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## Grace, Trees, and Getting on My Knees: A Memoir about the Beginning of My Recovery

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*Grace, Trees, and Getting on My Knees:*  
*A Memoir about the Beginning of My Recovery*

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A THESIS  
SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS  
FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF FINE ARTS  
UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHERN MAINE  
STONECOAST MFA IN CREATIVE WRITING

BY

**Kateri Patrice Hall**

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May 2015

The University of Southern Maine  
Stonecoast MFA in Creative Writing

2015

We hereby recommend that the thesis of Kateri Patrice Hall entitled *Grace, Trees, and Getting on My Knees: A Memoir about the Beginning of My Recovery* be accepted as partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Masters of Fine Arts.



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Accepted



Dean, College of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences

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**Abstract:**

Having struggled with drug and alcohol abuse on and off for almost three years, I finally reached my proverbial bottom on May 5, 2010 at only 21 years of age. Bill Hulings, a father of two and a seemingly average man by Western Pennsylvania standards, took me out to the woods and raped me while I screamed for him to stop. The next morning, through the physical, mental, and emotional pain I reached out to a God I barely believed in, and chose rehab, chose healing, over death. A week later, I was in rehab, starting an almost three month journey to begin healing not just from the rape but from years of self-hate and lack of faith that had tortured me since before kindergarten.



### Acknowledgements:

I would like to thank my amazingly supportive and loving boyfriend Michael Singleton for helping through my journey at not just Stonecoast but life. I would like to thank my dad and my brothers for their love and forgiveness. Much thanks to all the Stonecoast staff for my awesome time here. Especially all my mentors: Cait Johnson, Breena Clark, Alexs Pate, and Dolen Perkins-Valdez. My thanks a bunch to my second reader, Deb Marquart. Thanks to my loving and incredibly adorable pets (Bella, Kitty, Garfield, MayMay, and Angel) for cuddling with me every time I write. Thanks to my mom for all the love she gave me while alive and for being my guardian angel in the years since her passing. And last but definitely not least, I want to thank God for his unconditional love and support.

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## Preface

The morning after Bill raped me, the last thing I ever thought I would do was write about it, let alone write about it in a book and then let others read it. At the time, it broke me.

Physically, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually. Like an egg cracked into the frying pan and then scrambled about, Bill took so much from me that night. Dignity, self-respect, and almost all the hope I possessed. And even through these two-hundred some pages I did not regain everything he took. Another book, another journey, would be needed to share that story. But even when I first sat down to write this book, I knew it wasn't about complete healing. This memoir is about the start of healing, the beginning of hope, and the depiction of change in a girl who was drowning in the dark before finding a lifesaver of light.

I first had an inkling to write about what happened to me in late 2011. Though the rape was still vividly fresh and my recovery still a day-to-day challenge, I felt the urge to share my story. At first I wasn't sure why, and in fact dismissed it as one-hundred percent insanity. It was an ugly, terrifying story that should be kept concealed from anyone but my closest friends and family. But then I took my first creative nonfiction class at the University of Pittsburgh-Bradford, taught by Prof. Nancy McCabe. Having never read any memoir before, and in fact not really seeing a distinction between biography and memoir, I was amazed when I started to read the assigned memoirs. *A Pearl in the Storm: How I Found My Heart in the Middle of the Ocean* by Tori Murden and *The Tender Bar: A Memoir* by J. R. Moehringer ripped open the tattered curtain of my less than stellar high school education and showed me a world where personal stories became universal themes.

It seemed so amazing to me that a story about a woman's journey across the Atlantic and her troubled childhood or a story about a young man's coming of age and figuring out what the heck he was going to do with his life while clinging to the comfort of a local bar could be made into books let alone books that people actually purchase and read. I wondered how and why we should care about these individuals' lives at first. They weren't famous people, the type of people you see strutting about on CNN or creating scandals on Entertainment Network. However, by the time we had finished reading the books as a class, I realized that through the specific details of individuals' stories universal themes emerged that allowed readers to connect with the books.

With these books having opened the door, I realized that not only did I like reading memoirs but I wanted to write them as well. The first creative nonfiction piece I wrote was "A Night of Decision" about my first night in rehab and how hard it was to resist leaving and just giving back into drugs. I workshopped that piece in my creative nonfiction class and received much praise for the craft aspect as well as the honesty in tackling such a difficult subject as drug addiction. One classmate even advised I had changed her mind about addiction. She had previously believed that all addicts were a hopeless cause until she read my essay and saw how I had been through the throes of active addiction and emerged through the other side.

Fueled by the knowledge that I had changed one life by sharing my story, I decided to share the darkest part of my tale: the first time I was raped. Writing the essay entitled, "Waking Up from a Daydreaming Nightmare" was beautiful and horrible. It was the first time since my rape crisis therapy while in rehab that I had written about it. Pain spiked through my body and soul with each key stroke. At times I wanted desperately to stop. But I felt compelled to share my story because it was about more than just me, I realized. By that time I had read enough rape

statistics to realize that the likelihood of other women on campus being the victims of rape was high. If even one of them read the essay and realized that she was not alone then I had done something worthwhile. And so I finished the essay, submitted it for workshop—where received praise for my work and strength as a person—, then sent it into our campus literary magazine, *Bailey's Beads*. When the essay was not only accepted and published but received second place for best prose piece behind our fiction writing professor's short story and earned comparisons to the work of Alice Sebold's *Lucky*, I knew that I practically *had* to write a full-length memoir sharing my story.

From there I started a series of essays about specific moments from my time in rehab. The thought of a full length narrative arc terrified me, having no had only minimal teaching in it. I thought perhaps that the book could be made up of a collection of essays. It seemed the easiest and safest route for me. It may have ended up an essay collection had it not been for something clicking in my mind after I graduated from University of Pittsburgh-Bradford and before I started at University of Southern Maine. I started writing my memoir with a narrative arc in the fashion of fiction. By the time I attended my first Stonecoast residency I had several chapters written.

While at Stonecoast I was guided to select memoirs that I could both learn from and emulate. These included *After Silence: Rape & My Journey Back* by Nancy Venable Raine, *Telling: A Memoir of Rape and Recovery* by Patricia Weaver Francisco, *Crash Into Me* by Liz Seccuro. In those memoirs about rape and the process of recovery from it, I learned craft techniques as well as the simple fact that I am was not the only women brave enough to share my rape survival story. Nancy Venable Raine's memoir *After Silence: Rape & My Journey Back* describes her brutal rape and the years of denial, therapy, and eventually recovery, that followed. When I began reading this book and discovered that Raine, like Alice Sebold, was a victim of

stranger rape, I felt a tangible disappointment. As a victim of acquaintance or date rape (which, as Raine points out later in her book is the most common of all rapes, representing about 75 to 80 percent of all rapes) I often feel distanced from survivors of stranger rape because I believed it carried with it a different set of challenges to recovery than date rape did. However, my disappointment was soon completely obliterated. On page 17 Raine takes a break from detailing the rape itself to explore the aftermath that will soon follow. She explains the dictionary and historical definition of the word nightmare. She quotes one, writing, “a frightening dream that usually awakens the sleeper.” Thus, a child that experiences a horrific nightmare about being eaten alive slowly by killer gorillas (as I did when I was five and six-years-old) will eventually wake up from that nightmare and realize that it was only a dream and they are now safe. However for a rape survivor suffering from PTSD the nightmares do not end upon waking, as I portrayed in my essay “Waking Up from a Daydreaming Nightmare” and in my memoir. Thus, it was with shock that I read Raine’s own experience with this nightmare, reading, “But for me, the experience of my rape was a contradiction, a waking nightmare.” My mouth fell open, my pulse quickened, and I started to cry tears of a sad joy spawned from a connection I did not expect to feel to this woman I had never met. This one sentence expressed how I viewed rape, prompting me to realize that though there are differences between stranger versus date rape the major aftereffects of pain are the same. I felt connected not only to Raine but to every rape survivor out there. This sense of connection cut through the inherent isolation that is a byproduct of rape, as Raine herself observes later in the novel. Using beautifully creative metaphors and a strong sense of theme throughout the book, Raine creates a memoir that not only universalizes the experience of rape among fellow survivors but among people in general.

Raine uses metaphor throughout the text to aid in explaining the horrible and inconceivable trauma that is rape and its aftermath. After the assault has occurred and Raine has called the police, she is eventually taken to the hospital where the rape examination is conducted. The reader can imagine the discomfort that she must feel at having just been invaded by her rapist only to have to be probed by a doctor in that very same area. However, this experience holds so much more pain than the average person can genuinely imagine. Realizing this Raine uses metaphors to further elucidate this humiliating situation, writing, "I shudder and feel I am curling up, like a worm that has been cut in half by a trowel." The image of a worm being cut in half is grisly, thus effectively conveying the horror of her situation. Later in that same chapter, Raine must contact a friend to see if she can spend the night, as the thought of returning to her own home (where she was raped) is unthinkable. She starts the conversation off with the usual pleasantries before her friend recognizes that something is not right. Raine, unsure how to utter the truth of her pain, writes, "I can't say the word. The word is too terrible to say. If I tell someone who is not a professional stranger, the fact will spin out of control, like a car hitting ice." Though this is not an especially creative metaphor, it serves to provide the reader with both the frightful image of a car careening around on a sheet of ice as well as the terrifying sensation of having no control over something as powerful as a car. This metaphor allows the average person to connect with the feeling of helplessness that Raine felt when faced with the prospect of sharing her rape with a person she knew, afraid of how the secret would be treated.

From the very first page of the book, Raine establishes the theme of the importance of language, featuring a quote from Thomas Mann stating that, "Speech is civilization itself. The word...preserves contact—it is silence which isolates." This quote encapsulates the essence of the power of language in not only Raine's recovery but also the recovery of rape survivors in

general. During her rape, Raine is told by her rapist repeatedly to “shut up.” Similarly, during my rape my rapist clasped his hand over my mouth, silencing me. Raine discovers that it is this command of silence from rapists to their victims that impedes healing and recovery from this trauma. For example, in the first few years following the rape she tells only people who absolutely need to know while at the same time writing almost nothing. Before the rape writing was an integral part of her life, however after the rape she is unable to write anything of significance, feeling like her rapist’s command of silence is still with her. In the fifth year after her rape, she begins to undergo extensive psychotherapy to cope with the trauma, finally talking about every horrendous, unspeakable aspect of the rape and its aftermath. Her silence broken, she begins to heal, to recover, to write again. Similarly, in my case I feel my first step to recovery was writing my essay “Waking Up from a Daydreaming Nightmare.” It was not until I wrote that essay that I opened up, that I removed that hand Bill had placed so firmly on my mouth.

Patricia Weaver Francisco weaves a nonlinear story chronicling her rape and its impact on everything and everyone in her life. A happily married aspiring writer, she is working on a novel in bed, her husband away for work, when her rapist breaks into her house. She is blindfolded, never getting the chance to see her attacker, and brutally raped. To say her world is turned upside down is an understatement. Her marriage, under the strain of her PTSD symptoms, begins to disintegrate. In an effort to banish the rape from their minds and save their marriage the couple has a baby boy. However, the labor was very difficult and painful, bringing forward a surge of memories of the rape. By the time their son is five years old Francisco’s marriage has ended. However, even as the love of her life is lost she finally begins to achieve recovery.



Francisco conveys her story to the reader powerfully with understated, matter-of-fact prose and the juxtaposition of her struggles with recovery and loving moments with her son.

Over the course of four chapters she reveals details of her rape and its immediate aftermath bit by bit, divided by scenes from her childhood, her parents' lives, and her relationship with her son. In chapter four, when she is finally depicting the start of the physical rape she enhances her descriptions of her hearing. This is especially effective when the reader considers that she was blindfolded and is left in a helpless state to what is around her. She must guess, using her hearing and imagination. She writes:

“My only clues in this darkness are sounds. Beer sloshing in the can. Flimsy book matches scratching across the floorboards. An abrupt inhale on a cigarette or joint. The clanking of his belt buckle as he takes off his pants...He enters my body with his body in a sad and quiet way. He is unable to maintain an erection. I lie perfectly still and then begin to wonder with detachment and clarity what the best strategy might be.”

I like her use of sentence fragments to reflect the actual act of hearing in such a situation. It is quick long and drawn on like two sentences joined by a semicolon. Furthermore, I like the wording she used to describe him penetrating her. It was not unnecessarily vulgar and yet it was specific, simply stating the joining of two bodies.

In the first chapter, after the rape was first introduced in the prologue, Francisco jars the reader by describing reading a bedtime story to her young son. Initially I was shocked and irritated at such an abrupt shift of tone and subject matter. However, after thinking about my own experiences in my ongoing recovery from rape this sudden shift accurately reflects the ups and downs of recovery. For example, my sex life after the rape has been a rollercoaster. Sometimes I am able to make love to my boyfriend with no thoughts of the rape. It may remain

like this for months at a time. And then, suddenly and with no warning, I feel repulsed at the thought of sex. I believe Francisco uses this nonlinear pattern to represent the nonlinear nature of recovery. Rape is not something that fades away as the years go by until it is forgotten. Rather, it is something that becomes integrated into our life with time but never vanishes.

Liz Seccuro's memoir details her harrowing struggle for justice twenty years after her rape. As a 17-year-old freshman in college, three men raped her (though she only has memory of the last man because the men slipped a date rape drug into her drink). After trying and failing to obtain justice through the university, she gives up and strives to move on with her life. Twenty years later she is happily married and the mother of a young daughter. As she readies to go on a vacation with her family, she discovers a letter from her rapist in her mailbox. From that letter, she begins a correspondence with him via email that eventually prompts her to finally report the rape to the police. She endures a difficult trial during which, of course, she is treated like the perpetrator instead of a victim, before finally obtaining a small measure of justice as he is convicted and given a two-year sentence. Of that sentence, however, the rapist serves less than five months. Though a story that is certainly a depressing reminder of the utter lack of punishment and in turn deterrence for rapists, it is also a story of hope. Seccuro lives her life with vivacity despite her great pain and the failure of the justice system. Furthermore, I noticed a technique Seccuro employed that I applied to my own work: the use of the third person.

Seccuro begins the book with a prologue written in the third person describing what she remembers of the rape, writing:

“As the freshman girl struggled on the filthy sheets, the stranger pounding into her, she looked to the left and saw a light outside the window...She screamed but no one could

hear her...She realized now, covered in saliva, sweat, semen, and stale beer, that she might never leave this room...This is her story.”

This unexpected perspective surprised me, initially believing the author had chosen this to represent a victim’s tendency to disassociate after trauma. However, after finishing the book and recalling my own experiences writing in the third person, I believe Seccuro used the third person to represent the fact that a person will never be the same person they were before a rape. Thus, in a sense, it is like he or she is a different person altogether.

Even just writing this preface has provided me more insight into my own work. Initially, I thought my memoir was about my recovery from addiction and rape. And perhaps that makes a great surface summary of the work, but it isn’t really accurate. Because recovery from addiction and rape are lifelong challenges. With that perspective I realized that my memoir was about the beginning of change.

## Chapter One:

*When the righteous cry for help, the Lord hears, and rescues them from all their troubles. -Psalm 34:17*

May 5, 2010

Cinco de Mayo was more sacred to me than Christmas. You couldn't go out, become completely trashed on Christmas, and not have people stare. But May 5 everyone in town was so messed up they would fail sobriety tests with flying colors. When I woke that morning, I was ready to get high. The same as every morning before that.

Later that morning, after finally finding one of my regular guys, or johns as I guess the city whores might call them, I knelt in the gravel as it embedded in my scar and scab-covered knees, stinging and worrying against the open cuts while a hot wind blew dust up at my face from the dirt road. The man in front of me, Garrett, undid his pants eagerly, too eagerly. I knew he hadn't gotten any since the last time we screwed a month ago. Frigid wife or girlfriend wouldn't put out. Whatever the reasons men paid me I was grateful. After having been fired from my job for missing an entire week of shifts without bothering to call off, I needed another reliable source for drugs.

I gave him head after screwing him. Strange, for me, as I usually sucked and then fucked. But for what he was paying me I would have probably done anything short of killing someone. He handed me a Ziploc baggie with a cocktail of oxycontin, vicodin, klonopins, and Xanax. He was definitely married. I could always tell the married guys by the way they so readily agreed to even my most ridiculous requests for payment. A quick screw against the hood of his Honda Accord and a half-hearted blowjob were worth not even a quarter of the bounty he gave me. But thankfully, no one told him that.

I didn't even wait until I got back home to my dad's house to start in. I had been drug free for almost four hours, after having passed out in the back of an acquaintance's truck only to wake up in my back yard as the sun came up. My drugs, cash, and cigarettes were gone. Bastard. Take my advice when I say you can never trust an addict. Every second of the four hours it took me to find a guy that wasn't too busy with his wife or girlfriend to come screw me for pills were agony as piercing as claws dragged across my scarred bare skin.

"Can't you wait until I drop you off, sweetheart?" he asked while glaring at me, injecting the last word with disdain. It was funny how sweet they were to me until they got what they wanted.

"No." I pulled out several pills and swallowed them, feeling better already even though the high would take several minutes to kick in. I couldn't wait. Maybe that was part of my problem. I couldn't wait for a darn thing. Not for the pain of missing my mom to go away and certainly not for the craziness and sadness that my bipolar disorder had burdened me with my whole life to vanish. Forget waiting and hand me something that works now. I pulled out my small compact mirror, empty pill bottle, and straw from my brown generically Indian-looking purse. "I'm going to snort some of this. If it's really that disturbing to you I'll just walk the fuck home. And maybe stop by your house to tell your wife what a great fuck you were. Let her know what she's missing out on, you know." I wasn't serious. I knew better than to reveal that to any woman in town. Titusville women could fist fight just like the men. I had no desire to end up in the ER. Still, he didn't know that and I needed my drugs up my nose where they were supposed to go. Swallowing was mockingly slow.

He hit the brakes abruptly and steered the car off to the side of the road. When he turned the key off and looked over at me I immediately reached for the door handle, seeing the barely

restrained fury in his sunburnt face. “I am only going to tell you this once. If you ever tell my wife a thing about our fun together, your black ass will be found in a fucking ditch. Alright, sweetheart?” This time he said “sweetheart” with the calm, stern voice one reserved for a child about to be put in time out.

I wanted to open the door and run out into the woods. I had been hit enough by men to know when the violence was about to come. But I couldn’t move. I pressed against the seat, body shaking slightly, holding in tears. I was so dumb. So darn dumb to walk right into violence. I didn’t mean to, I even tried like hell to avoid getting beat. But it happened. Again and again and again. By the time I got out of my first abusive relationship, I had already realized the violence was my fault. Something in me was just wrong. If God really did exist, he must have made me as some sort of cruel joke.

“Don’t tell me you’re going to cry, Kateri?” he asked, chuckling, his face starting to soften.

I hated being asked that question. Mostly because people always asked it when I was about to cry. Before I even thought about it words jumped out of my mouth, “Go fuck yourself, Garret.”

He slapped me with his open palm. Not enough to leave a bruise but hard enough to sting and draw out the tears I had been suppressing. I stuffed my paraphernalia back into my purse, hating myself for crying in front of him and even more for opening my mouth. Stupid, stupid, stupid girl. I opened the car door, intending to walk the miles back into town and home.

“Get back in the car, babe. It didn’t hurt that bad. You can’t walk that far,” he called while laughing as if I was simply being a petulant child at naptime. “You can snort the fucking

pills.” I got back into the car. He kissed the cheek where he smacked me and drove me home to the sound of my hearty snorting.

Several minutes later, I sat on the porch, watching his ugly green, speckled with rust car pull away and head out towards Hydetown where he lived with his wife and daughter. I had actually met his wife at the AA barbecue and had been struck by how amiable and pretty she was. Garret certainly wasn’t the first married man I had done it with but I had never met any of the wives until that night. The guilt that was only a fuzzy, nagging feeling at the very back of my drugged up mind abruptly magnified into an all-encompassing net that quickly wrapped around my entire body. She really didn’t seem like such a bad person. At least not the kind I tried to imagine whenever I lay down with someone else’s man. Always so much easier to ignore morals like don’t sleep with someone else’s man when you can imagine a gnarled witch of a woman as the wife. Echoes from Catholic Sunday school drifted into my mind on and off. I couldn’t remember if there was an actual commandment against it but I doubted if any priest would approve of my recent behaviors.

When the car was out of sight I decided to go find the closest thing to a boyfriend I had: Jared. I walked the two blocks to his parents’ house, my baggie of pills safely tucked out of sight. The high was finally settling on me and as usual, I couldn’t hide the inkling of paranoia that aroused every time I reached Jared’s house to see the police station right across the street. Sweet, sexy irony if I ever saw it. If the police were ever actually to look over at his porch during the night, they’d catch us screwing or snorting. Or both. Thankfully, the police were far more interested in “click it or ticket” than busting nymphomaniac drug addicts.

I climbed up the white steps towards the red and white porch, forcing myself not to think about Garret. He only did it because I ran my mouth. Blaming myself was always easier than

blaming others. I didn't know why. It just was. Besides, it was Cinco de Mayo and I was ready to party with somebody. The rest of my so-called friends had decided to throw a Cinco de Mayo party out at their hangout spot, an old garage with a large second floor, dubbed The Hanger. Quite rudely, they had deliberately not invited Jared or me. I guess they didn't want to worry about the two drunks mucking things up. Forget all of them.

Unfortunately, when I arrived at Jared's house I saw that his plans had been made. And they too, did not include me. "Sorry, dude," he said, shrugging his bare shoulders, his shirt laying on the red porch railing, allowing his wiry frame to be exposed. I could never look at him without feeling a stirring in both my crotch and my heart. "I'm hanging out with Kenny and some other dudes. We don't want any chicks. Too much drama." He puffed on his cigarette and offered me another shrug followed by a more deliberate glare. I knew that glare well. It meant he was bored with me. It meant for me to hurry up and leave while he was still trying to be civil.

I wanted to beg him to let me hang out. I wanted to offer him a hand job, blowjob, a night of amazing sex. But arguing with him had always been as productive as holding a debate with a smooth, white, wall. "Whatever," I mumbled and turned to climb down the concrete steps of the large, pristine house. At times when I felt pathetic for still living with my parent at age 21, I simply reminded myself that Jared still lived with his at age 23. It was as reliable a pep talk as coke was an upper. I made it to the bottom of the steps and was already walking down the sidewalk when he called after me.

"If I'm in town later I'll give you a call. You can come over and we'll fuck." I nodded, long since accepting of the fact that he never asked me things. He simply told me. At first, I was resentful of that until one night I had confronted him, stating, "Why do you think you can tell me what to do all the time?" High on oxies, we had both stared at each other dumbly, before he



simply shrugged. “Because you always do what I tell you to anyway. So what’s the point of wasting time asking?” I bristled, ready for an argument for an instance then recalled all the middle of the night phone calls he had ever made to me. No matter what he had asked for or when he asked for it I always did it. At the time I had believed it was because I loved him; I believed it was because that’s what you did when you loved someone.

“Alright. Later, man,” I replied and hurried down the sidewalk, my skirt ruffling slightly by the breeze. I put one hand down to keep it from blowing up and hastily sucked on my Pall Mall. I couldn’t believe it. Here it was, the night for getting utterly shitfaced and I had no money (being paid in drugs had its disadvantages) and no friends to do it with. I felt a deep craving for a cold mug of Yuengling beer. I knew that one way or another I would find my way to the Diamond Lunch and Bar tonight. I’d be damned if I didn’t have at least one drink.

Later that evening, high as a jet plane way up in the clouds from snorting the rest of my baggie of pills, I pulled open the door to the Diamond and smiled at the throng of men, beer, and hard liquor. With my pink spaghetti strap tank top and pink mini skirt, I knew my chances of getting my drinks bought were at least pretty good. However, I wasn’t going to wait around the dive all night. Before coming out, I had finally found a \$1.50 in quarters in my dad’s bedroom and had to smother a scream of glee. It was just enough to buy a draft beer. I took it as a sign that the blessed god of shitfacedness ordained my night of partying. Better that god than the other one, I had thought.

I took a seat towards the end of the bar, away from the entrance and pulled my quarters out of my purse. Looking around me, I tried to see if I had caught any man’s eye yet. It didn’t appear so. Though the Cinco de Mayo party was already going, with shots of tequila and draft beer being held in both hands like sacred treasures, all the men seemed more concerned with the

pool game and bullshitting with each other than trying to get laid. Was every guy in this town having a guys' night tonight? I wondered angrily.

If I didn't get another beer bought for me by the time I finished mine, I decided as my mug was placed in front of me, then I would leave and stop by Jared's for a screw and some oxy snorting. I knew he had some. He nearly always had something to use. Between the both of us, we were literally high almost twenty-four hours a day. Continually sighing, I sipped my beer, keeping an eye out for a potential booze source, and chain-smoked my Pall Malls until my throat ached.

Happy Cinco de Mayo, indeed. I finished my beer. I started to swivel my stool to leave when one of the men a few seats down from mine motioned with his hand towards me. "Sweetie, you want a shot of tequila on me?"

I grinned, tasted the cherry from my favorite lip-gloss, and scampered over to where he sat with two other men. He was short, barely taller than my five-foot-two frame, with the kind of dirty blonde hair that sparked debates about whether it was light brown or just a tattered, undignified blond. He laid his arm across my shoulders and smiled, exposing a row of straight, though yellowed teeth. I nodded towards his two friends, both with dark hair, possibly black, maybe dark brown with skin too pale for the nice weather. When the bartender, a man so wrinkled he resembled the tiny rolls of fat on a cat shaved for surgery, placed my shot in front of me, he winked at the three men and gave a thumbs up sign.

Men were so obviously dumb that it was painful. Neither of this trio was getting lucky tonight if I could help it. Though I was not opposed to trading sex for what I needed, or sleeping around in general, I would rather avoid sleeping with a man whose face looked like a giant thumb had pressed against it, flattening the surface to an odd, almost alien like appearance.

“On the count of three we’re doing these, babe,” he shouted slamming his thick hand on the bar top as he loudly counted. I smiled the vacant grin of a smitten drunk girl in the hopes that he would pay my way to achieving it. “Three!” he shouted with enough excitement to unleash my inner Cinco de Mayo party girl. So my friends where tired of my drunken and drug fueled antics. So Jared berated me when I slept with other men yet expected me to be just fine when he tried to screw my female friends. So my family looked at me with a mixture of disgust and horror. So what. I was perfectly fine. Alive. So alive and in love with my life of highs. I downed the shot, grimaced, and gladly accepted the mug of beer the man offered me.

“Ivan,” he said, and instead of shaking my hand merely gazed down my shirt.

I leaned into his ear to pronounce my name, which he then shouted over the music to his two companions.

“Kateri, this is Bill and Dan,” he waved his mug like it was an official scroll and he was proclaiming some dire announcement from the king.

I waved, ignoring Dan with his dough-like face and frightening buck teeth, and extended my hand towards Bill. His mustache and goatee were impeccably groomed and the tattoos coating his arms and skinny legs would be an interesting source of conversation. I had two tattoos, though I invariably wanted much more. A pink ribbon with “In Memory of Mom” and the date she passed away, “11-13-06,” on my left leg and the kanji symbol for friendship on my right shoulder. Growing up raised by conservative Catholic parents, I believed tattoos were both juvenile and trashy and had even vowed never to get a tattoo. Of course, I had also swore I would never use drugs and that hadn’t exactly worked out either. Now, though, I loved tattoos and was always eager to explain mine and listen to others explain theirs.

The three of us continued downing our mugs of beer, small talk smothered by the pounding music of the jukebox, some country song I pleaded to end soon. Ivan placed his hand on my thigh and slid it higher up at a slow but steady pace. “You’re almost out of beer,” he slurred, seeming to have reached the point of drunkenness within the last couple of minutes.

“So get me another Yuengling and a shot, too, please,” I shouted and gave his dick a squeeze through the fabric of his blue jeans.

He shook his head, slow, like a father who was about to politely tell his daughter that there was no way in hell that she could go out with Ronnie the Pothead, and took a gulp of Yuengling before he replied, “I’ll get us a pitcher of beer and then some if you fuck me.” He said this loud enough for Bill, Dan, and the bartender who was hovering nearby, apparently anticipating our need for more booze, to hear.

Indignant, after all my whoring was always done in a quietly obvious manner, in a way that most people had an inkling of what was happening but not verifiable proof. Now, with Ivan’s bold proposition, one made by a man who I would later learn had been drinking virtually all of the day, I wanted to give the retort I had held in against every single one of my johns: “Go to hell.” But I was only buzzed. Even with the drugs I had snorted, my body was still ready for more. That was the problem with being a druggie. Always more. And more. And so much more.

“Where do you want to go?” I asked keeping my voice low enough for only the two of us to hear.

“Go? Sweetie, we don’t have to go anywhere,” he said and snickered before giving a nod to the bartender who placed a pitcher of beer and two shots of tequila in front of us.

Realizing what he meant I quickly downed my tequila and gulped the beer straight out of the pitcher to chase it. “Bathroom? Men’s or Women’s?” I asked hating this routine but deciding that a smooth tiled floor did have its advantages over the gravel-strewn alleys.

“Women’s. The one by the stage,” he directed and waved to Bill, Dan, and the bartender, who I would later learn was the former father-in-law of Bill. They hooted in praise and gave us the thumbs-up. Morons, I thought as Ivan pulled open the large, heavy wooden door to the stage. It was dark, no band having been scheduled for tonight despite the holiday and enormous crowd. He led me by the hand to the bathroom furthest from the stage, the women’s, and pushed open the door. A part of me, the part that secretly hated every time I traded sex for booze, or drugs, or cigarettes, wished the door would be locked. It wasn’t.

The light that poured out of the abnormally pristine bar restroom blinded me for a moment. When my eyes adjusted, Ivan had already closed and locked the door and undone his belt and jeans. I stared at his already hard member for a long moment, the white tiled floor and cream colored walls, reminding me of a time in my life when I promised to wait until marriage before my present was unwrapped. But that was so many years ago it seemed like such a silly goal, no different from a little girl declaring she is going to grow up to be Superman. It’s a fun thing to aspire to but ultimately hopeless. Just like my life.

“Come one, sweetie,” he said his voice echoing around the bright room. I swiftly complied, approaching him and lowering myself onto my knees, the floor cold against my bare skin. I opened my mouth, wider than I was used to since moving to Titusville a year ago, and begin working on what seemed like man’s only concept of foreplay.

After a few minutes, his hands were on my shoulders, gently pushing me away. “I want in you, baby.” Contrary to what so many people believed about my many “exchanges,” I never

enjoyed them. To this day, I refuse to count the men I screwed for drugs and alcohol as men I actually slept with. Sex, real sex, requires at the very least enjoyment if not friendship or love. It shouldn't be done in the same fashion as you toil away at your minimum wage 12-hour-a-day job. No. So when Ivan bent me over against the chilly, white wall, I closed my eyes tight and tried to think of something else.

It was what I did every time I subjected myself to another man for what I needed. And I always seemed to need something. Sometimes I would imagine I was with Jared. If I was already wasted and/or high I could even convince myself for those few minutes that it was Jared screwing me. Until the guy pulled out, zipped up his pants, and shoved the slimy dollar bills, a pack of smokes, or baggies of pills or coke into my hand. Now, while Ivan muttered "baby" and "yeah" as he took me I allowed myself to imagine the blissful state of intoxication that would soon arrive.

He didn't finish. Shocked that he pulled out without achieving his aim, I stayed bent over, naked ass exposed, until I heard his pants zipper. "Clean yourself up and come on out. And we'll have those drinks, baby," he said and tossed a roll of toilet paper at me. He left the stall leaving me hastily wiping myself dry before yanking up my panties. I knew he'd want to go again. I hated that. Men seemed to think that I enjoyed this. It was nothing more than a job. Unfortunately, it seemed like tonight it was going to be a rough job.

When I rejoined Ivan, he was talking about music with Bill. The men gave a whistle as I approached and passed me a shot of Jose and another mug of beer. Thank God, I thought, already tired of even looking at Ivan. Bill, though was more my type. I smiled at him as Ivan ran off to the other end of the bar, shouting after some portly man in a mud-speckled jacket.

Thirty minutes and three shots of tequila later, Bill and I were well on our way to getting to know each other. After inquiring where I was from and wondering why in the heck would any black girl willingly move to Titusville, a town whiter than a freaking sheet of paper," I explained that I moved here from the Philadelphia area to start college and move back in with my father. His eyes, a murky blue, widened and he animatedly explained that he had worked in that area. We traded remembrances of our various mishaps and adventures in cities like Coatesville, West Chester, and Chester until Ivan returned and immediately interrupted us.

"Double shot for her," he called to the Santa Claus lookalike bartender. He leaned into Bill's ear and spoke in a whisper to him for a few minutes while I smoked a cigarette, swallowed my burning shot, and chugged the last of my beer.

"Another?" I asked holding my mug out to Ivan and smiling drunkenly. I felt the familiar and ever-comforting warmth flower within me and work its way outward, flopping itself over my limbs before settling nicely over my head and heart. No more pain. No more missing mom, feeling alone, and no more craziness inside my head. Just a dullness that I welcomed.

"You want more you got to earn it, sweetie," he said and headed for the other set of bathrooms at the other end of the large barroom. I followed, too gone to be annoyed at having my conversation with Bill interrupted. I didn't even mind that Ivan chose the filthy, cramped men's room for us to screw in. The stench of piss, though, almost made me gag when Ivan finished his fun and gave me a not-so-playful push that sent me onto the floor before the urinal. He laughed, and walked out of the room, knowing I would be back out. I did not understand how men seemed to be able to read my mind; I couldn't grasp why it was so easy for men to control me. Not until I was in recovery would I discover the answer: they knew how desperate I was to get what I needed. Desperation was a very powerful tool to use against someone.

I wiped the piss off my knees and rejoined the men out there. I wasn't anywhere near drunk enough. No. I could still feel an inkling of the sharp, stabbing pain in my heart. The pain that when I took a breath sometimes, I thought I would simply crumple to the ground and cry. But maybe it was more than just the pain. Sometimes, when the high first hit and I felt nothing but the mind-altering substance at work, I realized how exquisite it was not to feel anything at all. No feeling was preferable to depression. I had been depressed for most of my life. But now at least I was old enough to blunt it out.

When I returned Ivan was on his cellphone walking quickly out the door and my drinks (three shots and a mug of beer) awaited me. Bill smiled at me and I grinned back, hoping I didn't smell of piss. We resumed our conversation, turning to his children. He showed me a picture of them, adorable, smiling, strikingly blonde children. Like any good little drunk girl, I gaped at the picture and gushed over the children's saccharine innocence. He spoke of the kids with love, a love that shattered any misgivings I had had about him. He was a loving father and therefore a decent guy. Or so my mind managed to piece together this conclusion amidst the spinning of the room and the screaming noise of the twang-filled music.

From the children we moved on to an even more trust winning topic for me: drugs. "I get cocaine from New York and deal from time to time," he admitted after I had asked if he had "anything" he'd share with me. "If you want I'll give you my number and you can give me a call when you have some cash to blow," he said before we both begun laughing at piercing decibels about his unintended pun. Only drunks.

As the minutes turned into two hours, our conversation became increasingly one-sided. Ivan popped in and out of our area, ordering more drinks for the three of us before going to find someone else to high five or give a sharp titty-twister to. Finally, last call was announced. Ivan



emerged from the crowd that had suddenly rushed to the bar and ordered me two double shots. He carried them in one hand and drug me back to the women's barroom bathroom with the other one.

He set the drinks on the sink and hurriedly screwed me one last time, finally climaxing. In the last two hours, I had slowly slid from drunk to wasted to shitfaced to utterly destroyed. I slumped to the bathroom floor and downed the two shots, Ivan cheering me on. "That's a girl. You can hold your liquor with the boys," he said and helped me to my feet. His cellphone rang and he rested me on the toilet seat to answer it, my panties still around my ankles. He waved bye and left the bathroom, leaving me to stare at the grimy ceiling as it spun and spun. Screw me. Oh, God I felt so messed up. It was time to go home and crawl into oblivion in my tiny single bed in my closet sized room. Slowly I stood up, and supporting myself against the wall I slowly worked my way back to our spot at the bar.

At my plea to take me home Ivan shook his head and told me something about his girlfriend. I tried to focus on his excuse, tried to muster anger at his need for sex when he had a girl at home, but instead all I could do was collapse on the barstool and lean my head against the moist bar top. I was done. Done. Maybe I'd just pass out here and be done with Cinco de Mayo. Before I made my way to unconsciousness, though, Ivan asked Bill if he'd take me home.

Apparently, assenting Bill helped me out of the stool and half-dragged, half-carried me out of the bar to his white Buick, its maroon interior dotted with child toys, two car seats, and Sippy cups. Good dad, I thought as he lowered me down into the shotgun seat. I snuggled against the cloth material, already imagining the peaceful feeling my bed and pillows would bring in a few minutes.

## Chapter 2

*And no wonder, for even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light. -2 Corinthians 11:14*

“So what did you do tonight to get yourself so messed up, kiddo?” Bill asked as he pulled out into the near-empty streets, giving my very high and terribly drunk ass a ride home.

“I did some klonopins and xanies and oxies and vics. I would’ve been all right if I hadn’t drank so much on top of it all,” I mumbled struggling to stay conscious, a little annoyed at his use of kiddo. He didn’t seem that much older than I did, after all.

“Nice,” he said and laughed. “Where do you live?” he asked, turning his gaze from the road to stare at me.

“417 North Perry Street,” I whispered wondering if my heart would slow down until it stopped. That was what happened to Greg. I should have kissed him that night I realized, recalling the night he drove me home, just the two of us in his cramped car.

“You want to go somewhere and do some coke before I take you home?” He cursed under his breath at catching a red light.

“Coke? Yeah, sure,” I slurred fighting as hard as I could to stay awake. I needed to ask him where he planned to go and if he wanted any money in return. Ironically, it never occurred to me to wonder why, when he admitted not having any drugs on him earlier that he would suddenly have some now. Unfortunately, I lost my struggle and finally slammed into unconscious with a force enough to pummel a bodybuilder who actually didn’t use steroids.

When I awoke, it was to nothing. No street lights, no houses, no cars. Nothing. Nothing but my fear and the blackness out the window and the suddenly ominous man beside me.

I saw the town disappearing behind us as we turned onto a dirt road. I felt a rush of panic as I struggled to remember where I was and whom I was with.

“You’re awake, sweetheart. Good. We’ll be there before you know it.”

I knew I should have asked where there was, but the pull of the drugs and alcohol forced me back out of reality.

When I awoke again, it was to Bill shaking me by the shoulders. “Finally, you’re up. I was starting to worry,” he said.

Confused, I looked out the window and saw nothing but woods around us. “Are we going to do the stuff already?” I asked wishing I had just said no to begin with.

Bill just looked at me and laughed before hitting a button that slid the front bench seat back, creating more room in front. Before I could ask him what he was doing or what was so funny, he grabbed my legs and yanked me towards him.

“What are you doing?” I shouted and absurdly recalled the picture he had shown me of him holding his blue-eyed children. My heart, which had felt like it was beating so slow as to barely be keeping me alive, was suddenly pumping with a ferocity spawned only from fear.

“Just relax, honey,” he mumbled and pushed me into a lying position on the seat before he climbed on top of me.

No. No. No. No. The words careened around my head so loudly that it took me a moment to realize I was not saying them aloud. In that moment he had unzipped his pants and pulled my panties aside to shove his dick into me. “No!” I couldn’t breathe. I couldn’t believe this was happening to me. Rape was something I saw on TV. Rape was something that happened in big cities, committed by lifelong criminals with pistols and knives. Not fathers in a small town who I had talked with most of the night. No. Oh my God no.

“Stop. Please stop,” I screamed hoping that if I protested enough he would give up and just take me home.

He hushed me, took his dick out of my vagina, and slammed it up my ass. I had never had anal sex before. Very few guys liked it. It was for queers, they had proclaimed. The pain that shot through me as he forced himself deeper and deeper elicited shrieks and wild, desperate pleas. “Oh my God please stop. Please, please, please. No. I’ll get you cash. Or drugs, or whatever. Just stop.”

“I can’t stop,” he gasped. “I’ve always wanted to do this. I’ve always wanted to fuck a black girl,” he said, his breath coming out heavy and laced with liquor. He took his dick out of my ass and forced it back into my other hole. For a moment, I thought the pain would subside but he compensated for the change of holes by raping me hard. Harder than was safe for any girl to take.

I stopped bothering with words and simply screamed and screamed, wishing that I was not so messed up. Wishing that I had the strength to fight back. Wishing that I had not ever got in his freaking car. God please help me, I thought. It had been years since I had prayed and yet it still came so natural to me. God, please make him stop.

Bill’s expression, previously one of pure euphoria, turned into rage. He took both of my wrists in one hand and clamped the other one firmly over my mouth. I couldn’t beg. I couldn’t tell him no. I couldn’t do anything but lie there and feel the pain. “That’ll shut you the hell up, kiddo,” he panted, again switching holes.

I wondered briefly if he would tear something in there. I smelled blood. Maybe I would bleed to death. At least the pain would end. At least he wouldn’t be in control anymore. I longed for death.

Pain. Pain choked off all other feelings; pain radiated from my crotch yet filled my entire body. Blood. So much of it that I thought he must have stabbed me. But no. I felt the blood soaking my skirt and the back of my shirt and realized it was from my crotch. Pain and the stench of my own blood wrapped around me, creating a cocoon of hell.

One last unimaginable burst of pain and then he was finally finished. His left hand released my wrist, his right my mouth. He was going to kill me now. I started to shriek again in hope that someone would save me. His hand lashed across my face and I tasted blood. As he started to yell at me, I closed my eyes and accepted death. It wouldn't be so bad. At least this night would be over. At least I wouldn't have to hurt anymore. And maybe there really was a God who didn't totally hate me. Maybe whatever he had in store for me on the other side wouldn't be as bad as Bill.

"You had this coming all night and you fucking know it," he shouted, placing me back into a sitting position. He returned the seat to its original position, zipped up his pants, and started the car. "This is your fault for being such a fucking tease. You understand me, kiddo?"

It's my fault? I thought, trying to process the horrific revelation. "I understand. Are you going to take me home now? Please."

"Yeah. But you start any more of that screaming bullshit and we're going to have some serious problems. Okay?" His voice had contorted from controlled rage into something deadly and ugly.

"Okay," I whispered before allowing myself to pass out again. I almost hoped that I would not wake up.

When I entered back into the hell that was my reality, it was to the sound of him yelling, "Wake the fuck up, bitch!"

He was shaking me violently and screaming in my face. I felt beads of spit splatter onto my cheek and longed to wipe them off but found my body limp and useless. “This your house?” he asked and grabbed me by my hair, yanking me up to see out the window.

I tried to focus on the house but it was merely a blur. My eyelids grew heavy, and I began to panic at the thought of passing out again. Focus. Through my dizzy, blurry perception of the world, the hazy brown form of our porch swing. “Yeah,” I groaned as I willed myself to stand up, open the door, and get out of his car before he changed his mind and decided to take me back to the woods.

“Good,” he growled and climbed out of the car. In a moment, he was opening my door and yanking me out. “Can you walk?” he asked and released his hold on my waist for a brief moment. Despite my desperate plea for my body to stay standing, I felt myself falling toward the brick-paved street before Bill’s hands were upon me again. “Guess not,” he grumbled as he dragged me to the front porch. “Open the door,” he whispered.

“No,” I slurred terrified of what he would do if I granted him access to my house.

“I’m not going to rob you. I’m just going to help you get cleaned off and into bed,” he said while tightening his grip. The next morning I would realize he probably wanted to try to wash away evidence. I had seen a guy rape a girl and then make her shower before he left on one of those crime TV shows.

“Oww,” I whimpered. “I can’t let you in. I can get myself in bed. Please just leave.” All I wanted was to be safe in my own home with him gone.

“Fine,” he snapped instantly releasing his hold on me and bolting down the stairs. I collapsed on the porch and laid there until I could no longer hear the sound of his car. “Please, God.” I no longer even knew what I expected him to do. What *could* he do at this point anyway?

Still terrified that he would change his mind and come back for me, I managed to crawl to the door and unlock it. I thought I would feel safe once I crawled inside and locked the door behind me. Instead, the terror and pain remained, punctuated by the stench of blood, booze, and a faint trace of piss. I slinked up the front staircase, down the long hallway past my brothers' and sister's rooms, before finally reaching my door. Shaking from fear, pain, and the chill of the night I crawled across my floor and used the last of my strength to pull myself up into my bed.

I wanted to pull my blood stained clothes off. I wanted to scream until my throat was so raw I could not utter a sound. I wanted to bang my head against the wall until it cracked open and my flawed brain plopped out onto the floor. I wanted to take my razor and cut up my thighs. But exhaustion prompted me to collapse onto my pillow, pull my blanket over me, and cry for what felt like hours.

When I could open my mouth and form words other than "Why, no, God," I shakily reached for the phone and dialed my friend Heidi's number. I had no idea why I was calling her. Maybe because a part of me knew that what had happened needed to be reported to some sort of authorities and I knew I couldn't do it on my own.

After a few rings, I heard Heidi's loud, firm voice and the sound of Nate's eardrum rapturing chatter in the background along with the holler of the wind. "I've messed up," I whispered. I didn't want to cry but even before Heidi started lecturing me about getting my life together and to stop being a self-pitying loser, I started crying.

I heard a rustling sound and a pop before Nate's voice came on the line. Something about I needed to stop feeling sorry for myself was all I heard over the sound of my thick sobs. "He raped me. He did it. I said no. God, I fucking swear I said no."

Silence.

Even my sobs stopped as I waited for Nate's response. Again a rustling and then no noise from his end. Maybe he hung up on me. Or maybe he was covering the stupid phone while he wondered why I was telling this lie. Of course, they wouldn't believe me. I was the slut, the whore of our friend circle. The two of them were probably covering up their laughter.

"I'm very sorry that happened to you," he mumbled, his tone somber. I strained to hear Heidi. Did they believe me? Was he sincere?

"What do I do? What do I do?" I didn't even know what I meant by that but couldn't stop asking. Nate let me cry and continue repeating that question for a few minutes before finally telling me that I needed to get myself straight. I heard Heidi second his opinion, telling him to tell me to say off the drugs and go get help. I hung up the phone before I screamed at them that there was no help for me now.

"How, God? This isn't happening. God, wake me up from this nightmare." I continued to sob questions to a God I hadn't even believed in a few hours ago until I finally passed out from intoxication, exhaustion, and the strain of trauma.

I woke up to the sound of the birds chirping out my open window and the neighbor's dog barking persistently at some nonexistent object no doubt. I had woken up most mornings since moving into the hulking yet graceful Victorian-like home my father and stepmother rented in that same way. A feeble glance at my clock displayed the bright red numbers 9:00 am. My siblings were already in school, my dad at work, and my stepmom already racing about town on her bike, preparing to run the Tour de France (or so I liked to joke behind her back). Outside my bedroom, everything in my world was essentially the same. But as soon as I rolled onto my side,



a quick shot of pain burst from my crotch and ass and I knew no matter how much I wanted to deny what had happened last night, it was impossible.

Slowly I sat up in bed, determined to remove my still damp with blood and sweat clothes. I pulled my camisole off over my head, telling myself not to look at the back of it but doing so anyway. The bottom half of it was red with blood. My blood. Where had it come from? A wave of sudden dizziness hit me hard enough to almost faint. I tossed the shirt aside and hurriedly laid down to slid out of my skirt. The whole backside of it looked as if it had purposefully been dyed red. I swallowed the vomit that surged up into my mouth and let the skirt fall from my hands to the floor.

No. No. No. The same roaring loud mantra from last night begin to play in my mind only this time it was directed not at Bill but at God. I had been raped. I had been raped. How could it have happened?

Suddenly, unable to bare the sight of the bloodied clothing, I climbed unsteadily to my feet and leaning against the wall, made my way to the upstairs bathroom as quickly as I could. I was still drunk from the night before while at the same time horribly hungover. That combined with the pain from my crotch area made walking an imposition. When I finally got to the bathroom, I leaned over the toilet and vomited. Tequila and stomach acid perfumed the bathroom as I heaved and heaved. Even after my stomach gave up all it had, I continued to gag into the toilet, though the only things actually coming out of me were sobs and tears. As I cried, I undid my bra, letting it fall to the bathroom tiles while I walked to the tub. I caught a glimpse of my reflection in the large mirror and cringed at both my near nakedness and the bruises that seemed painted across my body like roses on a homemade Valentine's Day card. My wrists had impressions of his grip. I hadn't realized he had held me that hard. My right cheek sported a dark

purple spot where his hand had connected with it and my lip was busted. My shoulders bore blue spots in various places, no pattern discernible. They looked like a child's finger painting.

Random thumbprints all over the page.

I gazed at my ruined body for several minutes, tracing over each bruise with my eyes before running my fingers over them. I let my mind fall into exploring this strange mosaic of pain as if it were a work of art in a museum. It was fascinating in its horribleness. The longer I stared the more I felt that I was looking at but some other girl. I must have just heard about her rape last night. Yes. Ivan took me home last night and I was fine. I was fine. I latched onto these thoughts and slowed the tears and my ragged breathing. I decided I would go call Jared. We would get together and get drunk on his dad's crappy tasting cheap beer. My hangover would be gone in no time. Then we'd—

My panties were wet. I looked down. As soon as I did I knew I had been flowing into my fantasy precisely to avoid this action. They were damp and crusted in spots from the blood. "This is real," I whispered and pulled my panties down, kicking them to where my bra laid. I turned the water on and jerked the hot water knob all the way up. I listened to the water smacking against the tub bottom, and instantly recalled the pounding rhythm of Bill in me. "No," I whimpered and started crying frantically, unsure whether I should allow myself the cleansing of the water. I had watched enough crime shows to know that if I wanted to prosecute my rapist I'd have to wait until after the police collected their evidence before I showered.

