be scared of food. Just because you're losing weight doesn't mean you can't enjoy food. Yeah, a good diet is half the effort but you have to live your life, too. You have to be happy. Counting every calorie won't help with that."

"I just... I just want this so bad, you know? I want to do this right. I don't want to be feeling like this."

"Are you finding the diet too hard?"

"Actually, no. I like the diet in an odd way. I like the empty feeling of having not eaten. It makes me feel like I'm really trying to lose weight. Hunger is an old friend." I laughed lightly. Warren was stone-faced. I realized what I had just said and wished I could take

the words and stuff them back in my mouth. I knew how they made me sound.

"The point isn't to starve. You know that right?"

An uncomfortable knot formed in my stomach.

"It's hard for me."

I debated the pros and cons of telling him about Ms. Daniels and my freshman year. I didn't want him to look at me like I was pathetic or sick or something, but something in me wanted him to know. I didn't know how to even start the conversation, though. I decided to skip the stuff about Ms. Daniels, and just told him about freshman year. I told him about the days I would go without eating a single thing. On my bad days I could survive on nothing but a pack of gum and diet soda. I didn't look at Warren as I told him, but I could imagine what he was thinking. There was only one word I could think of that might be drifting through his head.

Anorexia.

The word scared me. It held more power than any other word. I don't know if that's what I went through. I don't know if that's what I was. Am.

I felt tears drip slowly down my face as I talked. It felt like there was a pressure pushing against my chest from the inside, trying to get out. It hurt in a way I hadn't felt before. Warren listened to me patiently, asking questions periodically.

"Did you... did you make yourself throw up?"

"No... never. I was just afraid to eat. I was afraid if I did I would never stop. The emptiness felt good. Each day I went without food made me feel strong, like I was somehow a better person for it."

"How about now? How is it now?"

"I read somewhere that it can take years for a... for someone like me to get better. I didn't let it take me to a scary place. I never got sick. My bones weren't poking through my clothes. Sometimes I think that it never happened, that I made it up in my head or something. But then there are moments when it hits me so hard. In those moments I hate myself so much and all I want to be are lovely, perfect bones."

"Have you ever talked to someone about it? "

"What? Like a therapist or something? I don't want to make a big thing out of nothing."

"Your health is not 'nothing,' Burn." He reached over and placed his hand over mine. "It doesn't have to be a therapist. It could just be someone who's gone through the same thing."

I thought of Cassie almost instantly.

"I've never told anyone about this."

"I'm glad you trust me."

He squeezed my hand gently. I ate my frozen yogurt and watched a couple of kids flying a kite, guiding it higher and higher. Warren lifted his camera and snapped away, and I felt light and happy watching him do it.

Day 79

19.00

I'm about to head over to Nat's place to give her emotional strength before her date. Ryan is picking her up at eight and taking her to some bar. She says there's an Indy band playing. She must really like this guy because Nat hate Indy music. She thinks all the singers are "whiney, over-emotional idiots."

I've spent most of my day inside. After my workout with Warren I decided to snuggle up with some tea and a good book. The study is my favorite room in the house. It's like some rooms hold memories in them, and even after the owners of a house are gone you can still feel them there. I used to sit in the study with Nana. I used to find it comical when I'd be reading books with pictures in them while she balanced a heavy, thousand-page book on her lap. She used to wear thick, old-fashioned glasses with purple frames when she was reading. I'd watch as she pinched her brows in concentration. She had a habit of sticking out her tongue slightly when she was really trying to figure something out.

Now, all my books are mixed in with hers. My copy of *Twilight* sits next her copy of *Dracula*. Bronte sits next to Picot and Austen next to Rowling. I love just holding one of her books. I like the scent of the pages as I flip to my favorite parts. I especially like finding the bits she marked herself. Sometimes I find small notes she made in pencil in the margins. Sadness mixes with joy when I find those.

I don't know when I'll stop missing her so deeply. She's the only loved one I've ever lost. I feel like she was one of the only people to love me without fault. She thought I was beautiful. I wonder if she would still think that if she could see me now.

22.00

Nat was a hysterical mess when I got to her house. She was wearing an avocado face mask when I got there. Her nails were wet and she was blowing on them while simultaneously trying to get dressed. She changed her outfit three times before settling on what we chose before.

"I hope he likes me. I know there's an age gap, but that could be a good thing. Boys our age are so immature about sex and relationships... even about women."

"Promise me you'll be careful. I know you're on a crusade to get laid, but that doesn't mean you have to throw yourself at whoever will have you. You don't want to be *that* kind of girl."

I said it with more venom than I meant to. Nat stopped what she was doing and looked at me. I could tell she was trying to think of what to say.

"Why is it that when a man says he just wants sex, everyone is okay with it, but when a woman says that, she's a slut?"

"I'm sorry Nat, I didn't mean—"

"I know what you meant. I know you just don't want to see me get hurt like you did. I get that. But you need to understand that I'm not looking for love. Not right now. I don't want a fairy tale with a modern-day Prince Charming trying to save me, or fix me, or whatever."

I just want sex. I'm not doing this for anyone but me. It's not a reflection on my insecurities or anything like that. I just want to have sex."

"Okay."

"Okay. Now come help me get this dress on."

Ryan picked her up in a red vintage car. I don't know much about cars, but I could tell it was probably expensive. He was wearing dark jeans, a leather jacket and Converse. His dark hair was pulled back in a small ponytail, and he had a bit of stubble on his chin and face. I was suddenly very worried about the fact that my best friend was going on a date with a man. Not some boy from school, but a proper man with a job and probably an apartment. I took note of his license plate, just in case.

I'm going to try to stay up in case something does go wrong and Nat calls me. Fred recommended I start watching *Dexter*. I rented the first season so I'm going to make myself a snack of celery sticks and cheese and watch it while I wait.

Day 78

01.00

I officially think Dexter is one of the sexiest characters in the world. I mean... wow. I know I probably shouldn't be attracted to the sociopathic serial killer but... well... I am. I wonder if that's a reflection of me? I kept texting Fred as I watched the first few episodes. The first time Dexter killed someone, I wrote:

Is it weird that I find this man extremely attractive?

He replied a minute later:

Not at all. You obviously have a thing for red heads ;)

I'll admit that I've spent an unhealthy amount of time going through the pictures on his band's website. I especially like one of him playing in a café. He's on his own, sitting on a stool with fairy lights hanging low above him. He's wearing thick black boots, faded jeans and a black T-shirt with flecks of paint on it. I asked him about it on Skype and he was quite sheepish. He doesn't think he's that good of a singer, but I do. I think he should be the one leading the band instead of Lily.

His band is planning a tour for next month. He's always wanted to tour at least once in his life. He's not going to have a lot of time for music when he's at Columbia. It's weird how life kind of gets decided for us. In high school there was this girl I used to admire. Her name was Rachel. She was the head of numerous groups, and captain of the girls' lacrosse team. She was class president and got an early acceptance into Yale. She was meant to be president or head of the Supreme Court or something like that. But no. Right now she's working as a temp at an events company. Her parents were in debt apparently, and she just didn't have the money to go to school. She did everything right, and her life still didn't go according to plan.

I know three girls from my year that are currently pregnant/have just given birth. I know some really smart people that didn't get into the Ivy League schools they applied to. Then there's Warren, who has so much talent and is a real artist, but is going for a business degree. I don't know why everyone says we can be whomever we want to be when they know perfectly well that we can't. If the world says no, then that's it. You have to form a new dream.

I asked Fred why he wanted to be a doctor. I thought he'd say because he wants to help people. I thought maybe because he's so smart so he can. Instead he said:

My dad walked out on us a while back. My mom's been taking care of me and my two sisters. If I become a doctor, then one day I'll have the money to take care of all of them and give her a break.

So the world won't let Fredrick Charles become a rock star.

05.00 (I think)

I heard a noise and I woke to check out what it was. I looked out the window and found myself staring at the back of LTC's head. I watched him jump from our drainpipes to the tree directly outside my window. He almost lost his balance, but he righted himself just in

time. He then shuffled to the trunk of the tree and quickly climbed down. It looked like it wasn't the first time he'd used that tree to sneak out of our house. I watched him walk away and my heart sank. He must have spent the night with Olivia. I always thought she'd tell me after her first time. Even after we grew apart. But I guess that was a silly expectation to have. After all, I didn't tell her.

12.00

I woke up with a start and my mind instantly went to Nat. I fell asleep before she let me know she got home okay. I searched all around me and finally found my phone under my bed. I have four missed calls from her and eight messages. My heart started beating faster. I thought I'd have to go to the police and alert the media or something. I scrolled through the messages. The first few were just here telling me how the date was going. I breathed a sigh of relief when one said she was home. The others were her telling me to pick up my phone. I quickly wrote Warren a text, asking to reschedule our workout to later today and pulled on my sneakers.

I jogged slowly to Nat's house. My chest was tight and I was coughing slightly by the time I got there. Nat's mom opened the door. She was still in her PJs and a silk gown.

"Thank God you're here. Natalie won't leave her room. She's refusing to eat breakfast or talk to me. Let me know what's wrong. Okay, dear?"

I nodded and made my way to her room. When she opened the door I was taken aback slightly. Her hair was a tangled mess and mascara dripped steadily down her cheeks. She looked flushed, like she'd been crying for days.

"He thinks I'm too young for him." She was practically weeping. I hugged her tight for a long time, waiting for her to calm down. "All night I kept thinking, how lucky am I? He was so... he was perfect."

We sat on her bed and I gave her a tissue to wipe away the black mess on her face.

"What happened exactly?"

I wanted to break the boy's neck for hurting her.

"He took me to see the band, right? We were dancing, and he kissed me and I was so happy. Everything was okay until he asked if I wanted something to drink. I went to the bar with him and the bartender refused to give me a drink because he thought I was too young. It was mortifying! All these people were just staring and laughing at me. Then Ryan started arguing with the bartender. I realized he thought I was twenty-one like him."

"You didn't tell him you're eighteen?"

"He never asked, so... I didn't tell him. He was making such a scene so I pulled him away and told him how old I am. You should have seen his expression..."

She paused to wipe her face again.

"He looked at me like I'd tricked him or something. He wouldn't touch me. He just drove me home and told me he couldn't date me. He said, and I quote, 'let's just be friends.'"

I held my best friend as she cried and complained. When she was done she pulled away from me slightly.

"You know what? Screw him. It's his loss. There are loads of guys that would want to be more than just my *friend*. I'm not going to cry about him anymore."

If there's one thing I love about Nat it's her bounce-back ability.

23.00

Just came back from Warren's house. I met up with him around six for our workout. When I got there, his parents weren't home like before. My mom and I don't talk a lot, but she's usually around the house unless she's super busy. It seems like Warren's parents are *never* home. He greeted me at the door wrapped in a towel and nothing else. His hair was dripping and his hand was cold on my back as he led me in. He'd started swimming without me.

I quickly changed in his bathroom. I felt less self-conscious about what I was wearing the second time around. I just figured that I'd already let Warren see me at my most vulnerable at the beach that afternoon. There was no point being embarrassed around him after that. He was already in the pool when I went out. He swam with me this time. I knew he was slowing himself down considerably to match the pace of my stroke, but he didn't seem to mind. It felt weird to feel him moving underwater next to me. He moved with a grace I couldn't even attempt to muster.

After swimming for an hour and a half he helped me stretch. I could barely stand up and follow him back into his house afterward; I felt so weak.

"You're getting better every day." He handed me a towel and I attempted to dry my hair. "Swimming is a great way to exercise. When you go to college you should join a gym and you can use their pool."

I nodded and added that to my list of things to do when I get to New York.

After I changed my clothes and dried my hair with Warren's dryer I joined him in his kitchen. He was pulling stuff out of a grocery bag.

"I'm going to show you how to make a meal under 2500 kilojoules. You should always look at the energy provided by the food you consume. That way you know how much you need to burn."

He wrapped an apron around his waist and I couldn't suppress a smile.

"I didn't know you could cook."

"My skills are limited, but I can make an awesome steak."

He peeled the plastic from a tray with two beef steaks. I didn't have the heart to tell him I'm not a fan.

"What do you want me to do?"

"Clean the beans and put them in some hot water, then start peeling butternut." He used the same authoritative voice he uses on me during our workouts. I'm starting to find it a bit sexy.

"Yes, Grey."

We worked in a comfortable silence. I occasionally asked questions as he cooked and he

showed me how to work the grill. We were just plating up when I heard a door open and bang shut. I flinched and Warren stopped what he was doing.

"You just don't get it, do you? You just don't give a shit about anyone but yourself!"

"I don't give a shit? I don't? That's rich coming from you, Shelly!"

The voices were loud and clear. I could hear every word, and I suddenly wished I was anywhere but there. Warren looked at me, blushing violently, and I could tell he wished I wasn't there, too.

"Did you think I wouldn't find out? Why do you keep doing this to your family? Are we not enough?"

"This isn't about Warren and you know that."

"Yeah, everything is my fault. Like always."

Warren's parents were moving closer to where we were. I could hear the tapping of his mom's heels as she opened and closed doors. She stopped so that she was right outside the door leading to Warren's den.

"How could you bring her here? How could you do that to me?" Her voice was small and broken. It cut through my heart.

Warren's hands were clenched into fists, his jaw was tight, and he wouldn't look at me. There was silence for a few painful minutes and then I heard the sound of her heels retreating. I placed my hand over his. He shook it off and kept dishing out the food like nothing happened.

"Uh... sorry about that. They weren't supposed to be home. If I'd known... I wouldn't have brought you here." His voice was rough, and his jaw was still tight.

"You have nothing to apologize for." He just shook his head and still wouldn't look at me. "Are they always that... loud?"

"Pretty much. Come on, this is going to get cold."

He picked up our plates and took them to the couch. He obviously didn't want to talk about it, so I let it go.

"Anything good on TV?"

"Not sure."

He switched it on and channel surfed as I dug in. He was better at cooking than he gave himself credit for. I made some appreciative noises.

"Good, huh? You don't need tons of butter and oil to make something taste good."

I filed the recipe away in my memory for later. Warren settled on a random channel as a movie started. It was called *That's What I Am*. Neither of us had seen it before, so we sat back and watched in silence. It was really good. It was mostly about being who you are no matter what people think. It was also about tolerance and not judging people you don't understand.

At the end of it Warren was really quiet for a bit and then he said, "I don't understand."

Why didn't he just admit that he wasn't gay? He could have kept his job."

"Because he shouldn't have to admit to anything. His ability to teach had absolutely nothing to do with his sexuality. He was trying to make a point."

He mulled that over for a bit but I could tell he didn't agree.

"It's like you and your photography. Why should you have to play into the role people have set for you? You're a photographer. That's what you are. If people don't want to accept that then that's their fault, not yours. *You* decide what you are worth, not a bunch of small-minded, bigoted idiots."

"And you are a writer. That's what you are."

"Exactly. That's what I am. I am what I want to be, not what anyone else wants me to be."

"You know... it's like we weren't even watching the same movie." He laughed and I laughed with him, the awkwardness from earlier evaporating.

"Obviously I'm just a deeper person than you."

"Obviously."

He took our empty plates back to the kitchen and I helped him clean up. He filled the sink up with dishwashing liquid so that bubbles starting running over.

"You want to wash or dry?" He asked me.

"I'll dry."

His hands disappeared in the suds and we fell into another comfortable silence. Weird that I could feel so... safe with someone I'd never talked to a month before.

"You know... I think we could have been friends."

"What do you mean, Rivers?"

"You and me, we could have been friends in high school. I mean... if it weren't for the political bullshit. You're not nearly as annoying as I thought you might be."

"I'll try to take that as a compliment."

He flicked suds in my face, and I whipped him with the dishtowel.

"Seriously, though. I like you."

"I like you, too." A million butterflies in my stomach this time. "But I don't think we would have been friends. Not in high school."

I tried to ignore the painful shudder of my heart but I couldn't help but feel a little hurt. He looked my face and backtracked.

"Not because of you. No, I was just too wrapped up in myself then. Politics... that's what you called it. You wouldn't have liked me in high school."

"How different could you possibly be? It was barely a month ago." I laughed and he didn't. He leaned back against the sink, facing me.

"You know how we were talking about playing a role?" I nodded. "It's more than that, though. You decide to play a role for other people, and eventually you find you're playing it for yourself. And then one day you wake up and realize you *are* the conceited, oblivious jerk everyone thinks you are."

"But that's not you."

He looked at me for a very long time, like he wanted to tell me something. He just shook his head and his hair fell forward a bit, covering his eyes.

"I'm trying not to be."

"And that's what is important, you know."

"Yeah, I can see that now."

We finished cleaning up and he drove me home. He stopped the car outside my house and turned toward me. Again I could tell he wanted to say something, but I guess he couldn't find the words. The light from the streetlamps washed into his car and fell on his face. I had a very strong urge to push his hair away so I could see his eyes in that light. My stomach twisted with nerves at what he wanted to say.

"Uh... so, good workout today. See you Monday, same time."

My heart felt heavy as I exited the car and watched him drive away. I'll admit it. For a moment there I thought he might want to kiss me. Stupid.

Day 77

11.00

I texted Cassie and we're meeting up at the mall for lunch. I'm both excited and nervous to see her. I don't particularly want to dive into the stuff with Ms. Daniels, but it would be nice to talk to her about what she went through after. She never really told me before.

I had a nice morning today. When I went downstairs, my mom was in the kitchen making breakfast. She hardly ever cooks, so this was a pleasant sight. She had on sweats and her hair was piled on her head. I often think that my mom is the most beautiful when she isn't trying.

"Morning, Bernie." She handed me a plate, and I helped myself to scrambled eggs.

"You didn't put any butter or milk in this, right?" She shook her head and smiled.

"I'm so glad to see you kicking the junk food. I know I haven't been very supportive but... well... I'm happy to see you trying."

It was a big understatement. Not only had my mother not been supportive, she'd been pretty mean about it. I decided not dwell on it though. I wanted a good morning with my mom.

We sat on the couch with our eggs and watched a recording of *Say Yes to the Dress*. It was an episode with a particularly dramatic bride, and an even more dramatic mother, that had us laughing super hard.

"I promise that when you get married one day I won't cause such a scene."

"So if I wanted to go down the aisle in a white leather mini, you'd be absolutely okay with it?"

"Okay, okay. Maybe I'd cause a little bit of a scene then."

We laughed, and it felt good. I almost told her about why I was going to see Cassie, but it didn't feel like the right time. I liked seeing her smile and I liked hearing her laugh. I didn't want to take that away.

"Maybe, if you get down to your goal weight, you could just wear one of Nana's dresses. They're up in the attic."

"That would be nice. It would feel like she was part of the wedding, too."

Nana made a hobby of marrying unsuitable men. In total, she had five husbands. She divorced her last one when I was about four and she moved in with us after that.

"You have a nice selection to choose from, too." She smiled.

"Why did Nana get married so many times?"

My mom shrugged. "I don't know. She liked falling in love, I guess."

"Is that it?"

"I mean... my father was it for her. She always told me how much she loved him; how much he made her happy. When he died, it was like her whole world just disappeared."

Everything that she was... gone. She used to just stop what she was doing and start crying out of nowhere. It was like simply breathing was too painful without him."

"How did she get through it?" I asked.

"I don't think she ever got over it, but she learned to live with it. You have to, you know? You can't just shut yourself away and cry all day. She had to keep going. Keep living, because that's what he would have wanted."

"I wish I could have known him."

"He was a good man. An amazing father and husband. I think Nana married so often because she never learned how to be alone. When someone loves you like that... it's hard to remember what it was like before them. It's hard to just be alone."

"I guess it's also hard to raise a child alone."

She was quiet for a bit and I realized what I'd just said.

"Not that you... not that you aren't..."

"I know what you meant, Bernie. It's always easier to raise a child with someone at your side."

"But you didn't want that."

She hesitated.

"It wasn't exactly an option for me."

I was about to ask her what she meant when the Olivia came skipping down the stairs.

"Yum, eggs!"

I don't know what she meant, but that sentence is going to bother me until I find out.

17.30

Lunch with Cassie was quite nice. We met at a health bar that sold stuff like wheatgrass and fat-free smoothies. I picked her out of the crowd easily. She was the only one wearing head-to-toe black in this heat.

"Bernadette! Hey, I'm glad you came." We hugged briefly and we both sat down. I noticed that she not only had an eyebrow piercing but a tongue ring too.

We talked small talk for a bit. I ordered a chicken salad while she had pasta with pesto. I tried not to be too envious. She must have noticed me staring because she offered me some. I obviously had to decline.

"Diet?" I nodded. "Yeah, I used to diet a lot too, but I got over it."

"I'm not like crash dieting or anything. I'm trying to change the way I eat permanently."

"I hope you're not crash dieting. Those kinds of diets never work and leave you feeling cranky and bitter when the weight comes back. I just eat what I like, but I do exercise. I have to."

The conversation naturally drifted toward Ms. Daniels and the club. She told me a bit about what she went through after she left.

"It's not like I suddenly started making myself puke or anything. I mean, I tried it once but... I just... it didn't feel right."

"What did happen?"

"Remember what she used to say? She'd tell us to skip meals if we were 'bad.' I mean, seriously... it was pretty messed up. I know that now, but at the time... I just wanted to be thin so badly. I used to cut out pictures of the thinnest girls I could find in magazines and tape them all over my room. I would skip meals... often. Sometimes I was actually afraid to eat. I was barely twelve and I was afraid to eat."

"I know how you feel. I know exactly how you feel."

I looked at her intently. She had tears brimming in her eyes.

"She was harder on you than on me. I remember the things she used to say to you when she thought no one was around."

That surprised me. I always thought she was just as cruel and mean to all the others. I guess I was teacher's pet. How lovely for me.

"How did you... what changed for you? What made you stop?" I asked her.

"My mom did. She made me see a counselor. She watched me like a hawk every night at dinner. At the time I was so mad. I thought she was trying to sabotage me. I thought she didn't want me to be beautiful. But now, I'm so grateful to her. I still talk to some of the other girls in the club, so I know I'm lucky. You're lucky, too."

"It wasn't all her fault though." Cassie looked at me disbelievingly. "Don't get me wrong, what she did wasn't right. It's just... she was more like a trigger, really. Sometimes I think that I would have gone through all that stuff even if she'd never asked me to join her club. It's not like she was in my house forcing me not to eat. That was all me. I have to take responsibility for that."

"Yeah... I guess I know what you mean. Still... if I ever see her again, someone better hold me back."

"It wouldn't be me. I'd be attacking with you."

We finished our meal and went window shopping for a while. I wasn't ready to go into any of the stores. I want to go in when I'm a couple sizes smaller and can really rock whatever I try on.

Well, I'm definitely glad I followed Warren's advice. Cassie promised to call me, and we plan to go out pretty soon. I really can't wait.

Day 76

12.00

Warren concentrated more on surfing today. We ran laps as usual, and I attempted to move him with the rubber band thing (to no avail), but then he brought me a board. It wasn't a long one like he uses, but it still looked rather intimidating. He wanted to get me into the water and I was beyond nervous.

"I'm not going to let anything happen to you." He handed me the board and I accepted. It was cool in my hands and smelled faintly of wax.

"It's not like you can do anything against a shark," I remarked as he led me to the ocean.

"There are no sharks here, Rivers."

