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a difference'

Bliss

PUSHING THE LIMITS

Katie McGarry

A PUSHING THE LIMITS NOVEL

Katie McGarry

Pushing the Limits

«HarperCollins»

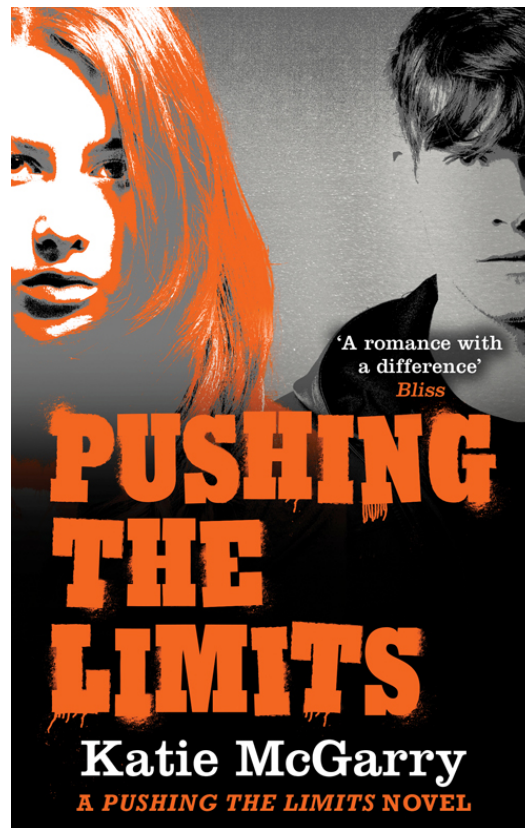
McGarry K.

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They say be a good girl, get good grades, be popular. They know nothing about me. I can't remember the night that changed my life. The night I went from popular to loner freak. And my family are determined to keep it that way. They said therapy was supposed to help. They didn't expect Noah. Noah is the dangerous boy my parents warned me about. But the only one who'll listen. The only one who'll help me find the truth. I know every kiss, every promise, every touch is forbidden. But what if finding your destiny means breaking all the rules? A brave and powerful novel about loss, change and growing up, but most of all love. The Pushing the Limits Series 1. Pushing the Limits 2. Dare You To 3. Crash Into You 4. Take Me On 5. Breaking the Rules

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Praise for Katie McGarry's brave, unflinching and powerful debut novel

'A riveting and emotional ride!' —Simone Elkeles

'McGarry details the sexy highs, the devastating lows and the real work it takes to build true love.' —Jennifer Echols

PUSHING THE LIMITS

‘I won’t tell anyone, Echo. I promise.’

Noah tucked a curl behind my ear. It had been so long since someone touched me like he did. Why did it have to be Noah Hutchins?

His dark brown eyes shifted to my covered arms. ‘You didn’t do that—did you? It was done to you?’

No one ever asked that question. They stared. They whispered. They laughed. But they never asked.

About the Author

KATIE McGARRY

was a teenager during the age of grunge and boy bands and remembers those years as the best and worst of her life. She is a lover of music, happy endings and reality television, and is a secret University of Kentucky basketball fan.

Katie would love to hear from her readers. Contact her via her website, katiemcgarry.com, follow her on Twitter @KatieMcGarry, or become a fan on Facebook and Goodreads.

Find out more about

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at www.miraink.co.uk and join the conversation on

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the
Limits
Katie McGarry**



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Acknowledgements

To God—Luke 1:37

For Dave—it is because of you I know love.

Thank you to ...

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Echo

“My father is a control freak, I hate my stepmother, my brother is dead and my mother has ... well ... issues. How do you think I’m doing?”

That’s how I would have loved to respond to Mrs. Collins’s question, but my father placed too much importance on appearance for me to answer honestly. Instead, I blinked three times and said, “Fine.”

Mrs. Collins, Eastwick High’s new clinical social worker, acted as if I hadn’t spoken. She shoved a stack of files to the side of her already cluttered desk and flipped through various papers. My new therapist hummed when she found my three-inch-thick file and rewarded herself with a sip of coffee, leaving bright red lipstick on the curve of the mug. The stench of cheap coffee and freshly sharpened pencils hung in the air.

My father checked his watch from the chair to my right and, on my left, the Wicked Witch of the West shifted impatiently. I was missing first period calculus, my father was missing some very important meeting, and my stepmother from Oz? I’m sure she was missing her brain.

“Don’t you just love January?” Mrs. Collins asked as she opened my file. “New year, new month, new slate to start over on.” Not even waiting for a reply, she continued, “Do you like the curtains? I made them myself.”

In one synchronized movement, my father, my stepmother and I turned our attention to the pink polka-dotted curtains hanging on the windows overlooking the student parking lot. The curtains were too *Little House on the Prairie* with the color scheme of a bad rave for my taste. Not a single one of us answered and our silence created a heavy awkwardness.

My father’s BlackBerry vibrated. With exaggerated effort, he pulled it out of his pocket and scrolled down the screen. Ashley drummed her fingers over her bloated belly and I read the various handpainted plaques hanging on the wall so I could focus on anything that wasn’t her.

Failure is your only enemy. The only way up is to never look down. We succeed because we believe. How much wood would a woodchuck chuck if a woodchuck could chuck wood?

Okay—so that last one didn’t make the wall of sayings, but I would have found it amusing.

Mrs. Collins reminded me of an overgrown Labrador retriever with her blond hair and much too friendly attitude. “Echo’s ACT and SAT scores are fabulous. You should be very proud of your daughter.” She gave me a sincere smile, exposing all of her teeth.

Start the timer. My therapy session had officially begun. Close to two years ago, after the incident, Child Protective Services had “strongly encouraged” therapy—and Dad quickly learned that it was better to say yes to anything “strongly encouraged.” I used to go to therapy like normal people, at an office separate from school. Thanks to an influx in funding from the state of Kentucky and an overenthusiastic social worker, I’d become part of this pilot program. Mrs. Collins’s sole job was to deal with a few kids from my high school. Lucky me.

My father sat up taller in his seat. “Her math scores were low. I want her to retake the tests.”

“Is there a bathroom nearby?” Ashley interrupted. “The baby loves to sit on my bladder.”

More like Ashley loved to make everything about her. Mrs. Collins gave her a strained smile and pointed to the door. “Go out to the main hallway and take a right.”

The way she maneuvered out of her chair, Ashley acted as if she carried a thousand-pound ball of lead instead of a tiny baby. I shook my head in disgust, which only drew my father’s ice-cold stare.

“Mr. Emerson,” Mrs. Collins continued once Ashley left the room, “Echo’s scores are well above the national average and, according to her file, she’s already applied to the colleges of her choice.”

“There are some business schools with extended deadlines I’d like her to apply to. Besides, this family does not accept ‘above average.’ My daughter will excel.” My father spoke with the air of a

deity. He might as well have added the phrase *so let it be written, so let it be done*. I propped my elbow on the armrest and hid my face in my hands.

"I can see that this really bothers you, Mr. Emerson," Mrs. Collins said in an annoyingly even tone. "But Echo's English scores are close to perfect...."

And this was where I tuned them out. My father and the previous guidance counselor had this fight my sophomore year when I took the PSAT. Then again last year when I took the SAT and ACT for the first time. Eventually, the guidance counselor learned my father always won and started giving up after one round.

My test scores were the least of my concerns. Finding the money to fix Aires' car was the worry that plagued my brain. Since Aires' death, my father had remained stubborn on the subject, insisting we should sell it.

"Echo, are you happy with your scores?" asked Mrs. Collins.

I peeked at her through the red, curly hair hanging over my face. The last therapist understood the hierarchy of our family and talked to my father, not me. "Excuse me?"

"Are you happy with your ACT and SAT scores? Do you want to retake the tests?" She folded her hands and placed them on top of my file. "Do you want to apply to more schools?"

I met my father's tired gray eyes. Let's see. Retaking the tests would mean my father hounding me every second to study, which in turn would mean me getting up early on a Saturday, blowing the whole morning frying my brain and then worrying for weeks over the results. As for applying to more schools? I'd rather retake the tests. "Not really."

The worry lines forever etched around his eyes and mouth deepened with disapproval. I changed my tune. "My dad is right. I should retake the tests."

Mrs. Collins scratched away in my file with a pen. My last therapist had been highly aware of my authority issues. No need to rewrite what was already there.

Ashley waddled back into the room and dropped into the seat next to me. "What did I miss?" I'd honestly forgotten she existed. Oh, if only Dad would, too.

"Nothing," my father replied.

Mrs. Collins finally lifted her pen from the page. "Ask Mrs. Marcos for the next testing dates before you go to class. And while I'm playing the role of guidance counselor, I'd like to discuss your schedule for the winter term. You've filled your free periods with multiple business classes. I was wondering why."

The real answer, because my father told me to, would probably irritate multiple people in the room so I ad-libbed, "They'll help prepare me for college." Wow. I'd said that with all the enthusiasm of a six-year-old waiting for a flu shot. Bad choice on my part. My father shifted in his seat again and sighed. I considered giving a different answer, but figured that reply would also come off flat.

Mrs. Collins perused my file. "You've shown an incredible talent in the arts, specifically painting. I'm not suggesting you drop all of your business courses, but you could drop one and take an art class instead."

"No," my father barked. He leaned forward in his seat, steepling his fingers. "Echo won't be taking any art classes, is that clear?" My father was a strange combination of drill instructor and Alice's white rabbit: he always had someplace important to go and enjoyed bossing everyone else around.

I had to give Mrs. Collins credit; she never once flinched before she caved. "Crystal."

"Well, now that we've settled that ..." Ashley and her baby bump perched on the edge of the chair, preparing to stand. "I accidentally overbooked today and I have an OB appointment. We may find out the baby's gender."

"Mrs. Emerson, Echo's academics aren't the reason for this meeting, but I understand if you need to leave." She withdrew an official letter from her top drawer as a red-faced Ashley sat back

in her seat. I'd seen that letterhead several times over the past two years. Child Protective Services enjoyed killing rainforests.

Mrs. Collins read the letter to herself while I secretly wished I would spontaneously combust. Both my father and I slouched in our seats. Oh, the freaking joy of group therapy.

While waiting for her to finish reading, I noticed a stuffed green frog by her computer, a picture of her and some guy—possibly her husband—and then on the corner of her desk a big blue ribbon. The fancy kind people received when they won a competition. Something strange stirred inside me. Huh—weird.

Mrs. Collins hole-punched the letter and then placed it in my already overwhelmed file. “There. I’m officially your therapist.”

When she said nothing else, I drew my gaze away from the ribbon to her. She was watching me. “It’s a nice ribbon, isn’t it, Echo?”

My father cleared his throat and sent Mrs. Collins a death glare. Okay, that was an odd reaction, but then again, he was irritated just to be here. My eyes flickered to the ribbon again. Why did it feel familiar? “I guess.”

Her eyes drifted to the dog tags I absently fingered around my neck. “I’m very sorry for your family’s loss. What branch of the armed forces?”

Great. My father was going to have a stinking coronary. He’d only made it clear seventy-five times that Aires’ dog tags were to stay in the box under my bed, but I needed them today—new therapist, the two-year anniversary of Aires’ death still fresh, and the first day of my last semester of high school. Nausea skipped and played in my intestines. Avoiding my father’s disappointed frown, I took great pains to search my hair for split ends.

“Marine,” my father answered curtly. “Look, I’ve got a meeting this morning with prospective clients, I promised Ashley I’d go to her doctor’s appointment and Echo’s missing class. When are we going to wrap this up?”

“When I say so. If you’re going to make these sessions difficult, Mr. Emerson, I will be more than happy to call Echo’s social worker.”

I fought the smile tugging at my lips. Mrs. Collins played a well-choreographed hand. My father backed down, but my stepmother on the other hand ...

“I don’t understand. Echo turns eighteen soon. Why does the state still have authority over her?”

“Because it’s what the state, her social worker and myself think is in her best interest.” Mrs. Collins closed my file. “Echo will continue therapy with me until she graduates this spring. At that point, the state of Kentucky will release her—and you.”

She waited until Ashley nodded her silent acceptance of the situation before continuing. “How are you doing, Echo?”

Splendid. Fantastic. Never worse. “Fine.”

“Really?” She tapped a finger against her chin. “Because I would have thought that the anniversary of your brother’s death might trigger painful emotions.”

Mrs. Collins eyed me while I stared blankly in return. My father and Ashley watched the uncomfortable showdown. Guilt nagged at me. She didn’t technically ask me a question, so in theory, I didn’t owe her a response, but the need to please her swept over me like a tidal wave. But why? She was another therapist in the revolving door. They all asked the same questions and promised help, but each of them left me in the same condition as they found me—broken.

“She cries.” Ashley’s high-pitched voice cut through the silence as if she were dispensing juicy country-club gossip. “All the time. She really misses Aires.”

Both my father and I turned our heads to look at the blonde bimbo. I willed her to continue while my father, I’m sure, willed her to shut up. God listened to me for once. Ashley went on, “We all miss him. It’s so sad that the baby will never know him.”

And once again, welcome to the Ashley show, sponsored by Ashley and my father's money. Mrs. Collins wrote briskly, no doubt etching each of Ashley's unguarded words into my file while my father groaned.

"Echo, would you like to talk about Aires during today's session?" Mrs. Collins asked.

"No." That was possibly the most honest answer I'd given all morning.

"That's fine," she said. "We'll save him for a later date. What about your mother? Have you had any contact with her?"

Ashley and my father answered simultaneously, "No," while I blurted, "Kind of."

I felt like the middle of a ham sandwich the way the two of them leaned toward me. I wasn't sure what prompted me to tell the truth. "I tried calling her over break." When she didn't answer, I'd sat next to the phone for days, hoping and praying my mother would care that two years before, my brother, her son, had died.

My father ran a hand over his face. "You know you're not allowed to have contact with your mother." The anger in his voice hinted that he couldn't believe I'd told the therapist this tantalizing tidbit. I imagined visions of social workers dancing in his head. "There *is* a restraining order. Tell me, Echo, landline or cell phone?"