Did I want to report Bill? Did I want him to go to prison? Did I want him to be bent over in his cell and see how it fucking felt to be sodomized? Obviously yes but I wasn't delusional. He wouldn't go to prison. He wouldn't be convicted. And the Titusville police would laugh so hard they'd upchuck their donuts when I, after a night of whoring myself, claimed to be raped.

They wouldn't believe me. Hell, I wasn't even sure if I believed me. Does it count as rape if I was literally whoring around? I wasn't sure but I knew that the last thing I would do was share my humiliation with people who neither cared nor understood. I switched the water's flow to the shower head and climbed in, letting the scalding heat and noise of the water disguise my pain and sobs.

I took my luffa and scoured my bruised skin furiously, rubbed it until the entire first layer of skin was off. I took my Summer's Eve wash and lathered it between my hands, softly chanting, "No. No. No," seeing Bill's face and feeling the force of his dick all over again. My inner thighs were bruised the worst, looking like the face of a boxer who lost a 15 round fight. Five days later, when I would go to my gynecologist, I would learn that I suffered tearing of my vagina wall, perineum, and received an anal fissure. Now, having cleaned my filthy skin I curled into a fetal position on the bathtub floor and suffered the worst panic attack I have ever had.

An hour later, I was dressed in my blue skirt and top and lying in bed, gazing blankly at my bedroom's high ceiling. I wanted to die. I would kill myself. Even before I had decided this, I was reaching for the corded phone that sat on the floor by my bed. I would dial Kenny and Ramen's numbers and between the two of them, I had no doubt I could score enough opiates to stop my heart. I started to dial Kenny's number when something stopped me.

Previously, in an attempt to get clean that winter I had attended Deerfield Drug and Alcohol counseling sessions in town and had acquired several pamphlets for rehabs. Partially acting out of the purest desperation, an urge that emerged from the very basic human instinct of survival, I dug through the assortment of candy bar wrappers, study guides, and bills I would never pay until I found a pamphlet for Gaudenzia Drug and Alcohol Rehab Center. I flipped to the last page where the number was printed and stared at it.

In Alcoholics/Narcotics Anonymous meetings, we would always talk about “hitting bottom” and arriving at a “turning point.” But no matter how many meetings I had attended or how many different sponsors tried to keep me from OD-ing like my friend Greg, everything they said was meaningless. The guest speakers at meetings might as well have been mumbling through a walkie-talkie in a garbled foreign language. Nothing stuck. And yet here was my rock bottom and turning point molded into one incredibly crappy moment. “I don’t want to die,” I whispered. Whether I was talking to myself, to God, or to no one I couldn’t be certain. And the irony of it all was that I couldn’t put into words one sensible reason as to why I finally wanted to live.

I called Gaudenzia. Not because I particularly wanted to spend 30 days away from home but because I could not keep living the way I was living. Even through my trauma and hangover, I knew I essentially had only two choices: get clean or just hurry up and kill myself on drugs. Because death would be better than *ever* waking up again with the knowledge that I had been raped because of booze and drugs. Though I had no way of knowing it then, I would be raped again a few months after getting out of rehab. But that is a different story altogether.

### **Chapter Three**

*My presence will go with you, and I will give you rest. -Exodus 33:14*

A week later, I was enduring the ridiculously awkward car ride to rehab with my dad and stepmom. I had been up all night smoking pot with my friends (a drug I considered as harmless as cigarettes and thus did not associate with my rape). When I had finally decided to head home I couldn't leave without saying goodbye to Jared. He'd hugged me and wished me luck. I forced myself to walk away from him without turning around, knowing that if I did I would stop. I'd run back to him, get high, and fuck him for the rest of the day. Instead, I cried the entire way home, the perfume of pot clinging to me even as I climbed up to my room to finish packing.

Now, lying down in the back seat of my dad's green minivan, I tried and failed to fall asleep. My father's disappointment was filling up the car, leaving no room for a catnap before I began my last chance at life.

Even the sweet, sticky goodness of weed was no comfort or replacement for my opiates, uppers, and cocaine. But it had sustained me during my week waiting for a bed to open up at Gaudenzia, the rehab the county had decided to pay for me to attend. Somehow, I had been dropped for my dad's insurance, forcing me to detox in pain only masked by the strong weed.

I followed my dad as he carried my large black duffle bag to the rehab's main entrance and contemplated knocking him into my stepmom and making a run for it. The neighborhood around the old brown-red brick building was doing far more than crumbling. It was devouring itself from the inside out. Each home, with its plethora of junk collected on the front yard and porch, (mattresses, bicycles rusted beyond conceivable use, clothes meant to be hung to dry but instead found their way onto each cracked slat of wood) served as an incubator of current and future dealers, users, and the enablers that every addict absolutely delighted in manipulating.

I had heard fellow addicts say that we could just sense when a score was near. I knew it wasn't that simple. It was our ability to observe our surroundings, identifying the weakness within the societal foundation, and then making love to that weakness while we snorted our little noses bloody. Or at least I'd like to think the process of acquiring drugs was so refined. As I would find out in my days to come in rehab, most addicts possess a "terminal uniqueness," meaning we were too damn special to be expected to live like functioning adults.

Sleep deprived and still feeling a hint of the low-grade high the pot provided, the goodbyes were a haze. I reined in tears, genuinely going to miss my dad despite the numerous reasons why I harbored resentment and hate towards him, but mostly just terrified of living without drugs. Could I do it, I wondered as I followed the intake women through the doors that separated Gaudenzia from the real world. The series of questions and paperwork that we went over has long since left my memory, though I can recall her pointedly clearing her throat at one point when I fell asleep at her desk. When we were finally through, she smiled warmly and said, "Let me show you to your home and family for the duration of your treatment."

Home? Family? If I wasn't so tired, I might have asked her if she were high, too. Instead, I followed her out of the administrative section of the building and into the client section. The first room, the common area, served as a playroom for adults. Hung up on the left wall was the jobs board, handwritten so neatly I wondered if a human actually did it. Every client was assigned a job for each week to be completed during the "work therapy" period each morning. In the center of the blue-grey carpeted room was a ping pong table whose net and paddles were missing. Later I'd learn that after recreation period the net and paddles were locked in the storage closet along with the radio, volleyball, horseshoes, and basketball.

On the right side wall were two doorways to the auditorium, a large often-chilly room used for some group meetings and community reprimands. As we walked through the playroom, I felt the blessed kiss of the air conditioner and enjoyed the cool air. Back at home, every room in my dad's house grew hotter with the progression of the summer. Only at night, when the sun finally gave way to the moon, would the fans win their battle against the heat. On the far end of the playroom was the group room, a large room set up similarly to a classroom only without the desks for the students. I peeked in on morning meeting and saw the men and women on separate sides of the room. That was beyond stupid. Most of my friends were men. I hated having to associate with girls, or worse yet, pretend I actually enjoyed "girls' night out." Now I would be stuck with thirty of them. Great.

"Come along," she said her cheerfulness enough to make me want to punch her in her pretty, auburn hair framed face. A week after the rape and I was having nightmares every time I closed my eyes, part of which prompted me to stay up most of the night for the last seven days. And the flashbacks, though sporadic were absolutely crippling when they occurred. "Up those stairs," she said as we approached a wide staircase to our right and a small set of stairs with an accompanying ramp to our left, "is the men's dorms on the second floor. But you won't have any need for that, honey." If there was one thing that an older woman could say to instantly piss me off it was calling me a pet name. Not even my own mother had called me honey.

"Why not," I asked while visualizing hanging out on the bottom bunk of a guy's bed and bullshitting about sports and music.

"Because one of the major rules is no fraternizing with the opposite sex. As I just explained to you no more than ten minutes ago, honey." Perhaps if I were fully conscious I would have remembered. "Also, the cafeteria is up that stairwell on the third floor. I'm going to

escort you to the nurses' station and detox to get you situated, okay?" she asked, again irritating me. Since I was a child, commands that were politely issued as a question seemed supremely idiotic.

The nurses' station was down the ramp and through two sets of double doors, offering me a glimpse of the outside courtyard with its picnic tables, pavilion, volleyball court, and basketball hoops, and out in front of it stood a very stern looking elderly black man. He wore a hat I had only ever seen on posters proclaiming African Pride that had been hung around our high school for black history month. He lead me into the detox area, instructing me in his heavy accent which I could not quite place, to have a seat and wait for him to return to search my belongings.

I watched him plod slowly but deliberately out of the quadrant before I turned to the series of tables congregated in the middle of the room. At the one furthest away from me sat two women eating a lunch of small subs and generic brand potato chips, engaged in a whispered conversation. Uncertain whether to join them or slink quietly into the chair closest to me I stood awkwardly waiting for either an invitation or rejection. I hadn't felt that uncomfortable indecision about where to sit since high school. During my first few months of my freshman year I solved this fear by eating my weight loss bar in the girls' bathroom while reading a book. A bookworm since I had injured my foot in the third grade and couldn't enjoy recess, I had preferred reading rather than socializing with kids that, though my age, seemed to me to be light-years behind in maturity.

"Come sit with us," one of them, a girl several shades darker in complexion than me called," smoothing her flatiron straightened hair back into its tight, short ponytail. She looked quite young from a distance but as I approached the table, I saw the traces of wrinkles across her beautiful, smiling face. Later I would find out she was in her mid-thirties and had a recently born



daughter. “I’m Desiree and that’s Ally,” she said, gesturing to the fair-skinned girl with long, slightly greasy black hair. The pronounced wrinkles across her slackening facial skin showed a woman in middle age that had no doubt lived a life of drugs much longer than I had.

“Kateri,” as my stomach growled upon smelling their ham and cheese subs. If only they were veggie, I thought. I had been a vegetarian since the sixth grade and would under no circumstances consume the flesh of animals. Still, that didn’t stop my stomach from admiring what most humans viewed as food. Damn.

I listened intently as they continued their whispered discussion, which I quickly gathered, was complaining about some of the staff members, among them the black man that I had encountered, Mr. Wally. Too tired to contribute I simply nodded and laughed when appropriate, focusing on staying awake and observing my surroundings. Behind our table was a series of single rooms where clients detoxing from their various drugs of choice stayed before being integrated into the general population. I could just see inside the first room where a girl was curled up in bed, a thin blanket wrapped around her. I hoped I would be placed in detox. Even though I had already went through withdrawal I still had hopes of being allowed to orientate myself to my new surroundings and sleep before I was thrown into a system I knew nothing about. Unfortunately, as Mr. Wally returned with my bag and purse he announced that after we were done here I would be shown to my room in the girls’ dorms. Awesome.

“Let’s see what you brought, Ms. Hall,” he muttered, his accent making it difficult for me to discern this phrase. He unzipped my bag and began pulling out everything in it and tossing the contents on the long table it sat on. In display of everyone. Desiree and Ally had finished their lunch and as they left detox to rejoin the group, they gave me a wave and a sympathetic shrug of

their shoulders. Perhaps they had been through this same humiliating process. He held up each item and inspected it carefully, making comments on some.

“Panties,” he stated his voice very loud and firm, as if urging a group of fellow activists to continue protesting against some travesty of justice. My eyes became wide as my thongs and hipsters were spread out in a row across the table just as a young male client emerged from one of the detox rooms.

“What’s up, girl,” he said, staring at my panties first before his eyes drifted to my face.

Feeling heat rushing to my cheeks I cleared my throat and stepped in between his view of my underwear. “My first day. It’s been wonderful so far,” I said, injecting enough sarcasm for him to get it without being so obvious as to earn the ire of Mr. Wally.

“Don’t you have somewhere to be, sir,” Mr. Wally snapped and the boy, he couldn’t have been any older than my twenty-one years of age, shook his head of blonde waves before slowly ambling back to his room. I felt relief that my personal items would no longer be on display for another random stranger.

I heard Mr. Wally mumble something about that “boy being trouble,” but could not stop staring at the neat line of my panties. My favorite pair, the ones I had worn the night of the rape, the ones that were stained red, were noticeably missing. I knew they wouldn’t be there, I had thrown them in the trash the day after it happened, wrapped in two paper bags to conceal them from my dad who I knew went through my garbage (I had missed my period one month and, worried, had taken a pregnancy test. I left the box in the tiny white garbage can, relieved at the negative sign, and went to class. I came home to be accosted about whether I intended to keep the child or not.) But still, to not see the adorable pink panties with red hearts was jarring.

Bill had gone around my panties. Somehow, I always imagined that rapists pulled them down or ripped them off. But he hadn't. Nothing he had done was like what I had seen on television. It was worse in a way. Those girls on TV didn't know the guy or do anything that gave him an idea that it was okay. They were walking home from work and grabbed out of a back alley by a serial rapist. Then Benson and Stabler would come to their rescues and the case would be solved in less than sixty minutes. Not mine. I wasn't an innocent victim.

"Shirts," Mr. Wally continued as if the boy had never appeared, pulling out first my blue tank top and then my white one. "You are not allowed to wear sleeveless shirts outside of using them as nightclothes."

Normally I would have protested such a decree. I lived in tank tops all spring, summer, fall, and even sometimes during the winter. But my energy was fixated on not crying in front of this guy I didn't know.

"Do you understand, Ms. Hall?" he asked holding my white tank up to my face to get my attention.

My hands curled into fists as I fought the reflex to rip the tank top right out of his long, bone-thin fingers. "Yeah," I mumbled as stomach acid worked its way up my throat, insisting that it be expelled as my thoughts of Bill became more vivid.

His dark colored, bristling goatee had been so close to my face I could have counted the individual hairs had it been brighter in the car. His breath had rushed out at me as he had groaned and moaned, thrusting harder and deeper than any man should. Pain. Maybe the fear and helplessness magnified the pain or perhaps simply the genuine consequences of tearing tissues in such intimate areas. Whatever it had been, I had never experienced such a large hole of pain. Like falling into what you thought was a shallow ditch and then realizing, as you failed to hit

bottom that it in fact was a chasm leading all the way to the center of the earth. I could curl up in the pain and just die.

“Shorts,” Mr. Wally continued his stern yet calm countenance was insane to me. How could I have been going through hell, feeling Bill’s hot, tequila-scented breath on my face and yet no one else was affected. It just didn’t seem fair. “These are way too short, Ms. Hall. I will put them in storage with the bags,” he announced staring at the two pairs of Bermuda shorts I owned as if they held samples of a highly contagious infectious disease.

“No they are not,” I meekly protested. “They’re down to my knees.”

“Too short. Too short. Not wearing them,” he chanted, placing them back inside the bag without even reacting to my words. What the fuck was wrong with you, I wanted to shriek. Just let me wear my goddamn shorts and show me my bed so I could get some fucking sleep.

I stood there acknowledging Mr. Wally with a nod of the head for the rest of the search. When he was done he handed me a white garbage bag to put the clothes I was allowed to wear in. The rest were zippered in my bag and taken away to storage (which I would later find out was located in Reentry girls’ dorm).

Next came a strip search performed by a female nurse in the medical examination room. When I ventured into the room and she closed the door, her yellow scrubs so bright and cheery I felt my nausea return at someone so happy as to willingly wear bright bumblebee yellow, I assumed it would just be a pat down. “Strip down to your bra and panties please and then shake them so I can be sure you’re not hiding anything in them. Thank you.” I took a deep breath and tried to get the sight of Bill standing there grinning at me instead of Ms. Bumblebee out of my head.

When the search was done, my eyes closed the entire time, focusing on the prospect of sleep and blankets to chase away my misgivings about my choice of rehab, she escorted me back into the large playroom and down a narrow hallway behind a set of double doors. “This is your dorm. It’s called Reentry. The bathrooms and showers are down the hall,” she said while looking at me expectantly. As I stood in front of the bunk bed that I was to share with another girl, I held my garbage bag and just stared around the room. This was where Bill had put me. And where was he?

“Put the bag down. You have to go to group now,” she finally said her voice firm but not harsh. No. I would soon find out what *harsh* was.

“Can’t I take a nap first? I haven’t sleep in I don’t know how long,” I asked and yawned accidentally, pleased though for the added emphasis.

“You can sleep when it’s bedtime tonight,” she replied and walked out of the room. I followed, putting my body into my equivalent of autopilot. My body walked behind her to the auditorium and obediently sat in an empty seat in the upper left side. I observed the predominance of men and the scarcity of the females. I glanced around the room, picking out the familiar face of Ally and Desiree before settling on Mr. Wally. He stood at the bottom of the amphitheater like setup, waving his hands while he spoke ardently about something that I couldn’t quite gather. But my mind wasn’t with my body. Not really anyway. It was wondering what Bill was doing right now. Was he hugging his two children, eating lunch at work, or chopping up the lines of coke he had promised me? Maybe he was remembering that night, playing it back repeatedly like a broken VCR replaying some old Disney movie. He enjoyed it.

A worksheet was suddenly in my hand, given to me by the heavysset woman sitting beside me. “What’s this for,” I whispered, too tired to bother reading the instructions.

“It’s a relapse prevention group. You list your relapse triggers under there,” she whispered back and pointed towards the large block with bullet points marked out on the page.

“Thanks,” I replied before realizing I had nothing to write with. My purse had a pen but that was no help to me now. Hesitantly I raised my hand.

“Do you have a question?” Mr. Wally shouted crossing his arms and pausing in his diatribe against dating early in recovery. Or at least that’s what I gathered of what he said.

“May I have a pen or pencil?” It seemed like a fairly innocuous question to me. Everyone else had a pen. Surely they all hadn’t had the sense to carry a pen with them when then walked into rehab in the midst of detoxing. The staff must have just forgotten to give me one. Or a folder, I realized as I noted a blue folder in every client’s hand or lap. I felt like I was back in high school and had arrived late to class. Everyone else in the room had known what the hell was going on and I was left to fidget with whatever necklace I was wearing that day.

“You want a pen you have to put a request in,” he snapped dismissively shaking his head. “You should know better than to lose your pen.”

Are you kidding me? “But I didn’t lose my pen. No one’s given me one yet. I had one in my purse but that’s...”

He started talking loudly over me, continuing his lecture as if I hadn’t even spoken. Fuck him. I stared at the tall ceiling and ignored every word he said. If he didn’t want to listen to me, there was no way I’d listen to him. I hadn’t been there more than a couple of hours and already I was tired of the place. I wanted freedom. I wanted home. I wanted Jared.

Jared was more than just my best friend and lover. He was my mirror image. All of our mutual friends agreed that if I were a man I’d be just like Jared and vice versa. I had met him at the AA meetings I had started attending after my public drunkenness misdemeanor in November

of 2009. However, we were merely casual acquaintances until January of 2010. Early that month I went out drinking and ended up getting too drunk to walk on my own. The men that gave me a ride home were all too pleased with my helpless state, as one of them had rubbed his hand against my crotch then inserted a few of his fingers into me before I lost consciousness. Besides being terribly ill for the next few days, I was shaken by the encounter and found comfort in Jared's friendship. A friendship that started out platonically with the two of us supporting each other in our efforts to stay clean and sober before rapidly transforming into a sex and drug fueled quasi-relationship.

I didn't know how to tell Jared about the rape. When I had met him early that morning to say good-bye I couldn't find the words. If anyone should have known about it should have been him. But my lips couldn't even form the "r" of "rape."

I loved him. Even when he treated me like a piece of shit, I could only love him. I hoped he was all right. I hoped he would decide to get clean and join me here. Such a thought was pure fantasy but it was too comforting not to latch on to.

The large black women beside me nudged my arm, as she and everyone around me stood up. "Smoke break. And you better go to the bathroom now if you need to, too. You get bitched at if you ask during groups."

That figured. This was like being back in high school again. Plenty of rules tossed out but no courtesy. "I'm Bertha," she said and motioned me to exit the row. "You'll be fine once you get used to things, baby girl," she muttered as we climbed the stairs, the last two words coming out as one as she wheezed her way up the stairs behind me. She was well over 300 pounds, her dark skin stretched to accommodate the cellulite that protruded off every inch of her body. I watched her gargantuan butt wiggle as she waddled through the playroom and headed for the

courtyard. She was the epitome of what I always feared I'd become. I had struggled with both my weight and maintaining a positive body image most of my life. I felt a mixture of fear, disgust, and gratefulness as I followed Bertha outside, pulling my pack of Pall Mall menthol 100s from the pocket of my jeans.

The rest of that first day there, a Friday, continued to consist of reprimands, confusion, and a blur of faces with names I would only remember after a few days there. At dinner in the sweltering cafeteria, I learned that my vegetarian diet was viewed as an inconvenience to the kitchen staff, as rolled eyes and sighs emerged when I rejected the nausea-inducing meat dish. I ended up, like many other meals while there, eating a peanut butter sandwich and the vegetable being served. By the time I left rehab I was so sick of peanut butter I couldn't stand the sight of a jar of it for months.

After an in house AA meeting and our nightly ritual of "goodnights" (like we were a pack of four year olds being tucked in by our parents) the men were sent to the nurses' station first while all of us girls waited in the group room and the hallway next to the door exiting to the rest of the facility. "How's your first day been?" I heard a voice ask from behind me. Tired and so sick of being peppered with just as many questions as I had experienced as the perpetual new kid in school while my family had moved around the county like a pack of pathetic nomads, I turned from my spot in the line to see a young girl, seemingly even younger than me, smiling at me.

Her long, pale brown hair fell to her mid back, with wisps of it framing her lightly freckled face. A face that, although unnaturally thin, was striking. Not in its beauty, though she was a pretty girl, but in the intoxicating innocence of it. Still uncertain whether love at first sight exists, I can say meeting Tanya was lust and obsession at first sight.



“Oh, it’s been fucking wonderful,” I said, not holding a single oozing ounce of sarcasm back. Someone once told me that sarcasm was a pathetic attempt at avoiding real communication. I had only smiled and explained that was the point. Clearly if I had my shit together enough to “communicate” I wouldn’t have been snorting things up my nose. Duh.

She laughed, her smile growing in size and smudging her pinkish lip-gloss slightly. “It gets better,” she said and placed her thin hand on my shoulder. “I’ve been here five days and already I am getting adjusted to the bliss of institutional life.” She winked and gave me a friendly nudge with her elbow. “You’re in Reentry, right?” I nodded. “Cool. We’ll be roommates.” Tanya gave a girlish squeal and high-fived me before ducking into the nearby girls’ bathroom. She was too young. Hell even I was too young to be in a fucking rehab. She was all of 18 or 19. One thing comforting about the company of other addicts is the fact that you can make accurate assumptions about things they’ve been through. The things girls did to get drugs aged you in ways that went deeper than skin or body.

Looking at the other girls gathered around me, I realized that none of us had been anywhere close to innocent since we took our first hit or did our first line.

“Hey new girl,” I heard Lindsey, another younger girl I’d meet earlier that day during a smoke break, shout. “Come hang with us. The guys are coming back in and heading to bed.”

Glad that it was almost time for meds, smoke, and bed I hurried to the front of the line where Lindsey and another girl, who looked to be in her mid to late twenties, stood with the door cracked open.

“Justin!” Lindsey shouted as a thin, lanky, blond young man walked up the steps. He turned and motioned to his shorter, likewise blond companion.

The two men smiled down at Lindsey and the other girl, whom I would later learn was named Sarah.

“Do it. We dare you.”

Do what? I wondered staring uneasily in the general direction of the nurses’ station. We weren’t supposed to have the door open until one of the staff said it was our turn.

Suddenly the two girls lifted up their T-shirts before yanking up their bras as well, exposing small but firm breasts to the men above. Oh my God, I thought, my eyes becoming wide in surprise. Nervously I made my way to the back of the line, seeking refuge behind Bertha’s large frame. So it was that kind of place. The first psychiatric ward I had stayed at was like that. People dated, flirted, wrote notes to each other, kissed, and even fucked. Surprisingly, to even me, I had only ever made it to the kissing stage before being released. Now, I didn’t want to think about any stages but bed. If I made a friend or fuck buddy fine. If not fine. I was in here to get clean. Or at least try to. I knew, in the dark, whorled reaches of my supposedly brilliant mind that if I failed I would make sure I died as soon as possible.

“Do it, new girl,” Lindsey said giggling while still exposing herself. I shook my head, willing myself to avert my eyes from her chest. I was bisexual and although I had made peace with that as a teenager, I wasn’t stupid enough to think that the rest of the world didn’t judge people on their sexual orientation. I kept it private as much as possible. “You will before you leave here, baby. I know it.” She winked as she and Sarah pulled their bras and shirts back down. The men gave the two streakers a round of applause before heading into their dorm area.

I shook my head again in response to Lindsey’s proclamation. It wasn’t that I wasn’t used to exposing myself. Obviously, none of us girls could fool ourselves about the tricks we had pulled for drugs. But that was different. Those things had been for a purpose. Whipping my tits

out to earn a few claps and whistles seemed pointless. Later I would learn that the flashing did indeed serve a purpose. Men traded cigarettes for the show. Later I would lean out the window after bedtime and flash a few guys for cigarettes and cans of Mountain Dew. We weren't allowed caffeine. Apparently, it was a drug as well. Ironical considering we could smoke.

"Get back," Sarah hissed as she shoved Lindsey back into the hallway and closed the door. Within a few seconds it was opened again by one of our house managers, essentially our babysitters, Tony, who ushered us to the nurses' station for med line. Those who didn't take meds were allowed to go directly out for smoke break while us crazies stood in line after grabbing a paper cup and filling it with water from the leaking water fountain.

I stood behind Lindsey and Sarah, trying to ignore their conversation, which consisted of the best way to cheek their meds so that they could exchange them for something stronger. I realized how stupid I was for believing that I would be protected from the temptation of drug abuse within these walls. I wanted to get fucked up as much as they did. But I couldn't. It just wasn't something I could do anymore.

When I reached the window the young, blindingly white nurse with blonde hair handed me a cup with my name written across it in black marker. I glanced at it and saw my familiar medicine for my bipolar disorder: Carbamazepine 200 milligrams. I was supposed to take it twice a day, morning and at night. But I hadn't taken any since the end of April. "Is there anything I can get to help me sleep?" I asked, realizing how ridiculous my request was half a second after I asked it. Any medicine request I made would be viewed as a symptom of my addiction. Never mind the fact that I hadn't slept more than a few hours in a week. Or that I wasn't sure if I dared sleep tonight because I knew what awaited me. Bill.

“Sorry, honey. You’ll have to talk to the psychiatrist about that when you see him,” the nurse replied waiting for me to swallow my pill. I did quickly and went out for my smoke break.

I sat on the picnic table closet to the building and lit up. The other girls around me were engaged in several different conversations, fragments of it floating toward me like pieces of tissues ripped apart in front of a fan. Always on the outside looking in. It had been that way most of my life. I was petrifyingly shy as a child, preferring the company of one or two close friends and shunning large gatherings whenever possible. As my family continued to move from state to state, my dad changing jobs like a toddler changes which toy he’s interested in, my shyness flourished. Why get to know any of these kids if I was going to move in a year or so, anyway, I had assured myself as I hid behind my good grades and plentiful extracurricular activities. Now, though, I was somewhat glad to be alone. I didn’t feel like pretending not to be teetering between two worlds, the present and the night of the fifth.

I had expected anal sex to feel good. How could anyone willingly engage in something so painful? I didn’t want to think about the rape but it refused to be forgotten.

“Hall?” Tanya called from the pavilion’s picnic table, waving her pale hand gracefully at me.

I got up and walked reluctantly towards her. When I reached the bench she held out a Camel Wide, her smile suddenly disturbing. “I love them. Try one,” she insisted eyeing the almost gone cigarette in my own hand.

I took it and lit it quickly, inhaling it with a strength I normally reserved for a hit off a bong. “They’re fucking good,” I whispered and sat down beside her on the table.

Tanya giggled, sliding closer to me until our bodies touched. I wanted to smile back, wanted to share her strange joy. Until I realized why her smile was eerie. We’re in rehab. No one

with a freaking drug addiction should look so *happy*. Was she high? If people were swapping meds there's no telling who was clean and who wasn't. "What's your poison?" she whispered, leaning her light head against mine.

"Everything." I was what addicts called a "human garbage can." Jared and I both were. Sitting in his room sucking off potent joints, we'd laugh hysterically for minutes at a time at our ability to try any drug at least once. And we kept on laughing even after our friend Greg overdosed on heroin.

I gazed up at the stars, only barely visible through the city lights of Erie and couldn't deny my brokenness. Normal people didn't have a friend die from something yet never have any thought of quitting the deadly activity. I wasn't normal. Hell, I was definitely insane.

*"I've always wanted to fuck a black girl."* Bill's voice was as deep and serious as that night. He didn't give any indication that he regretted what he was doing, that he thought about stopping. Like he said, he couldn't. But I didn't think I believed race was the issue. It was me. All me.

"Yo girlie," Tanya said as she stood up and did a twirl on the dirt covered pavement. "It's time to go in." She gazed at me curiously, probing me with her green eyes that I could easily dive into, forgetting my purpose here and forgetting how I got myself raped. "What's wrong," she practically chirped as I slowly rose from the table and followed her towards the building, her step confident despite the fact that she walked backwards.

I was raped because I was a whore, I wanted to tell her. But just as with Jared the words would not come out. Maybe if I told her she'd hold me tonight and keep the nightmares away. "Nothing. Just tired from my meds."

Tanya seemed satisfied with my answer, nodding as if she knew what I was talking about. She was the only female not in med line. The only female in the rehab that wasn't on psych meds. She had no clue what it was like to rely on a stupid pill every day to keep from supposedly going crazy. I didn't think my mood stabilizer would have made me think twice about getting in the car with Bill. But it might have. It was awful how much a slight chance could sting.

I heard Tanya talking about her Dad, reverently chronicling his life in Arizona and how someday she would move out there, but the conversation seemed further away than the God people begged me to believe in to get clean. Bill. Bill. Bill. I would not think of him anymore, I vowed as Tanya and I entered the building and headed for Reentry. It never happened. It never fucking happened.

I repeated my chant of denial while I unpacked my belongings and slowly filed them away in the dresser and cubbyhole that were designated as mine. It felt good. It felt so good to forget. I pulled down my shorts and panties and saw the bruises. I could feel the gaze of my roommates upon me, their unasked questions were loud enough to deafen me. "I can't do this," I whispered. Denying something that was showing right on me was even more crazy than the fact that I was considering getting high right now.

Later that night I woke up in the hard bottom bunk, the scratchy blanket covering only my feet the, urge to urinate stronger than the pull of my medicine to sleep, and felt wetness covering my face and pillow. I had been crying in my sleep. For once, I was glad I had no memory of my dreams.

He stood over her in the doorway, the light from her small lamp glinting off his dark baldhead, and yelled at her. Words of anger, disappointment, and perhaps disgust. She wasn't really listening to him, though. The young woman had ceased listening to her father more than a decade ago. The exact moment when she gave up trying to win his love and approval, a feat she now viewed as impossible, was difficult to place. Perhaps it was when he, in an irrational rage, grabbed her younger brother and swung him by his arm and leg into the playroom wall before kicking him repeatedly while his high-pitched screams filled the house. Or maybe it was when she performed in the junior high talent show and he went to one of her brother's many baseball games. Or when, while experiencing one of her numerous depressive episodes, he told her mother to "just get rid of her. Send her away." Regardless of when, it had happened.

At 21, the words he said to her meant nothing in comparison to the words of the men she slept with. The men she had convinced herself actually loved her. After receiving a public drunkenness citation, and promising to stay sober, only a few months later, she had been carried onto the front porch in a near comatose state from booze and God only knew what else. The man standing before her, her father, referenced both events now, only a few days after she had woken up from that night. The memories of the man that had touched her still fresh, and yet here was another reprimand. Though she hadn't told her father about it, in fact she never would tell him, she still hated him for every word he tossed at her. That man, with his huge grin, and firm insistence that she keep taking shot after shot of Jack was the one her father should have been yelling at. The man that had shoved his hand between her legs and entered her while she slumped limply in the back seat of a stranger's van, whimpering from the alcohol poisoning he had helped her achieve.

When her father left her small, white walled, stained carpet, closet sized bedroom, she called one of the men she was sure loved her. Unlike her father. Jared was just getting ready to head out the door, and invited her to come to Perks Place Café with him for a cup of coffee. Her hands shook in time with her racing heart, as she pulled on her black hoodie, too thin for the chilly January air, and situated her lucky, shoplifted hat on top of her tangled hair. Not owning a pair of boots or inclined to spend her small paychecks on one, she tromped through the dirty snow in her sneakers, already used to having wet and/or frozen feet since the winter had started.

Too many people in T-Vegas didn't bother to shovel their sidewalks. Or even throw some salt down after an ice storm. If she made it through the neighborhoods and into downtown without falling on her ass, the snow and pieces of ice sliding down her jeans and freezing her butt, she considered herself not only lucky but damned blessed. Tonight, she fell only once, hitting the ground on both knees, the layer of ice breaking, allowing her joints to slam onto the concrete. If the thought of going down on Jared, of him groping her breasts, or casually throwing his arm around her hadn't been so utterly appealing she would have screamed in frustration and pain before going to the bars to numb herself out.

Instead, she forced herself back to her feet, and finished the short walk to the corner of the block, the Country Fair gas station, the first sign of downtown, across the street. From there, she would head left, crossing the street to the small, still Christmas light decorated park, before continuing past it to the series of old brick buildings housing what served as the hub of a hopelessly intoxicated small town. The United Way, an insurance company, and a counseling office shared space in the first of such buildings. Each time she hurried past the building, on the way to the bars or to meet a guy, she stared at the large thermometer shaped poster that



proclaimed how much money the United Way had raised so far. The fact that the thermometer was less than a quarter full said plenty about T-Vegas as a town.

On the other side of the street stood the newspaper headquarters, a small squat building that looked closed more often than open and beside that was the cable company's building, taller, newer, and infinitely more busy. If she thought about the contrast between the two buildings, she would have smiled at the visual representation of the two media outlets. Further into downtown were two banks, the two main options to throw your paycheck into before you blew it all on booze and drugs. Perks Place sat a block before the bars, a place she went to for coffee but often ended up leaving with a few beers in her as well. Across from the bars was a small shopping complex, consisting of a discount grocery store, the kind that actually made you pay for grocery bags, a laundromat, a furniture rental store, and one of the dollar stores she loved to shoplift from.

If she walked past the bars and shopping complex, which she rarely did save for attending class, a drug store, another grocery store, a senior citizens apartment building, and the only national chain non-fast-food restaurant in town: Perkins loomed. When she and Jared weren't guzzling double espressos, sweet potato fries, and quesadillas at the café, they went to Perkins for the unlimited cups of coffee, berry syrup smothered pancakes, and pies that tasted better than any piece of cake. Later that night, they would end up in the restaurant, chugging coffee and pretending that either of them would stay clean for thirty days. When he would ask her to give him head, she wouldn't think twice about it, as she kneeled in the snow out by the restaurant's dumpster. He would rest his hand on her head, sliding her hat halfway off, while snaring her hair in between his long fingers. And she would feel the love she had always hoped to feel from the first man in her life.

## Chapter 4

*So flee youthful passions and pursue righteousness, faith, love, and peace, along with those who call on the Lord from a pure heart -2 Timothy 2:22*

It was my second day there, a Saturday, which consisted of hours of forced rec period outside in the surprisingly hot spring sun, when I decided to screw Jonathan. A pale skin, black-haired chubby Goth-meets-Emo boy, he was anything but my type. Blue-collared, country boy, with dirt still under his fingernails from a rough day's work, trucker's hat, and facial hair. That was my type. Even now, I don't know why I sauntered up to where Jonathan sat on the picnic tables underneath the pavilion, gloating to an older, balding red-haired man about his most recent sexual escapade. Perhaps because I was most likely in a manic state, my bipolar medication not having built up to the proper level yet to be effective. Or because, even after pleading with Jared to make love to me, he hadn't had sex with me the night I told him good-bye, and I simply needed to force my brain to associate sex with something other than rape. Or because I was actually experiencing every horrible emotion the drugs had suppressed and I needed to smother them in fleeting moments of imagined pleasure. But I didn't know. I don't know.

"Get up on the toilet seat so if somebody comes in they won't see two sets of feet," Jonathan instructed as I lifted up my gold-hued, knee-length skirt. This wasn't what I wanted. It was supposed to be romantic. I wanted to make love not fuck. Fucking was what Bill did. How could we make love with me crouched on a freaking toilet?

He lifted my skirt up and slipped himself in. I gasped not from pleasure but pain. I knew I was injured down there but I figured that after a week things would be healed. They weren't. I had gotten myself into this situation. If I asked him to stop it might piss him off. I would just take it. Out of all the things I had messed up, taking it had never been one of them.

It was quick, only a minute or two, my teeth clenched the entire time while tears formed in my eyes. “That was good for you?” he asked breathing heavily.

I didn’t answer, too focused on hiding my wincing. I could still feel Bill inside me. I wanted Bill out and was willing to do anything to achieve it. “I’ll go out first,” I whispered suddenly realizing that I had to figure out how to sneak out of the men’s room and back into the group room. Impulsivity and lack of planning was another thing I excelled at. Later, I would learn that impulsively engaging in risky behaviors like unprotected sex was a symptom of bipolar disorder.

I opened the door a crack and looked around the playroom. No one. Carefully I finished opening it only to smack into Marcus, a short, young, dark-skinned man with hands abnormally large in comparison to the rest of his body who had hit on me earlier that day. Obviously, he had swung and missed. “Don’t say anything,” I hissed at him and dashed towards the group room. I didn’t think he would tell. I was fairly certain that the “don’t rat people out” rule, something that addicts in Titusville claimed to swear by, still applied in rehab. After all, it was evoked in prison and jail.

Later that night, the house manager, a masculine looking women whose name I couldn’t remember called me into Charon, one of the counselor’s, offices. It took less than a second to realize I had been turned in.

“You want to tell me what happened?” Charon asked leaning forward in her chair and placing her hands into a prayer-like position. Her yellow shirt hugged tightly to her small yet muscular frame while a wisp of short blonde hair fell down into her face. She didn’t look all that intimidating until she spoke. Her voice was lower than most women’s were, giving her an air of sternness and authority even when she was joking.

“I’m not saying anything that will get me kicked out of here. I need this,” I replied and commanded my body not to shake and my breath to stay even. I visualized being kicked out of rehab onto the street. I would get as much junk as I could and then I would try my damnest to join Greg. I missed him. He had passed in January, finally losing his battle against “the monkey on his back.” The last time I saw him he had smiled and waved bye to me from the backseat of a fellow AA/NA member’s SUV. For the first two months after his death, I kept wondering why and how he hadn’t called me. I had hated him for leaving me in the fucked up world without so much as an “I love you” or “take care.” Then, somewhere between fucking Jared in the park behind Titusville hospital and snorting coke in the McDonald’s bathroom I understood. Some things about drug use, like killing yourself, were simply too private. Sometimes, when I was snorting Suboxone until my nose was bloodied the last thing I wanted was to see or talk to anyone. Smooth surfaces and straws were plenty enough company.

“What you need is to realize is that this program only works through honesty, Ms. Hall,” she said her voice not angry, not irritated, but simply tired. But I supposed dealing with a bunch of addicts all day would make anyone tired.

“If I am honest will I be rewarded by finding myself on the sidewalk?” I asked not ready to believe that my idiocy could be so simply forgiven. I glanced at her face for an instant, seeing her green eyes behind her glasses before staring back down at the desk. I had screwed up. I wanted to believe that my promiscuity was all about the drugs but it wasn’t. I was away from the drugs and still spreading my legs.

“No. There are only three things that will get you kicked out. Physical violence to any clients or staff members, drug use, and gross insubordination towards a staff member,” she said while stretching her fingers then took out a notepad and pen from a drawer in her desk.

“I screwed Jonathan in the men’s bathroom.” I shrugged my shoulders. It was done. I felt Charon’s gaze on me, waiting for the explanation. Normal people did things for a reason. I wished I knew even half of the reasons why I did some of the inane things I did.

After about a minute of slow silence, Charon cleared her throat and nodded. I waited for her to yell at me and issue my punishment. Tense, I felt the shame and humiliation I had experienced as a child just before discipline, a spanking, was administered. “Why did you come to rehab?”

Surprised by her calm tone and question I stared at her small hand grasping the pen for a moment before responding. “To get clean. And stay clean.” Why else did people come to rehab? Certainly not for a vacation. Later, I would learn that almost every other client here was either court ordered by their probation or parole officer or placed here directly out of jail or prison. The majority of clients didn’t have a choice but to be here.

“But why do you want to get clean. Why now and not three months ago for example?” she asked and focused her eyes on the paper before her, ready to jot down my messed up life.

I was raped because of my addiction. I was put in a car, driven out to the woods, and raped. I was too drunk and high to even try to fight back. And no one knew. And no one cared. “A week ago I got too drunk and high and a man took advantage of that. He took advantage of me.” No matter how much I thought the word it wouldn’t come out of my mouth. “Took advantage” was too much of an understatement to even be considered truthful.

Charon scribbled onto the notepad for several seconds before she laid the pen down and stood up. “My advice, Ms. Hall, is to use this program. Listen, learn, and stay away from the men. This is what you make it.” She started walking towards the door and I followed, still waiting for the screaming tirade I was sure would occur. As we left the Reentry staff office I

glanced at the clock on the wall and saw that it was almost lights out and I still had yet to take my night meds.

“So I’m not getting kicked out, right?” I asked hearing the childish uncertainty in my voice but still shocked at what was happening. Charon laughed as we made our way to the nurses’ station.

“No.” Her voice became even lower as she stood behind me, her body only inches from my own. The pill cup rattled in my hand as I dumped my meds into my mouth. She was too close. She sounded like a man. Did she know I was raped? She didn’t appear to. I wanted away from her. “Cigarette?” she asked and, not trusting myself to speak without sobs exploding out, I started walking towards the double doors

Once outside I practically ran to the pavilion, intent on putting as much distance between her and myself as I could get away with. She sat on the bench by the door and pulled out a cigarette. I pulled my pack and lighter out of my bra and gratefully lit up. Inhale, exhale. The smoke floated out around me for a minute before a cool gust of lakeshore wind carried it away. I repeated the process, watching the smoke until it was out of sight. Gone. The swiftness of the smoke’s disappearance was comforting. Everything went away someday. Maybe my brokenness would vanish, too.

Later back in the Reentry dorm, I laid on my hard mattress with my head against the crinkly flat pillow listening to the snickers and hushed conversation of the other girls. “Hey Kateri,” I heard the tiny shorthaired blonde girl in the top bunk of the next bed over call.

I lifted my head off the pillow and looked up at her heart-shaped face. My medication was kicking in, working its annoying magic of fogging my mind and yanking me down to my

nightmare filled sleep. Talking at this point was like trying to knit a sweater while nodding off on junk.

“You want a sandwich or apple?” she asked and sat up in bed, extending her arms to reach the cardboard looking ceiling tiles. She slid it aside and pulled down a plastic bag with five or six sandwiches and four apples. Really? Was there a reason why they were hoarding food?

“No thanks,” I muttered apparently allowing my confusion to seep into my tone.

“We’re not allowed to take food from the cafeteria. So me and the other girls hide it in our clothing or folders to sneak back here. That way we can have another snack if we want to,” she said before tossing the sandwiches around the room and laughing as the majority of the girls failed to catch them. I wondered if she would throw the apples too hard and knock someone unconscious. That would no doubt create an interesting explanation to the staff. Or maybe we’d just lay her in bed and hope she wasn’t brain damaged.

“How many stupid rules do they have here?” I finally asked after she finished chucking food around. It was like being back in high school. Only without the lockers and book bags.

“Jesus, I don’t know. Too many. I keep learning more each time I break one,” she said. Laughing she collapsed back onto her pillow and proceeded to stuff most of her sandwich into her mouth.

I tried to laugh like the other girls. I looked over at Tanya on the top bunk of the bed on the other side of the room. She was laughing and nibbling an apple. Everyone was having fun. Maybe if I didn’t know I was about to meet Bill again, maybe if I didn’t hate myself every freaking moment of the day for getting raped, maybe if I could look in the mirror and not be disgusted I could laugh. Maybe.

I woke up early the next morning and forced myself out of bed. In the real world, I would wander down the steep carpeted staircase of my father's house and into the kitchen. I'd make a cup of instant coffee and take it out onto the back porch. I'd take a bump of whatever drug I had on me, after carefully looking around for my family or neighbors, and then light up a cigarette. I'd slump back into the lawn chair and suck the menthol flavored smoke deep into me before scalding my tongue with a gulp of the too strong coffee. And I'd wonder what my day would hold. Now all I needed to do was follow all the other girls around and listen to the staff. Every moment of my day was planned for me. I had no control.

I walked over to my cubbyhole, which held the toiletries they had given me and the thin, scratchy towels and washcloths that would be mine for my stay here and yawned. I was tired. The gnawing sensation in the back of my mind would never go away without drugs. But I never could do them again. No. Drugs brought me to Bill. My own damn stupidity made him rape me. After grabbing my bar of soap, razor, shampoo, conditioner, towel, and washcloth, I walked quietly to the heavy, wooden dorm room door and slipped out the space between the door and the wall. I didn't want the other girls awake. It was too early for smiles. I didn't think I'd ever be able to smile again.

I walked swiftly down the carpeted hallway, feeling the gaze of the camera on me before I hit the cold tiled floor, passed the desk and chair, and entered the bathroom. Time to feel clean again. Even before sunrise, Reentry was hot and humid. I turned the water onto cold and shivered under the showerhead for a minute. Goosebumps sprung up across my arms, arms that still bore the bruises from Bill. I always did bruise easily and take a long time to heal. I stared at the bruises and ran my hands across them. Bill. Bill with his hand over my mouth. Bill with his hand grasping both my wrists. Bill raping me. Raping me. Raping me.



I bit down on my tongue hard, drawing blood that I swallowed eagerly. My breathing became rapid, each breath merely a short gasp for air. For something. For someone. I cried, I swallowed blood, and I felt what little control I had over my emotions, over the memories of what happened dissolve. I jerked my head out from under the water and banged it against the whitish-tannish plastic shower stall wall. The pain was immediate and lovely, sending a rush through my entire body that was second only to drugs and booze. My breathing began to slow as the anger pushed aside my fear and helplessness. Anger, even at myself, was always better than fear or sadness.

As a child, I had loved my anger. Anger at myself, at my parents, at my brothers and sisters, at my friends, at my many enemies, was my only reliable partner. I had taken that anger and turned it upon myself. Once, when I was around 11 or 12, and my family was preparing to move from the first place that had ever felt like home to me, the anger grew into an uncontrollable rage at being so helpless and I threw myself down the stairs of our two-story town house. I had been self-injuring since I was about four or five-years-old yet my parents had not noticed until that day. And even then, they had seemed too enmeshed in their own private, adult business to deal with a “hormonal preteen girl.” Even today I wonder what my life would have been like if my parents had permitted and encouraged me to seek treatment for my mental illness sooner.

I smashed my head against the wall six more times before I was finally able to scrub myself with the soap without feeling nauseated. All I saw when I looked at my skin was someone who was raped, someone who had drastically messed up her life.

A half hour later I was getting dressed back in the dorm room while the other girls were just waking up. All except Tanya.

“Tanya get your ass up,” Ally shouted as she hurried out of the room with her towel.

“Tanya always sleeps in. And she is almost always late, too. We try to wake her but...she does what she wants,” the shorthaired blonde woman, Monica said. She stood naked in front of her dresser, moving clothes around while shuffling from foot to foot. “Got to pee but don’t want to get caught on camera naked,” she said, grinning and winking at me. I grinned and threw her my pink robe. She wrapped it around herself and sprinted out of the room.

I finished dressing having chosen my purple skirt and almost low cut black tee shirt. My favorite shirt. I had shoplifted it from Old Navy earlier that spring. The other girls were rushing around grabbing clothes and throwing them on or running to the showers. I looked at Tanya’s sleeping form splayed out across the bed. She laid with one foot draped over the edge, one hand resting on her forehead, and I wanted to climb into bed with her. As I walked over to her bed, I saw her face, her mouth partly open, her eyes fluttering beneath her eyelids, and envied her so strongly I felt tears threatening to squirm down my face. She was different from the rest of us. She hadn’t fallen into the pit that drugs created yet. No one who had worked on their back could sleep so soundly.

“Tanya,” I called gently while climbing up the wooden ladder until my upper body was leaning over the bed. She murmured in her sleep but did not stir. I continued climbing until I was up high enough to swing my legs up and into the bed. I fought the urge to kiss her, the longing to be with someone who would no doubt hold me for longer than two minutes. “Tanya,” I said, louder this time. Her eyelids slowly opened and her slack mouth morphed into a smile.

“Hey, Kateri. Mornings suck.” I smiled for the second time that morning, stunned that I could momentarily forget the pain, and started to climb down from the bed.

“That’s for sure,” I mumbled and glanced out the window at the rest of the clients already outside, lighting up for morning smoke break. “You want me to wait for you?” I asked, part of me hoping for a no, the rest pleading for a yes.

“Nope. But thanks,” she said before yawning deeply and making her way down the latter.

I nodded and hurried out of the room. Tanya seemed like she could be a friend. The only problem was the gigantic bloodied elephant in the room: my rape. It was like a force in and of itself, crashing me down into a filthy sea of guilt and anger in which I could only barely see the surface. Tanya was beyond that surface. Everyone around me was beyond that surface.