"Yeah, sure. It's like you haven't watched Jaws one to four."

He laughed as we entered the water. The sand shifted beneath my feet and I looked to him for instruction.

"We're just going to paddle out for a bit, okay?"

The water was pretty flat, so I hoped I wouldn't have to actually surf. I paddled out with Warren next to me and I tried not to think of homicidal water beasts.

"Rivers, you look like you're about to faint." He chuckled and I wanted to hit him, but I also didn't want to let go of my board.

"How much longer do we have to do this?"

"Just... relax. Stop paddling and let the water lull you for a bit."

I did what he said and rested my cheek against the wet board. The water was a clear aquamarine and I could see the sun and clouds reflected in it. I ran my hand across the surface and blurred the sun. I looked over at Warren. He was breathtaking in that moment. His skin looked even more tanned than usual against the stark white of his board. His arms flexed as he supported his weight and ran his fingers through his damp hair. His smile was juvenile as he regarded me.

"Tell me this isn't relaxing."

"Yeah, I guess. You know... when I forget the threat of being eaten alive by a shark."

"If a shark got to you, you wouldn't be eaten *alive*."

"How comforting you are."

I was becoming very accustomed to his laugh.

We drifted on the surface for a little while longer before I started to feel the current changing; getting stronger.

"Okay, moment of truth. I need you to paddle strong and try to stand when you feel ready."

My heart flipped in my chest as I followed him. I paddled as hard as I could and tried to remember how he told me to get up. The first time I tried, I was too slow and the current

knocked me off my board. Water forced its way up my nose and down my throat. There was a scary moment when I thought I might just keep sinking lower and lower, but then Warren was pulling back onto my board.

"It's okay. No one gets it on the first try. You're going to keep falling, but you just have to get back up again."

"If you make some cliché comment about surfing being like life, I will hit you with this board."

"I'd like to see you try."

I ended up falling about two dozen times. I didn't catch a single wave. Warren, on the other hand, was gliding on the water like he belonged there. At some point I decided I was just slowing him down, so I paddled back to shore and just sat and watched him. He went inside a tunnel and I could imagine him running his fingers against the descending wave. When he finally tired himself out, he dumped his board next to me and sank onto the sand. He barely moved as the early morning sun warmed his back.

"You really love the water." It wasn't a question. It was obvious.

"My mom thinks I was a marine animal in my past life. Even when I was a kid I loved the water. I learned how to swim before I learned how to walk."

"I can imagine a little baby Warren in his Barney swimsuit."

He gave me a lazy smile. "It was a Spiderman swimsuit, not Barney."

I would have been perfectly content with tanning there for the rest of the morning, but of course Warren wasn't done with me. He eventually, and begrudgingly, went to his truck and came back with a shovel.

"I want you to dig me a hole. Make it about your height in depth."

"Warren, this is just a tad bit creepy."

"I'm not going to bury you, Rivers. God, you watch too much TV."

I started digging as he pulled on a pair of shades and lay back on the damp sand. I thought he was asleep before he spoke up again.

"Is there anything you want to get out of this experience? I mean, besides the obvious weight loss," he asked me.

"What do you mean?"

I was breathless and I'd barely made a dent.

"Like, do you want to run a 5k marathon? Do you want to compete in an amateur surfing competition? Is there anything you want from this summer?"

I paused and considered what I wanted to say. I'd been thinking about it for a while.

"Yeah, there is."

"Tell me," he prompted.

"I want to get closer to my sister. I figure that when I lose weight, when I get through this

summer, maybe we'll have more to talk about."

"That's... doable. She could join us for a workout session if she wants."

"Yeah, that would be nice."

"Anything else?"

I paused again, weighing the pros and cons of being truly honest.

"You can trust me."

"Yeah, I know. It's just... silly, I guess. There's a boy."

"Isn't there always?" He sounded amused.

"There's a boy and I... I don't know... it would be cool if when I saw him... I was... different."

"Different how?"

"Different better."

I found myself telling him about Fred. The words tumbled out of my mouth before I could think them through. I told him about meeting him while in math club. I told him I slept with him. I told him how it felt when he treated it like nothing. By the time I was done talking, I was in a hole.

"You went to a Math club? There's really such a thing?"

"Is that really all you got from that?"

"I'm just messing with you." He pulled off his glasses, sat up and looked at me. "I can help you lose weight. I can help you fit into a size twelve pair of jeans. But I can't help you change a jerk."

"Fred isn't a jerk."

"Sounds like it to me." He stopped me when I tried to protest. "Listen, you have to get to a place in your head where you know you deserve better. You deserve a man who'll treat you with respect. Frankly, you can lose fifty pounds, you can change your hair, and dress better, but all that means nothing if you don't change what you think about yourself."

"It's hard, though."

"Everything worth doing is hard. No one is ever going to stop seeing you as 'the fat girl' until you stop seeing yourself that way. Trust me."

"I do."

"Okay." He paused. "You know you're going to have to fill that hole now."

"I kind of figured. You're going to have to help me out of it first."

18.00

I've been thinking about what Warren said. He's right, of course. I know that nothing I do on the outside will ever matter if I don't change anything on the inside. I think he's wrong about Fred, though. I can't say I know him that well but I know he isn't a jerk. He's sweet.

He's... different from any boy I've ever talked to. I was IM'ing him while working. Renata sent me to develop pictures for her. She has a darkroom in her studio and she showed me how to use it. I was mixing the solutions as I talked to him. He was telling me about his time at the hospital he was volunteering at.

Fred007: My job isn't glamorous. I just do the stuff the nurses don't feel like doing. I've seen more of the photocopy room than I have of the ER. I like it, though. I'm surrounded by people who know so much and every once in a while I get to do something amazing.

BurnRivers: I think it's cool that you're doing something productive with your summer.

Fred007: Only half of it. I told you about my band's tour...

BurnRivers: Yeah, how's that going.

Fred007: Pretty well. We hit the road in about two weeks.

BurnRivers: That's so close.

Fred007: I know. We've been planning and saving and freaking out but finally, everything is sorted. Nathan knows a lot of people, and he has us booked in clubs all over the place.

BurnRivers: That's awesome. I wish you tons of luck.

Fred007: Do you know what's even more awesome?

BurnRivers: Tell me.

Fred007: We're going to be playing at Cloud 9 as our final stop before heading home.

BurnRivers: Cloud 9? Why does that sound familiar?

Fred007: Probably because it's only a 20 min drive from where you live.

BurnRivers:...

BurnRivers: That is the most amazing thing I've heard this summer.

Fred007: In approximately 3 weeks, I'll be with you.

BurnRivers: I don't know how I'll be able to wait.

Fred007: You'll survive ;)

I was ecstatic the rest of the day. I'm already planning what to wear. Hopefully I'll be at least a size smaller by then so I can buy something new and pretty. Not that I'm expecting anything to happen with him...

Day 75

20.30

Today was a very long day. I gave my all with Warren this morning. I ran and pushed and fell. I kept going until I physically couldn't move. Warren was quite impressed, so I decided not to tell him Fred was the reason for my morale. After that I went to work. Renata had me running around half the town, looking for a specific type of camera that she wanted. Then I had to go with her to the beach to help with the group. Needless to say, by the time I got home, I was very unimpressed by life and ready for bed.

Unfortunately, when I did get home I found LTC lounging in my living room with Olivia. He had his arm draped around her and they were watching a Rom Com. He gave me the sweetest of smiles as I came in and my stomach twisted painfully.

"What are you doing here," I demanded.

"Oh my God, rude much?" Olivia asked. "I'm sorry, Liam. Obviously my sister's forgotten basic manners."

"It's okay, love." He kissed her on the forehead and I found that I couldn't move from the doorway. "Bernie, why don't you come and watch this with us?"

Olivia looked horrified and I felt it.

"Liam, I'm sure she has better things to do... like in her room." She gave me a pointed look and I found my legs.

I dumped my stuff on my bed and turned on my laptop. I had a few songs by Fred's band and I clicked on a random one, turning up the volume as loud as it would go. Despite my sore feet, I jumped around and danced to the music. I let my hair down and shook it out. I was hoping to shake out the bitter feeling I had lodged inside me.

I connected to the Internet while I was still jumping around. As I thought, I had a message from Fred.

Fred007: How was your day? Fantastic, I hope.

BurnRivers: It was okay until I got home.

Fred007: Family problems?

BurnRivers: Kind of. My sister is dating this jerk that used to go to my school. He was so awful to me, and it hurts that she won't listen to me when I tell her he's a creep.

Fred007: What did he do to you?

BurnRivers: I've never told anyone about this. It's so embarrassing.

Fred007: You don't have to tell me if you don't want to.

BurnRivers: I want to.

BurnRivers: It was a month before prom. He asked me to go with him. Of course I was suspicious. I'm not stupid. I said no at first, but then he just kept asking. He started e-mailing and texting me all the time. I decided to humor him and talk to

him. I don't know... when we were talking I thought maybe I had it all wrong. I thought maybe he was actually a pretty decent guy. He was sweet and funny and nice. He convinced me that he liked me, and I let myself believe. I was so ready to just throw my heart at the first guy to tell me I was pretty.

Fred007: What happened?

BurnRivers: I bought a dress. I did my hair and my makeup. I waited. I stood outside my house and waited for him to pick me up.

Fred007: He didn't come?

BurnRivers: Oh no, he did. Him, his real date, and all their friends. They rolled up in their limo just to see me standing there in my stupid pink dress.

Fred007: Burn... I'm so sorry.

BurnRivers: Don't be. It was my fault. I should have seen it coming.

Fred007: It's NOT your fault. How could it be?

BurnRivers: I'm over it now, though. No one walks away from high school without at least one horror story. That was mine.

Fred007: But now your sister is dating him...

BurnRivers: Yup.

Fred007: What are you going to do about it?

BurnRivers: What can I do? She won't listen to me.

BurnRivers: Besides... maybe she already knows.

Fred007: You think she'd still be dating him if she knew what he did to you?

BurnRivers: I don't know. I don't know my sister as well as I used to.

Fred007: I'm sorry.

BurnRivers: Again, don't be.

Fred007: I know what will cheer you up...

Fred007: Go to YouTube and type in 'The Avett Brothers'

I did as he said. I realized The Avett Brothers are a band and clicked on the first song I saw; *I and Love and You*. I had never heard the song before, but I found myself being lulled by the lyrics and the instruments. When the song was over I clicked on the next one and then the next. I forgot I was tired and spent most of the night singing along. I almost forgot LTC was downstairs. I texted Fred when I'd sung my way through an entire album.

Thank you. I needed that. I can't wait to see you... I'll be counting down the days. X

Day 72

11.00

Today was my second weigh-in. I was almost excited to see Warren standing outside our house with his scale in his hands. I've been working so hard these past couple of days. Even when my time with Warren was over, I'd stay and run a little longer, or I'd come home and work with weights. I've also been following Warren's diet. I have fruit every day and I've been careful to watch how many carbs I eat. It's tedious, but worth it when I can already feel the loose fabric in my favorite jeans.

"Morning, Rivers. Let's do this."

I stepped on the scale expecting a lot of things. I read somewhere that after a while, even when dieting and exercising, the body just decided it's lost enough weight. I thought maybe this weigh-in could be like that for me. I expected the numbers to be the same, and if not, then maybe only a few pounds lighter. That wasn't the case.

"Oh my God! Seriously?" I exclaimed.

Warren had a very self-satisfied smile on his face as he told me I'd lost another ten pounds since the first weigh-in.

"That means you're at 222. That's pretty awesome, Rivers."

I hugged him really tightly, and I wasn't surprised by the tears that started to fall freely down my face.

"I didn't think I could do this. I thought I'd have given up by now, but... here I am. I'm doing it."

Warren patted my back a little awkwardly.

"Of course, you're doing it. This is just the beginning for you."

Needless to say, I had a really good workout. I'm starting to feel the slight definition of muscle in my arms and thighs. Not much, but it's there.

Day 71

18.00

Tomorrow's Father's Day. Normally I don't keep track of it, but Warren was in a sullen mood because of it. His dad is taking him fishing and he's less than excited to be spending hours alone in a boat with him. Warren doesn't talk much about his family, but from what I gather he has a bit of a strained relationship with his dad. To put it in his own words, he thinks his dad is a "pretentious, selfish dickhead who thinks about no one but himself." He didn't want to elaborate on it, so I just kept digging my hole.

There's almost something therapeutic about digging a hole and filling it. You wouldn't think so but it's pretty calming. I like feeling the breeze from the ocean hitting my neck as I unload shovel after shovel of sand. I think Warren should give it a go. I'd never seen him look so aggrieved. I was almost too relieved when he dropped me off at home.

I know Nat is spending tomorrow with her dad. They are going to a yacht club; the kind that requires everyone to dress like they're having tea with the Queen. She's excited more about the prospect of meeting a cute sailor type than lunch with her dad. I'm hoping for his sake that she doesn't decide to dress in a skanky sailor outfit for the occasion.

I was talking to Fred, like I have been every day, and I asked him how Father's Day is like for him.

Fred007: It's just another day for me. I'm planning on going to the hospital and helping out. Some of the hospice patients don't get a lot of visitors, so days like this are hard on them.

BurnRivers: What's it like for your family?

Fred007: My mom ignores it as best she can. I can tell my dad still gets under her skin, though. He sometimes calls so she never really gets any peace from him, you know? I find myself wishing he'd just cut all contact. It would be better than the random phone call or card every few months. Nikki, my younger sister, still idolizes him. She'll probably make him a card or something. I hate seeing the look on my mom's face when she does stuff like that.

BurnRivers: How does Danielle deal with it?

Fred007: She's at college so I don't really know. When she did live with us she'd make a point of buying my mom something. Kind of like letting her know that we know she's the mom AND the dad around here. I think I'll pull my money together and get her something. How about you? You've never mentioned your dad.

BurnRivers: That's because I don't have one.

Fred007: What do you mean? Everyone has a dad. Not necessarily great ones, but still.

BurnRivers: My mom used a sperm donor so Olivia and I don't have a dad.

Fred007: Have you ever thought of contacting him?

Fred007: You could, you know?

BurnRivers: It just never seemed like something to do. Why would I? I don't even know how. I'm sure they keep that kind of information private.

Fred007: But you're 18. You have the right to contact the sperm bank and request information. It has to be his decision whether or not it's released to you, but it can't hurt to ask.

BurnRivers: I'm scared to do that.

Fred007: Why?

BurnRivers: What if he doesn't want to know me. What if he's an ass or a creep? I mean... what kind of man sells his sperm.

Fred007: But what if he's a rock star. What if he's a lonely millionaire? He could be anyone or anywhere. Doesn't that make you curious?

BurnRivers: He could be the postman.

Fred007: He could your old English teacher.

BurnRivers: He could be the news anchorman.

Fred007: It can't hurt to know.

Fred planted the seed in my head and now I've let it grow. It's not the first time I've thought of who my biological father could be. I've never been lacking in affection. I've never needed a dad at the school parent/teacher evening. I've never needed a dad to teach me how to drive or take dorky pictures with me before prom. It's never been something I've needed. But now... maybe it's something I want. It seems like a missing piece in the puzzle of who I am. How can I know who I am? How I can be sure of who I can be, if I don't even know where half my genetic code comes from.

After my conversation with Fred, I went and found my mom. She was resting her feet in a footbath. She was still wearing a pencil skirt and blouse so I knew she was coming from work. I watched her rubbing her ankles and tried to find the words.

"Are you just going to stand there, Bernie? What do you want?"

She pulled the hairband out of her hair. Her hair is naturally very straight. Even after being tied up all day, it fell perfectly against her shoulders. Olivia and I don't get our curly hair from her. Who do we get it from?

"I've been wondering... just... thinking about..." I hesitated a moment longer until she looked up to meet my eyes. Her eyes are a soft gray color. Olivia and I have gray eyes too, but ours are darker... sometimes almost blue.

"What is it? It's been a really long day."

"I just want... do you know who my father is?" She looked at me blankly, as if trying to absorb what I just asked, and failing. "I mean... of course you don't know who he is but... do you know how to find out about him? Like, what clinic did you go to when you wanted us?"

She looked warily at me. She stopped rubbing her ankles and folded her hands in her lap.

"Why do you want know all this? Who... what did you hear?"

"Nothing... I just want to know."

She let out a sigh and moved to rubbing her temples. I could tell she was fighting to control her voice.

"All that is in the past, Bernie. You can't just dig up stuff like that. There's a legal side that we have to respect."

"Yeah, but I was talking to my friend and he said if I just contacted the clinic then—"

"He obviously doesn't know what he's talking about." She cut me off. "You can't..." She let out another sigh. "I'm sorry, but I don't know who your father is, and there's nothing I can do about it."

She stood up and started to change out of her work clothes.

"I know this is probably difficult for you to understand but it's for the best, really. Your dad was just a number on a list. I picked him for the color of his hair... his eyes. Not much more, really." Her voice was shaky and unconvincing. "Now, please go start dinner. Chicken would be nice."

She moved toward me and backed me out the door. I heard the click of her lock. My mom only locks her door when she wants to cry. It's obvious I'm not getting the full story.

I say as much to Fred.

If your mom really used a sperm donor then she probably has some sort of file somewhere. Stuff with his information. You should go check her desk, or wherever.

I hated him saying "if" like my mom would lie. Why would she lie about something like this?

Day 70

14.30

I told Nat about my doubts about my conception. She agrees with Fred about doing a little snooping. I was hesitant because I didn't know what I'd find. If my mom lied, then she must have a really good reason. If my mom lied, then that means Nana lied too. She wouldn't unless she wanted to protect me.

This morning my mom left the house early. She said something about visiting a friend. Olivia's out with LTC. She's spending the day with his family. That left me with a whole day and a whole house to dig through. My mom is a bit of a hoarder, she doesn't like to throw anything away. She tends to box piles of stuff and dump them in the attic. I figured that if I was going to find something, it would be there.

There's a window in the attic, but it's blocked with boxes and a huge pile of dusty newspapers. Every square inch is covered with something or another. A rack of Olivia's old pageant dresses, Nana's box of costumes, old quilts and family albums. I decided to start with the boxes because they were labeled and looked promising.

After an hour of shifting through baby clothes, I was quickly rethinking my approach. I had just opened my tenth box when I found Nana's wedding dresses. They were folded neatly in tissue paper and closed off with some dried lavender. I pulled them each out and laid them side by side. The most special was definitely the one she wore for Grandpa. I'd seen pictures so I knew how stunning she looked that day. The dress itself isn't spectacular. It's silk, long with a fitted bodice. Small pearls and diamantes line the sweetheart neckline and the rest is pretty plain. It's special because of how she looked in it that day. Happiness was radiating from her skin. She looked like she'd just stepped out of a film with her as the leading role.

I ran my fingers on the silk and imagined being her that day.

Mom doesn't believe in marriage. At least I don't think she does. As long as I've lived, she's never had a long-term relationship, which is wild because she's so beautiful.

I spent thirty minutes just going over each of Nana's dresses, imaging myself wearing them. I could picture myself in each one, walking down the aisle. I could do that, but I couldn't quite wrap my mind around who'd be standing at the altar. Who would commit to loving me forever? Maybe my mom believes in marriage. Maybe she just doesn't believe in never-ending love.

After packing up the dresses, I kept going through boxes. I finally found a promising one. It had a bunch of files in it. I quickly found Olivia and mine's birth certificates. The space for the father's name was blank.

Yeah... I didn't think it would be that easy.

It was only at the bottom of the carton that I got really excited. I found a shoe box. It was red with drawings all over the front of it. I didn't recognize the writing on it, but it had my mother's name. I opened it tentatively and coughed when dust wafted in my face. More papers. A lot of them meant nothing to me. The ink was so faded on some that I couldn't make out anything. I took out one sheet of paper. The edges were so burnt it was obvious

a flame had eaten up most of it. I could only make out the bottom of the paper. It was the same handwriting on the box. It read:

And that will always be my biggest regret; that my love was not strong enough.

I will never forget. I will never stop loving you.

- J

I knew, right then, that this was what I was looking for. I didn't know what it was, but I could feel the importance of it in the depth of my heart. I put the paper back in the box, cleared up everything I touched and took the box to my room. I wasn't sure what to do. I wasn't sure if I should ask my mother again or if I should talk to Olivia about it. What would I say? "Hey, I think our mother has been lying to us for eighteen years"?

I decided to hide the box under my bed. I just wanted to think things through. Whatever my mother is hiding from me, she's been hiding it all my life. Whatever it is, Nana was hiding it, too. Maybe I should trust that I'm not supposed to know the importance of this box or the burnt letter. Maybe I'm not supposed to know who "J" is.

Day 69

12.30

Because of my lack of self-control, I couldn't just leave the box under my bed where it belonged. I woke up early this morning and I could just feel it there, like it was calling out to me, begging to be opened again. I spent an hour going through it and trying to make sense of the stuff inside. Besides the singed letter, there was a road map that had been folded too many times. There were receipts faded with time and open envelopes with no addresses on them. There was a corsage, like the one people wear to prom. It was pressed flat and a dried brown color. Wrapped around it was an ugly purple bowtie. There was also a thin silver bracelet with my mother's name on it; *Ellie*.

Nothing in the box made any sense. Nothing stood out as important. I was very aware of the fact that the only person who would understand the significance of any of the items was the one person who would tell me nothing.

It was a relief to go workout. My head cleared as the sun beat down hard on me and sweat pooled down my back. Warren was determined to get me back in the water and I complied. I didn't expect it go my way but, for the first time, I stood on my board. It was only for a few minutes. The wind barely went through my hair before I was falling again. But it was amazing. I did it and it felt great.

Warren was ecstatic. When I came out of the water he wrapped me in his arms and lifted me a bit off the ground. I felt the strength of his arms around me, and it left me feeling too hot in the summer sun.

"I knew you could do it."

He treated me to a fruit smoothie before taking me home. He was in a better mood than I thought he'd be after the day with his dad. I asked him about it.

"It's not like I hate him or anything. I just hate the way he treats my mom." His jaw clenched as he maneuvered the road in front of him. "He used to lie. He used to tell her he was working late or whatever, and that felt... better. Now he doesn't bother. He knows she won't leave him."

"That's horrible."

"She doesn't... I don't know. I think she thinks that's all she's worth. It's pathetic. And sad."

His hands formed fists around the steering wheel. I placed my hand over his and this time he let me. He loosened his fingers so that I was kind of holding his hand.

"You know, I don't know if it's a woman thing, but we tend to give so much of ourselves away." He glanced away from the road and looked at me. "Some of us throw our hearts... some of us our bodies."

"But when you keep being hurt over and over again... what's the fucking point? When is she just going to open her eyes and see she deserves more?"

"When he hurts her so badly she can't pretend," I replied, hating what I was saying.

His fingers entwined around mine and he held them tightly. There was a lot going on

behind his eyes.

"How is it that I've known you for barely a month, and I can talk to you better than I can talk to most of my friends."

I didn't miss a beat.

"Because most of your friends are jerks," I said, half-joking.

He was quiet for a long time and I thought I'd offended him. He didn't let go of my hand when he said, "I'm afraid I'm going to be just like him."

"Not if you don't want to be."

His thumb brushed over my hand softly, gently. I was disappointed when he pulled into my street. I looked at him and I didn't imagine the disappointment in his eyes. He let go of my hand reluctantly.