"Landline," I choked out. "But we never talked. I swear."

He swiped at his BlackBerry and his lawyer's number appeared on the screen. I clutched the dog tags, Aires' name and serial number embedding in my palm. "Please, Daddy, don't," I whispered.

He hesitated and my heart pressed against my rib cage. Then, by the grace of God, he dropped the phone to his lap. "We're going to have to change the number now."

I nodded. It stunk that my mom would never be able to call my home, but I'd take the hit ... for her. Of all the things my mother needed, prison wasn't one of them.

"Have you had contact with your mother since then?" Mrs. Collins lost her friendliness.

"No." I closed my eyes and took a deep breath. Everything inside of me ached. I couldn't keep up the "I'm fine" facade much longer. This line of questioning ripped at my soul's freshly scabbed wounds.

"To confirm we're on the same page, you understand that contact between you and your mother while there is a restraining order, even if you initiate it, is forbidden."

"Yes." I took another gulp of air. The lump in my throat denied the entry of the precious oxygen. I missed Aires and, God, my mom, and Ashley was having a baby, and my dad was on me all the time, and ... I needed something, anything.

Against my better judgment, I let the words tumble out of my mouth. "I want to fix Aires' car." Maybe, just maybe, restoring something of his would make the pain go away.

"Oh, not this again," my father muttered.

"Wait. Not what again? Echo, what are you talking about?" asked Mrs. Collins.

I stared at the gloves on my hands. "Aires found a 1965 Corvette in a scrap yard. He spent all of his free time fixing it up and he was almost done before he went to Afghanistan. I want to restore it. For Aires." For me. He didn't leave anything behind when he left, except the car.

"That sounds like a healthy way to grieve. What are your thoughts on this, Mr. Emerson?" Mrs. Collins gave great puppy dog eyes—a trait I had yet to master.

My father scrolled again through his BlackBerry, his body present but his mind already at work. "It costs money and I don't see the point in fixing up a broken-down car when she has a car that works."

"Then let me get a job," I snapped. "And we can sell my car once I get Aires' working."

All eyes were on him and now his were on me. Without meaning to, I'd backed him into a corner. He wanted to say no, but that would bring down the wrath of the new therapist. After all, we had to be perfect in therapy. God forbid we take advantage of it and hash out some issues.

“Fine, but she has to pay for the car herself, and Echo knows my rules regarding employment. She has to find a flexible job that will not interfere with her schoolwork, the clubs we agreed upon or her grades. Now, are we done here?”

Mrs. Collins glanced at the clock. “Not quite. Echo, your social worker extended your therapy until graduation because of your teacher evaluations. Since the beginning of your junior year, each of your teachers has noted a distinct withdrawal from your participation in class and in your social interactions with your peers.” Her kind eyes bored into mine. “Everyone wants you to be happy, Echo, and I’d like you to give me the opportunity to help.”

I cocked an eyebrow. Like I had a choice about therapy, and as for my happiness—good freaking luck. “Sure.”

Ashley’s perky voice startled me. “She has a date for the Valentine’s Dance.”

Now my father and I took our turn speaking simultaneously. “I do?”—“She does?”

Ashley’s eyes darted nervously between me and my father. “Yes, remember, Echo? Last night we discussed the new guy you’re into and I told you that you shouldn’t dump your friends at school while you obsessed over some guy.”

I deliberated over which part disturbed me more: the imaginary boyfriend or that she claimed we’d had an actual conversation. While I was deciding, my father stood and put on his coat. “See, Mrs. Collins, Echo is fine. Just a little lovestruck. As much as I enjoy these sessions, Ashley’s appointment is in twenty minutes and I don’t want Echo to miss any more class.”

“Echo, are you really interested in making money to fix your brother’s car?” Mrs. Collins asked as she stood to escort my father and stepmother out.

I pulled at the gloves I wore to cover my skin. “More than you could possibly imagine.”

She smiled at me before walking out the door. “Then I’ve got a job for you. Wait here and we’ll discuss the details.”

The three of them huddled together on the far side of the main office, whispering to one another. My father wrapped his arm around Ashley’s waist and she leaned into him as they nodded at Mrs. Collins’s hushed words. The familiar pang of jealousy and anger ate at the lining of my gut. How could he love her when she’d destroyed so much?

NOAH

Fresh paint and the scent of drywall dust made me think of my father, not school. Yet that smell slapped me in the face when I walked into the newly remodeled front office. With books in hand, I sauntered toward the counter. “Sup, Mrs. Marcos.”

“Noah, why you late again, muchacho?” she said while stapling papers together.

The clock on the wall flipped to nine in the morning. “Hell, this is early.”

Mrs. Marcos stepped around her new cherry desk to meet me at the counter. She gave me crap when I came in late, but I still liked her. With her long brown hair, she reminded me of a Hispanic version of my mother.

“You missed your appointment with Mrs. Collins this morning. Not a good way to start the second term,” she whispered as she wrote my tardy slip. She tilted her head toward the three adults huddled together in the far corner of the room. I assumed the middle-aged blond woman whispering to the rich couple was the new guidance counselor.

I shrugged and let the right side of my mouth twitch up. “Oops.”

Mrs. Marcos slid the tardy slip to me and gave me her patented stern glare. She was the one person at this school who didn’t believe that me and my future were completely fucked.

The middle-aged blonde called out, “Mr. Hutchins, I’m thrilled you remembered our appointment, even if you are late. I’m sure you wouldn’t mind taking a seat while I finish a few things.” She smiled at me like we were old friends and spoke so sweetly that for a moment, I almost smiled back. Instead, I nodded and took a seat on the line of chairs pushed against the office wall.

Mrs. Marcos laughed.

“What?”

“She’s not going to put up with your attitude. Maybe she’ll convince you to take school seriously.”

I rested my head against the painted cinder-block wall and shut my eyes, in need of a few more hours’ sleep. Short one person for closing, the restaurant hadn’t let me go until after midnight, and then Beth and Isaiah kept me up.

“Mrs. Marcos?” asked an angelic voice. “Can you please tell me the upcoming dates for the ACT and SAT?”

The phone rang. “Wait one sec,” said Mrs. Marcos. Then the ringing ceased.

A chair down the row from mine shifted and my mouth watered from the aroma of hot cinnamon rolls. I snuck a peek and noticed red, silky, curly hair. I knew her. Echo Emerson.

Not a cinnamon roll in sight, but damn if she didn’t smell like one. We had several of our main courses together and last semester one of our free periods. I didn’t know much about her other than she kept to herself, she was smart, a redhead and she had big tits. She wore large, long-sleeved shirts that hung off her shoulders and tank tops underneath that revealed just enough to get the fantasies flowing.

Like always, she stared straight ahead as if I didn’t exist. Hell, I probably didn’t exist in her mind. People like Echo Emerson irritated the crap out of me.

“You’ve got a fucked-up name,” I mumbled. I didn’t know why I wanted to rattle her, I just did.

“Shouldn’t you be getting high in the bathroom?”

So she did know me. “They installed security cameras. We do it in the parking lot now.”

“My bad.” Her foot rocked frantically back and forth.

Good, I’d succeeded in getting under that perfect facade. “Echo ... echo ... echo ...”

Her foot stopped rocking and red curls bounced furiously as she turned to face me. “How original. I’ve never heard that before.” She swept up her backpack and left the office. Her tight ass

swayed side to side as she marched down the hallway. That wasn't nearly as fun as I'd thought it would be. In fact, I kind of felt like a dick.

"Noah?" Mrs. Collins called me into her office.

The last guidance counselor had major OCD issues. Everything in the office perfectly placed. I used to move his plaques just to mess with him. There'd be no such entertainment with Mrs. Collins. Her desk was a mess. I could bury a body in here and no one would ever find it.

Taking the seat across from her, I waited for my ass-chewing.

"How was your Christmas break?" She had that kind look again, sort of like a puppy.

"Good." That is if you considered your foster mom and dad getting into a screaming match and throwing everyone's gifts into the fireplace a good Christmas. I'd always dreamed of spending my Christmas in a hellhole basement watching my two best friends get stoned.

"Wonderful. So things are working out with your new foster family." She said it as a statement, but meant it as a question.

"Yeah." Compared to the last three families I had, they were the fucking Brady Bunch. This time around, the system had placed me with another kid. Either the people in charge were short on homes or they were finally starting to believe I wasn't the menace they'd pegged me to be. People with my labels weren't allowed to live with other minors. "Look, I already have a social worker and she's enough of a pain in my ass. Tell your bosses you don't need to waste your time on me."

"I'm not a social worker," she said. "I'm a *clinical* social worker."

"Same thing."

"Actually, it's not. I went to school for a lot longer."

"Good for you."

"And it means I can provide a different level of help for you."

"Do you get paid by the state?" I asked.

"Yes."

"Then I don't want your help."

Her lips flinched into an almost smile and I almost had an ounce of respect for her. "How about we shoot this straight?" she said. "According to your file you have a history of violence."

I stared at her. She stared at me. That file was full of shit, but I learned years ago the word of a teenager meant nothing against the word of an adult.

"This file, Noah." She tapped it three times with her finger. "I don't think it tells the whole story. I talked to your teachers at Highland High. The picture they painted doesn't represent the young man I see in front of me."

I clutched the spiral metal binding of my calculus notebook until it stabbed the palm of my hand. Who the hell did this lady think she was digging into my past?

She flipped through my file. "You've been bounced around to several foster homes in the past two and a half years. This is your fourth high school since your parents' death. What I find interesting is that until a year and a half ago, you still made the honor roll and you still competed in sports. Those are qualities that don't usually match a disciplinary case."

"Maybe you need to dig a little further." I wanted this lady out of my life and the best way to do that was to scare her. "If you did, you'd find out I beat up my first foster father." Actually, I had punched him in the face when I caught him hitting his biological son. Funny how no one in that family took my side when the cops arrived. Not even the kid I defended.

Mrs. Collins paused as if she was waiting for me to give her my side of the story, but she was sadly mistaken. Since my parents' death, I'd learned that no one in the system gave a crap. Once you entered, you were damned.

"Your old guidance counselor at Highland spoke highly of you. Made the varsity basketball team your freshman year, honor roll, involved in several student activities, popular amongst your peers." She surveyed me. "I think I would have liked that kid."

So did I—but life sucked. “Little late for me to join the basketball team—halfway through the season and all. Think coach will be fine with my tattoos?”

“I have no interest in you re-creating your old life, but together I think we can build something new. A better future than the one you will have if you continue down your current path.” She sounded so damn sincere. I wanted to believe her, but I’d learned the hard way to never trust anyone. Keeping my face devoid of emotion, I let the silence build.

She broke eye contact first and shook her head. “You’ve been dealt a rough hand, but you’re full of possibilities. Your scores on the aptitude tests are phenomenal and your teachers see your potential. Your grade point average needs a boost, as does your attendance. I believe those are related.

“Now, I have a plan. Along with seeing me once a week, you will attend tutoring sessions until your G.P.A. matches your test scores.”

I stood. I’d already missed first period. This fun little meeting got me out of second. But since I’d actually gotten my ass out of bed, I intended to go to class sometime today. “I don’t have time for this.”

A slight edge crept into her tone, so subtle I almost missed it. “Do I need to contact your social worker?”

I headed for the door. “Go ahead. What is she going to do? Rip my family apart? Put me in the foster care system? Continue to dig and you’ll see you’re too late.”

“When was the last time you saw your brothers, Noah?”

My hand froze on the doorknob.

“What if I could offer you increased supervised visitation?”

I let go of the doorknob and sat back down.

Echo

If only I could wear gloves every moment of the day, I'd feel more secure, but the stupid dress code wouldn't let me. Because of this, my wardrobe consisted of anything with long sleeves— the longer the better.

I clutched the ends of my sleeves and pulled them over my fingers, causing my blue cotton shirt to hang off my right shoulder. My freshman year, I would have freaked if people stared at my white skin and the occasional orange freckle. Now, I preferred for people to look at my bare shoulder instead of trying to catch a glimpse of the scars on my arms.

“Did she say who it was? I bet you it's Jackson Coleman. I heard he's failing math and if he doesn't get his grades up he'll lose his scholarship to college. God, I hope it is. He is so hot.” My best friend, Lila McCormick, took her first breath since I'd given her the rundown on my counseling session and the tutoring job Mrs. Collins spontaneously created. With her nonstop mouth and tight clothes, Lila was Eastwick High's own version of Glinda the Good Witch. She floated in her own beautiful bubble spreading happiness and cheer.

As Lila moved her tray down the lunch line, the smell of pizza and French fries made my mouth water, but the nausea roiling in my stomach kept me from buying food. My heart thundered and I hugged my sketch pad closer to my chest. I couldn't believe I was actually in the lunchroom. Lila and I had been best friends since preschool and the one thing she'd asked of me for Christmas was that I ditch the library and reclaim my old spot at our lunch table.

It may have sounded like an easy request, but it wasn't. The last time I'd eaten lunch in the cafeteria was at the beginning of May during my sophomore year: the day before my entire world fell apart. Back then, no one stared at me or whispered.

“Who's hot?” Natalie cut the line by sliding her tray between me and Lila. A group of guys behind us groaned at her boldness. As usual, she ignored them. Natalie was the second of two people who refused to treat me like a social pariah because of the gossip flying about me at school.

Lila pulled her sleek golden hair into a ponytail before paying the cashier. “Jackson Coleman. Echo is going to tutor some lucky guy and I'm guessing it might be him. Who would you like to add to our list of hot yet stupid boys?”

I followed them to the lunch table as Natalie's eyes roamed the cafeteria, searching for the right combination. “Nicholas Green. He's dumber than dirt, but I could eat him for dessert. If you're tutoring him, Echo, think you could introduce me?”

“Introduce who to who?” asked Grace. Natalie and Lila took their seats and I hesitated.

Grace's smile fell when she spotted me. She was the main reason why I didn't want to return to the lunchroom. We were total best friends before the incident and, I guess, even after. She visited me every day in the hospital and at home during the summer, but when our junior year began and my social status took a nosedive, so did our friendship ... in public that is. In private she claimed to love me like a sister. Everyone else at school treated me like I didn't exist.