Once outside I sought the most isolated place possible. Around the corner of the building where a sewage drain was, no other clients gathered. I leaned against the rough brick wall at first before plopping down onto the already warm, black concrete. With my cigarette dangling from my right hand, I rested my head against my left one and cried silently. I hated crying without privacy but it didn’t matter. I was so far away from everyone that whatever they thought of my tear stained face when I went back inside the building didn’t matter. I was gone and I really doubted that I could find my way back.

Were all men either rapists or potential rapists? The question didn’t sound crazy like it should have, like it would in any world resembling something even remotely sane. After taking a hit off the thick joint she shared with one of the several pot dealers around Titusville, she passed it back to him and leaned back against the well-worn sofa. After everything men had done to her it seemed more than plausible to assume that any of them could hurt her in a sexual way. That guy from the bar, the way he just shoved his fingers into had shocked her. Scared her. But it hadn’t been enough. If there was a God, and she doubted there was, he had tried to warn her that

night. But it had felt so impossible, so unreal as to be a freak accident. Not once had she thought something like that would happen to her in this small town again. Until Bill pummeled her.

“Sweetie,” the dealer said in a hoarse voice. Smoking more than he sold, his throat probably felt scrapped and scratched raw from the weed. “You can crash here if you want. I even have some oxies if you’re willing to give me some of that pussy in return.”

Why was she even there? Only half conscious on his dirt and stale food encrusted sofa, her jean skirt hiked up to only barely covering her crotch, revealing the bruises Bill left, she couldn’t even recall making the decision to come to his place. If she wanted to smoke there were dozens of people she could have got it from. Why him, when she knew damn well he dabbled in harder stuff, when she knew he had wanted to fuck her ever since he walked in on her and a friend of his screwing on his pool table.

Because she was painfully sick of withdrawal, of thinking about Bill, of looking at the bruises, and of feeling the pain. Getting high, a real high, would erase all of it. Surrender to drugs and death would be so much easier than picking rehab and a chance at some kind of life. “I can’t.” The two of them were shocked by her announcement. Since they had known each other she was a druggie, a whore, a person that couldn’t define self-respect much less apply it. But she wasn’t that person any more. What kind of person she actually was neither of them knew.

“Why the hell not?” he snapped and sat up from the beanbag chair he lounged in, the half-smoked joint clutched between his fingers. His brownish blonde hair, falling just to his shoulders, slapped into his face, leaving a streak of grease where it touched. To some of the hardcore potheads, bathing and shampooing was an unnecessary chore. The stench of pot, cigarette butts, piss, and spoiled milk followed him around as he rode his bike about town each day.

“I’m going to rehab. I don’t do that shit anymore,” she replied as she rose from the sofa, pulling her skirt down to cover a bit more of her thighs and butt.

Even she felt the irony of citing rehab while smoking a joint with a dealer. But pot and pills were as different as freaking oranges and monkeys. Any druggie or dealer knew it. Still, the man laughed and followed her as she wound her way around the piles of trash, clothing, and rotten food that decorated his apartment. When she reached the door, he passed her the joint and grinned calmly at her. “We both know you’ll be back in a couple hours at most, sweetie. So let’s just skip the phony shit and fuck already.”

“How about you just go fuck yourself, sweetie,” she said with a sexy smile. Then taking a long pull off the joint, she opened the door, flipped him off for good measure, and then slammed it behind her.

Outside in the cool spring breeze, the darkness of the predawn hours briefly disorientated her. For a moment, she had no idea what day or time it was. Then the dealer yanked open his small window and thrust his head out, cursing at her and demanding his joint back. His pale face, light by the nearby streetlight, looked bright red from anger and humiliation. Smiling, feeling something close to pride in herself, the first such feeling she had felt since she fell back in love with drugs, she walked back towards her father’s house, ready to spend the last full day before heading to rehab as high on pot as possible.

## Chapter 5

*For as the body is one, and hath many members, and all the members of that one body, being many, are one body: so also is Christ. - 1 Corinthians 12:12*

Isolation. A word and concept that inevitably has a negative connotation. No one wants to be alone, figuratively or literally. And yet after only four days in rehab, isolation was not only my new favorite word, it was the best lover I had ever had. The first three days of my stay, partly because I entered on a weekend and partly because I did not detox there, were a pointless blur of not having any idea of what the heck I was supposed to do or why things were done the way they were. It wasn't until I plodded into the group room on Monday morning, awake physically but falling asleep mentally while my morning dose of carbamazepine took effect, was I given any hint of a explanation of the Gaudenzia therapeutic community. I was assigned a "buddy," Monica, to help me adjust to the program and complete my Orientation work. However, in my entire Orientation phase, Monica would be as effective a buddy as nicotine patches were for me when I tried to quit smoking. Somewhat fortunately, though, I met with my assigned counselor shortly after work therapy, during which us Reentry girls cleaned our dorm and the bathrooms. My job was to clean the showers, easy and quick, allowing me to have time to shave my legs afterwards if I hadn't had time to earlier that morning.

We were just coming back from breakfast, eggs and a vomit-looking concoction of meat know as corn beef hash, making our way down the staircase and entering the area by the ramp, when a tall, thin, and very dark young woman appeared in front of me. "Kateri Hall?" she asked, her arms full of what looked like clients' charts and a mug of coffee. I bet she didn't have to drink decaf. I nodded assent and instead of extending her hand, something that in my real life I was accustomed to even among my addict friends and acquaintances, she started talking and

walking towards the basement. “I’m your counselor, Ms. Sherlanda. We’re going to have our first meeting today, review your Orientation work, establish your treatment plan, and give you some homework of course,” she said the last three words with a high pitch laugh, as if homework in a drug rehab facility was just too ironic not to chortle at. If I weren’t in a rehab, I probably would have laughed at it too.

“Oh,” I said, when she looked back over her shoulder before unlocking the basement door to see if I was either following, listening, or both. Her face was pretty enough to be on the cover of a magazine, her chin length black hair straighten and gleaming, obviously done at a salon instead of in front of a steamed covered bathroom mirror, and her clothing was that of someone about to go work at an accounting firm instead of a rundown, seemingly barely funded rehab. I wanted to like her, to trust her, to let her help me. But she was so perfect looking I felt both afraid and ashamed to discuss my entirely messy life with her.

After we reached the bottom of the stairs, we headed past the laundry room and the large pseudo-conference room towards a series of cubicles and offices. She stopped at one office, unlocked the door, and motioned with her head for me to enter. She walked to her side of the desk, a desk immaculately organized into folders, files, and mini crates all labeled and categorized. Impressive. And more intimidating. Although I wasn’t that different from her only about four years ago. Organized and serious about success. Things change.

“So how much Orientation work have you done so far?” she asked after we were both seated, me in the metal chair with a thin layer of tattered cloth over it, her in her black leather, heavily padded office chair.

I had only even heard about Orientation from Monica this morning over breakfast. She had said I had to complete it in order to have visitors and phone privileges. When I questioned

her about what the hell I was supposed to do she shrugged and stuffed half her bagel into her mouth, smearing cream cheese across her left cheek and chin. “I haven’t done any—“

“Well why not?” she asked, surprise registering on her face. Her daintily plucked eyebrows creased as she slowly opened the folder that contained my case.

Are you fucking kidding me? I had been in this place for three days and the only thing relevant I had learned as far as staying clean was what I read in my copies of the AA Big Book and the Twelve Steps book. “Because no one has told me what I’m supposed to be doing.” At least I was able to keep my smart remarks to myself.

“That’s ridiculous. It’s in your folder. In the Orientation and Welcome packet,” she replied, her voice mimicking the tone of a teacher explaining something painfully obvious to a notoriously slow student.

I held my empty hands up and wiggled my fingers, only just refraining from a smirk. “I never got a folder. Or a pen. I only just got a buddy today and she hasn’t been very helpful to say the least.” I waited for her to deny it but instead she sighed quietly and reached down to open a drawer. She pulled out a blue folder and a pen and handed them to me. “Okay since you’ve been the victim of the weekend staff I’ll just quickly explain some of what’s in the packet. To complete Orientation you have to complete a series of tasks such as reciting the Serenity Prayer and the Gaudenzia Philosophy during morning meeting as well as writing about what each means to you. You will submit them to me for approval and they will be handed back to you after I look over them.” She paused, licked her lips, and took a gentle sip of coffee. “Any questions?”

I shook my head. I had plenty of questions but figured now that I had some written material about the place I’d be able to answer them for myself. Besides, I just wanted to get on to the important thing: my treatment plan. The plan that might fix me.



“Alright. Before we can start on your treatment plan I’ll need to get some more background information about you. Now these questions are going to be very personal but I cannot stress enough how important it is to be totally honest with your answers. We can’t help you if you aren’t honest. Do you understand?”

Did I understand the meaning of what she said or did I understand that I’d have to be honest? I thought about asking it but figured she’d either laugh or scream at the seemingly ludicrous question. But it wasn’t. I had no idea if I could be honest with someone I’d know for less than ten minutes. “Yeah. I guess,” I finally said after her French manicured nails started tapping the desktop.

She smiled, revealing a set of vividly white teeth, the only flaw a spot of her reddish-pinkish lipstick smudged of her front teeth. I guess she wasn’t totally perfect after all. “Okay, I’m going to ask you a series of questions to gather your history both in relation to your addiction and otherwise.” I leaned back in the chair and tried to get comfortable, anticipating the time it would take to both convey my crazy life and help her make sense of it. That last part would be the hardest because most of the time I couldn’t even make sense of it.

I explained to her about my childhood, or at least what I could form into comprehensible sentences. Even today, there is much of it that I remember and think, “What the fuck was happening *there*?” I had three older half siblings, one from my dad, Shane, and two from my mother, Misty and Lamont. By the time, I was around eight-years-old none of them maintained any significant level of contact with the family. My other siblings were all younger than me, Charlie, Anthony, and Caroline, all just teenagers right now and thankfully blissfully naïve to drugs and alcohol. My parents moved us frequently, and by the time I left home, I had lived in

eight different states and attended eleven different schools. Stability, roots, a sense of home were foreign concepts to all four of us kids.

I didn't mention the self-injury, though. I knew should, even that I still might, but her expensive-looking pink blouse and pearl necklace forced silence upon me. She knew nothing of that world. It was better for both of us to keep it that way. She asked what my dad did, and I quickly explained that he was the library director of the University of Pittsburgh at Titusville. Her eyebrows shot up and her pretty mouth formed a round "oh" of shock. I imagined the stereotypical addict profile didn't include college-educated parents. "What about your mother? What does she do?"

I let my hands curl into fists and dug my nails into the flesh. She didn't do a goddamn thing because she was buried in the ground. "She died three years ago of breast cancer."

This time, instead of surprise, she nodded as if she had expected this, as if my mother's death explained everything. I wanted to latch onto this simple explanation to a complex thing like addiction. I wanted to cling to it, kiss it, and hold it tighter than I even did Jared. But it wasn't the complete truth. My siblings had lost their mother, too. Anthony was only ten-years-old when she died. But I was the only drug addict. Clearly, there was something wrong with me, something about me that made me weak enough to fall in love with pills, powder, and blackout drinking.

Sherlanda continued the questions, asking me about the first time I drank and the first time I used, probing to find out how I felt and why I did it. I was depressed. So life sucking, heartbreakingly depressed that I didn't care about anything or anyone anymore. The first night I had drank was with my high school girlfriend, Rene. It was only a handful of weeks after my mother had passed and the sight of her pallid skin and permanently shut eyelids still haunted my

dreams. For some reason, I can't remember why now, I was hysterically crying, my head pressed against Rene's almost flat chest. We were spending the night with our friend Hope, a pale-skinned dark-haired girl who had lost her virginity before high school and regularly stole from her parents' extensive liquor stash. "Let's get her drunk," Hope had whispered in the dim light of the finished basement, the Budweiser sign glowing orange from above her parents fully supplied bar.

I had stopped crying. I had drank a shot of scotch, of peach schnapps, of Jack Daniels whiskey, and Southern Comfort vodka. Later, too hammered to even lift my head out of Rene's lap, I sternly demanded she share some of her Mike's Hard Lemonade with me. I was an addict before I ever did my first line.

The first time I used, though, had hardly been as comforting or dignifying. I was with a young man I barely knew, (I can't even remember where I meet him now) giving him head, my knees on top of the layer of clothing, candy wrappers, fast food bags, and receipts that covered his floor, when he went into my mouth then immediately exclaimed, "That's a girl. You want to get messed up?" I nodded even before I had finished swallowing his seed, believing he meant alcohol. When he pulled out his baggy of vicodin I had a moment of panic. A graduate of DARE, I knew I should say no. I loved my booze but drugs were something else. Something much more dangerous. And yet when he offered me the set of lines he prepared I did them. I loved them. Whoever thought up "love at first sight" must surely have been an addict. It had been a love that equaled religious devotion. Until Bill. How could I love something that had caused me to hurt so damn much?

When I finished recounting the beginning of my downhill story, I leaned back against the chair and closed my eyes. I didn't want to mention Bill to her. I knew she wouldn't get it. Her

handwriting on my chart was beautiful, the grace of the cursive flowing across the page enviable by anyone. She was a real person. A functional, no an excelling, member of society. I couldn't show her my ugliness. "What brought you to rehab?" Was she dumb? I had told Charon. Didn't they share notes or something?

"Well," I began, lowering my head and fixing my eyes on my feet and pink flip-flops. Bill. Bill. With each rapid beat of my heart, I felt him in me. "I hated myself. I pretended that I didn't, lied to myself all the time." I stopped, my eyes focusing in on my right big toe. The pink nail polish was chipped along the nail's edge, exposing the nail beneath. I hated toenails. They looked like pieces of brittle, stale sugar cookies ground up and then molded into a distorted fingernail shape. Gross. I kept my toenails painted as often as possible. Until now. Nail polish was just one of many things we were not allowed to have along with Q-tips and nail clippers. "I guess lately I was having a harder time pretending. Even with the drugs, the lies only worked so well. Sometimes, when I was snorting something I'd stare at the straw in my hand and wonder what happened. Who I had become. And why did I need lies to get through each day."

Sherlanda nodded before looking up from her writing, her brown eyes expectant, waiting for my "light bulb" moment. I knew I had to tell the truth. But lies were so much safer. Jonathan, was a painful part of that lie. If I could fuck any guy, anytime, anywhere like I used to, then it didn't happen. I was the same. I was still me. I wasn't that girl: the girl who had her pussy forced full of cock while she screamed and cried, the girl who couldn't save herself, the girl who doomed herself.

"I was raped," I whispered, so quiet I knew she wouldn't hear me.

“You’re going to have to speak a little louder,” she said, glancing over her shoulder at the clock. I wondered if we had a time limit for our session and hoped she would raise elegantly from her seat and escort me back to the group incredibly soon.

“I—was—raped,” I said in a loud, but shaking voice. I enunciated each word as if it was its own sentence, giving equal heft to each one, unwilling to let *rape* stand out to avoid further reminding myself of my predicament.

“And that’s what prompted you to seek help?” she asked, her voice suddenly very quiet, her bright but firm tone gone. She knows what a stupid slut I was, I realized.

I nodded my head and despite my best efforts started to cry. They were soft, gentle sobs at first, the real pain held in by my determination to wait. Wait until I was behind a bathroom stall door before I disintegrated into fifty billion different jagged, broken pieces.

“I am very sorry,” she said, her voice sounding sincere despite my presumption that it wasn’t. She was clearly intelligent. She had to be able to figure out I was to blame. She was humoring me. Her fake pity fueled my tears and within two seconds my head was against her desk, my body quivering as my mouth released loud, unfettered cries.

Bill. He was a father. He loved his kids. He was a good guy. Good guys didn’t rape girls. He was provoked by me. But why hadn’t he stopped? My heart was thudding so quickly and hard I expected to die right there on her desk. The pain from the rape was an Olympic size swimming pool of pain. And I was drowning in it.

I heard a drawer slide open and then shut before I felt Sherlanda tap my arm. I flinched and my head snapped up, my eyes glaring at her before I saw the box of tissues. I nodded my head, unable to speak a thank you through my sobs. She didn’t say anything or try to touch me again. I didn’t know how long I cried, snot flowed out of my nose and onto my forearm before

slowly spreading out to coat my face, but I didn't notice. The stabbing sensation, the ripping feeling, the expanding of things that weren't meant to stretch so far was all I could perceive. A part of me wished Bill had killed me and buried my body in the fertile, damp forest soil. Filth belonged with filth.

The rape played through my mind once, twice, three times before the tape, which magnified every smell, sight, sound, and feeling of that night by ten thousand, switched off.

Gradually my heartbeat returned to normal, the sobs ceased, and I was able to lift my head up, snot and tears dribbling down my face. Sherlanda pretended to rearrange her already perfectly organized desk while I cleaned my face off, blew my nose, and wiped the puddles of tears of her desk. "Well," she started to say, stopping for a moment perhaps ready to see if I would have another emotional breakdown, "I think that covers your history." I would have laughed at the use of such a casual statement to describe events of gravity had it not been for the serious expression on Sherlanda's face. "Let's take a look at your treatment plan." She pulled out two pages of paper with my name, age, and emitting date at the top. "What's one thing you want to change or improve before you leave here, besides the obvious rape trauma?"

Hearing *rape* was more startling, more painful, and more demoralizing than when Jared had put me in a headlock after I refused to give him head, forcing me to pleasure him. "I want to learn how to like myself." I doubted she or anyone else could make that happen but trying was better than continuing living the way I was.

"Excellent goal," she exclaimed, like a kindergarten teacher about to award her student a big, shiny butterfly sticker. I wanted to punch her and then hit myself in the head until I was unconscious. Anger roiled in my stomach, burning my insides and rising up to create a sore taste in my mouth. "I am going to give you these packets of self-esteem worksheets for you to work

through. I expect at least three pages turned in a week.” She grabbed a folder from her filing bin and handed me three thick packets. Then, after applying a coat of the lipstick that she had retrieved from possibly a purse under her desk, she wrote “self-esteem” in large, artful cursive. Below that she wrote “processing rape trauma and coping with mother’s death.” Guess those goals were so obvious she didn’t need to ask me.

“I think these three goals are a great start. Now, I just want to quickly explain the rest of the treatment plan. Any questions so far?” She laid her pen down for a moment and held one manicured hand out before her as if admiring its beauty.

“Can I leave now?” It was rude to ask but I was tired of Ms. Perfect. I didn’t like being so exposed. At least with the group I could blend in with the rest of the motley crew of junkies, cokeheads, pill heads, meth heads, and alkies.

Sherlanda’s mouth closed firmly, her two lips sucked together firmly as if she was struggling to hold in something particularly rude and her eyebrows furrowed deeply. “When we are done,” she said curtly, tossing my packets towards me. “Since you are bipolar you qualify for our dual diagnosis program. You will see the psychiatrist once a week as needed to manage your medicine. You will also participate in our dual diagnosis group once a week. Understand?” She waited for half a second before continuing, too irritated to care whether I did or not. If such a mild smart remark could piss her off, I wondered how she dealt with some of the more blunt clients. “This is a therapeutic community, meaning everyone, even your fellow clients, needs to work together to help each other recover.” She hastily printed then signed her name to the treatment plan before turning it towards me. “Sign here,” she demanded and started tapping her nails on the edge of her desk. At least I was getting out of there soon.

I signed my name and stuffed my self-esteem packets into my folder. Sherlanda stood up and walked swiftly out of her office, heading towards the stairs. Her anger or perhaps disgust towards me was heard in each loud clack of her red high-heeled shoes.

When I reached the group room, I saw Tanya sitting towards the back of the room on the right side, the females' side. I entered the room, head down, staring awkwardly at the floor, as I swiftly walked back towards the empty seat by Tanya.

"Hey, girlye," she whispered and placed her hand on my thigh. She gave it a light squeeze but instead of removing it like I expected she would she left it there. I sat, tense at first, unsure what to do under her touch, before I gave in. I relaxed into my seat and let her hand rest on my thigh. I let my left hand drift down my thigh to meet her hand until it made slight contact with it. She immediately removed her hand and I fought back tears. She knew I was dirty, I started to think before her hand wrapped around mine and held it tightly.

"I like you," she whispered into my ear.

"I like you, too," I replied, not really sure what she meant by "like" and not really caring. I wanted to collapse against Tanya and press my lips into hers until I didn't remember the feel of Bill's goatee against my face.

"Hands off each other girls," the heavysset black woman leading the group snapped.

Our hands retracted to our sides before we directed our attention back to the front of the room. "What group is this?" I whispered, dreading that I might be asked to repeat what the group leader had just said.

"Can either one of you two explain what I was just discussing?" Damnit. I looked to Tanya, sure that she could offer at least a half-assed answer after being here for the whole group.



Tanya smiled, tucked a stray strand of hair back behind her ear, and shrugged her shoulders. Apparently, she must have been daydreaming.

“What about you, Hall?” The sound of my last name being used to address me without even a miss in front of it sounded harsh, rude, and strange.

“I just got here. I was meeting with my counselor.” At least I had an excuse.

“Relapse prevention. I am discussing how to avoid common triggers and staying clean. Can you name one of your triggers, Hall?” What ever happened to giving the new person time to adjust?

She paused, as every person in the room fixed their gaze on me. I didn’t know what my relapse triggers were. How could I? My focus was on just getting through each day in this strange institution. I had yet to devote a single second of my time to contemplating what I would do once I was out. The real world seemed distant and scary. The real world held Bill. “I don’t know,” I muttered, embarrassed at being unable to answer as the other clients chuckled. Jonathan winked at me and made a jerking motion with his one hand. I didn’t wink back but looked over at Tanya who was staring out the window, seemingly oblivious to what the group leader had said.

“See, everyone. That’s the problem with addicts. You all want to have fun all day long without thinking about anything. To all of you there is no tomorrow,” she said, raising from her seat behind the group room table and walking around it to stand in front with her arms crossed. “This isn’t a joke. Relapse is a big deal. You may think if you screw up you always have that second chance but that’s not always the case. That one more could be your last.” Her purple lipstick was smudged across her lower lip and chin, as she continued her lecture, her voice growing louder even while the entire room began to ignore her.

I wasn't stupid. I knew that any high could potentially be the one that killed me. But that just wasn't a deterrent. Rape, though, now that was a huge motivator not to relapse. So I continued listening even while Tanya hummed an unfamiliar song under her breath and stared out the window. She made a list on the large chalkboard behind her of various triggers. When she was done, I felt incredibly dumb for not thinking of one.

"Your biggest triggers, in general, are going to be the old places, people, and things from your using life. If you think you can still hang out with your buddy Jim while he lights up his crack pipe you are insane or stupid," she said, before finally seeming to realize her lipstick was speckling her chin, wiping it off with the back of her long red fingernailed hand onto her black slacks.

What about Jared? I could cut out Kenny and his circle of drug dealing, pot smoking friends just fine, even give up going out to the bars and getting shitfaced, but give up Jared? I loved him. And I thought he loved me in his own warped, self-centered way. He was part of my day-to-day life almost twenty-four hours a day normally. And when I wasn't with him or trying to get with him, I was thinking about him. I figured that once I got out of here I'd work up the nerve to tell Jared what happened to me. He'd hold me and help me along the rest of my journey to put that night behind me. Life without Jared was more terrifying than life without drugs.

I raised my hand, slowly, my arm trembling as I did it. "Yes, Hall?" she asked, her voice surprised but not stern. Maybe asking questions was a way to gain brownie points.

"What if one of those old persons is our best friend?" I wanted to say boyfriend but could not forget that late night phone call I had had with Jared. He'd called me around midnight, sounding a little high, and demanded to know why I had told a mutual friend that I loved him.

My grip on the phone had tightened so greatly I wondered if I would crush it, sending bits of plastic all over my unmade, and unwashed bed.

“I didn’t tell anyone that,” I had said, my voice contorted into a quiet, brusque tone in order to hold the sobs back.

“Bullshit. I know you. And it makes sense. I just wish it wasn’t true, you know,” he’d said, his voice stern at first then slipping into softness. I wanted to believe it was compassion but knew better. Jared had no compassion for anyone.

He had gone on to explain that he cared about me as a friend but he didn’t love any girl. He couldn’t. He wasn’t at a place in his life to date anyone. I had begged him to change his mind, had listed all the ways we were already in a romantic relationship. He hadn’t cared. When he wished me goodnight I had hung up the phone and went to the bar. This was during one of my clean runs, I had been up to about 30 days clean that night, and just like with all my other clean periods it was demolished by something, anything going wrong in my life. I had scored Adderalls and Ritalin, snorted them off the toilet seat lid, consumed too many shots of vodka, and blacked out. I had woke up the following morning in my own bed with the panties I had on the night before gone.

Now, as the group leader laughed at my question, before seeing my deadpan face, I knew the answer to my own question. I just didn’t want it to be true. “No. Not unless you want to start using again really soon. Does that answer your question?”

I nodded my head and joined Tanya in staring out the window.

When the group ended the clients all begin to file out of the room, Tanya and I walking side by side, the group leader motioned with her short, meaty hand to approach her. Was I going to get in trouble for asking a stupid question?

“You’re the girl who gave Jonathan head in the men’s bathroom?” she shouted, assuring that everyone in the room would hear. All the men stopped walking out of the room and craned their heads to see whom she was addressing. My cheeks flushed, my heart quickened its paced, and my hands balled into fists.

“No.” I shouted, wanting to make sure my response to her allegation was heard. And it was true. I hadn’t. We’d fucked. How it got to her that I had sucked him off I didn’t know but was furious that she addressed it in public. Weren’t you suppose to discuss it in a private office setting like Charon had done?

“Well that’s not what I heard. You better keep you mouth to yourself from now on, Hall, or you’ll find yourself with a reputation you don’t want,” she said, before turning to exit the room herself.

“Who was that bitch?” I asked Tanya, ignoring the suddenly friendly smiles of the men.

“Ms. Fatima. She’s my counselor. And if you think that’s being a bitch you’ll be really shocked at some of the worst shit she pulls,” Tanya said, her pretty smile vanishing as her eyebrows crinkled in thought.

“Like what?” I asked but if Tanya heard me, she showed no reaction. As soon as we exited, the double doors to the courtyard for smoke break, Tanya pulled out two Camel Wides, handing me one and sticking the other in her mouth. Grateful I lit it up and sucked hard, harder than I had as a child trying to drink a frozen slushie that was all ice and no slush.

“Hey, sweetie,” I heard a male voice call from behind me. I turned around towards the bench that sat on the concrete porch where Tanya and I stood still, undecided where we wanted to sit for our fifteen-minute reprieve from bullshit.

“You mean me?” I asked, still hoping he may have been talking to Tanya. He was at least twice as old as me, his head completely bald, and his face looking open and friendly. But too open. Like a girl who sits with her legs spread wide in a skirt at the bar, she may be up for anything but there was some serious problems hidden behind her cute smile and shaved crotch.

He nodded and grinned widely, his hand patting the free seat beside him. “You want to talk? You’re probably having a rough few days here, huh?” It didn’t take a fucking genius to figure that out but when Tanya elbowed me in the side and whispered, “Do it” I sighed and sat down.

After we introduced ourselves, Charlie seemed to become even more open, suddenly throwing his tragic story onto my unsteady shoulders. His daughter was raped and murdered some years ago, before he got himself put away for years.

I wanted to tell him how sorry I was but the words seemed cheap, pointless. I couldn’t imagine the pain he had and was still going through. And in fact, I didn’t want to. Because someday I would have to tell my dad what happened to me. What did it feel like as a father to know, to carry that knowledge around like 500 pounds of burning hot coals strapped to your hands, that your daughter was raped? I didn’t want to know but like the Discovery Channel shows I watched where animals mauled people to death, I simply couldn’t change the channel. “What does it feel like?”

“Think of the worst possible hell you could ever imagine and then multiply that by infinity.” His face stayed open, stayed ready to share his pain. “Is that what happened to you?”

I knew if there was a client to speak *rape* to it was him. I had done it with Sherlanda, surely I could do it with him. He deserved it. I swallowed the vomit that had lurched its way into the back of my throat and whispered, “Yes. How?”

Thankfully, Charlie knew what I was asking. “I went to a support group for rape victims and their families. And the girls there, they all had the same look in their eyes. Fear, anger, hate, and a hollowness that reminded me of my dead daughter’s eyes the day I went to identify her body. You have that same look, Kateri.”

The word dead careened around my head like a bird who accidentally flew into a house and just wanted to get the fuck out before the family cat caught it. I stood up, leaned over the bench, and puked off the porch. I heaved up my breakfast and when it was gone, dry heaves shook my frame. Did Bill really kill me without killing me?

“Hall, do you need to see the nurse?” the house manager on duty shouted from somewhere out in the courtyard. I nodded and sat back on the bench, my body quivering and my heart taking off faster than ever. I was just like all the other victims. Dead. I would never be the same. Ever.

“I’m going to walk you inside, honey,” she said, placing a hand lightly on my shoulder and guiding me through the door. Francis. That was her name I remembered Tanya had told me. Her shoulder-length black hair was pulled into a tight ponytail, leaving the strong angular face exposed, accenting the masculinity of it. “What’s wrong?”

“Stomach upset,” I mumbled. “Just need to go to the bathroom and get some Pepto. I’ll be fine.” Why didn’t I tell her. Because it didn’t matter. It was like what Charlie had said. Dead.

She spoke to the nurse who gave me a medicine cup of the nausea inducing pink liquid and a lay-in pass. “What’s that?” I asked, still shaking.

“It means you can go to your dorm and rest for whatever time it says. I wrote two hours for you, dear,” the nurse, Peg, said, smiling warmly at me before brushing a piece of fuzz off her purple scrubs.

I thanked her and slowly followed Francis back to my dorm. “If you’re not in for group I will send someone to wake you. Feel better.” She left and I suddenly found myself with the most privacy I had since I arrived at Gaudenzia. No other clients, no staff. Just me. I knew what I had to do to make the shaking, the pain, the anger, the memories stop. I went to the cubbyhole furthest away from mine, the one pressed against the wall closest to the door and took out the razor. I held it gently and gazed at it with glee. It wasn’t a line of coke but it would do.

Five minutes later, I had ripped apart the plastic head to free the three blades. Ecstatic I clutched them carefully in my fist and walked slowly, sickly towards the bathroom. The shaking had ceased by the time I locked the door and sat down on the edge of the toilet. My mind and body knew what was about to happen. The quick, sweet relief from turmoil was guaranteed with the smooth slice of the razor blade across my skin. Pain and then blood. Beautiful. Every single fucking time.

I wrapped two of them individually in toilet paper, creating a misshaped ball and placed one in each bra cup. I would figure out where to hide them later. If I hid each blade in a different place, it was less likely a staff member would find all of them. The practical things taken care of, it was time to choose where to cut. My favorite place had always been my arms. When I first started cutting as a teenager, my arms were the only place I dragged the blade across my skin. I had worn long-sleeve shirts under my tee shirts to hide the cuts and scars until a friend from school, a fellow cutter, showed me how to layer bracelets to hide it or wear arm warmers. For years after that I thought arm warmers were the greatest invention ever. Now, though, the only thing I had to hide with them was my black hoodie. Did I really want to be hot all the time or should I just cut somewhere else?

I placed the blade against my left forearm and pressed down firmly before dragging it to the right. A sparkling of hot pain and then a rush of pure relief, almost as good as any drug. “Fuck, yeah,” I whispered with as much reverence as a priest holding up the bread and chalice of wine. I stared at the blood beginning to seep out for a moment before I made another cut. And another. And another. And another. By the time I was done, I had made twelve cuts in two neat rows along my arm. Beautiful. Perfection. Control. I had found my way to survive the knowledge of my rape and the stress of rehab.

Clean for several months, straight A’s in college, and a ring on her hand, she should have been smiling constantly. Instead, she found herself perfectly the art of lying as she crafted excuses for the bruises she continually wore.

“You look like you’re pregnant. Like you’re going to make me a proud papa at any minute, honey,” her fiancé said. The office chair he sat on sank several inches under his weight. Though she didn’t know how much he weighed, it was obvious he was fat. If she hadn’t been so scared of him she might have asked if he was expecting twins in response to yet another of his many scathing remarks about her own weight.

Needing to lose at least 40 pounds, she knew she was heavy. But after growing up watching Disney princesses finding their happily ever after’s with prince charming, she had the seemingly naïve notion that your partner loved you at any weight. And in any dress.

The red dress she wore, had worn dozens of times at the same damn weight while around him, was her favorite. The way it hugged her breasts, drawing attention away from the extra weight around her midsection, made her feel as close to pretty as she figured she would ever feel. “I don’t look like that,” she replied after several seconds of silence save for the groaning of the



chair as he swiveled it around the small computer room. Normally, she didn't say anything after he insulted and/or reprimanded her. But the thought of having to go to a wedding with him after having whatever was left of her self-esteem pounded into practically invisible fragments had given her the nerve to stand up for herself. For once.

"Of course you do." He didn't even sound angry or irritated for once. Just matter of fact and bored, as if explaining some fact of life to a child who wouldn't stop asking a series of "why" questions.

If she continued to argue with him he would become far more than mad. Furious. And loud. The neighbors had filed several complaints with the lot owner already because of his screaming at her, throwing things at her, and slamming her into whatever objects happened to be near by. The prospect of attending a wedding and creating another pathetic excuse for her bruises or cuts made her stomach tighten and her throat dry. "Do you want me to change?" Most of the time she wasn't permitted to leave the house without him approving her outfit, knowing where she was going, whom she was going with, and when she would be back. And still, save for college she was kept at home for the most part, finishing the chores he had assigned her.

"No. You're fat. It doesn't matter what you wear. You can't hide your gut, honey." Again, no anger. Instead, he laughed as he struggled out of the chair and waddled back to the bedroom to get himself ready to leave. "You better talk to people. And fit it." He didn't have to say what would happen if she didn't. Her body still wore the evidence of the last time she disappointed him with her shyness. But he loved her. He told her so several times every day. And the diamond on her finger was from him. And with her past as a junkie, a slut, she knew without a doubt that she was lucky to have someone who even tolerated her let alone wanted to marry

her. When he would finally end the engagement, she would fell back into drugs hard. And into the arms of another man who would abuse her just as avidly: Jared.

## Chapter 6

*“He who walks with the wise grows wise, but a companion of fools suffers harm.” –Proverbs*

13:20

After two weeks in rehab, I was asked to “knock” for the second time. The first time a client knocks is always to introduce him or herself to the rest of the clients, aka the family. I delivered this first knock the day after my first session with Sherlanda. As a shy person and hater of public speaking, the event had been terrifying. I had stuttered my name, drug of choice, age, and where I was from before walking swiftly to my usual seat in the second to last row. However, each knock after a client’s first knock was a particularly humiliating form of punishment, as was most of Gaudenzia’s unique brand of discipline tactics.

As I headed into morning meeting, barely awake and wishing I could spend the day asleep in my bunk, the client monitor—the boss of everyone else essentially—tapped me on my shoulder. Oh, shit. I turned to see Andy who was looking at his list of victims and lining them up outside the group room door.

“Kateri, I’m sorry but you’re knocking today.” His eyes held genuine sympathy and I smiled weakly, trying to assure him I would be okay. Out of all the men here, he was the one I actually considered trusting. About 6-8 inches taller than me, arm muscles impressive enough to conjure steroid rumors, with a face that was the kind of generic cute that appeared on cheaply made teenage movies, he wasn’t a guy I would normally even look twice at. But this place and situation was anything but normal. He talked to me, listened to me, looked at my face and not my chest like every other guy here.

A few days ago he had found me crying alone on the ramp and gave me a hug even despite being the staff’s flunky for the week, having had been assigned that job to “aide in his

recovery.” I had flinched and pulled away, remembering the feel of Bill’s hands clenching my wrists. But still. It was, despite the cliché taste of it, the thought that counted.

I watched as Andy again broke the staff’s rules, going down the line of the six of us and whispering the reason why we were knocking. “Sorry about this. Do you need to know why?” he asked, reaching his large hand towards my shoulders before letting it drop. He remembered.

“Probably something to do with my ‘negative attitude,’” I replied, using my fingers as quotations marks and producing a chuckle from Andy.

“Sort of. It’s because you have been isolating from everyone. Even just wanting alone<sup>3</sup> time is viewed as a ‘negative, drug-seeking behavior’ around here.” Andy mimicked my quotes and I forced a weak smile in return. He was so nice. Too nice to be in a place like this. Too nice to be a fucking addict. But then so was Greg.

An assistant monitor opened the group room door, his potbelly leading the way, and waved Andy towards him. Vince, I thought his name was, vaguely remembering his request for a bathroom rendezvous with me last week. “It’s time,” Andy said, his face solemn, his words grim. He seemed like a commander about to lead his troops into a battle he knew they would lose.

First, was Lindsey and Sarah, both of them laughing and joking, as calm about the whole procedure as I was nervous. Then Jonathan, who, despite the awkwardness of our fuck, I still talked to. He seemed more than calm; he seemed bored. He shrugged his shoulders and yawned as he knocked on the door and shouted his request for entry. He didn’t care. Not just about knocking but about rehab in general. It was alien to me, to be in a drug and alcohol rehab and not feel anything about it. Anger, fear, sadness, shame. Nothing. Jonathan just simply existed, nothing more. Just before me was one of the blonde boys Lindsey and Sarah had flashed my first night there. He had his arms crossed over his chest and paced back and forth, muttering under his

breath. I stood still, resisting the enormous urge to pull my razor blade from my bra and start slicing my arm up like a tomato for my salad, dicing it up while the red juice spurted out onto the countertop.

“You’ll be fine. Just feed them the bullshit they want to hear and you’ll be in your seat in under thirty seconds,” Andy whispered to me as I waited directly in front of the door. “You got this, girl.”

His arm went out toward my shoulder but again returned to his side. I wanted to tell him it was okay, that he could hug me all night if he wanted to. But I knew I would flinch. Not because I didn’t want his comfort but because my body would simply react.

I knocked three times, as was the protocol, and waited to be acknowledged. “Family may I please come in?” I asked loudly, and recalled some game I played as a child in which I had to ask “mother may I” to do anything. The game was fun when I was five but just plain stupid at 21-years-old.

“You may enter,” Robby, a hippy-wannabe with filthy dreadlocks called and I opened the door, my heart rate increasing as I entered, followed by Andy.. I stepped up towards the table where Ms. Fatima along with the new staff member, a young woman with dark brown hair and greasy white skin sat, and clasped my hands in front of me, stood straight up, and begin to count to thirty in my head.

“Do you know why you are knocking today, Ms. Hall?” the new girl asked, her too tight purple shirt clinging to her medium-sized breasts, emphasizing the rise and fall of her chest as she breathed. And they worried about how the clients dressed?

“Yes, ma’am,” I replied, careful to keep the anger and sadness from my voice. “I am isolating myself from the clients and staff and exhibiting a negative attitude in general.” I saw

utter shock flash across her face, her too bushy eyebrows knitting together, before her dry lips parted slightly.

“Yes,” she replied her voice tight and annoyed. I wondered if she was disappointed at not being able to lecture me about my failure to live up to the program. I wanted to tell her not to worry, that I was sure she would have a chance for that later. “Can you please tell us what you can do to change this behavior?”

How the hell should I know what to do? I was just the client. And I didn’t think I even wanted to stop isolating. No one understood me. They were so far away in a world without Bill. “I can talk to people when I feel upset and make more of an effort to socialize with my dorm mates,” I said, after five seconds of searching around for any half-hearted suggestion to appease them.

“Good, that’s a nice start. I also suggest you participate with the other clients during rec period and refrain from sitting alone,” the new girl said, smiling and licking her chapped lips. She was enjoying herself, I thought and fought a smile at the absurdity of it all. “What do you think the staff and clients can do to help you avoid these negative behaviors?”

Go fuck themselves. Those three words were so close to flying out of my mouth that I could feel them dancing around on my tongue. “If anyone sees me alone and trying to isolate talk to me and try to include me in group activities. Or if anyone sees me upset ask me what’s wrong.”

“Very good, Hall,” said Ms. Fatima before asking if the family accepted my knock. After a roomful of yes’s I half-jogged to my seat besides Tanya. I prayed I would not have to do that idiotic ritual again.

“Nice job, girlie,” Tanya whispered, letting her hand drift towards the back of my neck where she began rubbing it gently.

“Thanks,” I whispered back and leaned into her hand, savoring the massage, the release of muscle tension, and the feel of physical contact that was one-hundred percent consensual.

I don’t remember much of that morning meeting. I suppose it was much the same as any other. Readings from the *Daily Reflections* (an AA mediation book), another reading from *Morning Light* (a Hazelden recovery publication), and of course the obligatory listening to addicts and albies get up in front of everyone and read their Orientation work. Some, especially some of the younger men, got up there and could not stop snickering under their breath as they recited the Serenity Prayer or the Gaudenzia Philosophy. But a few of the women seemed to be genuine as they explained what each meant to them. Lindsey spoke about her young son. I was shocked, unable to reconcile the image of her as a mother with the image of her exposing her tits for cigarettes. She cried, though, wishing she could get him back. A part of me hoped she did but another part, the part that knew most of us would never make it, prayed that the little boy would be kept as far away from his crack and heroin-addicted mother as possible.

Some days I listened intently to what was said, twirling each word around in my head looking for some special truth that would cure me. But today, I was too hurt, too angry, to confused to give a shit what Fatima or Ms. New Girl said. I needed to cut. Back in junior high school, I would sit at the back of the classroom and pull my razor out from its place in my purse, roll up the sleeves of my black long-sleeved shirt, and cut my arm while Mr. So-and-So discussed how to write a proper persuasive paper. I never thought I’d have less freedom now as an adult than I did as a suicidal fourteen-year-old girl.

I felt the drowsiness from my morning medication pulling at me and promptly turned my attention towards the front of the room. At some point Charon had taken over the meeting and was harshly lecturing us about something called the Boards. I assumed it was something I would read about in my folder.

“The Boards were turned in late last night. There is no excuse for that. No excuse,” she repeated, louder the second time just in case any of us had suddenly suffered hearing loss.

I saw Andy’s hand shoot up and wondered if he was stupidly courageous enough to defend us. “They were only five minutes late and that’s only because we were trying to work on them after we took our meds. Have you tried to print perfectly on Seroquel?” Every client chuckled cautiously before Charon’s harping voice interrupted us.

“That’s addictive behavior, sir.” I bit my tongue at the condescending tone she coated the word “sir” in. She was a bitch. One of those people who claimed to know everything and if you disagreed you were not only a jackass but an ignorant jackass. From my seat in the back I saw Andy’s body grow rigid. If you were to rate the level of “addictive behavior” for each client I’d bet his would be the lowest. It was his second time here at Gaudenzia. His second time skewering his life with his young son. His second time pounding the phone against the wall when his ex-girlfriend refused to let him speak to his kid. He would make it. He had to.

Tell her off, dude, I wanted to shout but had no desire to be knocking again. I was a coward I knew, but I couldn’t care. It was safer to be one.

“When we were out there using we manufactured excuses by the millisecond. Excuses why we couldn’t stop using, stealing, lying, or selling our bodies. I understand that the side effects of medications can make it difficult to concentrate but the fact remains that if you had



finished them earlier you wouldn't have that problem. You're making excuses instead of accepting responsibility."

"It's not an excuse," Tanya said, her quiet voice suddenly taking on a strength rivaling the outspoken Ms. Fatima. I stared at her, unsure whether to high five her or move to another row.

"It is. And until all of you can comprehend that you will relapse within a day or two of getting out of here." Charon crossed her arms and left the room, unwilling to listen to our protests. Before the morning meeting could conclude Tanya leaned in and hugged me. I smelled the generic shampoo they provided us with still lingering in her hair. I imagined meeting her on the outside world. Would we have been lovers and make on the beach by the lake? I hugged her back just before we were yelled at by Fatima.

"So why won't you talk to me anymore?" I heard Jonathan's voice through my tears. A day after the lovely Board lecture I still had no real idea what they were and no clue why I was here anymore. "Hello?" he said, his tone growing more irritated.

With my head still buried in my arms which were clutching my knees to my chest, I sniffled. I imagined the relief I'd feel if I could slash my razor blade deep into my wrists and let the blood flow all over Jonathan G. Instead, I flipped my middle finger up and remained in my fetal position against the brick wall. Smoke break was almost over. I only had to deal with him for another minute or so.

"Oh come on," he said. His voice was softer this time. Or perhaps simply desperate. Having become desperate's favorite concubine it was often hard to acknowledge it in someone else. Irony. "It was good for you. Let's do it again. I'm horny."

I started laughing. So he was fucking horny. I was sure Bill was horny, too. So damn horny he couldn't wait to find a consenting partner. I used to love men. Almost all my friends were men. They were less drama, less work, and more fun than girls. But Bill took that from me too. I hated the thought of anything sexual with a man. Jonathan was proof that sex and men were stolen from me.

"Use your hand." I heard him cussing quietly as he walked away. Ms. Stephanie shrieked in all her annoyance for us to come in.

I wiped my tears off on my black hoodie before climbing off the concrete. I was still isolating. I was adept at finding places where the other clients avoided or forgot about. I'd hide in a corner, behind a wall, underneath a table, or in the bathroom. I couldn't connect. The closest I came to it was with Tanya, Andy, and Charlie. But they couldn't see my pain, couldn't possibly understand the whorls of agony that made up my brain. I was alone.

It was relationship group as we filed in, my stomach rumbling. I hadn't been eating regularly. While the other girls were savoring their "three squares a day," I begin purging again. As a teenager, I ate all my meals to not worry my parents. But immediately following every meal I crouched over the commode and vomited it all into the blue-tinted water. Before entering rehab, the last time I had purged was at age 15. Two days ago, I had met Kelsey, a thin girl with hair that hung in curly red waves around her angular face. She had been anorexic on the streets. Shooting up, chain smoking, and lettuce without dressing had been her only sustenance. Within the first hour of her entering Gaudenzia, she was put on a weight-gaining diet and her food intake was monitored. Sitting across from her at dinner that first day she explained that she was a vegetarian too. I grinned and we began talking about the evils of eating meat.

When we were done eating, she asked if I would buddy her to the bathroom. I heard the sound of her puking and smiled. “They can make me eat all the hell they want but they can’t make me keep it down.” She pushed her black glasses up her nose and smiled.

“Wait for me,” I had asked and she nodded. I shoved my hand down my throat and felt my weakened gag reflex react. The peanut butter sandwich and salad came up in chunks, splashing loudly into the toilet.

“Sweet,” Kelsey said while we both checked our faces in the mirror. I knew what we were doing was fucked up. Knew that like I did when I was a kid. It would only lead to me getting sick. I didn’t care. Kelsey was a grown woman and would find a way to purge whether I snitched on her or not. It was better to support her and have another pseudo-friend.

Now, having not digested a meal in two days, the hunger pains were strong. I luxuriated in the rush it produced. It was almost as good as cutting. Still, I carried my razor in my bra just in case things got bad. And considering how every damn day I had been here was bad I figured it was a good choice. I filed in behind Tanya, waved to Kelsey as she pretended to be the model client and sat in the front, before eventually taking my seat in the back.

“Now ladies,” Ms. Anise, the workshop leader shouted. Across the hall in the auditorium Mr. Wally was no doubt rambling on incomprehensibly to the half-awake male clients. The purpose of a relationships group in a rehab was very simple: get the druggies to understand that “Healthy relationships are not possible for an active addict to achieve.” Yet, as a recovering addict, I found it difficult to believe that a healthy relationship was possible to obtain at all.

“Think of your most recent relationship you had or have. Think of the best moment you had with the person,” she continued, flicking her blindingly bright red hair out of her eyes, and giving us time to recall that moment.

Jared. I smiled sadly to myself at the thought of pressing my face into his greasy hair. I was not sure if what we had could be classified as a relationship but I figured that it was definitely close enough to count. My best friend and lover yet would rather drink his own vomit than consider himself my boyfriend. It was what Facebook would dub as “Complicated.” He wanted all the benefits but none of the work. He didn’t consider himself to have ever “dated” any girls; he merely “hung out” and “screwed around” with them.

“Do you have that moment yet?” she asked.

It had been a frigid March night and I had messed up once again. Jared and I had both been attending Narcotics Anonymous meetings for several months in an effort to stay clean. However, after a friend of my sponsor broke the NA sacred rule and revealed to everyone that Jared and I were sleeping together, Jared had become disillusioned with the program, quit attending meetings, and given up sobriety. I strived to continue to amass some clean time; I was clean for 35 days when I relapsed. Ashamed and with no one to cling to for comfort, I turned to Jared.

I stood on his porch, shivering as the wind whipped around me. Dressed in a tube top and mini skirt with only a thin sweater draped across my shoulders, I knew I deserved to freeze for my stupidity. I had promised myself that I would never trade my body for drug money again and yet here I was freezing my ass off on my lover’s porch and high as the goddamn moon from drugs I had worked for by laying on my back. I felt dumb, dirty, and drenched in humiliation. Trying to force the tears to stop, I knocked lightly on the door before opening it.

“So you used?” he asked, as soon as I walked through the door of his parents’ house. My eyeliner was streaked all across my face as the tears continued to flow. I shut the door behind me and stood there shivering.

“Yeah,” I whispered, trying not to sound like I was whimpering. Jared hated weakness and he never bothered to look up the meaning of compassion. I expected him to launch into a ruthless tirade about how pathetic I was. I stood close to the door, poised to retreat if he elicited any more tears from me.

Instead, to my surprise, he merely motioned with his head for me to sit with him on the love seat. Hurriedly, I kicked my calf length black boots off and walked over. “Sit. I’m going to make everything better, dude,” he assured me. I plopped down and watched in awed silence, as he pulled out a small plastic baggy filled with white powder and dumped some of it out on the mirror sitting on the coffee table in front of us.

“Coke?” I asked, my mouth watering as if I was about to consume an entrée from a fine dining restaurant.