"Don't forget to work with your weights tonight, Rivers."

Yet again I felt a heavy feeling in my chest as I watched him pull out my driveway and drive off.

21.30

Fred called me on Skype again. My heart fluttered when his image came up. I briefly wondered what kind of person I am that I could feel like that when Fred called, and yet feel such a loss when Warren drove away from me. I decided to blame raging teenage hormones.

Fred was wearing a ridiculous-looking red fedora with a black feather in it. I asked him where he got his fashion sense from.

"There're a lot of thrift stores where I live. I like clothes with a story behind them. Plus, it saves money I could be using for something more important."

I felt almost inadequate talking to him while wearing a Gap T-shirt and jeans.

His guitar was in his hands and he tuned it while talking to me about my Father's Day discoveries.

"Are you going to talk to your mom about it?" he asked while strumming his guitar softly.

"I don't think she wants to talk about it. I don't want to upset her."

"But you have a right to know."

"I know that but... do I really want to know? What if he was a bad guy?"

I think about Warren's dad and all the grief he brings to his family. What if my bio dad is a douchbag? I say as much to Fred.

"Yeah, but he's still your dad. You're going to want to know more about him. Maybe not right now, but some day."

"Then I'll ask her about him."

We spent two hours playing. Fred has promised to teach me as many Avett Brothers

songs as he knows. He once saw them live, and I was super envious when he told me.

"They were amazing. Our seats were crap, but my sister and I didn't care."

Fred's not like anyone I know. He likes music I've never heard of. He likes old movies with zero special effects and clothes older than he is. His favorite person in the world is his baby sister, and he'd rather spend the day entertaining her than getting drunk or high like a lot of guys his age.

"Nikki's too young to remember when my dad was around. She doesn't remember what an ass he could be, so she misses him like crazy. In her head, he's just on a really long holiday. I worry about her a lot."

"You're a good brother, though. She's lucky to have you."

He smiled shyly and starting singing *I and Love and You*. My heart felt like a caged bird, dancing around in my chest.

Day 68

19.30

Cassie and I had lunch during my break. I met her at the same health bar we met up last time. She had on a black lace tutu, red corset and black leather jacket. I decided to ask her about the drastic change in style.

"This is how I feel comfortable. I used to look in the mirror and be like 'this doesn't look like me.' Now I do, and I'm like 'yeah, this is me.'" She paused and looked at me. "Not everyone gets it."

"I think you look amazing. I wish I was as confident. I'm going to have to lose at least another thirty pounds before I'd feel comfortable in a skirt."

She paused from sipping her iced tea. "Says who?"

"What?"

"Who says you can't wear a skirt if that's what you want to do?" she asked.

"No one... but, I just wouldn't feel right. I'd feel too self-conscious."

"When I first got the rings." She pointed to her face. "And I started wearing things like this, I felt like people were always staring at me. They probably were."

"So why did you do it?"

"Because if I can't be myself at eighteen, then how will I live the rest of my life?" She pulled out her phone from her studded tote bag. "There's a quote by Christina Hendricks I found a while back. Here it is; 'at the end of the day, you're just going to a big party. You have to remind yourself to wear the things you love.'"

She looked at me to see if I was following. I clearly wasn't. She sighed in exasperation.

"It's like... yeah, it's important to be healthy. It's important to eat properly, and exercise, and all that jazz. But it's also important to stay true to you. You shouldn't want to look like anyone but yourself." She finished off her iced tea and began gesturing with her hands. The silver bangles on her wrists banged together noisily. "All these women in the magazines we want to like, like... half of them don't look like that really. Only a small percentage of women are actually a size zero naturally. The rest are faking it, making themselves miserable with diets. And for what, exactly? So they can look like children? And why do we do it? To fit in to society? To attract men?" She huffed agitatedly. "Most women are just like you and me. Most women have hips and thighs and breasts! Why is that such a bad thing? Frankly, I think it's the women that look like little boys that should be trying to fit into our definition of beautiful."

Some people were looking at us oddly. Cassie didn't bother trying to stay quiet, and I didn't want her to. I'd never talked to anyone who thinks like her.

"And men... most men don't even give a shit what size jeans we wear. Sure, you get jerks that give you grief, but they're not worth the bother anyway. Most men, most *real* men, want a woman that looks like a woman."

"That's not what I've experienced."

"That's because we're still surrounded by little boys. Little boys who don't know what they want and base their preferences on what they see in *Playboy*. All I'm saying is fuck it! Fuck trying to look like someone else. You'll never achieve it, and it will only make you depressed as hell."

What she was saying sounded so similar to what Warren was saying that I was starting to wonder if there wasn't some great self-help book everyone had read but me.

Cassie carried on.

"When you're stuck listening to the voice in your head, the one that says you're not pretty enough or skinny enough... you feel like you don't deserve to be happy. Suddenly losing weight is the answer to all your problems. In reality, if you were a horrid, unattractive bitch at two hundred pounds, you're still probably going to be a horrid, unattractive bitch at a hundred and thirty."

"That's a comforting thought," I said, drily.

"It's true though. Bernadette, if you want to walk around in nothing but a sequined bra with tassels, just do it. Seriously. Confidence is something you learn. If you walk around telling yourself you don't care what people think, eventually you really won't."

I mulled that thought over in my head for a while. I was still thinking about it when I went back to work. I sat watching Renata teach, and I started to understand what Cassie was saying. I think Renata is one of the most beautiful women I've met. She is far from a size zero, but she's stunning and I see men hitting on her all the time. She was probably just as insecure and shy as me when she was my age. But look at her now, she's naked on a storefront, and she just doesn't give a shit.

I asked her about the picture after work. I wanted to know what gave her the confidence. She paused from packing up her things long enough to look at me.

"A lot of the time, the way you see yourself isn't the way other people see you. Sometimes, your body is like an art piece. Some people get it. Some people find it beautiful. Some don't. That's just how it is. Was it easy for me to strip naked and be that vulnerable? No. Was it the worst thing in the world, did I die? No."

"I want to get there. I'm working on it."

"Let me know when you are there. You can borrow a camera and use the studio space. Even if it's just for you to see, I think it's worth it."

The prospect of being naked in front of anyone is daunting, but I want to do it. I want to take a picture of myself after this journey. I want to look at it like an art piece and find something beautiful about it. I want to learn how to be confident.

When I got home I took down the board I used to count down the days of my summer holiday. In its place I left an A3 piece of paper with Christina Hendricks' quote.

Day 67

22.30

Today was another long day. The workouts are getting more intense. I think Warren has a book entitled *How to Break the Human Spirit* somewhere in his possession. After working on the beach, he took me to his house to swim laps. Even with him swimming with me, I was annoyed and exhausted by the end of it.

Afterward, I stood in his room, hair dripping, looking for his dryer. Warren was downstairs making us dinner with the radio on loud. He was playing a house song with a very fast beat. I couldn't make out anything the singer was saying, but I couldn't help but wiggle my hips to the tune. I found the dryer under a pile of clothes and I began the process of detangling my hair.

Warren has a full-length mirror on his wardrobe door. I was using it to see what I was doing with my hair. I was wearing an old black swimming suit of mine. The one I didn't think would fit. It was considerably tight around the breast and bum area, but it still fit. I was wearing a pair of shorts that I slide off while drying my hair. When I turned to the side I stared at my bum. I had to admit, all the running and digging and surfing and pulling and etcetera had done wonders for my derriere. In just a couple of weeks I looked to be... firmer. I was shaking my hips to the beat of Warren's song and kind of whipping hair around and humming. I don't know why but I started singing; "Look at me and my yummy bum!"

I was really getting into it, and doing a bit of a booty hop type thing when I had the feeling someone was watching. I turned and Warren was standing at the doorway. His fist was in his mouth and his eyes were watering with the effort of trying not to laugh.

Needless to say I was mortified.

I threw my wet shorts at him, but that didn't stop him from turning around and shaking his butt in an attempt to imitate me.

"Look at me and my yummy bum!"

He spent the rest of the night trying, and failing, not to laugh at me.

Day 60

12.00

Fred's band started their tour a couple days ago. I went through their pictures on their website and he sent me some from his camera, too. They're using Nathan's old-fashioned camper van and sleeping in motels along the way. Fred says it's not very glamorous, but it sounds seriously cool. Someone took a picture of them in front of the van. They painted it red and black, which are the band's colors, and wrote 'Ground Zero' in neon spray paint over the doors. Lil dyed her hair a very striking platinum blonde for the occasion and Fred invested in a 'new' red blazer and dress pants. There was a picture of them sitting on a rock in an open field, arms slung over each other. I tried to ignore the bitter feeling churning in my stomach and remind myself that they're just friends and band members.

I kind of know that Fred likes me. Every time they stop at a motel he makes a point of finding a computer and chatting to me. The one time the motel they were in didn't have Internet connection, so he called me. I almost didn't recognize his voice on the phone. It was deeper and more gravelly than I remembered it to be.

That night we talked about so much. The conversation was all over the place, so I can't even recall what we actually talked about. I just remember falling asleep to the low rumble of his voice and waking up with the imprint of the phone on my cheek.

I can't wrap my mind around the fact that he's going to be less than twenty minutes away from me in a few days. I think I've irritated the hell out of Nat lately; I've not been able to shut up. She's excited for me and also at the prospect of losing her virginity to a drummer. She saw a picture of Jared from the website and is now thinking up a plan for seduction.

I don't think it's a very good idea, partly because I know he has a girlfriend, and partly because I know Nat still really likes Ryan. He's been adamant about not dating her, but he keeps leaving her deserts and cakes and things. Each time he drops something off at her house she either throws it out or gives it to me to give to Olivia.

"I don't want anything from that ass. I still feel seriously embarrassed about that night," she said.

I've talked to Ryan a few times when I've crossed paths with him outside her house. He seems like a nice enough guy. I think it's admirable that he doesn't just want to sleep with her. I'm holding on to a hope that he'll change his mind about their age gap, and she'll stop thinking of ways to get a total stranger into bed with her.

Anyway, I mentioned Fred's band to Warren today while digging my tenth hole. Surprisingly, he already knew about it.

"Yeah, it's supposed to be a really great night. A few DJs from all over are also performing. I'm planning on going with some of my friends."

"Which friends?"

Sometimes I forget that Warren has a life outside me and my weight loss journey. He listed a few names and I stilled.

"Whitney, Liam and all of them are going to be there?" I asked.

"Yeah, what's the problem?"

"They're not my favorite people. Don't try to tell me they're actually nice people at heart, because that's bullshit, and you know it."

He didn't argue.

"People change, you know," he said weakly.

"Not all people."

"The things we do in high school... they don't have to define who we are."

"Yeah, but they are a good indication of who we will become. People like Whitney and Liam... they're not the kind of people I want to be friends with."

He hesitated before adding, "Fair enough."

I filled my hole, patted down the sand, and Warren took me home as per usual. It was actually comforting to know he'd be there on Saturday. I'm so nervous it's nice to know I have a friend in the crowd supporting me. One that's not focused on sleeping with the drummer.

Day 58

18.30

Today was my third weigh-in. I lost another ten pounds. I feel... strong and energized. I feel more like myself every day. I can see my body changing. It's a slow process. It's not like I can suddenly fit into my sister's pageant dresses or anything, but there is a difference. My jeans fit a bit better, and my shirts are considerably looser. Cassie suggested a shopping trip as a reward for my continued success. She, Nat and I met up at the mall with the intention of finding me something to wear to give me a confidence boost tomorrow at Fred's gig. I was leaning more toward a colorful scarf or something, but Cassie led the way to *Victoria Secret*. I put up a good fight at first, but they wouldn't budge.

"I'm not saying you're going to sleep with the boy. Lingerie isn't for the guy, it's for the girl. It's to make you feel like a sex goddess," Cassie said as she led me toward the lace.

Nat was immediately distracted by a complicated leather thing. Cassie left me to fend for myself while she went through the lotions and perfumes.

I had no idea where to start.

I'll admit I've been a cotton and elastic kind of girl for as long as I can remember. Mostly because no one has been that intrigued by my underwear, and a little because I didn't think that any store carried sexy things in my size. But I've been trying to find confidence in myself so there I was carrying an armful of lace to a changing room.

Losing weight has changed my bra size, so it took a few attempts before I found anything that fit properly. I had to ask for a store assistant to measure me and I was pleasantly surprised to find that I'd gone down a size. She handed me an array of different things to try on.

A lot of it looked intimidating. I didn't want anything that needed another pair of hands to put on or take off. In the end I settled for a lacy red bra and matching underwear. It was the most daring thing I'd ever bought in the underwear department, and I flushed a dark red when trying them on.

It did feel... empowering though to walk out with the little pink bag. I felt older and more mature. More understanding of my body. Cassie was right, I felt a bit like a sex goddess.

22.00

I've just spent an hour on the phone with Nat trying to figure out what to wear tomorrow. Olivia walked by my room as I was laying out my outfit. I had decided on my one and only pair of skinny jeans, a loose striped top and a plain black jacket. She paused at my door and eyed the outfit. I half expected her to say something rude. I wasn't feeling too confident about the skinny jeans.

"You're going to look really cute, Burn." I was surprised and delighted. I'm sure my expression said as much. "I just wanted you to know, I think what you're doing is pretty awesome. You've been working so hard."

It took me a moment to realize that she was talking about the weight loss.

"Thanks, I appreciate it."

She nodded, hesitated like she was going to say more, and then backed out of my room. I think I might listen to Warren's advice and sign us up for a marathon run or something. I know there's one coming up for breast cancer. If someone had told me I'd be willingly signing up for a 5k run with my super-fit sister, I'd think they were high as a kite. Now, I'm kind of excited.

Day 57

11.00

I mentioned the marathon to Olivia and she's interested. She said she'd have to check her schedule though, because she has a pretty big pageant coming up. Olivia is the only person my age that I know who actually has a schedule. A lot goes into pageants. She has voice lessons, dance class, dress fittings, makeup trials... it goes on and on. I'm just hoping she didn't say yes just to appease me. I hope she'll actually try to do it with me.

Needless to say, Warren was ecstatic about the marathon. He's going to sign Olivia and I up. He has more faith in my sister than I do.

"You really think she'll do it with me?" I asked while doing my fortieth sit-up with Warren doing the same next to me.

"Usually when Olivia says she's going to do something, she does it."

"You and my sister have hung out before?" I asked a little nervously. I couldn't forget the photo of her on his bedroom wall.

"Not really. She's friends with a couple of my friends, so we've talked before. We don't have a lot in common though." I smiled as he said that, secretly delighted that they weren't close. "But I do know she'll be there for you. You're both going to have a lot of fun."

"Running and fun are not two things I would associate together, but whatever you say, Grey."

He laughed and I was briefly distracted by the movement of his chest. His T-shirt stuck to his damp skin and I could see the very defined lines of his six-pack. He stopped laughing when he caught me looking. There was a brief moment when we both stopped doing the sit-ups and just looked at each other. His hair was wet and hanging into his face. I had another urge to run my fingers through it. I watched his eyes and they drifted down my face to my lips and stayed there. I might have licked them instinctively.

Out of nowhere a Frisbee came flying through the air and landed by his feet. That broke the spell. He tossed it back to the owner and continued his sit-ups while telling me what exactly sit-up work. I hesitated a little before continuing my own. I have no idea if I imagined it, but I think Warren Grey was about to kiss me.

18.00

Cassie and Nat have gone mad. They have spent the last hour combing through my closet. Apparently, my chosen outfit is just 'not daring enough.' I almost felt bad for them because I knew they weren't going to find anything worthwhile in there.

"Seriously, Burn. I'm taking you shopping," Cassie said as she pulled out yet another pair of tracksuit pants.

Eventually, they gave up trying to put something together from my clothes and instead, fished some stuff out of Cassie's bag. Cassie has a very intriguing sense of style. She seems to like a lot of black and leathery things. Nat held up a short black dress with a fitted net skirt. It would have been nice if it I was maybe two sizes smaller.

"I'm not walking out of this house looking like a streetwalker."

"Hey!" Cassie looked quite offended, but I just shrugged.

We spent at least twenty minutes arguing. They kept pulling out shocking pieces of clothing and I kept rejecting them, and sometimes telling them where to put them. Exasperated, Cassie threw herself onto my beanbag chair and threw an arm over her face. Nat dumped the remaining clothes from her bag shifted through them. She pulled out a pair of pants at random and I stopped her before she put them back down.

"Wait! Wait, I like those."

Cassie perked up when I said that and a smile spread across her face.

"Finally!"

Nat gave me the pants and I brought them up against me and looked in the mirror. They were loose, baggy black pants with a high waist. Nat handed me a gold sequined top I'd previously said no to and I brought it behind the pants.

"Hm... that could work. Very... hipster meets Gaga," Nat said as she dug in her bag looking for shoes. She handed me a pair of her black and gold ankle boots.

"Okay, great. Now that that's decided... let's begin the beautifying process!" I looked at Cassie, not understanding what she meant by 'beautifying process,' and then I saw Nat opening her makeup bag.

"I feel like this isn't going to go in my favor," I murmured and Nat gave me a wicked smile.

20.00

We are about to leave and I am in my closet. I've never been so nervous. A thousand butterflies are doing the Macarena in the pit of my stomach. What if he doesn't really like me? What if he takes one look at me and doesn't want anything to do with me?

I felt tears threatening, so I had to stop and take a breath. I know I can't stay in this closet forever. No matter how much I want to. I can hear Nat and Cassie outside by Cassie's car. I told them I forgot something and came inside, but really I just wanted to be on my own for a second.

I don't really feel like myself right now. I definitely don't look like myself. Nat straightened my hair into submission and pulled it up into a tight bun with about a dozen pins. Cassie lined my eyes with black eyeliner and applied tons of mascara and gold-tinted eye shadow. My lips are a pale pink and I'm wearing blush for the first time ever.

I look... well... hot.

I think.

I hear a noise outside my closet door and then Nat is staring down at me.

"Put the journal down. Life is waiting for you."

Day 56

10.00

God, where do I even begin? I'm trying to think of everything that happened last night, there's just so much. I'll start at the beginning.

So Nat, Cassie and I piled into Nat's Beetle and started the drive to Cloud 9. Nat slipped in her Beyoncé CD and put the music up as loud as it would you.

"Beyoncé? Really?" Cassie asked, incredulously.

"What? Burn needs to tune into her inner diva. Who else but Beyoncé?"

Despite Cassie's initial reluctance, even she was singing along after a while. We rolled the windows down and the cool night breeze sent wisps of my hair flying. I watched Nat and Cassie crooning along with Beyoncé, faces all scrunched up as they tried to hit the high notes, and I was suddenly so glad for my friends.

When we got to the club, it was a hassle finding parking. A lot of people were there. On the way to the door, we said hi to at least a dozen people from our high school. Cloud 9's logo illuminated the street and stained the pavement a bright pink. We joined the line to get into the club and my heart beat faster the closer we got. I could hear the low base of a house song coming out of the club. Nat wiggled her hips and shook her hair to the beat. She was looking devilish in a short black skirt and tight red tank. Cassie looked more relaxed and cool in dark jeans, band shirt and leather jacket. Her shirt read, *Mass Robot Suicide*. Flyers were drifting around us, and I picked one up. I saw that quite a few people were playing, including Cassie's favorite band. Fred's band was close to the last groups playing.

"If you decide to go away with Fred, just let one of us know, okay?" I shook my head at Nat.

"I'm not planning on going off with him."

"Sure, whatever you say."

Eventually we got in and a wall of smoke hit us as we walked past the threshold. I could see people smoking everywhere I looked. The place was packed. There was hardly any room to move. Cassie led Nat and me to the bar and we ordered drinks as a DJ walked on stage with his laptop and a mike. A techno beat started as Cassie handed me my Coke. I didn't want to drink. My one and only experience with alcohol wasn't so pleasant, and I didn't want to replicate it.

I watched Nat take a tequila shot and Cassie sip on beer and I was happy with my Coke. I scanned the crowd, looking for Fred's signature red hair and instead spotted Warren with some of his friends. I breathed a sigh of relief when I saw that Whitney wasn't in the crowd. I waved at him to get his attention. He looked directly at me for a moment, not waving back. I was a little confused until he started making his way toward me.

"Wow, Burn. You look... different." He had to lean quite close to me so I could hear him above the blaring music. He smelled... nice.

"Different good?"

"Different amazing."

I was glad for the low lighting because I knew I was blushing ferociously. I introduced him to Cassie and he said hi to Nat, who was then sipping on a beer I hadn't seen her buy. I wanted to tell her to slow down a bit, but she motioned toward the dance floor and moved off, pulling Cassie behind her.

I was alone with Warren.

Someone bumped against him and he stumbled toward me. His hands gripped the bar behind me and he was super close. His lips were so close to mine, I could almost taste the drink he'd been drinking before he saw me.

For a second, I couldn't hear the loud thump, thump of baseline of the song playing. I couldn't hear the crowd of people all around us. My world narrowed, and all I could hear and see and feel was him... so close.

"Burn... I need to tell you something. It's important."

I watched his mouth moving, but I didn't care much about what he was saying. If he just moved an inch, we'd be kissing. I wondered if I wanted him to as I looked up at him through my eyelashes.

"Okay... what do you want to tell me?"

He opened his mouth to speak when something caught my eye. I looked over his shoulder and there was Fred. He was standing on a bar stool looking around the club. I instantly knew he was looking for me. Our eyes locked and a smile began to form on his lips. It died when he noticed Warren's proximity to me. I watched him frown and get off the stool and then I lost him in the crowd. My heart slammed against my chest painfully and I pulled away from Warren. He looked a little hurt, but he recovered quickly.

"I guess we can talk about it later. Don't leave before we talk, okay?"

He backed away from me and soon I lost him in the crowd too. Cassie and Nat were suddenly by my side and Cassie was shaking me.

"Girl, seriously? Which guy are you here for?"

That was a good question that I didn't have an answer for.

I was beginning to feel desolate and contemplating joining Nat with a tequila shot but then Fred was next to me. I stilled. I was so used to seeing him on my computer screen and then there he was. Looking down at me. Looking... angry.

"Bernadette, can we talk... privately."

I was suddenly scared to leave my friends. He didn't look very impressed with me. Cassie hooked her arms through mine and Nat did the same on the other side of me.

"Where she goes, we go, too."

Fred eyed them and then shrugged. He signaled us to follow him and we did. We bypassed all the people at the bar and the dance floor and climbed a spiraling stairwell. We reached a black door that had a "V.I.P." sign on it and Fred pushed it open. He flashed a card that was around his neck to the bouncer sitting by the entrance to another

door. He nodded at him and motioned to stop Cassie, Nat and me but Fred said, "They're with me," and he let us go.

He opened the second door and I had to wait for my eyes to adjust to the brighter light. A couple dozen people were lounging in the room. Someone was strumming a guitar while someone else sang softly. Most people were lounging on the floor and on plush beanbag chairs scattered around the room. Some people were smoking while others milled around with drinks in their hands. I recognized a few people from the flyer, and I realized those were all the artists performing. We followed Fred to a corner of the room and Cassie almost died. The lead singer of her favorite band, *Mass Robot Suicide*, Jerry Cray, lay sprawled on a beanbag chair clutching an open bottle of vodka. He was talking to a blonde that I instantly recognized as Lily. Jared and Nathan were with them on the floor, both tuning guitars.