“Natalie to Nicholas Green.” Lila patted the seat between her and Natalie. Attempting to hide, I dropped into the chair, slouched and propped my sketch pad against the edge of the table.

The other girls whispered to each other as they glimpsed me. One giggled. From the time I'd come back to school, I never had a social shot. The rumors about why I was absent for the last month of my sophomore year ranged from pregnancy to rehab to attempted suicide. My gloves became the kindling and my memory loss the match. When I returned that fall, the rumors exploded into a firestorm.

Lila continued her explanation. “Echo's going to be tutoring some dumb hottie. We're trying to guess who it will be.”

“Well, don’t hold out on us, Lila. Who is Echo tutoring?” Grace’s eyes flickered from Lila to the girls on her squad sitting at the table. When we’d returned for junior year, Grace had found out she had a shot at making head cheerleader—a difficult feat since she’d always hovered in the periphery of popular in that crowd. I’d assumed things between us would go back to normal once she was voted in. I’d been mistaken.

“Ask Echo.” Lila’s teeth crunched into the apple, her hardened gaze locked on Grace. Our table became eerily silent as the most beautiful girl at school openly defied the most popular girl at school. A lull fell over the cafeteria as the student body prepared to watch the showdown in progress. I would have sworn a tumbleweed blew past the table and that weird Western whistle song played on the loudspeaker.

I gave Lila’s foot a nudge, begging her in my mind to answer for me, instead of forcing Grace to acknowledge me in front of other people. Seconds ticked by as neither flinched in the stare-down.

I couldn’t take it. “I don’t know. I meet him this afternoon.” Mrs. Collins didn’t want to say who I’d be tutoring. She’d mumbled something about smoothing over a few details with him before we met.

Movement and chatter resumed in the cafeteria. The muscles in Grace’s face relaxed and she took a relieved breath before taking stock of the reaction of her public friends. “I’ll play guess the stupid hunk.” She sent me a private wink. For the billionth time, I wished my life could go back to normal.

When Grace threw out a name the rest of the group also decided to play. I sketched Grace as they talked. Her new short blond haircut framed her face perfectly. I listened to their name-dropping and the new school gossip that accompanied their guesses.

“Maybe Echo’s tutoring Luke Manning,” Lila said with a not-so-gentle nudge of my arm. “He fits hunk and less-than-bright.”

I rolled my eyes and did my best to fix the dark line her nudge had created on my drawing. Lila held on to the false hope that Luke, my boyfriend from my life before, still harbored feelings for me. She substantiated her claim with made-up stories of how he watched me when I wasn’t paying attention.

“Luke and Deanna broke up over the winter break,” said Grace. “Deanna says she broke up with him. Luke says he broke up with her. Who knows if we’ll ever find out the truth?”

“Who would you believe, Echo?” Natalie asked. Gotta give her credit. She wanted me to participate in the conversation, regardless of whether I wanted to be included.

I focused on shading the shadow Grace’s hair created against her ear. After meeting Luke in freshman English, I’d dated him for a year and a half. This made me the table’s Luke expert. Since our breakup, every table with a female contained a Luke expert. “Hard to say. I broke up with Luke and he didn’t claim any differently, but he’s changed a lot since then.”

“Noah Hutchins,” Natalie said.

I stopped sketching, confused about what Noah had to do with Luke. “What?”

“Guess the hunk, remember? Noah Hutchins is definitely hot. I’d tutor him.” Lila stared over at the stoner table, practically drooling. How could she swoon over the guy who’d made fun of me?

Grace’s mouth gaped. “And take the social hit? No way.”

“I said I’d tutor him, not take him to prom. Besides, from what I’ve heard, quite a few girls have ridden that train and loved every second of it.”

Grace glanced at Noah, eyes wandering up, then down. “You’re right. He’s hot, and rumor has it he’s only into one-nighters. Though Bella Monahan tried to force a relationship. She followed him around like a pathetic puppy dog. He wanted nothing to do with her if it didn’t involve the backseat of his car.”

Lila loved dirt. “She lost her boyfriend, her virginity, her reputation and her self-respect in less than a month. That’s why she transferred to another school.”

Guys like Noah Hutchins ticked me off. He used girls, used drugs and had made me feel like crap this morning. Not that I should be surprised. I'd had a couple of classes with him last semester. He'd stride into the room like he owned the earth and smirk when girls fell all over themselves in his presence. "What a jerk."

As if he heard me from across the room, his dark eyes met mine. His shaggy brown hair fell over them, but I could tell he was looking at me. The stubble on his face moved as he smiled. Noah had muscles, looks and trouble stalking him. Somehow, he made jeans and a T-shirt look dangerous. Not that I was into girl-using stoners. Yet, I took another peek at him while sipping my drink.

"Harsh words, Echo. You're not talking about me, are you?" A chair scraped the floor. Luke flipped it around so he could straddle it between Natalie and Grace. Come freaking on. Luke and I had barely spoken a word to each other since we broke up sophomore year. Why was everyone pushing me into social mode today?

"No," said Lila. "We talked about you earlier. Echo was calling Noah Hutchins a jerk." I kicked her under the table. She sent me a glare in return.

"Hutchins?" Luke Manning: six foot two, built like a freight train with black hair, blue eyes, captain of the basketball team, hot and full of himself. To my horror, he sized Noah up. "What's stoner boy done to deserve your wrath?"

"Nothing." I returned to my sketch pad. My cheeks burned when one of Grace's public friends mumbled something about my weirdness. Why couldn't Lila, Natalie and Luke just leave me alone? The gossip only became worse when I crept out of my shell.

Unfortunately, Lila chose to ignore my red cheeks and my warning kick. "He made fun of Echo this morning, but don't worry, she told him off."

The pencil in my hand bowed from my tighter grip as I fought the urge to yank Lila's gorgeous hair out of her head. My teachers and Mrs. Collins were so wrong. Interacting with my peers stunk.

Luke's eyes narrowed. "What did he say to you?"

I stomped on Lila's toes and stared straight at her. "Nothing."

"He told her that she had an effed-up name and then did the stupid 'echo' thing people did in elementary school," said Lila. Oh, God, I wanted to murder my best friend.

"You want me to talk to him?" Luke stared at me with a familiar hint of possessiveness. Both Grace and Natalie smiled like Cheshire cats. I refused to look at Lila, who bounced in her seat. Now I would never hear the end of her fantasies about Luke and me getting back together.

"No. He's a stupid guy who said a stupid thing. He probably doesn't even remember saying it."

Luke chuckled. "True. That whole table's screwed up. Did you know that Hutchins is a foster kid?"

The girls at my table gasped at the new gossip. I checked out Noah again. He appeared deep in conversation with some girl with long black hair.

"Yep," Luke continued. "Heard Mrs. Rogers and Mr. Norris discussing it in the hallway." The bell rang, ending Luke's spotlight on the forbidden information on Noah Hutchins.

While I threw away the remains of my lunch, Grace sidled up beside me and whispered, "This was huge, Echo. If Luke's into you again, life will change. Who he talks to and dates changes everyone's opinion. Maybe things will finally get back to normal."

One of Grace's public friends called out to her and she left my side without a second glance. I sighed as I pulled my sleeves over my fingers. What I wouldn't give for normal.

NOAH

I'd told Mrs. Collins the truth. I didn't have time for tutoring or counseling. In June, I would turn eighteen and graduate from foster care. That meant I'd need a place of my own, and rent meant a job. But Mrs. Collins had played me like a street hustler. An occasional supervised visit with my brothers wasn't enough. She dangled them in front of me like a damn needle to a heroin addict.

My shift at the Malt and Burger started at five. I glanced at the clock hanging over the reference librarian's desk. What part of "meet the guy you're tutoring directly after school at the public library" did my know-it-all misunderstand? Mrs. Collins might have mentioned who would be tutoring me, but I'd stopped listening after a few minutes. The lady talked too much.

I focused on the double doors. Five more minutes and I could happily call this session a failure, a fact I would be thrilled to throw in Mrs. Collins's face.

One door opened and cold air swept in, causing goose bumps to rise on my arms. *Ah, hell.* I leaned back in my chair and folded my arms across my chest. Echo Emerson glided into the library.

Her eyes swept the room while her gloved hands rubbed her arms. Like the cold could penetrate that fancy-ass brown leather coat. A light, sunshine smile rested on her face. It appeared Mrs. Collins had kept us both in the dark. The moment she saw me, her smile faded and her green eyes erupted with thunderclouds. *Join the fucking club.*

From under the table, I kicked out the chair opposite me. "You're late."

She set her book bag on the table and scooted the chair in as she sat. "I had to go to the office and find out testing dates. I could have gotten the information this morning, but some jerk got in my way."

Advantage Echo, but I smiled at her like I had the upper hand. "You could have stayed. I never asked you to leave."

"And let you harass me some more? No, thanks." She shrugged off her jacket, but kept on her knitted gloves. She smelled of cold and leather. Her blue cotton shirt dipped below her beige tank, exposing the top of her cleavage. Girls like her enjoyed teasing guys. Little did she know, I didn't mind looking.

Catching me staring, she readjusted her shirt and her cleavage disappeared from view. *Well, that was fun.* She glared at me, possibly waiting for an apology. She'd be waiting a long time.

"What subject are you failing? All of them?" Those green eyes danced. It appeared Echo also enjoyed dishing out shit.

All right, I'd screwed with her this morning for no reason. She deserved to get a couple blows in. "None. Mrs. Collins is calling the shots on this."

Echo opened her backpack and withdrew a notebook. A shadow crossed her face when she slid off the gloves and immediately pulled her long sleeves over her hands. "What subject do you want to start with? We have calculus and physics together, so we could start there. You've got to be a complete moron if you need help with business technology." She paused. "And weren't you in my Spanish class last term?"

I lowered my head so my hair fell into my eyes. For a girl who didn't know I existed, she sure knew a lot about me. "Yeah." And this term, too. She barely beat the bell walking into class and took the first seat available without giving anyone a second look.

"Qué tan bien hablas español?" she asked.

How well could I speak Spanish? Pretty damn decent. I shoved away from the table. "I gotta go."

"What?" Her forehead crinkled in disbelief.

"Unlike you, I don't have parents to pay for everything. I've got a job, Princess, and if I don't leave now, I'll be late. See you around."

Grabbing my books and jacket, I left the table and immediately exited the library. The cold January air smacked me in the face. Ice covered several spots on the pavement.

“Hey!”

I glanced over my shoulder. Echo bounded after me, leather jacket on one arm and pack slung over her back.

“Get your damn jacket on. It’s cold outside.” I didn’t stop for her, but I slowed my pace, curious as to why she followed me out.

She caught up quickly and kept step beside me. “Where do you think you’re going?”

“I told you, to work. I thought you were smart.” I’d never met anyone so fun to mess with.

“Fine. Then when are we going to make this session up?”

I slammed my books on the piece of crap I called a car, causing rust to scatter to the ground. “We’re not. I’ll make you a deal. You tell Mrs. Collins that we’re meeting as many days after school as you want, collect whatever volunteer hours you need for whatever little club you belong to, and I’ll back you up. I won’t have to see you and you won’t have to look at me. I get to continue with my screwed up life and you get to go home and play dress-up with your friends. Deal?”

Echo winced and backed away as if I’d slapped her. She lost her footing when she hit a patch of ice. My right hand swept out and snatched her wrist before her body could smack the ground.

I kept hold of her while she steadied herself using the trunk of my car. Embarrassment or cold flushed her white cheeks. Either way, I found it funny. But before I had a chance to make fun of her, her eyes widened and she stared down at the wrist I held.

Her long blue sleeve was hiked past her elbow and I followed her gaze to the exposed skin. She attempted to yank her hand away, but I tightened my grip and swallowed my disgust. In all the horror-show homes I’d lived in, I never once saw mutilation like that. White and pale red, raised scars zigzagged up her arm. “What the fuck is that?”

I tore my eyes away from the scars and searched her face for answers. She sucked in several shallow gasps before yanking a second time and successfully jerking out of my grasp. “Nothing.”

“That ain’t nothing.” And that *something* had to hurt like hell when it happened.

Echo stretched her sleeve past her wrist to her fingertips. She resembled a corpse. The blood rushed out of her cheeks and her body quaked with silent tremors. “Leave me alone.”

She turned away and stumbled back to the library.

Echo

“Nothing,” said Lila. “Not a word, not a peep, not a sound. Natalie, Grace and I even put a few feelers out to the juniors, but there is absolutely no gossip flying about you. Well, at least nothing involving Noah Hutchins.”

Lila sat in the passenger seat and I sat in the driver’s side of Aires’ 1965 Corvette. She’d come home with me to act as my barrier for Family Friday—or as I liked to refer to it, Dinner for the Damned.

In the garage, the radio played from my 1998 forest-green Dodge Neon. Aires’ Corvette still had its original radio. Translation: a piece of crap, but the rest of the car was totally beast. Flashy bloodred with black pinstriping running horizontally— Aires typically lost me at this point, but he would still continue talking even though my eyes glazed over—three functional, vertical front, slanting louvers on the sides of the front fenders; a blacked-out, horizontal-bars grille and different rocker panel moldings.

I had no idea what that meant, but Aires said it enough that I had the description memorized. The car looked awesome, but it didn’t run. Thanks to Noah Hutchins, my chances of it ever running lessened each day. I tightened my hands on the steering wheel and remembered Aires’ promise to me. Days before he left, he had hovered over the open hood as I sat on the workbench.

“It’s going to be okay, Echo.” Aires’ eyes had flicked to my rocking foot. “It’s only a six-month deployment.”

“I’m fine,” I’d said as I blinked three times. I didn’t want him to leave. Aires was the only person in the world who understood the craziness of our family, plus he was the only one capable of keeping the peace between me, Ashley and our father. He wasn’t Ashley’s biggest fan, but regardless of his feelings, he always encouraged me to give her a break.

He chuckled. “Next time at least try to stop your telltale sign of lying. One of these days Dad will pick up on it.”

“Will you write?” I asked, changing the subject. He’d talked a lot about our father before he left.

