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## Parallel adolescents

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# **PARALLEL ADOLESCENTS**

**by**

**TRICIA WINDOWMAKER**

**A Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the Honors in the Major Program in English  
in the College of Arts and Humanities  
and in the Burnett Honors College  
at the University of Central Florida  
Orlando, Florida**

**Summer Term 2010**

**Thesis Chair: Dr. Toni Jensen**

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## ABSTRACT

The general intent of my thesis is to write two *novellas* that show the differences in ways of life in two completely dissimilar states, and the conflicts that occurred therein. Therefore, the *novellas* will include a variation in gender, setting, and conflict. The main characters will be roughly the same age, but I will explore how the setting they live in has affected conflicts they have to deal with. I will explore writing these two *novellas* in the category of young adult fiction, as well as, first person narration for a close psychic distance.

## DEDICATION

To the niece who says I rock, Briana, for being my audience for the first *novella*, and to my brother who inspired Nelchina. And of course I can't forget Kevin, Kayla, and Diana who were my first audience as I read them stories at bedtime. None of this would have been possible without Professor Toni Jensen, who has mentored me during my time at UCF, so thank you so much Toni. All the thanks in the world to my supportive family.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank Kenneth Redbeard who put up with me as I wrote these *novellas*, and my dad who took every phone call just so he could answer all my questions, big and small. A lot of appreciation goes out to Luis Ramos and Patricia Samuels, who really helped me throughout this process.

Above all, I would like to thank Professor Toni Jensen for the advice and editing of my work, and to Professor Martha Garcia and Professor Darlin Neal who joined my committee making all this possible. A special thanks to Professor Russ Kesler for stepping in this summer so I could defend.

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## HIGH SCHOOL WITH A SIDE OF PUDDING

I'm a junior at Oaks High School, where if there was a caste system I would be equal to what was once known as a peasant. Basically, in high school lingo, I'm a nobody. I don't even register on the Richter scale as a nerd, dweeb, dork, geek, or even a chess club member. On the plus side the lunch lady does know who I am, so I get extra pudding when I go through the line. The pudding is the focal point of what happened to me today. As usual I got my "I at least know someone here sees me pudding," and then I headed to the table where Lin was sitting. Now, Lin was gorgeous. She has long flowing black hair similar to what Snow White has, and Barbie would be jealous of her figure. I have no idea why she is friends with me. Well, maybe I do. In the seventh grade before her bosoms came in and she still had her bug glasses, I was the only person who didn't make fun of her. She remembered that fact all these years and through her rise in popularity. I have brown hair and the only quality I inherited from the princess Snow White was her pasty white skin. In the great state of Florida, pale skin is not the trait a high school girl would want. I was headed to the seat that Lin graciously saved for me, when that faithful extra pudding of mine slipped off my tray and found its way under my shoe. Was it a gracious fall? No.

Laughter.

I heard a lot of laughter as I was lying on the floor of the cafeteria. Focusing my eyes on what was directly in front of my line of sight, I realized how nice the blue tile Principal Rudd picked out was and why Sherry the lunch lady commented on it so much. Then I noticed the bits of Salisbury steak and the oozing gravy that was falling off my face. I had landed in my lunch tray. Not just landed, but smashed my face into it and I had an audience. Oh dear God, this is high school hell. I never wanted to take a trip here. Turn around. Turn around. Wait, it's not like I drove a car



here. What should I do? I can't lie here in my lunch, but lifting my head up means everyone can see who I am. Crap. I have to lift my head up.

I lifted my head up, and I noticed for the first time the blue jean colored knees that were near me along with an outstretched arm with a hand holding a napkin. Then I heard the voice that was attached to it. Could this be worse? The voice was male. Please be a chess member, a Dungeons and Dragons player, be anyone except...Who was I kidding? I, Sarah, could not catch that kind of break. Nope. Instead it was Jason. Quarterback of the football team, I'm such a gentlemen, Jason.

"Here take this. Are you okay?" Jason asked with a tone that sounded sincere and a facial expression that looked like he had been the one who fell into his lunch.

I took the napkin he offered and then lifted myself up onto my knees, so I could wipe the meal off my face.

"Thanks," I said as I rolled my eyes. Well I was embarrassed to the point of no return; did I have to be polite at the same time too?

"No problem. Here, you still have potatoes on your face." He said this as he began to wipe my face with the napkin he had in his hand.