“Hell yes!” he shouted, grabbing my hair with one hand and yanking my head back. “We’re going to party hardcore for the next three days. My parents are out of town.” Before I could express my joy, my mouth was smothered with a thick, sloppy kiss.

I savored every second of it, as I always did, and allowed myself to imagine that he loved me. A montage of what life would be like if we were an actual couple flashed before my eyes. Two crazy happy 20-something year olds passionately kissing in a corner booth at Perks Place Café. Two ecstatic young people moving into *their* new apartment. Two excited newlyweds on their honeymoon. Two thrilled expecting parents picking out a baby crib. As he broke the kiss off and released my hair, my idea of the perfect life evaporated. He quickly cut the coke and ordered it into three lines on one side of the mirror and three lines on the other. “Bitches first,” he said, chuckling at his favorite pet name for all females before sliding the mirror closer to me and pulling the straw out from behind his ear.

I thought about objecting to being called a bitch but decided it was pointless. He would call me that as long as he wanted to regardless of my half-hearted protests. Deciding that getting the coke in me was more important than what dignity I may still have had, I snorted all three lines as swiftly as possible. “Fuck, yes,” I gasped, feeling the high coursing through my body and my throat already beginning its familiar burn.

“My turn, man,” he snapped, sliding the mirror to his side and snorting the lines just as quickly as I had. “Now...” he began, “tell me why you were crying.”

I looked at him, confused, for a moment before hesitantly replying, “Because I used.”

“It wasn’t because you used,” he replied with confidence. “It was what you did to get the drugs, right?” he asked, though it sounded almost as if he were telling me.

How did he know? It was only an hour ago. There was no way he could know what I did already, was there? “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Bullshit. You and I both know that I can tell when you’re lying. And besides, he called and fucking bragged to me about it already,” Jared said, anger as firmly intertwined in his voice as the pills with his life. I glanced down at my lap, too ashamed to meet his eyes. I had made Ralph promise not to tell Jared. The two men and I knew each other through the local AA/NA meetings. From the first time, Ralph saw me it was obvious to me, Jared, and every other male in the program that Ralph intended to sleep with me. Yet I vehemently rejected his pathetic pickup lines and ridiculous advances. That is until the night came around when I wanted a quick and easy high.

“I’m sorry,” I whispered and braced myself for his long delayed diatribe. He was going to call me a whore, a slut, stupid, pathetic, dumb, and worthless and I knew I deserved all of it.

Though we were not dating, there was an understood monogamy between us and I had violated it in order to get high.

“How much did he pay you? Was it at least 100 bucks?” he asked, his voice unusually tender. He wrapped his arm around my shoulder and gently drew me to his chest. I pressed the side of my face against it and sobbed freely, greedily inhaling his familiar scent of booze, sweat, and weed.

“Enough for oxies and ‘ralls I needed,” I whispered, too mortified to admit having sold my body for such a small price. In a town where a man could walk into any bar and have his pick of any number of horrendously intoxicated females, paying for sex was a new and foreign concept. I was lucky to get the \$75 that I did.

“Jesus Christ, dude,” he snapped. “You’re worth at least \$350 and I’m willing to bet you didn’t get that much,” he added, with a laugh. I noted his jovial tone and struggled to comprehend this new reality where Jared could actually feel compassion.

“You’re not mad?” I asked. Between the cherished rush of the coke and Jared’s unheard of ability to show kindness, I felt my hold on reality slipping away.

“I was pissed as fuck at first,” he admitted. “But I get why you did it. When you need a fix you do what you got to do. I get that. Just do me a favor, okay?” he asked as his hand found its way up my shirt.

“What?” I asked, though at this point I was so relieved I’d have done just about anything.

“Don’t ever do that fucking shit again. Ever. You need something I’ll hook you up. And you know you can always afford what I charge,” he added, his voice abandoning its harsh tone as his hands ran across my body. “Promise?”

“I promise,” I whispered as he leaned in for a kiss.

Now, sitting in the flimsy, hard as hell chairs in a low-budget, lost cause rehab, I thought of what my dad would think if I told him what I had told Jared. I knew the anger, hurt, and disappointment that would cloud his expression would rip my heart into two neat and smooth shame-filled halves. More disconcerting to me was that my friends would discard me quicker than they would a used condom they found under their beds if they knew what I had done. But not Jared. I never had to justify anything to him and I loved him for it.

“Alright, ladies,” Ms. Anise shouted. “Now that you have that moment I want you to raise your hands if what I say about it is true. Understand?” I nodded along with the other women and tried to stay focused. At 6pm, all I wanted to do was go to bed. I battled my meds to stay awake all day long and by the time evening groups arrived, I was steadily losing the battle. However, I mustered my last reserves of energy and prepared to listen to Ms. Anise.

“Raise your hand if your moment involved drugs or alcohol,” she commanded, and my hand went up. I glanced around the room and was startled to see that the vast majority of the women’s hands were up as well. Strange.

“Look around the room,” she said. “You’ll notice that most of your hands are up. Think about why that might be. Think about why your relationships are so closely knitted to drugs.”

I stifled the urge to roll my eyes. Way ahead of you. I gave myself a mental pat on the back.

“Now think about the reason why you love and care about that person,” she said while she toyed with a strand of her annoying red hair.

That was easy. Jared never judged me; no matter what I did and who I hurt, he never condemned me. I stole from my family to get money for drugs and he gave me “props.” We



shoplifted and stole from our friends and high fived each other afterwards. Even after I sold my body in order to get high, he didn't think any less of me. I didn't know anyone else that would do that. I didn't think there was anyone else that would make me feel like I wasn't a complete piece of shit for the lifestyle I had been living.

"Ladies," she shouted, and I couldn't help but wonder why she shouted when we were all within three feet of her. "Raise your hand if you love them because they encouraged you to get clean."

"We're addicts," Jared had said one night after hours of opiate-powered lovemaking. "We're not meant to be clean." My hand stayed down and so did almost all the other hands in the room.

"Oh how surprising," Ms. Anise, said. "You mean your charming crack head boyfriend didn't want you to get clean? How can this be?" Despite my growing irritation at her sarcasm, I began to wonder the same thing. If Jared cared so much about me, wouldn't he have wanted me to get clean?

"Raise your hand if your partner ever gave you advice not to do something you knew was wrong?" Again almost no hands went up and I felt a sickening feeling in my stomach as my eyes were being pried open to the truth. "Oh come on, ladies. You can't tell me that junkie Jim didn't warn you not to steal from your Momma," she said, gazing around the room and letting her gaze rest on each woman. When her eyes turned to me I meant her stare and demanded the answers to the millions of questions racing through my mind. Why didn't Jared want me to get clean? What was wrong with him not judging me when I did bad things? If he would have judged me, I didn't know what I would have done. What was this crazy redhead's point?

“We’re almost out of time this week but before we end I want you to ask yourself this one question: If you didn’t have Mat the meth head justifying your addiction and bad deeds would you have decided to get clean sooner?” Ms. Anise racked her long fingernails through her hair and bid us goodnight, as she went around the room straightening up. We filed out into the hallway to wait for the men before going to our next smoke break.

I looked around for a sign of a staff member and seeing none I ducked into the restroom. I closed and locked the stall door before sliding to the floor and sobbing. As soon as the question was out of Ms. Anise’s mouth, I knew the answer. If Jared had not been in my life to justify everything I did, I knew that guilt would have driven me into rehab months ago. I realized I never really loved him so much as I loved how he alleviated my shame and guilt. And I knew without a doubt that I served the same function for him. He made love to me not because he loved me but because I was the only girl dumb enough to let him. I extracted my razor from my pink lace bra. Shoved up the left sleeve of my hoodie. And slashed a straight column of cuts from my wrist to the crook of my arm.

Yet, a week later during the next Relationships Workshop, I was furthered reminded of the warped relationship Jared and I had, when I learned the name for what Jared and I did for each other: “cosigning each other’s bullshit.”

## Chapter 7

*“For you formed my inward parts; you knitted me together in my mother's womb. I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Wonderful are your works; my soul knows it very well.”*

*- Psalm 139:13-14*

My first meeting with the psychiatrist has long since faded from my memory, leaving me with the vague impression of impatience as I slouched in the waiting room. I probably tapped my feet, fidgeted my fingers, and stared at the ceiling. I no doubted sighed frequently. Impatient for as long as I can remember, few things annoyed me more than waiting for something or someone. It is only as I write this that I realize that this inherent impatience is yet another characteristic that made becoming an addict all too easy. Addicts want what they want when they want it and not a nanosecond later. Instant gratification was not only my best friend but also my soul mate.

When he finally saw me, I remember crying. I know I murmured something about the rape, my guilt, and nightmares. He was the first person to use the word posttraumatic stress disorder to refer to my agony. I didn't tell him about the cutting. I know this because I associate, and still do to an extent, psychiatrists with psych wards. Bipolar and borderline personality disorder for life, the psych ward is a possibility of terrible closeness.

He reaffirmed my dosage of carbamazepine and added an antidepressant to it: Pristiq. I must have felt some relief at the prospect of my all-consuming depression lessening. However, within three days of starting it, it was obvious that something was very wrong.

“You look like a damn zombie.” I heard Lindsey say. Her voice was distant, muffled. Like a barrier had been placed between me and the rest of the world, keeping the sound and activity away. I stared at Ms. Charon's lips at the front of the group room. They moved but the

sound was deflected from my ears. Earlier that morning during smoke break I had told Tanya I felt like I was high but without the good feeling.

“I feel like a zombie.” I whispered back to her, the movement of my lips requiring concentration. Everything, even rolling my eyes behind Ms. Stephanie’s back, took every bit of mental power I possessed. If I had felt drowsy from my medication before I now felt incapacitated.

“Do you feel high?” Lindsey asked. I dragged my gaze over to stare at her green eyes. She was excited. She shifted in her seat and smiled with a liveliness I had never seen in her. She hoped the pills produced something similar to heroin. I anticipated her next question before she asked. “Can you cheek a few and give me some.”

“No and no. They are the opposite of a high. Kind of like when you drink yourself into a near coma.” The absurdity of this comparison was hilarious. Neither of us should have been drinking long enough to have had our first hangover. And yet as addicts, we knew such near death highs as intimately as our own private parts.

“Yeah I hate when that happens. Bad shit happens.” She turned away from me, her body slumping into the chair. Though I still hung out with Tanya in the dorms, I found myself unable to tolerate her endless smiles throughout the day. She wasn’t like the rest of us. Her parents were practically rich I found out one night as we laid in my bed together. She hadn’t had anything “real bad” happen to her because of using. She lost weight, enough weight to build another thin human with. But nothing that would mess her up for life. Her ability to believe that everything was just fine nauseated me.

But Lindsey, even at age 20, had felt the jagged blade of addiction. She was spunky and could throw on the dollish smile when needed but beneath that was a brokenness that I loved. “I

know,” I replied. I never did ask her what exactly had happened to her from overdrinking. Maybe she had been touched, her crotch rubbed even as she cried. Maybe she had woken up to find herself in a truck between two guys, one yanking her breast from her bra. Maybe she was raped in the woods alone where no one could hear her screams.

“Mental illness is often a significant motivator for using,” I heard Charon’s voice and mentally nodded my head. I knew I had been mentally ill since I was a young child. Knew that if I hadn’t had such a warped childhood because of mental illness I might have had a more healthy reaction to my mother’s death. My three siblings lost their mom too but I was the only one in a rehab.

I felt Lindsey lean her head against my shoulder. She mumbled, “Bored as hell,” before closing her eyes. I heard her faint, whispering snores within a few minutes and smiled. The warmth of her body and the feel of her breath grounded me from my induced zombiehood.

“Wake up, Hall and Masters.” I jolted up, awaking from Bill forcing himself into me, and let out a small whimper. “If I have to wake either of you up again you can go sit in the awareness chair,” Charon said. She waved around the piece of chalk she was using to write on the board, sending a cloud of white across the desk before her.

“Dumb bitch,” Lindsey whispered and smoothed my hair back into place before staring at the ceiling. If we wanted to pretend we were anywhere but at Gaudenzia we picked either the floors, ceilings, or windows to stare at. We’d block out the noise of the house managers or counselors and go wherever it was that didn’t feel like a punishment. For Lindsey it was with her baby boy. For Tanya it was with any number of men she professed love to. For Andy it was with his child as well. For me it was nowhere. Everywhere, even my dreams and imagination, held pain.

“In order to avoid relapsing when you are released you must become educated about your mental illness as well as your addiction,” Charon continued. “For example, I know there are several clients suffering from bipolar disorder.” I sat up straight in my chair and actually started to listen.

I didn’t know much about my disease. The doctors at UPMC had diagnosed me only a month ago. On my last day there, they handed me a two-page packet about the disease. Though not floridly manic, I was still buzzing enough to make only a cursory glance at it. Now, as Charon began to explain the disease in “human terms” I recalled only one detail from the packet: that multiple hospitalizations throughout a patient’s life were almost certain. I had promised to kill myself before going back to a nuthouse.

It was a stupid promise. Something only a crazy addict would make. It would be horrible to wake up under a flimsy hospital blanket again but there plenty of things that were worse. Rape. Rape. Rape. Bill put his hand over my mouth. An unnecessary act. Who would have heard me? Maybe he couldn’t get off with someone begging for mercy.

I wanted to know my disease. I wanted to stay out of the hospital. I wanted to stay away from drugs.

By the end of the group, I wondered how someone hadn’t caught my disease sooner. I turned to Lindsey as we stood to leave. I felt empowered by the rush of information. Just as I had after a particularly interesting day of school, I was determined to share what I had learned. “I can’t believe all those symptoms that I thought were just my own messed up personality were actually my disease.”

“What?” Lindsey asked, slowing turning her head from the window. “I can’t wait for a smoke break.” She hadn’t heard a thing said. It wasn’t surprising but it still stung. As a kid, I had

always had someone to share my excited facts with. If not my siblings than my mother. Standing in the hallway by the bathroom, I watched the other clients walk by. I knew at least a few others must have listened to the lecture. But I didn't feel like talking to any of them. Not one. After everyone else went out, I trudged after them. My craving for a smoke was strong but I took several deep breaths and pushed it aside. I pressed my back against the wall beside the ramp and slide down. I cried with my face pressed into the itchy carpet for several minutes. Bill, my disease, and loneliness hit me harder than any man ever had.

Later that evening, during the smoke break following dinner, a new girl arrived. I saw her walking from the detox unit to join us, her head focused on the tiles, hands buried in her three sizes too large hoodie. Her light brown hair, forced into a high ponytail, fell out in numerous directions. Though thin, her face was ruggedly pretty with a beauty mark above her lip, a scar on her right cheek, and a few pronounced wrinkles on her forehead. She nodded at me as she gave the door a rough shove and tottered out.

I followed and took a seat beside her on one of the benches on the porch. Her hands shook as she light her cigarette. I thought about offering my help but she got it lit before I could decide whether to speak with her.

"Hey, girl," she said. Her voice was deep and raspy, the product of a chain smoker and a life full of too much screaming she would tell me later. "Liz."

She didn't extend her hand or even take her gaze from her thick plaid pajama pants. "Kateri." I didn't know what else to say. I felt sorry for her. For anyone going through detox. But I knew how dreadful it felt, how carrying on a conversation was about as enjoyable as dragging dirty nails across one's bare ass.

“This place sucks. Feeling like this is fucking torture,” she said. I nodded several times. “You have a damn clique like all the rest of the fucking assholes?” she asked, gesturing with her cigarette toward the various groups of clients. It wasn’t that different from looking at a high school cafeteria. There were the popular clients, the emo/goth clients, the wannabe gangster clients, the black clients, the losers/freaks, and the ones that slept around. High school epitomized by adults that were all in their twenties and up for the most part.

“No. I mean I have some friends I guess. But I don’t hang out with anyone regularly. I don’t fit in, I guess.” I felt self-conscious under Liz’s greenish-blue eyes. She looked so intense, so angry. Later, when I came to trust Liz I learned that anger was her weapon against the world. “It’s how I keep from fucking blowing my own goddamn brains all over the place,” she would tell me.

“I didn’t think you were. You seem cool. Better than those dickhead guys over there.” She jerked her cigarette in the direction of the gangster wannabes, a group consisting of a handful of blond white guys with baggy pants that often sat below their ass. I knew her problem with them even before she said it. They had propositioned her, treated her like the whore she had been on the streets. Eventually I would open up about my own whoring and be rewarded with it being spread through the entire rehab.

“Is the regular section that bad?” she asked after we had smoked our cigarettes for several minutes in silence. I wanted to tell her that it was great. That all the staff was dedicated to ensuring not only our recovery but also our well-being as human beings. But lying wasn’t as easy as it was on the streets. I lied about everything on the outside. Where I was going, whom I was with, how much drugs I had or was going to get, and whom I had and had not slept with. But things changed. I couldn’t say when but I just knew I was starting to change. It was terrifying. “It



sucks but there are so many things you can learn.” Why did the truth always seem so darn terrifying?

“I hope so. About the learning, not the sucking,” she said and gave a throaty snicker. “I did enough sucking on the outside to last for a damn lifetime.” She pulled the hood of her hoodie up and rose as Tony signaled the end of the break.

“Talk to you later,” I called as we entered the building and she headed back to detox. She didn’t look back but threw her hand up in a feeble wave. I hoped she would enter the program. Many people simply crawled into rehab to detox and then left. They thought the hardest part of recovery was quitting the drug. They didn’t realize that it was much harder not to pick the drug back up than it ever could be to put it down in the first place.

The next morning, I took my Pristiq and stared at the square, pale pink pill in my hands for several moments. I didn’t want to take it. Something was wrong. The way I felt like I was only half in reality. Unlike when I used drugs or alcohol, I didn’t know where that other half was. It wasn’t surrounded in a coke-fueled high or swamped by a oxycontin damped bliss. It felt simply gone. But I had to take it. If I didn’t I’d find myself receiving a reprimand, or a pull-up as it was officially called in Gaudenzia-speak. I found it fitting that a phrase referring to a toddler’s diaper was used here. The staff treated us not just like children but incredibly dumb children. At times I wondered if it wasn’t rightly so.

I swallowed the pill and went to work therapy. As I walked by the ramp Vince, a pudgy middle-aged, bald man wrapped his fingers around my wrist. “We’re going to fuck.” He said it light, airy, like he was just breathing out. I jerked my hand to pull it away but he held on. “When

and where?” For the first time I wished for a staff member to appear. Through the double doors, I saw Charon talking to Tony, unaware of my situation.

“No. I don’t want to fuck you. Or any of the other guys so you can pass the word on, please.” I waited for him to let me go. He laughed instead.

“We aren’t stupid. We know what you girls do out on the streets to score. And now you’re in here and you think you’re fucking virgins or some shit.” He continued laughing until Lindsey walked by behind him and shoved him. His grip loosened and I pulled my hand out. I couldn’t even stop to thank Lindsey. I ran through the door into the playroom, pulled open the door to Reentry, and slammed it behind me. Helpless. It wasn’t just with Bill. I’d always felt helpless.

When I was three or four years old I had vivid nightmares about a man coming into my room, kidnapping me, and slitting my throat. I can’t remember what prompted that series of nightmares but I suspect it was some movie I happened to see. Many times I would lay awake in bed, frozen in fear, too terrified to do anything but cry and scream. I wanted to sleep in my parents’ room. I didn’t even care if it was on the floor. I simply wanted that feeling of safety. Eventually, my dad would become enraged by the noise, thud into the bedroom, and demand I be quiet and sleep. I didn’t have the words then to explain that sleep was torture. I just continued to cry. He would spank me, leaving me crying even harder, and go back to bed. But I wouldn’t stop crying and screaming. I was certain that man would take me at any moment, any night. I screamed until my father would return again and beat my behind even harder. It didn’t work. By the third time he was so frustrated he threatened to spank my bare butt with the belt. I stopped screaming but continued to cry quietly into my Mickey Mouse pillow.

I had felt trapped, helpless. I was incapable of keeping myself safe from either the potential kidnapper or my own dad. It wouldn't be until I discovered self-injury at age five that I would find the first distorted cure for my helplessness.

I ran to the bathroom, knowing I had only a few minutes before the other girls came back to start work therapy, and began to cut. I cut my arm from my mid forearm down to the crook of it. I watched the blood swell up and ooze out. I felt Bill inside my vagina and then my ass. I tried to breathe but the air was gone. Bill was there, panting in my face, holding my wrists, and pounding me. "Oh God," I whispered through my rapid, shallow breathing. I couldn't do this. I wanted to be strong, to turn my life around. But the pain was too much. Like a measuring cup filled with water, there was only so many drops it could hold before it spilled over. The side effects of Pristiq and Vince were the final drops. I was too full of pain to live.

I decided I would kill myself that night.

I met with Sherlanda again that day to discuss the progress I had made on my treatment plan. Before lunch, she called me out of group and led me down to her office. I had been crying on and off for since that morning. People say that you feel calm, maybe even upbeat after decided to end your life. I felt beaten to an ugly, bloodied smear on the rug by guilt and failure. I sat down into the chair and waited for her to start bitching at me. I wasn't getting things done. I had barely started on my self-esteem packet and though I had finished my Orientation work, I had yet to read it in front of the group. I knew that the assignments were important to staying clean. But how were they helping me with the rape? How were they helping me be able to think of my mom without grief snatching away my breath? How were they helping me stop resenting my dad?

“First I want to thank you for such thorough work with the Serenity Prayer and the Gaudenzia Philosophy. They are some of the best personalizations I have read here.” I nodded. I wanted to thank her. But she went on quickly, “But I still haven’t received your treatment plan work. You’ve been here more than two weeks now and haven’t done anything to better your self of situation. How do you think that’s acceptable?” She held my file between her purple and light blue manicured nails while sighing. What did she know about me? She had no idea what kind of hell I was living in.

“I’ve been distracted.” An inadequate answer. I couldn’t say the truth. The words would burn as they left my mouth. The tears would start flowing and there was no way they would stop.

Sherlanda tilted her head slightly, her straighten bob-cut swayed as she did. She seemed to be considering whether to inquire further or scream. She did neither, letting the issue go. “I recently got word that you had sexual intercourse with another client. Jonathan G. Why didn’t you mention this? In our first meeting I told you about honesty. You lied to me. And if there is one thing that will disappoint me its being lied to.”

I wanted to point out that I hadn’t really lied because she never asked if I had sex with anyone. Her stare was intense, her eyes latching onto me in a way my father’s did when he was about to erupt in pure, dangerous rage. “I’m sorry.” I gave a squeak of a scream and started sobbing loudly. “I didn’t want to be judged. I didn’t want you to give up on me before I even had a real chance.” I hadn’t known I felt that way until I said it.

Sherlanda continued her looking at me for several more seconds, watching my untidy breakdown in silence. I doubted the other clients cried like this in front of her. Maybe some gave the traditional sympathy-producing whimpers. None, though, I could imagine showing this raw vulnerability. Hustling on city streets, Pittsburgh and Erie, these addicts were hardened from the

inside out. There was a marked difference between my small town addiction and the genuine thug city life.

Eventually, though, Sherlanda's face slackened to compassion. She reached her hand across the desk towards me. I pulled my hands off the desk and wrapped them across my chest. She withdrew her hand and stared. Somehow, during her four-year psychology degree program she had failed to learn to deal with troubled people. If I hadn't been the one crying, I would have laughed at the irony. "What's wrong?" She asked it with an uncertain voice. I wondered if I was scaring her with my hysterics. Maybe she would dial the psych ward and hand me over to them to put up with. If she knew about my cutting, I suspect she would.

"I was thinking about killing myself." My eyes widened at the words. I hadn't meant to tell her or anyone. Just off myself quietly in some dark corner while everyone else slept.

"Why?" She shifted in her seat and stared at her hands. It was easy to forget that she was young too. Coming from the upper-middle class kingdom I assumed she came from, she hadn't been exposed to such messy things firsthand. And from what I had heard, she hadn't worked at Gaudenzia that long. Definitely baptism by fire.

How to answer such a complicated question. She said she wanted the truth. I sucked in several gulps of air and figured if she asked for it, I couldn't be faulted for giving it to her. "I have nightmares about my rape every night. I have flashbacks about it frequently. I feel like he is still inside me, raping me in every damn way possible. I blame myself. It was my fault. I lead him on. And my drugs caused it. I'm a slut and whore and that's why it happened to." I used up every molecule of oxygen and gasped for air; my sobs sounding more like death rattles.

Sherlanda's mouth opened but before she could speak, I continued. "And the shrink put me on this antidepressant called Pristiq. And since I've been on it I feel so awful. I think that's

why I want to fucking off myself. It's making everything so much more painful than it already is. And I have to take it because if I don't I'll get in trouble. And I just can't stand this anymore." I slammed my hands down onto my thighs. I took deep breaths and allowed the tears to continue. I felt terrified. I waited for her to snap at me, to tell me I was dumb for questioning the shrink. Maybe she would tell me that lots of girls who used drugs were raped and it was our own dumb fault. I knew I shouldn't have told her anything.

"I'm very sorry for everything that you're going through, Kateri." My snivels quieted in astonishment. I accepted the box of tissues she handed me and tried to slow my rapid heartbeat. She continued talking but I only half-heard her. Seeing an outside rape crisis counselor once a week. Stopping the Pristiq. The shrink was coming in a few days. More self-esteem work. I should have been relieved. I was finally being noticed. I wasn't just another dumb addict to be talked down to.

But Bill. He was in front of Sherlanda. He was in front of every damn thing. I went into rehab thinking Bill had given me the key to getting clean. Something I feared more than death. And in a way, he had. Yet, the memory of the rape, the fear, the suffocating self-blame hid my real problems. Even as I realized that, I shook my head. It was insane. It was true.

"So try to have half this packet done by next week, alright?" I held a thick booklet of self-esteem worksheets in my hands. I couldn't remember taking it from her. Or standing up and following her out of her office.

I nodded yes and followed her up the stairs. Drowning. If I didn't cope with the rape it was going to make me use again. I became an addict because I hated myself, hated life, hated the unfairness of my mother's death. And I hated waiting. Hated feeling sad, mad, and even happy at times. I didn't know how to live.

“What’s up, babe?” Lindsey asked several minutes later at the lunch table. “Sherlanda bitch you out?”

“No.” Lindsey bit into her greasy hamburger and raised her eyebrows. Details. Every girl here wanted details. Or dirt.

“I just realized I need to start dealing with my issues. Stop fucking around and, I know this sounds dumb, but use the tools they’re giving us.” I took a nibble of my peanut butter sandwich and waited anxiously for her reaction.

She laughed, reached across the table, and gave me a light slap on my shoulder. “You’re so weird. That’s why I love.”

I didn’t care if she laughed. I didn’t expect her to understand. Though I never consciously thought it, I knew Lindsey would not make it. I was tired of clinging to others for love. I wanted to love myself.

## Chapter8

*“Casting all your anxieties on him, because he cares for you” - 1 Peter 5:7*

“You’re on transport, Hall,” New Girl said. She smiled as she spoke and adjusted her tight ponytail. She wore a purple dress with large, black buttons running up the middle. On anyone else, I would have been envious of such a bold fashion statement. I loved wearing things that were either saccharinely cute or strangely bold. But she sullied the dress with her backhanded compliments and condescending attitude. Though not permitted to associate with Johnathan I still talked to him when I could. The other day I had been listening to the radio during rec period when Johnathan had sat down on the other side of the picnic table. Neither of us spoke to each other save of a quick greeting. After about five minutes New Girl appeared. Her long black nails tapped on her pale arms as she glared at us.

“Could you please move somewhere else, Hall?” Her voice was tight with forced politeness.

“But I’m not even talking to him. I just want to listen to the radio.” I knew my protest was pointless. It didn’t matter what I said. As an addict, my word was worthless.

“I understand that. But you’re not allowed to be near him. Now would you please move for me?”

For me? My moving didn’t have a thing to do with her. I hopped off the picnic bench and headed towards the pavilion instead. I moved for one person: me. It was stupid. It was unfair. But if I wanted to recover here, I had to play the game.

“Thank you so much,” New Girl called after me. I laughed at the irony of her polite words delivered in the same way you’d say, “Fuck you.” She wasn’t an addict. There was no



way she could be one of us and yet hold her nose when dealing with us. I knew it wasn't right but I hated her nonetheless.

Now, as I followed her out the playroom door towards the outer offices, I was too excited about getting out of here for a little while to care what she thought of me. Today I would begin to heal. I was meeting with my rape crisis counselor for the first time today. I didn't have any idea what I would say to her, how she would help me, or if I could really stop cutting. But I had enough hope to hang onto to keep me here and clean.

"Wait here and Travis will take you on transport," she said as we reached the exit door. I peeked out the window at the fence about five feet away. I wondered why they bothered with a fence. At first, I thought it was to keep people away from us. That was before I heard the male clients talking about sneaking drugs in and fashioning drug paraphernalia out of whatever they could obtain. Trying to protect us from the outside world of dealers, drugs, and crime was useless. No. The fence was to protect the neighborhood from us.

Travis waved and honked the horn as he pulled up in a green minivan. "Heck yeah," I whispered. I climbed into the front passenger seat and buckled my seat belt.

"Do you want to listen to the radio?" he asked. He turned it on and glanced at me as we pulled out of the parking lot.

"Yeah. What channel?" During rec period, only a pop music channel played through the speakers. Though we would occasionally change it to rock or country, it wasn't long before a staff member figured it out and was yelling at us. I expected Travis to turn it onto the pop station.

"Whatever one you want. That's the nice thing about being the only one on transport. No fighting for control of the radio." Though his face was stern beneath his blonde goatee, a goatee that reminded me of Bill's despite the color difference, he managed to force a chuckle.

“Thanks.” I turned it to a rock channel but left the volume only barely audible.

“You can turn it up you know. I promise I won’t pull you up for it” He smiled and itched his buzzed cut pale blonde hair. I hadn’t seen this side of him before. During his shifts as a house manager, he wore a perpetual scowl with his almost invisible eyebrows wrinkled. He didn’t yell or belittle clients like some staff members. Instead he used his tone and body language to gain obedience and in some instances respect. Sharp, firm, and insistent, his voice cut through even the petty fights between clients. Arms crossed over his chest, fists tightly formed he made it clear he was not our friend. Or so I thought.

I nodded and turned it up until the words of a heavy metal song filled the van. I didn’t know the song but was grateful for something other than the same Ke\$ha song that played repeatedly. Travis seemed nice enough but I couldn’t trust him. He had Bill clinging to him.

“I hope this helps you, Kateri. And if you’re comfortable,” he paused a moment and cleared his throat, “I am here for you to talk to.”

I could never imagine talking to him about what happened to me. But knowing that Travis cared enough to offer help placed a large crack in the presence of Bill.

“Thank you.” We spent the rest of the ride in silence. His eyes darted in my direction occasionally and I swiftly looked out the window. I had never seen this part of Erie. In fact, I hadn’t seen most of the city. Peach Street, with its endless strip of restaurants and stores was the extent of my visits to Erie. I had no idea where we were in relation to Peach. The tall buildings and parking garages loomed around us. After several minutes, we pulled into a small, grungy shopping center with a bar nearby.

Travis stopped the van directly in front of the Crime Victim Center. “Good luck.” He waved slowly as I got out and walked into the center. I knew it was rude to wave back but the

occasion didn't call for it. I wasn't going to a soccer game or to get ice cream. I was going to tell someone about my rape. About Bill penetrating me anally and vaginally. About the pain. About the despair when I awoke the morning after. A panic attack began. I half-jogged to the receptionist's desk to sign in. I needed to get outside. I needed to breathe. I needed a cigarette.

The heavyset blonde woman smiled gently at me as she confirmed my information and presented several forms for me to sign. My hand shook as I scrawled my name. Finally, she gestured to the rows of seats and a table with coffee. "Help yourself and take a seat. She'll be with you shortly."

"Can I smoke a cigarette outside while I wait?" Before she had a chance to answer, I was already halfway to the door. I heard her brightly reply yes, as I walked out the door. Within a second I had my cigarette lit, puffing on it vigorously. I pulled on it hard and fast until I felt lightheaded from the nicotine rush. I watched the people come and go from the grimy stores around me. A woman in a pink tank top carrying a toddler. A man shouting into his cellphone. A teenage girl blowing a large bubble with red gum. Everyone looked so damn normal it was disgusting and strange. How could so many people live "normal" lives? Lives where they didn't need to be in rehabs or psych wards. Lives where they didn't repulse their own families. It was hard not to hate myself. It was hard not to hate them.

"Kat-ter-e," my therapist said as she opened the door. "Did I say that right?" Her brown long hair, lightly pulled back into a ponytail and clipped, exposed her delicate facial features and wide green eyes.

"No. Its Kateri," I replied, shoving my cigarette through the hole of the large black ashtray. I followed her inside. Though my panic attack had subsided, a large ball of icy apprehension remained lodged in my stomach.

“I’m sorry, hun. It’s such a pretty name.” She seemed genuine. Her face was relaxed, not poised to shout a correction like the staff at the rehab. Perhaps I could trust her. Perhaps she’d help me.

“It’s alright. Can I get some coffee before we start?” Any chance to have real, non-decaf coffee thrilled all of us clients. Once, Lindsey and I drank instant coffee one of the guys had given her. We used paper cups and the lukewarm water from the bathroom sink to make it. It was grotesque but we chugged down every drop of it and spent the rest of the day hyper, jittering, and giggling.

“Sure. I’ll be in there,” she said and pointed to the first office past the receptionist’s desk on the left.

I walked behind the desk to the long white table. The large metal containers that sat on it weighed the center down. I imagined the table snapping in half, hot coffee flooding the small, clean front section of the center. I bypassed the decaf and snatched up one of the Styrofoam cups that sat in a neat row on the table’s edge. After filling the cup with steaming coffee, I dosed it with creamer, stirred, and sipped. Amazing. I had only drunk coffee at meetings on the outside. My dad was a tea drinker and though he owned a dust-covered coffee maker there wasn’t a single container of coffee in his house. But, like so many other things, I realized I missed them the most when I didn’t have them.

I kept the thin straw I had used to stir it, preferring to sip coffee out of a straw when it was so hot. It would be okay, I repeated to myself. I wasn’t sure if I believed that but I didn’t really have a choice. I crossed the expanse of blue carpet and entered her office. As I sat down, I realized I had never caught her name. I didn’t think the receptionist had told me it but even if she had, I wasn’t listening.

“Have a seat, honey,” she said, smiling so wide I worried her lips would crack open and ooze blood down her flawless face. I wanted to ask her what kind of cover-up she used. Instead, I took an awkward seat in the flowered pattern armchair. “I’m Kelly.” Before sitting down in her matching armchair she extended her hand. I shook it. Her grip was strong like a man’s but without the threatening squeeze, which many men added. Her nails were clean and short, resembling how mine looked on the outside. Since coming to rehab I hadn’t been able to cut my nails. The rules banned nail clippers.

She asked about the general circumstances of my rape. Her voice remained kind, calm, but slipped into a somber tone. I imagined she had practiced this transition dozens of times. Hundreds of times. How many women did men rape a day? I had to set my coffee down as my hands shook in fear. Until that moment, I had only thought of rape in terms of my own. It never occurred to me that not only was I not alone, but that hundreds of other women had been and would be raped. The thought that Bill would rape again started to thrust its way into my mind before I slammed the door on it. I would not go there. Ever.

She asked about how I decided to go to rehab. She asked about my family, if they knew. When I shrugged my shoulders and muttered no, she frowned, her powdered face crinkling. She tried to talk me into telling them but I ignored her, staring at the blonde surface of my coffee. I would tell my dad eventually. When I found the words. If they were any words to tell your father you had been raped.

Towards the end of the session, she asked about how rehab was going. Without a thought, I told her about Johnathan, about the cutting, about isolating, about the staff’s general disdain for me. I waited for her to scold me, tell me I was wrong, a slut, and just plain dumb. She did not.

Her voice grew softer as she explained how my actions “certainly weren’t atypical of a rape survivor.”

I flinched at the word “survivor.” I knew technically I had survived. He hadn’t killed me as I had wished for at the time. Besides that, though, I didn’t feel like I had survived anything. I was a victim. Bill’s victim.

“You don’t feel like a survivor?” I downed the last of my coffee, shocked. She folded her hands over her blue dress pants and leaned back into the chair. How had she known?

“No. I feel like his victim. I feel him all the time. He’s in me in every damn way possible.” I set my cup down on the wooden end stand and pressed my hands to my head. If only it were as simple as reaching into my head and pulling his memory out.

“I know you won’t believe this now but eventually that hold on you he has will lessen. I’m not going to tell you it will go away because it won’t. But with help, you will be able to integrate the rape into your life. It won’t rule you.” What she said made perfect sense and none at all. I was smart enough to acknowledge that time and help healed wounds. However, I still could not fully believe it.

“Thanks.” I fiddled with the button of my left shorts pocket and looked around the small office for a clock.

“That’s all for this week. I know it doesn’t seem like we accomplished much today. But keep in mind, and I know this is corny, that the longest journey starts with the first step.” It was corny but comforting. I grinned as I stood up. I waited at the door while she called Gaudenzia, letting them know I was ready for pick up.

After wishing her goodbye I headed over to the coffee container again, cup in hand. I filled it, tossed in the powdered creamer, and took several slugs. It burned, stinging my tongue

and throat, but the taste and rush of energy was worth it. Within two minutes I had drank the entire cup, threw it away, and left the center.

I leaned against the windows outside and smoked another Pall Mall. The menthol blended while with the taste of coffee still in my mouth. A young woman, probably no much older than me, got out of her dark SUV and walked towards the center. I turned my head to look at the other shops but continued to watch her out of the corner of my eye. Her long, gauzy white skirt fluttered in the hot breeze, revealing her pair of gold-colored sandals. Her red hair fell to her butt, with strands blowing around her face and green blouse. She was vibrantly beautiful. I waited and hoped she would enter another building. I didn't want to imagine her rape. She walked passed me and nodded as she pulled open the door, entering the center. I turned to watch her through the window, hoping that perhaps she worked there. She greeted the receptionist hurriedly before Kelly appeared. I watched the two women disappear into Kelly's office and hated reality.

Did a stranger rape her? Or maybe someone she had only just met? Or someone she knew well, someone she had cared about and trusted? I couldn't imagine that last scenario. I hadn't thought of myself as lucky until then. It could have been worse. As appalling a thought it was, it was true in a sense. Why did this happen to us? Of all the girls in this country, why did it happen to us? I knew there were obvious answers to that question and yet none of them was accurate. I wondered if I could accept never knowing for sure why Bill had raped me that night. It seemed impossible to say yes. But to say no would take me back to drugs, back to a place I would never go again.

Travis pulled up in the same green van and honked the horn. I took one last hit off my almost finished cigarette before throwing it away. "How was your session?" he asked while he pulled away from the curb. His voice was piqued with interest. I didn't know why or how he

could care about me but I was beginning to suspect that he did. Perhaps I had an ally on the staff after all.

“It was okay. Just introductory stuff. But the longest journey begins with the first step, you know.” On the outside world, I would have laughed at my own repetition of the cliché line. Just as I had laughed at the AA/NA slogans of “one day at a time” and “take it easy.” Now, though, I felt the truth in them. More importantly, I could actually believe the hope they were meant to impart.

“That’s true. So true,” he replied. I turned the radio back onto the rock station and beamed when I heard Good Charlotte’s “Hold On” blare through the speakers. I mouthed the words, “Hold on if you feel like letting go/Hold on it gets better than you know” as we road back to Gaudenzia in silence.

At dinnertime I sat next to Lindsey and Sarah and listened to them complain. There was always something to gripe about here. The staff, the food, the rules, the unbearable heat, the lack of air conditioning. Normally, I’d join in with them. Instead, I simply nodded my head yes where appropriate and laughed when expected to.

“Why so quiet?” Sarah asked, as she pushed green beans around in circles. She wasn’t on any diet restrictions though she should have been. She purged after every meal and never was caught.

“Just thinking. I had my first outside counseling session today.” I munched on my peanut butter sandwich and enjoyed the feeling of food in my stomach.

“That’s cool,” Lindsey replied after several seconds of silence from Sarah. “You want to buddy us to the bathroom?” Both girls had finished everything on their plates they wanted to eat. It was time to lean our heads over toilets and upchuck.



My peanut butter sandwich tasted good, if boring. My green beans, smothered in hot sauce were good. And my small piece of pound cake looked edible. I was tired of being hungry. Purging gave me the feeling of control but what was I really controlling. I wasn't punishing anyone but myself. It didn't affect any of the people that had hurt me. It was dumb. Dumber even than cutting, though stopping that was not in the near future. "No. I'm going to stay here and finish my food."

Both girls' mouths hung open slightly. They gazed at me as if I had just made a bomb threat. "Why?" Lindsey spoke after what felt like minutes.

I motioned both girls to lean closer to me, knowing that only a table away sat Bertha. Bertha had appointed herself as the mother of us younger girls. She would turn us in for any self-destructive behavior in an instant. "I don't want to purge anymore. I'm done with it. Okay?"

They left, shaking their heads back and forth, and carried their trays out of the cafeteria. I knew it wasn't okay. That they would probably hold it against me for the rest of our rehab stay. I liked both girls but not enough to really care that I had offended them. I was in here for me. Not them or anyone else in here. Me.

I ate everything on my plate and enjoyed the absence of a growling stomach that night as I laid in bed. I opened my copy of the AA Big Book, given to me by my first sponsor, and started reading it. Though I did not get very far before my medicine demanded my sleep, I promised myself to read a little out of it each night. I begin step one of the AA/NA Twelve Step program. Out of all the steps I would complete this one was the easiest: "We admitted we were powerless of alcohol (drugs)—that are lives had become unmanageable."

## **Chapter 9**

*For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ does the church” - Ephesians 5:29*

Watching a movie during Relapse Prevention group, I realized my addiction affected other people besides me. I entered the group room after smoke break and saw the large, old TV set wheeled in. Relief filled me. I was always tired by afternoon. After Tony turned down the lights, I could close my eyes and nap. Unlike other clients, I waited until the opportunity presented itself to catch up on sleep; some clients fell asleep in the middle of AA/NA meetings and received the Awareness Chair as punishment.

After attendance, Tony turned the movie on. Wonderful, I thought wondering if I could pretend to be sick to flee. An episode of *Intervention* played on the screen. My stomach tightened into several impossible knots. I hadn't watched the show since I had started using. Without consciously thinking about it, I was protecting myself from getting hurt. Because even at age 19, snorting lines off my ex-girlfriend's kitchen table, I knew what I was doing was wrong. So wrong that, like a virus, it spread out to infect everyone that gave a damn about me. Sometimes, like the night I had been raped, I stepped outside myself for just a moment. When Ivan had been screwing me in the bathroom, a minuscule part of me knew my dad would weep over it. And not because it was shameful to him but because it was shameful to *me*: his daughter.

I can't remember which episode it was, or even what the addicts' names were. I think that's because I wasn't really watching their addictions and their families try to save them. No. I was watching my descent. Scene-by-scene I remembered the drug and booze filled path that put me here. Along the way, I had done my best to avoid acknowledging others' feelings. But occasionally I had no choice. I remembered when two men had brought me home dangerously

drunk and high on Xanax. They had carried me to my dad's door and rung the doorbell. When he opened it, the look of pure horror on his face was unforgettable. Up until now, though, I had assumed it was embarrassment at my behavior. But as the family members on the show read their letters during the actual intervention, I realized that maybe he was afraid because he loved me.

Later that same night, after I had passed out and rolled onto my back, I threw up. I remember being vaguely aware of choking, of searching for breath and finding none. My dad heard me. He turned me onto my side and wiped up the vomit. The next morning I had only been thankful at not having to clean up puke. I had been so dumb, so damn selfish. Tears pooled in my eyes before wriggling down my cheeks. The show was almost over. I tried to watch it through my tears but only saw my dad's face that night.

After the show ended, two male clients wheeled the TV out and turned the lights on. I looked around the room swiftly, wondered if the show affected anyone else. Several female clients and a couple of male clients hurriedly wiped tears from their faces. I felt relieved. I wasn't the only one. Tony stood where the TV had been in the middle of the far right side of the room.

"Okay everybody. We're going to talk about what we just watched. Any thoughts?" His large, flabby frame stood up straight as he surveyed the room. "No one wants to go first?" I didn't think most of us wanted to go at all.

"Fine. I'll go first and then I'm going to start calling on people. The point you should have taken away from this video is that addiction doesn't just affect you. It affects everyone around you. Your parents, kids, husband, wife, boyfriend, girlfriend, friends, and even your pets." As he spoke, he squared his feet, letting his weight settle on his short, thick legs. I liked

Tony. He could be just harsh as some of the other staff but unlike them, he explained it. He was the parent who would spank his kids but also explain why they were getting the spanking. The explanation didn't take the pain of the punishment away but it did provide a justification. He looked around the room a moment before pointing to the new guy, John S.

"What did you take away from this video, John?" Tony turned his squat frame to face where John sat near the room's door. John sat backwards on his chair, his eyes still red from crying. I wanted to hug him. Cry with him. Tell him everything would be okay even though I had no way to know that. I was always a sucker for guys who cried openly. I wanted to fix them whether they could be fixed or not. Even as I write this, I could be absolutely furious at my boyfriend but if he starts crying all is almost instantly forgiven. Perhaps this comes from hearing my dad screaming and crying when my mom declared she was leaving him and taking us kids. That memory still haunts me today.

"It reminded me of my daughter," he began. His voice was shaking and I knew he was holding back sobs. Poor guy. "She hardly knows me because I've been in and out of prison most of her life. She's only six years old. I mean, you can't get more innocent than that. She doesn't deserve this..." he trailed off and pressed his hand over his mouth. The room was silent as we listened to his sobs. I cursed him under my breath as my own tears increased. I cried for him, for his daughter, for me, for my dad, for my siblings, for our cats.

"Thank you for sharing, John. Next?" He waited a moment for a volunteer before pointing his finger at me.

He must like listening to us cry, I thought with frustration. "I thought of my dad. And it's strange because up until now I've never thought of anyone but myself. I feel really guilty right now because of everything I've done to him, the rest of my family, and my friends. And I feel

like a selfish idiot for not realizing sooner what I was doing to them. I don't understand how I could have been so deluded."

Tony clapped his hands together and smiled. I took a deep breath to avoid getting angry at what seemed like an inappropriate reaction. What was there to be happy about in what I said? "That is a great point, Kateri." The anger I had vanished. I appreciated how Tony called us by our first names. Somehow being referred to simply by a last name felt dehumanizing. "That selfishness is part of addiction. It's essential in fact. It's what allows this sickness to grow and before you know it, it's so bad you're doing things you would have never even imagined doing before."

I nodded along with several other clients, including John. I wondered how after a month at Gaudenzia I was only now realizing my selfishness. Regardless, now that I had it had to be corrected. For the first time in years, I wanted to talk to my dad.

Tony called on Tanya next. Her head jerked up from her notebook upon hearing her name. She must have been working on a letter to her dad or doodling again. Seated between Lindsey and Sarah I couldn't see the notebook from where I sat. Tanya had picked a chair in the left corner by an open window. "What?" she asked absently. It didn't surprise me that she hadn't watched the movie, just disappointed me. I wanted her to stay clean, to avoid the mistakes Lindsey and I had made.

"Your thoughts on the movie, please. And put up that notebook until rec period or smoke break. You know the rules." Tony sighed loudly and stretched his jiggling arms above his head.

"I don't know. It was just an episode of *Intervention*. They're all basically the same." Several clients gaffed at her comment and I heard Tony mutter something under his breath. She

needed to be shook and slapped awake. I cared about her but she seemed to be living in a dream world.

“I think you missed the point while you were scribbling in your book.” Tony never sounded nasty but his voice was incredibly close to it. I pitied Tanya. He quickly summarized what John and I had said then prompted her for whatever coherent thoughts she had.

“I live with my mom and stepdad. They both want me off junk. And while they wish me the best in here, they get that I don’t really belong here. So I guess my thoughts about the show are that I’m glad I’m not in that situation.” I could imagine the look of determination on her face. She wasn’t being rude or arrogant. She believed every word she said.

Tony shook his head slowly, as if someone had hit pause on our badly written, soap opera. He knew, too. There wasn’t a point in arguing with a wall. It wouldn’t give.

Lindsey put her arm around my shoulder and whispered, “She’s a fucking idiot. I’m glad you don’t hang out with her anymore, girl.” I could have argued, should have argued. Instead, I simply nodded agreement. Guilt filled me at not defending Tanya but was quickly overpowered by the relief of acceptance. I was liked, popular, and safe with these two girls. I had already crossed them about the purging. I wasn’t sure if our messed up friendship could withstand another disagreement.

“I’m sorry about your dad. Things will work out.” She clasped my shoulder and quickly withdrew her arm before Tony reprimanded us. He was lax with the “no physical contact” rule between members of the same-sex. Still, we didn’t want to push him.

“Thanks. I’m sorry about your son.” I didn’t add her reassurance. She had spoken the unlikely phrase for the both of us. We would cling to the slight hope that things really would “work out. for as long as possible”

As Tony continued to call on clients, I made plans to persuade Sherlanda to let me call my dad during our next session. After all, I had finished all my Orientation work, save for taking my test. I needed to apologize to him, to thank him. I doubted he would receive either statement well. I had said such things in the past with no genuine feeling behind them. He had no reason yet to think this time was any different. Still, I had to say them. I couldn't imagine him coming to see me without knowing that I at least recognized his pain and struggles.

By the time the group was over, my sobs had resumed. Though I had been working on not cutting, it was a half-hearted process. I walked swiftly into the women's room. After locking the stall door behind me, I pulled out my razor. My hands shook. I unbuttoned my blue Almost Famous jeans and pulled them down to my knees. I made eight slices in a single column across my left thigh. The rush was instant, soothing. It smashed the guilt down to a manageable level. I watched the blood pool onto my thigh for a minute before wiping it away with toilet paper. I carefully pulled my jeans up. After redoing them, I placed my razor back into my bra. My hands still shook but the thought of a Pall Mall comforted me.