“And email and Skype.” He wiped his hands on an already greasy rag and stretched to his full six feet. “I’ll tell you what. When I get home and finish the car, you can be first to drive it. After me, of course.”

My foot stopped rocking and I was flooded with the first real feeling of hope since Aires told me of his deployment. Aires would return home as long as his car waited for him. He’d given me a dream and I held on to it after he left. My dreams died with him on a desolate road in Afghanistan.

“Whatcha thinking about?” asked Lila now.

“Noah Hutchins,” I lied. “He’s had all week to tell the whole school about my scars. What do you think he’s waiting for?”

“Maybe Noah doesn’t have anyone to tell. He’s a stoner foster kid who needs tutoring.”

“Yeah, maybe,” I answered. Or maybe he was waiting for the perfect moment to make my life a living hell.

Lila played with the rings on her fingers, signaling nerves.

“What?” I asked.

I had to strain to hear her mumbled answer. “We told Luke.”

Every single muscle in my neck tightened and I released my grip on the steering wheel, terrified I’d rip the plastic to shreds. “You what?”

Lila turned in her seat, wringing her hands in her lap. “He’s in our English class. Instead of proofreading each others’ papers, Natalie, Grace and I were discussing the Noah situation and your scars and ... Luke overheard a few things.”

My heart pounded in my ears. For almost two years, I'd kept this horrible secret and in one week two people had forced their way into my personal nightmare.

When I didn't say anything she continued, "Those scars are not your fault. You have absolutely nothing to be ashamed of. Your mom definitely does and possibly your dad, but you? Nothing. Luke already knew your mom was freaking psychotic and he never told anyone. He's a moron, but even he could figure out your mom hurt you."

Should I be mad? Relieved? I settled for numb. "She's not psychotic," I murmured, knowing that anything I said regarding my mother fell on deaf ears. "She has issues."

In a slow, deliberate movement, Lila placed her hand over mine, giving my fingers a reassuring squeeze. A reminder she'd love me regardless. "We think you should tell people. You know, take the offensive instead of the defensive. That way if Noah tells everybody, people will already know the real story and think he's a jerk for making fun of you."

I stared at Aires' workbench. My father never tinkered with tools. If something broke, he called someone to fix it. Aires had loved to tinker. He spent every moment here in this garage. God, I needed him. I needed him to tell me what to do.

"Please say something, Echo." The heartbreak in Lila's voice broke mine.

"Whose idea was it?" I asked, even though I knew the answer. "Grace?" She'd wanted me to tell the whole school what'd happened immediately.

"That's not fair." Lila exhaled. "Not that Grace has been fair to you either. She swore this whole public versus private thing would end after the head cheerleader vote, but here's the thing, Echo. She wants what we all want—everything back to normal. As long as everyone thinks you're a cutter or tried to commit suicide you'll always be on the outs. Maybe this whole Noah thing is a blessing in disguise."

I looked at Lila for the first time since she'd broken the news. "My mom is off-limits."

"We'll back you." Lila rushed out the words. "Luke said he'd tell his friends about the crazy mom episodes he witnessed when the two of you were dating. You know, to add legitimacy to your story. And when Grace heard that, she agreed to tell everyone what she, Natalie and I saw in the hospital. We saw the cops. We heard your father yelling at your mother. Grace wants this so badly—we all do."

"Because having a crazy mom and no memory of the night she tried to kill me is so much better than people guessing I'm a cutter or tried to commit suicide."

Lila spoke softly. "People will feel bad for you. Being a victim ... it makes it different. That's what Grace has been trying to tell you all along."

Anger snapped my frail patience. "I don't want their sympathy and I don't want the worst night of my life up for discussion for the whole school. If I ever tell anyone what happened, I want to be able to tell them the truth, not that I'm some pathetic moron who remembers nothing." I rapped the back of my head against the seat and stared at the ceiling of the car. *Deep breaths, Echo. Deep breaths.*

I remembered absolutely nothing about that night. My father, Ashley and my mom knew the truth. But I was forbidden to speak to my mom, and Dad and Ashley believed what the therapists said. That when my mind could handle the truth, I'd remember.

Whatever. They weren't the ones who lay in bed at night trying to figure out what happened. They weren't the ones who woke up screaming. They weren't the ones wondering if they were losing their minds.

They weren't the ones who felt hopeless.

"Echo ..." Lila faltered, took a deep breath, and stared out the windshield. This had to be bad. Lila always could make eye contact. "Have you ever thought that maybe you've brought some of this on yourself?"

I flinched and fought to control the anger shaking my insides. "Excuse me?"

“I know it was rough coming back after what happened between you and your mom, but have you ever wondered if maybe you’d come back in September and continued life as normal, people would have eventually moved on? I mean, you sort of became a recluse.”

The anger gave way to a hurt that shoved my heart into my throat. Was this how my best friend saw me? As a coward? A failure? “Yeah, I did think of that.” And I waited before speaking again to keep my voice from cracking. “But the more I put myself out there, the more people talked. Remember last year’s dance team tryouts? People tend to gossip about what they see.”

Her head lowered. “I remember.”

“Why?” I asked her. “Why bring this all up now?”

“Because you’re trying, Echo. You actually came to lunch. You’re talking to people. It’s the first time since our sophomore year that I’ve seen you try and I’m terrified you’re going to go back into your shell.” She turned to face me with a strange spring in her movements. “Don’t let what Noah saw scare you off. Come to Michael Blair’s party with me tomorrow night.”

Had she lost her mind? “No way.”

“Come on,” she pleaded. “It’s your birthday tomorrow. We have to go out for your birthday.”

“No.” I wanted to forget that the day even existed. Mom and Aires used to make a holiday out of my birthday. Without them....

She clasped her hands together and placed them under her chin. “Please? Pretty please? Pretty please with hot fudge? Try it my way and if it doesn’t work I swear I’ll never bring it up again. And did I mention I overheard Ashley tell your dad that she wanted to take you out to dinner? At a restaurant. A fancy one. With five courses. One little yes to me and I can get you out of it.”

Dinner for the Damned on Fridays was bad enough. Dinner for the Damned in public would be inhumane. I took another deep breath. Lila had stuck with me through it all: my mother’s insanity, my parents’ divorce, Aires’ death and now this. She may not know it yet, but Lila was about to receive *her* birthday present. “Fine.”

She squealed and clapped her hands together. In one long, continuous sentence, she described her plans for the next night. Maybe Lila and Grace were right. Maybe life could go back to normal. I could hide my scars and go to parties and just lie low. Noah hadn’t told anybody and maybe he wouldn’t.

Besides, only four more months till graduation and after that I could wear gloves every day for the rest of my life.

NOAH

Twenty-eight anxious days had passed since I'd visited this bleakly decorated room in the social services building. The clowns and elephants painted on the wall were meant to invite happiness, yet the longer I looked, the more sinister they became. Nervous as hell and holding two wrapped gifts, I sat on a cold folding chair. I didn't need this reminder of how screwed up my family had become. My little brothers used to shadow my every footstep, worshipping the ground I walked on. Now, I wasn't sure if Tyler remembered our last name.

I waited like a caged jack-in-the-box ready to spring. The social worker needed to bring my brothers in before my nerves exploded. For some reason, Echo and her rocking foot came to mind. She must be wound twice as tight as me.

My mother's voice chimed in my head. "You must always look presentable. It's important to put your best foot forward."

I'd shaved, which I normally didn't bother doing every day. My mom and dad would have hated my hairstyle and any sign of stubble on my face. With my mother in mind, I didn't let my hair grow past my ears on the sides, but, out of self-preservation, I'd let the top grow a little long, denying people access to my eyes.

The door opened and I automatically stood with the gifts still in my hands. Jacob flew through the door and rammed his body into mine. His head reached my stomach now. I tossed the presents on the table, lowered myself to Jacob's level and wrapped my arms around him. My heart dropped. Man, he'd grown.

My social worker, a heavysset black lady in her fifties, paused in the door frame. "Remember, no askin' personal questions about their foster parents. I'll be on the other side of that mirror."

I glared at Keesha. She glared back at me before she left. At least the hate was mutual. After I hit my first foster father, the system had labeled me emotionally unstable and I'd lost the right to see my brothers. Since I'd had no outbursts with any of my other foster families and showed "improvement," I'd recently regained once-a-month supervised visitation.

Jacob mumbled into my shoulder, "I missed you, Noah."

I pulled away and looked at my eight-year-old brother. He had Dad's blond hair, blue eyes and nose. "I missed you, too. Where's Tyler?"

Jacob diverted his gaze to the floor. "He's coming. Mom ... I mean ..." he stuttered. "Carrie is talking to him in the hallway. He's a little nervous." His eyes met mine again, full of worry.

I faked a smile and messed up his hair. "No worries, bro. He'll come when he's ready. You want to open your present?"

He flashed a smile that reminded me of Mom and nodded. I handed him his gift and watched him open the box that contained twenty new packs of Pokémon cards. He sat on the floor and lost interest in me as he tore open each pack, occasionally telling me random facts about a particular card he liked.

I glanced at the clock and then at the door. I only had so much time with my brothers and some bitch had Tyler. Even though I'd told Jacob it was okay, it wasn't. Tyler was only two when our parents died. I needed every minute I could get to help him remember them. Hell, who was I kidding? I needed every minute to help him remember me.

"How are things with Carrie and Joe?" I tried to sound nonchalant, but this question made me nervous. I had firsthand experience with shitty foster parents and I'd kill anybody who tried to treat my brothers like those people had treated me.

Jacob organized the cards into different categories. "Fine. They told us on Christmas that we could start calling them Mom and Dad if we wanted to."

Son of a bitch. My fist clenched and I bit the inside of my mouth, drawing blood.

Jacob looked away from his cards for the first time. “Where you going, Noah?”

“To get Tyler.” I only had forty-five minutes left. If they wanted to play dirty, so could I.

The minute I entered the hallway, Keesha stepped out of the observation room connected to mine, shutting the door behind her. “Get back in there and visit with your brother. You already complain that you don’t see them enough.”

I pointed my finger at her. “I earned at least two hours a month with my brothers. At *least*—not limited to. If they don’t get Tyler in that room in thirty seconds, I’m going to call a lawyer and tell him you’re knowingly keeping me from my brothers.”

Keesha stared at me for a second then started to laugh. “You’re a smart boy, Noah. Learnin’ the system and usin’ it to your advantage. Get back in there. He’s on his way.” I turned, but Keesha called out, “And Noah, if you ever point your finger at me again, I’ll break it off and hand it to you.”

Jacob gave me Mom’s smile again when I reentered. I focused on shoving the anger out of my system. Jacob was easy. Jacob remembered. Tyler—Tyler was a whole other animal.

Carrie, the perfect adult with perfect brunette hair, entered the room with Tyler wrapped around her like a baby monkey to his mother. I held out my hands. “Give him to me.”

I towered over her. Easy to do since she only came to my shoulder. Instead of handing him over, she slipped another arm around him. “He’s scared.”

Correction. She was scared. “I’m his brother and you’re not related to him. He’ll be fine.”

When she made no move to release him, I continued, “I have the right to this visit.”

She licked her lips. “Tyler, baby, it’s time to see Noah and play with Jacob. It looks like Noah got you a present.”

At those words, Tyler lifted his head and stared at me. The face of my youngest brother almost brought me to my knees. It wasn’t because he looked like me and Mom, but because the entire right side of his face was bruised. My heart beat faster when I saw the patch of shaved brown hair and at least five staples in his skull.

My head snapped to the transparent mirror, a clear indication that if Keesha didn’t get her social worker ass in here, I was going to kill this woman.

I sucked in a calming breath. Tyler was only four and my anger would frighten him. I reached out and took him from her. She held her arms out as if I’d stolen her puppy. “It was an accident,” she whispered.

“Hey, lil’ bro. Would you like to open your present?” I asked Tyler.

Tyler nodded. I placed him next to Jacob and handed him his gift. Keesha walked in as Carrie scurried out. Keesha held her hands up. “It was an accident. I should have told you before Tyler came in, but it slipped my mind.”

My eyes narrowed as I looked straight at her. “We’ll discuss this later.” I returned to my brothers and prayed that Tyler would speak at least one word to me before the session ended.

ONCE AGAIN, I SAT ON THE folding chair, but I wasn’t nervous this time. I was fucking pissed.

Keesha took the seat opposite me. “Carrie and Joe got Tyler a bike for Christmas and they let him ride it a couple of days ago without a helmet. When he fell, they took him immediately to the hospital and notified me. They feel horrible.”

“They should,” I barked. “How do you know they didn’t hit him?”

Keesha picked up the blue ribbon from Tyler’s package. “They’re good people. I don’t believe they would intentionally hurt your brothers.”

Yeah. Genuine saints. “If they’re so great, then they should stop stonewalling me and let me see my brothers.”

“They took on the boys after the incident with your first foster family, Noah. They’d heard that you were emotionally unstable. That alone proves how much they care for those boys. Carrie and Joe don’t want to see them get hurt.”

My fist closed and I kept my hand under the table to prevent myself from pounding the wall like I wanted. Keesha would love more leverage to prove my instability. “I would never hurt them.”

“I know that,” said Keesha with a hint of defeat. “Why do you think I suggested that Mrs. Collins take you on?”

I should have known. “So she’s your fault.”

She leaned forward, placing her arms on the table. “You’re a great kid, Noah. You’ve got a lot of potential in front of you if you’d just lose the attitude.”

I shook my head. “I thought I proved myself already. Christ, you’ve placed me in a home with another teenager.”

“I told you. This can be a slow process. Just come to the visitations, behave and work with Mrs. Collins. By the time you graduate, I’m sure we can move on to unsupervised visitation.”

Unsupervised visitation? A muscle in my jaw jumped. Bullshit. “I’ll be eighteen by the time I graduate. I’ll have custody by then.”

Keesha’s face twitched with amusement, but then became solemn. “You think you could raise your brothers while workin’ at a fast-food joint? You think a judge would choose you over Carrie and Joe?”