"Everyone, this is Bernadette and Bernadette's friends." He introduced us.

Nathan's head perked up. "*The Bernadette?*"

He smiled and looked me up and down. I looked at Fred, and he was blushing even more than I was under Nathan's stare. My heart fluttered as I realized he'd been talking about me.

I shook Jared and Nathan's outstretched hands. It didn't escape my attention that Lily blatantly ignored me.

Fred shuffled a little impatiently and touched my elbow. "Can I talk to you for a minute?"

He sounded nervous which made me nervous.

I looked at Cassie and Nat and realized our band of solidarity was over. Nat was sitting on the floor very close to Jared and Cassie had intercepted the conversation between Lily and Jerry Cray.

I followed Fred as he led me down a corridor and through another door. We were alone in a room full of band equipment—mix tables, drums and the like. The lights were dim and there was a faint smell of dust and dampness in the air. He turned and looked at me and everything inside me came alive. His smile was slow, hesitant.

"Hi," he said.

"Hi."

And then I was in his arms. He brushed the hair against my neck and his hand floated down my back. I shivered slightly. My nose was against his chest and I breathed in. I was surprised to find that I remembered what he smelt like. Like body wash, coffee and cigarettes.

I could feel his breath against the little hairs against my hairline and clutched the back of his T-shirt, not wanting to let go.

Slowly, we pulled apart and looked at each other shyly. I wanted to kiss him, so I moved to do just that. He stopped me just before I could. I looked up at him.

"That guy you were with... is he... I mean... are you..." He looked so uncomfortable and unsure and it was kind of cute.

"No... no we're not."

He full-on grinned and it made him even cuter.

"Good."

He kissed me then. First kind of slow, and then deeply... thoroughly. He kissed me the way I've always wanted to be kissed. He pulled me by the waist as he leaned against a turntable behind him. He pulled me closer so that I was leaning on top of him. I ran my fingers through his long hair and kissed the stubble on his chin. I was surprised at how it felt against my tender, just-been-kissed lips.

He moaned softly and I came undone.

"I love your hair down. It's so lovely." He tried slipping his fingers into my hair but all the pins stopped him. "Turn around," he urged softly.

I did as he said. He kissed the nape of my neck as he started pulling pins out of hair. I let my head tilt back at the contact of his lips. No one had ever kissed me there before.

After a couple minutes, my hair fell in soft wisps down my back. He pocketed the pins and swept it to one side. I turned around and looked up at him.

"I haven't been able to think of anything else but you for a very long time," he told me. He caressed my cheek and I felt too hot in that little room. An electric current ran through my arms and legs to my fingers and toes. I'd only felt that feeling once before. With him. In the elevator before we slept together.

"Kiss me again," I whispered and he did. I grabbed the collar of his blazer to steady myself. I felt dizzy and off-kilter like I'd joined Nat in her tequila shots. I could hear the deep rumble of Jerry Cray's voice drifting into the room.

"No one will love you like I do. No one will touch you like I can."

He pulled away from me again and rested his forehead against mine. I was glad to see he was just as out of breath as me.

"I think... I think we should go and join the others now, or I am in extreme danger of getting very carried away."

"What if I want to get carried away?"

His breath caught in his throat and he regarded me steadily. I thought I would explode under his gaze.

Then the door opened and a petite Goth girl with purple hair coughed pointedly and asked us to leave. I must have been blushing furiously as we walked around her. Fred didn't let go of my hand, even when we sat down with the others. Lily looked at our joined hands with a blank expression and I decided I didn't particularly like her.

"Ooh... where have you two been?" Nat asked, her voice slurring a tad. I frowned. Jared was gone and in his place was a guy I hadn't seen before. She was sitting partly on his lap and his hand gripped her waist. He looked a tad bit too old to be at a club.

"Where did Cassie go?" It was just Fred, Lily, Nathan and the creeper left.

"She's watching Jerry play," Lily said. It was the first time she'd spoken to me, and she

didn't look at me when she spoke. She was sharing a hand-rolled cigarette with Nathan. The smoke hung in the air around her. She looked every bit the rocker in tight white jeans and a ripped black and red top that showed her perfectly flat stomach. I felt a stab of jealousy and I was ashamed for it.

Fred distracted me from my negative thoughts. His thumb drew pictures on my hand and he was looking at me with this expression... it made me feel... sexy. I couldn't stop looking at him. I knew I should stop but... I just couldn't. His lips, his eyes, the sprinkle of freckles across his nose... I wanted to kiss him all over.

He leaned right up to me and whispered, "If you keep looking at me like that... I'll never make it to the stage."

A million butterflies in my stomach this time.

Lily stood up and left, muttering something about getting a drink, and Nathan followed her. He handed Fred the cigarette before leaving and he put it between his lips. I watched as he pulled out a lighter from his jean pocket and light it without taking his eyes off me. The pit of my stomach clenched as he pulled it out, lifted his head and blew a white cloud up toward the ceiling.

He took another drag and this time I kissed him before he could blow out the smoke. I pulled away and felt elated by his look of surprise. I tipped my head back like he'd done and blew the smoke out.

"Burn... after we play... do you want to go have dinner with me?"

I kissed him again as a response.

We spent the next two hours dancing and listening to amazing bands and... yes... kissing. I made sure Cassie was with Nat and followed Fred into the mosh pit. A heavy rock band was playing a cover song and people kept pushing back and forth. We soon got swept up and I found my body being moved around like a leaf on water. He kept his hand in mine so we wouldn't lose each other. I kept looking at him as the lights above us flashed green, blue, red and purple. My heart felt heavy and I realized I was happy. I was happy to be jumping up and down to a loud bass with my hand being held by Fredrick Charles. I was happy because as I watched him watching me, as the music washed over us in waves, I felt like I knew him. As he let go and shook out his hair, face serious, but youthful with joy, I realized I was seeing a part of him not everyone else saw.

So I let go too. For a while, with him, I didn't care about what I looked like. I jumped and laughed and shook out my hair. I sang along, as loud as everyone else. He laughed with me, and sang with me. I didn't want it to end.

But then Cassie was calling my name, and Ryan was with her, and Nat was leaning against him. I briefly pondered what he was doing there, and then I realized Nat wasn't supporting her own weight. Ryan was practically carrying her.

"Follow us!" Cassie shouted. Fred helped me maneuver my way through the crowd and I followed them outside the club. Ryan had given up trying to make Nat walk and just picked her up. Fear gripped my heart as I saw my best friend with her limbs limp.

"She had way too much to drink. I was looking after her but then she just... disappeared.

I was so scared." Cassie's mascara ran down her cheeks and she looked pale. We followed Ryan as he put Nat in the backseat of his car. Her makeup was smudged and I could see her bra peeking through the top of her shirt.

Fred handed Cassie a tissue and she blew into it loudly. I looked at Ryan and realized he was wearing PJ bottoms. He looked tired, and worried, and also quite relieved.

"She called me from the bathroom. I came as soon as I could." He offered as explanation.

"Thank you so much, Ryan. We'll take her home now," I told him.

"No, I want to take her home. I need to see her get into her house." I decided then that he was worthy of my best friend. Nat stirred then and murmured Ryan's name. He brushed the hair out of her face with tenderness.

"Okay, Ryan. I'll follow you with her car." Cassie looked at me and Fred, who still had his hand in mine. "You guys should go back inside. Nat will be fine. You haven't seen each other in so long... I'll take care of her."

I hesitated. I didn't want to leave her.

"It's okay if you want to leave," Fred said, sincerely. He rubbed his thumb against my hand again gently. Ryan shook his keys impatiently and got in the car.

I looked to Cassie. "Are you sure she'll be okay?"

She nodded.

"You'll call me if you need me?"

She promised and hugged me before getting into Nat's car and following Ryan's lead. I slumped against Fred as they left. He wrapped his arms around me and I was grateful for the support.

I wanted to stay like that for a while, but then I heard the MC's voice from inside the club. It was *Ground Zero's* turn to play.

"You nervous?" I asked him.

"Usually... no." He smiled weakly.

"What's different this time?"

"This time... I know you'll be watching me."

I turned my face into his chest so he wouldn't see my ridiculous smile. I heard the MC calling the band again, so we broke apart and made our way back to the club. Once inside, Fred guided me back to the very front of the stage and left me there. He told me not to move and kissed me very deeply. I could still faintly taste our shared cigarette.

I watched him run backstage and I felt giddy and nervous. I was nervous about being alone in a club without my best friend, but I was excited too. Excited at the possibilities the night could hold.

The lights dimmed and a single red spot light was all I could see on stage. Lily walked into it, mike in hand. She was pouting moodily as she eyed the crowd. She had a quiet confidence about her; like we should be honored to be in her presence, or something. The

red light dimmed and the normal stage lights were turned on. On stage, behind Lily, stood the rest of the band. Fred was cradling his guitar and simultaneously smoking a cigarette. He held it between his lips and lifted his arm high, guitar pick in hand. He dropped it and a long, loud sound pierced the silence and they began.

Ground Zero's set was amazing. I have to admit, Lily had amazing stage presence. The crowd went wild for her. She swore at them, kicked, screamed and they lapped it up. Nathan was more subdued, with a serious expression that didn't change throughout the songs. Jared played most of the songs with silent concentration and a small smile. They were all amazing, but it was Fred that I couldn't stop looking at.

Every time he sang, he would sing to me. His eyes never left mine. It made my chest feel tight and my head dizzy. There was one song... oh my. There was a line like "*I want you now. Here, right now.*"

He drawled the words into the mike and stared at me as he said them. My skin felt like it was set alight.

They played their last song and the crowd went wild one more time. The MC came back on stage and some tech crew people started pulling out Jared's drums. I was about to leave the pit when I saw Fred approaching the MC and whispering in his ear. He nodded and they shook hands. Then Fred left the stage for a moment and returned with a classical guitar. The same one he taught me with.

"People, we have a special impromptu treat for you. Give a hand for Fredrick Charles who'll be singing his own composition."

People clapped politely and I watched him drag a stool closer to the edge of the stage. He was so close to me that I could have touched him if I wanted to. He settled his guitar on his lap and smiled at me.

"This is a song for a very special girl." A couple people cooed. "I call it *Hotel Room*. This is for you, Bernadette Rivers."

I was gob smacked and beyond embarrassed. I could feel people's eyes on me as he began strumming his guitar slowly. I found it hard to meet his gaze as he started singing.

Hotel Room

I didn't know what it meant

To feel someone else

Didn't get it

When Jimi told me to smash the mirrors in my head

And stop seeing myself.

I got it in the end

When I was kissing you in your hotel room

I felt the glass smash

And I saw you

*So beautiful in your uniform
I got it in the end
When I was kissing you in your hotel room
New York wasn't big enough for what I was feeling
As I felt you reach into my chest
And take a look at my heart
My pathetic fucked-up heart
I got it in the end
When I was kissing you in your hotel room
I understood
That I could live a thousand lives and never be worth you*

I didn't know what to do. In that moment, I wanted him to understand that I wasn't angry, or regretful about New York. I wanted him to understand that he'd taken a look at my heart too. So, I ignored the hundreds of people around me and reached out and grabbed his pant leg. He leaned down and I pulled him by his blazer the rest of the way. People cat-whistled and clapped as I kissed him softly.

"Let's go kiss in your hotel room," I whispered.

Fred got his things together and we left. I saw Warren briefly on my way out. He gave me a tentative wave and quickly turned back to the girl he was talking to. I didn't have time to think about him because Fred was leading me out the door.

Fred and his band were staying in a hotel only a fifteen-minute walk from the club. We walked slowly and he intertwined his fingers with mine as we talked. We talked about a lot. We talked about his volunteer work, his application essay to Columbia and the stupid stuff his older sister does. We talked about the books I was reading, my hopes and fears about New York, and what I wanted to write about one day. We talked about a lot, but neither of us mentioned what would happen when we got to the hotel.

He had a little trouble trying to open the door. I had to take the key card out from his shaking hands and open it myself. He smiled at me sheepishly. It made me feel shy all of a sudden.

The hotel room was really small but nice too. The bed had a colorful quilt on it and I thought it made the room look a little bit homey. Fred's clothes were scattered on the floor and bed. He quickly picked them up and tossed them on an armchair, apologizing as he did.

I used the nightstand to balance myself as I took off my heels. My feet felt like they'd fall right off if I didn't. With them off, I realized how short I was in comparison to him. It made me giggle which made me feel silly.

He switched on the bedside lamp and took off his blazer, tossing it onto the armchair. He was wearing a faded black band shirt and worn jeans. He kicked off his docs and ran his hand through his hair. It flopped into his face. I moved toward him and I could hear him

breathe a little quicker. It made me feel wanted.

I stood up on my tiptoes and pushed his hair out of his eyes. I kissed the side of his face, liking the way his stubble felt against my cheek. A moan started deep in his throat and I melted.

It didn't take long for us to really start kissing. He paused only briefly to turn on his iPod speakers. A slow song I didn't recognize started playing as he pulled off my tank top.

"*Perfume Genius*." He whispered against my neck.

Tonight by Lykke Li started as we finished undressing each other and began slowly exploring with our fingertips. We lay facing each other on the bed and I just took him in.

"You're so..." I let out air. "I can't believe you want me."

He moved closer to me so I could feel his want right up against me.

"Of course I want you. You're beauti—"

"Don't say it if you don't mean it, okay," I whispered and his fingers stopped playing with my hair.

"You. Are. Beautiful." He kissed my cheek, my lips, my neck. "You. Are. Beautiful." He kissed my shoulder, the top of my breast, my stomach. I didn't want him to kiss me there. I tried to pull away but he just looked at me through his lashes and I stopped. "You. Are. Beautiful." He kissed each of my hips and my thighs.

I pulled his face back up toward me and kissed him again.

Another song started playing and I asked him who it was between kisses.

"*Take me Somewhere Nice* by Mogwai."

He pulled back the covers and we climbed inside. He pulled them over us and I giggled. Suddenly he was all I could see, leaning over me. He touched my face and I never felt so precious.

I reached behind me and unclasped my bra. His breath caught as I slipped it off and tossed it out of the bed. He drank me in lazily, and then leaned down and began kissing me all over again like we had all the time in the world. Every part of me was heated. It felt like my desire had been set on fire then doused in gasoline. I wanted him so badly.

I pulled him against me and he got the message. He came out from under our little world and reached into his drawer. He dug around for a while. He dove back under the covers with me eagerly and it made me laugh.

I took the condom from his hand, curious.

Our eyes locked as *Same Mistakes* by the Echo-friendly started playing. I stilled as I listened to the lyrics. Fred watched me as I listened.

I make the same mistakes

Feels like I never learn

Always give way too much

For little in return

I haven't changed a bit

I'm still not over it

I make the same mistakes

I make the same mistakes

I...

Fred pulled away before I could.

"Not tonight?" I shook my head. He didn't look upset with me or anything. Disappointed, yes. "Okay... that's okay, Burn."

He touched my face again before getting up.

"I'm sorry," I whispered, feeling embarrassed.

"Don't be. I know I have to earn your trust. I know... what I did... it was shitty. I can't take all that back so I'll wait. For as long as you want."

I almost called him back into bed but I knew it would be a mega mistake. He excused himself and went to the bathroom. I heard the shower start and knew it would be cold. I sank deeper into the thick pillows and closed my eyes. I listened to the shower running and the fading notes of *The Echo-friendly's* bass line and willed my heart to stop jumping around in my chest.

When Fred opened the door again he had a towel wrapped around his waist. I peeked at him from under the sheets as he strode across the room. His chest was still a little wet and I had an inappropriate desire to touch his slight dusting of chest hair. He smiled a little shyly and rummaged through the clothes on the arm chair.

"What some PJs?" he asked, holding out a soft flannel pajama shirt. I reached out and took it and I was grateful when he shut himself in the bathroom again. The shirt smelled like him so I wrapped it around myself eagerly.

I started looking through the hotel menu as he opened the door again. He was wearing just the bottoms.

"When they say twenty-four seven, do you think they mean it?"

I was kneeling on the bed and he stood a little away from it. He tilted his head and just looked at me.

"You look so damn gorgeous, Burn," he whispered. He ran his hands roughly through his hair and circled the bed. He flopped onto the bed and I leaned back so that I was in the crook of his arm. The smell of soap lifted off his skin.

"I love that you think so," I whispered back.

He kissed me again and I almost forgot my new found resolution.

"So... you were saying something about food?"

"Yeah... I'm feeling like something sweet."

He agreed and called the front desk. He ordered chocolate mousse, crème Brule, cheesecake and two strawberry milkshakes.

I felt a tad bit guilty about all the sugar. I could imagine Warren's expression if he saw the tray of treats spread out in front of us. I ate slowly and we talked while listening to his playlists.

"You like a lot of different music. One second we were listening to Snow Patrol, then Jimi Hendrix and now... what is this anyway?"

"African House."

He sucked on the end of his spoon and shrugged.

"My tastes vary quite a bit."

The song changed again and we were listening to Radiohead.

"What time is it?"

He reached behind him and dug in his jeans pocket. He pulled out a pocket watch and I had to suppress a smile. I wouldn't be surprised if he had a monogrammed handkerchief in there too.

"Uhm... it's just past one."

I blanched. "Seriously? Where the hell did the time go? I should have gone, like hours ago."

His face fell.

"I thought you might want to sleepover... not to do anything. I mean sleep."

Inside my head I was doing backflips. I wanted to stay with him. I wanted to fall asleep and know he'd be there when I woke up. I was very close to telling him I didn't want to go anywhere, but then I pictured my mom waking up and not finding me in my room. She'd freak out majorly.

"I really should be going."

He relented and told me he'd give me a ride home. I didn't want to take off his pajama shirt so I slipped on my bra and pants and waited for him to lace up his boots. He draped his arm around me as we went to the hotel parking lot. I was walking toward the only car in the lot; a Jeep. He tugged my arm and led me the other way.

"No... no..." I stammered as we approached the motorcycle. His motorcycle.

"Don't worry. Just hold on to me."

I'm not great with models or anything, but his bike was one of the old-fashioned kinds with the long handlebars. It was sleek and black with a long red leather seat. Fred opened the seat and pulled out two helmets. One was bright yellow and the other black. He draped the leather jacket he'd been carrying around my shoulders and fitted the helmet on my head.

"You look exceptionally cute."

"Thank you. How about you? You don't have a jacket."

"I'll be fine. Just don't let go of me okay? I'll go slow, but you have to hold on tight."

He climbed onto the bike and I followed him on. I wrapped my arms around him and I could feel his hair brushing against my face. He asked me if I was ready and I nodded.

He revved the bike and I held on tighter.

"Don't let go, Burn."

I loved the feel of the cool wind on my face and the rush I got when Fred accelerated down the deserted roads.

I was disappointed when we started to near my house. When we stopped I didn't stop holding onto him. He placed his hands over mine and I breathed him in.

"I don't want to say good-bye," I whispered.

"I don't want to either."

I pulled away and climbed off. I pulled off the helmet and offered it to him. He shook his head. "Keep it for next time."

"You want a next time?"

He smiled a brilliant smile. "Of course. New York is going to be ours."

I leaned in for one more kiss and it felt different from all the others. It felt like good-bye. I felt a really horrible need to cry and I had to suppress it. I knew it was ridiculous, but I didn't want to let go. I didn't want to watch him ride away from me.

When we eventually pulled apart he promised to call me after every gig on his way back home. I clutched his helmet as he started his bike and pulled out of my driveway. He waved once before riding off and I kissed the glossy paint of his helmet.

I sneaked silently into my house and started to climb the stairs when I heard shouting outside. I paused and listened.

"Burn! Bernie, Bernie! Bernadette!"

I ran outside before Warren woke my mom up. He was leaning against his truck which was parked haphazardly across my driveway. I could smell the alcohol coming off him the closer I got.

"Warren? Did you drive here on your own? What the hell?"

He pushed himself off the truck and walked toward me awkwardly.

"Bernie! Hey... I wanted to tell you something."

He was talking slowly, like he was trying to think through a fog in his head.

"Okay... come inside."

I moved toward him and took his elbow. He leaned into me and I almost fell because of the weight of him. I helped him inside and up the stairs. It took forever because he kept tripping over his own feet. I prayed that my mom wouldn't come check what was making such noise.

"Thank you so much Bernie. I just... I just needed to tell you not to settle."

"Settle?"

"Don't let him make you less. That's what my mom did. She settled, and he made her less. He keeps... he keeps doing it."

"I'm not your mom, Warren."

I helped him into my room and he fell onto my bed. He looked up at me and smiled lazily.

"I know you're not my mom. You're so... strong." He reached out his hand and I let him pull me on the bed next to him. "Don't let him..."

"Don't let who do what?"

"Fred... don't let him..."

"You don't have to look after me, Warren. I'm not... I'm not going to let him make me feel like how I felt that night. Never again."

He looked so vulnerable then and I guessed something had happened between seeing him at the club and then.

I finally felt comfortable pushing his hair out from his face and he smiled a small smile at me.

"You are beautiful, do you know that?"

Being told you're beautiful twice in one day by two different guys, yeah, makes a girl feel good.

"Can I stay here? I don't want to go home right now."

"Of course."

"I'm so sorry."

"It's okay, just don't drive drunk anymore. Please."

"No... not about that. I'm sorry."

He started to babble, so I stood up and went to the bathroom. I brushed my teeth and changed. I realized then that I was still wearing Fred's jacket and shirt. I looked at myself in the mirror. My face was flushed and I wasn't sure if it was because I was thinking about Fred, or because I had Warren in my room. When I went back into my room, Warren was completely passed out. I pulled off his sneakers and managed to get his jacket off, but I didn't even try to take his jeans off.

I pulled a comforter over him and slipped under my duvet. It was weird falling asleep next to him. He was just big and wide and I wasn't used to feeling someone taking up space next to me. I could feel his heat even through the covers. He turned so that he was facing me and I was so close I could have kissed him if I wanted to.

I fall asleep to the sound of his soft breathing.

Needless to say, the morning was pretty awkward. I had to wake him up pretty early. He jerked awake when I shook him and he had the cutest confused expression. It took a moment for him to understand where he was. He looked horrified as he took in my

disheveled hair and lack of pants.

"Calm down. Nothing happened. Well... you did babble a lot, but nothing happened."

He looked relieved for a brief moment but then worried again.

"What did I say exactly?"

"Not much..." I decided to stay vague. I felt too embarrassed to rehash the whole "you're beautiful" thing. "Just told me how brilliant I am."

He blushed and smiled and ran his hand across his face. I gave him a glass of orange juice and some aspirin. He downed the whole thing and rubbed his eyes.

"Are you okay to drive? I'm sorry it's so early, but my mom will freak if she finds you here."

He told me it was okay and got ready quickly. He kept apologizing as we made our way downstairs. He paused at the door when he saw how he'd parked his car last night.

"That was a very stupid thing to do, Warren."

"I know. I just... it was a difficult night."

"Your parents?"

"Yes... among other things."

He didn't elaborate, so I didn't make him.

I waved him off as he maneuvered his truck out my driveway. I waited until he was completely out of sight and went back to bed, still exhausted by the night's events.

22.30

Nat doesn't handle her alcohol very well. I went to see her a little while after Warren left, and she was not having a good day. Her parents completely freaked out when their daughter was brought home drunk off her ass and carried by a man they'd never met. When she opened the door for me she was pale, and she looked like she'd been crying.