I shoved open the bathroom door. The sound of wood connecting with flesh followed by a groan panicked me. Whom had I hit? Would I be kicked out for violence? Thoughts careened around my mind. I stood in the doorway, holding the door open just enough for it not to hit me. I couldn't move. If I were kicked out, I would die. I would use. I would die.

"What the hell, man." John came around the door, not even a bruise visible. The scowl on his face quickly vanished when he saw me. "Trying to pick on the new guy?" he asked. He smiled.

"I'm sorry. Are you alright?" I came out from behind the door, so relieved I could have hugged him.

“Dude, I’m fine. Want to walk with me out for smokes?” I nodded. I really wanted to be alone but after hitting him with a door it seemed rude to decline. Now, recalling that moment I smile sadly at how one inconsequential decision can change so damn much.

“I know you don’t know me very well,” he begin as we walked past the ramp, “and my words may not mean shit,”

“How do you know that even if I knew you that they would mean anything more than shit?” I grinned and gave him a light punch in the arm. I didn’t know what it was about him. He made me feel like the old me. The wisecracking, sarcastic, playful me. The one before the raped. It felt good to pretend I could be that same person again.

“So you’re a smartass, huh?”

“I have my moments.” He pushed his black glasses up his prominent nose and winked at me. I felt a flutter in my stomach, the kind I got when I had my first real girlfriend in high school. I ignored it. With his dark brown hair, brown eyes, and tan skin, the two of us could have definitely passed for cousins at the least, if not siblings. I magnified this argument into Mount Everest and set it between us. Something had to keep him in the friendship zone. I didn’t come to rehab to date. I didn’t need another Jared in my life.

“We haven’t really met. I’m John.” His large, thin hand enclosed mine.

“Kateri,” I whispered before placing my hand in his. We stood in the suffocating corridor between the two sets of double doors. He stared down at me, more than a foot taller than I was. His eyes were gentle, soft. Jared’s eyes were like jagged shards of burnt brown rock, perpetually ready to cut someone down. They weren’t the same.



John placed his hands on my shoulder. I flinched. I hadn't wanted to but body reflex was stronger than conscious thought. "I'm sorry," he stuttered. He probably thought I was a weirdo, I realized.

"No. It's not you. It's me." I pushed open the door to the courtyard and quickly pulled my Pall Mall free of its green box.

"Maybe someday you'll tell me about it." John walked off the steps toward the growing group of guys laughing under the pavilion.

I didn't answer him. I wasn't sure if I could tell him about Bill. I didn't want him to look at me and see a rape victim. When I looked in the mirror lately that's all I saw.

That night I laid on my stomach in bed working on my self-esteem packet. The page instructed me to make a list of ten things I liked about myself. Ten things? I wasn't sure I could name three things let alone ten. The room was noisy as usual. Girls gossiped about other clients and staff members. They speculated on what guys liked which girls and how they could get so-and-so to ask them out. It was the closest thing to going away to summer camp I had known. For the most part, I ignored the conversations at night, preferring instead to do packet or 12 Step work and get some reading done.

Even at my most depressed in junior high school, I had still recognized the fact that I was very intelligent. Even while I had laid in bed, the lights shut off, the blinds drawn, listening to songs about misery and anger, I knew I was gifted. I wrote down intelligence on the first line. I yawned and shook my head and shoulders to stay alert. Number two. Though I had mostly my experiences in high school as a reference, I believed I was a good writer. My high school teachers and freshman professors all praised my essays as amazingly written. Number two was filled. I stared at the remaining eight slots and sighed.

My breasts. Countless guys had lauded them for their size. As a kid, I had hated them. They were too large, different from all my classmates' barely visible boobs. But around age 17, I realized that many guys actually preferred large breasts. At first, I continued to hate them even as I flaunted them to win male attention. But at some point, I realized I appreciated them. It happened in an AA that past winter, about a month before Greg died. I was wearing my favorite top at the time. Black, with chain shoulder straps, and a low neckline. It made me feel as close to sexy as I could get. One of the newcomers hit on me, a tall, young guy with gel-spiked hair. He wrote his number on the back of an AA pamphlet and stuffed it into my hand. When the meeting ending and everyone filed out to smoke, Greg was hysterical with laughter.

“Dude, what’s your problem?” I had snapped.

He rolled his eyes, and pointed to my breasts. “You could get any guy in here with those, babies.” Though I had wanted to follow up on his statement, wanted to see if “any guy” included him, I had not. He had a fiancée, a family. Still, I will always regret not knowing the answer.

It was such an obvious statement, but for me it was a revelation of biblical proportions. I had went home that night and stared at my breasts in my bedroom mirror. I found dozens of things I disliked about them. However, my embedded negative thinking couldn’t deny the evidence. They were desirable. I liked them. A little bit.

That filled the third slot. I took a deep breath and exhaled, as if I had just finished exercising. And indeed, it was exerting to think positive after wallowing in negative thinking for 21 years. It felt like my brain was running 90 miles per hour one direction while I was trying to pull it the other. Another yawn, this one bigger than the others. I’d be asleep soon whether I wanted to or not. I needed to finish this tonight. I was tired of spinning around in circles in my own self-hate.

Number four? I remembered a saying Greg used to tell me. Another cliché AA/NA mantra that held truth. Fake it until you make it. Even if you didn't feel happy smile. Even if you didn't want to go and talk to people in recovery, do it. The theory was that if you force yourself to do the right things eventually they would become natural to you. I groaned inwardly, and decided to try it. I had to get the damn list done one way or the other. I hated my eyes. They were bug-eyed and boring. I wrote down my brown eyes. I hated my hair. It was entirely too unruly with its nappy curls. I wrote down my hair. I felt I was overweight, fat, and unsightly. I wrote down my womanly curves. I thought back to my personality before drugs. I was kind, empathetic, loyal, loving. I wrote down loyal and kind personality. Without believing, I wrote down I was brave. I could have overdosed after the raped, could have took the easy way out. But I didn't. That had to count for something, right.

One more. I blinked my eyes several times to keep them from closing. You can do this, I thought. One more. One more. There has to be one more thing I can write down to talk myself into liking about me. My lips. I didn't like them because they were too big. Too black, as my classmates in second grade had said. I smiled at the tenth line's lack of emptiness. I read back over the list twice, whispering each line. I was supposed to look at the list at least three times a day to remind myself and improve my self-image. It felt good to pretend I liked myself. Completely foreign, but good.

I put my packet and pen back into my folder and placed it on top of my dresser. The other girls clustered in the far corner and whispered urgently. I thought about investigating but figured if it was important, I could find out in the morning. I closed my eyes and just managed to say the Serenity Prayer before I fell asleep.

## Chapter 10

*"But when these things begin to take place, straighten up and lift up your heads, because your redemption is drawing near."* – Luke 21:28

During rec period, I let Johnathan finger me while we watched a movie. The beginning of June. I had finally begun redeem myself in the staff's eyes for what I did with Johnathan. We managed to sneak into seat next to each other despite our ban. Each of us homesick, we whispered about our lives on the outside. He told me about his girlfriend, how she would no doubt take him back, and how he had tried everything and anything to get high back in Indiana, PA. I mentioned I used to live there, and provided him with my memories of trick or treating and playing in the leaves to his drug-filled version of the town. "Can I play with your pussy?" he asked, interrupting my story about the birth of my brother, Charlie, in Indiana.

"Why?" I expected him to ask for sex or maybe a blowjob. What would he gain by pleasuring, or rather trying to pleasure, me?

"Why does it matter? I want to, okay. I'll give you two packs of smokes if you let me."

I knew it was dumb, wrong, and slutty but I had been smoking the butts of cigarettes from the ashtrays for the last few days. My father had been buying my cigarettes but had not been up to Erie to drop any off lately. I worried that perhaps he decided I should just quit cold turkey. I wanted cigarettes. I looked around the room and saw no sign of Tony. Recalling how Lindsey and Jason had gotten away with the same thing, I decided I could chance it. The worse that could happen was I'd be written up and have the staff against me again. I had made it through the first time. I could make it through again if it came to that.

"Okay, whatever. But don't put any in." I didn't want anything in there. Even thinking about penetration brought the pain of Bill forcing his penis into my anus back. Burning pain,

unendurable pressure. I breathed deeply. Looked at Johnathan's pale, pudgy face. No resemblance to Bill.

"Why, dude?" he whined, stretching his hands as if warming up. If I could have punched him in the face and not gotten caught I might have. He was so clueless to my pain.

"Because I don't. And if you do I will literally scream." He stared at me, eyebrows raised. No doubt waiting for me to laugh, to show I was joking. My continued scowl eventually sunk into his dandruff covered head.

He nodded. I spread my legs slowly, my calf-length yellow skirt rustling quietly. Johnathan grinned and muttered something. His breath smelled like someone had stuffed a basket full of sweaty socks into his mouth. He had given up on his personal hygiene just as he had given up on his recovery.

I tried to focus on the movie as he pushed his hand underneath the band of my panties. His dry fingers fumbled around for several seconds before finding my clit. My thighs tensed. I shut my eyes and forced them back open. Two packs of cigarettes for just a few minutes, I reminded myself. It seemed like a good idea at the time. On the outside world, I had given blowjobs for either five dollars or a pack of cigarettes. It had seemed smart. Why pay for something when I could get it free in exchange for just a few minutes of my time. Where did that logic go?

"You like it, slut?" he whispered in my ear. Like Jared, he got off on demeaning women during sex acts. In my experience, so did many other men.

I nodded and faked a sigh of pleasure. Again, pretending to want, to like, to get off on it had been so easy before. Something wasn't right. I hated his touch. But it was more than just that.

After two minutes, I faked an orgasm. I fooled countless men since I was 18 into thinking they pleased me. Give them what they want so I could have what I wanted.

“Daddy makes you feel real good,” he said, not so quietly. He roughly pulled his hands out of my panties, snapping the band against me. I looked around and saw several male clients watching us, smiling but still not Tony. We were safe. I snapped my legs together and stared at the carpet. “Here are your cigs. Thanks. Always nice to play.”

I reached out for the cigarettes without looking up. Everything felt off, wrong. I hadn’t felt like this since I slept with a married man for the first time back when I had only just started to use again.

Shame.

It should have been an obvious emotion to distinguish. For any normal person it would have. But for an addict, for me, shame was as unfamiliar as prancing around in the desert would be for a fish. Shame. I cursed quietly when I realized the right thing to do. The only thing to do if I didn’t want to continue to be a whore.

“Keep them, dude. I don’t want them. And we won’t be playing anymore.” The smokes were mere inches from my hands. I could take them, smoke them, and have instant pleasure. If I hadn’t been reading the AA/NA literature, if I hadn’t been paying attention in group, I wouldn’t know that this craving for instant gratification was part of addiction. It was part of what drove me to whore, steal, lie, and manipulate. I wanted what I wanted and I had no clue what waiting was.

“Why not?” he asked. I smiled sadly, knowing he wasn’t asking about the cigarettes. Did men only like me for one thing?

“Because I don’t like you like that. You’re just a friend. And I just don’t want to do it.” I didn’t mean to sound angry but it crept into my voice anyway. It wasn’t really Johnathan’s fault. He was just doing what any addict would do. It was mine for playing along in the first place.

He stood up in disgust just as Tony walked into the room. I heard him ask to use the restroom. I hoped he would find another seat when he came back. I stared at the movie and tried to remember its name. Explosions filled the screen and I yawned. Most of the time we were only shown action movies during rec. This was no exception. I tried to follow what little plot there was, but couldn’t forget the feel of Johnathan’s hands on me. I shouldn’t have done it. I felt a confusing mixture of shame and pride. I didn’t take the smokes. To anyone else it probably would have seemed either stupid or of no consequence. But I knew what it meant. I wasn’t the same girl I had been on the outside anymore. I didn’t have to continue to categorize myself as a whore. No. I used to be that kind of person. I used my hoodie sleeve to dab at the tears that started to fall. I cried because I was relieved; I cried because a part of me was dead. And I didn’t know who I was anymore.

The next day, Monday, the normal weekday schedule disappeared halfway through the morning meeting. I finally worked up the courage to read from one of the meditation books. The page I read discussed addiction in terms of a sickness. Though both AA/NA and rehab repeated this notion daily, it wasn’t always easy to believe. My Catholic, conservative, Republican family viewed addiction as a weakness of character, morality, and willpower. From my DARE classes in elementary school to my health classes in high school, I thought addicts were dumb. Why not just quit using? Use your willpower and tough it out. Even after I became an addict, this attitude lingered, despite all evidence to the contrary. I don’t think I believed that addiction really was “a

progressive illness” until Greg overdosed. He wasn’t weak, immoral, and he had more willpower than most people I knew. But he couldn’t break free of addiction.

After I finished the reading, I stared at everyone for several seconds. I had to explain what the passage meant to me. I didn’t want to tell them about Greg. Didn’t feel like they would understand or care. Most of them had lost several people to overdoses. Some of them had even left friends to die when they knew they were OD-ing. Greg deserved better for his memory.

“This reminds me of my younger sister.” I hadn’t thought about her at all until I mentioned it. She suffered from bipolar disorder as well but refused treatment. She was sick in every way a person can be. Physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual. Like me before I came here. I voiced the thought aloud and felt proud when Charon nodded and almost smiled. She, like Travis, was stern and adept at instilling fear into the clients. “I keep thinking that at least I know what’s wrong with me and I’m getting help. I may be sick but I’m trying to get better. And that’s what counts.”

I grinned cautiously as I returned to my seat, receiving whispers of approval from some of the older male and female clients. “Maybe you should have given her some coke so she could be in here with you,” Lindsey said and she and Sarah giggled. I wanted to hate them sometimes. But they were so young, so pretty, and so full of life. Looking back now, I realized that what I felt for them wasn’t so much friendship as lust and the old, gnawing need to belong. The same need that had followed me since I had been bullied in the first grade.

“Do you have any visitors coming this weekend?” I asked. I knew she wouldn’t. She didn’t have anyone who would even consider visiting her. I asked to remind her, to hurt in the same passive-aggressive way she used against me. A dead father, and abusive mother, and a son



in the foster care system, she had no one. Her eyes closed for several seconds and I reached out to hug her. It was wrong. Once again having a functional conscience shocked me.

“What about you?” She managed to ask it without any malice in her voice. She was a good actor.

“My dad and stepmom. I take my test tomorrow so I’ll be able to have visitors.”

I had called my dad a few days ago, on Friday during my counseling session. Sherlanda had read the list I had made of things I liked about myself and nodded. She went on for several minutes about how self-esteem was vital to staying clean. She explained that if I weren’t able to love and respect myself my motivation to lead a drug-free life would be next to nothing. I nodded along. It made sense. You don’t take proper care of something if you don’t care about it. I knew I cared about myself somewhat. But love? Even imagining loving myself felt crazy.

She had let me call my dad. I stood next to the long gray table where the archaic corded phone sat and dialed his number. It rang several times before he answered. Though I cannot recall the exact conversation—I think because I cried the entire time, drowning out most of what he said—I do remember sobbing apology after apology into the phone. He asked when he could come visit me and I told him the following weekend. Then, and this part is strikingly vivid in my memory, I told him I loved him. He wished me well and hung up.

Sherlanda allowed me to sit by her desk and cry for several minutes. To her credit, she had the wherewithal to remain silent. The last thing I wanted was anyone’s consolation. My dad wasn’t being cruel or cold. I had hurt him repeatedly. He had every right to react as he did. But that didn’t mean it didn’t hurt me as much as someone stabbing me in my eye with an icepick. I used up half her box of tissues before I was ready to return to group.

Now, I was both excited and terrified to see my dad for the first time in over a month.

“I don’t get any visitors either.” Sarah suddenly whispered. I waited for her to provide an explanation. Though both Lindsey and I spent plenty of time with her, we knew very little about her. I didn’t know anything about her family or where she was from. I knew her drug of choice, heroin, I knew that she was on a fistful of psych meds, I knew that she was bipolar. I knew that because of her meds she was constantly drowsy, constant napping. I knew she loved when I rubbed her back or let her lay her head in my lap while she napped during rec. But I didn’t know her.

“I’m sorry,” I replied when I realized she wouldn’t elaborate.

She shrugged and yawned. It didn’t seem to bother her. Perhaps the meds numbed her. Maybe that’s why she never complained about their side effects. Sometimes, as a teenager, I had become numb as a defense mechanism. No happiness, no depression, no rage. Nothing. It kept me alive but may have been worse than the emotions I worked to block out. The frequency of my self-injury had increased tenfold. How did Sarah live like that?

Just before morning, meeting ended Charon and New Girl stalked into the room. New Girl entered the room with her black, shiny designer heels shuffling over the carpet. Charon, dressed in her uniform of high-waist khakis and polo shirts, radiated rage. We were in deep shit.

“We’ve just finished conducting room searches,” New Girl said and I felt relieved. I didn’t have anything worth finding. I knew my roommates hide food and other contraband but I had no part in it. There was no way I would let them punish me for what they did while I read or slept. “It was amazing how much contraband and other illegal materials we found.” Just get to the point, lady. I wanted my cigarette. I still believed that this had nothing to do with me. That what I let happen around me didn’t affect me.

“We’re going to call people out to talk to about our findings. In the meantime, everyone needs to stay in the auditorium.” New Girl took a breath and licked her lips. Her mouth opened to continue when the obvious protests began.

“What about smoke break?” Robby, normally the best at deceiving the staff into believing he was working the program, shouted.

“Smoke breaks are cancelled until we get this taken care of. In fact, all of you are lucky we don’t just cancel them period.” Even Charon raised her eyebrows as New Girl made that last statement. The staff effectively used smoking privileges to keep us in line. If there were no more smoke breaks—ever—riots would erupt. Though it sounds ridiculous to riot over cigarettes, when you are coming off heroin or resisting the urge to snort a line, taking away cigarettes can be the tipping point between sanity and bat shit crazy.

No one said a word after the threat. At least not words loud enough for the staff to hear. Fatima and Sherlanda read off names as we shuffled to the auditorium. I expected to have time to get some packet work done. My name wouldn’t be called.

Ms. Fatima sharply called every girls’ name from Reentry. This was so not happening, I thought. I followed my roommates whose demeanor was relaxed. They knew they were caught so why worry about it. I didn’t do anything. I wanted to protest my innocence but couldn’t risk delaying my smoke break longer than it already was.

Fatima lead us to Reentry where she listed every single item she found. Food, flat irons and blow dryers that should have been checked at the nurses’ station, Q-tips, a set of nail clippers, and bag of instant coffee, and notes. Besides feeling irritation at no one sharing the Q-tips or nail clippers with me, I didn’t care about the list until the last item. Notes. I had notes. They weren’t signed but it didn’t matter. All one had to do was read them and the content alone

would be enough to write me up. I hadn't thought about the notes until that moment because I hadn't read them in weeks.

"And that is just the standard contraband. Anyone want to tell me what else we found that had every single one of you in serious breach of the rules?" Fatima's plump face scowled at us, reminding me of a partially squished orange. I knew my roommates had been hiding something. Their whispers conversations on occasion at night had alerted me to this. But I had never asked about it. If they didn't want to include me I figured, it wasn't any of my business. Everyone remained silent. Great guys.

"Lie. Why not. That's the addict way, right." Fatima reached into the pocket of her bright yellow poncho, the ugliest clothing item I had ever seen, and pulled out a cellphone. The shock on my face must have been overly obvious because Fatima laughed. "Trying to play dumb, Hall?"

I didn't get angry with others often, had primarily cowed, or respected the staff. But being accused of lying, when I was finally learning to be honest, enraged me. I didn't care about a smoke break as I replied, "I didn't know about the stupid phone. This is the first time I've even seen it." I spared no modicum of spite. I had done a lot of dumb things well here but I was not going to be called a liar, or blamed for something I didn't do let alone punished for it.

Fatima started to shout at me, emphasizing the word liar like it was the name Jesus during a prayer. I wanted for one of the other girls to confirm what I was saying. I tried to meet their eyes but one by one, they stared at the ceiling or out the nearest window. Never trust an addict I reminded myself before Tanya loudly cleared her throat.

Fatima turned her condensed blubbery face on her, ready to shout her down. I waited for Tanya to proclaim her own innocence and wondered if I could restrain myself from shrieking in

frustration when she did. “Kateri didn’t know. We didn’t talk on the phone until after lights out. And she was already snoring away by then because of her meds.”

I didn’t know who was more surprised, Fatima, or me. No one said anything for several seconds before several of the other girls confirmed what Tanya had said. I willed myself not to run across the room to kiss Tanya on the mouth. After I had essentially shunned her, she still stood up for me. I wasn’t sure if Lindsey would have done the same in this situation.

“Fine.” Fatima snapped. I didn’t expect an apology but could see her rage towards me lessen. I knew I was still in trouble because of the notes but at least I wasn’t caught with a cellphone. “Hall, who wrote those notes to you?”

I could have lied. It would have been so much smarter to lie. I doubted they could produce a handwriting expert to prove me wrong. When I muttered, “Johnathan G.” I started at the name. I had told the truth. No guilt or shame only a sad relief. Until I realized that not only was I getting myself in trouble but Johnathan too. Would it have been better to lie, to protect him? I didn’t know.

“Thank you for your honesty. I’m proud of you.” Fatima’s face softened and transformed back into its human form for an instant. Though I felt bad for Johnathan, I couldn’t help but feel pride. Fatima didn’t like me as a person and yet she was proud. I must have done the right thing. “Now before I let you go I need the razor you’ve been using to cut yourself.”

The elation vanished. I knew they would notice eventually. Like fish in an aquarium, the staff saw almost everything. Still, shock flickered across my face. Though, I wasn’t sure if it was shock at her discovering or the notion that I would actually give up my razor. “No.”

Fatima squared her shoulders and whipped her head around in a semicircle. For a moment, I envisioned it turning 360 degrees, recalling the movie *The Exorcist*. “I wasn’t asking.

I was telling, Hall. Your cutting is addictive behavior. You are stunting your recovery. Give it to me.” I shook my head no. It couldn’t. I knew it was addictive behavior because it was an *addictive* habit. I had periods of my life when I was cutting free. But, like a drug or drink, all it took was one cut to start another run. And once I started stopping was unbearably difficult.

“Fine. You made your choice so you are accepting the consequences.” Though she sounded angry, I thought I detected a hint of compassion. Maybe. “You can go back to the auditorium. And go straight there.”

“I will.” As soon as I entered the playroom I allowed myself to relax. I had escaped whatever horrible punishment the other girls would get. Though I was apprehensive about my own and Johnathan’s, I knew it couldn’t be as bad as the girls’ punishment could. After choosing a seat next to Lindsey, I opened my folder and started to work on my self-esteem packet. I thought things were finally looking hopeful.

“Want to buddy to the bathroom?” Lindsey suddenly asked. She had been staring at her nails, her pale eyebrows furrowed.

I nodded. We climbed up the large, carpeted steps until we reached the top where Francis stood. Her small but muscular biceps were threatening to rip through the blue polo shirt she always wore. A face aged by her former drug use, she appeared much older than her thirty some years. An ally to the clients she actually listened before condemning. “Where you girls off to?”

Lindsey breezily replied the bathroom and we walked by Francis with a nod and instructed not to be too long. Even before we entered the empty bathroom, I had a feeling Lindsey didn’t really have to pee.

“You know how you cut to make yourself feel better?” Though I never told her about my cutting, I made no effort to hide it when it was just the two of us.

“What about it?” I didn’t want to believe that she wanted to cut too. No. It had to be that she just wanted to talk me out of doing it.

“Can you show me how?” She grabbed my hand and led me into the larger stall, locking it behind us.

“Why? It’s not good. I just got in trouble because of it. Believe me, it’s not something you want to start.” I only spoke for my own benefit. Lindsey did what she wanted. Like most addicts, she didn’t know how to listen to advice. At least I tried.

“Because I’m upset. They found all the notes I wrote to Jason. And they’ll put a ban on us. I know it.” She went from controlled panic to sobbing hysterically in an instant. I hugged her to me tightly, rubbed my hands up and down her back, and kissed her forehead repeatedly.

“It will be okay. A ban is an obstacle but not one that you guys can’t overcome.” Though working around a ban to communicate was difficult, it wasn’t impossible. The staff wasn’t God. They didn’t see everything at every single moment.

She shook her head against me and continued to cry. I knew that pain. That inconsolable, breathtaking pain. I knew a way to take it away. It felt wrong to keep that from her. “I’ll give you my extra razor. You can cut your thighs. That way the only time staff will see it is during body searches.”

She pulled away from me slightly before kissing me. I kissed back surprised but eager. She was my friend and she was beautiful. “I love you. You are my best friend.”

“I thought Sarah was?” The two were nearly always together.

“No. I mean she’s cool. But she’s wacked. I love you. I wouldn’t be able to stay in this hellhole without you.” We kissed again. I took out the bundle of toilet paper from my bra and

unwrapped the razors. I gave her my spare, the one with the smallest amount of my blood on it. I had been tested for any diseases but I still felt bad giving her something with my blood on it.

She undid her pants and sat on the edge of the toilet seat, her entire body quivering. I dropped the razor into her open palm and waited. I didn't know why I wanted to watch. I just knew that I could not look away from her pale thighs. The thought of scars on them seemed horrible. I almost snatched the razor back.

"Can you do it with me? I'm scared." I hadn't felt the urge to cut until she asked. I unbuttoned my jeans and sliced several across my thigh. Lindsey's eyes widened and she smiled. Her hand steadied as she made one long cut along her left thigh.

It was deep. Deeper than I had cut since I was a teenager. Cuts that deep scarred too badly and bled too much. Lindsey watched the blood flow out and drip down her thigh onto the floor. I waited for her to grab the toilet paper, to wipe it up, to put pressure on the wound. She continued to stare.

"Fuck. That's too deep." I tore a bundle of paper off the roll and threw it on the floor before stepping on it. The last thing I needed was someone to come in and see two seats of feet and a puddle of blood. Then I grabbed another wad and pressed it against the wound. "Don't cut that deep. Ever. Again. It's going to scar you for life. I know." I didn't mean to sound so angry. She didn't know. It was my fault. All of this was my fault.

After a few minutes the bleeding ceased, leaving the last layer of toilet paper caked onto the wound. I waited for Lindsey to yell at me, to flip out at the huge blemish on her otherwise perfect body. Instead, she looked like I imagined she would after shooting up. Euphoric, blank stare, empty of thought or emotion. "Thank you, girl." She wrapped the razor in toilet paper and handed it back to me. I would put it in in a sanitary napkin and throw it away later. Though I



regularly had unprotected sex with johns, friends, and boyfriends, I balked at exchanging blood. I never shared needles or razors. Logically I knew I could contract diseases like HIV from both blood and semen. And yet somehow blood always seemed scarier. Dirtier.

I watched her gingerly pull up her pants. “Are you going to be alright?” Instead of an answer, she hugged me and left the bathroom. I made sure the blood was cleaned up. Then I stared at myself in the mirror. I hoped my reflection would explain what had just happened to me. I helped my friend by hurting my friend. Should I feel guilty? I almost asked the question aloud. If I thought I would actually get an answer I would have.

The next morning, things seemed to be strangely serene. I expected the yelling, disgust, and rage from the day before to have carried over. Entering morning meeting I was torn between sitting with Tanya or sitting with Lindsey. I didn’t want to offend Lindsey. But what Tanya had done deserved something. I didn’t have much to give her, or anyone for that matter, but I could sit with her. Lindsey would have to understand or throw her annoying yet beautiful hissy fit.

“Yoyo, girlie,” Tanya sang. She tightened her ponytail and patted the seat next to her as I approached. She her hand slowly moved across her notebook. A letter. Her letters reminded me of the kind from movies set in the 1800 or 1700s. They were long, full of rich details, multiple emotions, and put the modern day email to shame. Sometimes, at night or in the morning, she would sit on my bed and read me a few pages of her twenty to thirty page letters. I would lie there, barely awake, like a child during story time. The sound of her voice cradled me as she drew me into her mind. I couldn’t imagine how she peeled back layer upon layer of her consciousness and placed it on paper. I would be utterly terrified at what I would find buried down there.

“Thank you for telling the truth.” The words sounded flat and hollow. The sincerity I felt, the love, the relief didn’t find their way into the sentence. Though I had always considered myself a very empathetic and compassionate person I could rarely convey this with spoken words. Give me a pencil and paper, though, and I was eloquent. For years, I wondered about this strange paradox. Only recently have I realized how much like my father I am. Though he cares and loves, he never had any words to articulate it. As a child, I assumed if people never said they loved you, than they didn’t. Simple, faulty-logic that would ruin my relationship with my father for years.

“It’s no problem. I wouldn’t let my friend go down for no reason. Besides, you’d do the same.” I nodded. Though I didn’t know it then, I would return the favor and then some in our time at Gaudenzia. It wouldn’t be until we were both released that I would recognize the unhealthiness of our friendship.

Tanya handed me several pages of the letter she was working on and whispered, “Read.” I gladly accepted the distraction from the boredom of waiting for the meeting to start. I had finished almost two pages when Tanya elbowed my shoulder urgently.

I handed her the pages before looking up to see most of the counselors as well as the house manager on duty, Francis, standing at the front of the room. My stomach contorted into intricate knots. I tried to undo them, assuring myself that I hadn’t done anything so wrong to be worried. But I might as well have been trying to undo an Eagle Scout’s work for how skillfully the knots were formed.

Charon announced that because of the findings the searches revealed more than half of the clients had been placed back to the beginning of Orientation. She explained that a list had been posted on the bulletin board out in the hallway. The clamor that erupted as soon as she

finished speaking left my ears aching and a headache developing. Tanya, who hadn't done any Orientation work to begin with, simply shrugged her shoulders and went back to writing. After repeated threats of cancelling smoke breaks, everyone finally quieted and the meeting began. However, I doubt anyone, myself included, could tell you a thing of what anyone read or discussed during it. I wondered if the staff had made the announcement at the beginning of the meeting as opposed to the end to further the punishment. Like a parent who instructs a child to go to her room and wait for her spanking, the staff must have known that thinking about the ramifications of the punishment was in and of itself punishment.

When the meeting ended, we moved like terrified buffalo towards the door. I tried to find Lindsey, knowing she needed my support more than Tanya. I saw her already through the doorway and headed towards the list. Impatient to find out my fate and get to her, I bit down on my tongue until a trickle of blood started. Gradually I moved along with the herd to the board. The list was two-and-a-half sheets of paper long. Andy, Lindsey, Sarah, Tanya, every other girl in Reentry, Jason, and Johnathan. I read down the list, feeling more and more hope that my name would not be on it. It wasn't until the last sheet of paper that I saw my name.

"Are you fucking kidding me?" I hadn't shouted in the presence of staff my entire time in rehab until that moment. I looked around for a staff member to scream at, someone to take my mammoth amount of rage out on. All the staff members wisely waited by the auditorium, supervising each of our personal mental downs. Everyone around me shouted profanity with the ease of a child grabbing candy at a parade. The staff wouldn't do anything until after smoke break I realized. I guess they were not particularly suicidal today.

"Bullshit. I didn't do anything nearly as bad as use a cellphone. Why am I getting punished the same way?" I shouted, though no one listened. As a child, I had learned that

whining about fairness in a fundamentally unfair world was pointless. Still, just because it wouldn't do anything didn't mean it didn't feel good. So I cursed. Louder than anyone around me. I bit my tongue again and turned my hands into fists. I hated this place. I hated the stupid rules. I hated that no matter how hard I tried it wasn't good enough. From reading AA/NA literature, I knew bitterness and self-pity were emotions that never lead addicts in any good place. Still, hadn't I earned the right to indulge in them? I practically lived in them on the outside. In a sad, demented way, I realized I had missed them.

"I'm going to leave." I wasn't sure who first shouted it. But once uttered the phrase spread through the crowd quicker than the flu in a daycare. Everyone started muttering it as the staff directed us out for a smoke break. Everyone that is but Tanya, John, and I. Unlike other smoke breaks where we divided into our various cliques, the majority of us congregated together by the picnic tables. I sat beside Lindsey as she debated leaving. She and Sarah would hitch hike out of state, away from their probation officers and the prison that awaited them if caught. They would shoot up until everything was okay again. I knew neither would leave. Knew both were too scared of going back to prison to simply march out that front door. Still, I wrapped my arms around their shoulders and tried to placate them.

When everyone had taken a seat in the group room, Francis asked who wanted to leave. As almost the entire room rose, Francis pulled a roll of garbage bags from behind her back. "I hope you all realize that you'll throw your things in a garbage and be on your own getting to wherever. And we will call all of your probation or parole officers. You may get high a few times before the cops pick you up and put your ass back in prison. Is that worth it?"

Several people sat down. The ones that remained standing looked at each other uncertainly.

“You messed up and you got punished. Running from the consequences of your actions is addict behavior. So if you want back on that street to OD come forward and get your bag.” She held the bags at arm’s length and waited. Only two clients, both males, plodded up to her. They took the bags without looking at her. My self-pity and anger suddenly seemed dumb. I may have been treated unfairly but at least I was clean. And not in jail. And alive. Those two guys would be neither. Eventually, even the perfect high has a crash. It didn’t matter how pissed I was at the staff. For me the crash, the consequences, the bottom of using would always be rape. Even as I write this, I still struggle over the conflicting emotions of horror and gratitude when I recall May 5, 2010.

## Chapter 11

*“Honor your father and your mother, that your days may be long in the land that the LORD your God is giving you.” – Exodus 20:12*

He didn't love her. Or so she fiercely believed. Sometimes she would mention this to the rare close friend. Her friends would believe she was simply griping the way they did after a grounding. They would point out the clothes his money bought her, the food, the house she lived in, the cable TV. They knew all those things had to equal love. Though she knew these things must have meant something. But that something wasn't love. No. Hugs, kisses, high fives, pet names, worrying about if she dated, and conversations longer than two sentences. These things, the thing her friends experienced every day from their fathers, equaled love. She wanted him to call her “his princess.” She wanted him to hug her when he arrived home from work. She wanted him to worry about boys, to pretend to plot creative ways to destroy them if they ever hurt his baby girl. She wanted him to *want* to know about the musical she was in, how band and choir practice went, and if she had written anything new. He was a father that was always there, supported his children without ever really being there.

When she started cutting herself, she wanted him to do something about it. Sure, he told her to stop. Once, he even came into her room and used a soft, human voice to tell her not to do it anymore. But he didn't do anything. And, ironically, unlike most crazy people she actually knew she was crazy. She figured it must be a good sign that, at 14, she wasn't so far gone not to realize cutting yourself with a razor blade was incredibly twisted. That didn't stop her from doing it, though. No. She felt a depression that tore apart her soul (she imagined her soul as small, charred black nub. Stripped away of any happiness) every waking moment. The cutting allowed her to live. She thought about death constantly. She even prayed sometimes, as her eyes

closed, to not wake up. Still, the cutting served as her least suicidal gesture. Without it, the pain would drive her to hang herself from a shower rod.

She had felt miserable most of her life. However, this depression began at age 12. That was the first time she asked her mom and dad for help. The first time they denied her access to a counselor or psychiatrist. The first time her mother brushed her sadness, suicidal proclamations, and self-injury off as a passing phase fueled by hormones. She had thought it unsettling that any adult, let alone her mother, could know less than a sixth grader.

After two years, her depression did nothing but blossom into a large thorn on a dead rose bush. The last time she had asked for help she asked her father in private. His response that he would talk to her mother made the shower rod seem incredibly appealing. She knew that one way or another her mother would assure that she never talked to any mental health professional. Surprisingly, her mother agreed to let her mention “the cutting” to their family doctor. She had a urinary tract infection that needed treated. The doctor asked her a few questions before leaving the room. Her mother instructed her that the doctor would not understand “her problem” and that she should “wait for another time.” She knew there wouldn’t be any other time.

Eleven years later she will start to delve into that broken space in her life known as childhood. She will have so many questions. Why did her mother not get her help? Did she honestly believe that a teen slicing her arms up was normal? Did she think writing and talking about suicide didn’t merit professional help? She will answer some of these questions herself. She will discover that her mother was just as sick as she was. In emails from relatives, she will dig up a family history of mental illness, pain, and lies. She will realize that her mother was too sick to help herself let alone anyone else. She will have a moment of numbing rage before

slipping into compassion. She remembers that tired saying, “The blind leading the blind” and wonders how it happens.

I didn’t know how to warn my dad not to visit me. A letter would reach him after the fact. Phone privileges disappeared the second someone on the treatment team decided I messed up too many times. I felt guilt, shame, and loads of stupidity knowing my father would show up to see me only to be turned away. I loathed myself for treasuring my crutch of cutting over advancing my recovery. I spent over two weeks believing this. Though explaining to people why they are being punished seemed like common sense, not one staff mentioned it to me. It would not be until a spontaneous counseling session with Charon that I learned I was demoted because of the notes from Johnathan.

That Sunday, as visiting hours approached, I thought about cutting. Stupid. Cutting caused this. At least my dad wouldn’t see it as “addictive behavior.” No. It would seem normal. Maybe even make sense to him given the situation. I looked around the group room. *2012* played on the TV. Besides the special effects, the movie had little redeeming qualities. Liz, a new girl and my bunkmate, made out with Zach in the far right corner. Zach, the rehab’s class clown. Zach, the pothead and pot dealer who thought everything in here was a hysterically funny joke. I shook my head. Liz could have chosen better. A lot better. It wasn’t my business, though.

I looked back down at the Orientation work in my lap. I had already finished and turned in the Serenity Prayer. Currently I worked on the Gaudenzia Philosophy. As I finished the first paragraph of my thought about it, I sighed. It felt frustrating to waste time working on the same thing over again.



“Not having fun?” John asked. Though I sat by him we hadn’t spoken since the movie started. He worked feverishly on his Orientation work. The sooner he finished it, the sooner he could see his daughter. Or so he hoped. From the little he had mentioned about his ex-wife, they were not exactly on any kind of good terms.

“Oh, loads of fun. I can hardly sit still I’m having such a freaking good time.” I grinned and forgot about cutting.

“I thought so. This place is like a damn amusement park,” John replied before holding his hand up to me for a high five. I slapped it lightly and laughed. Sarcasm may be a barrier to real communication but it sure felt good.

For a minute, we sat in silence. Not the awkward silence that I often felt when getting to know someone, though. Instead, it felt like a comfortable break. A commercial break at the end of a scene instead of in the middle of a conversation. “Can I ask you something?” I nodded, anxiety creeping in. “How’d you get hooked on drugs? I mean, you seem kind of like me. Middleclass background instead of running the streets at age six.”

My shoulders relaxed and I turned in my chair to face him. An easy question. A question I heard before. A question answered in a sentence. “My mother died when I was 18 and after that it was a snowball effect straight to hell.” I meant to keep my voice light. Meant to laugh slightly towards the end of the sentence. But without drugs, stuffing my emotions away didn’t work 99 percent of the time. My voice broke and a few tears spattered my cheeks.

“I’m sorry.” John placed his hand over mine. I flinched but didn’t pull away. He hadn’t asked for further explanation. Many people would have. People died every day. If all people became a drug addict because they lost a loved one the world would be destroyed. Never mind

that grief affects everyone differently. People only saw my weakness, my failure. But John somehow understood.

Again the sweet pause before I changed the subject. “What do you think of this movie, man?” We spent several minutes laughing at the film. I hadn’t realized how much I missed just hanging out with someone. With Lindsey, Sarah, and Tanya I always seemed to be taking care of them. I didn’t want to be a caretaker. I wanted to be cared for.

“Hall.” Fatima shouted from the doorway. What did I do? Panic started in my heart before flowing to each of my limbs. I just wanted a break. I waved goodbye to John and left the room. I walked slowly, heavily, like a prisoner about to be executed.

When I reached her she didn’t say anything but keep walking. Assuming she expected me to follow her, I quickened my step. We left the playroom, went by the ramp, through the set of double doors, and arrived at the nurses’ station. My panic glided into shock. My dad and stepmom waited against the wall next to the station. When they saw me, they smiled. Though I didn’t even know if I was allowed to, I rushed to my dad. We hugged. And perhaps for the first time in my life I actually felt him hug back. Though age had collided with him, I still felt the murmur of strength in his embrace. When we broke apart, I turned to Chris. Though we had our differences, I appreciated her presence. I gave her a light and quick hug.

Fatima motioned with her head for me to follow her into the detox wing. “I am letting you visit with them today,” she began.

“Thank you so much,” I interrupted, briefly forgetting the dynamics of power.

“It is not for your benefit. Your folks drove an hour to see you. They are nice, caring people. I am not turning them away because of your poor judgment.” I nodded. The reminder of my failings stung but I knew she was right. “I think you should let this visit motivate you to

focus on your recovery instead of anything else.” Again I nodded, my head bobbing yes rigorously. I felt such gratitude towards her I would have hugged her if she’d have let.

When I walked back out and saw my dad, I realized there was so much to say. Maybe too much to say in the few hours we had together. “You look very well,” Chris said the first to speak as we headed through the double doors. Clients could take visitors downstairs to the basement meeting room or outside to the courtyard. Because I could smoke outside during the visit I opted for outside.

“Thanks.” I wasn’t sure what Chris meant by that. Was I better looking now than before rehab? I certainly didn’t notice any extra hotness when I looked in the mirror.

She must have seen my confusion as we stepped outside. “You look healthier. Before, when you were using you did not look well. One could see that you were ill.” That made sense. I had no idea how sickly I must have looked well using. The only thing that had mattered than was the drugs and drinking.

We walked around the courtyard several times, bypassing rain puddles and drifting away from other families’ conversations. Small talk ruled. My dad told me about my sister’s high school graduation, how my brothers were doing in school, and how the cats were still peeing on the clean laundry. I explained rehab life. The rules, the groups, my friends. I didn’t mention Johnathan. With the walking and the sun just past its highest point, I decided the truth was preferable to the heat and sweat. I took it off and we stopped. The scars and scabs, and more recent cuts covered both my arms. Chris look horrified. My dad pushed his glassed up his nose and started walking again. I stated the obvious. I coped by cutting. I promised them both I was trying to cut down.

We walked in silence save for the humming of insects and the hushed conversations of the three other families roaming the yard. What to say? They both knew something had happened to me. But how to say it? Finally, Chris broke the small talk to ask me what I did for fun here. My dad and I laughed simultaneously at the incongruently of the situation and the question. Chris, familiar with the culture gap, sighed and rolled her eyes.

We sat down at the picnic table in the shade and I showed them some of my less morbid poems. One of them, though written in the third person, was clearly about rape. I put the other three on top of it and waited. They weren't long poems. The time between the first one and the last one couldn't have been more than five minutes. And yet those five minutes felt longer than any time out I had endured as a five year old.

Finally, they reached the last one. Though I long since lost that poem, it described a young woman who was raped and then murdered in the woods. I poured details into the murder, bringing her stabbing and then bleeding out to life. I had survived my rape, yes. But a part of me died. "On May 5 I was raped because I got too high and drunk to get home on my own. This guy said he'd give me a ride and well..." My dad nodded. I didn't have to finish. I couldn't finish. Maybe someday, years from now, I imagined, I would tell him everything that happened that night. If he wanted me to. But now, it was enough that both of us knew I had been hurt.

I hadn't expected my dad to show an outpouring of emotion. It wasn't him and for the first time in my life, I was grateful. "These poems are all very good. They're rough drafts yes, but good." He slid them back across the table to me and as he did so, he briefly clasped my hand. An insignificant gesture to anyone that didn't know my dad, that hadn't grown up with only a handful of hugs from him ever. I wanted to cry but felt I had to be strong. I had no idea of what it

was like to be a parent, didn't want to more the most part. But it wasn't difficult to assume that hearing that your child was hurt wounded you in some way.

Small talk again. I laughed as I explained about the Awareness Chair. Chris talked her yoga classes. She was the most flexible old woman I had ever met. I asked again about Caroline's graduation. My dad described it in detail for the second time, no trace of annoyance in his voice. I wondered if he understood my regret. I had left my sister, my best friend for our entire lives until that point, three years ago. Our mother had just died and I ran. And now I wasn't there for her on the biggest day of her life to date. I knew I would regret not seeing her walk for the rest of my life.

Before any of us were ready, visiting ended. My dad left me with a cartoon of my Pall Malls, a notebook, and extra pens. I hugged Chris lightly, still unable to look at her without seeing the absence of my mother. I clung to my dad for several seconds breathing in his aftershave. So much wreckage from our past. As a child, I never understood anything but the pain and anger that polluted our family. Now, after making my own barrel of mistakes, I realized my dad made mistakes. And if he made mistakes, he was not perfect. He wasn't God, he wasn't all knowing. He was just a man. He was human. I started at the obviousness of this. Still, as children our parents were gods.

After I Ms. Steph searched, I entered the group room and once again faced the dilemma of who to sit with. Lindsey or Tanya. Why did I have to choose? Why couldn't people grow up and get along? "Over here," Lindsey shouted. I glanced at Tanya and she waved and smiled. Maybe I could please everyone, I thought.

"Rub my shoulders for me pretty please?" Lindsey said her voice a little too high for normal. She turned in her seat to face her back to me.

I started to massage her, staring out the window, for once not having any heads to obscure my view. No heads. “Where is Sarah?” Though she tended to simply fade into the background, I felt ashamed not to notice her absence. If the situation were reversed, I would certainly hope someone noticed I was gone.

“She’s gone,” Lindsey whispered, her voice trembling slightly.

“What do you mean she’s gone?” I knew the answer but didn’t want to believe it.

“She left. They were going to write her up and put her in the Awareness Chair for sleeping. She flipped the fuck out and left.” I waited for Lindsey to cry. They took her shadow, drove her away with their lack of understanding of medicine side effects. Instead, Lindsey seemed merely angry. Had she really cared about Sarah?

“That’s awful.” I felt anger towards this system, a system that seemed to have somehow forgotten the human element in all this. But Sarah chose to leave. If she had really wanted to stay clean, she wouldn’t have left. It was harsh but the truth. I would miss running my fingers through her hair and imagining touching her breasts. But she made her choice. “Are you going to be okay?”

“I’m fine. Just pissed. You’re my new BFF, girl.” And she really did seem fine. If I left or was kicked out, would she so easily replace me? She didn’t ask about my visit. I pretended it was Sarah’s leaving that distracted her. But even then, I knew I was lying. Addicts are adept at lying to others but masterful at deceiving themselves.

“My visit went good,” I muttered. Even if Lindsey didn’t care, I needed to tell someone about it.

“That’s nice. Did you tell your old man that you were raped?” I flinched at the word, at the casual way she said it. She sounded as if she were talking about a dinner date.

“Yeah. I had too. My family has too many secrets as it is. I couldn’t add one more.” I knew I had done the right thing. A difficult, terrifying thing. I waited for the pride I knew I should feel. It didn’t arrive. Instead, I felt relief. I didn’t have to hold this secret in, cope with it alone.

She never told anyone. It happened years ago, when she was maybe four or five. At eight years old, she considered herself beyond it. Beyond him. She told herself that she had bigger problems to worry about. She attended an almost all white Catholic school, a school she nicknamed hell. She doesn’t realize at first that her skin sets her apart. Insulated in her mixed family, she doesn’t see race when looking at people. She doesn’t think of her mom as white or her father as black. They are simply her parents. But that changes after only a month at Saint John the Baptist in Indiana.

The white girls, the same ones she envied for their straight hair, form playgroups that invariably excluded her. The white boys teased her every day. Fat. She was heavy for her age and ashamed of this. The boys acted as if they read a thesaurus to find synonyms for fat. She began to hate school. One day, when she had spent the night awake to avoid nightmares, she decided she cannot go to school. She tried to fake illness, begged her mother to let her stay home for just one day. But her mother knew her daughter, knew when she was really sick and when she was feigning. When both her parents sentence her to a day of torture, she still refused. She hid in the bathroom, crouched down beside the toilet seat. She cried and hugged herself because she knew no one else would

When she refused to move her mother appears with a metal cooking spoon. She didn’t warn the girl before she began to beat her. The pain that exploded from her head turned her cries

into screams. Get up, get up, get up, her mother repeated. She wonders if she could die this way. She didn't think having her head beat in would be so terrible.

She refused to get up at first. She would rather endure the physical pain than the bullying of her classmates. Then, because she hated when her mother was angry, she got up. She was shaking. Snot and tears covered her face and white school shirt. Her mother cleaned her up and handed her a fresh shirt. She went to school that day with goose eggs sprouting up all over her head.

She sat and class and touched them, counted them one by one. Sister Grace is teaching math, handing out worksheets and yelling at students. She hates Sister Grace. She reminds her too much of home. Once, she tore apart a boy's notebook with hands. Her face had been redder than a strawberry and contorted in rage.

Sometimes she wished she could tell someone about what happened. She may be young but she saw the connection between her nightmares, her fear, and what he did to her. She didn't think about it often but it was always there. It fueled the dreams of being kidnapped, or eaten alive slowly, or driven into the ocean to drown. He was her doctor. She knows this partially fueled her hesitation to tell. She didn't really know what a doctor is supposed to do and not supposed to do. She couldn't be sure that if she told she would simply be called an idiot. She already felt like an idiot most of the time.