Choose me over Carrie and Joe? The realization that the judge might have this choice created a disturbing nausea in my gut. Jacob had said they wanted him to call them Mom and Dad. “Carrie and Joe are filing for adoption, aren’t they?”

The moment she looked away I knew the answer. There was no way in hell anyone but me would raise my brothers. “You’re right, Keesha. I’ve learned a lot in the past two and a half years. I’ve learned that this state takes blood into consideration and that the excuse of me being emotionally unstable must not be sticking if I’ve been placed in a home with another foster kid. I may not be able to take care of my brothers now, but in four months I will.”

Ready to leave, I pushed away from the table and stood. Keesha’s eyes crunched together in anger. “Don’t mess those boys’ lives up over an accident.”

I spun around and pulled up my sleeve, pointing at the round scar on my bicep. “Gerald called that an accident. The best way to describe Don is as an accident. What type of accident would you call Faith and Charles Meeks? I’ve got words for them, but you forbade that type of language. My brothers will never be accidents of this system.”

With that, I stalked out, slamming the door behind me.

Echo

Watching beer pong typically bored me, but not when Lila continued to kick everyone's butt. The girl was on fire. Plus anytime the opposing team hit her cup, she asked some random guy to drink it. Guys always lined up to do her bidding.

"Are you going to play?" Luke asked.

Caught up in my own thoughts, I'd missed his approach. "Nope. This is all Lila." Plus I didn't do anything that drew attention to me.

"Tonight should be all about you. It is your birthday." He paused. "Happy birthday, Echo."

"Thanks."

"So you gonna watch her all night?" Luke appraised the game with his thumbs hitched in his pockets. If I didn't know better, I'd say he was up to something.

"Buddy system. I've got Lila and Lila's got me. Natalie and Grace are around here somewhere." I surveyed the kitchen, half expecting them to spontaneously appear.

"Smart, yet annoying." Luke placed his palm on the wall next to my head, but kept his body a safe distance from mine. When he used to do that, he would crowd me with his body, causing butterflies to pole-vault in my stomach. Then he would lean in closer and kiss me. Those days were long gone—the crowding, the butterflies, the pole-vaulting and especially the kissing. "I was going to ask you to dance."

I made a show of looking around. "Who you trying to make jealous, Luke?"

He withdrew his hand and laughed—really laughed. Not the fake one he used in the cafeteria with his girl of the week. "Come find me when Lila's done playing games."

Lila threw her hands in the air and yelled as she demolished, once again, another team. At this point, I was sure they were letting her win just so she'd continue to play. Luke disappeared.

She grabbed one of the remaining cups of beer and walked away from the table, to the dismay of the guys who hung on her every movement. She drank half then handed the rest to me. "Here. Nat's still DD, right?"

"Yep." I took the cup from her and finished it off. I didn't particularly care for the taste, but when at a kegger ...

I enjoyed the warm fuzzy feeling the beer eventually brought on. The edges of my life didn't seem so bad then. Week number two of the second term had brought on my first one-on-one therapy session with Mrs. Collins, no job, and the fear that Noah Hutchins would change his mind and tell everyone about my scars. The two of us had gone back to ignoring each other. "Mrs. Collins asked me this week if I drank. I'm really tired of lying to her."

Michael Blair, host of the party, walked by with a tray full of beers for another round of beer pong. Lila stole two and passed one to me. "Adults want us to lie. They expect us to lie. They want to live in their perfect little worlds and pretend we do nothing more than eat cookie dough and watch reality TV."

I sipped the beer. "But we do eat cookie dough and watch reality TV."

Lila stumbled before narrowing her eyes at me. "Exactly. We do that to take them off guard."

The warm fuzzy feeling that helped take the edge off also slowed the thought process. I ran through what she said twice. "That doesn't make any sense."

She waved her hand around like she was going to explain. Her hand kept moving, but her mouth stayed shut. Finally she dropped her hand and took another drink. "I've got no clue. Let's dance, birthday girl."

We threw our empty cups in the garbage and wove through the crowd to the source of the pumping music. Music ... dancing ... Luke had said I needed to find him. I opened my mouth to

tell Lila when she abruptly stopped. “I’ve gotta pee.” She took a sharp left and closed the bathroom door behind her.

I leaned my right shoulder against it and listened for dry heaves. Nope, she was definitely peeing.

Pain shot down my left arm when someone ran into me and kept walking. I glanced over my shoulder. “Watch it!”

A girl with long black hair, dressed in black from head to toe and sporting a nose ring, stepped toward me. She stood close enough that I could count her eyelashes over her bloodshot eyes.

“Get out of my way and there wouldn’t be a problem.”

Okay. I was a complete wuss. I’d never gotten into a fistfight in my life. Did anything to avoid people yelling at me. Worried at night that I may have offended someone. So when this biker-looking chick stood there with her arms stretched out wide, waiting for my witty comeback or me to throw a punch, I considered puking.

“Back off, Beth,” a deep, husky voice called out behind me. Crap. I knew that voice.

Biker Beth’s gaze settled right behind my shoulder. “She yelled at me.”

“You ran into her first.” Noah Hutchins stood beside me. His biceps touched my shoulder.

The corners of her mouth stretched up. “You didn’t tell me you were fucking Echo Emerson.”

“Oh, God,” I moaned. She knew me—and she thought I was doing “it” with him. The room tilted and the warm fuzzy feeling I loved faded. *Happy birthday to me.*

“She’s my tutor.”

I leaned against the wall and wished everything would stop moving.

“Whatever. I’ll see you outside when you’re done studying.” Biker chick Beth waggled her eyebrows and walked away.

Fantastic. Another rumor to worry about. I needed to get away from him. Noah Hutchins meant nothing but bad news. First he made fun of me. Then he saw my scars. Then he destroyed my hopes of fixing Aires’ car. Then he made people think we were doing “it.”

I tried the doorknob to the bathroom, hoping to join Lila in there, but it didn’t budge. Locked doors were in direct violation of the buddy system. Screw it. I pushed off the wall and stumbled to the back door. Air. I needed lots of air.

I inhaled deeply the moment I stepped out onto the patio. The cold air burned my lungs and immediately nipped at the exposed skin on my neck and face. I heard laughter and voices in the darkness beyond the patio line. Probably the stoners smoking their crap.

“Do you have some sort of issue with jackets?”

Come freaking on. Why couldn’t I get rid of him? I spun around and nearly ran into Noah. Depth perception and beer obviously weren’t related. “Are you determined to ruin my life?” *Shut up, Echo.* “I mean, do you have nothing else to do but destroy me?” *That’s enough. You can stop anytime now.* “Did you come to this party to tell everyone about my scars?” And I officially became the after-school special on why teenagers shouldn’t drink.

I stared into his eyes and waited for his response. Neither one of us moved. Dear God, Lila and Natalie were right. He was hot. How could I have missed a body built like this? His unzipped jacket exposed his T-shirt, so tight I could see the curve of his muscles. And those dark brown eyes ...

Noah straightened his head and coolly responded, “No.”

A cold wind swept across the patio, causing me to shiver. Noah shrugged off his black leather jacket and tossed it around my shoulders. “How are you going to tutor me if you get fucking pneumonia?”

I cocked an eyebrow. What an odd combination of romantic gesture and horribly crude wording. I clutched his jacket, resisting the urge to close my eyes when a sweet, musky scent surrounded me. My slow mind turned one wheel. “That’s twice you brought up tutoring.”

He shoved his hands in his pockets. His hair fell into his eyes, blocking my new favorite view. “Nice to know that your mind still works when you’re fucked up.”

“You use that word a lot.” I swayed. Maybe I didn’t need space. I needed a wall. I stumbled and leaned my back against the cold brick. A small mutinous part of my brain chanted “buddy system” over and over again. *Yeah, I’ll get on it—in a few.*

Noah followed and stopped less than an inch in front of me. So close, the heat from his body enveloped every inch of mine.

“What word?”

“The *f* one.” Wow. He stood closer to me than Luke had earlier. Close enough that, if he wanted to, he could kiss me.

His dark eyes searched mine and then moved down to inspect the rest of my body. I should tell him to stop or make a sarcastic comment or at least feel degraded, but none of that happened. Not until his lips turned up.

“Meet your approval?” I asked sarcastically.

He laughed. “Yes.” I liked his deep laugh. It tickled my insides.

“You’re high.” Because no one in their right mind would find me attractive. Especially when that person had seen the infamous scars.

“Not yet, but I’m planning on it. Want to come?”

I didn’t need full use of my brain for this answer. “No. I like my brain cells. I find they come in handy when I ... oh, I don’t know ... think.”

His wicked grin made me smile. Not my fake smile—my real one.

“Funny.” In a lightning-fast move, he placed both of his hands on the brick wall, caging me with his body. He leaned toward me and my heart shifted into a gear I didn’t know existed. His warm breath caressed my neck, melting my frozen skin. I tilted my head, waiting for the solid warmth of his body on mine. I could see his eyes again and those dark orbs screamed hunger. “I heard a rumor.”

“What’s that?” I struggled to get out.

“It’s your birthday.”

Terrified speaking would break the spell, I licked my suddenly dry lips and nodded.

“Happy birthday.” Noah drew his lips closer to mine; that sweet musky smell overwhelmed my senses. I could almost taste his lips when he unexpectedly took a step back, inhaling deeply. The cold air slapped me into the land of the sober.

He ran a hand over his face before heading toward the tree line. “See you soon, Echo Emerson.”

“Wait.” I began to pull off his jacket. “You forgot this.”

“Keep it,” he said without looking back. “I’ll get it from you on Monday. When we discuss tutoring.”

And Noah Hutchins—girl-using stoner boy and jacket-loaning savior—faded into the shadows.

NOAH

“What I don’t get is why you gave her your jacket.” Beth’s head and hair dangled off the mattress. She took a hit off the joint and passed it to Isaiah.

“Because she was cold.” I slouched so far back into the couch that if I relaxed any further it might open up and consume me. I chuckled. This was good shit.

After my run-in with Echo, I bought some pot, gathered Beth and Isaiah from the woods behind Michael Blair’s house and herded us back to Shirley and Dale’s. I couldn’t depend upon either one of them to stay sober enough to drive me home, and I intended to get fucked up beyond belief.

According to my social worker’s file, Isaiah, another foster kid, and I slept in bedrooms upstairs. In reality, this frozen hellhole, more cement block than basement, was where the three of us lived. We took turns sleeping on the old king-size mattress and couch we’d found at Goodwill. We let Beth have the bed upstairs, but when her aunt Shirley and uncle Dale fought, which was most of the time, she shared the mattress with Isaiah while I slept on the couch.

Besides my brothers, Isaiah and Beth were the only people I considered family. I’d met them when Keesha placed me at Shirley and Dale’s the day after my junior year ended. Child Protective Services had placed Isaiah here his freshman year. It was more like a boardinghouse than a home.

Shirley and Dale became foster parents for the money. They ignored us. We ignored them. Beth’s aunt and uncle were okay people, though they had some anger issues. At least they saved their anger for each other. Beth’s mother and boyfriend of the week, on the other hand, liked to take their anger out on Beth, so she stayed here. Keesha remained unaware of this arrangement.

Beth flipped so she could see me straight. “For real. Are you doing her?”

“No.” But after standing so damn close to her, I couldn’t stop thinking about the possibility of her warm body under mine. I wished I could blame it on the pot, but I couldn’t. I had been as sober as the day of a court-ordered drug test standing next to her on that patio. Her silky red hair had glimmered in the moonlight, those green eyes looked up at me like I was some sort of answer, and, damn, she smelled like cinnamon and sugar fresh out of the oven. I rubbed my head and sighed. What was wrong with me?

Ever since that day at the library, I couldn’t get Echo Emerson out of my head. Even when I visited my brothers, I thought of her and that rocking foot.

She plagued me for several reasons. First, as much as I hated to admit it, I needed the tutoring. If I intended to get my brothers back, I needed to graduate high school, on time, with a job a hell of a lot better than cooking burgers. I’d missed enough class that I was behind and someone who attended class daily could help me catch up.

“Here. There ain’t much left, but give it a try.” Isaiah sat on the floor between the bed and the couch. He passed me the joint.

I took the last hit and held the smoke until my nostrils and lungs burned. And then there were the reasons that confused me. I exhaled. “Tell me about her.”

“Who?” Beth stared at the floor.

“Echo.” What crackhead names their kid Echo? I knew her, yet I didn’t. I only pursued girls who showed an easy interest in me.

Isaiah closed his eyes and rested his head against the couch. He kept his hair buzzed close to his scalp. His ears were pierced multiple times and tattoos ran the length of his arms. “She’s out of your league.”

Beth giggled. “That’s because she turned you down flat freshman year. Isaiah thought he could date up and asked a sophomore out. Little did he know Ms. Perfect had been dating King Luke for a year.”

Isaiah's lips twitched. "I seem to remember Luke switching lab partners behind your back so he could sit next to her."

Beth's eyes narrowed. "Dick."

"Focus for me. Echo? Not your pathetic lives." Like an old married couple, the two of them enjoyed bickering. Isaiah and Beth were a year behind me, but the age difference never bothered us.

Beth sat up on the mattress. She loved to dish dirt. "So Echo's sophomore year, she's the star of the school, right? She's on the dance team, advanced classes, honor roll, art guru, Miss Popularity, and she's got Luke Manning feeling her up between classes. One month before school lets out—she disappears." Beth's eyes widened and she spread her fingers out like a magician doing a trick.

This was not where I thought this story would go. Isaiah watched my reaction and nodded. "Poof."

"Gone," added Beth.

"Vanished," said Isaiah.

"Lost."

"Evaporated."

"Gone," repeated Beth. Her eyes glazed over and she stared down at her toes.

"Beth," I prodded.

She blinked. "What?"

"The story." This was the problem with hanging out with stoners. "Echo. Continue."

"Oh, yeah, so she disappeared," said Beth.

"Poof," added Isaiah.

Not this again. "I got it. Moving along."

"She comes back junior year a completely different person— like Body Snatcher different. It's still Echo, right? She's got red curly hair and a rockin' body," said Beth.

Isaiah laughed. "You just called her body rocking."