The curtains in her room were closed and she was watching TV on mute.

"My parents are not very impressed with me."

"I can imagine."

She offered me a cup of tea and I declined. She sipped hers from a gigantic cup. She looked very young with her hands wrapped around it, and I felt a pang in my chest thinking about what could have happened to her.

"I was really stupid," she whispered.

"What happened exactly?"

I leaned back on her bed and she sat cross-legged in front of me.

"Remember that guy I was talking to after we met Fred's friends?" I nodded, remembering the older man. "He kept buying me drinks and I just let him. I was pissed because Jared wasn't paying me any attention, and I wanted to make him a bit jealous. I

know I was being stupid."

"Mega stupid."

"I just... I don't know. I wanted to be different. I wanted to have fun. I never have fun." She uncurled her legs and ran her hand through her hair. She sighed heavily. "Well... the guy... he thought because he'd bought me drinks he was entitled to... you know... me."

She looked really uncomfortable and I felt awful for her. "He kept asking me to go outside with him. He kept touching me and... I couldn't see you guys... It wasn't the best moment of my life."

"What happened? How did Ryan find you?"

"I called him from the bathroom. He told me to stay in there and he came and got me. If he hadn't... I don't know what would have happened."

"He's a pretty awesome guy."

She smiled a sweet, small smile and she suddenly didn't look so pale.

"He took me home and spoke to my parents about what happened. They were so worried. He even asked them if he could sleepover to make sure I was all right."

"So are you going to stop being such an idiot now and date the guy?"

The smile disappeared. "He's never going to date me now. I just proved his point... I'm just a silly, sheltered little girl who can't handle her alcohol."

"The guy is mad about you. How many guys do you know who'd drop everything at a phone call and drive almost half an hour away to help out a friend? Suck it up and talk to him."

She deliberated for a moment longer and then called him. Five minutes later they had a date for next weekend. Despite her hangover, Nat did a little dance around her room.

We spent the rest of the afternoon watching Vampire Diaries reruns and debating which outfit she should wear.

Day 55

13.00

Warren wasn't particularly talkative today. We've started training for the marathon. It's a few days before I'm supposed to leave for NYU. Warren strapped some weight around my ankles and wrists and made me run up and down a gigantic hill near my house. Sweat was pooling and staining my shirt before I'd made it down the first trip.

Usually Warren runs with me, but today he sat it out and just watched from the sidewalk. I figured he was either still embarrassed about this weekend or he was still nursing a bit of a hangover.

"Five more times and we can hit the beach."

I was ridiculously glad when I finished the last trip. I bent over and placed my hands on my thighs. They felt firmer since the beginning of summer, and it made me feel proud. I imagined myself in a short party dress; the kind of thing Nat or Olivia would wear. I can finally really see myself in something like that. I can see it happening.

I pushed myself really hard at the beach. Every muscle was screaming at me but I kept going. I was grateful when Warren told me to take a break. I lay down next to him and shielded my eyes from the sun.

"You just keep on surprising me." He handed me his water bottle and, once again, I thought of his lips on mine. "You keep breaking down all the boundaries I imagined for you."

He smiled and squeezed my arm. I didn't imagine his fingers lingering there.

"I wouldn't be able to do it without you."

"No... that's not true. Yeah, sure, you needed someone to push you, but you're the one doing this. You're the one accomplishing this."

I bathed in the warmth of his praise. It felt so right to be lying there next to him that I almost felt guilty. It was silly because it wasn't like I was doing anything with him. I couldn't shake the feeling off, though. Even after Warren dropped me off at home, I felt that guilt tugging away at my heart.

I sat down at my computer and checked my e-mail. Nothing from Fred, but it had only been a day. I checked his band's website and there were no new updates. I need to take a breath and chill, obviously.

Day 50

01.30

I haven't heard from Fred in three days, sixteen hours and thirty minutes. Not that I'm counting or anything. The last time I heard from him was when he sent me a brief text letting me know he'd got home safely. I tried calling him, but I got his voice mail and then today I tried to Skype him but he was "busy." I'm worried. I don't want to be the untrusting girlfriend. I mean... I'm not even his girlfriend. He doesn't owe me anything.

I should just get some sleep and think about this properly at a decent hour.

15.00

I have shown great resistance and moral courage. I opened a box of chocolate chip cookies and I didn't have one. I wanted to stuff them all in my mouth, but I didn't. I settled for a banana and an apple instead.

I didn't want the cookies because I'm particularly hungry. I wanted them because I don't know what to do with myself other than eat. I went onto the band website again. I was scrolling through their pictures, looking at the images they took on tour. I wanted to print out a picture of him on stage but then I stumbled on a picture I can't get out of my head. It's one of the whole band on stage after a show. Jared and Nathan are taking a bow, but Fred and Lil aren't. They are turned to each other and they are kissing. When I saw the picture, I felt this sense of detachment. It was like I'd been anticipating it. It made sense. It was... expected.

I went and sat in my closet on top of a pile of discarded sweaters. When I was little I used to do that a lot when I had a fight with my mom or Nana. They would always know where to find me. Sometimes Olivia would join me and let me rest my head on her shoulder as I cried. I leaned back in the closet and closed my eyes, willing the tears to come. They didn't though. I was aware of the fact that I was very late to work out with Warren. I was hoping he'd just let it go but after a while I could hear his truck outside. I followed the faint sound of his voice in my house. He was talking to my mom as they opened the door to my room.

"She's not in here," he said.

I sent a quick prayer hoping they'd leave.

"No, she is. She's in the closet." There was an awkward pause where I held perfectly still, even holding my breath. "Feel free to join her."

I heard her turn and leave and then I heard Warren approaching the closet.

"Erm... Rivers?" I stayed silent. "I'm coming in."

He opened the closet door and light filtered through. I shifted so that I was sitting at the very edge on top of my shoes. He sat on my sweaters and closed the door. I could make out the outline of his face in the darkness and I was acutely aware of how small the space actually was.

"Is there a reason why you're sitting in a closet?"

"I'm taking a mental health day."

He leaned back against the closet and didn't say anything. I could hear the faint sound of his breathing and, in that small space; I could smell his soapy scent.

"I don't really feel up to all the running and all today. Can we just... can we just take a break today."

"No, no we can't. You want to work through something? Then you can work through it with me."

He opened the closet door a tad and offered me his hand. I stood up with him but I couldn't look him in the eye. I felt childish and stupid.

"Come on. Get dressed and meet me outside. Don't make me come back and get you or I'll carry you out."

It wasn't much of a threat. I would quite enjoy him carrying me.

I whispered okay, and changed quickly. Warren took us to his house instead of the beach. At first I thought we'd be swimming again but we didn't go through his front door. Instead we went round the back, through the kitchen and down a flight of stairs. He opened a door and inside was a room full of gym equipment. It was expected, I guess. His parents are trainers.

Warren told me to put down my bag and then he tossed me a pair of boxing gloves. They were thin and soft and not like the chunky ones you see on TV.

He went and stood on an exercise mat and told me to come to him.

"When I'm frustrated I come down here and hit the punching bag, but you haven't tried that before and I don't want you to hurt yourself. Instead, you're going to hit me."

I didn't want to hit him. I wanted to hit a skinny, fake blond singer.

"Hit me as hard as you want to."

He indicated to hit chest and I hit him hesitantly. He gave me a very unimpressed look and told me to do it again. I did and he made an exasperated sound.

"I'd actually like to feel it, Rivers."

I took a deep breath and punched him as hard as I could.

"Good, again!" I hit him again. "Again!"

I kept hitting him and hitting him until my arms were killing me. I kept hitting him and seeing that picture. When I stopped, I was out of breath and feeling dangerously close to tears. Warren held my hands to his chest and forced me to look at him.

"Whatever he did, fuck him. You are gorgeous, funny and extremely smart. Seriously... fuck him."

"Fuck him," I whispered.

"Fuck him!" he shouted and I laughed. The laugh turned into a bit of a hiccup and I was tired of holding my tears back.

"Come on, let's work through it."

We worked nonstop for over an hour, and I decided that working out was better for my heart than chocolate chip cookies.

Day 49

16.30

Fred called me this morning. It was by far the most awkward conversation that I've taken part in. When I picked up the phone, and realized it was him, all I could think about was how I felt when I saw that picture and how I felt when he hadn't called for a week.

"Hey, Bernie... listen..."

"I don't want to hear it."

"What are you... are you angry at me because I didn't call? I can explain about that."

"I'm sure you can. Look... I'm just over it. I'm over you making me feel cheap and meaningless. I'm over making myself feel cheap and meaningless. So... go fuck yourself, Fredrick Charles."

I hung up the phone before he could say anything else. He called back right after and I picked it up and hung up again. It felt pretty awesome. When I turned around Olivia was standing at the doorway. She doesn't know who Fred is, but she gave me a smile and a thumbs-up anyway. Today is the day that I, Bernadette Rivers, start treating myself like the goddess I am.

Day 45

20.00

Work was fun today. Renata brought in a group of models to pose for her class. They weren't the skinny pretty kind of models I expected. She asked an older, curvy woman with very long greying hair; a very thin young girl with freckled *everywhere*; a dark skinned boy with a gap between his front teeth and very old man with the bluest eyes I've ever seen. Renata had them sit in front of a white backdrop and told her class to take turns taking photos of each of them. They were told to tell them what emotion they wanted them to show and then try to capture it in an image.

Warren took the most time with the challenge. A lot of the other people just shouted out an emotion and expected the model to just do it. Warren took a few minutes to go and talk to each model before taking his pictures. While he snapped away he kept speaking to them softly. When everyone had taken their photos they went into a separate dark room to develop them.

Warren's photos... they were beyond words. I don't know what he said to those models, but each photo showed an emotion perfectly. My favorite was one of the freckled girl, Anna. She was laughing so hard that tears breamed in her eyelids. She looked beautiful in that moment, not pretty, but stunning in her own right. There was one of the old man, Gerald, that Renata lingered at. He looked so shattered, his blue eyes showing so much pain.

"What did you say to him, Warren? What were you talking about?" I asked him when we were leaving.

"I asked him to tell me about his wife. She died a year ago." He paused for a beat. "That's what love looks like."

I thought of Fred for a moment, and my heart ached. I shook my head as if I could shake the thought of him out of me. I can't pretend like I don't miss him. He e-mails me every day. I haven't opened a single one.

Day 44

18.00

Nat has been spending a lot of time with Ryan. She doesn't seem to have time for me anymore. Every time I go to see her, there he is, kissing her, whispering in her ear, or calling her sickeningly-sweet nicknames. I know I'm only upset because I'm horrible and jealous. I feel the same kind of bitterness when LTC comes over to pick up Olivia, or when I see him sneak out in the morning. I talked to Cassie about it.

We met at the same health bar we went to before. We sat outside so she could smoke. She was wearing dark, round glasses and bright red lipstick and she had on a black corset, jeans and Doc Martens. I watched the smoke rise up above her head as we split a slice of organic carrot cake.

"You just need to focus on right now. Right now you're working on you. You're doing something amazing that not everyone can do. There're always going to be boys wherever you go. Just accomplish your goals right now, and all the other stuff will fall in place."

Cassie has a boyfriend that goes to a college in Florida. She's planning on joining him after the summer. I know she's right about focusing and everything, but it's not like I can just tell my heart to stop wanting what it wants.

"Also, this whole Fred thing... you know I think no man has the right to treat you bad, but I met the guy, and he seemed pretty decent. You never gave him an opportunity to explain. Do you think... maybe the reason you won't talk to him is because you actually want someone else."

"What do you mean?" But I already knew what she meant.

"Well... with him out of the picture, now you can give Warren a try without feeling guilty."

"Give him a try? He's not some car I can test drive before making a purchase, Cassie."

"All I'm saying is that we're young. We're on the brink of life. You have the right to experiment and make mistakes and figure out what you want. Maybe you and Fred will get back together, maybe not. Whatever the case, you don't want to always be wondering 'what if.'"

"He's not interested in me. How could he be?"

"We've gone over this. You are stunning. So you're not a size two... who gives a shit? Neither is like eighty percent of the population. If you like him, then go for it. The worst that can happen is that he doesn't feel the same way. No one has died from rejection."

"Yeah, but I'm sure people have come close."

I mulled her advice over for a while on my way home. She was right, of course. Cassie has a way of hitting the nail on the head. I can't deny that I'm attracted to Warren. I can't deny that might be the reason I'm not opening Fred's e-mails. I'm scared, though. I'm scared of what he might say if he doesn't feel the same way. I'm scared that I'll lose my trainer and a really good friend. I'm also scared that he really might feel the same way. If he does, then what will come next? I'm going to college in just over a month. What would

even be the point of starting something now?

Warren has invited Olivia to come work out with us tomorrow in preparation for the marathon. I'm glad that I won't be completely alone with him. I'm afraid I won't be able to talk to him like I normally do because, at the moment, all I can think about is how it would feel to have him right up against me.

Day 43

12.30

Today's workout was probably the best I've ever had. Warren took Olivia and me to the beach to run drills. He had cones and everything. I noticed right away that they had a friendly banter going on, but not much more. I was worried because next to her in her short shorts, I was feeling heavy and not very "stunning" at all.

Olivia tied back her hair and gave me a reassuring smile as we walked up to our starting point. She hardly ever works out, but she's strong and lean from hours of dance classes. Warren told us how to run the drills and waved us off. Olivia was faster than me, for sure. At first she was at least three drills ahead of me. But she tired out faster than I did. I caught up to her easily as she began to slow down and walk. Warren shouted out encouragement at her, but she just waved him off. Her face was flushed despite the makeup she had on, and she looked like she'd really enjoy punching him in the face. I knew how she felt.

"I'm done. I'm so done." She sat down where she was despite Warren's threats to make her run more. I ran around her, which made me feel like Wonder Woman. A month ago, if someone had told me I'd be able to outrun my sister, I'd tell them to go do something private to themselves. I couldn't contain my grin as I finished my last lap and joined Warren at the starting point. He high-fived me and went to help Olivia up. After that he ran one more lap by her side. He kept encouraging her until she finished too.

"There we go, there we go. Not so hard, is it?"

She didn't answer, but just collapsed at my feet. We're only running a half marathon but I can already tell it's going to be super hard on her. I think I can do it. That is, if Warren's there cheering me on.

22.30

Nat and I have devised a plan to get me Warren. She came over this afternoon and I was so glad to see her. She looked more like her old self in baggy jeans and a Star Trek T-shirt. It was obvious that Ryan was the cause for the transformation.

"He's so different from all the other boys I've known. He wants me to be just me, you know? He said I shouldn't try so hard to be someone I'm not."

I was happy for her, and I decided that I didn't mind Ryan so much anymore.

Anyway, this is how I'm going to get Warren.

Burn and Nat's 5 Step Plan to Landing Warren Grey:

- 1. Make the effort to actually brush hair and apply makeup as just-rolled-out-of-bed look is not very appealing.**
- 2. Subtly drop idea into his head that Burn would make great model for photography project (no way to avoid budding sexual tension when forced to stare at each other for long periods of time).**
- 3. Splurge on sexy, but tasteful, dress that will make him go wild with lust. And invite him to dinner as friends.**

4. Be open and honest about feelings.

5. Make sweet love to him (obviously Nat's step, not mine).

A tight knot of nerves form in the pit of my stomach every time I imagine actually telling Warren I'm interested in him. I know I have to try. I know I have to do this before I leave. I have to do it to prove to myself that I can.

Day 42

15.00

I completely chickened out. I had the perfect opportunity to apply step two today. Warren was telling me about how Renata wants everyone to create a photo journal about something/someone they find important, or inspiring, or whatever. I had the perfect opening. He was telling me about how he had no idea where to start, or who to take pictures of. I could have batted my eyelashes and purred all sultry-like and said, "Me, of course." Instead, I wiped the sweat off my brow and kept doing sit-ups.

Today wasn't a total waste, though. Warren asked me if I wanted to join him and friends this weekend for trip to his parent's beach house. He knows Olivia will be going and he thinks it'll be good for us to hang out. That's the reason he gave, but I like to think he just wants me there with him.

I said yes despite the fact I know LTC and Whitney will be there too, as well as a few of my least favorite people from high school. I figure I have to get over it eventually. If I keep running my life like I'm still a scared freshman then high school will never end.

Warren smiled so brightly when I agreed. He says the weather is going to be good, so we can get a little surfing in and have a barbeque or something.

I'm excited to be going somewhere with him, even if it's with other people. Might have to skip step three, and just move on to the confession of my feeling part.

21.30

I have twenty e-mails in my inbox from Fred. He's given up trying to text or call, but he keeps e-mailing. I know Cassie is right. I jumped to conclusions about Lily. For all I know, she's the one who kissed him. The rational part of my head knows I should just swallow my pride and call him, but the other part of me can still feel the hurt sitting in the pit of my stomach. I'll call him. I will. Just not right now.

Day 41

17.00

Turns out there was no need to drop hints to get Warren to make me his project. After Renata's class today he asked me if I'd be his muse. Okay... he didn't use the word muse, but in my head he did. I was elated until he outlined what he wanted from me. I was hoping for something romantic and maybe a little sexy. In my head, it was like that scene out of *Titanic* when Leonardo is sketching Kate and she looks all sultry, and it's obvious they're going to get sexual. That's not what Warren is going for. He wants to take pictures of me working out. He wants to take pictures of me in the early morning, before I've had adequate time to tame my hair, when I'm all sweaty and red and probably annoyed.

I wanted to protest, but then I saw the look on his face, all hopeful, and I couldn't. Not sure what lustful feelings he's going to have after trying to Photoshop my sweat stains.

Day 40

12.00

Warren has turned part coach and part photographer. Olivia came to work out with us again today, and he had her tie some rope around her waist and then mine. I had run up the hill again with her pulling me back. Olivia has more muscle than she lets on, so it wasn't an easy task.

Warren stood to the side and snapped away with his old-fashioned-looking camera. I tried not to be bothered, but I knew I probably didn't look as good as my sister in her mini shorts and tank. We did that more times than I thought necessary and then went to this playground near our house. He made me do pull-ups on the monkey bars and I've never felt so ridiculous. Even as a kid I never did that.

It was strenuous and Olivia quit about five minutes into it. She whipped out her phone and earphones and settled under a shady tree. I was envious as I watched her fan herself while texting away.

I kept at it, like I always do. Every time I feel like giving in, I just picture myself a month or two from now. I know I'm not going to look like my sister in that time. I probably will never look like her. But I will be so much happier and healthier than I've ever been.

After the push-ups I ran drills for a while, and Warren even gave me a skipping rope to work with.

I was relieved when he told me I could stop. By then I was so tired I didn't care about his camera anymore.

"When will I get to see the pictures you're taking?" I asked him.

"The projects are due in about two weeks. I'll run them by you before I submit them."

He looked excited about it, and I wondered how his parents could possibly picture him doing anything other than photography.

Day 39

10.00

Olivia has been running around in a panic for a half hour now. She hasn't packed or finished dressing, and Warren's going to be here in the next twenty minutes. It's a bit of a drive to his parent's beach house, so he wanted us to get on the road early so we can have plenty of time to surf before we start the barbeque.

I've had my bag packed and I've been dressed and ready to go for an hour now. I'm super nervous. The last time I saw all these people together was graduation, and I planned for that to be the last time. I couldn't help but think back to prom night.

I can still picture Whitney's low cut, skin-tight dress and how it sparkled from our porch light as she watched me crumble. Liam couldn't just laugh and drive away. No. He had to get out of the limo. He had to tell me exactly why I was stupid to think he'd ever take me to prom.

"Guys that look like me don't date girls that look like you."

He sneered, and the face I'd been crushing on for weeks never looked so ugly.

I can still hear Whitney's high-pitched laugh and the laughs of the other people in the limo as I turned to leave. My dress caught onto something and ripped as I ran back to my house. I was actually glad for the tears as it stopped me from looking back and seeing their faces. Seeing them laugh at me.

Afterward I grabbed a bottle of my mother's Rosé and a box of cereal and perched on one of our lawn chairs. I alternated between lucky charms and wine as I let my tears wash my mascara away. I must have looked comical in my puffy pink dress, chugging from a bottle.

Needless to say I was sick and suffered the worst hangover in the history of underage drinking.

"Don't just sit there! Help me get ready. Warren's almost here." Olivia snapped me out of my self-pity moment and I was grateful. The past is behind me. I don't have to be "the fat girl" unless I let myself be.

11.30

I cannot believe that I am sitting in a car in between two ex-cheerleaders on my way to surf with the people that gave me hell in high school. Warren is driving and his friend Jake is in the seat next to him. I'm sitting next to Sarah Klaus (but everyone calls her Twiggy because (duh) she looks like Twiggy) and Megan Richards. I don't know them very well. I've probably spoken to both of them a handful of times before, but they are trying to bring me into their conversation. It's not a very interesting conversation. They're talking about the episode of America's Next Top Model they watched yesterday, so I'm pretty lost.

"She totally should have won best photo! She's so high fashion!" Said Sarah.

"Yeah, but she's not very commercial and that's what Tyra was looking for."

On and on for like half an hour. A few times Warren would meet my eyes in the rear-

view mirror and I could tell he was trying not to laugh. I couldn't be more misplaced with his friends.

Olivia is riding with LTC, Whitney and a couple other people. When LTC pulled up behind Warren to pick her up, I felt my heart rate pick up. The last time he was in my driveway was one of the most embarrassing nights of my life. Luckily, he didn't pay me much attention. Neither did Whitney. She was glued to her cell phone and only spoke to me once to tell me to hurry up. I was relieved when Warren told me to ride with him. If I can help it, I won't talk to either of them this afternoon.

17.30

If Olivia could see me right now she'd be really pissed off. I'm sitting in one of the bathrooms on the tiled floor. She'd think I'm being anti-social, but really I just want a little time to breathe. I've already been in the water three times and I've been talking to Megan and Sarah nonstop. They're not so bad when they're not talking about trash TV. Sarah is going to NYU too, and we were talking about registration and what we want to do when we get there.

I also got into a conversation with Jake. He gave me some tips about how to hit the water. The waves are crashing hard today, so I haven't been able to get up for more than a minute, but it's been fun watching him and Warren at it. Warren has totally been holding back on me. He's an absolute god on the water. He looks like he should be in a sunscreen commercial or something, the way he looks coming out of the water. I've caught Whitney eyeing him a few times and I really can't blame her.

Whitney's been keeping to herself, thank God. Her and a few other girls have been hanging out by the grill LTC started. Olivia is among them, and it strikes me how at ease she looks with them. She fits right in with her red bikini and long straight hair.

Warren caught me staring once, and he wrapped an arm around me like he knew what I was thinking. Whitney chose that moment to look at me and she looked anything but pleased. I'm hoping this trip will end without any mishaps on her part. I need today to be perfect so I can tell him. I'm going to tell Warren what I want. I'm going to channel my inner sex goddess and just let him have it.

"Bernie! I know you're in there! Come out already, Liam has something special for us!"
My sister giggled.

Breathe.

Here I go.

Day 36

03.00

I can't sleep, so I might as well write. So, what happened?

It seems so long ago though it was only a few days back. Remembering feels like looking through murky water. My mind just can't focus.