She remembered her parents weren't in the room. She remembered the toothpick he chewed on and the crackers he stuffed into his mouth. When he talked he spat them out in little, soggy pieces. She remembered that he smelled like stale crackers and sweat. She recalled him instructing her to take off her clothes. She had never been naked in front of anyone outside her family. She remembered the crinkling of the paper over the exam table as she laid down. She



could still feel his hands softly stroking her shoulder while she tried to cover her privates. She remembered him telling her not to, remembered him shoving his hand there in place of hers. He touched her there, and grabbed her already growing breasts. She developed early, needing a bra by the first grade. She remembered how he made her flip over and coughed some of his partially chewed crackers onto her. She remembered the roughness of his hands when he massaged her butt. She recalled that when it was finally over he had met with her parents and her in his office. He asked her to ride the wooden rocking horse he kept in the corner. She remembered that she didn't want to, that she hurt down there, but she was too afraid to say no. She always hated rocking horses after that.

She will wonder for years after that why she had only seen him once. Why, if her parents didn't know what he did, did they select another pediatrician? She struggled with that answer for years until, shortly before this school year, she found what she thought was an answer. It had been her fault. That was why she had felt dirty afterwards. Her parents knew what happened and were too ashamed to take her back. She fell into the gaping hole of self-blame.

## Chapter 12

*“For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us.” – Romans 8:18*

“Can you tell me some of the emotions and thoughts you had during the rape?” my counselor asked. It was my fourth appointment at the rape crisis center. Up until this point, we had primarily danced around the rape itself. Focusing on my concerns with rehab and my battle to end self-injury, we let the rape sit in the empty flower chair beside us, waiting patiently for its turn to talk. I sipped my coffee and played with the drawstring of my purple shorts. I didn’t really want to talk about the rape. I wanted to talk about John. I wanted to gush about the flowers he picked me. No guy had ever given me flowers besides my father.

“Fear. Helplessness,” I whispered. I twirled the drawstring around my finger and took several deep breaths. “And I thought he would kill me. At first, I was afraid of it. But when he...” I couldn’t say it. I didn’t know why but I was most ashamed of the fact that he sodomized me. I had never had anal sex, never wanted to have it. And to experience it for the first time as rape would ruin that sex act for me forever.

“I know it’s hard, Kateri. But you don’t have to be afraid or ashamed to share things with me. You know that, don’t you?” she asked. She wore a pink blouse with large, white buttons down the front. It was gorgeous, something I would have shoplifted in my life pre-rehab.

“When he started sodomizing me I didn’t think it would be so bad. To die I mean. And I had disbelief. You know things like that happen but you never think it will be you. And sometimes I still can’t believe it. I want to know why and how he could have done that to me.” I set my coffee on the small round table on the left side of my chair. My hands were shaking. I didn’t feel staining the furniture or burning myself by spilling coffee. I knew she couldn’t tell me

why. I wondered if even Bill could tell me. It was easy to think he had planned the rape. But something told me it hadn't crossed his mind until he got me alone. Maybe it was just easier to pretend that we were both just in the wrong place at the wrong time.

I grabbed my journal off the floor, the one she had gave me with bright colors and flowers. Something so beautiful to write about something so ugly. "Can you read what I wrote this week? I can't talk about it." My heart was beating at an uncountable pace and felt as if a ton of concrete had fallen on it. A panic attack. I didn't want to just shut down, wasting a session. It hurt to pull the words out. Like dragging the razor across my skin, it stung and took my breath away. The sharp push, pressure, and the sudden knowledge that he was in me. The realization that he was in complete control over my body.

I had written several pages since our last appointment. I wrote down random details of the rape itself. I described the entire day leading up to when I got into his car. Ivan bending me over in the bathroom. The shame I had kept all but undetectable with each beer or shot. The confusion at closing time. The insane trust I had placed in Ivan. The smiles Bill and I exchanged over talks of Philly and drugs. The pictures of his blue-eyed boy and girl. The fear squirming around beneath my intoxicated brain. The morning after and wanting to die. Picking up the phone, calling rehab, and not really knowing why.

I stared at the off-white ceiling while she read. Waiting. Waiting for her to finish. Waiting to heal. Waiting to learn how to live life on life's terms.

"It wasn't your fault," she said when she'd finished.

I nodded. I didn't know what she wanted me to say. Logically, I knew it wasn't my fault. I hadn't asked to be raped. I had made my lack of consent abundantly clear. But that part of all of us that doesn't function on logic, blamed me for it.

“You need to know that. It doesn’t matter that you had sex with Ivan. It doesn’t matter that you have a substance addiction. It doesn’t even matter that you got in his car. Understand?”

She placed my notebook on my lap and fixed her brown eyes on me.

“I guess. I mean I know everything you’re saying makes sense. But believing it is another story.” I grabbed the two arms of the chair and squeezed.

“Deep, slow breaths, Kateri.”

It took several minutes for me to come out of the panic attack and climb out of the flashbacks. But I did it. I did it without screaming hysterically or slicing up my arm. After setting up an appointment time for the next session, I hurried out of her office for a cigarette. I watched the outside world unfold before in the parking lot and surrounding stores while waiting for Travis to pick me up. People got in and out of cars, heading to work, lunch, home, or maybe even to score some drugs. I puffed on my cigarette, staring at my shorts and realizing I hated the color. I loved purple but for shorts, it was ridiculous. How had I even gotten them? I couldn’t recall whether I had bought them, stole them, or borrowed them without any intention of returning them. Whatever the case I had to be high to have thought they would look good.

Sodomy. It was humiliating. That’s why it haunted me more than the vaginal rape. And the shock of it. Things weren’t supposed to go up there, not for me. Only out. But I was making progress. I felt the panic and him inside me without taking it out on myself. I didn’t exactly feel pride but rather something akin to its second cousin. I couldn’t quite name it.

Travis pulled up to the curb in the rehab’s green van and waved. I took three long drags of my Pall Mall before stabbing it out and throwing the butt in the garbage. “How did it go today?” he asked waiting for me to find the rock station I liked and to turn the volume up.

“Difficult but good.” I buckled my seat belt and stared out the window as he navigated us out of the parking lot.

He nodded and smiled. “Good.” Though I knew, he would be glad to listen and offer whatever help he could I remained silent for the ride back to Gaudenzia. Our relationship consisted of a few words and smiles. I didn’t want to change that just yet.

Later, that day John and I lingered in the hallway outside the cafeteria. The other clients plodded their way towards and then down the steps, parting around us as we goofed off. John chased me in small circles, long arms pulled into his body, giving me a small advantage. Like a couple of second graders playing tag I dodged his touch, laughing. I had divided my smoke break time that day between Lindsey and John. I had mentioned that I had had a counseling session and how hard it had been, leaving the word rape pointedly out. He had put his hand on mine and leaned down to whisper in my ear. I waited for words of comfort that would accomplish nothing. Instead, his tongue flicked out and swiftly ran from my ear lobe to the cartilage. If I hadn’t bitten down on my lip, I would have moaned. Then, before I could sort out how I felt about his inappropriate move, he gave me a wet Willy. I punched him.

Now, as he wrapped his arms around me, yanked me to towards him, and then tickled me, I savored our friendship. It was different then Lindsey or Tanya. He was present, he listened, and he cared about me beyond his own needs. Or at least it seemed that way. He continued to tickle me as wriggled in his arms for several more moments before we both were brought back into our anything but funny reality.

“I’m pulling you up, girl,” Bernard, snapped. He leaned heavily on his cane, his only middle-aged frame resembling that of my 80-something year old grandfather’s only much, much skinnier.

“We were just playing around,” John protested. He dropped his hands to his sides and quickly caught up with Bernard on the stairs.

I stood there watching the two men, unable to make out their words. John’s hands cut through the air swiftly. His brow furrowed at Bernard’s repeated tapping of the Pull Up log. I knew we would be written up but it was poignant to see John trying to protect us, protect me.

“He wants your pussy, girl.” I didn’t have to turn around to know it was Lindsey. She came up behind me and took my hand in hers. I rolled my eyes and laughed awkwardly. I didn’t want to think about sex. And I especially didn’t want to think about sex in relation to John. Not after talking about Bill only hours ago. John made me smile when I didn’t have any reason to. That was enough for me now.

“No he doesn’t. And even if he did we are just friends.” Sternness punctuated the words and Lindsey shrugged. I quickened my pace to leave her several steps behind me.

By the time we had reached the group room, I had caught sight of John again. He leaned against the wall and job board, tapping his folder and notebook against his muscular but skinny legs. Tony was doing a group this evening and everyone seemed almost glad to file into the group room. With Tony, a former addict and client here, we knew we would get respect. I turned to go into the room when John whistled and motioned me over.

“Don’t worry about the Pull Up. I took care of it.” He swung his arms back and forth and smiled proudly.

My mouth fell agape for a moment, eliciting a chuckle from him. Bernard, called Papa by several of the younger female clients, was notoriously stubborn. He didn’t care about the jailhouse no snitching rule. After a lifetime of running on city streets, chasing a constant high from crack, he was in here to get clean and to hell with anyone else. “How?”

“Don’t worry about it, babe.” He said the word so naturally but the instant it left his mouth he cleared his mouth and ducked past me. I wanted to be irritated at the word. But it felt nice. It felt so different to have a man taking care of me for a change.

“Thanks. I...you’re really sweet.” I mumbled to his back before Tony tapped me on the shoulder and motioned me into the group room.

I waved at Tanya who sat playing with her hair by the heat register against the wall and sat down in the empty seat beside Lindsey. With Sarah, gone Lindsey and I were inseparable and everyone knew it. “Today’s group is going to be a little different,” Tony, said silencing the room with his baritone voice. He stood in between the two sections of chairs, a stack of papers in his hands. I leaned forward in my seat in Relapse Row to see what was on them but could only make out a large number three. I realized we had to be working on Step 3. A step I was decidedly flailing at.

The rape had made Step 1 obvious. Entering rehab required that I have at least a small belief that something greater than I could restore me to sanity. I knew I couldn’t get clean on my own, knew that something other than my own thoughts prompted me to call Gaudenzia. And yet when it came to Step 3, which was making “a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God as we understood Him,” I was stuck. I didn’t have any understanding of God that I could consciously trust my will in. The God of my childhood, the vengeful Catholic God I had learned to fear, was something I refused to surrender to. It would be akin to a mouse leaping into a mousetrap. I ceased believing in that god by the time I reached ninth grade.

And now? I believed there was some kind of god. But I felt very little trust or love for it. I could profess Step 3 until my throat was parched but until I found a god that loved me and I loved back it didn’t mean anything. Tony passed the worksheets out and I waited impatiently for

my copy. I stared at the large Step 3 on the page and the list of questions about your higher power. I winced at the thought of answering them.

She remembered sitting on the sofa and staring at the fake wood paneling. The whorls in the plastic panels almost looked real. Or at least real in the same way her entire life was. To her teachers she was the perfect student. Great grades and more extracurricular activities than one student should be able to juggle. But appearances were rarely reality. At age 13, she was only beginning to know these facts with intense intimacy. Sure, she had dated them for years. But only now was she becoming serious with them.

In hindsight, there had been plenty of moments where her true sexuality was present. But at the time, she had only known straight. She didn't know what gay was until she was in the sixth grade. And not until very recently did she learn what a lesbian or bisexual was. She threw this group of people under the heading of perverts and evil like her mother taught her, like her church instructed her.

She took her gaze from the paneling and shifted her position on the sofa, pulling her legs up underneath her. Her history textbook sat beside her, opened to a page about the Civil War. Normally she loved history, but that day she couldn't focus on the thick black lettering and bold headings. An image was forming at the furthest reaches of her mind, developing vividly and quickly as it continued to crawl its way to the forefront.

Her pen pal, Megan, naked. Her black hair let down out of its normal ponytail. Her skin all the paler against the long, thick hair. Her breasts large and round. Her nipples erect. Her crotch covered with a thin strip of black hair. Her legs spread wide open.



She imagined herself setting next to Megan on the sofa instead of the throw pillow and folded blanket. She was nervous, excited, shocked. She didn't know what she was expected to do. What two women did together was as foreign to her as a swingers' club etiquette. So she imagined herself staring at her for several minutes. She felt wetness between her legs and shifted on the sofa. She wanted to slip her hand beneath the waistband of her pajama pants and touch herself. Megan's breasts, her crotch, her pink, slightly puffy lips.

She heard her mother yell for her to go to bed. Megan vanished. Horror. Her hands began to shake as she realized the significance of her fantasy and her body's reaction. It was wrong to think about a girl that way. No. It was way beyond wrong. It was immoral. That word her mother tossed around while watching the news or discussing things about the Church. Sometimes gay rights issues would make headlines on Fox News. Her mother, as eager as a dog about to receive a treat, would begin expounding what the Bible said the second a commercial came on. She didn't remember her mother's exact words or those of the Bible for that matter. But the message remained. Loving someone of the same gender was evil, wrong, immoral, perverted. Being gay, lesbian, bisexual was the equivalent of being perverted, being shunned by God. God hated them.

She liked girls. She wanted girls. She was a pervert. God hated her. Her mother would hate her if she ever found out. She could never find out.

Her mother shouted at her from the kitchen again to get upstairs. Afraid that she would come out to the small, ugly den, and see her, somehow know what she had done, had become, she sprang off the sofa. She ran out of the den, her feet sliding on the wood floors, through the now dark living room, and mounted the narrow staircase. She felt the moisture between her legs as she climbed up to the second floor of the old farmhouse. It felt like a hot brand, undeniable evidence at what she was. But what was she?

Bisexual. The internet. Her family never talked about anything, least of all anything to do with sex. The internet became her guru. As the fantasies of girls increased, as she found herself lusting after the girls in her classes, she knew she needed answers. So she had Googled lesbian and bisexual, unsure which one she was. Bisexual. She liked boys. She liked boys. That was good. That was moral. But she liked girls. She was immoral.

The night after she discovered her sexual identity, she changed her prayers. Instead of praying for God to take away her depression or to simply just let her die as she had been, she added this line: “Dear God, please cure me of my bisexual perversion. Please forgive me. Please help me to be normal. And if I cannot be normal than please do not let me wake up tomorrow.” She prayed that prayer every night for two years.

The worksheet listed several examples of different addicts’ concepts of a higher power. The Christian God, the Jewish God, the Wiccan gods. I read them as Tony talked about his own experience. I couldn’t hear him. The worksheet was my entire world. Underneath the examples was a paragraph worth of empty lines to describe what my higher power was. The only God I had ever known was the Catholic God. A God who I had believed hated me for years. A God I felt impenetrable resentment towards.

“You have to finish the worksheet and turn it in before you can go on smoke break,” I suddenly heard Tony shout.

Fantastic. What was I supposed to write? I looked over at what Lindsey had written and grimaced. She described the Christian God. No help from her. I suddenly wished I sat next to Tanya. She was probably writing something about love as a higher power or the wind. Something strange, spacey, but safe.

“Do you need some help?” Tony asked. I looked up to see him staring down at my empty lines.

“I don’t know what or who my higher power is. I know there is one. But I don’t what or who it is. And I can’t just let myself go to something I don’t even really know. Let alone trust. I just don’t know.” I twirled my pen between my fingers impatiently. Waiting. Tony had an answer to everything addiction related. He could help me. He had to.

“Well,” he began and I barely suppressed a sigh. “I can’t tell you what to believe in. If I did, it wouldn’t really mean anything. You have to discover it yourself or you won’t have faith.” For a second I thought about crumpling the paper and shrieking in his face. Instead, I nodded and tried not to cry. Seeing the disappointment advertised all over my face, he offered, “Just write about your dilemma. I don’t expect you to figure something like this out in the next half hour,” he said.

I nodded, sighed, and relaxed my body against my chair. I filled the empty lines and, still not done, wrote below them, around them, and on the next page. I hadn’t realized just how angry with God I was until then. I hated him for taking my mother at only age 49. I hated him for making her suffer so damn horribly before she finally lost her fight. I hated him for allowing others to miraculously beat cancer but not her. I hated him for making me hate myself all those years for being bisexual. I hated him. I hated him. I handed my paper to Tony and hurried out, leaving Lindsey still in her seat, collecting her folder and pens. I knew what I had to do to find my higher power, to work through the steps, to stay clean, to fix myself. I had to make peace with my mom’s death. I had to forgive.

As I walked past the ramp, John fell in step beside me. “You okay?”

I smiled and punched him gently in the arm. “Yeah. Or at least I think I will be.”

“I think we could all say that,” he said and slipped his hand into mine for a few steps. I wanted him to hold me while I cried into his chest. Instead, I squeezed his hand. Outside, the normally sweltering June heat had given away to a warm but pleasant day. I light a cigarette and waved to John as he went to the pavilion to hang out with his clique of guys. I walked slowly to the empty picnic table that provided a view of the rehab and the large tree growing beside it.

Lindsey emerged from the building and glowered at me. I mouthed the word sorry and watched as she started doing laps around the courtyard alone. She would be over it by the time the break was over. I needed alone time to think.

I laid down on the table, my back against the rough wood, and stared up at the clouds and the tree. And I stared. And stared. I couldn't remember the last time I had simply watched the world. When I was a kid, I loved observing nature. I would sit out on the front porch, lay on the porch swing, flop down into the backyard grass, or press my face against a window and stare at everything. The clouds, the rays of sunshine, rain, snow, thunderstorms, grass, trees, leaves falling, and flowers. Everything held a wonder that nothing manmade could surpass. I wasn't sure when I stopped observing anything but my own small life. I could say that as a teen, the wonder faded, but it was still there. No. It didn't vanish until after I laid the rose on my mom's casket. I had turned, pulled my jacket around me, and walked through the rain back to the limo. I didn't realize it then, but I had buried a part of me with my mom that day.

Now, I saw the thin wisps of clouds slowly moving across the vibrant blue sky. I saw the sun shining above me to my right. I saw patch of trees to my right that separated the pavilion from the front of the courtyard. And to my left another tree that stood taller even than the building. It must have seen a lot in its lifetime. The birthing of Gaudenzia Crossroads and the faces of thousands of addicts who had come and gone in the program. Its trunk, though not a

terribly thick one, looked solid. Gnarled as it went up and up before sprouting into countless branches. From the branches, the green leaves swayed in the wind, thick and vivid. Their green was the true green, the green that every crayon aspired to be. People used the word beautiful to describe many things, some of which are actually horribly ugly. I had thought drugs were beautiful. The sight of a line of coke and a rolled dollar bill had been the definition of beauty.

I puffed on my cigarette and felt tears dribbling down my face. I was crying and I couldn't explain why. That tree, the clouds, the sun. They were more beautiful than any drug, person, or building. They rendered any words to describe them inadequate. I knew it was strange, maybe even crazy, but I knew that nothing evil, mean, or cruel could create such beauty. I didn't really know why exactly. I just felt it. It sat lightly in my heart at first before growing solid to prevent any denial. God created nature. I had no doubt about that. And a God that could create this beauty couldn't warrant my hate. I still couldn't describe my higher power in terms of a religion. And in fact, I never would. My God was nature, the creator of nature, and love. I could believe in that. I could trust that. I could love that.

"Sit up, Hall," shouted Ms. Stephanie.

I took a drag off my cigarette and sat up slowly. I smiled at her sneer and watched confusion appear across her insect-like face. I bowed my head, staring at my black and pink flip-flops, and prayed. "God, I turn my will and my life over to you. I know how much I've messed up. And I know I can't heal, can't clean up my mess without you. Be my guide," I silently thought. Ms. Steph blew her whistle, ending smoke break. I stared up at the tree once more before getting off the table. I remembered my sponsors telling me about the serenity a spiritual awakening would create. I knew such an awakening wasn't supposed to occur until after you

finished the 12 Steps. I also knew that life was too complicated to always be predicted. My heart had been closed, dead before. Now, it felt open. Alive.

Lindsey appeared beside me, a pout on her face. I knew I would be screamed at but I couldn't help it. I wanted to share the joy I felt. I leaned over and gave Lindsey a peck on the cheek. Her pout went away and we both tried to hide our laughing from Steph as she shrieked at us until we were out of earshot.

## Chapter 13

*They are to stand every morning to thank and to praise the LORD, and likewise at evening” – 1*

Chronicles 23:30

Gary, a gray-haired, soft-spoken house manager led the Gratitude Group outside. He even permitted us to smoke during the group, bending the rules. Technically the only time we were allowed to smoke was during smoke break. Even when outside on rec period you were expected not to light up. Naturally, not a single client that smoked followed that rule. However, on the rare occasion when we had groups outside most of us kept our packs in our pockets and fidgeted instead. It was the second week of June. I had been here about a month. Though I knew coming in that Gaudenzia had a long-term treatment program I did not intend to be part of that. I figured I'd spend my month here, then get out, and pick up the pieces of my real life.

I sat in between John and Lindsey, enjoying the attention I had been getting from both of them for the past week. Though Lindsey and I had our petty fights, I was beginning to genuinely view her as a friend instead of just a rehab companion. On the outside, she lived only about thirty minutes from me. I imagined us hanging out, watching movies, cuddling in her bed, and leaning on each other when sobriety became unbearable.

But John? I didn't know what if any place he might hold in my real life. He lived about 30 minutes from my small town. And he had goals, hopes for a future life that included success and sobriety. We had been passing each other notes for the last week, getting to know each other better than we ever could with the short conversations at smoke breaks or in between groups. He wanted to go back to school and become an electrician. He wanted to build his own house, with his own two enormous hands. And, though he already had a young daughter, he wanted to marry again and have more children someday. His future seemed so perfect, so defined.

Lindsey's, though hopeful, was hazy. She wanted to move back into her house and have a real relationship with Jason once they were both out. She even offered to let me move in with her if my dad didn't let me move back home. And she had a vague hope of getting her son back. When I prodded her for more information, like how she would support herself, Jason, or her son she flipped her blond hair back and shook her head. Still, Lindsey seemed safer than John did. I couldn't see myself being hurt by her. Physically or emotionally. My friendship with John grew a little each day while the fear I felt of my feelings towards him multiplied by ten. I looked at John and I couldn't help but see Jared.

Jared shoving me in Schiedy Park at 3AM after I had bought him a sub and a pack of cigarettes. Jared putting me in a headlock when I said no to giving him a blowjob. I knew we had good times. But I also knew that he was abusive, manipulative, and if I went back to him (and a small part of me still wanted to) the abuse would continue.

Gary stood up from his seat at the end of the picnic tables we had jammed together for group and said, "I'm going to read this short article I found last night. When I'm done, we're going to discuss it. And if I can't get people to participate in the discussion we'll have to go around the tables and each person take a turn. So work with me, alright, guys." Several clients nodded, some groaned, and a few cursed quietly. I smiled.

I liked Gratitude Group and I liked Gary. I didn't have the same familiarity with him as I did Tony, but his compassion toward the clients made up for it. I couldn't remember when exactly, but one night a week or two ago I had stumbled into the Reentry counselor's office crying. Vince, knowing that I was a cutter, had proclaimed, "If you're going to do it you might as well do it long ways and kill yourself. Get it over with already." I wanted to cut but I didn't want



to cut. I had hoped to find Charon in her office but instead Gary stood shuffling around paperwork on a desk. He dropped the papers and pulled up chairs for the two of us.

The exact words of the conversation are hazy in my memory. But the meaning behind them is unforgettable. He asked me what was wrong. I sobbed out the story with Vince, excluding only his name for fear of repercussions, and waited to be told I was indeed an idiot for self-injuring. Instead, he explained to me the strange logic behind the behavior. Cutting was an unhealthy way to self-soothe not an outcry for attention or a passive-aggressive form of suicide. Of course, I knew all this but to hear someone else, especially someone who seemed to function effectively in society, was different. I knew it wasn't helping to continue cutting; but I also knew that I wasn't any less of a person because I struggled with it. I left his office that night with a packet he had printed off about recovering from self-injury. I didn't know where he had found it or why someone hadn't given me it before. I had fallen asleep working on the packet that night.

Now, as Gary finished reading an article about a person who overcame a double amputation, I breathed in deeply the smell of cigarette smoke and pollen. I had never been grateful for very much growing up. I had only been able to see the numerous negatives. Even today, the awful overshadows the beautiful in my memories. But as I swung my feet back and forth under the table, I realized I was grateful. Grateful to breathe in the outside air, grateful to see the sky, the trees, the pen scribbles on the table. Grateful to be alive. Grateful to be in rehab. My heart lurched at the realization. Not too many months ago, I had vowed to die before going to rehab. How could I be grateful to be in one now?

Hands went up around me to comment on the article. I listened and nodded, only half-aware of what was said until John spoke. "I think the story isn't really so much about that guy as it is about finding the silver lining in any situation." He spoke around his menthol cigarette,

puffing and smiling. Gary nodded repeatedly, assuring John that that was exactly the point he intended to make.

Lindsey muttered, "Good so we can go take a nap now that that's cleared up." I glared at her before writing a quick note on the edge of her paper. "What's wrong?" She ignored the message and hastily crossed it out. She had seemed fine before the group. Her sudden sour mood wasn't typical of her. She always had a reason, no matter how insignificant, for her irritation.

Before I could write anything else, John had put his hand on my leg underneath the picnic table. I trembled under his touch, as much from pleasure as fear. I waited for him to move it, but he kept it there for what seemed like hours. Gary elaborated on what John had said. He explained that addicts often complained of life's unfairness. They used their "bad breaks" to keep the needle in their skin, the pipe to their mouths, or the straw to their noses. But what they, what I, didn't see was that everyone has had something negative happen in their lives. We pretended that our losses were the greatest. We assured ourselves that we were broken. Nothing or no one could save us. So why not marinate our brains in alcohol and drugs. But that story, of a man who went from running, standing on two feet, to not having a single leg spoke the truth. Suffering is part of the human condition. It is how we react to it that defines us as people.

When his explanation ended, Gary instructed us to write our own gratitude list. Again, I heard complaining from Lindsey. I gave her a pat on the back, hoping it would make her feel better until we were alone to talk. John's hand was still on my thigh. His grip went from friendly to sensual in an instance as he slid his hand inwards. I drew in a sharp intake of breath and used both my hands to lift his off. I wanted his hand there and wanted it as far away from me as possible. I didn't understand what any man wanted with me right now. I couldn't separate John from Jared from Bill. I looked up at John, expecting to see his disapproving stare. Instead he just

smiled and mouthed the words, “It’s okay.” But it wasn’t okay. I was so messed up. And he knew it, too. That was what baffled me the most about him. Any other man that knew me as well as he did would either trip over himself running away or use and abuse me until he got bored.

I cautiously smiled back at John and finally turned my attention to making my list. I smiled as I wrote down ten things. Ten things that only two months before I would not have even dreamed of being grateful for. My life, rehab, my family, my friends, my writing, my intelligence, my health, my personality, enrollment in college, and having a place to call home. I finished writing and read the list several times, my smile growing wider. I hadn’t smiled so much while sober since before my mother died. I had hated Gaudenzia. I had a list of complaints that could fill a notebook. And I still had those complaints but they were tempered by the positives. Maybe that was another reason we used. Because we didn’t know how to see the positives beneath the negatives.

I read my list aloud. When I reached the tenth thing, I realized I had forgot one. “I am grateful for my ability to have faith. Not just in God but in life in general. I can believe that something other than shitty things will happen in my life.” I saw Lindsey smile before shifting back into her grim mood. Gary didn’t object to my use of “shitty” but instead noted how far I had come. And John gave me the thumbs up sign. Then, as Tanya took her turn, reading a list about how grateful she was for her new friends (which I would later find out was a disguised reference to the fact that she slept with the majority of the male clients there), he started to write something on my paper.

It took up a large chunk of the corner of the page. Though I wanted to read it, I strived to focus on the end of the group. We were discussing the Serenity Prayer. And though, after more than two months here, we had long since dissected every facet of it, I was finally realizing that

repetition was essential in recovery. Some things in life we had no control over. Like the past. I thought of the rape. I knew no matter how much I wanted to pretend it didn't happen I couldn't. I had to accept it. The thought caused me to throw up in my mouth. No human should have to accept something so awful. But life wasn't fair.

Group ended and I eagerly started to read John's note as we headed back inside for lunch but stopped when I remembered Lindsey. "What's wrong?" She didn't answer me. She balled her hands into fists and shoved past me. I watched her walk into the detox area instead of back towards the group room. Though I wanted to follow her, knew I should follow, I didn't. I told myself I didn't need to be yelled at. But in reality, I knew I just didn't feel like coddling her and cleaning up after her yet again. I wanted to read the note, to hang out with John, and take care of myself.

I lingered at the bottom of the stairs and leaned against the wall. Some people hurried past me, others moved slowly while whispering to each other, planning a high or how to get one no doubt I would later realize. My hands were unsteady as I read over the note. When I reached the end, a smiley face, I tilted my head towards the ceiling and mouthed a thank you. He had promised me not only friendship but also support through recovery from my rape. I had told him about it in one of our dozens of notes to each other. In turn, he had trusted me to talk about the hell he had endured in prison for four years for a parole violation.

"Let's eat, hun," John said, grabbing me by my hand and leading me up the stairs. He let go after the first flight. Ms. Steph glared down at us from the top of the stairs. I knew by the time I reached the top she would be hollering my last name like it was a curse word.

"Hall and Severo keep your hands to yourselves. Keep your hands to *yourselves*," she shouted, the purple lipstick she wore spotting her prominent front teeth. Normally, I would be

stuttering an apology or explanation to silence her. Normally, I would be afraid of her. Instead, I smiled at both her and John.

“I hope you have a nice evening.” The look of surprise on her face sent John into a convulsion of laughter as he quickly continued up the stairs. Ms. Steph composed herself and pursed her lips before patting her already smooth hair into place. I watched her walk up the stairs, waited until I couldn’t hear the clack of her highs, before laughing myself. It felt so good to remember the me before drugs. I hadn’t been sure I would ever see her again.

After dinner, during which Lindsey stared at her lumpy mashed potatoes and didn’t say a word, I met up with John to walk down the stairs beside him. “What’s wrong with your girlfriend?” he asked his voice full of concern and absent of the taunting, sexual infliction on “girlfriend” that any of the other men here would use.

“I don’t know. She won’t talk to me. I can’t tell whether she’s really sad or incredibly pissed off. I’m waiting for her to snap and get herself in trouble again. I don’t know why she can’t just...”

“Just let the little things go,” John finished for me. It wasn’t exactly what I meant but it was close enough. I nodded and wished there were more steps. The longer I talked to John and walked beside him the more I realized he made me happy. Happiness had been a rare thing my entire life. “Is there anything I can do?” he asked.

We reached the bottom of the steps and Lindsey walked in between us. “Can you rub my back during smoke break?” she asked, her voice sounding strained as if she was picking up a heavy object and grunting instructions at the same time. She didn’t wait for me to answer. We both knew I would. Maybe she was just having a bad day. It wasn’t as if we were all on a luxury

vacation in here. I felt silly for being so concerned about her. We were all going through hell. Why should she be spared from it?

We walked through the door to the playroom and stopped by the girls' bathroom. I leaned against the wall and stared up at John. At five-feet-and-two-inches, I knew I was short but next to John's six foot-something frame I felt miniscule. He placed first one hand and then the other against the wall above me and leaned in. "What that guy did to you. He deserves to die, you know. I would never let anyone hurt you."

He started to bend down towards me. I felt a panic attack hit me harder than the locker door I used to accidentally slam on my thumb in high school. Several images surged through my mind in only a few seconds time. Jared yelling at me. His face centimeters from my own. I could feel his spit hitting my cheeks. We had been in front of Wal-Mart, in the early morning hours, passing a joint back and forth. The argument had started small. I mentioned the name of a girl I had found out he was sleeping with behind my back. He laughed about it and passed me the joint. But I insisted. I never knew when to shut up he had snapped. And then everything slowed. Small details like the chip on his front tooth and the cigarette butts by the curb came into focus.

"I'm not afraid to hit chicks." He didn't shout, not literally anyway. Instead, he directed the energy he would have expended through volume into his angry tone. He took the joint from between my fingers before slamming me into the gray wall. I didn't mention the woman again.

John continued to move towards me slowly, as if I had pressed pause and then fast forward on an old RCV. After Jared flashed Bill. Of course. Bill pulling me towards him in the car. And the dull pleasure and anger in his blue eyes.

John pressed a stray strand of hair behind my ear, letting his hand linger for an instance. I flinched and shrank back into the wall. He stood up straight quickly, his face flashing offense

before hiding it behind a smile. "Sorry." He swung his hands back behind his back and walked into the group room. I was so messed up. The wires in my head were crossed. A good guy had stood in front of me and all I saw were the men that hurt me. I didn't know if the wires could be uncrossed. Could I ever really be close to any man without seeing at least a little of Bill? I didn't think it was possible. But maybe that wasn't the point. Maybe all I had to do was learn how to see beyond Bill to the man in front of me now. I didn't know.

The next morning I woke myself up with a muffled scream into my pillow. A nightmare. The anti-depressant I was on was supposed to help with those. Or at least that's what the doctor had promised me. I wondered when I could expect a night without Bill. This dream was different from ones I normally had. It wasn't about the rape. Bill somehow got into the rehab at night. He woke me up when clamped his hand over my mouth. Then, with my roommates sleeping around me, he raped me again. And the pain from the real rape happened again. In one hole and then the other. That nightmare had been more terrifying than the ones based on fact. Imagining that Bill could rape me again was like imagining watching my feet being cut off, then my hands, then my legs, then my arms, then my hips, then my breasts, and then being left to die from blood lost. It was something that left me breathless, scared, and sick to my stomach.

I hopped out of bed, the goose bumps on my bare skin a blessing. I slept in my sports bra and short shorts and yet still often woke up overheated and sweating from the summer heat and lack of ventilation. This morning, though, was cool and windy, the blinds of our open windows actually moving. I peeked out the window and saw a hint of sunlight in the sky. No point in trying to go back to sleep even if I had wanted to. I grabbed my toiletries, towel, and washcloth

and headed for the bathroom. I needed to shower and wash off the memory of the nightmare and the feeling of him inside me.

I turned the water on hot, the first hot shower I had taken since arriving to rehab. I remembered the shower I had taken the morning after the rape. I looked at my body half-expecting to see new bruises. But the only wounds were the scars and scabs from my cutting. The wounds sang in pain under the deluge of heat, soap, and rough fabric as I scrubbed. I wondered if anyone else was awake. I tried to hold in my tears, the sobs, the soft screams. I succeeded for a few moments before they all came out. I showered and cried and wished Bill was dead. I knew it was wrong. But it made me feel good to imagine his body limp, pale, and under six feet of dirt.

Emerging from the shower, I saw Liz, clad only in her bra and panties as usual, heading for the showers. "You doing alright? Bad dreams?" I realized I must have woken her up with my scream. I felt sorry that she had the unlucky pleasure of being my bunkmate. I wondered how many nights my noises had awoken her. How many nights she had heard me crying into my flat, lumpy pillow.

"Always. Sorry if I woke you." Sleep was as valuable here as pens. Anyone caught stealing either from someone didn't exactly generate grins and kisses.

"Don't worry about it, man. I needed to get my ass up early anyway. My legs are getting hairy. I haven't shaved all week," she said and laughed, holding up one of her legs towards me and pointing towards the fine down of black hairs on the pale white skin.

We stared at each other in silence for several seconds. Liz fidgeted with her long gray-black hair. She pulled it thick strand by thick strand from the hair tie. It fell down, curly and ruffled with a few stray pieces of tan fuzz from the standard issue Gaudenzia blankets. I



tightened the thin, scratchy towel around my body and shifted my weight from one foot to the other. I didn't know whether the conversation was over or if I was expected to say something else. I didn't want to seem rude but Liz wasn't someone I felt like talking to. Not this early, not after a terrifying night, and not when she loathed Lindsey.

"This place isn't what it should be, you know," she whispered suddenly. Intrigued I raised my eyebrows and waited for her to continue. We all complained about Gaudenzia but no one ever cared or wondered about what the place "should be." Time was spent surviving the past and present not worrying about hypotheticals. "It's too fake. Too many of the damn staff and us druggies are fake."

"It's a drug and alcohol rehab. How genuine did you think it would be. Addicts lie. The staff is underpaid and underappreciated. Insincerity is inevitable," I responded without thinking, without censoring myself to not offend her. I waited for her to start swear at me or flip her hair back and ignore me.

"I didn't come here to deal with this shit, man. People think I'm fucking stupid. But I'm not. I know they all call me a whore behind my back. I know they talk about what I did out on the streets. And not just the motherfucking guys but the girls, too. Like they haven't been on their knees for the fucking crack pipe. I don't need this. Who are they," she quietly shouted and spread her hands in a wide circle, "to judge me, man."

I knew what people said. I knew they said similar things about me, too. I didn't really care. I wasn't here to win any popularity contests. I just wanted to heal. "Forget about people. You're not here for them, girl." I meant the words to hold comfort but they smacked of the very insincerity she complained of. I wanted to tell her that honestly, if she cannot cut it in here than she should hit the streets and see how friendly the drugs treated her. But I couldn't. I couldn't

because a part of me knew she wouldn't be here very long anyway. She came in here screaming and she would leave smiling. And die. Like Greg. Sometimes, I wondered if any of us really had a chance to avoid smothering the life out of ourselves with booze and dope.

"Yeah. Maybe. Maybe you're right, man." Liz quickly nodded her head in agreement. Too quickly to be sincere. She unsnapped her bra and kicked off her panties. She turned on the shower and smiled at me before getting in. She was letting this place get to her. Letting it chase her away like Sarah did.

After getting dressed and trying halfheartedly to wake Tanya up, I rushed outside for morning smoke break. I yawned and lit up my Pall Mall as soon as I stepped outside. Lindsey propelled herself off the nearest picnic bench and rushed towards me. I had just laid my folder down on the bench beside the door, when she wrapped her arms around me. She hugged me with both arms around my waist and rested her head in the crook between my head and shoulders. I reciprocated instinctively.

We had separated and sat on the bench together by the time Charon came out the double doors. "I wish we were roommates," Lindsey said, watching Charon taking her own smoke break in the corner between the ramp and the building wall.

"It'd be cool," I replied, resting my head against the pillar while Lindsey leaned against the buildings wall. It would have been nice to have someone to cuddle against when the nightmares woke me up before dawn.

"All the fucking girls in the detox wing are so annoying." She pulled out a pink tube of lip-gloss and soothed it onto her lips before passing it to me. I put some on and tried to think of something to say. It shouldn't have been this hard to talk to her. She was my best friend. I loved her. But I wondered if my relationship with her survived more on my compassion for her than

anything else. What did we have in common other than makeup and clothes? And sexuality, I reminded myself, as she leaned forward stretching and her shirt gapped, exposing part of one of her breasts.

“Yeah.” My agreement seemed to satisfy her and we went back to smoking in silence. I didn’t ask her about what was bothering her. She would tell me if and when she was ready to. To this day, I don’t know what upset her or if there was anything I could have done to help her.

Johnathan walked by me on the way to the ashtray, dropping a balled up piece of paper into my lap. Lindsey rolled her eyes and jeered at him. “You need help doing your nails, girl?” she asked him, her usually beautiful smile ugly. I hated that about her. She could be so sweet, so damn innocent at times and then snap into a ruthless person with a face contorted into ugly bags of wrinkles.

Johnathan buried his cigarette in the ashtray and stomped away, his flip-flops slapping loudly. I unwrinkled the note before sliding it into my folder to read without drawing the staff’s attention. He wanted to have sex. He told me to stop hanging out with John, underlining the phrase three times with smudged black ink. He asked me to be his girl. He missed me. I shook my head through the entire note until I got to the last line. It said, “All John wants to do is fuck the shit out of you. That’s all any guy would want after four damn years in prison.” I folded the note, ignoring Lindsey’s knotted string of questions about its contents, and slapped my folder shut.

Sex. I hated the word. Sex equaled raped. Sex was what Bill did. I didn’t want sex. I wanted love. Did John want love? I didn’t even know if I was capable of loving a man anyone. Maybe Johnathan was right. Maybe I should just stop talking to him, stop looking at his brown eyes, stop feeling the hint of craving every time he touched me or even looked at me. “Did he

ask you to suck on his ding-a-ling?” Lindsey’s rudely comic phrase interrupted my thoughts. I laughed despite suddenly feeling stupid. I didn’t know I could feel heartbroken before I even realized I was in love.

“Sort of. But I’m not. The only reason I did before was because I was literally crazy.” I faked a grin. Lindsey would agree with what Johnathan said anyway. Everyone else’s relationship was doomed but her and Jason’s relationship. Never mind the rumors that he was caught making out with Amanda by the basement door. Their love was the only true love. I admired her ability to hide from the truth. My own such talent waned with each day clean.

Lindsey nodded with her head towards the stairs and I looked up to see John. His white tank top stuck to his chest from sweat, revealing a stomach that was flat and tight, no doubt from years of exercising in prison. I didn’t know much about what happened in a men’s prison but John had hinted that the weak got hurt. Bad. His black and red shorts hung off his skinny legs. His stride was quick and confident as usual. I wanted to have his self-assurance. I didn’t know then it was an illusion.

“I got something for you,” he whispered when he stood above Lindsey and me. I didn’t have to look to know she was rolling her eyes yet again. John rested his hand on my shoulder before dropping a folded note into my lap. I smiled nervously at him before glancing at Lindsey to see her applying more lip-gloss to her scowling lips.

“What’s it say?” I really wanted to ask what he saw me as: just a piece of ass, a friend, a lover. But the words stuck in the back of my throat, unwilling to finish their journey out.

“Nope. You have to read it, okay? But I will tell you one thing.” He looked around for Tony. Seeing him talking with the crying Tanya, he whispered, “You’re so goddamn gorgeous.”

He walked away, lighting up another cigarette as he passed Johnathan. The two men met each other's gaze for a second before Johnathan stared at the black top.

"What a stupid line. Any idiot could tell that you're gorgeous." Lindsey stood up and walked the couple of feet towards me. I didn't know whether she was mad at John or me. Whether she really meant I was pretty or was just belittling John.

"I don't think that's true." There was that honesty thing again. Strange but slowly becoming more natural to me.

"I don't know why the hell not, girl. You're beautiful." Lindsey stood in between my legs, hands on my shoulders. If we weren't in rehab, if Tony wasn't only yards away, if neither of us was so messed up, we would have kissed. "I love you." I didn't have to wonder what she meant by that. I nodded slowly, too surprised to think of anything to say. "Can't you just forget about the two Johns and be with me?" I felt like a moron. Of course. She wasn't idealizing her relationship. She was jealous of John and Johnathan. She wanted me for her. Her green eyes stared at me, begging for a response.

"I love you, too." And in some way, I did. What that way was, I am not entirely sure to this day. As a friend, a sister, a lover, a partner in misery. All of the reasons blurred into one, creating a relationship of mutual need. "I'm done with Johnathan. You know that. And John," I knew I had to word my feelings carefully, "I don't know what I feel, how he feels, or what we are. But you're my girl."

Lindsey leaned down to whisper in my ear but before she could speak Tony blew his whistle. The pout on her face, the way her too pink lips puffed out, made the thought of not kissing her unbearable. She was safe. She wasn't a man. She didn't rape me. When she touched

me memories of Bill lay dormant. That, if nothing else, gave her advantage over John. “Meet me in the bathroom before group?” A question that we both knew the answer to.

My heart began to pound, vibrating my chest to the point of alarm. I remembered my aunt Susan. She died of a heart condition about a month after my mother passed away. I wondered if my heart was finally giving out after all the drugs I had forced it to endure. Dying because of love. Though tragic, the irony was enough to make me laugh and calm down. I was fine. Just nervous. We walked with our hands close enough to be touching through the double doors and then up the ramp. I felt John’s note in my pocket and wondered what it said. Would it be enough to make Bill go away? Would loving John get rid of him?

We flowed with the group through the door into the playroom and then slipped into the bathroom. We waited until we couldn’t hear the muffled noise of conversations and Tony’s voice urging everyone to hurry up and get ready for group. Then, we stared at each other in the silence. Lindsey pulled her hair tie out and shook out her blonde hair. I swallowed the large glob of saliva that had built up in my mouth and walked toward her.

She stepped back slowly from me, grinning, until she was against the bathroom wall. I walked slowly towards her and the feeling of a heart attack appeared again. My chest was assaulted by a heart beating faster than when I was coked up for a week straight. With a few steps, our bodies were within centimeters of one and another’s. I raised my head, moving it gradually towards her face as if it were weighted down by crates of dope.

Lindsey grabbed the collar of my hoodie and yanked me against her body. Surprised for only a moment I pressed my lips against hers. Our hands wound through each other’s hair, latched onto each other’s necks, and finally pulled up each other’s shirts. Lindsey mumbled something and then pressed my hand against her crotch. I felt the moisture through her jeans and

moaned louder despite the danger. Anyone could walk in and see us. But somehow, right then, it didn't matter. Thoughts of recovery, of punishments, of the past, and even of Bill didn't exist. Just blonde hair, small breasts, and wet jeans. She mumbled again and I realized she wanted us to take off our pants. I unbuttoned her jeans while she undid mine.

We grabbed, caressed, and entered each other. And for those minutes we both forgot about how damned scared we were of life.

We were twenty minutes late for group by the time we pried ourselves away from each other to get dressed, fix our hair, and touch up our makeup. I didn't care. She didn't care. We were made to apologize to the family and sentenced to writing an essay about something related to responsibility.

Later that day, I waited impatiently for Lindsey to come out for smoke break. She was never late. Almost no one was ever late for the highlight of our days. I sat on the same bench we had shared that morning and took long drag after long drag as I waited for her to come out. We hadn't been allowed to sit next to each other during the groups or at lunch. I missed her. Just being near her protected me from thinking about Bill. Where was she?

Tanya came running out of the building, her face crinkled into a grimace. She stopped when she saw me and took several deep breaths. I stared at her, annoyed that she was bothering me during the day. Our time to hang out was at night. Lindsey and I needed the daytime. "They just took her."

"Took who?" A part of me already knew but refused to believe it. It simply wasn't possible. It couldn't happen. I had felt the same way about my mother's death and about the rape.

"Lindsey. They just took her out in handcuffs. She's gone. Their bagging up all her belongings right now. She's gone. I'm sorry, girlie."

I wanted to scream. Instead, I bit down on my tongue until a steady stream of blood came out. No. I couldn't breathe. Not because a heart attack but a panic attack. I gasped for air that I knew wasn't there. It wouldn't ever be. She was gone. And I didn't even get to say goodbye.

"No. Why?"

"They won't tell us. I tried to ask for you but they threatened to put me in the chair if I didn't get outside. I'm sorry." Tanya continued apologizing until I started crying. Not the quiet, discreet tears I usually did in public but loud, half-shrieking sobs that no doubt drew numerous stares. I didn't care. I couldn't care. Tanya sat on the bench and pulled my body towards hers. She hugged me to her almost flat chest and I screamed into it. Her shirt quickly became wet with tears. I heard Tony's voice nearby telling me to "let it out" and that I would "be okay." I didn't want to believe it, didn't want to believe that I could survive yet more pain without the comfort of drugs, but I knew he was right. I just prayed Lindsey could do the same.

Her parents disappointed her a lot. Sometimes it was the things they did. Sometimes it was the things they didn't do. Sometimes it was things they said they would do but then didn't. Years later, as a freshman in college, she would learn the importance of young children's trust in their parents. She would not remember the exact phrasing, but the consequences of the trust breaking would affect the children's future ability to form meaningful relationships with others. When she was five years old, her father promised her and her mother that they would not move anymore. Though she recalls their previous life in California, and the long move east to Pennsylvania, she does not realize how much more moves there were before that one. She does, however, recognize the importance of this promise. It makes her mother happy. It makes her happy. They set down deep roots. A friendship with their next-door neighbors that interrupts the



stifling isolation of their lives. Outside the walls of their newly bought home, her family is all joy and love. She befriends the second youngest daughter of neighbor's. Her mother swaps recipes and stories of child development with her fellow housewife. Her younger siblings tagalong with giggles and squeals. But inside the large house with the fresh coat of paint and the sprawling back yard, things are not quite right. Her mother cried often, her father yelled, her older siblings used her like she was their most hated toy. Once her parents went out at night, and her older sister handcuffed her in the bathroom instead of giving her a bath. She screamed and cried until her throat burned like someone had taken an SOS pad to it.

But their life there kept her fractured family together. She sensed this, allowed herself to believe the life would last.

She was seven years old when her parents announced they were moving to Indiana. The family busted open along the carefully stitched seams. Her older brother left. Her older sister took her hatred for her half-siblings and stepfather to a level of burning proportions. Her mother pretended to be calm, to be fine. But she could not cover up for the slips of phrases like "I wish I was dead" or "The world would be better off without me." In a way, it was comforting to hear her thoughts coming out of her mother's mouth. She was bonded with her in a way only misery could fashion.

By the time she was 10 years old, she gave up believing what her parents told her. Each move degraded the value of their word until the only thing she could place her trust in was disappointment. She became disillusioned with life before she reached junior high school. The gleeful smiles of her classmates only set her more against the notion of happiness.

## **Chapter 14**

*But they who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings like eagles; they shall run and not be weary; they shall walk and not faint.” – Isaiah 40:31*

I knew the moment I was called into Fatima’s office, that I was about to be screamed at. And I knew the reason before she opened her dark purple lipstick painted mouth. Before lunch that day, New Girl had lead for the female clients a group designed to encourage “appropriate discussion of conflicts or problems.” In actuality, it had been no more than an hour spent pressuring us to rat one another out to staff. New Girl had become flustered enough to raise her voice from its usually calm, condescending tone into a strained shout. Still, we kept our mouths shut and watched the clock on the auditorium wall count down time until smoke break.

Tanya and I had scribbled notes to each other on a sheet of notebook paper and tried to keep our faces set in a frown instead of the grins we both held in. Lindsey had been gone for two weeks and it still seemed strange to be spending every moment with Tanya and not her. And though there were still things about Tanya that made me wonder if she was high or just plain out of her mind, I had come to see that beneath her peculiar exterior was a girl that knew her addiction wasn’t taking her anywhere but to hell.