Beth threw a pillow at him before continuing, "But she's not Miss Social anymore. Luke and her are history. He moved on to some other girl. Though the rumor is she broke up with him before her disappearance. She quits the dance team, stops entering art contests and barely talks to anyone. Not that I would have talked to anyone either, the way rumors flew around about her."

"The gossip was brutal, man," said Isaiah. Beth, Isaiah and I understood gossip. Foster kids and those from bad homes lay low for a reason.

"What did they say?" I had a sinking feeling where this conversation was headed and it didn't sit well with me.

Beth wrapped her arms around her knees. "On the first day of our junior year she came back wearing a long-sleeve shirt and the same thing the day after that and on and on. It was ninety degrees for the first three weeks of school. What do you think people said?"

Isaiah made a circling motion with his finger. "Her little friends circled the wagons and kept her out of sight."

"And she started meeting with the school counselor." Beth paused. "You gotta feel bad for her."

My eyes had been drifting closed, but Beth's statement shocked them open. "What?" Beth lacked the sympathy gene.

She lay down on the bed, her eyes fluttering. "Obviously something fucked-up happened to her. Plus, her brother died a couple of months before she disappeared. They were super close. He was only three years older than her and took her to parties and stuff when he was in town. I used to hate her for having an older brother who cared." Now Beth's eyes shut completely.

Isaiah stood. "Roll over."

Beth rolled against the wall. Isaiah grabbed a blanket off the floor and draped it over her. Our storyteller passed out.

Isaiah joined me on the couch. “Most people call Echo a cutter. Some said she tried to commit suicide.” He shook his head. “It’s all messed up, man.”

I was tempted to say I agreed and tell him what happened at the library, but I didn’t. “What happened to her brother?”

“Aires? He was a good guy. Cool to everyone. Joined the Marines out of high school and got himself blown to hell over in Afghanistan.”

Aires and Echo Emerson. Their mother must have hated them to give them names like that. Now I needed to find a way to make nice with the girl. She was my ticket to getting my brothers back.

Echo

I held Noah's black leather jacket over my arm and headed toward my locker. The temptation to wear it overwhelmed me. I loved the way it smelled, how warm it made me feel and how it reminded me of our moment together outside Michael Blair's house.

Get a grip, Echo. You're not an idiot. I knew the gossip regarding Noah. He only attended parties to get high and browse the drunken female crowd for a one-night stand. If I'd gone off to get high with him, I would have been it. I wasn't interested in a one-night stand, but it was nice to be considered. After all, since my sophomore year, no other guy at this school had showed an ounce of interest in me.

"What's your problem? You look like a four-year-old who lost her balloon." Lila joined me as I walked down the hall.

"I'm destined to die a virgin." My own admission shocked me. Had those words left my mouth? I rubbed the smooth material of Noah's jacket. Maybe I should have gone off with him. Not to get high, but to ... well ... not die a virgin.

Lila laughed so loudly several people gawked as we walked past. I lowered my head, let my curls hide my face and willed everyone to look away. We reached our lockers and I opened mine with the hopes of crawling inside.

"Hardly likely. But I thought you weren't into hookups." Lila rifled through her own locker, which was next to mine.

"I'm not. I held out with Luke because I wasn't ready. I never imagined there would come a day when nobody would want me."

I stared down at my gloved hands, causing seasickness to hit me on dry land. When the bell rang, I'd have to take them off. This wasn't about sex. "No guy's going to get close enough to ever love me."

Lila closed her locker and bit her lip. "Your mom sucks."

I inhaled deeply to keep from falling apart. "Yeah. I know."

Her eyes narrowed on the jacket I still clutched. "What's that?"

"Noah Hutchins's jacket," Natalie said, appearing out of nowhere and snatching it out of my hand. Her brown hair swung from side to side. "Follow me! Now!"

Lila's eyes widened to the size of cantaloupes as we trailed Natalie into the restroom. "Why do you have Noah Hutchins's jacket?"

I opened my mouth to answer, but Grace slammed the door to the bathroom shut. "We don't have time for small talk. He's coming."

Natalie used one finger to push each stall door open to confirm we were alone. The place smelled of disinfectant and a sink dripped every couple of seconds.

"Stop it," said Grace. "I already checked."

Lila grabbed Grace's hand. "Whoa. I need answers. Who's coming? Why does Echo have Noah's jacket and where did you get that sweater?"

"Luke. For Echo. You were so drunk at the party that you messed with the buddy system and now Echo has Noah's jacket. She can't be seen with it." Grace jerked it out of Natalie's hand. "We are getting Echo's life back."

I pried the jacket from Grace's fingers. My friends had officially lost their minds. "It's a jacket, not crack. He's in my first period class. I'll give it to him then. And who cares that Luke is looking for me?"

Grace pointed a red fingernail at me. "You held out. Luke asked you to dance at the party and instead of dancing with him we had to take Lila home. Now he's looking for you to find out why you stood him up. This is the answer to all of our prayers."

I clutched the jacket closer. "What? I mean, so? Luke and I are friends." I guessed. He'd wished me a happy birthday. Friends do that.

Lila started her annoying bouncing dance. “So? Dancing with you at a party is way past friendship. It means he’s into you again.”

“Exactly,” said Grace. “If Luke’s into you then everyone else will be into you, too.”

Lila waved her hands in the air. “More importantly, you are not going to die a virgin.” She sucked in a dramatic breath. “Luke cannot see you with another guy’s jacket. Grace, take the jacket to your locker and we’ll figure out a plan later.”

Grace raised an eyebrow. “No way. I’m sure that thing reeks of drugs. What if they bring drug-sniffing dogs to school?”

“Oh, my God, you are worthless,” Lila said.

Tossing some of my curls over my shoulder, Grace straightened my shirt. “Go on, get out there before he misses you and heads to class.”

Lila and Natalie pulled me out the door and I clutched Noah’s jacket closer to me. “You guys are way overanalyzing this,” I said as Lila speed dialed the combination to my locker.

“He’s coming,” Natalie sang.

Lila plucked the jacket from my hands, threw it in my locker, pushed me out of the way and slammed it shut. She and Natalie leaned against my locker, adding a second layer of security.

“Hey, Echo.”

I turned and faced Luke. “Hey.” So much had happened in the past three minutes, my mind became a tilt-a-whirl.

Luke’s eyes flickered over Natalie and Lila. His eyebrows inched closer together. I remembered that look: he had something he wanted to say without an audience. But if Luke remembered nothing else about me, he’d recall I was a package deal.

“I waited for you,” he said.

“It’s my fault,” Lila blurted. “She didn’t have time to dance with you because I wanted to go home. I drank too much.”

Both Luke and I stared at her and then at each other. One Mississippi of awkward silence. Two Mississippi of awkward silence. Three Mississippi of awkward silence.

“Can I walk you to class, Echo?” he finally asked.

“Sure.” I glanced at Lila and Natalie over my shoulder as I accompanied Luke down the hallway. Both flashed quick thumbs-ups. I sucked in a deep breath and smiled when I noticed Luke grinning at me. Wow—normal. Maybe it really was possible.

That is, if normal meant hiding Noah Hutchins’s jacket in my locker ... and pretending that I wasn’t thinking about how close he’d come to kissing me.

NOAH

“Hold this.” Mrs. Collins shoved a steaming to-go cup at me and went back to war with the school’s locked doors. We could barely see in the pale morning light, making it hard for her to find the right key on the overloaded chain. I considered giving her crap about her lack of organizational skills, but decided not to. It took some major balls to be alone with a punk like me.

The warmth of the coffee reminded me how cold it was outside. Goose bumps pricked my exposed arms. I owned one long-sleeved shirt and only wore that for my brothers. Being jacket-less sucked.

Her eyes settled on the tattoo on my biceps and her forever smile fell a centimeter. “Where’s your jacket, Noah? It’s cold.”

“I gave it to someone.”

A relieved sigh escaped her mouth when the third key she tried unlocked the door. She waved for me to go in. Instead, I held the door and nodded for her to go first. It would be my luck that a security guard would see me, shoot, then ask questions.

Our footsteps echoed down the empty hallway. Thanks to our school’s new green policy, the lights flashed on as we approached. It put me on edge. On top of the system that stalked my every movement, now the building did, too.

“Who did you give your jacket to?” Mrs. Collins entered the main office and unlocked her office door on the first try.

“A girl.” A girl who’d ignored me all day Monday and had yet to return said jacket.

“A girlfriend or a friend that’s a girl?”

“Neither.”

Mrs. Collins gave me the pity look then busied herself with her purse. “Do you need a coat?”

I hated the pity look. After my parents died, everyone I knew wore that look. Eyes slightly rounded. The ends of their mouths curved up slightly while their lips pulled down. The entire time they fought to look normal, but they only came across as uncomfortable.

“No. I’m getting it back today.”

“Good.” She flipped open my file. “How are your tutoring sessions with Echo?”

“We’re starting today.” Only Echo didn’t know that yet.

“Glorious.” She opened her mouth to ask another asinine question, but I had my own.

“What do you know about my brothers?”

She picked up a pen and tapped it against the desk, keeping time with the second hand on the clock. “Keesha and I had a chat regarding your visit this weekend. What happened to Tyler was an accident.”

What the hell? “You’re a school counselor. What are you doing talking to my social worker? And what are you doing talking to her about Tyler?”

“I already told you. I’m a clinical social worker, and I’m the guinea pig for the pilot program. My job isn’t to handle a part of you, but to handle all of you. That means I have access to your brothers. I’ll be communicating with their foster parents and sometimes I’ll be talking to Jacob and Tyler as well.

“As for where I fit in here at Eastwick, Mrs. Branch handles the typical guidance counselor issues and I handle ...” She bobbed her head. “The more enlightening students. School fills your mind with knowledge, but we tend to ignore the emotional. I’m here to see what happens if we pay attention to both.”

Yay for me. Having Keesha up my ass was bad enough. Now I had Sally Sunshine in my business, too. I ran my hand over my face and shifted in my chair.

Mrs. Collins continued, “Keesha also told me that you’re threatening to petition for custody of your brothers after you graduate. If that’s true, Noah, you’ve got some major changes you need to make in your life. Are you willing to make them?”

“Excuse me?” Did she just challenge me to get my shit together so I could get my family back?

She put the pen down and leaned forward. “Are you willing to make the changes necessary to possibly care for your brothers after graduation?”

Fuck, yeah. Hell, yes. “Yes, ma’am.”

Mrs. Collins picked her pen back up and wrote in my file. “Then you’re going to have to prove it to me. I know you have no reason to trust me, but this process will go faster and smoother if you can find a way to do it. You need to focus on yourself right now and trust Keesha and me to see to the welfare of your brothers.

“The reality of the situation is this. If you continue to harass Keesha about visitation and if you continue to pump Jacob for information on his foster parents, specifically their last name, then you are making it appear as if you aren’t willing to play by the rules. The visitation you have now is a privilege, Noah. A privilege I want to see you keep. Do we have an understanding?”

The chair jerked beneath me as I pointed at her. “Those are my brothers.”

The lack of information about who had my brothers—their foster parents’ last name, their address, their phone number ... the fact that I couldn’t see Jacob and Tyler whenever I wanted ... I lost all of those “privileges” the day I hit my first foster father. My throat swelled and my eyes stung. The realization that I was on the verge of tears pissed me off. I stood, unsure what to do ... or who to blame. “You have no right. They’re my responsibility.”

Mrs. Collins stared at me straight-faced. “They’re safe. You need to believe me on this. You’re putting your experiences on your brothers. I understand your need to protect them, but right now it isn’t necessary. If you want to see them on a regular basis then you need to learn to work with me, and I’ve explained how you can do that.”

“Go to hell.” I grabbed my books and left her office.

Echo

Mrs. Collins's plaques had moved by a fraction of an inch, revealing black marks on the wall. For once, I found myself wishing for Ashley's attendance. The imperfection would have driven her insane.

Just like last week, the blue ribbon sat on Mrs. Collins's desk and just like last week, the placement of the ribbon changed—each time closer to my seat. It was as if the ribbon contained a force field that enveloped me—a pull I couldn't explain.

"How are things with your boyfriend?" asked Mrs. Collins. Another Tuesday afternoon, another therapy session.

I drew my eyes away from the ribbon. Thank God Luke had asked me out on a group date for Saturday night. One less lie for me to tell. "Ashley misunderstood. I don't have a boyfriend, but I am dating somebody." Kind of. Sort of. If one date was considered dating.

Her eyes brightened. "Wonderful. Is it that basketball player I've seen hanging around with you in the hall?"

"Yes." Great, a stalking therapist. Was that even legal?

"Tell me about him."

Um ... no. "I don't want to talk about Luke."

"All right," she said, totally unruffled. "Let's talk about Noah. He told me today is your first tutoring session."

I blinked several times in succession. Crap. Was it? Maybe I should have discussed Luke. I still had Noah's jacket in my locker since I'd let Lila and Grace convince me I couldn't simply hand it to him during school. They were still devising a plan to get it back to him. "Yes. Yes, it is."

"Would you like some unsolicited advice?"

I shrugged and yawned simultaneously, preparing for the just-say-no-to-drugs-sex-and-alcohol lecture. After all, in theory, I was tutoring Noah Hutchins. "Sure."

"Noah is more than capable of doing the work. He just needs a small push. Don't let him fool you into thinking otherwise. And you, Echo, are the one person at this school I believe can challenge him academically."

Alllllrighty. That was a totally strange pep talk. "Okay." I covered my mouth as I yawned again.

"You look tired. How are you sleeping?"

Awesome. I slept a whole two hours last night. My foot began to rock.

"Echo, are you okay? You look pale."

"I'm fine." If I kept saying it then maybe it would come true. And maybe, someday, I could sleep a full night without horrible dreams—strange dreams, scary dreams, full of constellations, darkness, broken glass and, sometimes, blood.

"Your father mentioned that you don't take your prescribed sleeping pills even though you still have night terrors."