"Um...." was all I could say as I pulled my face away and took the napkins from him.

"Thanks, but you don't have to wipe me off like a baby." There was that rudeness in my voice again. Geez, Sarah, he's helping not laughing.

Sure he was helping to make himself look better. That had to be the reason. Then at that moment I looked over at him and made eye contact. Those weren't the eyes of someone that was judging or making fun of me. These eyes seemed hurt by my harsh tone; these eyes had empathy in them not apathy.

“Well, maybe you shouldn’t play with your food like a baby does and you won’t have to be wiped off like one.” These words did not come from Jason; instead they came from Dan the star linebacker of the team.

“Dude, knock it off.” These words were shot out at him from Lin. She had pushed her way through the small crowd of students watching me like I was a star of some sitcom just in time. Any more of this and I was going to break down into tears.

“Come on, Sarah; let’s get you to the locker room to wash up before class.” Lin always had a plan. Here I was thinking that I looked fine enough to go to class now that my lunch had been wiped away from my face. I stood up, though, and noticed the rest of it on my shirt—pudding streaked across the legs of my jeans and felt the green beans in my bra—I knew Lin’s idea to shower was much better than mine of going straight to class.

“Move out of the way, you freaks.” People moved as Lin yelled at them. Beauty always has the ability to demand and see results.

In the locker room after my shower, I sat wrapped in a towel on the red metal bench stretched out in front of the grated lockers. I bent down to stuff my clothes into a plastic bag and looked over at the folded gym clothes sitting beside me. Grey sweats and a white tank. Not exactly what you would see on Stylista, but I was no fashion queen anyway. Once I was dressed, I slowly brushed my hair out. The bell for next class had rung when I was in the shower, so what was the point of rushing now? Gym classes started in an hour so I had the locker room all to myself. I tied my wet hair into a messy bun, shoved my dirty clothes into my locker, picked up my bag, and headed for the door. I didn’t want to miss all of biology; it was my worst subject. Swinging open the locker room door, I hesitated before exiting completely. Jason stood leaning against the opposite wall from the door. Oaks High wasn’t known for its great architecture. Then I continued to walk

out, not acknowledging him because that would be the usual routine, but not today. Today Jason was talking to me.

“Hey.” Jason had slid quickly off the wall and was now walking beside me.

“Hey,” I said this hesitantly because Jason and I didn’t really communicate, ever.

“I just wanted to make sure you were okay. That was kind of a nasty fall you took.” He was talking to me as if we were old chums. Was I the one who had hit my head today or had he?

“Yeah I’m okay. I’ve had better days, but I can’t complain about my own clumsiness.” I said this nervously and I was suddenly very aware that I looked like a bum in my gym clothes.

“Could’ve happened to anyone,” he responded light heartedly.

“I disagree. I don’t see you as the type that would dive into your lunch tray.” I was talking normal, no tone this time.

He was laughing, but not at me. He was laughing at what I said. Did I make a funny?

“Maybe not, but I have taken a hit on the field and came up with some grass in mouth.”

Jason was trying to make me feel better, but honestly why?

“So you’re saying that slipping on my pudding cup is like being tackled on the field during a game. Klutz and football players are the same thing now. Wow, I’ve really moved up.”

“Moved up? I don’t follow. But football players aren’t always graceful. We have our moments just like anybody else. Despite what you must have heard, we are in fact human.”

“I never said you weren’t...”

“No, you just implied it. Stereotype—it’s okay. People do it to you, so it’s fair that you do it back.”

He was taking the high road. How did I, the usual victim and outcast, end up the bad guy in this conversation to Mr. Perfect football player?



“Sorry, but honestly are you trying to be funny? You don’t even know who I am and I’ve sat behind you in English since freshman year. But today, today when I embarrass myself completely I go from being invisible to someone you wait for in the hall. Maybe I stereotype, but do me the courtesy of not trying to be all high and mighty and pretend like you don’t.”

His eyebrows twitched which gave me the impression that he was completely taken aback by what I said. Hesitating for a few seconds, he finally responded.

“Your name is Sarah Burton and not only do we have English together, but also biology which we are both late for. I’m sorry you slipped in the cafeteria, that people laughed at you, and that no one but my arrogant footballer self is the one out here making sure you’re okay.” He started to walk away from me at this point, but he turned halfway to tell me one more thing. “And by the way, sweats look good on you.”