New Girl cleared her throat loudly and stared at the paper sitting on Tanya’s desk. Tanya sighed and shoved the paper into her folder. We exchanged a look of frustration and stared at the clock. The group was a waste of everyone’s time. You didn’t snitch on people in jail or prison and almost everyone here was from there. Why did New Girl think this place would be any different? Even if any of us was brave enough to present someone like raw meat to wolves, the thought of the consequences for such a betrayal were a gigantic deterrent. If you opened your mouth about someone else then every other client had the right to rat out everything you did or

thought. No one needed that kind of additional stress. Having the staff watching your every move was more than enough.

Amanda raised her trembling hand and waited for New Girl to call her name. Every girl turned in her seats to glower at her. A few girls shifted in their seats and muttered swear words. I had sat calm, not seeing the point in worrying about what she was going to say when I had no control over it. But when she had complained that Johnathan fingering me during the movies had offended her I imagined getting up from my seat and slapping her across her freckled covered, bloated face. Instead, I had turned around to face New Girl and awaited the scolding.

Now, as I fidgeted with my earrings and stared at the stack of papers on Fatima's desk I felt even more frustration not only at Amanda and New Girl but also at myself. I had known better at the time when I let him do it. But my old life, my old ways, were so familiar then. Even now, trying to maintain self-respect and honesty sometimes felt like swimming upstream with a brick lashed to each of my limbs. That was weeks ago. I had moved on, matured. But that didn't change the fact I had slipped up. It may have been inconsiderate for Amanda to wait until Snitching for Staff Approval group to complain about my behavior and she probably should have talked to me personally about it, but the fact is I did. Tony always said one of an addict's many problems was shunning responsibility for his actions. In my drug-driven world everything that I did wrong was someone else's fault. I realized how much easier that world had been then this sober one.

"So why did you let some boy, because none of these guys here can be called men, put his fingers in your pussy?" Even though I knew Fatima was not afraid to say anything, even the most vulgar, crack house inspired saying, hearing "pussy" coming out of her mouth was still

jarring. She raised her well-plucked eyebrows at me, crossed her short flabby arms across her chest, and waited for my reply.

Time to really enjoy this whole responsibility thing. “He offered me a pack of cigarettes if I let him do it. And at the time I didn’t have any cigs of my own. But I...”

“So you’re not only a slut in here but a whore? I’m sure you have all kinds of fun being that on the streets but in here that is not going to happen. Again.” She placed furious emphasis on the words not and again. Her eyes were wide and frenzied and her upper body seemed tensed up, ready for a quick release of rage.

“But I didn’t take the cigarettes from him. And I told him it wasn’t going to happen again. I know I messed up but I...”

“Lies are the only thing that comes out of your mouth, Hall. Get out of my office and back to group.” I tried to finish, tried to get her to see that I wasn’t a slut or a whore anymore. But she snapped her fingers and pointed one purple painted nail to the door. I walked slowly out the room, holding my anger and hurt inside a glass ball of calm, until the door clicked closed behind me. Then, without even looking if there was anyone around, I slammed both my fists against my head. Several round points of pain exploded atop my head. I gulped in air and then hit myself again.

The glass ball was shattered and scattered around the gray carpet. Tears carved paths through my foundation and makeup. Instead of heading back to the group room, I ran back to the dorms bathroom. No one would hear me crying or hitting myself back there. As soon as I rounded the corner into the bathroom, I threw my back against the wall and slid to the floor. Panic. Bill’s hand around my heart, crushing it so hard that I knew it would explode in my chest, covering my insides in microscopic pieces of heart tissue.

I didn't know why those two words, words I had been called numerous times before, bothered me so much. I had been a slut and a whore. Had. I wasn't anymore but no one seemed to recognize it. That was what bothered, I realized, not the words. I imagined slamming my head back against the wall until I knocked myself out. The fireworks of pain would echo around my head for a millisecond before nothingness cradled me. But I knew the outcome if I did. Someone would find me and I would be sent off to one of Erie's psych wards. I didn't ever want to go back to the nut house. I refused. They would have to strap me down to a gurney and wheel me out shrieking. Not that that would help support my sanity.

I imagined cutting up my left arm some more. Though there was precious little space left on it for fresh cuts, I always managed to fit a slice in between others. My arm looked like it had went through some kind of factory machine. Diced up, scarred, dried blood crusted on it more often than not. If John ever saw me without my hoodie on, he would ask what the hell was wrong with me like every other guy had. My self-inflicted injuries were disgusting. I looked at them every day but succeeded in keeping a distance between the grisly sight and the fact that those wounds were on my body. Sometimes, though, like in the shower or during staff searches, I knew it was horrible. Right now, I needed to harm myself to release my frustration at being treated like a child. Seen, scolded, but never heard.

Breathe. Breathe. Breathe. I whispered the words while taking slow, deep breaths. I knew I would never be able to sever the association between my rape and any feeling of helplessness. And in this place, I was often helpless or close to it. Irony of the finest. I needed this place to stay clean but at the same time, it was only making the trauma I endured worse. I didn't want to hurt myself anymore. I knew why I was so disgusted by Fatima's words. I continued to breathe slowly as I pulled my knees to my chest. I rested my head against them and sighed. Maybe

knowledge was power in a way. When I was high the last thing I wanted to do was feel much less know why I felt the way I felt.

After fixing my makeup, I hurried back to the group room, relieved that the in house meeting had yet to start. Francis gave me a questioning stare as I walked in just before she closed the door. Tanya was seated in the second row, to my surprise, twirling a chunk of limp brown hair in between her fingers. "What happened?" I knew my eyes were still red from crying but shrugged off her question. Tanya, either not really concerned or too excited to start talking herself whispered, "I did it with that handyman who fixed the lights last week."

Before I could ask her how she talked him into putting his job on the line and where she did it without being caught, the meeting began. Francis sat behind the table at the front of the room, one leg crossed over the other while the other leg bounced up and down. Was she nervous? She must have talked to the group dozens of times before. I stared at my feet, feeling embarrassed and nervous for her. The fluttering, surging feeling of anticipation began in my stomach and lurched its way to my throat. Something was different about this meeting. I knew it.

In high school, after several brief encounters with boys, she began dating her first girlfriend, Renee. The two girls seemingly made not only a beautiful match but also a perfect match. Both multiracial and understanding all the tribulations and rewards that come with it, both dabbling in the Goth lifestyle, both captivated by Japanese anime and manga, both dangerously lonely and seeking someone to fix their lives. Best friends at first, they alternated spending the night at each other houses, walked to class side by side, laughing at the muffled cries of "dyke" hurtled at them, and turned lunch period into a two-person anime convention. But the intimate tension was there almost from the beginning. With every playful tap, high five, or hug exchanged

between the two of them, she felt an electric shock surge through her brain and shot to her crotch, wetting it every time. Even her father knew they would be a couple before long. With her mother recently dead from the cancer, she had fought for three years, no one objected to her finding love with a girl instead of a boy.

The first time they made love her world expanded into infinite sparkling universes, each one spinning rapidly around her, sucking her breath away, before colliding together to form one world made of swirling fire. She never wanted Renee's fingers out of her or her lips to part from hers. They were in love; they were a couple with every reason to spend forever together. Young and needing someone to cover the hole left by the absence of her mother, she ignored everything negative about her lover. Renee picked out her outfits for her because she loved her so much, Renee screamed at her for talking to other girls because she loved her so much, Renee wanted to know what she was doing every moment of the day because she loved her so much.

And she would believe this for years after the relationship has ended, her self-esteem too low to demand anything resembling a healthy relationship.

The first time Renee hit her they were in the foyer of an old Baptist church. Having shunned Christianity a year before, the girl was reluctant to attend the church with Renee. When they walked into the foyer and the girl saw a thick colony of spiders and their webs, she voiced her disgust. Renee punched her in the cheek, just below her right eye, causing her to stumble and fall back against the wooden doors. Tears blinded her vision and pure shock paralyzed her mind. Renee pulled her away from the door, wiped the tears off her cheeks, and then opened the doors to enter the church. When they were seated beside Renee's family, the girl holding in tears and willing herself not to touch her throbbing cheek, Renee whispered, "If you don't cut it out you'll get it again." The relationship should have ended then and not have went on for the year after

that day like it did. But Renee blamed her for the abuse. Each punch, kick, shove, and concussion she doled out was the girl's fault.

After looking at a small stack of index cards in front of her, Francis took a sip from her Aquafina bottle and began. The theme for the meeting wasn't directly drug or alcohol related. In fact, Francis only mentioned her actual using a few times. What she did discuss, though, was not only a possible cause and fuel of addiction but also a cause of many of the other problems that addicts and alcoholics struggle with: self-esteem. Tanya started whispering to me immediately after hearing the topic, mumblings things her dad had wrote her in her letters. I disregarded her, the whispers of other clients, and the sound of boisterous laughter from across the street. I cared only about this topic, about this thing I had been working to improve sense arriving and yet still struggled to maintain.

Francis explained that one of the major reasons we so often found ourselves in awful situations was because either consciously or unconsciously we believed all we deserved was those situations. She used the example of unhealthy or abusive relationships first. You could not become trapped in such relationships if you loved and respected yourself, she stated. At first, I balked at that idea. I didn't want to admit how broken I had been for so many years. But as she shared several stories from other addicts and alcoholics, I began to see myself in them. A woman whose boyfriend watched her cook him dinner than regularly put cigarettes out on her stomach and chest. A teenage girl who wore sweaters even in the overbearing humidity of Florida summers because her twenty-year-old boyfriend would grab her arms with enough force leave blue and purple impressions of his hand. A young man who cut himself in his closet size bathroom while his girlfriend screamed he was a piece of shit through the door. None of them



was exactly like me but all of them had a piece of me in them. That piece that couldn't look in the mirror and whisper, "You're beautiful" or "I love you." The cell that loathed being lodged in its own, acne prone, greasy, too-dark skin. But I was so different from anyone, from every other stressed, walking-injured person in the world. I had believed that for years before rehab. And even with the knowledge that "terminal uniqueness" was a symptom of addiction, it still lingered in my whorled brain.

"No one deserves to be abused. No one deserves to be miserable," Francis said, having reached the end of her hour-long lecture. I had always agreed with the statement except when it applied to myself. I gazed at the brown plastic table as Francis stood to lead us in the Serenity Prayer. It was insane to leave my self-exempt from those two statements. And I guess I always knew this but had perfected the ability to belittle myself years ago and used it during the few moments I questioned why I let myself be punched around.

"God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change," we all spoke, some of us with our heads bowed, others with eyes closed, and a few in relapse row on the men's side who rolled their eyes. Insecurity about my mix race heritage, my skin tone, my hair, my eyes, and my face in general had been partners in crime with me since I was five years old. Letting go of such old and reliably miserable friends was terrifying I realized with shock. I didn't want to be miserable and I suspected that many of the other clients felt the same. But accepting ourselves for who we are required change. A change that though exciting didn't seem fully possible.

"The courage to change the things I can," we said, some of us already looking at the clock, no doubt counting the minutes until med line and then bedtime. I had survived what Bill did to me. That had to take courage. Calling this damn place had to have taken courage when everything that I was at the time, that I had really ever been, wanted to kill myself. I had begun

to change before any staff member even had the chance to yell at me. I had to believe I could get beyond the assigned worksheets about self-esteem and just look in the mirror and love the girl I saw looking at me.

“And the courage to know the difference. Amen,” we finished immediately everyone began gathering up their folders and pens to amble out for smoke break. I wouldn’t ever be the pale skinned, frail as a beaten down sapling girls I had grown up seeing on TV and in magazines. I was curvy, I was tan, and I had hair that fought every day to stay in a state of parched unruliness. And that was okay, I forced myself to think. Yes, it was I. I couldn’t change that but rather how I perceived myself. If I said I loved myself, if I, and the corniness of such an idea was not lost on me, hug myself every day like I would a friend, I could run into happiness.

During smoke break, sharing a Camel Wide cigarette with Tanya, I watched the tree from our seat on the picnic table. “Do you think I’m beautiful?” I asked Tanya, already knowing the answer. It sounded conceited to ask but both of us knew it wasn’t vanity that would motivate such a question coming from me.

“Yep, girly. Beauty is beauty precisely because it is so diverse. If everybody were a blonde supermodel, the world would be boring. My dad always tells me that it’s in our flaws that real beauty is found.” I loved when Tanya quoted her dad about something other than the Arizona desert where he lived and Tanya’s childhood. Though I had never met the man, his detailed observations in his letters showed him as someone who saw the world in all its dimensions, instead of just the outer, filthy one.

After smoke ended, Tanya and I went into the playroom girls’ bathroom and shared the mirror. Tanya used the time to pull her brush from her plastic bag full of markers, crayons, pens, paper, notebooks, letters, notes, and cigarettes and tame her hair into a tight, high ponytail. I



leaned over the sink as far as possible and stared at myself. “You’re beautiful. I love you,” I whispered, too quiet for even Tanya to hear. I felt foolish saying it but it seemed right and necessary. I made myself see what was there instead of what I wanted to be there or what I thought should be there. I saw my hair, the curls pulled back into a ponytail with a red headband containing the strays. I saw my chocolate brown eyes behind my purple framed glasses. I saw my full lips, moist with a layer of pale red lip-gloss. And I saw a girl that was pretty. A girl that if I saw her walk by me on the street I would stare at and admire. The girl had some shine to her complexion and a few zits on her cheeks but she was still pretty. The girl had hair that you’d get your fingers tangled in but that didn’t mean you couldn’t try to as you kissed her. And that girl was pretty enough that I would slide my tongue in between her lips and smear the lip-gloss all over both of us. That girl was I. The connection was more thrilling than any high I had ever had.

## **Chapter 15**

*“So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand.” – Isaiah 41:10*

When Sherlanda asked me to meet with her for the second time that week, I was curious but not alarmed. Not until I opened the door to the small meeting room in Reentry and saw New Girl and Charon did it occur to me that a pull up or scolding was the least of my problems.

Though I had expected to back home the beginning of June, it was now creeping towards the end of the month, with no release date in sight. I wasn't ready and I had too many unresolved issues, Sherlanda had sternly explained to me after I badgered her for a release date. Many of the clients had at least an estimated release date to look forward to. But neither John, Tanya, nor I had one. The three of us, along with Tanya's latest “boyfriend” Zeth, had become more than a clique. We were two sets of Romeo and Juliets, crazily in love, fighting against the people who would keep us apart, and ultimately destined to failure.

I had been clean for over thirty days and finally resembled the almost perfect rehab client. As I continued working my way through the 12 Steps, sneaking time in between groups and before falling asleep, my understanding of addiction as a spiritual disease grew. Steadily working through step four, making a “searching and fearless moral inventory” of myself, I discovered a question some people ponder their entire lives: what made me the way I am. Though I had originally approached the step afraid that I wouldn't be able to complete it, so many of my memoires having been stifled to the point of vanishing, I now had ten pages and was not done yet. The step involved making a list of those that had harmed you, going back as long as you can remember. As if that wasn't emotionally taxing enough you had to describe how they harmed you and what emotion you experienced because of the harm.

Molestation at age four. Though not the very top of my list, it had been the beginning of everything. Low self-esteem, hating myself, looking in the damn mirror and seeing someone dirty and repulsive staring back at me. Everything that happened after that simply reaffirmed and grew what my former pediatrician had done. I suppose it seems obvious to anyone looking at my case file or anyone reading this. But as I was realizing, it was incredibly easier to see the answers to the whys and hows in anyone else's life but you own.

She wasn't even old enough to drink legally. Barely old enough to buy her own cigarettes. Still wore braces, had only just started her first ever job, opened her first bank account, and cuddled with her favorite teddy bear most nights. In the men's bathroom at some airport whose name she wouldn't remember a year later, she had sex with two men at once for a pack of cigarettes and several snorts of coke.

A three-hour layover without any beer or vodka. Even with her fake ID, she still looked all of 15. Most people doubted she was even 18 years old let alone 21. Standing just outside a urine smelling airport bar, she sipped from her A&W root beer float and stared hungrily at the bottles of liquor behind the bar. The two men, tipsy as they walked out of the bar, bumped into her and stopped. The feeling of their eyes on her, squirming their way down from her face, to her chocker around her neck, to her large bosom which was barely covered by the unbuttoned pink Henley, to her crotch, covered only by her favorite pink mini skirt. Nervous but curious she stared back, wondering if perhaps they could somehow buy her some booze.

The taller man, his odor of vodka was better than any body spray she had ever purchased, whispered to his companion for several seconds. The girl continued to stare at them, anxious. The thought that they were serial killers and she their next victim entered her thoughts. But when

the tall man whispered his plans in her ear, her parents' warnings about not talking to strangers seemed dumb.

The two men were addicts, waiting for a plane to somewhere, she didn't ask where nor did she care. What interested her was the cocaine they had somehow snuck through security and were willing to share with her. But not for nothing. This didn't surprise her. By age four she had grasped that outside her parents, no one would give her anything free. Sex. They wanted her naked, shaking, and whimpering their names in the largest stall in the men's room. Two men at once was shocking to her. The pornographic films she watched late at night, after everyone in the house was asleep, showed threesomes. And yet she had never made a connection between what men did to women in those films and what men might want to do with her.

They didn't even ask her age. Perhaps they didn't care. Or maybe the not knowing, the thought that she may be only 15 or 16, was a turn on in and of itself. It lasted no more than twenty minutes. When the men finished they zipped up their pants and stared at her as she dressed. Then, the taller one emptied what remained in their baggie of powder, onto the textbook she pulled from her book bag, and cut 15 lines. Five for each of them, he told. Though she had worked for the entire bag, she couldn't force words of complaint out of her mouth. Scared that the men stood between her and the door, afraid that they wouldn't let her have any after all and just nauseated by their company she quickly snorted her lines.

But the men remained in front of the door, staring at her again. The tall one forced her to her knees into a small puddle of what smelled like piss and unzipped his jeans. A blowjob. After snorting some of what she had earned he wanted another happy ending. Unwilling to even think about putting that thing in her mouth, she tried to stand up only to be pushed back down. Tears started to form in her eyes as he grabbed her ponytail and pulled her face towards his crotch.

“Open,” he commanded. After a second went by with her peppermint lip-gloss coated lips remaining closed, he put his other hand around her neck and squeezed.

He was a serial killer. Her parents had been right. Crying she opened her mouth which he quickly filled. The other man watched him control her head, tapping his foot against the linoleum floor.

But the men didn’t kill her. Not physically anyway. On the plane ride home, she faced the window with her headphones on, and struggled not to cry. It was the first time since she was four years old that a man had hurt her that way.

After the molestation came my older half-sister, Misty, and my older half-brother, Lamont’s, endless torment and ridicule. From looking me in my face at five years old and explaining to me just how fat, ugly, and incredibly stupid I was to handcuffing me in the bathroom while I cried instead of giving me a bath to pinning me to the sofa and stuffing food down my throat while bending my finger backwards until I screamed. At 21, I recognized that none of what they did was nearly as horrible as I had thought at the time. And yet I couldn’t deny the fact that nothing they did to me was within the normal parameters of a sibling relationship. They had hated me and took every opportunity to remind me of it.

Because I had experienced being bullied in my own house, when I entered school and heard the same taunts of “fat, ugly, and stupid” that my older siblings used, I reacted with a stream of tears almost every day after school. But somewhere along the way from grade school to high school, I stopped crying. I accepted what they said as truth, pulled it into my body, and found it a home between my heart and lungs. Nothing, not even my dramatic weight loss in



junior high school, dropping me down from an 18/20 to a size 6/8 could convince me that I was not fat or ugly.

The dissolution of my relationship with my younger sister. Caroline and I had been best friends since she learned to talk and overcame the annoying younger sibling category in my mind. People change and even siblings grow apart, I remember my mother telling me after she had found me crying after a particularly vicious fight between us. We had changed, she seemingly growing angrier at everything in the world, me crashing into the darkness that was bipolar depression. When writing this on the list I had written: anger, loss, self-esteem. Anger and loss at losing the one person I trusted to stay with me through the hell of a life we both thought we had been living. And lower self-esteem from the thought that it was my own messed up mind driving her away.

Before Sherlanda asked me to her office, I read from one of the books at morning meaning and shared what the passage meant to me. The text described the importance of spiritual healing in order to overcome active addiction. Unwilling to share my experience and continuing connection to the tree, I had instead talked about the security of knowing that something greater than all of us was out there, in charge of all the seeming disorder of earth.

“You’re so eloquent at times,” Tanya had whispered when I returned to my seat. I smiled at her use of a word 99 percent of the clients here wouldn’t have any idea of the meaning. Tanya’s intelligence, beauty, and tarnished innocence made her heroin addiction startling and tragic.

Unwilling to take a seat in the purple padded office chairs around the short meeting table, I shifted from foot to foot and wished that Tanya were here with me. She wouldn’t be afraid of what they were going to do. Her method of survival here so far consisted of throwing tantrums

consisting of tears, screams, and feet stomping then finding a guy to screw in some back room out of staff's view.

Sherlanda started talking about my progress. Or, as she saw it, lack thereof. The more her lips moved, the less I listened. Every house manager save Steph had commented on my progress and changed attitude. And yet, all Sherlanda seemed to see was wrong, wrong, and serious fuck ups. My gaze sought the ceiling and stayed there but Sherlanda's voice continued. If I listened to it, to any of the outright lies she was telling me, I would start shrieking and end up banging my own head against the table in frustration. The image of being trapped in a wired cage and prodded with a Taser seemed to best describe my situation.

"So we have decided to transfer to our affiliate facility in Philadelphia," Sherlanda finished. Several seconds of silence followed before I realized they were waiting for a response from me.

"In Philly? That's all the way on the other side of the state," I whispered still confused at how I ended up in this office being told I wasn't good enough to stay here, being told that I needed "specialized help" that Crossroads couldn't handle.

"We realize that," New Girl replied and smiled as wide as I had seen her since she started working here. At least someone was thrilled with how the meeting was going. "However, it is an all women rehabilitation center as well as specializing in co-occurring addiction and mental health issues."

"That's what this is about? My cutting? That's not fair. I've been doing pretty well lately. I haven't stopped but I am making progress. How can you just write me off?" Despite ordering myself not to, I started crying. I should have been stronger. I should have stopped cutting when they searched the rooms. The threat of being sent to one of Erie's psych wards had been my



greatest concern. The idea that they might ship me hundreds of miles, back to the very area where I had started using drugs in the first place was laughable in its irony.

“If you let me finish talking you’ll know what it’s about, young lady,” New Girl hissed and yet kept her face in a wide, serial killer-ish smile. Her ability to infuse a smile with sadism would have been intriguing if it weren’t directed at me. “In addition to your mental health issues and your lack of satisfying progress, you have turned a rehab center into a swingers bar.” Since I had had sex with Johnathan, the other clients were coupling up and breaking the no fraternizing rules in every way they could imagine. Though no one had blamed or praised me for the turn of events aloud, I had assumed that at least some staff and clients did. Sometimes it was disheartening to be right.

“I have bipolar disorder. And yes, my actions contributed to the other clients choices indirectly. But for you or Ms. Sherlanda to say I have made no progress is insane. Ask almost any of the house managers. You know, the people who actually spend all day with the clients instead of hiding in their offices as much as possible.” Born with a naturally smart mouth, I couldn’t help but let a sarcastic comment burst out. Of all the things I wanted to say to both of them, a smart but truthful remark seemed like the least rude.

Sherlanda’s mouth fell slowly open and her dark brown eyes widen. New Girl narrowed her green eyes, and sucked her smile into a tight frown. I wondered what she was thinking, if she really did have as much disgust for not just myself but the other clients that she exuded throughout her shifts. “Your choices are very simple, Hall. Either you agree to be transferred to New Images when a spot opens up or you pack your belongings and leave Crossroads. Either way we need your answer now. The county doesn’t see the need to continue funding your

treatment here after reading our reports about your lack of progress,” New Girl said her voice serene yet wrapped with a strong hint of fury.

Being kicked out of Crossroads when I was finally starting to become something close to a responsible adult was not an option. But leaving Crossroads to go to a whole new rehab, a rehab without Tanya or John, and one so far away that I wouldn’t see my dad until who knew when, seemed like an option only slightly better than the first. I sat down, a panic attack threatening to start. Breathe. Breathe. “So if I go, do you know how long I’d be there?”

Sherlanda opened the manila folder she held in her hands and slid a New Images brochure and handbook across the table. “It’s a long term treatment facility. The minimum stay is six months.”

The panic attack went from small to full scale. I dropped the papers on the table as my hands shook, and my breath became loud and panting. “I go back to school at the end of August. That’s only two months from now. I can’t go clear across the state for six stupid months. What is this?” I emphasized the word “this” with as much incredulous rage as I could without having to punctuate it with throwing the papers in Sherlanda’s face.

“We have decided that school is not something that is beneficial for you right now in your recovery. New Images will be time better spent than going back to school. They will help you work on your not only your recovery but your mental illness, your issues with sexuality, and provide you with job skills,” New Girl said holding up more papers with New Image written across them before tossing them in my direction.

At that point, my entire body shaking while my breathing seemed loud enough to give all of us hearing damage, I stood up and shoved my chair against the table. The soft thud prompted Sherlanda to look up from whatever she was reading in the folder. “I am learning ‘job skills’ in

college. I would think that would be a common sense concept. This makes no sense.” If I knew, they wouldn’t call 911 and cart me away to Millcreek Hospital’s psych ward I would have whipped out my razor in front of them and cut my arm up even more, slicing open old scars to make room for new ones.

As Sherlanda and New Girl both started to speak, I closed my eyes and forced myself to imagine going to the other rehab. I wouldn’t see my dad for six months. Since I had moved home, the most time I had went without at least saying hello to him was a week. I’d be alone in another pseudo-prison with its own set of restrictions, rules, and expectations. A scary situation but not as terrifying as standing across from the street from Crossroads with a garbage full of my belongings in one hand and a baggie of cocaine in the other.

The two women continued to speak, though I made a point of ignoring their words. “Can I call my dad? This is a big decision. And I just want to talk to him about it. Please.” New Girl frowned slightly while Sherlanda walked to the head of the table, grabbed the office phone, and pulled it down the table towards me.

“Make it quick, please,” she said before sitting back down.

I closed my eyes for a moment, praying to God that he would pick up, and then dialed his cell phone number. After six rings, it went to his voicemail. Though I knew it would be pointless to leave a message, I enjoyed the sound of his voice, even recorded, before hanging up. New Girl grabbed the cord of the phone and yanked it towards her before shoving it back to the head of the table. Standing up from my chair, pushing it in, and meeting the expectant stares of the women, I made my decision. “I will go. I will do what I have to to keep myself clean.”

Sherlanda smiled, the first time she had ever smiled about anything related to me, and said, “I am very proud of you for making the right choice, Kateri.” Even though their decision

made no sense, even though it was based on lies, I couldn't help but feel engorged pride at her words. "But before you can be transferred we need you to write a letter to the treatment team describing how New Images can help you progress in your recovery. Since the county has called your funding into issue, it is necessary to prove that you are worth continuing to fund."

Have you ever been so intensely angry that your options are either to laugh or stab someone in the eye with a gel pen lying in the middle of a table? I laughed until tears dangled from my eyes and both women looked at each other in concern. "I'll have the letter turned in by tomorrow morning. Can I leave now?"

New Girl nodded and Sherlanda escorted me back to the group room in time for last few minutes of a relapse prevention group. When I sat down next to Tanya, she shoved her hand into mine and rested her head on my shoulder for a minute before Charon reminded us to keep our "body parts" to ourselves. I didn't have to tell Tanya that something unbelievably shitty had happened. Being taken away by more than one staff member was a clear sign that you were about to be get the Gaudenzia equivalent of a detention and then some.

As we filed out for smoke break, I tore off a blank sheet of yellow paper off the tablet my dad had given me, eager to start writing a letter of lies in order to keep me sober. Recovery was about honesty and yet I was being booted from Crossroads on the misperceptions and lies of the very people that I thought should be helping me. Irony and just flat out bullshit. Trying to stay calm, to withhold resentment was almost impossible. I was leaving my dad and my friends here. Just when I was starting to fall in love with John, I had to say goodbye.

I heard a whistle and emerged from my brooding to realize that the only people still inside, still by the ramp, were John and I. He laid flat on his back, his glasses resting on his chest

and his legs hanging over the edge of the ramp. “You look like you want to smack someone, baby,” he said and grinned.

The only thing I wanted to do at that moment was jump on top of him and suck on his tongue. Instead, I leaned on the railing of the ramp, allowing my shirt to gap enough to show some cleavage, and smiled down at him. “Long story. And I’d rather not talk about it right now. I might start shouting in rage.”

“I have something to make you happy, baby girl. I know this doesn’t sound very romantic but in here romance is hard to swing. So here it goes,” he said and sat up, grabbing both my hands in his. “Do you want to have sex with me?”

It wasn’t romantic at all. It wasn’t even really what I wanted to hear from him. Asking me to meet him somewhere alone, then kissing me all over my body, then just doing it. That’s what I wanted. Bluntness just sounded ugly. “Yes. Why not? Why the fuck not.” I asked him at first, and then asked myself the question. I was leaving. I wouldn’t see John again in all likelihood. If we were caught, I doubted they would spend much time punishing me when I was already half gone anyway. And as for John, if he was caught he I was sure he could handle whatever punishment they gave him. After four years in prison, I imagine anything Crossroads could think up was equivalent to being beaten with foam bunny rabbits in comparison to what went on when the guards’ backs were turned and inmate law ruled.

He stood up from the ramp and blew me a kiss before going through the set of double doors on his way outside for smoke break. After I made my way outside, I sat on the bench near the door and started work on the letter to the treatment team. After writing the letter’s greeting, I chewed on the top of my pen and debated how to begin it. Lying, once as natural as going to the bathroom, felt more than just uncomfortable. It was wrong. I couldn’t do it, not even to please



the treatment team and get them to fund me at New Images. If lying wasn't part of a clean lifestyle. The adage "damned if you do and damned if you don't" came to mind. The excitement at the thought of sleeping with John was gone and replaced with frustration as I struggled to find a way out of this odd situation.

My freshman English teacher in high school often told us to "write not only what we know but what we know is true." I didn't know why her class and teachings entered my mind then. I couldn't even remember her name or her hair color. But the poems and essays I wrote had been the best I had written up until that point. The memory of pride and hope from her class had stayed with me. Taking the pen out of my mouth, I knew what I had to write. Every moment of progress, change, revelation, determination, and hope that I had experienced since coming to Gaudenzia flowed out onto the piece of paper, which by the end of the day was several pieces of paper.

As I had promised, I turned the letter in the next morning. By that afternoon, New Girl told me, her eyebrows creased and her thin lips sucked into a pronounced frown, that the treatment team and county had reconsidered their decision to transfer me. My funding was reinstated to continue my recovery at Crossroads until I "either completed the program or dropped out," New Girl mumbled without looking at me. I snuck away to the bathroom as soon as she marched back into the counselors' office and cried tears prompted from—a rare occurrence—triumph and not failure or pain.

## **Chapter 16**

*Judge not, that you be not judged. For with the judgment you pronounce you will be judged, and with the measure you use it will be measured to you.” - Matthew 7:1-2*

Charon found me laying on the Reentry bathroom floor, bawling noisily and carving straight, bloody lines onto my opposite arm. My black hoodie sat on the shining floor behind me. I had heard her footsteps before she entered but couldn't make myself care about the consequences of being caught, literarily red-handed. A flashback had driven me from my bunk, out of the dark dorm room, and into the harsh fluorescent light and comforting illusion of privacy that the bathroom offered. Bill's breathe on my face, his weight on my body, and his penis inside me. I tried to calm down, breath, be in the moment, and ground myself. Everything my rape crisis counselor had been teaching me to do. But I was so tired of him. I didn't think I could hang on much longer if I couldn't get the feeling of him inside me out of my head. For the first time in a month, I thought about surrendering. I was certain he couldn't follow me into death.

“Are you done yet?” Charon asked, jolting me with her grim and impatient tone. I was suicidal. I had cut my arm several times, some of them a bit too deep as the blood continued to spill out onto the white tiles. And she was asking me if I was done? Done doing what?

Sensing my confusion, she gestured to the cuts. “I know you hurt and that you've been through shitty times. And for that, I am very sorry. But this,” she flung her hands out at me, pushing the air between us away from her as if my agony were contagious, “is not going to help a damn thing.”

“I know that,” I said, biting my tongue as I watched a few more beads of blood well out.

“Apparently not.” Closing the few feet between us, she stood over me and aimed her stern stare directly into my eyes.

How could she be so calm about this? It was as if I simply arrived late to group. “I do. But knowing something and actually using that knowledge are two different things.” The words came out without forethought and I realized how stupid I must look. I hadn’t cut in weeks. And now, because I had another flashback, I gave in to the easy fix. Despite the embarrassment of crying in front of her, I sobbed softly for several seconds. If I gave into cutting, who was to say that I wouldn’t give into using when I returned to real life. “I just wanted the pain and fear to stop instantly. I didn’t want to struggle to work through it on my own.”

“It’s our first impulse to seek immediate gratification over the wiser and ultimately healthier route. Don’t cry over it. Just because you’re here and recovering doesn’t mean you’ll ever stop being an addict. Those warped thoughts and behaviors will always be part of you.” Charon pulled a thick stack of paper towels from the dispenser behind her and dropped them in front of me, just in front of the small blood puddle. I pressed several to my own wounds, absorbing the blood and halting the flow of more, before using the rest to soak up the puddle.

Though I heard this concept mentioned repeatedly in meetings and groups, it had never really seemed logical. I was clean, I was learning to be a decent person, a responsible adult, and I planned to stay that way. The old me, the girl that stole from her family and sold her body for drugs, booze, or even smokes, was dead. I had dug her grave, dumped her gnarled body into the hole, and with each day at Gaudenzia, I had filled the hole with more dirt. By the time I went back home, she should be six feet under and forgotten. But it couldn’t be so easy. If it were, I would have reached for a positive coping skill instead of one of my quick and easy negative ones.

After I finished cleaning up the blood as best I could Charon motioned me with her head to follow her. “I fucked up,” I whispered, more to myself than to her.

“Everyone does. Especially in early recovery. And realistically you may mess up again. You may get out of here and relapse that same day. It happens so often. And as awful as I know you think that sounds, it is only the end of your recovery if you chose it to be. You are going to make mistakes whether with drugs, cutting, or just everyday poor decisions. It’s a fact of life, Hall,” she said as we walked through the empty hallway, past the almost closed door of the dorms, the others girls asleep and several of them snoring, and finally past the counselor’s office.

“That’s scary,” I blurted out. I didn’t want to admit fear to her, not when I didn’t fully trust her. She was part of the treatment team, the very same team that had tried to ship me hundreds of miles because I was too much of a headache to deal with.

“It’s terrifying.” We went through the door and into the dimly lit playroom. Not used to seeing it so quiet, so empty, I stopped for a moment and looked around. It could have been a rec room at a college campus until you looked up at the job board and realized this was an institution of recovery and not higher education. “But you have to build the inner strength to know that whatever happens you can overcome it. You have that inner strength already. Which is why I bothered coming back to that bathroom. If you were one of the girls who were just waiting for her out date, I would have let you cut until you were wore out.”

Finished speaking, Charon turned from me and walked towards the door leading from the playroom and out to the ramp and staircase. Everything she had just said left me spinning in a mixture of pride and outrage. Pride that she believed in me, pride that she wanted to help me. Outrage that like the rest of the treatment team, she deemed some clients a waste of time. I didn’t care who it was. It was never a waste of time to save a life.

It wasn’t until we walked past the ramp that I wondered where we were going. Charon shoved open the first set of double doors, making me inanely hope for a smoke break, before

briskly walking to the second set. The nurses' station. For the first time since I'd been here, I would receive medical attention for my cuts. Seeking treatment for harm that I did to myself seemed strange and somewhat attention seeking. Still, I knew not to protest as Charon led me behind the wooden door into the station itself, pointed to a red sliding chair, and then whispered to the young, sandy haired woman on duty. The three of us remained silent as she cleaned the cuts, the alcohol pads prompting a burn strong enough to make me flinch. She took two pads of gauze from a drawer along with a roll of medical tape. My gaze darted to the floor, unable to meet either women's eyes anymore. It was just plain awkward to be bandaged up for something I did. At least I wouldn't have to worry about reopening the wounds as they healed.

"Stop by anytime to have your bandages changed. And make sure the nurse on duty checks the cuts for infection. It's not the brightest idea to cut yourself in a drug and alcohol facility. There's no telling what kind of diseases are present in the client population." The young nurse pressed the edges of the tape down then stood up and went back over to the open magazine she had left open on the counter behind her. Reading copies of Vogue magazine for \$15 an hour was a good a job as most people could hope to get. Resisting the urge to ask to borrow her magazine sometime, I followed Charon out of the office and back through the double doors. Expecting to be led back to bed, I barely managed to smother a giggle as she opened the doors out to the courtyard instead. Smoke break. Never mind the fact that it was after lights out or that I should have been reprimanded for my behavior, Charon was breaking the rules for me to begin with, why not break a few more I supposed she thought.

"You have your smokes with you?" she asked. I reached down instinctively to where my jeans or shorts pocket would have been. Of course, the only thing I felt was my pajama shorts with no pockets. I groaned in frustration as she pulled out and lit her cigarette.

“They’re in my room? Can we go get them, please?” I doubted the answer would be yes, given that she had already begun smoking her own. Still, she had appeared to be on my side since finding me on the bathroom floor. My trust for her, though tenuous, was beginning to overcome my natural wariness of the counselors.

“No. But here,” she mumbled and handed me a cigarette from her pack of Camel Lights. “Don’t tell anyone, Ms. Hall,” she said, louder and with her familiar edge of authority. I took the cigarette between my suddenly trembling fingers. I hadn’t expected that. Hell, not one of the almost 100 or so clients would have even believed any of this night had even happened. Everyone feared Charon. Stern, blunt, firm, and ruthless in her punishments, she was the last staff member anyone would expect to treat one of us like a normal person.

“Thank you. Wow. Thanks,” I stuttered the words out as she lit the cigarette for me. I wanted to hug her. Standing in the dim light of the porch light, shoulders back, chest out, back straight, and still harboring softness in her eyes, she reminded me of my mother. The strong, determined woman before she became sick and before she realized she would not live to see even one of her children graduate from high school. Dizziness and an upsurge of nausea hit me as the disjointed images of my mother, Charon, Bill, and memories of my active addiction blurred together.

The softer, lenient voice of Charon drifted towards me but I couldn’t make out the words. I took a few unsteady steps backwards until my legs bumped into the bench. I sat down and leaned against the pillar, closing my eyes and puffing on the flavorless cigarette. “How do you put yourself back together when you don’t even know what you’re supposed to be? I can’t be the girl I was before the drugs. Everything that’s happened, that I’ve done, has erased her. I don’t know whom I am or what I am supposed to do with my life. I’m almost 22 and should know that

by now. I feel like I'm all of 16." While I spoke, I listened to the sound of Charon's inhales and exhales, the wind streaking through the trees around the yard, the cars driving by in front and behind the rehab, and the quiet conversations and laughter emanating from the buildings windows. The world was alive and continuing on. But my life was on pause. Maybe it had been that way since I was a teenager. Maybe I was only as mature as a 16 year old. The realization that I feared my release date, that I felt safer not knowing, safer living here shielded from the fast-paced relentless pace of reality.

"That's part of what you're doing here. You have a chance to figure the woman you want to be when you get out. It's scary being an adult. It's hard being a good person. And it was terrifying going through life without a tool to blot out any discomfort. But it's worth it, Ms. Hall. You remember that and you'll be alright." Charon sat down beside me, her elbow almost touching mine, and smoked the rest of her cigarette in silence. I didn't know who I wanted to be or how I was going to do it, but at least I knew that I could figure it out. And as long as I didn't give in to the easy out of addiction, I could figure it, someday.

She began drinking at ten in the morning. As soon as she had finished getting dress, her favorite purple skirt and a purple corset top, and doing her makeup, she had sunk back to the storage room, seeking a can of warm Miller Beer. Renee, the girl she had thought was her soul mate—how stupid had she been to believe that anyone that could give her two concussions could love her—had broken up with her only the night before. Only a week after their one year anniversary, only a couple of months after she had moved in with her, and only three weeks after the last time Renee had knocked her to the floor to shut her up. Now, as she stood precariously

on the pile of clutter that covered not just the storage room's floor but the walls, she popped open the Miller and started chugging it.

The disgusting warmth slid down her throat and slopped into her empty belly. When had she eaten last? Between her drinking, snorting, and fighting with Renee it seemed that eating had been forgotten. After weaving her way out of the storage room, she stopped in the laundry to retrieve the bottle of Captain Morgan she had hidden in the cupboard above the washer, nearly invisible behind the laundry detergent, fabric softener, and a plethora of cleaning supplies stuffed in blue bucket. Dust gathered on everything but the detergent and softener. Clothes were her life, she had said so often only a year ago. Now, though she still loved clothing, drugs and booze had moved ahead as her number one favorite thing.

Rene came out of her bedroom—it used to be their bedroom—and told her to make her breakfast. Apparently, Rene didn't realize that dumping a girl meant it was no longer acceptable to order her around like her indentured servant. Ignoring a girl who had been her whole world, whom she had spent 90 percent of her paychecks on, who she had tolerated the particular humility of being abused by someone of her same gender she took several swigs from the bottle and chased them with the worse beer she would ever taste.

By 4 PM that evening, eagerly awaiting the kickoff of the Super Bowl, ready to cheer the undefeated Patriots on to victory, she was lying on the sofa with a beer in one hand and a tall glass of coconut rum, compliments of her best friend, Kit, in the other. The next morning she would have no memories of the game save for the Patriots loss. Unconscious with spit oozing from her mouth for almost the entire game, she had woken up in time to see the loss and that she was the only one in the room. Enraged at her second favorite team's failure, she grabbed the



remote and pounded her hand against the power button. The flat screen TV turned silent and black; the only light in the room now came from the lamp in the end stand beside her.

Where was everyone else? How could the Pats have lost? Why don't I have any booze near me?

As she tried to reason the answer to her urgent questions, she heard moaning from Renee's bedroom. Before she even opened the door, she knew it was Kit making love to Renee. The two girls, too intent on each other and the porno that played on Renee's small TV, didn't notice her standing there for a moment before softly closing the door. Her ex-girlfriend of only a day and her best friend. The walk to the refrigerator was a blur of swiftness and a rage that burrowed underneath her skin, chewed through her fat and muscle, and nested in her heart. The only bottle left was Svedka orange-flavored vodka. She doesn't remember drinking the whole bottle, or passing out on her back on the tan, shaggy carpet, or vomiting, and definitely not almost drowning on stomach acid and booze.

In the morning, Kit makes her eggs, toast, and home fries for breakfast with a side of cocaine and a straw. She cannot decide whom she hates more: herself, Renee, Kit, or God.

John slammed me against the bathroom stall door, grasped one of my pigtails in his oversized fist, and latched his mouth over mine in what was his first kiss with a female in four years. Since we had agreed to have sex, our notes had morphed from talk about our lives to an extended discussion on two topics: his penis and my vagina. At first, I only accepted his sex notes, glanced over them, and then waited for the next one. Then, after almost a week, bored during lunchtime smoke break, I unfolded his latest note and read every word. The first read

through I couldn't imagine John. Bill filled John's role. Instead of making me wet like John had intended, I felt sick and weak.

But I read the note again during dinnertime. And again while waiting for the in house NA meeting. Each time, I thought less of Bill and more of the man I hesitantly admitted I might love. That night, lying on my stomach on top of the itchy blanket, I wrote a sex note back to him. My hands quivered as I scrawled each letter onto the black yellow paper, all while struggling to keep Bill in the background and John in the foreground. In high school, I spent most of my AP Calculus class trading sexual text messages with my girlfriend. It had felt freeing, exhilarating, and served to make me more comfortable with my body and sex.

When I finished writing John back, though I didn't feel as ecstatic as I had back in math class, it seemed like I had won something. A smidgeon of separation between the act of consensual sex and rape. Bill's name was nowhere in the note. Obvious to anyone, this fact prompted me to sit up in bed, lowering my head to avoid smacking it against the top bunk. If I could write a two-page note about John making love to me until I gasped his name without Bill appearing in it, then perhaps it was possible to make love to John without him entering my mind. The logic was precarious, but it felt true. John knew my reluctance, knew that I was procrastinating having sex with him as long as possible because of my fear. I folded the note up and slid it into my folder pocket, decided I would give it to him tomorrow morning, let him read it, let him think about me while he showered tonight, and then tell him the good news the following morning. I would have sex with him. And Bill wasn't allowed to control my desires.

While kissing me John's hands yanked up my shirt, pulled up my bra, and firmly gripped my breasts. The encounter was brief, no more than a few minutes, yet it held a passion that I hadn't felt even with Jared. Before unlocking the stall door, John kissed me, gently this time,

sucking softly on my bottom lip. He leaned towards my ear to whisper something and I realized that even if I didn't know whether I was in love with him or not, I wanted him to love me.

"You're so damn beautiful. And unbelievably tight, baby girl," he said then opened the door and snuck out. We had decided to go out separately, so we wouldn't arrive late to dinner at the same time. Even the dimmest staff member would have suspicions if we walked in one right after the other. I waited in the stall for ten minutes then slowly climbed the stairs to the cafeteria, holding my stomach the whole way. If anyone questioned me about my lateness, I would moan and gesture to my stomach, citing an upset tummy. I wasn't going to be caught this time.

When I reached the top of the stairs I stopped, thinking about John's words. He hadn't said anything wrong and other different circumstances I would gloat about the tightness comment. But they weren't what I had hoped to hear. Still, I entered the cafeteria smiling, proud of myself for not thinking of Bill for a moment while John screwed me.

## **Chapter 17**

*Rejoice in hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer.* ” – Romans 12:12

Over the weeks that I had been at Gaudenzia, I had watched other clients struggle with the frustration of working on the Boards and swelled with gratitude that it was they and not I. And I hoped, knowing it was unlikely, that it would remain that way. The day after John and I hooked up in the bathroom, I walked sluggishly into morning meeting, still exhausted from a restless night in the 90-something heat, and was tapped on the shoulder. I turned around and visibly flinched. Jen, a multiple time Gaudenzia client, had arrived only a few days ago and yet had already been given the job of client leader. Besides that, she had left several fellow clients in tears, including one male client, after she blistered them with her sharp, commanding voice. Any rule the staff had she followed, enforced, and did all she could to punish clients that didn't obey or praise the rules. Staring up at her, tracing the thick scar that ran from one brown eye down to her chin, I waited for her to either shriek at me or punch me.

“You're second on the boards today, Hall.” Like most of the staff, she referred to us by our last names, grinding on the nerves of almost every person.

I nodded stiffly and speed-walked to my seat next to Tanya. Not sleeping well either, Tanya slumped in her chair with her chin resting against her almost flat chest. Her quiet, high-pitched snores were soothing in their familiarity, helping my adrenaline to burn out enough to realize that the bigger problem than Jen was the Boards.

“Good morning, beautiful. How was your night?” John whisper-sang to me as he galloped in, wide-awake and smiling. If someone could only lock Jen in a closet for a minute, I would have ran into his arms and starting whining hysterically about the torture method that the staff lovingly dubbed the Boards.

Instead, I smiled feebly and whispered, “It was awful, baby. And today isn’t looking so good either.” John’s eyebrows knitted, his brown eyes tensed around his prominent nose, as he opened his mouth to reply.

“Sit down and shut up, Severo,” Jen hissed. His hands became fists while his shoulders tensed up. What if he does something stupid and hits her? Saying goodbye to John in handcuffs was unspeakable. He relaxed and casually dropped into his chair.

By the time everyone had arrived for morning meeting, Tanya had woken up and grimaced at the mention of the boards.

“They won’t even assign me them, girlie.” The assurance in her voice seemed strange. There was no way for her to know that. They could assign anyone anything any day they wanted. “They know better than to do that because they know I won’t do them. I’m here to heal spiritually, not to learn how to print again.”

“But if you didn’t do them they’d flip out on you,” I whispered as the books were set on the table. The familiar call for volunteers to read by Tony. I raised my hand as I did almost every morning, eager to break myself out of the terror of public speaking.

“I don’t give a fuck what they do. Kateri, you have to know that almost everything they do here is simply to punish us anyway. They don’t give a damn if we stay clean or not.” Her voice didn’t sound natural angry, its lilting innocence only lent itself to happy or gracefully sad.

“Kateri,” Tony called before I could reply to Tanya. It was difficult to deny the truth in her statement. From the air conditioning installed only in places where staff members frequented to the condescending attitude of several staff members to the branding of some clients as a waste of time or too much trouble. Crossroads wasn’t what the sleek brochures they had given to my father when he dropped me off advertised. But I couldn’t believe that not a single staff member

cared if I stayed clean or not. Tony, Travis, and Francis cared about every single client, even the drug dealers that had been stuck in here instead of jail by mislead judges.

“Feel like reading from the *Daily Reflection* today?” Tony asked as I reached the desk before the three other clients he had called up even made their way through the aisles.

As usual, the thrill at being asked if I wanted to do something instead of told made me smile. “Sure.” I picked up the small, gray book and flipped through the pages until I found the date. June 22. John, exchanging places with Andy in order to stand by me briefly without Jen threatening both of us, read from the Hazelden book first. His voice was strong, spreading around the room, and even waking up a few of our regular group sleepers. The passage discussed patience. The two of us both knowing I was hardly a naturally patient person, John glanced at me out of the corner of his eye several times. When he finished reading, he pretended to cough into his hand, turning his head to glance directly at me, and winked.