Nightly. Scary enough I didn't want to fall asleep. Frightening enough that if I lost the battle and did sleep, I woke up screaming. My father and Ashley kept the pills in a locked cabinet in their bathroom and only gave them to me if I asked. I'd rather have poked my eye out with a bleach-laced needle than ask Ashley for anything. "I said I'm fine."

With the word *fine*, my eyes shot back to the ribbon. What was it about that thing that attracted me to it? I felt like a moth flying toward an electric bug zapper.

"You appear very interested in the ribbon, Echo," said Mrs. Collins. "You're more than welcome to hold it if you'd like."

"No, I'm good," I replied. But I wasn't good. My fingers twitched in my lap. For some insane reason, I wanted to hold it. Mrs. Collins said nothing and the silence sort of crept me out.

My heart stuttered as I finally shifted forward and took the ribbon in my hand.

This wasn't one of those cheesy blue ribbons. This was the real deal—large and made of silk. I rubbed the fabric between my thumb and forefinger. First in Show: Painting—Kentucky Governor's Cup.

Someone at my school won the Governor's Cup. How freaking cool was that? Every high school artist dreamed of winning that competition.

Maybe some lowerclassman had remarkable art talent. Screw my dad—the moment Mrs. Collins released me, I planned on checking out the art room and seeing this talent for myself. To win first place in the Governor's Cup, you had to be a stinking genius.

As I ran my fingers over the ribbon again, applause echoed in my head. A still frame image of my outstretched arm accepting the ribbon sprang into my mind.

My eyes snapped to Mrs. Collins as my heart thundered in my chest. "This is mine."

The thundering moved to my head and my chest constricted as another image squeezed out. In my mind's eye I was accepting not only the ribbon, but a certificate. I didn't see the name printed there, but I saw the date. It was *the* date.

Jolts of electricity shot up my arms and straight to my heart. Horrified, I threw the ribbon across the room and bolted from my chair. My knee slammed against the desk, causing needle-sharp pains to shoot behind my kneecap. I fell to the floor and scrambled backward, away from the ribbon, until my back smacked the door.

Mrs. Collins pushed slowly away from her desk, crossed the room to retrieve the ribbon, and held it in her hand. "Yes, it's yours, Echo." She spoke like we were sharing a pizza instead of me having a panic attack.

"It's ... It ... can't be. I ... never won the Governor's Cup." Fog filled a portion of my mind, followed by a bright flash of red. A moment of clarity revealed a younger me filling out a form. "But I entered ... my sophomore year. I won the county, then regionals, and moved on to state. And then ... then ..." Nothing. The black hole swallowed the red and the gray. Only darkness remained.

Mrs. Collins smoothed her black skirt as she sat down in front of me. Maybe no one told her, but sitting on the floor during a therapy session was abnormal. She reined in her Labrador enthusiasm and spoke in a calm, reassuring tone. "You're in a safe place, Echo, and it is safe to remember." She stroked the ribbon. "You had a very happy morning that day."

I cocked my head to the side and squinted at the ribbon. "I ... won?"

She nodded. "I'm a huge art fan. I prefer statues over paintings, but I still love paintings. I'd rather go to a gallery than a movie any day of the week."

This lady was a feather-filled quack. No question about it. Yet in the middle of those annoyingly cheerful plaques hung honest-to-God legitimate degrees. The University of Louisville was a real school and so was Harvard, where she'd apparently continued her studies. I focused on breathing. "I don't remember winning."

Mrs. Collins placed the ribbon on the edge of her desk. "That's because you repressed the entire day, not just the night."

I stared at the file on her desk. "Will you tell me what happened to me?"

She shook her head. "I'm afraid that would be cheating. If you want to remember, then you need to start applying yourself during these sessions. That means you answer my questions honestly. No more lying. No more half lies. Even if your parents are here. In fact, especially if your parents are here."

I reached up to where Aires' dog tags would have rested around my neck if I had worn them. My eyes never left my file. "Did you bother reading that thing?"

One finger methodically rubbed her jaw. "Of course."

I bit the inside of my mouth. "Then you know. I tried to remember once and you know it isn't possible." Not without my mind fracturing in two. The summer after the incident, one psychologist

tried to open the steel door in my brain and demons raced out from the crack. I lost myself for two days and woke in the hospital. My nightmares escalated into night terrors.

“You want the truth?” I asked. “You’re right. I want so badly to know what happened. To prove I’m not ... to know ... because sometimes I wonder ... if I’m crazy like her.”

I could hear my father yelling at me to shut up in the dark recess of my mind, but the dam had burst open on my fears. “Because I’m like her, you know? We look the same, we’re both artists, and people always say that I have her spirit. I’m proud to be like her. Because she’s my mom, but I don’t want ...” To be crazy.

Mrs. Collins placed a hand over her heart. “Echo, no, you’re not bipolar.”

But why tempt fate? I’d tried once. Wasn’t that enough? Mrs. Collins didn’t understand. How could she? “If you tell me, I’ll know. I think my mind cracked because that therapist tried to make me relive it. Maybe the memories are too horrible. Maybe if you tell me, you know, just the facts, then the black hole in my brain will be filled, the nightmares will go away and I won’t lose my mind in the process.” I stared straight into her kind eyes. “Please.”

Her lips turned down. “I could read you the account from the police, your father, your stepmother and even your mother, but it won’t take the nightmares away. You’re the only person who can do that, but that means you need to stop running from the problem and face it head-on. Talk to me about your family, Aires, school, and yes, your mother.”

My mouth hung open to speak, but then I snapped it shut, only to attempt to speak again. “I don’t want to lose my mind.”

“You won’t, Echo. We’ll take it slow. You run the race and I’ll set the speed. I can help you, but you’ll have to trust me and you’ll have to work hard.”

Trust. Why not ask me to do something easier, like prove the existence of God? Even God had given up on me. “I’ve already lost a piece of my mind. I can’t trust you with what’s left.”

NOAH

After school, I spotted Echo weaving through the crowded hallway. She swung into the main office seconds before I caught up to her. Tuesday was my only night off and I'd planned on shooting hoops with Isaiah. I slammed my fist into the locker beside me. Now I had to wait for some stuck-up head case to be done with her therapy appointment.

I wandered the halls before settling across from Echo's locker. She hadn't had her backpack or coat with her, so I figured she'd have to come get them before she left for the day. Forty mind-numbing minutes later, I was questioning my decision. Echo had coat issues. Waiting by her car would have been smarter.

Heels clicking against the linoleum floor signaled her approach. Echo's red spiral curls bounced with each step. Clutching her books tight to her chest, she kept her head down. Every muscle in my body clenched when she walked past. I'd tolerated her ignoring me during school, but to flat-out diss me in an empty hallway was beyond cold. With her back to me, she tried the combination on her lock. The metal locker lurched open.

"You are the rudest damn person I have ever met." I shoved off the ground. Screw her, Mrs. Collins and tutoring. I'd find a way to bring myself to speed. "Give me my damn jacket."

Echo spun around. For a second, pure pain slashed her face, but then another storm brewed in her eyes. A storm that required hurricane warnings and evacuations. "No wonder you need tutoring. You have the worst vocabulary of anyone I know. Have you ever even bothered learning anything beyond four-letter words?"

"I've got another four-letter word for you. Fuck you. You got back with your boyfriend and couldn't stomach giving me my stuff in front of other people."

"You don't know anything."

"I know crazy when I see it." The moment the words flew out of my mouth I regretted them. Sometimes when you see the line, you think it's a good idea to cross it—until you do.

For the second time since meeting her, Echo looked as if I'd slapped her. Water pooled at the bottom edges of her eyes, her cheeks flushed red and she blinked rapidly. She'd succeeded in making me feel like a dick ... again.

She reached into her locker and flung my jacket at me. "You are such a jerk!" She slammed shut her locker and stalked off.

Dammit. Just dammit. "Echo!" I ran after her. "Echo, wait."

But she didn't. I caught up to her, grabbed her arm and turned her toward me. Dammit all to hell, tears poured down her face. What was I supposed to do now?

She sniffed. "I didn't know you were waiting for me. I didn't see you." She wiped the tears with the back of her hand. "I should have given you your jacket back yesterday, but ..." Her slender white neck moved as she swallowed. "But I wanted normal and for a few minutes that's what I was. Like two years ago ... like before ..." And she trailed off.

If I'd had the thinnest chance at normal again, I would have burned the damn jacket. I was sure she wanted her brother back as much as I wanted mine. To have a home again, and parents, and dammit. Normal.

I took a deep, pride-eating breath. In the wise words of Isaiah—poof. My muscles relaxed and my anger disappeared. Lowering her head, Echo withdrew into her hair. I would never understand why this girl made me grow a conscience. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have yelled at you."

She revealed her pale face and sniffed again. One red curl clung to her tearstained cheek. My hand reached out to release it, but I hesitated a mere heartbeat away from her skin. I swear to God she quit breathing and even blinking, and for a second so did I. In a deliberate movement, I freed the curl.

She exhaled a shaky breath and licked her lips when I lowered my hand. "Thanks."

For the apology or the curl, I had no idea and wasn't going to ask. My heart pounded in tune with thrash metal. We'd read about sirens in English this fall; Greek mythology bullshit about women so beautiful, their voices so enchanting, that men did anything for them. Turned out that mythology crap was real because every time I saw her, I lost my mind.

Normal. She wanted normal and so did I. "You know what's normal?"

"What?" She wiped away her remaining tears.

"Calculus."

No doubt, Echo Emerson equaled siren. She gave me the same smile I'd seen on Saturday night. That type of smile caused men to write those pussy-ass songs that Isaiah and I made fun of. I'd sit in Mrs. Collins's office for hours and wake my ass up early to go to calculus in order to see that smile again. This was fucked up.

"All right," she said. "Let's do normal."

And we did. For an hour, we sat against the lockers and she caught me up on a few lessons. She used her hands to describe things, which was pretty damn hilarious since we were discussing math. Her green eyes shone when I asked questions and she gave me that siren smile each time I clued in. That smile only made me want to learn more.

She took a deep breath after finishing her explanation of a derivative. I'd understood a derivative five minutes ago, but I loved the sound of her sweet voice. Part angel, part music.

"You know a lot about math," I said. You know a lot about math? What type of statement was that? Right along of the lines of "Hey, you have hair and it's red and curly." Real smooth.

"My brother, Aires, was the math genius of our family. The only reason I can keep up is because he tutored me. He never turned in his calculus book, knowing I'd need all the help I could get." Handling it with the same reverence my mother had carried the family Bible, Echo pulled out an old, tattered math book from her backpack and began turning pages. The book contained copious notes written in blue or black ink in the margins. "Guess that makes me a cheater, huh?"

"No, it means you have a brother who cared." Was my brothers' foster mom helping them with their homework, or was she like Gerald's wife? Locking herself in the bedroom, she'd pretended none of her foster kids existed and that he didn't beat us.

She stroked the handwritten words on the page. "I miss him. He died two years ago in Afghanistan." Echo clutched the book like it was a life raft. "IED."

"I'm sorry." I'd said that phrase more to her today than I had said it over the past two and a half years. "About your brother."

"Thanks," she said in a lifeless voice.

"It doesn't get better," I said. "The pain. The wounds scab over and you don't always feel like a knife is slashing through you. But when you least expect it, the pain flashes to remind you you'll never be the same."

Why I was telling her this, I didn't know. Maybe because she was the first person I'd met since my parents died who could understand. I stared at the pulsating fluorescent light hanging from the ceiling. On. Off. On. Off. I wished I could find my pain's off switch.

A warm, tickling touch crashed me back to earth. Maybe it sent me straight to heaven. Either way, it dragged me out of hell. Echo's pink fingernails caressed the back of my hand. "Who did you lose?"

"My parents." No pathetic sympathy crossed her face, only plain understanding. "Think Mrs. Collins put the two most depressed people together on purpose?" I flashed a smile to keep the honesty of the statement from corroding the remainder of my heart.

Her hand retreated. "Wow. I thought I was the only person at this school faking every moment."

Craving more of her touch, I shifted on the floor so my arm touched her shoulder. Echo's lips never moved, but my siren sang nonetheless. Her song seared my skin and my nose burned from her sugar and cinnamon scent.

Her back pocket vibrated, flinging me back to hell ... sorry— high school. I needed one of Beth's cigarettes and I didn't even smoke.

She skimmed a text message on her iPhone. Probably that lucky son-of-a-bitch ape boyfriend. Any trace of the siren smile I worked so hard to put on her face faded. That in itself was a fucking tragedy.

"You okay?" I asked.

"Yeah. My stepmom stalking my every move," she said with forced lightness.

I took a relieved breath. Better her stepmom than the ape. "At least you've got someone who cares." I doubted Shirley or Dale knew I owned a cell phone. "I am sorry for making you cry earlier. I promise I'll play nice in the future."

"Does this mean that I'm actually tutoring you now?"

"Yeah, I guess it does."

Echo pulled her sleeves over her hands. "You didn't make me cry. You didn't help, but you didn't make me cry."

She had exposed her hands while she tutored me—when she touched me. Shit. I'd forgotten about her scars. Hell, *she'd* forgotten about her scars—until now. I wanted that moment back, and to see her smile again. "Then who did? It's been a while since I've been in a fight. My rep will be ruined if I'm good for too long."

She fought it, but I won. The smile returned for a brief dazzling moment. "You'd be expelled if you got into a fight with Mrs. Collins. So thanks, but no, thanks."

I hit the back of my head against the locker. "She fucked with me today, too. Must be a third date thing." I chuckled when Echo looked at me like I'd tattooed my forehead.

"Third date thing meaning what?"

Did she live in a box? "After the third date, people generally have sex. Today was my third session and Mrs. Collins royally screwed me over. And by the looks of it, she did a number on you, too."

Her perfectly shaped eyebrows furrowed as she ran through what I said. I loved how her lips twitched in humor and a blush touched her cheeks.

"You know what sucks?" she asked.

"Mrs. Collins?"

"Yes, but that's not what I meant. Everything I need to know is in that freaking file she keeps on me. It's like the key to the magic door that opens the magic kingdom." She kicked her backpack across the hall. "I could finally find some real peace if I could get my hands on that stupid, stupid folder."