So, Olivia came and got me from the bathroom. I remember that. The 'something special' that LTC had been a container of weed brownies. Olivia and I joined the group in the living room as he handed them out. The container went around the group and I watched to see who would take one. Olivia looked like she wanted to take one, but changed her mind when the container got to her. When it was my turn LTC gave me this look like he knew I wouldn't take. It felt like a dare so I took one, not breaking eye contact with him. I remember Warren looking worried as he watched me take a bite.

It tasted like any other brownie except for the aftertaste. I didn't know what to expect but I didn't expect it to taste like... well... grass. Someone put some music on and Jake brought out board games.

"Thirty seconds is going to be fun like this."

I settled in and joined the group. I realized that only me, Whitney, LTC, Jake and Megan took brownies. Everyone else was joking and laughing about getting to watch us trip. I soon realized that I'd be the only person getting high that had never been high before. A pit of dread formed in my stomach and I weighed the benefits of going to the bathroom and throwing up. I was starting to panic when Warren sat next to me and wrapped an arm around me.

"Don't freak, Burn. I'll be your weed guru. I won't let anything happen to you."

He was so close I could smell the sea on his skin. He was so close all I had to do was just move a little bit... but I didn't. Instead I picked up the dice for my turn.

It didn't take very long for the brownies to kick it. It started out so slowly I didn't even realize what was happening. First Jake started laughing, and then Whitney, and before I knew it I was bent over trying to catch my breath I was laughing so hard.

I can't even remember what was so funny.

Olivia looked at me a little nervously and I tried to calm down, but I couldn't. The game went downhill from there because no one could focus long enough to answer. Megan gave up on trying and just went outside and lay on the sand with a bag of chips. Jake joined her and I was glad because the sound of his booming laugh was starting to give me a headache.

"Are you okay, Burn?" Olivia asked me.

"I'm fine. I'm so fine. I'm fine!" My voice was so shrill and I could tell I was talking too fast, but I couldn't slow down. *"Is this how it's supposed to feel, because I'm not mellow?"* I turned to LTC who was lying on the floor rubbing his legs. *"Are you mellow? Because I'm not."*

He turned to me and said very blankly, *"I'm afraid to look down because I'm ninety-five"*

percent sure my legs are gone."

That made Whitney start laughing all over again. Her blond hair fell over face as she rocked herself in her seat. Her laugh got louder and more high-pitched until it sounded like she was crying. Then I realized she was crying. Sarah and Olivia went to sit with her. Olivia rubbed her back.

"Is she okay? Am I okay? God, when is this going to end?" It was getting harder to breathe. I felt this burning sensation start out at the tips of my fingers and spread up my arms. "My hands... my hands feel like they're on fire."

"Hm... on fire. My legs are on fire!" LTC got up and ran up the stairs. "My legs are burning, dudes. They're burning!"

"Damn, they're tripping hard. How much was in there?" Warren sounded like he was speaking so slowly. "Olivia, go sort out your boyfriend. I'm going to take Burn outside."

"Okay, just take care of her."

I felt Warren's arm go around me. At first I didn't want him to touch me but when he did the burning went away. I shifted closer to him and we stood up and went outside. I thought he'd take me to sit with Jake and Megan but instead we kept walking. The burning sensation came back and I whimpered.

"Tell me what's going on so I can help you," he whispered.

"I just... I feel like something's sitting on my chest. And my hands... they're on fire. But a cold fire. Not a heat... I mean hot fire. Does that make sense?"

"Yeah, you'll be just fine. You'll be yourself in an hour. We're just going to walk for a while, okay."

"Okay." A scary thought came to mind. "Just don't leave me, Warren. Please don't leave me."

"I'm not going to leave you."

"Just don't."

He wrapped his arm tighter around me and I felt lighter. Air filled my lungs more easily.

"You help me breathe."

He chuckled and it was the sweetest sound in the world.

"Come. Let's sit down for a bit."

We sat down not very far from the water. The sand was damp and I could feel the trapped heat in the sand from the sun. I dug my fingers into it and fought the heavy feeling that was taking over my body.

"You're going to be just fine, Burn. You're going to be fine, and we're going to laugh about how stupid this was. "

"So stupid." I couldn't wait for it to be over. "How long has it been?"

"Twenty minutes."

It felt like hours had gone by. I rested my head on his shoulder and focused on my breathing to stop from freaking out. I wanted to cry. I was hoping for a nice, mellow experience or maybe writing the next best poem on the bathroom walls. Anything but this.

In the distance I could hear Jake and Megan laughing. I didn't realize what they were laughing at until I heard LTC.

"My face is a ship and I am sailing!"

LTC had a napkin on his head, his shirt was missing and he was carrying a metal spoon and running down the beach. Olivia chased after him and she looked anything but impressed. Even though I felt like crap, I had to laugh.

"At least you're not tripping like that." Warren laughed too, and I was struck by how... well... beautiful he looked right then. The sun was low in the sky and it brought out the copper in his hair.

"You're kind of beautiful, you know."

"Just kind of?" He joked.

"You are beautiful."

He turned to me and I could tell he was going to make a joke but instead he looked at me for what felt like hours.

"Burn, I... I need to tell you something."

"This is the part where you stop talking and kiss me."

I held my breath and I thought my heart might break out my chest. He leaned in toward me, and my skin burned for a totally different reason. His lips barely brushed mine when I heard Whitney behind us.

"Hell no! No! You are *not* with her." She stomped toward us and I honestly thought she would hit me. Warren moved away from me and the loss of his heat was startling for a moment.

"Whitney... what the—"

Whitney reached us and Warren stood up in front of me. He tried to back her off, but she sidestepped him and came scarily close to slapping me before he grabbed her. Everyone from the house came out to see the commotion. LTC even stopped pretending to be a ship.

"You weren't seriously about to kiss *that* were you? You weren't seriously... argh."

"Calm down, Whitney. You're being a—"

"I'm being a what? I'm being a bitch? Is that what you want to say?"

Maybe it was the weed, or maybe it was because Warren was between us, but I thought that would be a good time to confront Whitney. I was very wrong.

"Just leave us alone, Whitney. You're such a self-absorbed brat. Why can't you just let people be happy? What you do is fucked up. You are fucked up."

She stopped struggling with Warren and got very quiet for a moment. She looked scarier when she wasn't fighting. Warren let her go and she ran her hand through her hair, straightening it out. She took a breath and looked at me calmly.

"I'm fucked up? Do you want to know what's fucked up? Fucked up is falling for a guy that would stand you up at prom."

"What? What are you talking about?"

Warren looked scared when I looked at him. Jake was there too, and he wouldn't meet my eye.

"What are you talking about?"

Whitney's smile was slow, satisfied.

"Oh, he didn't tell you. Did you really think it was Liam that thought up that prank for prom? No... it was your boy Warren. He picked you, he talked to you for a month and then he laughed. He laughed with all of us as we watched you cry."

"I don't believe you." I looked at Warren and his face... it broke my heart. "Why? Why would you..."

"Burn, I... I didn't know you then." He reached for me and I walked away. I walked and then I started running. Behind me I could hear Warren calling my name, and then I could hear Olivia but I couldn't... wouldn't let them watch me cry for a second time. I ran into the house, up the stairs and into one of the bedrooms. Each step felt heavy, and air struggled to fill my lungs.

I opened the closet door and stepped inside. It was one of those walk-in closets. The carpet was thick and plush and the room smelled of air freshener. I leaned against the cool surface of the only mirror and tried to learn how to breathe again.

Outside the door I could hear Olivia screaming. She was demanding LTC's keys and screaming a whole lot of profanities at Warren.

"No! You do not get to say anything to her. I don't know the whole story here, but if you so much as look at my sister I will cut you with these keys."

That made me laugh. I kept laughing and laughing until everything hurt. I heard the door open and I knew it was Olivia. She sat next to me while I laughed and rubbed my back. That made me want to cry and I didn't want that.

"Come on, Bernie. Let's go home."

I was glad no one was in the house when we went down the stairs. No one stopped us when we got into the car. As soon as we pulled out of the driveway I couldn't stop the tears. Wave after wave, I felt it. Olivia held my hand as I curled into myself.

That was what he wanted to tell me. It was him I talked to for a month. It was him that I fell for. It was him laughing in the limo as LTC crushed me. How could I not see that before? He's been nice to me because he's been guilty. It was never about friendship... or anything else. It was pity.

All I wanted to do was curl up really small and pretend like nothing happened, but I couldn't catch my breath. Even when we got home and I was in my own bed, I couldn't

calm down enough to sleep. When I tried to breathe I felt like I sinking into my own body. It was scary and I almost called Olivia back into my room. In the end I fell into a restless sleep. My dreams were filled with blond-haired monsters and puffy dresses.

Day 35

15.00

I'm scaring Olivia and my mom. I haven't been out of my room in days. The first day scared me too. I woke up early Sunday morning and I couldn't move. I just couldn't move. I felt this weight throughout my body like someone was lying on top of me. I imagined simply sinking into the mattress and never coming out again.

Olivia came and sat with me, and I was glad. I cried silently and she rubbed my back like she used to after Nana died. She lay down next to me and didn't speak. It was comforting to know she was there and that helped me drift back to sleep.

When I woke up again in the night I could move again, but I didn't want to. I kept playing the scene over and over again in my head like a movie. I kept seeing Warren's face. I kept seeing Whitney's face. Then I played over prom night. Was he there in that limo? Did he really sit there and laugh? Did he tell LTC what to say to me?

It hurt in a way that I'd never felt before.

I spent most of Monday alternating between sleep and staring out my window. It rained for the first time in a long time and I watched the streaks it made against my window. The sound was comforting. All I could hear in the whole house was the sound of my breathing and the rain hitting the roof.

I blinked and it was nighttime.

By then my mom knew something was wrong. I figure Olivia told her because she let me sleep for a while longer. She opened the door and checked in on me a few times. I could feel her watching me. She didn't come in until this morning.

I felt her presence, but I didn't lift my head. I didn't feel like I could.

"That's enough, Bernadette. That's enough." She pulled my duvet off me. I don't think I even flinched. "You're going to get off that bed and take a damn shower. Then you're going to eat something."

"Please, I'm just so tired."

"That's not good enough, Bernie. It's just not."

I looked at her then and I'd never seen her so worried. I sat up and the room spun. I could feel the tears falling down my cheeks, but I didn't have the energy to wipe them away.

"I want to stop crying but I don't know how."

She came and held me for a while. She smelled like perfume and makeup and I breathed it all in.

"I know this feels like the worst feeling ever, but you're so much stronger than this. I know you are."

She held me for a while longer and then told me I smelled rank.

"Seriously, get in the shower. I'll make you some eggs."

"I love you, Mom."

She smiled at me.

"I love you more."

20.00

Warren has called me a dozen times and left nine messages. I deleted each one. Apparently he came over Monday morning and Olivia threatened to hit him with a frying pan. She knows about prom night now. I think Sarah or someone filled her in. I know she feels horrible for not knowing and even worse for dating a guy that was involved. She told me she ended things with LTC yesterday.

"You didn't have to do that for me," I told her over breakfast.

"Yes, I did. You're my sister. Anything that hurts you hurts me too." She dropped her fork and stared at me. "You can't do that anymore. You can't shut yourself in your room and in your head like I'm not right here. I'm right here for you."

"I'm sorry, Ollie."

I hadn't called her that in years. She hated it. She kicked me under the table and laughed. My heart felt lighter than it had in days.

"Maybe... after breakfast, we can go for a run? We're still doing that marathon thing right?"

I thought about it for a bit. No... I wasn't going to let some boy stop me from achieving the goals I set for myself.

"First one to the beach buys smoothies?"

"You're on."

Day 33

17.00

I've officially left the two hundreds. I'm sitting at 198 pounds, probably due to The Dark Ages, as I am now referring those days of slight depression. As I was doing my morning run this morning, before going to work, I kept repeating this one line from Tears for Fears *Everybody wants to rule the world*.

"Welcome to your life."

I feel like finally I'm starting to live. I'm starting to look how I was always meant to look. I'm starting to feel how I was always meant to feel.

And it feels good.

22.00

Avoidance has become an art form for me. I've changed my hours at work so I won't bump into Warren. I'm avoiding the beach altogether and I haven't looked at my phone in days. Warren isn't the only one I've perfected avoiding. Right now I'm sitting in front of my laptop staring at my inbox. Fred has sent me more e-mails than I'm willing to count. I should probably read them. I know I should because Cassie was right. I jumped to conclusions with him because I wanted to give Warren a chance without feeling guilty. Now that that is over...well...

I'm overwhelmed by how fickle I can be. I'm just going to close my laptop. If I open one e-mail, I'll open them all. If I let myself think about him... I won't stop.

Day 32

10.00

The marathon is in three weeks. Olivia's pageant is in two weeks. I found her in the kitchen making a timetable so she has enough time to work out with me and get everything done that she needs to. Being Olivia, the table was covered in glitter and colored markers. I'm going to be at my sister's pageant. I haven't been to one in years, but I want to be there for this one.

I poured us both a glass of juice and sat down opposite her.

"It's going to be my last pageant."

I was surprised. I thought she'd want to do the whole Miss America/Miss Universe thing. I said as much to her.

"I never wanted that. That's not why I did the pageants."

"Then why?"

It felt like I was getting to know my sister all over again and I was grateful.

"I like how I feel when I'm on that stage. When the judges are smiling and people are cheering and I can feel the other girls' envious stares. I'm a hundred percent secure. I'm a hundred percent confident. No doubt that I'm strong... that I'm beautiful."

"Like you ever have any doubt." I scoffed.

"I have doubts like any other teenage girl has doubts. Sometimes I hate my hair or think I look fat or wonder if I'm pretty. I wonder if I'm smart enough. I wonder if I matter. I wonder if I've done anything of substance in my life. I have doubts like anyone. But when I'm on that stage... yeah... nothing."

"Gosh... if I'd know that, maybe I'd have joined you."

"Nah, you would have hated it." She scrunches up her nose, probably thinking of me in a ball gown and tiara.

"Yeah, I probably would have."

We laughed and I could almost feel our hearts morphing into one again.

Day 30

08.00

It rained a bit last night. Raining twice in the space of about a week is so rare. There were probably car accidents or something last night. I love it after it rains. Everything feels different, like everyone is waiting to exhale. I'm excited to go running while it's not too hot. Olivia is going to join me when she gets back from her vocal coach. Who would think I would get to a point where I actually enjoy running? I didn't.

Okay, I'll write a bit more later.

Day 25

12.00 (I think)

I can't believe it. I actually just can't believe it. I keep replaying it over and over and... I can't believe it. I'm writing this from a hospital bed. Olivia is camped out in the bed next to me reading Cosmo, and Mom has just stepped out to grab herself some coffee. I've been in hospital all week because some douchbag hit me with his car.

I was jogging Monday morning like I always do. The road was wet and slippery because of the rain. I was turning a corner; I'd barely even left my neighborhood, and... bam. Just like that. The policeman that took my statement said I'm lucky that the driver wasn't going too fast. He said it could have been a lot worse.

I don't agree. I don't think I'm lucky. I was just supposed to get a workout and instead I've got three bruised ribs, scratches and bruises everywhere and a ruptured spleen. Okay... I guess if you're going to rupture something, the spleen is the best thing. But still, I feel like crap.

I don't remember a lot of what happened. I don't think I saw the car, but I remember the sound of the wheels scraping the asphalt. I don't remember the impact, but I remember the ambulance lights flashing. I remember the EMT. He had dark hair and he smelt like sand and sea. I remember thinking that he reminded me of Warren.

Then everything was dark for a really long time.

14.00

Visiting time is over, so Mom has gone home to get Olivia some clean clothes. The nurses are letting her stay here with me because she made a scene the first night when they told her to leave. When I woke up after the accident she was lying very still next to me. She pushed my hair out of my face and kissed my forehead.

"I swear, when that car hit you, I just knew. I knew you needed me. I could feel that something was wrong," she told me. "I've never been so scared."

She held me for a really long time and I let her even though everything hurt.

20.00

I keep falling asleep. The nurses say that's a good thing because my body needs a chance to recover. I've spent the past couple days doing nothing but watching TV and sleeping. Until today I didn't even have enough energy to write. Nat visited me with Ryan yesterday and I fall asleep mid-conversation. She brought me books instead of flowers.

She knows me too well.

My doctor said that if I'm feeling better by tomorrow night then I can go home. I'm super excited because I don't think I can stomach any more jelly.

Warren hasn't visited. I'm pretending not to care but really I do.

Day 24

15.00

I've read a lot of books. I've read a lot of love stories. There's always a point in the really good books which leave the reader melting. The girl finally gets the boy and it's all butterflies and sunshine. Those moments, that scene when the boy tells the girl why he loves her while holding a boom box above his head, they make the book.

But stuff like that never happens in real life. And even if it did, it would never happen to someone like me.

Or so I thought.

I had just finished breakfast and was taking a nap when Warren came. I woke up and found him next to me, caressing my hand. His hair was damp and he smelled of the beach. My heart fluttered in my chest and I attempted to stop the feeling. His eyes were a bit damp as he touched the bandage on my head. Unshed tears hung on his too-long eyelashes, and I fought the urge to wipe them away.

"Can't leave you alone for a second without you hurting yourself, can I?"

"Ha ha, so funny," I replied, sarcastically.

His fingers moved from my hand to my elbow. He brushed the bandage there lightly.

"Does it hurt?"

"Not so much right now. Not like it did the first day."

"If... if I had known you were here I would have been here sooner. I only found out today."

"How?"

"I ran into Nat at your house. I had come to grovel again and she told me what happened. I'm so happy you're okay. You don't know how much you've come to mean to me."

I was silent, not knowing the right words to say. He misinterpreted it.

"You don't believe me? You don't think I care about you?"

"The evidence speaks for itself. After all, the past couple weeks have just been your way of repenting, right? You offered to help me out of guilt... or obligation... or whatever."

He hung his head for a moment and exhaled slowly. My heart broke a bit more with each second that passed. He finally looked at me and I couldn't decipher the emotion in his eyes.

"I don't expect you to understand, or forgive, what I did. I was pretty messed up back then. I was going through a lot at home. It's no excuse, but it's true." He shifted so that his face was super close to mine. I wanted to back away, but I didn't have it in me.

"I wanted so desperately to be liked. I thought being popular was the best thing that could happen to me. Guys like me... we have a tendency to peak in high school. Who we are at eighteen is probably all we'll ever be. So I wanted it all." He rolled his eyes like he knew what he was saying was outrageous.

"It started off as a joke. I never meant to actually go through with it. But then one thing led to another and next thing I knew I was talking to you. And I liked it. You were nothing like my friends. You were deep and had big dreams and you made me laugh. You listened and actually cared. You made me feel... seen. Does that make sense?"

I nodded my head and thought back to all the messages I thought I was sharing with LTC back then. All the things he said, and all the thing I said. All the reasons I started to fall.

He continued.

"By the time prom night came around, I had changed my mind. I told Whitney and them that I didn't want to do it anymore. I thought we would just go to prom. I thought... I figured... I was an ass. I was hoping you'd come anyway when Liam didn't show and then I'd tell you the truth. I swear, I didn't know Whitney and Liam would go to your house. I promise I didn't know."

"But you were in the limo, right? Why didn't you tell me then? Why didn't you stop them then?"

"Because I was a little boy then and I didn't deserve you."

"And now? What are you now?"

"I still don't deserve you." He held my hand again. "But I hope to someday."

I should have kissed him then. I wanted to. I should have, but I didn't. Instead, I let him climb up next to me on the bed. He wrapped his arm around my shoulders which was the only place that didn't hurt. He surprised me by bringing the book I was reading before the accident. He got it from Nat when he met her at my house.

Lying there on that hospital bed wrapped up in Warren Grey's warmth as he read to me, I couldn't help but look inside my heart.

I looked and I found love there.

Day 23

12.00

I'm home again and supremely bored. I can't do much because I get tired simply from standing for too long. Warren has showed me some exercises I can do while sitting down, but even they tire me out pretty quickly.

Both Olivia and Mom have been faffing around me and doing silly thing like fluffing my pillow like I'm incapable of even that. I know they mean well, but all I want to do is get out of the house now. There is only so much daytime TV one person can watch.

I talked to Renata this morning about not being able to work anymore. She was sympathetic and sent her wishes. She's invited me to come to the exhibit she's hosting to showcase all her students' work. I'm definitely going to go considering Warren's project was about me.

I'm hoping to be all healed by then, especially since the marathon is only a couple days before then.

I don't want to give up just because I'm bruised up. I want to see this through to the end.

20.00

Fred continues to e-mail me every day. I've just starting sending them into my junk mail folder.

Day 20

14.00

Olivia is freaking out over her last pageant. I shuffled into the kitchen this morning to find her staring at a bathing suit with so much intensity that I half thought she was trying to move it with her mind. When I asked what she was doing she told me she was trying to "visualize success."

My sister is an odd one.

Since I have nothing better to do, she's been practicing on me. I sit in the living room while she does her runway strut in her bikini and then ball gown, and then I ask her a series of questions before she finishes off with the talent portion of the competition. If I'm being completely honest, I'm having quite a bit of fun. She's so serious that I can't help messing with her just a little. I've asked her questions like "*What are your beliefs about farting in public?*" and "*Vampire or Werewolf? Critically discuss.*"

She puts on this bright smile and answers them like they're normal. More than once I've had to exit the room so I don't laugh in her face.

But when she sings, that's when I shut up. I've heard her sing before, of course. But usually it's in the shower, or humming along to something. But when she stood in our living room with a hairbrush as a microphone and sang Pink's *Blow Me One Last Kiss*... wow. I've never seen my sister like that. I was in awe.

"No wonder you always win," I said and she blushed.

"I was thinking of Liam as I sang."

I knew her and Liam got really close over the summer so I couldn't imagine how she felt.

"Did you... I mean... was he your first?" Curiosity got the better of me and I had to ask. Her face got as red as the ball gown she was wearing. "You don't have to tell me, Olive."

"Um... no. I mean, we got pretty close a couple times, but it didn't feel right. I'm glad it didn't happen."

"Me too." I smiled. "So who was your first? Please tell me it wasn't that dumb jock you dated last year."

If possible, she went even redder and stared down at the six inch heels.

"I'm a virgin, Bernie."

I really hadn't seen that coming.

"I'd just assumed... you're so pretty that I thought... well, this is awkward."

Her head snapped up and something registered for her.

"Does that mean you aren't?" she whispered as if Mom could hear us from upstairs.

I found myself telling her about Fred. We sat together on the sofa and her huge ball gown took up most of the space. Light shined in from the window and the sequins cast off sparkles in all directions.

When I was done she hugged me really tight and said, "Let's not ever grow so far apart that you feel like you can't tell me stuff like this."

I hugged her back. She smelled of baby powder and flowers. She smelled like she always has. I wouldn't have traded that moment for anything.

"You have to open his e-mails! You just have to!" She exclaimed, bouncing up and down.

"Why?"

"OMG, Bernie. The guy is smart enough to be going to an Ivy League; he's got the whole sexy Indie rocker thing going on and he's obviously way into you. Like, why aren't you married to him already?!"

I laughed at her enthusiasm.