“Uh....thanks.” He had walked into class before he heard the thank you part of my sentence. I was a bit taken aback by the compliment and that he knew my name.

I walked into biology waiting for comments to be made, smirks of some kind to come out, but nothing. I walked to my seat and spent the rest of the day going over the hallway spat I had with Jason Todd. What was it about people who had two first names? Were they all good looking, talented individuals? Most of the popular people had two first names; maybe that was what I was lacking. There was Lin Patrick, Dan Daniels, Robert Evans, Shay Shannon, and then myself, Sarah Burton.

When the last bell of the day rang, I slipped quickly out the classroom, stopped by the gym to grab my clothes, and then headed for the parking lot. I saw Lin waiting by her car, looking around for me. I lifted my arm and waved till her attention was caught. She seemed relieved to see me. She probably thought I had died from embarrassment and was glad she was wrong. When I made it to

the car, she had a wide smile across her face. I knew this smile; it meant she had some juicy tid bit of gossip to share with me.

“You’ll never guess who Shay Shannon is jealous of.”

“Well, it couldn’t be me, especially after today.”

“Actually it could, especially after how Jason Todd waited for you in the hall after lunch. Turns out Lulu Butters saw the two of you talking and swears he asked you out.”

That’s one of the things about high school—nothing goes unnoticed and everything is exaggerated.

“No one was asked out.”

“So he didn’t wait for you in the hall?” She asked this slyly stressing the word didn’t.

“Well, he was in the hall, but just to see if I was okay, and then we went to class. But...”

“But what, Sarah Burton, spill!” Even I listened to Lin when she demanded things of me.

“He knew my name”

“And.....?”

“And told me I looked good in sweats. He was just being nice.”

“Jason Todd is nice when he holds the door open, lends you his pencil, or asks you to come to an event that a hundred people are coming to and then ignores you. Jason Todd does not say a girl looks good in sweats just to be nice. Every girl looks awful in sweats, does nothing for your figure. You know, Sarah, you should really wear heels more.”

“I tripped in tennis shoes today. Heels, are you crazy?”

“Right, bad idea. Don’t wear heels, but believe me when I say Jason wants something from you, and if it’s not a date, then watch yourself.”

Now Lin was probably right. Jason had to want something, and if he was being overly nice to someone like me, then I should be careful. This was high school. But really, what could be worse

than the attack my pudding made on me today? I knew those extra calories from sugar were bad for me.

“Look, I’m going to be late for track. I’ll meet you at the café later for the study group.”

“Alright see you, but shower before you come this time.” She said this right before she shut her car door so I couldn’t respond. You don’t shower once and suddenly you have hygiene problems.

Coach wouldn’t mind if I was late; he did football practice and track practice at the same time. Since I was the only one on the track team, it really didn’t matter much. The only reason why the school kept track funded was because my parents paid for it. It did help that I came in second in the state the last two years. The girl that kept making me the first loser graduated last year, so I didn’t have to worry about her, but LakeLand High had a freshman last year that almost stole second place from me. I had to train harder. I had to be first this year. As I approached Coach Mann, I was suddenly aware that this was how Jason Todd knew my name. Not because he noticed me in class, but because I ran with the football team during practice. He probably figured if I wasn’t okay after my fall, Coach Mann would let them out of jogging today. Sorry to disappoint him, but my ankles were fine.

“Hey, Coach, how many laps today?” I asked the same question every day, but he looked at me like it was out of the ordinary today.

“Thought you weren’t going to show today.”

I knew it. I knew it. He didn’t want me to show. Ha!

“Why wouldn’t I show, Coach?”

“I heard about your fall today. Figured you might have wanted the day off.”

“Nope. Can’t make it to state finals if I don’t train because I missed a meal.”



A silent chuckle spread across the team when I said this, but all of them saw firsthand why I missed a meal today.

“You’re right, Burton, do a mile with the team and then work on the hundred yard dash. You could slim a second and half off your time. My assistant is out today, so I’ll give you the player that comes in first from practice today to time you.”

“Thanks, Coach, but I can work the stopwatch myself.”

“Not accurate enough and Principal Rudd has been giving me strife for not working with you one on one this year.”

Apparently my parents had been complaining again. I really don’t mind working with Chad, the assistant coach, but they believed I should have more time with Coach Mann.

“Sorry about that, Coach, I’ll talk to the parentals about it.”