As she spoke, my mind whirled like a tornado. Mrs. Collins was in touch with Tyler and Jacob's foster parents, which meant she had their information: their last names, their phone number, their address. Echo was right. Those files were a gold mine. If I got my hands on my folder, I could check on my brothers. I could prove they were in an abusive home and gain custody. "You, Echo, are a genius."

Echo

Stage one of Operation Read My File consisted of my father, Ashley and me waiting for Mrs. Collins to call us in for our meeting. My father stood in the corner, speaking harshly to someone on the other end of his BlackBerry while Ashley and I sat next to each other on the row of chairs.

Ashley flung her hand over her stomach. “Oh. Oh, Echo, the baby kicked.”

“You can come in now,” called Mrs. Collins.

I flew out of my seat. “Thank God.” For months, Ashley had bored everyone with endless baby chatter. Okay, maybe not everyone. My father hung on her every word like she was Paul preaching the gospel. He’d never paid this much attention to my mother. If he had, I wouldn’t be the school freak.

Three weeks ago, Mrs. Collins had begun the term wearing business suits and then jeans and a nice shirt on casual Fridays. Each week casual Friday moved up a day. Today, Tuesday was the new Friday. From behind her desk, she flashed her never-ending smile. “Mr. and Mrs. Emerson, how wonderful to see you, but our group session is next week.”

With eyebrows raised, my father sent a questioning glance to Ashley, who sat stunned with her mouth open. “No. The family calendar clearly stated ...”

I cut her off. “I told them to come this week.”

Mrs. Collins did that weird thing where she shifted her entire mouth to the right. “I know we had a rough session last week, but did you really think you needed to bring bodyguards?”

“Echo?” My father asked. “What happened last week?”

My heart squeezed and dropped. His concern sounded real. I’d give anything if it was. I stood and walked to the window. Students mingled in the parking lot before heading home. This session had the possibility of stinking as much as last week’s. “Something good.”

“That’s fantastic. This family needs good news.” Ashley’s perky voice grated like sandpaper against my skin. “I read in a magazine that babies can sense negativity.”

A car pulled out of its spot, revealing Noah sitting on the hood of his rusting car next to some guy with lots of earrings and tattoos and biker chick Beth. His two friends stared at me when he gave me his mischievous grin. His friends gave me the creeps. Noah’s smile gave me flutters.

Not that I should have flutters for Noah Hutchins. I was dating Luke, not him—that is if you called Luke’s one-sided nighttime phone conversations and a single awkward group outing to the local pizza place dating.

I sighed and shook Luke out of my head. Noah and I had made a deal and I intended to uphold my end of the bargain. The plan was simple: I needed to push back my appointment so he could move his session from the morning to my current afternoon slot. With our appointment times near each other, one of us would distract Mrs. Collins while the other snuck a peek at the files.

“Echo?” my father prodded, the hint of concern still present. “What’s good?”

Inhaling deeply to calm the nerves squeezing my stomach, I turned to face him. I loathed confrontation and I hated confrontation with my father more. “Why didn’t you tell me I won the Governor’s Cup?”

“Excuse me?” No concern left in my father’s tone now.

A twinge of hurt joined the nerves. Why, on top of everything else, did he take art away from me, too? “I wanted to win so badly. You could have at least told me that much.”

Mrs. Collins eyed me warily and kept her hands folded on her lap. I expected her to jump in and defend herself, but she remained annoyingly cool. Ashley placed her hand over my father’s. “Owen?” Was that guilt flickering in her blue eyes?

Scaring the crap out of me, he turned an unusual color of gray. “You remember?” His eyes grew round, making him look lost and terribly sad.

I thought he wanted me to remember. My forehead wrinkled in confusion. Wasn't that the point of all this therapy?

Gray turned to red as he faced Mrs. Collins. "This is unacceptable. We saw two psychiatrists and had three separate psychological evaluations. Each of them had a different opinion of how to proceed, but after her breakdown, every single one of them told us to leave that day alone. I knew when you asked for that ribbon to put in this room we should have opted out of your program. How could you force her to remember?"

"I didn't force anything, Mr. Emerson. I simply placed the ribbon on the desk during her sessions. It's called desensitizing. Her mind decided it was safe to remember, so she did."

Springing from his chair, my father ran a hand through his hair. "My God, Echo. Why didn't you tell me earlier? You have to understand ..."

"Mr. Emerson, stop!" Mrs. Collins tried to keep her voice level, but I felt the slight urgency in her tone. "She only remembered receiving the ribbon. That's all."

My father's chest rose and fell rapidly. He reminded me of one of those paper bags people blow into during a panic attack. Then, as if to prove the impossible possible, he pulled me into him and hugged me. One of his arms wound around my back. His other hand cradled my head against him. I stood stiff.

Yet I felt warm. Secure. Safe. Like when I was a child and my mother spiraled into an episode and I was scared. Memories of my mother wide-eyed, yelling incoherently, her wild, red hair falling from a ponytail filled my mind. I used to run to my father and he would hold me—just like this. He protected me and kept me safe. I listened to his heart beating and I almost allowed myself to hug him back. Stilettos clicked against the floor when Ashley fidgeted.

Unbelievable pain stung my heart and I pushed him away. "You chose her."

My father held a hand out to me, his mouth hanging open. "What?"

"You chose Ashley. She weaseled her way into our home and she tore our family apart. You chose her over us."

"Echo, no. It wasn't like that." Ashley's plea was pathetic and fake. "I loved you and then I fell in love with your dad. Your parents' marriage was over way before the divorce."

My foot tapped the floor. Liar. She was a liar. "Yes, because of you."

"We're going home. This is a family matter." My father reached for his jacket and Ashley stood. "Mrs. Collins, I appreciate the state's willingness to place Echo in your program, but I believe it's best if my family seeks private counseling someplace else."

I panicked. In the parking lot, Noah was waiting for his turn to set our plan into motion. So far, I'd failed miserably. My father needed to stay until I accomplished my goal. In theory, I had one ally in this room. "Mrs. Collins?"

She gave me a nod. "Mr. and Mrs. Emerson, with all due respect this is exactly the kind of matter that should be discussed here."

My father held out Ashley's coat for her. "I'm capable of deciding what's appropriate for my family. My divorce from my ex-wife and my marriage to Ashley have nothing to do with Echo's memory loss."

"I beg to differ. They're issues Echo needs to deal with."

Oh, God. They were going to leave and I'd never learn what happened to me. I had to say something to keep them in the room. "I like her."

All three adults froze. "That's why I brought you here." I focused on the words I'd practiced since Noah and I had come up with the plan. "I wanted to tell you that I like the job Mrs. Collins found for me and that I'm done lying to her. I'm not fine and I'm not happy at home. I like her and I want to keep seeing her."

And oddly enough, I didn't blink.

Mrs. Collins's lips turned up, the exact reaction I hoped for. In order for Noah's plan to work, she needed to think I trusted her. Now, if I could build a time machine, go back to twenty minutes ago, and stop myself from telling my father how I really felt, my plan would be back on track. Telling Ashley off felt good, but that only disappointed my father. I sighed. In an effort to make this up to him, I'd be the only college freshman still attempting a perfect ACT score.

"I'm sorry, Daddy. I was out of line." Ugh. I'd rather eat cockroaches than say this. "And you, too, Ashley. My comments to you were rude." But true.

My father nodded and finished helping Ashley into her coat. "I don't blame you, Echo." He stared at Mrs. Collins, making it perfectly clear who he blamed for my outburst. "If you want to keep seeing Mrs. Collins then I'll let you. On a trial basis only. That means these next few sessions will be scrutinized."

Ashley rubbed her baby bump. "I'm glad you're making progress, Echo. It was a wonderful day when you got that ribbon. It was the first time I ever felt like the three of us were a real family."

"Why wasn't my mom there?" Silence. Ashley's hand froze mid-rub and my father stood motionless. I continued, "You said three. Mom would have never let you squeeze her out of that moment. She loved my paintings. She encouraged me more than the two of you combined."

The black hole pulsed in my head and a faint memory squeezed out. "I invited her to the ceremony and she accepted."

My mother's overly excited voice filled my head. "I wouldn't miss it, my little goddess."

"You're asking good questions, Echo, and I'm thrilled that you want to keep working with me. But I think we've had enough for today," Mrs. Collins said, bringing me back to the present. "We can pick this up in another session."

Speaking of another session ... I was veering off course again. I had to set up Noah. "Daddy, there's one more thing."

He pinched the bridge of his nose, no doubt praying for the day I would be off to college and out of his house. Then he could focus all of his attention on his new family—the replacement family. "Yes?"

"If it's okay with Mrs. Collins, I want to move my counseling sessions back an hour. I'm thinking of rejoining the dance team or at least helping them with their routines."

Ashley beamed and I considered taking the statement back if only to annoy her. The worry lines around my father's eyes lessened and his mouth actually hinted at a smile. "Of course. Do you need money for a new outfit or costume?" He pulled his wallet out and held toward me green dollars with zeros.

I shook my head and smiled a little. I'd made my father happy. Part of me flew high in the sky. "No. No, thanks. I have plenty of stuff to practice in and I'm not sure about the costume thing yet. I may not even compete."

"Take it anyhow—in case you need it." He bounced his hand insistently. I took the cash, feeling a little ashamed and guilty. I'd never intended to rejoin the dance team—it was an excuse for Noah to rearrange his appointment time to my slot. Now, I had to accept Natalie's offer. If rejoining the dance team made my father smile at me and not at Ashley for a few minutes, I'd do it.

"Echo, would you mind leaving me and Ashley alone with Mrs. Collins? There are some things I'd like to discuss."

Uh—no. I hoped Mrs. Collins would tell my father whatever he had to say to her could be said in front of me, but no such luck. "Why don't you wait in the main office? I'd like to schedule our next appointment before you leave."

I shut the door behind me. With the staff gone for the day, the main office sat eerily quiet.

"Is it working?"

Startled, I knocked over a cup of pens on the counter. Noah leaned against the door frame, laughing.

I busied myself with picking them up. “I think so. My dad and Ashley are on board with me moving my time back, but Mrs. Collins hasn’t committed yet. Though I think I just rejoined the dance team. What are you doing here?”

“It’s cold outside and warm in here.”

Having nothing left to fidget with, I rested against the counter and tried not to stare at Noah. But I wanted to. He had his jacket off and his black T-shirt fit him perfectly. Today, during lunch, Grace had turned her nose up when she spotted the bottom of his tattoo on his right bicep. I’d silently agreed with Lila’s comment—*yum*.

My insides had melted when Noah produced his wicked grin and gazed at me like I was naked. Luke used to give me butterflies. Noah spawned mutant pterodactyls.

A cabinet door clicked closed in Mrs. Collins’s office and jolted me back to reality. “But what if Mrs. Collins sees you? We shouldn’t be seen together.”

He chuckled. “You’re my tutor, remember? She expects to see us together. Besides, I didn’t show for my session this morning and she sent me a note informing me that I was to come as soon as possible.” He held out his hands. “So here I am.”

“When did you get the note?”

“First period.”

I sucked in air. “And you’re just now showing up?” I couldn’t imagine missing a session, much less disregarding a request from an adult.

“It’s all part of the plan, Echo. Chill.”

Tapping my foot against the floor, I regarded the closed door. “You think she knows we’re up to something?”

Noah crossed the room. The back of my neck exploded in heat when his body brushed mine. In a movement so nonchalant, it signaled he was impervious to temperatures only known in the Sahara Desert, he leaned his hip against the counter. He rubbed one of my curls between his thumb and forefinger. “You are paranoid. I’m glad you didn’t get high with me. You’d be a major downer.” He let the curl drop.

I folded my hands across my chest, attempted to ignore the warmth filling my cheeks, and said as dryly as I could, “Thanks.” Nothing increased your confidence level like being insulted by a stoner.

Keeping time with my foot, my fingers drummed against my sleeve.

“What are you worked up about?”

“My dad and Ashley are in there with Mrs. Collins discussing me.”

Noah picked up a phone from behind the counter. “Wanna hear what they’re saying? I’ve watched Mrs. Marcos do this plenty of times. Mrs. Collins’s phone is screwed up and it doesn’t make the beeping noise anymore, so Mrs. Marcos has to introduce herself quickly.”

I opened my mouth to protest, but Noah gently placed two warm fingers against my lips. He raised an eyebrow and flashed a pirate smile. “Shh.”

He removed his fingers, leaving my lips cold, and pushed buttons on the speakerphone. Adrenaline pumped in my blood and my head felt featherlight. I’d never done anything so wrong in my life. In order to hear better, I leaned in closer.

My father was speaking. “... don’t understand. If Echo wants to discuss her feelings regarding the divorce with you, that’s one thing. I’ll support any efforts to help her repair her relationship with Ashley. But you need to leave the rest alone. She’s obviously back on track. She makes straight A’s. She’s active in several clubs and rejoining the dance team.”

“Owen’s right,” Ashley said. “Socially, Echo is doing beautifully. She’s going out with her friends, talking on the phone and texting. She and Luke are dating again. It’s like she’s finally fitting back into her old skin.”

“What Ashley and I are trying to get at,” my father added, “is that Echo is becoming Echo again. Child Protective Services was right to get involved after what happened, but now, it’s overkill.

Her mother is no longer an issue. Echo has this new job and, I'll admit, you were right. Working toward repairing the car has given her a healthy way to grieve Aires. Therapy was needed when she couldn't cope, but Echo is no longer simply coping. She's living."

"And her memory loss?" asked Mrs. Collins. "The nightmares? Her insomnia? The fact that Echo refuses to expose her arms to anyone?"

My stomach churned. I craved my father's answer, but to my utter mortification, Noah Hutchins had already heard too much. I reached out to disconnect the line, but Noah shook his head and placed a steady hand on my back.

Dizzy from nerves, I swayed to the right. Noah took a small step toward me while guiding me into him using gentle pressure on my back. I shouldn't be touching him, but I wanted to hear the answer and I needed someone to lean on. Just one time—this one moment only—would I rely on him. I allowed my muscles to relax when he combed his fingers through the curls hanging near my shoulder blades.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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