"Because...I don't know. It really freaked me out when I saw him with Lily. It's like you said, he's got the whole sexy indie thing going for him. You should have seen all the girls screaming his name at *Cloud 9*. What if one day he wakes up and realizes he can do better?"

My sister hugged me again then hit me at the back of my head.

"What was that for?" I exclaimed.

"That was for being an absolute idiot. I'm going to say this once and never again. You are gorgeous. You are beautiful. Any guy would be lucky to be with you. Do you know how I know that?"

"How?"

"Because you look like me!"

I threw a cushion at her and she ducked giggling.

"Seriously Bernie. Make up your mind about this guy. He deserves to know the real reason why you haven't been replying his e-mails."

"Okay, okay."

I knew she was right. Of course she is right. But I couldn't bring myself to read his e-mails for fear of what they might say.

Day 19

14.30

Nat and Olivia are acting really weird. We're in Nat's car on the way to the mall to grab a few things for Olivia before her pageant tomorrow. I was expecting Nat to be a little freaked out by Olivia, because she never hangs out with us, but they've been weirdly friendly. Olivia is in the front next to Nat and she keeps looking back at me and smiling then looking at Nat and smiling. They are obviously up to something.

17.00

Turns out that they did plan something. When we got to the mall we immediately went to one of the little boutiques that sell dresses. I was confused at first because Olivia already has a dress, but I just went with it. I was lost in all the colors and shapes and fabrics. The boutique had a rack with just puffy Cinderella-type dresses and I had the urge to lay them all on the floor and dive into them.

I was getting bored when Olivia and Nat cornered me and shoved a dress in my hands.

"Okay, don't be mad," said Nat, looking at Olivia nervously. "But I saw this dress a while back and I just knew it was for you."

"Why would I be mad?"

"Because you hate shopping and we knew we'd have to trick you into it."

I wanted to tell them that I didn't hate shopping; I like clothes a lot. I hate that the clothes I like never fit.

"You guys, this is sweet of you, and I'm not mad, but this store isn't for me. I'm never going to fit anything in here."

Olivia rolled her eyes, grabbed my arm and led me to the changing rooms.

"Stop right there, Bernie. You've lost an amazing amount of weight. You haven't weighed yourself since the accident, but I bet you've lost a little since then too. You need to stop looking in the mirror and seeing who you used to be and start seeing who you are."

She practically pushed me into the dressing room and I stopped fighting her. I figured I'd just try on the dress, see how horrible it looks, and then persuade them to go to the gaming store with me.

I lay the dress against me and a little bubble of unwanted excitement sprung up inside me. It was a formfitting, blood red dress that hit just below the knee. The front opened up into a square shape hitting mid breast. It would have been a tad bit slutty if it weren't for the lace covering the skin up to the neck and forming little sleeves. The back was the best part. There was a button at the neck but the rest was just open space, a bit more lace and then the rest of the dress. It was too much for me. That was the kind of dress someone like Whitney would wear.

It was the kind of dress you conquer the world in.

I hesitantly unbuttoned my jeans. I've reached the point where I can form a fist against

my skin and the waistband of the jeans and still have room. I peeled them off and then my T-shirt. I looked at myself in the mirror. I was wearing the Victoria Secret undies I bought with Cassie, and for the first time in a long time, I felt good without my clothes on.

With that extra bit of confidence, I tried on the dress.

I could hear Olivia and Nat outside begging to see, but I didn't open the door. I was too transfixed on what I looked like in the dress. It was the first time I'd ever worn something that tight and revealing. I decided it wouldn't be the last.

When I did open the door Olivia starting screaming and jumping around me. The shop assistant stared at her like she'd lost her mind. Nat just stood there with her hand over her mouth, speechless.

"That's it," she whispered. "I'm officially burning all your hoodies and t-shirts."

I laughed and agreed.

"Too bad I don't have anywhere to wear it." I said.

I didn't miss the look they exchanged each other. I have no idea what my sister and my best friend have planned. But whatever it is, I can do it in that dress.

Day 18

Morning of Miss Elegance Pageant

Mom has been running around like a headless chicken all day. It is astonishing how much Olivia needs for one of these pageants. Mom has already packed three bags and there are still two more waiting to be filled. Olivia will do her hair and makeup there, but all the other prep work has to be done at home. She's sitting at the kitchen table skillfully doing her own nails. She looks a lot calmer than she did a couple days ago.

I keep expecting her to start tearing up or something. She's been doing pageants since I can remember. It must be hard to just give up something that you've dedicated so much time to.

I sat with her and watched her paste on the fake, glittery nail. She had such a look of concentration it made me think of Warren before he dives into a pool. I could tell inside her pretty little head, wheels were turning.

"I hope you win this one," I said.

"I hope so too. I don't mind if I don't... like I said, it was never about that."

I helped her with her toes and she painted a quick coat of red on my nails. Meanwhile, our mother was having a mini panic attack trying to remember if she packed the hair extensions or not.

Something tells me she's secretly glad this is Olivia's last pageant.

Warren, Nat and Ryan are meeting us at the pageant. It's being held at our old high school because they have a giant hall. I helped Mom pack the car and we were on our way. My sister immediately closed her eyes and looked to be napping. I wondered if she was always this calm. I know I wouldn't be.

18.00

There was a lot of activity when we got there. It took forever to find a parking spot and we were really early. It was obvious a lot of people would be there.

Backstage was a nightmare. Girls were running around half naked trying to figure out where they were meant to be. Someone was crying really loudly while she got her hair blown out. The smell of hair spray and perfume was suffocating.

In the midst of it, Olivia was still calm. She sat crossed-legged, leafing through a magazine as my mom tonged her hair. It was extremely comical. I watched for a while and then went to take my seat next to Warren. He smiled at me and I realized how much I missed not seeing him every day. He asked me how I felt and when I told him I was feeling good, he suggested we pick up training for the marathon. Never thought I'd be so happy about running before.

The lights dimmed and this cheesy classical music started playing.

A woman dressed completely in white took center stage. She could have been anywhere between the ages of thirty and sixty. She had short brunette hair cut in a severe bob and a smile that would make The Joker proud.

"Ladies and gentlemen... ladies and gentlemen, welcome to the Miss Elegance Pageant. We will be judging an exceptional group of young women who embody poise and elegance. These lovely beauties are competing for a cash prize of a thousand dollars, a spa day for two, and a cosmetics kit valued at two hundred dollars."

"Whoa... sign me up for the next one of these," Nat whispered and I had to stifle a giggle at the thought of her in a ball gown.

"We will begin with a dance choreographed by yours truly. Then we'll move onto the Q and A's, swimsuit competition, and finally the talent section! Please switch off your phones and watch these caterpillars become butterflies!"

I could almost feel Warren rolling his eyes next to me. He sunk into his seat like he was getting ready for a long nap.

The dance was nothing special. They basically just twirled around stage and curtsied a bit. Olivia looked gorgeous in a short, white, chiffon dress. She was like a twirling, curtsying angel up there. She continued to stand out in the Q and A. Her answers were short, to the point, and spot on. She answered with a demure smile and a tilt to the head like she was thinking each question over. I was the only one who knew that she had memorized all the possible questions they might ask. Everything from global warming to proper etiquette at a dinner party.

Of course she looked amazing in her red bathing suit. She was the only girl not to wear a bikini and I could tell the judges liked that. She had this whole Marilyn Monroe thing going on with her hair and came on stage with a rainbow striped beach bag. When she stopped to strike a pose and toss it into the air she looked like a post-war pin-up girl.

Perfect.

If I had come to watch her a month ago I probably would have felt inadequate in comparison. I think the best thing about this whole experience is how I feel about myself now. I know I'm not perfect. But that's okay. It really is. I don't have half the confidence of my sister, but I'm getting there.

Finally the last event arrived. My sister went last. After about ten girls Warren fell asleep and was snoring softly. Nat was on her phone, and Ryan had left to go to the bathroom like half an hour ago. It wasn't that the girls were boring; some had some really cool things going on. It was that they all kind of looked the same, and did the same kind of thing, that it was hard to remember who was who. I swear four girls in a row did a baton routine.

I had to sit through five more performances before my sister's.

I knew hers would be different because she was singing something from this decade. I knew it would be different, but hadn't realize how different.

It seemed like everyone was sleeping before she came on and woke up the second the spotlight hit her. There was a collective gasp and I couldn't believe it was my sister I was staring at.

For one thing, she wasn't wearing a red ball gown. She was wearing black leather pants. *Leather*. She wore it with a tiny black t-shirt that cut off a little after her breasts and a

man's waistcoat. If that wasn't enough, the pretty babydoll makeup was gone and replaced with dark eyeliner and red lips. She kept the extensions in so her hair hung to her waist.

She tapped the microphone once, twice and everyone fell silent. At least two hundred pairs of eyes were staring at my sister and she didn't even flinch.

She sang that song like it was the last thing she would ever do. She kicked and shook her hair out and jumped around. I had never seen her having so much fun. The all-white woman looked like she might faint. Someone was actually fanning her as Olivia performed.

I thought it was spectacular. Nat, Ryan, Warren, and I got out of our seats and jumped and clapped with her. I don't think anyone else did. Too shocked, I suspect.

When she was done, she put the microphone back on the stand and did a little curtsy then blew a kiss to the judges and strutted off stage.

I loved her so much just then.

Needless to say, she didn't win the prize. She did win Miss Congeniality, though. After the crowning, a group of girls rushed up to her and fawned over her. It seemed they also thought her performance was ace.

I asked her later why she did it. I mean, she could have won easily if she'd just worn the puffy red dress.

"I know I could have won. It would have been nice if I had but... I don't know. I wanted... to not be me for a little while. I wanted to win not because I look good in a dress but because of me. Because I can sing." I nodded, understanding her. "Plus, I just really wanted to see the judges' faces."

Day 17

12.00

I weighed myself this morning and I've lost another five pounds. It was just the boost I needed because I'm back to training for the marathon with Warren and Olivia.

I'm slower than I used to be, which is annoying, but I'm still doing it. Olivia and I raced against each other, and it was fun trying to outdo each other. Especially since Warren can be simply jogging and still overtake us.

Warren has been acting strangely toward me. He's quieter than usual. Usually he's forever baiting me and shouting at me to do better, but lately he keeps his mouth shut while he works with me. I'm going to attribute the silence to nerves. The exhibit is super close and I know he has invited his parents to come see it.

He took a few pictures of us racing so I guess he's not finished with it. He told me the other day that he's taken some other photos that don't include me in order to make his project 'richer.' I was a bit annoyed that I wasn't his only muse anymore, but now I'm excited to see what he's come up with.

I just hope I don't look too hideous.

Day 16

15.00

I love swimming now. I love how weightless I feel underneath the water. I love how it feels against my skin as I swim lap after lap. I'm still pretty terrible at it, but it's my favorite workout thus far. Warren says there'll be a swimming pool in the gym I'm joining in New York. I'm glad, because there isn't going to be a beach for me to dig holes in or anything like that. I would like to lose quite a bit more weight, but I'm really happy with what I've done so far. I still can't believe I've accomplished this much in such a short time.

I feel like Wonder Woman.

20.00

I've asked Warren to take a photo of me.

A nude photo.

When I called and asked he just went silent. For quite a while.

It was by far the most awkward moment I'd had with him. He's agreed to do it, though. I'm going to go over to Renata's studio tomorrow and get it done. I'm relieved that we'll be doing it there. It would be supremely awkward to do it at his place or mine. It would seem all too intimate.

Day 15

15.00

I was wrong. It didn't matter where we decided to take the photo, it was supremely awkward anyway.

I was a tense bundle of nerves by the time I got to Renata's studio. I'd spent the whole morning being preened by Olivia. She waxed my legs (ouch), did my makeup and hair in a pin-up girl style and even chose which underwear to wear. I wore a blush the whole morning.

I was chickening out by the time I opened the studio door and I almost bolted when I realized it would just be the two of us. Warren was already there, setting the scene and Renata was nowhere to be seen. I kind of thought she would be present and it freaked me out to think that we were alone.

Warren was a nervous wreck too. He bumped into three light stands on the way to greet me. He was blushing and I hadn't even undressed yet.

Awkward was the word of the day.

"Okay... um... this is maybe the most awkward thing I've ever done. It would be great if you weren't as nervous as I am," I said.

"This really isn't a big deal... it isn't. We're friends... and I'm a photographer. I can be totally professional." I nodded but I doubted he could be. Especially since he hadn't looked me in the eye since I came in. "You can change in the bathroom while I finish up here."

He'd gotten one of those vintage-looking love seats and placed it in front of a white backdrop. It was made of red velvet with gold legs and reminded me a little of the seat in the *Titanic* when Leo sketches Kate.

As I changed, I imagined that I was a muse. I imagined that my body was a work of art that needed to be forever immortalized.

I've seen loads of women with bodies like mine in art books. So, yeah, maybe Playboy wouldn't be interested in me, but that doesn't make my body any less beautiful. There was a mirror in the bathroom and I watched myself as I stripped. I had planned on leaving my underwear on for the shoot but I started to question that choice. Why not go all out?

I unhooked my bra and examined my breasts as if they didn't belong to me. I thought of them as a piece of art. Why couldn't they be a piece of art?

I took a deep breath and slipped off my panties. I looked at my naked self unflinchingly and, as if by magic, I smiled because I was in love with what I saw.

I will probably never forget the look on Warren's face when I stepped out of the bathroom. He was holding his camera and he nearly dropped it. He had to scramble to catch it and nearly knocked over another light stand.

I giggled nervously as I approached the love seat. I was painfully aware of both the cool air and Warren's gaze on my skin. I felt hot and cold at the same time.

When I was brave enough to sneak a glance at him, I almost wish I hadn't. His eyes were hungry as he drank all of me in. I felt the blush all over me and it was hard to remind myself that this was for art.

He licked his lips and I was undone.

"Um... we should probably... um... you know, start," I muttered, feeling anything but confident.

"Yes, that would be a good idea." His voice was low and sexy and I shivered. "There's a robe thing behind the couch if you're cold."

I picked it up and held it to the light. It was a sheer peach fabric that wouldn't do much to cover me up. I put it on and positioned it so that it covered my stomach and a bit of thigh.

"No, not like that." Warren said as he approached me. My heart picked up as he came closer. He showed me how to sit so that my more private bits would be covered. His hand on my thigh was almost too much. I found myself wondering if we could both fit on the couch as he shifted the robe so that it barely covered my breast.

He was so close. So very close. He gently moved some of my hair so that it fell over my shoulder. His scent was all around me and I was too aware of how his rough hands felt against my soft skin.

"Perfect," he whispered against my ear. I could hardly breathe.

He backed away too quickly and I felt the loss of his heat. I watched him get his camera ready. He was in his element. Just like when he swims, confidence radiated from him. I followed him with my eyes as he took picture after picture. It was torture having to stay perfectly still when all I wanted was to pounce on him.

Sometimes he would pause and tell me to change positions or shift the robe. Sometimes he would come and gently move me the way he wanted. Surprisingly, I never felt vulnerable. Just sexy.

After about twenty minutes of shooting, he put the camera down. I stood up and stretched, watching him as I did. His eyes devoured every curve, every piece of skin. He approached me slowly.

"Rivers, if you don't want this to happen, you need to say so *now*, because I've never wanted anyone as badly as I do you right now."

I could have covered up. I could have said good-bye and run to the bathroom.

I didn't.

Instead, I let the robe fall.

Right now, I'm lying on my bed writing this and I know I should feel guilty. I know I should feel like a giant slut, because that's how I felt after Fred, but honestly I don't. I feel tired, but not guilty.

We didn't have sex. Not that I didn't want to. Not that we didn't come very close.

I keep replaying every touch, every caress. He wanted me just as much, but I'm not on the pill and we didn't have protection. I thought guys like him carried condoms

everywhere, but I was wrong. I was both happy and frustrated by that at the time.

I'm lying here, immobilized by pure shock. I keep thinking I'll blink a few times and realize that it was a very elaborate dream. But it wasn't a dream. It was real. Every kiss and touch was so very real.

I can almost feel his warm breath hot against my skin. He was so tall and broad... he made me feel delicate and beautiful like a work of art. He was slow and gentle, whispering what he was going to do before doing it. I was undone before he even kissed me.

And that kiss. That kiss is what songs and movies and books are written about. That kiss left me drifting somewhere outside myself, too overwhelmed by him.

And then came his touch. Deliberate and hotter than his lips on mine. I squirmed underneath his hands, not used to feeling so much at the same time.

"You ever been kissed like this, babe?"

I shook my head. Every kiss with Fred felt too innocent to be compared to what Warren was doing to me in that moment.

"Anyone ever make you come before?"

I shivered at his words and he laughed softly against my skin. He led me to the love seat and covered my body with his. The feel of the rough fabric of his jeans against my sensitive skin was strange but electric.

I hesitantly slipped my fingers under the hem of his t-shirt. He sat up and pulled it off and I was again overwhelmed. It was one thing seeing his chest on the beach but something totally different in that context. He was breathing hard, like he'd just run a mile and it gave me great satisfaction to know that it was because of me.

The feel of his skin against my skin took me to the edge of reason and I tipped over when he slid his fingers between my legs.

"It's okay, let go, babe. I've got you," he whispered hotly.

So I did. And as I did, I thought of the ocean and how one small wave can cause a bigger one and an even bigger one until wave after wave hits the shore leaving it wet and changed forever.

I was embarrassed. I looked at him through my eyelashes and he was so beautiful in that moment. He looked at me like he'd never seen me before and kissed me like I'd never been kissed.

"Remember, I was the first. No one else. Me." He growled and I became liquid beneath him.

Despite the fact that I'm a bundle of tension right now, it is probably for the best that we stopped. It really is. It would have been a mistake... right?

Day 14

14.00

My mom took me and Olivia shopping today for dorm room stuff. I'm relieved because it gave me a reason not to work out with Warren. I'm afraid that working out might not mean the same thing now that it did before. The very thought of sweat glistening on his body makes me lose focus.

"I'm thinking pink and purple for a color scheme, you?" asked Olivia.

"Haven't given it much thought," I said.

She's been all too perky since the pageant, and today was no exception. I'm just glad that she didn't pry about the photo shoot with Warren. I'm not sure what to say just yet.

My mind has been a messy tangle of fragmented thoughts all day. I don't even remember what I actually picked out this morning. It's quite possible that I now have a pink-themed dorm room.

On the one hand, I wanted it to happen. I probably wouldn't have walked out of that bathroom the way I did if I didn't. On the other hand, I don't want to make the same mistakes. Warren has become a good friend and I don't want any weirdness between us. The last thing I want is to resent him like I did Fred.

Day 13

01.00

I came clean to Nat, Cassie and Olivia. We had an impromptu sleepover and I couldn't hold it in any longer. I kind of just blurted it out while we watched *Vampire Diaries* reruns.

"I hooked up with Warren." Is what I think I said.

Olivia and Cassie stared at me in silent disbelief and Nat spit out the nuts she was just eating.

"But what about Fred? He's perfect for you!" Olivia looked hurt as if she even knew Fred.

"Forget Fred, Warren is smoking," Nat interjected.

They turned to argue with each other. They each listed their qualities and why I should pick them. I could feel a slight headache creeping in.

"Calm down, calm down. Bernie is a grown woman. She can make her own decisions." Cassie turned to me. "This isn't black and white. You can't just make a list and pick one. I say, just go with the flow and see where it leads."

I gave Cassie a warm hug and continued to watch the vamp melodrama. Soon Olivia and Nat followed suite but I couldn't get what they said out my head. Reminds me of a quote I once read. It went something like; boys are like buses, when you want one you can never find one, but when you decide you don't need one, two come along at the same time.

12.00

Warren invited me to his house for a swim later on today. I don't know what to expect and I'm trying not to expect anything at all. After all, guys like him hook up all the time. It could mean absolutely nothing to him.

When I told Olivia she said it's about time I invested in a bathing suit that did "something for your figure." I let her drag me to the mall again. I think I've been to the mall more times this summer than I have the past few years.

I refused to try any of them on. It's one thing to feel good in a changing room when I'm trying on a dress. Something else entirely when I'm trying on a bathing suit. I left her to pick something for me.

I should have known she would come back with something pink. At least it's not a shocking pink, and it's not a two piece so I'll live. I hope Warren likes it. I hope he notices.

20.00

And notice he did. My mom dropped me off and I met him at the pool. He was doing laps and I stood there and watched for a moment. He was doing the butterfly stroke and I could see all his muscles working. I tentatively shrugged off the dress Olivia made me wear and slipped into the water before he could see me in the suit.

He stopped swimming just in front of me.

"Hi," I said shyly.

We were in the shallow end so the water only reached my waist. He looked me up and down and I felt my skin heat up. I wondered if maybe I was showing too much cleavage.

"You shouldn't have worn this," he said. I cringed.

"Why not?"

"Because I actually intended for us to work out but that will be impossible now." His voice dipped low and I trembled.

"And why is that?"

He closed the distance between us and backed me up against the pool wall. His erection pressed against my hip and his lips by my ear, he whispered.

"That's why."

His kisses were as slow and heat filled as they were in Renata's studio. I felt less shy in the water and let my hands dance all over his warm skin.

The sun beat down on my back as he undid the clasp of my suit so that my breasts were naked to him. The contrast between the cool water and his hot lips as he kissed me there left me whimpering unintelligently.

I gripped his damp hair as I let my head loll and I felt the ocean swelling inside me.

"Warren?" His name was like a prayer on my lips.

"Yes?" His hands replaced his lips and I almost forgot what I wanted to say.

"Warren... I can't... we can't..." Words lost meaning as his fingers found a new destination.

"You want me to stop, baby?" His eyes were mischievous. He knew exactly what he was doing to me.

"No, please don't."

He smiled slow and sexy as his fingers began a dance of seduction against the most sensitive part of me. I wanted more. I wanted him closer. I wanted him to touch every piece of skin that the sun was. But that would be bad. Though I struggled to remember why as he kissed me again.

"Warren... please..." I wasn't exactly sure what I wanted at that point.

He backed away from me slightly and I decided it wasn't that. I pulled myself out of the pool. He floated on his back watching me.

I slowly pulled my suit off, feeling particularly mischievous. I kicked it aside and waited for him to pull himself out too. He took his time, drinking me in first.

Warren shrugged out of his trunks as he walked toward me. The site of him completely naked with the sun behind him was devastating.

He held me and I didn't think about not being pretty enough or skinny enough or anything at all. I just focused on the rapid beating of his heart.

"I want you. *Now*. Is this going to happen?"

He gripped my waist and looked at me earnestly. I don't think I've ever wanted anything so much as I did right then.

I offered him my hand and let him lead me to his bedroom.

I always thought that the first time was the big deal and after that, sex was just sex. I didn't realize that every time might be a big deal. I woke up afterward wrapped in Warren's warmth. He was right there next to me. He looked so innocent with his long eyelashes and his soft lips slightly ajar. But those lips weren't innocent. He proved that.

I waited for the guilt to take over, but it didn't come. I was in a bubble of calm.

Warren shifted in his sleep and pulled me closer. I tried squirming away, but that just made him grip me tighter.

"Stop trying, Rivers," he grumbled into my hair.

He pushed me onto my back and leaned over me. His scent wafted over me and I could feel a familiar tightening down low.

"Again?" I whispered, shocked.

He kissed me in answer and began to thoroughly explore my body. I'd just gripped his shoulders to pull him closer when I heard the voices.