Falling in love in rehab was stupid. I knew it and assumed John did to. But falling in love with Jared had been insane. I could argue that when we first met he was in AA/NA and striving to get clean. I could argue that I genuinely had no intention of anything but friendship that night I first crashed in his bedroom. And that at first we both helped each other stay clean and supported each other through relapses. All of that was the truth, a truth I tried to explain to my various sponsors even while they warned me that it wouldn’t last, that it would only end badly for both of us. Neither of us had listened. And now I was in a rehab and Jared wasn’t even making an effort to get clean anymore. That was where stupid had gotten me before. Did I really want to skip down that road again?

“I’d like to think I know a lot about patience,” John began, after pausing several seconds to think of something to say about the reading. “Being in prison for four years you have to be

patient. Because really all you're doing is waiting for the day you get out." The strength in his voice disappeared, replaced with something somber. "And during that waiting it was hard to hold on. I keep wondering if I'd ever be somewhere where I didn't wake up miserable every day. But I held on. And now I'm here," he grinned and paused as most of the clients chuckled. "And I'm finding all kinds of new beginnings, new things and people to look forward to, appreciate, and love."

I ducked my head into my book, pretending to be familiarizing myself with the reading to hide my surprise. Had he been talking about me? I couldn't ask him if he had been without the risk of looking conceited. I wasn't sure if I wanted him to be talking about me or not. At least if he didn't love me then I wouldn't have to worry about the consequences of loving him.

After Tony thanked him for reading, everyone provided the obligatory clap, mine slow and hesitant, and John walked back to his seat in the middle row on the men's side of the room. Next to read was Jenny, a middle-age alcoholic, who like me, had come here on her own free will. Since arriving a few days ago, she remained primarily quiet save for her brief explosions of anger upon learning she broke yet another Gaudenzia rule.

As she opened the Big Book to the required page, John coughed loudly to get my attention. Swiftly I turned my head away from Jenny just in time to see him mouth the words, "I love you." I had never wanted to vomit and squeal in joy at the same time until that moment. If I didn't mouth the words back I would be rejecting him and my chance at finding out if the relationship really were as stupid as it looked from the outside. I didn't deserve guys like Jared anymore. I deserved a guy who made me smile, laugh, and feel beautiful. John did all that. God, shouldn't I at least give it a try?

“I love you,” I mouthed back, holding my book in front of the right side of my face to block Tony’s view. Jen, apparently figuring out what was going on, gave first John then me a stare resembling what would happen if hatred and disgust had a deformed infant. But her lips remained closed. She couldn’t rat us out for something that happened right in front of the staff and yet no one saw it. If I wasn’t convinced she would literally backhand me, I’d have stuck out my tongue at her.

The sound of clapping startled me and I quickly opened the book and skimmed over the passage. Tony thanked Jenny and nodded his head at me. I swallowed then brought a clump of spit up and swished it around my dry mouth. No matter how many times I read or talked in front of large groups, it would never feel comfortable. My aim in forcing myself to practice it was to make it at least tolerable.

“Today, I’m Free. This brought me to the good healthy realization that there were plenty of situations left in the world over which I had no personal power—that if I was so ready to admit that to be the case with alcohol, so I must make the same admission with respect to much else. I would have to be still and know that He, not I, was God.” I read the quote that preceded every small paragraph of text. Some were from the AA Big Book, other from the Twelve Steps and Traditions, and a few, like today’s were from a book I hadn’t even heard of before called *As Bill Sees It*. Bill, I safely assumed referred to the founder of the AA program.

I took a deep breath and considered what I could share in response to the reading before continuing. “I am learning to practice acceptance in all circumstances of my life, so that I may enjoy peace of mind. At one time life was a constant battle because I felt I had to go through each day fighting myself, and everyone else. Eventually, this became a losing battle. I ended up getting drunk and crying over my misery. When I began to let go and let God take over my life I



began to have peace of mind. Today I'm free. I do not have to fight anybody or anything anymore." I finished reading and set the book on the table behind me. I hated having to come up with a response coherent enough to share with an entire room within only a few seconds. The room was silent except for a few hesitant snores from a handful of napping clients and the tapping of pencils on folders in boredom or impatience.

"So this passage makes me think about contradictions and how they are a fact of life," I said quietly. I wasn't exactly sure where I was going with that statement but decided to just keep talking before I worked myself up into a panic attack. "It's saying that we are only free by accepting that we don't have power over lots of things in life. Our addictions are one of them. At first, I couldn't wrap my mind around the fact that I had to surrender my will in order to be free of addiction. It didn't make sense." I paused and tried to think about how I could explain the realization that God was present to lead us through the hell of addiction and life in general. "But I realized that giving my will over to God was not just surrendering. By accepting help from something greater than me I empowered myself as well." I sighed in triumph at surviving another public speaking stint and started back to my seat.

Tony led the group in applause, as I sat down next to Tanya. He grinned, rounding his flabby cheeks into miniature pumpkins, and gave me the thumbs up sign. If only the treatment team could have seen that. However, morning meeting ended and the Boards were officially assigned, I felt anything but successful. I didn't need the stress of a pointless assignment and yet I didn't have a choice.

Andy, who like me, was here much longer than the expected 28 days, was first up on the board. The advantage of being first was obvious. If you made a mistake, you only had to redo your work instead of the work of every person before you. There was a sheet of letters and

numbers, showing us the correct way to write them on the obligatory unlined white piece of paper. All it took was one slightly nonconforming letter, a smudge of pen ink or dirt, improper spacing, or a misspelled word to have to crumple the sheet up and start all over. Tears, sweat, swear words, threats of bodily harm, and even blood had been shed in the name of the perfection the Boards demanded.

Andy, having exhausted his tolerance for the Boards during his first stay at Gaudenzia, struggled to finish his section through most of the morning. Not allowed to work on the Boards during group left us using our smoke breaks, recreation period, and meal breaks to work on them. By lunch, the anticipation of the ordeal left me with no appetite. I pushed my hot sauce covered green beans around my plate, left my peanut butter sandwich untouched, and barely heard Tanya as she tried to draw details about my relationship with John from me. I did not intend to tell her or anyone else in there about John and me. We had made love without being caught, we continued to pass notes, and the staff treated our friendship no different from any of the other male/female friendships. I intended to keep it that way until I was released. If I started talking, even to someone I believed I could probably trust, rumors would start swirling amongst the clients. And it wouldn't be long after that before the staff was keeping us apart and watching us more intently than a dog eyeing his owner chomping on a strip of bacon.

"Here you go," Andy said. He dropped the clipboard with its thick stack of white paper clipped to it on the empty space of table across from Tanya and I. "I hope you have better luck with this fucking cocksucker than I did. Or we're not going to get it done today and then we'll get our asses beat tomorrow by the high and mighty queen Charon and her bitchy side kick." Despite my anxiety I laughed. Andy, facing the same judgment of a "problem client" as I was,

used sarcasm to keep from lashing out or running away. I admired him for that, for hanging on and trying to help others even while he was told he would never stay clean.

“I’ll try.” He gave me thumbs up and walked back to the other side of the room where the men’s tables sat. I moved my tray to the side, asked Tanya to be quiet, and started my section of the Boards.

Three hours, fifteen rewrites, two breaks to cry and curse, and one prayer to God later and I didn’t know how I was supposed to finish them today let alone soon enough to let everyone after me have time to complete their sections. I sat at the picnic table nearest the door and porch, several balls of crinkled paper surrounding the clipboard, and stared at the blank piece of paper in front of me. I had to complete the page number, title, section heading, Andy’s section, and my section without making a single mistake. Precision in handwriting was never something I worried about prior to the Boards. Now, I wanted to knee on the gravel and beg God to turn my sloppy, illegible handwriting into straight lines and beautifully shaped curves.

“You know, I’d like to get that damn thing and get started already,” I heard a male voice behind me say. I turned around quickly, debating whether to hit him over the head with the clipboard or not.

Garret, almost 50 years old and yet looking only a few years older than I did, grinned down at me, his oversized white T-shirt moist and heavy with sweat and probably water he had tossed on himself to stay cool, before taking a seat on the tabletop beside my paper pile. “Only kidding with you, girl,” he said, apparently noticing the tension that had worked its way into every part of my body.

“I didn’t know you were next. I’m sorry but I’m trying.” Though neither of us knew each other very well, we had become friends over the occasional game of Spades played during rec

period. Never having played any card game but Go Fish before, he had taught me and often played as my partner. Like several other of the men here, he had hinted at his attraction to me a few times before noticing what was going on between John and me. After that, the friendship remained platonic save for an undercurrent of flirting and sexual tension at times.

“I know. Those things are a bitch. Anything I can do to help you knock them out?” As much as I wanted to give the clipboard to him and let him do my section along with his, letting someone else do your Board work was equivalent to committing high treason. The Awareness Chair would only be the beginning of our punishments when we were caught.

“Thanks but we both know that’s a bad idea.” Cautiously I began forming the “G” of Gaudenzia, determined to make this attempt my last one.

Garrett didn’t say anything else as he watched me move the pen slowly across the page. I stopped and looked at him, giving him a chance to leave the table without making it rock and mess my writing up. “Instead of going so slow write at your normal speed. Your hand shakes going the slow. Maybe if just write like you normally would it will stay steady. Doing these fuckers with an unsteady hand is impossible, girl.”

The thought hadn’t crossed my mine. I had assumed that I had to go slow in order to get the shapes of the letters and numbers write. The fact my hand shook didn’t register consciously in my mind until he pointed it out. If I could have hugged him without Tony seeing, I would have. “Thank you.”

“No problem, girl. You got this,” Garrett said as he left the table and headed back over to the pavilion to continue his game of Spades or Hearts.

“God, please help me through this task. I am so frustrated. I can’t do this on my own,” I silently prayed.

“Stop fooling around and get that Board done. Now, Hall,” Ms. Steph barked. Turning around I saw her stepping out of the doorway, the heavy door closing sluggishly behind her. Just starting her shift, she apparently decided to focus on the problem clients first.

I started to form a flippant response, my lips eager to through it at her, when I realized what she had to say didn’t really bother me. Instead, I just nodded my head at her and returned my focus to the blank page. “God, tell me how I am supposed to get this done without tearing every sheet of paper into tiny pieces and then setting them on fire with my lighter?” I prayed and lit a cigarette. If I wasn’t running precariously low on cigarettes I would have puffed furiously on a cigarette, one right after the other, scraping the moisture from my throat and frying whatever was left of my lungs.

I looked up at the trees I could see from my seat at the picnic table and waited for something. Not sure what or why I was waiting, I shifted my gaze from the trees to the tip of my cigarette and back again. Surrender. Surrender to God and the fact that some things in this twisted world are beyond my control. I had never considered myself a control freak until that moment. Letting go of my fierce illusion of control was akin to yanking my intestines out through my throat.

If I couldn’t control things than anything could happen at any time. Like the rape. I wanted to ask God why it had happened to me. And how I could ever feel safe without knowing that it would never happen again. But I didn’t have the time, not with the Boards and definitely not with a schedule that accounted for every second of my time. I took a deep slow breath, closed my eyes, and mentally unclenched my entire body, a body tensed so rigidly in preparation for anything and everything. I wasn’t alone. God was here. I had to believe that he had and would continue to help me.

I picked up the pen and began working on the heading of the Boards, my hand moving at its normal writing speed instead of the slow, hesitant speed I had been using earlier. After two minutes, I had finished writing Gaudenzia without a mistake. I stopped and quickly took several huge breaths of air, realizing that I had hardly been breathing the entire time. I wasn't finished yet but it still felt like a victory. I didn't feel frustrated or impatient but rather confident. I would finish the Boards. Just thinking that made me smile broadly, cracking my dry lips. Thank you, God, I thought, repeating the words in my head as Steph blew her whistle, and everyone began to head for the building. I carefully gathered up the papers and clipboard and speed walked up the steps, through the door, and headed for the group room. I could be more done on the Boards before group started.

Hours later, when I finished the Boards and passed them off to the next person, I felt lightheaded with relief and accomplishment. Walking back towards Tanya, who was leaning against the sun warmed brick wall of the building, I struggled to keep myself from flinging myself into John's arms as he suddenly appeared beside me. "Good job, baby," he said.

I struggled to form a thank you, still in shock at our confession of love. What did we do now? Where was this going? "I want you to know that this isn't just about the sex. You're beautiful inside and out. The four years I spent in prison are almost worth it just to meet you, baby."

No man, not even my father, had ever said anything so infused with love to me before. The questions I had asked myself only a moment before didn't matter anymore. He was mine and I was his. I was in love with not only a decent man but also a wonderful man for the first time in my life.

## **Chapter 18**

*Then David continued, “Be strong and courageous, and do the work. Don’t be afraid or discouraged, for the Lord God, my God, is with you. He will not fail you or forsake you. He will see to it that all the work related to the Temple of the Lord is finished correctly.” – 1 Chronicles*

28:20

“I have your release date, Ms. Hall,” Sherlanda whispered, shuffling through the manila folder marked with my last and first name.

“What?” I hadn’t meant to practically shout but the surrealism of her announcement prompted me to stand up from the barely padded chair. Some part of me must have realized that there was life outside of rehab. But shortly after I dubbed John my boyfriend, the outside world had vanished. Rehab, John, rehab, John. That had been my entire universe for the last two weeks. With my dad out of town, I had no visitors, no phone calls. Nothing to remind me that this institution was not, in fact, the entire world.

Groping, kissing, dry humping, and pants of “I love you,” had punctuated the routine of groups, meetings, therapy sessions, and meals eaten in the gallons of sweat inducing-cafeteria. Before my relationship with John, it took tremendous willpower to tug myself out of bed each morning and stumble half-awake to the bathroom to get ready for another day. Even with Tanya’s friendship, loneliness had permeated each day. With John, I was never lonely, even when we weren’t in each other’s sight. I did my recovery work, trudging my way through the 12 Steps, building my relationship with God, identifying my relapse triggers, and watching the gnawing cravings I had had gradually disappear. And John supported me through all of it. Maybe that knowledge was what finally prompted me to make love to him again while in rehab. Fortunately, for the both of us, no staff member knew.

Love, recovery, love, recovery. And love.

A few days ago, on the Fourth of July, the staff had organized a cookout, extra rec time, and permitted us to stay up later and go outside to see the city's fireworks display. Before dinner, when all the other clients had clattered up the stairs to the cafeteria, and the stairway was silent, John and I sat on the steps and whispered to each other. "When we get out of here, everything will be better. We'll be free. We won't have to sneak around like we're committing a crime just to spend some time together," he said as he wrapped his arms around me and pulled me against his chest.

The first either of us had mentioned life on the outside as a couple. I should have felt excitement or at the very least reassurance. Instead, I felt surprised, disoriented. We would be free. But did either of us know how to continue this relationship without the rules and structure of this place? With my extensive history of falling into and then clinging to abusive relationships and John's history of allowing women to treat him like a battered, elderly dog I couldn't just believe things would be happy.

"But how will we even see each other? You don't have a car, I don't drive, and it's 40 minutes to Meadville from shitty Titusville." We both knew this but it seemed like John preferred to forget these facts. He seemed to believe that everything would just work out. Though I had rediscovered the concepts of faith and hope since coming to rehab, I still knew that things just didn't magically work out. You had to do something.

Instead of answering me, John had leaned down and kissed me. Maybe the relationship was merely a rehab fling and wouldn't last a day after we rejoined the world. It could be like a candy bar. Sweet and wonderful for about two minutes and then gone.



“What are you doing?” Mr. Wally exclaimed. He stood a few feet from us, mouth hanging slightly open and his already wrinkled face buried in even more folds of skin.

For half a second, I thought about responding that what we were doing was pretty damn obvious. Then I realized that John’s arms were no longer around me. I looked around and saw his back as he took the stairs two at a time. I stayed put, waiting for the blistering lecture that I knew would happen eventually. Better to deal with it now then spend the rest of the day dreading it.

“You should know better than to waste your time messing with those boys. They’re all jokers. Do you understand me?” He wasn’t angry or even stern. Disappointment flavored with fatigue from watching hundreds of girls chose boys over their sobriety. I wanted to explain to him that that would never be me. I liked John, I loved John, but for the first time in my life, I could say that I loved myself more. And realized that self-love, or self-respect for that matter, is nothing to feel guilty about. But given that I was practically in a boys lap with his tongue rolling around in my throat, I doubted he would believe me. Instead, I mumbled yes and hurried up the stairs to dinner, my appetite now entirely gone.

Later, with the knowledge that John and I were likely to receive a ban anyway, I cuddled into his arms, the two of us lying with several other clients in the small grass patch in the furthest left corner of the courtyard. As the fireworks began, I felt the first of dozens of insect bites that I would scratch until some bleed in my sleep later that night. Neither of us spoke as yellows, greens, red, and blues splashed across the blackness, and distant booms drowned out the normal clicking and whirring of the insects. We held each other, and for those several minutes, it had felt as if we were just any other couple. Not two recovering addicts, not two people who had their whole lives to repair, and not two people who had only know each other a couple of months. As

the fireworks ended, and Gary called us to come inside, John kissed me goodnight. I had walked down the Reentry hallway that night, already itching the golf ball sized bites on my arms and legs, and thought with no realization of the bizarreness of it, that that had been the most romantic night of my life up until then.

But now, standing before Sherlanda and smelling of the Calagel the nurse had gave me in vain to relieve my itching and desperate scratching, the last thing I worried about was John or romance. What was I going to do? How I was supposed to just walk back into my life and make everything okay? I had the tools, Gaudenzia had seen to that, but applying them to my life, the life I had so dutifully trashed in the name drugs and booze, was much more difficult.

Sherlanda, not sure whether my “what” was a question or outburst, raised one of her long, thin, impeccably plucked eyebrows, and stared at me. “Your release date is in a week, Ms. Hall. We’ll have transport take you back to your home town and drop you off in a public place.”

“Why not my house?” The question was irrelevant compared to whether my dad would let me move back in and if not where would I stay. But the thought of being dumped at Country Fair with my garbage bags and duffle bag of belongings was not only embarrassing but also problematic. I physically couldn’t carry all of it.

“It’s against our policy. For clients and staff safety, we always drop off and pick up clients at a public place close to their residence. We will let you call someone before you leave to meet you so you can get your things home.” Sherlanda didn’t look at me as she spoke but instead appeared to be reading something in my file. “You don’t have a residence listed for your discharge.” A statement, not a question. I had left the line blank when filling out the paperwork, not knowing then or now, what my father’s verdict would be.

“I have to call my dad and see if he’ll let me move back home. If not, then I’m not really sure where I’ll live. There’s a homeless shelter in Titusville but I don’t know the name.” Seeing pity in her eyes, I abruptly switched my gaze to my hands. Usually something I engaged in only when painfully bored, I started to pick and dig at my cuticles, intent on peeling them back from the halfway point on my too-long fingernails.

“I can look up the name and write it down as your back up address. While I’m doing that you can call you dad and try to get an answer,” she said then placed my file down on her desk and swiveled her chair towards her hulking desktop computer. “But if he says no I strongly suggest that you consider waiting for a bed at the Community House.” Many of the women that graduated from Gaudenzia continued their recovery in the group-like home, made up of women and their children. Strict rules, drug testing, chores, meeting attendance, and meeting with counselors it differed from rehab only in the fact that you could come and go as you pleased as long as you were in by curfew and complied with all the other rules. Though I chafed at the thought of another institution-like environment, I had considered requesting a bed there several times. But it was it in Erie, an hour away from my college. Not far with a license and a car. But I had neither. School was the only thing I knew with certainty awaited me when I got out. I wasn’t going to drop out for anything or anyone.

“No,” I told her for at least the eighth time since I had been at Crossroads. But with each “no,” I became less convinced that I was making the right decision. I wouldn’t have to figure out what to do with my life at the House; they would tell me. But going back to T-Vegas, aka Titusville was like building a house without a foundation even set yet. Would the entire thing collapse on top of me, burying me in thousands of pounds of earth and rubble?

Sherlanda, clearing her throat and sighing quick and harsh, glared at me with her eyebrows raised. “We’re trying to get your future started and you’re not even listening to me,” she said.

Apparently, she had been talking while I slipped easily into my own worries. “I’m sorry. I’m scared.”

Her irritation gradually slipped off her face. “It’s better that you’re scared. At least it means that you recognize that the odds are stacked against you. That alone gives you a better chance of being one of the few who make it.” Her tone reminded me of auditions for one-act plays in junior high school. Most of the kids climbed onto the stage, shoved the script in front of their face, and read the lines without anything resembling emotion. Did the counselors have a script of their own, bullet points by the lines they would be most likely to need to say? “Here,” she muttered as she glided a large worksheet packet across the small desk towards me, “this is to be completed the day before you are discharged. It’s designed to help you set up your life post-Gaudenzia.”

I took the packet, put it in my folder, and then walked across the overly grey office to the corded phone. The not knowing if my father would trust me enough to allow me back home suddenly seemed better than finally finding out his answer. If he said no, my discharge would be that much more challenging. But more importantly, the disappointment of not having worked hard enough to fix myself, to fix our relationship, would be like trying to swallow a chunk of firewood.

After dialing his cellphone number, I listened to the persistent ringing for what seemed like several minutes but could not have been more than a few seconds, before he picked up and greeted me with a congested hello. Suddenly, I couldn’t think. I hadn’t spoken to him since he

went to Germany with his fiancée, and the sound of his voice created a tightness in my throat and tears on my eyelashes.

“It’s me, dad.” It was comforting and strange that no matter how distant or strained we were as a family, my father always recognized each of his children’s voices. And we his. We couldn’t forget his deep, alternately smooth and rough voice if we tried to. Some things were hooked into your heart. If you tore them out, you’d take part of yourself with them.

His familiar phrase for years whenever I called him, “Oh, hi, Kateri. How are you doing?” The first sentence was never said in surprise but rather as an exclamation. Like someone had just told him he’d won the lottery or a free tropical vacation. He managed to capture total glee in three words, as if my calling him made his day. For the first time, it occurred to me that maybe it did.

As for the second sentence, curiosity and concern inevitably intertwined with each of the four words. Why hadn’t I noticed the concern before? I had always heard the curiosity, always assumed it was because he was nosy, or wanted to know the latest way I had screwed my life up. Looking back, I realized that as wrong as I was about Jared, I was even more wrong about my dad. He didn’t just realize he loved me. The love had been there from the start. I just hadn’t let myself see it.

After I took a few deep breaths, I spent a few minutes telling him about some of the things I had learned, like patience from the awful Boards and love for God. I heard his breath as he listened and occasionally interjected with a “that’s great” and “you’re doing so well.” I knew he was nodding. A habit I had gleaned from him, we both had the tendency of nodding our agreement with what someone said while talking on the phone. It didn’t matter to either of us that the person talking couldn’t see it.

Sherlanda whispered my name, and I turned to see her tapping her purple wristwatch. Our session must be almost over. I didn't want to just blurt the question out. But I knew I had to say something before my dad took his turn to talk, a turn that was always discursive, though interesting.

To my surprise when I finished explaining to him about what Step I was on, he quietly asked if I knew when I was coming home. Home. Not when I would be getting out, but coming home. It wasn't a definite yes, but it gave me enough hope to ask the question without sobbing.

"I'm getting out in a week, dad. And I was wondering if I could move back in with you and everyone?" It had been asked. At least I would know where I would be living after I left the shelter of Gaudenzia.

"Yeah. Of course. Do you need me to pick you up?" He sounded as casual as if he were agreeing to buy me something for lunch instead of allowing a recovering addict back into his home. Though I wasn't audibly crying, the tears of relief, and something else—love, pride, gratitude—squiggled down my cheeks. I whispered the details of my discharge day, told him I loved him, listen to his customary goodbye of "take care," and practically fainted when he added, "Love you, too."

Sherlanda handed me the tissue box and tapped her pink-heeled foot repeatedly as I struggled to stop crying so I could clean my face up. Feeling silly for crying because of happiness, I realized that that wasn't really the case. The tears were because of love. And despite all the painful things I had seen happen because of or in the name of love, even one joyful moment of love could smother all of them. Love was always worthy of crying over.

A few minutes later, as Sherlanda walked me back to group, I tried to make a mental list of what I needed to do before discharge day. Finish that packet and turn it in. By the thickness of

it, I figured it had to be at least 40-some pages. I would have to work on it not just at night but also at smoke breaks and rec to get it finished in time. I crossed off the first item with a thick pink sharpie, wondering if they really made them in that color in reality. On the outside, my ex-sponsor, Leanna, had encouraged me to make lists. "Put everything you need to get done down on paper so it doesn't whiz around your head stressing you out," she had often told me.

A sponsor. In here, with recovery the number one thing we did all day, every day, having a sponsor wasn't necessary. The real world, aside from meetings at night and drug and alcohol outpatient treatment, didn't care about my recovery. It didn't have strict rules against anything that could even be construed as supporting using behavior let alone using itself.

The number of women in the Titusville recovery scene was less than two dozen. And of them, only about a quarter of them had the necessary one year of recovery to take on a sponsee. And ultimately, at any given time, only two or three of those women were willing to sponsor anyone. Unfortunately, for me, I had been through all three of those women with little success. Would any of them be willing to give me another chance? Chris, my first sponsor, fired me after I decided to be honest about the extent of my relationship with Jared. At the time, I hated her for not understanding that I loved him, that he was good for me and I him. Now, I wished I had listened to even ten percent of what the women in the rooms had tried to tell me.

My second sponsor, Jane, was paired me with without a choice from either of us. Greg, only a couple weeks before his death, grabbed me by the hood of my lucky black jacket, and led me over to her. I had shared my fears of being without a sponsor to him after Jared had expressed his outrage and sympathy but cancelled out dinner plans to go meet with his own sponsor. And to my surprise, Greg asked Jane to be my sponsor. But as my relapses became more frequent, I cared less about Jane and Step work and more about spending every moment possible with Jared.

Jane stopped answering my calls for weeks before finally admitting she didn't have time to sponsor anyone.

Not even in the program for six months, the fact that I had breezed through two sponsors, acted as a repellant to almost all the women in the program. Until Leanna. And I would have still claimed her as my sponsor were it not for the fact that I simply stopped calling her, returning her calls, or going to meetings. Perhaps more addicting then drugs or booze had been Jared. I hung on for maybe one or two weeks after he quit and then joined him in unrestrained addiction. Where he went, I followed, even if that meant giving up everything and everyone else in my life. But of the three, Leanna was the only one that might consider dealing with me again. I had to call her and humble myself by not only apologizing but admitting she was right about every "suggestion" she had made.

Sometimes, when she and Jared smoked pot together, they would laugh. Loud and gaudy chuckling that they hid only by setting the music's volume on 100 percent and turning the old TV onto Star Trek reruns or Comedy Central. And when the music became monotonous or the TV's picture quality became worse than usual, they would shut off both and watch porno on his laptop, giggling and half-heartedly groping each other. If he were in a particularly good mood, he'd share a bag of Doritos or a bowl of popcorn with her. But that was rare. Mostly, he ate these by himself and told her to buy her own. She found it ironic that they could share drugs together without thinking of the expense, but were strangely cautious with food.

Sometimes, when they smoked together, the pot became bland. High, restless, and wanting more, they sought pills, or booze, or both. They find them; they always find whatever



high they desire. But the consequences are never predictable. What was it about the rush that could change a person so much?

Shoved out his door at 2 AM with the snow accumulating. Pinned down on the sofa, his forearm flattening her windpipe. Skunky beer thrown on her, followed by the empty can, before he flings her onto the pot-holed covered street. Slapped swiftly across her face then immediately told to stop crying.

Maybe the high dulled her memory. Or maybe she believed that things would change. Whatever the reason, the commitment that should have been reserved for her schoolwork, or family, or her recovery went into him. Her thoughts and actions revolved around making him happy, spending time with him, and getting high with him.

## **Chapter 19**

*But the Lord said to Samuel, “Do not look on his appearance or on the height of his stature, because I have rejected him. For the Lord sees not as man sees: man looks on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart.” – 1 Samuel 16:7*

The day after receiving my out date, John and I snuck as many moments alone as possible under the somewhat strictly enforced banned, both of us terrified of the upcoming separation. In a speech infused with optimism several weeks ago, John had assured me that we would get out on the same day or very close to it. Now, with six days left of seeing his wide smile peeking out from his well-groomed mustache every day, the best I could do was to “act as if.” I smiled, laughed, kissed, hugged, and fooled around with him as if I knew we would see each other again, as if I knew this was a relationship of love and not of convenience.

At rec, I sat at the picnic table closest to the volleyball court and alternated between working on my packet and watching John sweat through his white wife-beater as he used his height to control the game. Every few serves he would turn and smile at me, sometimes mouthing he loved me, other times just blowing a kiss.

The packet included a survey designed to show the changes in my thinking from when I first came in to now. I read the questions, and vaguely remembered answering them a week after I came to Crossroads. It covered things like morals, relapse behaviors, support systems, and spirituality. Though I couldn’t remember all my previous answers, I remembered enough of them to acknowledge that I wasn’t the same petrified, brutalized girl that almost reluctantly chose rehab over suicide.

A question about shoplifting—one I had laughed at months ago, recalling the pride and rush I felt at knowing that I didn’t need to waste money on things like food and clothes but

instead could save it for what had really mattered: drugs—made me feel so disconnected from that girl. I couldn't steal now. Not for anyone or myself. Not even for Jared. Since John entered the picture my obsession with Jared had dissipated into one more thing in my troubled past. Still, as I continued through the section about morals, I wondered what I would do when I saw him again. Him, in person, living only two blocks from me. Him, with his body as familiar to me as my own. No matter how much I thought I loved John I couldn't lie to myself. The possibility that I might be drawn to Jared again was still there. Once, after I had just come home from Jared's house, my dad had muttered, "There's something not normal about you two. You're more than drawn together like magnets. You're closer to being different halves of the same whole."

We weren't the same anymore. We never would be again. A series of questions about lying was enough evidence in and of itself to prove this. I used to lie every day. To my dad, professors, friends, siblings, sponsors, fellow AA/NA members, and to myself. Jared lied to everyone, myself included. It was only now, though, that I realized that, as I had done, he lied to himself more than he lied to anyone else. Now, I couldn't even tell a convincing lie if I wanted to. It felt vividly wrong.

"Hey, beautiful," John whispered, as he ran by the table, chasing after the ball and wiping sweat off his face.

Before coming to Gaudenzia, I would have looked around, wondering whom he was talking to at a table with only me at it. How could I have seen only ugly for twenty-one-years? It had been as if every mirror I'd gazed in was broken. They all threw back a distorted image of a beautiful girl. And only recently had God fixed the mirrors for me. I saw me. Brown eyed, black-brown, short, curly haired beautiful me. I didn't feel pretty all the time, in fact, whenever the

rape came barging into my thoughts, it was all I could do to not feel repulsive. Still, when I looked in the mirror, beauty smiled back.

Later, placing the completed packet of discharge paperwork in the hand-in basket, I realized that even with every question answered, I still wasn't prepared to reenter the world. The nightmares, flashbacks, and anger from the rape were still there. I didn't know what dating John on the outside would be like. I didn't know what I wanted to do with the education I would be continuing. The only career that ever held any interest and joy and the only job that I knew I would be good at was being a writer. Did that even count as a real job? Maybe it did. Even if it didn't, I would make it count.

"Are you excited?" I turned around to see Tanya, half-smiling, half-scowling at my discharge packet. Like John, she had yet to receive her discharge date. My last full day at Crossroads, instead of vying for time with me like John was, including half-carrying me into the empty auditorium to kiss me until my chest shrieked in oxygen-deprived agony, Tanya sulked and provided me with a list of all the reasons why she should be discharged at that very moment.

"I don't know if excited is the right word," I said as I walked slowly back to the chair I had pulled up next to the window. The last Orientation work group. The last time I would sit with my yellow legal pad balanced on my lap, writing poetry and journaling while staring out the window at the world I had made such a mess of my life in. What reassurance did I have that I wouldn't continue making not only wrong decisions but terrible decisions? None.

Tanya kicked a chair with her flip flop clad foot until it sat next to mine and plopped down, smoothing her tie-dyed pink skirt around her bony legs. "What is the right word then? Super excited?" She swung her feet up and let them drop heavily onto my lap, covering my notepad and the poem about summer I had been slowly working on for the past few days.

Quickly, I took a deep breath, held it, and then let it out with focused slowness. It wasn't her fault she didn't understand my anxiety. We lived very different lives. She would go home to her upper middle class family, her parents would continue to buy and give her anything she wanted whether she relapsed or not. The only worry she had was whether her fiancé would ever figure out that she cheated on him as casually as if she were making morning coffee. It was wrong to resent her for her life. "I am glad to be going home. But I have my whole life ahead of me to figure out. I'm nervous I'll make the wrong choice."

Squinting at me, she wiggled her feet until her flip flops fell off my lap and onto the floor. "You can't be nervous about something as inevitable as choices. Life is full of choices. Even in this place, we still have choices to make every day, even if they are a lot easier than the ones we make in the real world." Taking a thick strand of her dry hair, she examined the split end as she continued speaking, "We can't avoid choices. They are as much a part of life as breathing, really. And you wouldn't be afraid of breathing, right?"

My fingers let go of the pen I had been holding, letting it roll around on top of my notepad, while I stared at her in silence. After several seconds of her staring back at me, eyebrows perked, I realized that she expected an answer to the seemingly rhetorical question. "No. You can't be afraid of breathing or life would just plain suck." I smiled and took her feet in my hands, beginning what would be the last massage I would give her.

"Exactly, girlie," she loudly replied as she reclined in her chair, closing her eyes as she did so. "So can you be afraid of choices either?"

Whenever I let myself forget that as shallow as Tanya sometimes appeared, she found a way to remind me that there was more depth to her young mind than even she probably knew. "No. We just have to remember all that we've survived already and use our brains. We try our

best to make the right choices and if we're wrong we can deal with whatever happens." Like a movie montage, complete with the slow motion hokey clips and music, I saw a flash of everything I had endured. And not just as an adult, but also the childhood that more often than not I simply wanted to forget. So much pain but so much hope. I wasn't dead. I was here, rubbing a beautiful girl's feet and only a month away from starting my second year of college.

"Yep. We are survivors. And don't ever forget that, girlie." Tanya smiled at me, her eyes still closed. I watched her chest rise and fall at a gradually slower rate, and waited until I heard the sound of her quiet snores before I released her feet. Gently, I pulled my notepad and pen out from under them. Determined to finish the poem before tomorrow, I stared out the window at the trees lining the sidewalks and let my mind dash around for inspiration.

Survivors. I would hold tightly onto that word in the weeks to come when life seemed achingly lonely without my old friends and using buddies. I would grasp it fiercely in the months that followed when my mental health would become as unstable as a soda can rattling around in the bed of a speeding pickup truck. I would collar it towards me as life became more down than up, or frustratingly difficult, or seemingly unbearable. And I would remember Tanya's words, long after we had ceased speaking to each other.

My last day at Gaudenzia raced by at speed that even now, years later, seems perilously fast. Only able to sleep that night because of my medications, I woke up earlier than usual, the clock in the hallway reading only 4:30 am. Had it really been three months since the day I unpacked my belongings, tossing them less than neatly into the wooden dresser? It felt like much longer; it felt like years. After picking out the clothes I wanted to wear that day—a light blue

tank top and my knee-length skirt—I packed my belongings away in my duffle bag, purse, and the Gaudenzia-issued garbage bags.

As I showered, the cold water rinsing the night sweat off me, I felt sadness squirm in amongst my joy. As many things and people that frustrated me at Crossroads, it still had been my home, in so many ways, for three months. Though I wouldn't miss it, I would miss the lessons and help I had received.

By the time I had dressed, applied makeup, and fixed my hair, morning smoke break had begun. I shook Tanya awake, hoping she would actually get up and not get herself in trouble again, before hurrying outside. John sat on the picnic table nearest the building, and as I walked down the steps he mouthed the three words that we both loved to hear. I mouthed them back, though still without the conviction he seemed to have behind them. Despite that, I still flirted with the idea of forgetting the ban, just as I had disregarded the fact that I wasn't allowed to wear skirts without pants underneath. It wasn't as if they could throw me out anymore or ship me across the state to the women's only long-term rehab. But they could still punish John. I watched from the tables by the pavilion as John dragged on his cigarette and continued smiling at me.

By the time smoke break ended, my nervousness and sadness had all but disappeared. For the first time since learning of my discharge, I was excited. It took the self-control I had learned over the past few months to prevent myself from joining Tanya as she skipped towards the group room.

As I walked by the steps, headed for the door into the playroom, John grabbed my arm and pulled me against his body. Before I could warn him against it, he was embracing and kissing me. Worried for him, it took a moment before I realized that this might be the last time I would ever be in his arms. I kissed back hard, shoved my tongue into his mouth, and gripped his

shirt tautly between my fingers. I didn't know if I loved him forever, or even until next month. But I loved him now, at that moment, and I didn't want to leave without saying goodbye.

After several seconds, as the last of the clients walked into the playroom, we broke off our kiss and just stared into each other's brown eyes. "You take care out there in the real world. I'll be joining you soon enough I hope," he said, his voice tight. He held tears in his eyes, and as one stubbornly escaped, I went from dry-eyed, to moist cheeks within half a second.

"I will. And you will. I'll miss you," I forced my voice not to tremble, not to reveal how hard saying goodbye was. Or how frightening the real possibility that this was goodbye forever.

After softly wiping the tears from my face, careful not to smudge my makeup, he pulled his blue polo shirt over his head. "This is my favorite shirt," he said as he folded it before holding it out to me. "You take it with you so you have a piece of me with you until I get out. And when I do, we're going to be together. I promise."

He took my folder from me as I pulled the shirt over my head, smelling Gaudenzia issued soap, deodorant, and John's sweat. For the first time since we started talking about life together in the real world, I actually believed it might be possible.

"It's time to leave. Your transport is ready." Sherlanda snapped loudly, walking swiftly up the ramp towards us. I immediately pulled away from John and tried to act as if I just happened to be standing near him. "Severo, you should head to group."

Turning to head into the playroom, he stopped and looked back over his shoulder at me. Before Sherlanda could protest otherwise, he pulled me against him for a quick kiss then dashed into the playroom. I watched the door close behind him before turning to see the glowering Sherlanda. Fortunately, she didn't say a word about it as I dragged my bags down to the nurses'



station where they would be quickly searched. As I watched Travis hurriedly glance into each bag, I wondered what the point was to search bags that were leaving rehab.

“Here is your official discharge paperwork. It has Deerfield Drug and Alcohol’s address and phone number so you can make an appointment there, preferably today for your own sake.” She talked quicker than usual while her whole body tensed, from her shoulders to her thin dark ankles. After handing it to me, she muttered something that sounded like good luck but had the inflection of good riddance. Still waiting for my certificate for completing the program, I was surprised to see her start to walk out of the office.

“When do I get my certificate?” I had assumed my counselor would just hand it to me. Perhaps there was more procedure to the process.

I heard a loud sigh before she firmly replied, “You didn’t graduate from the program. You are being discharged with the program and doctor’s approval. But you failed to meet the requirements of successful completion of the program.” For several seconds as I watched her exit the office then listened to the click of her designer heels, I hated her and the staff at Gaudenzia. After three months, I had yet to earn the treatment team’s approval. Tears from the rage, rage enough to make me contemplate shrieking until they hauled me out of the building, formed in my eyes.

Travis tapped me lightly on the shoulder, my bags in his arms and slung over his shoulder. “It’s time to go, Kateri.” I nodded, still struggling to hold the tears back.

After exiting the building, I helped him load my bags into the back of the van, still enraged that I was again being told I had failed. I dabbed at my eyes and climbed into the back seat, shutting the door firmly behind me.

“Kateri,” Travis said, as he started the van and pulled out of the courtyard. I mumbled yes and swallowed. “I heard what Sherlanda said. And I know you’re angry. I’d be pretty damned pissed, too.”

“Pissed and surprised. They could have gave me a heads up at least. Maybe a ‘hey, we’re going to screw you one last time’ note,” I said and let my anger slither into sarcasm and laughter.

Travis laughed with me as we pulled out of Crossroad’s parking lot and onto the street. I look one last look at it, before putting it behind me. The building, the anger, the disappointment, the staff’s doubt. My new life was beginning. I didn’t need any garbage from the old scumming it up already.

“Remember something while you’re out there. Don’t ever let anyone tell you what you can and can’t do. You are a strong person. If you want to make it, you will. Don’t let anyone tell you otherwise, okay,” he said, staring at me through the rearview mirror.

“Definitely. Thank you. For everything,” I replied.

The words hardly seemed adequate but by the time I knew what to say, I was already standing in the Pitt Titusville library, my bags at my feet, waiting for my dad to help me load them into his van. And Travis was on his way back to Erie. Still, in the silence of the library, interrupted only by the ubiquitous whirling of the fans, I whispered the words to him and myself, “You’re words are worth more than any piece of paper they could give me. I can and will do it.”

She knew she shouldn’t answer the phone. It rang and rang and rang. Jared. How had he learned she was home? Her trembling hand hovered over the receiver, wondering how many more times it would ring before going to voicemail.

“Yo, doll, pick up.” Ignoring the blinking of his number on caller ID was one thing, ignoring his voice went against her ingrained instincts. The receiver was in her hand and up to her face without a conscious decision.

“You’re back. You have no fucking idea how much I’ve missed you.” Jared’s voice but not words he would ever say. She craved his affection, but the worrying craving was only ever satisfied by his body. Never his words, never his heart. Maybe that’s why she remained quiet as he asked to hang out with her. Hanging out with him meant some kind of sex act. Always. John entered her mind, briefly, and wavering, like seeing him through broken glass floating in a lake. Ignoring him was surprisingly easy.

No more jeans, Bermuda shorts, or skirts down to her ankles. Miniskirts, something she had missed as much as actual soft pillows and non-scratchy towels. When she ran down the carpeted steps of her father’s house, her red and black skirt blowing slightly in the humid air, the knowledge that she could walk down the street without supervision was exhilarating. She wouldn’t use with him. Though, Sherlanda and several house managers had cautioned her that Jared was a trigger, she knew better. He wasn’t a trigger to using coke, pills, or anything else. He was a drug himself. And whether or not she would give in, and use him while he used her remained incredibly uncertain.

Was she really such an emotional pendulum, that she could accept John’s polo shirt that morning, vowing to see him again the day he got out, and then all but jog into Jared’s casually open arms? He walked slowly across the pot-holed and brick lined street, his naturally pale skin burnt from walking around town in only torn orange shorts with his black wife beater stuffed into one of the pockets. The wide smile, framed by brown hair, seemed both expectant and genuine. Like a rock star, permitting one adoring fan the privilege of an actual hug, he beckoned with one

hand and squeezed the air with the other. She smoothed her hair into place and walked the short distance to the corner to greet him.

“What are you waiting for, dude? Get your ass over here. You have no idea how horny I am. I think I might come just from looking at you right now.” There was the Jared she had known. Two holes and a pair of breasts. That’s how he really saw her. But John saw more. He had to see more. The stack of notes from him took effort and tenderness. Two qualities that emotionless sex lacked.

“I have a boyfriend. His name’s John,” she started to say, to explain that the confusing sexual aspect of their relationship was over, that the only thing left between them was the friendship they had long since tarnished through sex, lies, and drugs, when he grabbed her wrists.

“What does that matter? I was fucking some skinny bitch while you were gone. But you’re here now, I’m here, and forget those other two. Come back to my house and let me fuck your tight hole.” Though he didn’t know about the rape—how could she ever tell him about it when the words wouldn’t even slink out of her mouth—the abrupt mention of sex left her mouth dry and her stomach clenching.

“It’s different. I’m different.” Though she knew this, could not deny the lack of resemblance between the girl Jared screwed in his dad’s garage to the woman standing before him now, hearing it aloud jarred her. Like waiting for a firecracker to go off, and knowing all along that the explosion would startle her, the actual moment never stopped making her jump. “I don’t want that and I don’t want you that way anymore.”

The grip on her wrists constricted along with every frown line in his face. “We’ll see how long you last without me.” For the first time since they had meet, all those months ago, she watched his back as he walked away angry.

## Epilogue

*“Enter by the narrow gate. For the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many. For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few.” – Matthew 7:13-14*

John and I did see each other again. The day he was released from rehab we decided to meet at the townhouse apartment his mother owned and allowed him to move into, rent-free. I hadn't realized how much I missed him until he opened the door, picked me up, and flopped me back onto the sofa. Kissing, sucking, groping, and frantic screwing soon followed. And though I smelled the rum on his breath from the second he opened the door, I created a steady list of excuses for him which I played on repeat in my head until he fell asleep that night. While still having nightmares of what Bill did, I had no way of knowing that only a couple months later I would be raped again by another man I made the mistake of trusting.

When I left his house to go back to Titusville, I knew in my head the relationship would be doing far more than crashing and burning. It would implode and then explode, sending shrapnel composed of liquor and pill bottles everywhere. And yet, I was determined to hang on to it as long as possible. Without Jared, my using buddies, or my sober friends, I spent the majority of my time alone. Knowing that recovery would be lonely at first, I kept up my drug and alcohol classes and hoped for the future. But hope wouldn't hold me on boiling hot summer nights when I cried from nightmares in bed. John would, though.

Or at least until he progressed from light heavy drinking into being so intoxicated by the end of the day I had to leave him lie wherever he passed out. Some nights I would throw a pillow down on the rough carpet and sleep beside him. Others, I would climb the slanted stairs up to the bedroom and cry into the pillowcase.

And yet, even though I found myself increasingly alone even while with John, the booze transforming him from a polite, sweet man into a brusque, grumpy man-child, I stayed and waited for the man I thought I loved to reappear.

I stayed when he cheated on me, forgiving him when I knew I shouldn't. I stayed when he hit me, kicked me, and threw things at me, blaming it on the booze and not the man. Even though I knew I deserved someone so much better than him, someone who would rather stab themselves than hit me, I truly believed if I stayed I could save him, bring him back to the recovery that we had both wanted.

Only when I learned he was snorting pills again, did my mind began to process the truth. By staying with him, by picking up and then hiding the cans and bottles of alcohol before his parole officer came in the apartment, by tolerating his verbal and physical abuse, I was enabling him. Just as my dad had done for me before I entered rehab, supporting me in every way despite knowing I was using every day. The night I confronted him about his using and drinking, I entered the argument with the knowledge that I couldn't save him.

But John's relapse isn't an isolated incident. Far from it, according to National Institute of Drug Abuse, the rate of relapse is between 40 to 60 percent. Not desirable odds in something as vital as staying clean. However, addiction is not simply a flaw in character. It is actually more akin to any other disease, having "biological and behavioral components, both of which must be addressed during treatment." In rehab, the majority of the fellow addicts I encountered had been in treatment multiple times. In all actuality, I was more unique for being a first-timer. The recovery process is similar to the management of any long term illness, as times requiring "repeated episodes of treatment" ("Addiction Science").

According to the RAINN website (Rape, Abuse, and Incest National Network) 80 percent of victims are under age 30, like myself at only age 21. And approximately every two minutes “an American woman is sexually assaulted” (“Statistics”). Clearly this figures out to be thousands of rapes in the United States alone each year. Terrifyingly, RAINN points out the very horrifying fact that only two percent of rapists will ever serve a day jail or prison for their crimes (“Statistics”). In this memoir, I never reported the rape, making the choice to focus on getting a handle on my addiction before putting myself through the inevitably traumatizing process of reporting rape to the authorities. In fact, I didn’t report it until February of 2014, and that was only after months of therapy and years of my boyfriend encouraging me to do so. Unfortunately, without any physical evidence the police dubbed it as a “he said, she said case” and Bill was never arrested let alone prosecuted. At times I regret not reporting him right after it happened, but then I recall the reality of that situation and how young, scared, and shattered I was and realize that it was not something I would have survived at the time. It was difficult enough to endure in 2014, prompting flashback, nightmares, and depression that I pulled through with the help of my own cultivated strength and two different therapists and a support group for rape survivors.

A few times in the text I referred to being raped a second time and that that is another story entirely, and indeed that literally is. In September 2010 I was raped by Mike Kuhns but denied it for years because it did not have the same brutality as the first one among other reasons. I mention this again only to remind the reader that what they have just about finished reading is merely a beginning to hope, not the final destination.

Just as relapse is common with addiction so too is it common among rapists. In fact, according to Parents for Megan’s Law and the Crime Victim Center “Rapists repeat their

offenses at rates up to 35%.” However, that figure is in reality much more simply because only 32 % of rapes are reported to the police to begin with. For example, Bill has committed two other rapes besides mine, only one of which was reported. And, like in my case, he was not prosecuted. Furthermore, prior to him committing any rapes we attempted to rape a teenage girl as well, who sadly, never reported it. I am told by my therapist that we will eventually get caught. It would be so wonderful to fully believe them.

I wonder how Mike Kuhns and Bill Hulings can look themselves in the mirror without vomiting. I ponder how they can kiss their loved ones, laugh with their friends, and lie to everyone without being swallowed whole with guilt. In 2010 I wondered that incessantly. Now, in 2015 it is only a passing thought at times. The rapes will always be a part of me, always be a whorl of pain in the fibers of my soul, but I have so much more to live for then simply the pain. A family that loves me, pets that love and adore me, a job that I am grateful to have, and the opportunity to adopt a child of my own. While this adoption process is going to take months at the earliest, I can already imagine kissing my child goodnight at bedtime. And I refuse to wonder while I do that how in the heck Bill can do that with the crimes he bears.

The world is startlingly imperfect. To be honest, it is absolutely awful at times. But my world has gotten better. And that’s a form of justice against my rapists in and of itself. What they took from me has gradually returned.



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