"Fuck, fuck, fuck. My parents are home." He pushed himself off me and quickly shoved on a pair of jeans.

I scrambled off his bed wrapped up in a sheet. My heart sank as I recalled that my dress was outside. Warren had just thrown me a shirt when his mom, closely followed by his dad, burst through the door.

They stopped their conversation as they took the scene before them. So not the way I thought I might meet his parents.

Everyone was silent for one very awkward moment before his mom broke it.

"Really, Warren, really? This is what you do when we're gone. I thought we could trust you here alone!"

Her voice was so icy. I really didn't want to be in the middle of it.

"Um... I'm just... I'm just going to go," I said.

"Please do." His mom barely looked at me as I moved quickly by. His dad looked a bit too much. I must have been bright red with embarrassment.

It was by far the most awkward moment of my life. Or so I thought until I climbed down the stairs. Sitting in the small living room was a whole group of people. At least five adults and three kids. They stood stunned and immobile as I stood in front of them in nothing but a sheet.

There was nothing I could do. I had to walk past them to get to my clothes. I waved tentatively and made a dash to the sliding door. In my hurry I didn't notice it was closed and ran right into it head first. I almost lost the sheet.

I didn't turn around; I just quickly opened it and ran out. I grabbed my clothes and ran all the way down his driveway before ducking behind a bush to change. I left the sheet hanging on a tree branch.

Unfortunately, I forgot a shoe so I had to wobble my way home.

Not my proudest moment.

Day 12

10.00

I do not exist today. I am not leaving this room. I am not leaving this bed, actually. I can't believe that actually happened. Seriously? Only one good thing came from it though.

Warren called me this morning to apologize. He said he was sorry that he forgot some family were coming to visit. I cussed at him for a good minute and he just laughed. Then he said, "It's not every day that a dude's girlfriend manages to flash like half his family. You're going to be talked about for ages."

I couldn't hear a single thing he said after that because I was stuck on that one word. Girlfriend. I did a little dance while he talked on.

Another good thing came out of it. His parents were so pissed that they had it out with him when his family left. The fight started about me and my nakedness and then it morphed into fight about how they always leave him alone. He told me that he never told them before how it bothers him that days can go by without him seeing them. He confronted them about the constant fighting between them and how it was tearing him apart.

Somehow they even covered the topic of him going to study in South Africa. By the sounds of it, it was a long-overdue conversation.

He told me how they just sat down and talked for hours and hours. His dad had a lot to say and for once, he listened.

"He hasn't been happy for a very long time, and it's caused so much stress on all of us. It was good to have it out."

"You think they'll get a divorce?" I asked.

"I hope so... they just don't make each other happy anymore."

Warren sounded relieved, which was strange. Their marriage must be pretty messed up if their child actually wants a divorce.

We talked for a while until I was brave enough to ask him about UCT.

"They said I can go. I think I'll travel or work until their semester starts, but my parents are up for it. I think they feel guilty. They didn't realize how much their fighting was getting to me."

I tried to be happy for him but all I could think was; Africa. That is the epitome of long distance. He must have sensed my discomfort because he rushed to assure me.

"Hey, it will work out fine. I can visit you all the time before I go. We'll see each other on breaks and holidays... you'll see. It will be just fine."

I wasn't sure about that, but I was willing to try.

Day 11

07.00

Today is the marathon. I'm nervous because I haven't exactly been training hard as of late. Olivia is sitting across from me and looking very grumpy. I don't think she realized she'd have to be up this early.

Warren is picking us up in a few minutes and I'm just hoping I can get through this day without making too big a fool out of myself.

13.00

I've never felt this good. The marathon went well. Nat, Cassie and Ryan were there cheering on the sidelines. They had cheesy T-shirts that had a picture of Olivia and I on the it with the words "Double Power." Cassie even had bright pink pompoms, which looked odd because she was rocking her usual Goth attire.

Warren ran the marathon with us for moral support. It's a good thing he did because Olivia started dying out after the first kilometer. Warren urged me to keep going while he ran/walked with her.

I really surprised myself. I was nowhere near as fast as some of the professionals running, but I wasn't the slowest either. I kept up a steady jog most of the way and tried not to walk too much. The sun beat down on us hard, and I started to tire out rapidly. I was tired and I wanted to quit but I didn't. That's the important thing.

I didn't quit.

My legs were on fire by the end of it. I'd lost sight of Warren and Olivia long ago, but I could see Nat and them as I reached the finish line. Ryan snapped a few photos while Nat and Cassie jumped all over me.

About ten minutes later, Warren and Olivia found us in the crowd, and Olivia and I shared a sweaty hug. She flopped on the grass and vowed to never run again.

Warren grabbed me by the waist and gave me a congratulatory kiss. If my heart was beating hard before, it threatened to beat right out my chest just then.

It was a good day. A very good day.

I'm surprised, but I'm really going to miss it here. I was so ready to leave, but now I can already feel the homesickness heavy in my heart and I haven't even left yet.

Strange.

Day 10

15.00

Warren's exhibit is in a couple days and I'm supremely nervous. He gave me a flash drive with the nude picture on it. I look... I look unlike myself. The girl in that photo is a vixen. She radiates confidence and... sex. I don't look slutty or anything. It's very tasteful and lovely. The contrast between my hair and my skin and the velvet red of the couch all make an interesting photo. I'm not even showing *that* much skin really.

But when Warren asked to use the photo in his exhibit, I hesitated. It's one thing for Warren to see me like that. It's something all together for a bunch of strangers *and* my former employer to see it.

I hesitated, but then I agreed. It is a lovely photo and Warren should take ownership of it. He really made my body look like art.

Definitely *not* inviting my mom to the show. Don't want to have *that* conversation.

Day 7

18.00

The day has come and I'm more nervous about this than I was about taking the photo. Luckily my mom is busy tonight so she won't make it. But Olivia, Cassie, Nat and Ryan are coming. I'm scared of what they'll think when they see me blown up for all to see.

We're going to get ready at Nat's place because she lives a walking distance away from the place that's hosting the exhibition. I thought it was just going to be a small thing at Renata's studio but she actually booked a gallery for the night and put up posters everywhere advertising it.

It's going to be great for the photographers. Awful for me.

22.00

Tonight was magic. Absolute magic.

We arrived at the gallery a little late. The place was already packed with sophisticated artist types. A lot of people were wearing sleek, all-black outfits so we came in looking like a travelling circus in comparison. Cassie was looking fantastic as usual in a red lace corset, black jacket and bright blue tutu skirt with red thigh-high boots. Nat was more toned down than usual in jeans but even she had on a bright orange sequined top that hurt the eyes when you stared at it too long. We got some very odd looks as we moved from photo to photo trying, and failing, to blend in.

I separated from the group and looked at each photographer's work individually. I recognized a lot of their names, so it was awesome for me to see how far they'd come. Each photographer presented ten photographs as part of a theme.

One of my favorite themes was one called "The Essence of You." They were all pictures of the guy's wife. Everything from her standing in the rain looking up, to holding their daughter's hand at the beach. I could almost feel his love for her radiating off each picture.

I took my time looking at each photographer's work, steeling myself for Warren's. I knew I couldn't stall any longer so I took the plunge and went to find his.

He called his theme "Underneath." They weren't all photos of me. The first one was of me at the beach that day Renata took the class. I hadn't realized he'd taken a photo of me. I'm standing in front of the rainbow he created and my hair is flying everywhere and I'm looking just past him with a little smile on my face. I look speculative.

The next photo was of me and Olivia training for the marathon. We're racing each other and we're laughing. I tried not to notice how big I was compared to her.

I tried to see what he sees in me.

The theme changes slightly and I see who else he shot. He took a picture of Cassie. She has on a *Pussy Riot* band shirt and lacy red underwear. And nothing else. She's staring at the camera like; *what? I know I'm gorgeous*. He took one of Renata with nothing but a vintage camera covering her breasts and all her tattoos contrasting violently against her pale skin. One is of the freckled girl who came to the studio once. She's sitting on a stool

absolutely naked. Her long red hair covers her small breasts and she looks at the camera shyly, but with a soft confidence. Freckles cover every inch of her.

The theme continues with different-shaped women. All of them different. All of them beautiful.

And then my picture. Our picture.

I hadn't noticed him sneaking up behind me. He wrapped his arms around me and whispered, "Now everyone can see you the same way I do. Beautiful through and through."

I kissed him and I had no words for the way he was making me feel.

My friends and sister found us. They took their time over each of his pictures and I could feel him squirming. It must have been hard to stand there and know people were judging your work and, by association, you.

I held his hand as they finished and then congratulated him. Cassie was happiest of all.

"You made me look like a real badass." She smiled.

"That's because you are a badass," he replied.

He was absolutely beaming. There was no doubt in my mind that this was the work for him. Nothing else would ever make him as happy.

Renata came along after that and gave a short speech about all the progress they had made. She informed us that some pictures were already getting offers from potential buyers.

"Not the one of you. That's ours," he whispered in my ear and I felt warm all over.

The rest of the night went by smoothly. Three of Warren's photos were snatched up. One of the buyers was a gallery owner which was a big deal for Warren.

At the end of the night I told the others to go on without me and I waited for Warren outside. The air was warm against my skin and I could smell the ocean from where I stood. My hair ruffled around me and I felt content with everything in my life. It was an unfamiliar feeling.

Warren joined me outside and we walked to his car. Being in that small space with him, feeling as I was, I wanted nothing than to feel him against me.

"You're going to have to stop looking at me like that or I'll end up crashing this car," he said.

I had to sit on my hands to stop myself from touching him.

We drove to the beach, got out and walked for a while. The stars were shining bright above us and I felt so lucky to be there in that moment.

He lay down his jacket and we sat on it. He looked so handsome in dark jeans, a shirt and tie. He held my hand and we watched the waves crashing.

"I'm afraid I'm never going to be the same," he said.

"What do you mean?"

"You... you've changed me. I'm never going to be who I was. Everything about me feels different. It's disconcerting." He smiled ruefully.

"I like who you are now."

"I like me now, too."

He laughed softly and kissed me. We kissed and kissed. I memorized his face. His soft dark hair, his warm eyes, his amazing smile and I felt the love in my heart growing to unimaginable proportions.

I didn't want the night to end, but it had to because all good stories need an ending.

When I got home I couldn't bring myself to change my clothes because they smelt faintly of him.

Day 6

12.00

I'm starting to say my good-byes now. My flight is booked and I got my orientation information online. It feels surreal that in less than a week I'm going to be at NYU; my dream school.

Cassie, Nat and I hung out today for the last time as the three of us. Cassie is going back to Florida tonight. She's excited to see her boyfriend, but sad to see us go. It was amazing to have her in my life this summer. We promised to Skype at least once a week and I plan to. Nat was pretty emotional. I know she's thinking about when we part ways. It's going to be weird not having her with me. Every time I think about it, it hurts too much. We've been through so much. No one has been a better friend.

"We will never say good-bye. That's the thing about best friends, distance doesn't matter," she said as she dropped me off at home.

I hope she's right. I hope we never lose touch.

17.00

Nat is not the only emotional one. My mom has been acting so erratically around Olivia and me. It's silly, because Olivia isn't even leaving the state and my mom's the one that's sung NYU's praises for years.

When I went downstairs just now she was flipping through baby photos and crying softly. I suggested she get a couple cats when we leave and she threw a cushion at my head.

So much for motherly love.

Day 5

12.00

Olivia is keeping something from me. I know because she's such a terrible liar. She knows that, so she's been avoiding me all day. Whatever it is has to do with Warren because he's been MIA all day, and when I mentioned it to her, she mumbled some nonsense and bolted out the room.

Whatever it is, I just hope it's not a going away party. I don't need my mom getting all worked up again. There are only so many tissues in one house.

Day 3

02.00

Last night was probably the best night of my life.

I knew Olivia and Warren were up to something. Olivia woke me up this morning. I would have killed her but she looked so perky and excited, it was cute.

"I have been given strict instructions to make you look absolutely fabulous!"

She hopped on my bed and bounced until I got up. It wasn't hard figuring out who was behind the beauty ambush. A bubble of excitement formed in stomach as I tried figure out why Warren would want me dolled up.

She shoved me into the bathroom with a basket of products and told me to use every single one. I took my time waxing and shaving all the essential bits. I exfoliated, for the first time ever, with some of Olivia's vanilla body wash and washed my hair with her strawberry-scented shampoo. I was pretty sure I smelled like dessert by the end of it. I moisturized and met her in the living room in my bathrobe so she could do my hair.

Olivia spent a ridiculously long time on my hair. Nat came over to provide me with entertainment as she fiddled with my long locks. Nat and I played video games while she worked. It took her over an hour just to get all the knots out and have it somewhat straight. It took another hour to achieve the salon finished, tousled look she was going for. I have to admit, it looked good. It looked almost effortless, like my hair just grew out of my head like that. I wish.

My mom was in on the plan too. She did my makeup. I now understand why people pay her so much to go and show them how to do their makeup. She made me look lovely. She used soft colors for my eyes and a glittery foundation then finished off with a nude lip. The overall look was very pretty. I looked like myself, but a better version.

By the time they were finished toying with me, it was late afternoon and I was super hungry. My mom wouldn't let me eat though in case I ruined the makeup.

Nat, my amazing friend, snuck me fruit on sly and I ate when they weren't looking. It all felt ridiculous but I was happy. Happy that Warren cared enough about me to get my family to help him organize something for me.

Warren called Olivia to tell her he was on his way. She hurried me upstairs and helped me into the red dress she picked out for me. To my surprise, it was actually a little loose. Olivia had to call Mom to come and help her pin a bit of the loose fabric.

I was just putting on my heels as Warren arrived. I took a moment to assess myself in the mirror. I felt fabulous.

"You look gorgeous, Burn. Absolutely amaze balls!" Olivia gushed. I gave my sister a huge hug and thanked her. It seemed strange to think that up until this summer we hadn't been close. All I felt was love for her just then.

Warren looked amazing. He was wearing a tuxedo. An actual tuxedo. I paused at the top of the stairs just so I could drink in the sight of him. He looked up at me and butterflies somersaulted in my stomach.

"Yummy..." Olivia stage whispered and I had to agree.

I went down the stairs, slowly for dramatic effect, and he grinned.

"Absolutely gorgeous," he said.

He had a white rose corsage for me that he slipped over my wrist. I got it then. He was giving me the prom I never had.

My mom made us pose together while she took what seemed like a hundred pictures. It already felt like the prom of my dreams.

Warren opened the door for me and my breath caught in my throat. He hired a limo for the night. An actual limo.

Nat, Olivia, and my mom followed us out. They waved and smiled really big as we were driven down my driveway.

"I can't believe you did all this," I said.

"You should have had the perfect night with the perfect date, but you didn't. Because of me. Tonight I'm going to make it up to you."

It was so sweet I wanted to cry. I sniffled and he pulled me close.

"Don't cry, babe. They'll be no crying this time round."

I lay my head against his shoulder and breathed him in. I held my tears and kissed him instead.

It was a short ride. I was surprised to find ourselves at our high school.

"Thought I'd keep it authentic." He smiled shyly. I took his arm and he led me into the school. I realized he must have had to really plan this if he got someone to leave the door unlocked for him.

It was weird being back in my old high school. It was even weird being in it with Warren Grey. He held my hand tightly as he led me toward the gymnasium and I steeled myself for what I'd find.

I could hear the music before he opened the doors. It took a moment for my eyes to adjust but when they did, I couldn't help it anymore... a couple tears escaped.

It was perfect. Just perfect.

The lights were dimmed low. Blue, silver and white balloons were scattered everywhere. Blue and silver silk drapes covered the gymnasium walls and the ceiling. And in the center, a single, beautifully-decorated table.

More tears fell.

"This is the sweetest thing anyone has ever done for me. Ever." I kissed him hard.

"I can't take all the credit. I had lots of help." He shrugged sheepishly.

A couple of his help appeared just then. Sarah and Megan were looking very cute in matching black waitress outfits.

"Welcome to your senior prom! Please follow me to your table," Sarah said. She led us to

our table and let Warren pull out the seat for me. She then gave us the menus and told us photos would be taken in an hour.

It felt so real, and I felt so special to be there. More tears.

"Hey now, we agreed. No more tears."

"Bu these are happy tears," I told him.

Megan waved at me as she changed the music to something softer. She then lit the candles at the center of the table.

"How did you manage to pay for all this?" I asked him.

"It didn't cost too much. One of my friends' mothers owns an event planning company and she gave me a great deal."

"Still... this is amazing."

He thought of everything. Sarah served us a three course meal; Greek salad, my favorite pizza, and chocolate mousse. Megan played all my favorite music. I was sure none of the songs I liked made it to the real prom, so I knew he had tried really hard to make the night special for me.

We slowed dance almost all night. There was one song I loved most; *Love is Won* by Lia Ices. I loved it because as I drifted in the sea of balloons, with Warren holding me so close I could hear his heart, I'd never felt so carefree. I'd never felt so treasured.

More tears.

After the last song we said good-bye to Sarah and Megan, and we headed out. I thought we'd go back to the limo, but Warren led me away from the exit. He took me to the school's indoor pool. I was speechless once again.

He'd strung fairy lights along all the bleachers and lit paper lanterns along the sides of the pool. He switched off the lights and flicked another switch so that the only light came from the fairy lights, lanterns and the pool itself.

He smiled mischievously at me.

"Care for a swim?"

I nodded and slipped out of my heels.

I could only imagine what my mom and Olivia would say if they realized all their hard work was about to be washed away.

I watched Warren undress. He shrugged the layers off with absolutely no embarrassment. He hesitated a moment then took off his briefs too. He climbed onto the diving board and took the position he would take if it were a race. I whistled through my fingers and he took off.

I watched him swim two laps before I took off my dress. I hesitated a moment too, then discarded my underwear. He'd already seen me naked enough times. I had nothing to feel bashful about.

I didn't dive in like him. I used the steps and slipped in. He watched me from across the

pool. The heat of his gaze chased away the cold of the water.

He was next to me before I knew it. He held out his hand and I followed him the rest of the way.

I would have followed him anywhere.

We drove around in the limo for ages before he took me home. I wanted to see the city lights from inside the limo. It was truly the best prom I could have imagined for myself. I came home, heels in hand with skin smelling of chlorine and him. I wanted to dance I was so happy.

Olivia stayed up for me. She made me tell her every detail. It felt like such a role reversal. For once I was the sister with the hot date. How odd.

She went to bed after I'd told her everything. I was feeling nostalgic, so I grabbed my laptop and a blanket and slipped outside. I sat on a lawn chair and wondered if Nana could see me from wherever she is now.

I flipped open my laptop and went straight to my mailbox. I decided that I was never going to feel as confident as I did right then so I might as well read Fred's e-mails.

I opened the first message and saw that there was nothing there but an attachment. I opened ten more and realized they all held the same attachment. I clicked on the link and a video clip opened. My heart beat a little faster when he filled the screen.

"You once told me that you wish someone would write you a great love letter. Well, I'm not that great with words but music... that I understand. I want you to know that every moment I had with you was... well... remarkable. These are the songs that remind me the most of you and me and how you make me feel. I'm sorry."

He smiled dejectedly at the camera and a sketch of us together at the statue of liberty popped up. He drew himself seeing me for the first time and *Do You Realize* by The Flaming Lips began to play. One sentence from the lyrics shot across the screen; *do you realize—that you have the most beautiful face.*

As the song ended another sketch popped up. This time it was of us walking hand-in-hand through a blurry New York City. *Say Yes* by Elliott Smith started to play. I listened intently and the lyrics sunk inside my skin and settled into my heart.

*I'm in love with the world through the eyes of a girl who's still around the morning after
We broke up a month ago, and I grew up—I didn't know I'd be around the morning after*

I felt the warmth of my tears as they travelled down my cheeks and the image of us faded. Next one was of us in that hotel room. His gaze held mine and his fingers brushed my cheek. *Song for You* by Alexi Murdoch played softly as that image faded too and was replaced with one of him leaving me behind. *The Trapeze Swinging* by Iron and Wine started mid song and one line stood out.

Please remember me my misery, and how it lost me all I wanted

My heart contracted at the sketch of him and me together again at Cloud 9 standing in a whirlwind of color. *Love Love Love* by Avalanche City filled all the corners of my heart, making it feel too full with the thought of him. That image was replaced with one of him

standing alone with me gone and *The New Love Song* by The Avett Brothers filled the night. The line "Won't you please forgive me" repeated over and over and I felt wretched.

The last sketch was of New York with sun coming up and lighting everything up. The last song was *For You* by Sharon Van Etten, and I closed my eyes because I couldn't bear to see the lyrics on the screen. I knew what they said though; I'll wait for you.

I opened my eyes and laughed out loud. I needed to do something so I could breathe again. Damn, Fredric Charles. Damn him, for making me cry for him.

Day 2

14.00

I have decided to carry on like I never opened the attachment. I'm with Warren now. I made my choice. It's too late to be thinking about what could have been. I just have to forget. As hard as that may be, I have to.

Today Warren picked me up for our final workout session. We did the exact same workout he planned for me the very first time. It was ridiculous how much easier it was to do than before. When we finished we sat back together and just enjoyed the sun and the warm sand against our skin. I leaned against him and tried not to think about a red-haired boy and his sad songs.

Warren is going to work for his dad for a while and then do some travelling. We've already planned when he can visit me, and hopefully I'll be visiting him in Cape Town next year. This summer has possibly been the best one of my life. I'm leaving for college as the girlfriend of a sex god and looking the best that I ever have. New York will be nothing after what I've been through.

Day 1

20.00

All of today was dedicated to packing. You don't really realize how much stuff you have until you try to fit it into a couple suitcases. Nat came over to help, but we ended up sitting on a pile of my clothes and reminiscing while looking through some old albums. I'm finding it hard to imagine what it will be like to live away from home. I'm finding it hard to imagine what it will be like to live away from Nat.

When we did get down to packing, I found the box. J's box. Without really thinking about it, I packed into my suitcase so I could think about it later. I hadn't talked to anyone else about but Fred, and I wasn't planning to until I found out who the mysterious J was.

It might turn out to be nothing. It probably is nothing.

Day 0

11.00

I'm writing this in the plane. It was a mad dash this morning to get everything in the car and say all my good-byes. Warren and Nat came to see me off and it was pretty emotional. He gave me a simple gold bracelet to remember him by. As if I need a reminder.

We had one of our own sappy romance moments where my plane was about to leave and we didn't want to let go of each other. My mom had to break it up and we all laughed.

It was embarrassing how upset I was about saying good-bye to everyone. Olivia wouldn't even look me in the eye at first because she was scared of having a mini break down.

We held each other for a very long time, and I told her how much I love her. I thought I'd be glad to be rid of my sister, but I feel like someone chopped off one of my limbs, or something. First thing I'm doing when I get to my dorm is setting up my Internet so I can Skype them all.

Well... this is the last day of an amazing summer and the first day of an amazing life.

20.00

I didn't see this one coming. So, I was busy unpacking and waiting for my roommate when someone knocked on my door. I figured it was one of the other girls in my hallway so I opened it without asking who it was.

Fred.

I was about to tell him to leave and shut the door, but he dropped a bomb that rocked me to the core.

"Burn, I think I found your dad," he said and my world crashed down around me.