He chuckled in response then blew the whistle for us to line up. I was throwing my bag down when Jason came up beside me.

“Looks like we’ll be working together today.”

“Assuming you can out-run Mitch,” I said smugly.

Mitch always won when Coach made them the deal to get out of practice. Suddenly, though, I hoped that it wasn’t because he was the fastest, but rather he was the only one who wanted out of practice. Was I actually hoping Jason would win? What was wrong with me today?

When the whistle blew, I tried not to pay attention to who was leading. I kept telling myself not to look back—falling during the mile would not be good. This was serious. This was my training, and even though no one in the school cared about track, I did. But then I didn’t have to look back, Jason had just passed me.

Once everyone had finished their laps, Jason and I headed over to the left end of the field where Coach had set up the cones for the hundred yard dash.

"You seemed surprised you had to eat my dust, Burton." Jason was so arrogant.

"I was actually." No sense in lying right? "You usually aren't so..."

"Determined to win the mile to get out of practice?"

"Yeah, why was that?" I had to know the answer to this.

He hesitated. Then he looked down, and across the field to the guys doing pushups, and then finally back at me.

"Well, Burton, I just didn't want you to come in second this year, and Mitch just wasn't pushing you hard enough. You need someone like me egging you on." He was trying to joke but the comment stung a little. He must have noticed my wince at the coming in second part.

"Hey, I didn't mean to offend you—I probably wouldn't even make the top ten."

"It's fine. I did come in second and you probably wouldn't make the top twenty."

After running the hundred yard dash about a dozen and a half times, I was ready to call it quits. I had only taken half a second off my time, so I had a lot more dashes to do tomorrow to improve that. Right now, though, I needed to shower and get to the café to meet Lin.

"Hey, what are you doing after you shower?"

Why was Jason so interested in what I was doing today? That is when it occurred to me I had no clothes to change back into after I showered, mine were covered in today's lunch. Shoot.

"Well, I might have to skip a shower. I don't have another change of clothes here, but I'm supposed to meet Lin at the café."

"Oh, well if you let me tag along with you to the café, I can let you borrow some extra sweats I have in my locker."

I knew that if I showed up to the café without taking a shower after Lin specifically told me to, I was going to get *ewwed* like last time. I agreed to his terms. Besides Jason Todd tagging along



after me, nothing about that sounded bad at all. Apparently, it was hard even for me to think when a hot boy with his shirt off asked to hang out with me longer.

"I could use the clothes, but we're really only meeting up to study. It won't be that exciting."

"Let me get the sweats for you and then we'll meet at my car in...let's say fifteen minutes?"

"Yeah, that sounds good."

After he handed me the sweat pants and t-shirt I headed to the girls' locker room. Once showered and dressed in his clothes I couldn't help but notice how nice they smelled. I never imagined a football player would smell this good. Then again I didn't think I would ever get close enough to find out. Realizing that I had taken longer than fifteen minutes to get ready, I quickly grabbed my bag and rushed out to the parking lot. Jason was leaning against his truck talking to Dan. Dan was taller than Jason with blond hair instead of brown. He always looked like he needed to shave. Dan and I did not get along. He was one of the few people who noticed me long enough to make me wish I had walked down a different hallway. Because of him, I often got plenty of exercise when walking to class. When I got closer to the car and Jason noticed me, he lifted himself off the truck and took a few steps in my direction, putting himself between Dan and me.

"Hey, Sarah, you know Dan, right?"

"Yeah, we've met." I said this with a slight tone of disdain. It went unnoticed.

"Good. He's going to go to the café with us. Did you need a ride?"

Sure, thanks for asking if Dan could tag along; it's just like jocks to invite people without asking. But hey what was I supposed to say? I didn't want Dan to come to the café and I didn't need a ride either. I thought I'd just mention the no ride part.

"No, that won't be necessary. My car is parked over there." I pointed to it, but their eyes didn't follow my hand.

"See you there, then," Jason said.

I headed for my car, cursing non-stop in my head for mentioning the café to Jason. All good things come at a cost and Dan was an expensive price to pay. Lin would love the extra faces, but I really didn't want to show. I wondered if they would notice my absence. Maybe not. Okay, I ditched. Instead of driving to the café I booked it home to study. I would come up with an excuse tomorrow. Lin would understand—she ditched me all the time at the café. Maybe she hadn't shown today either. One could hope anyway.

The next morning I was just about done switching out my books at my locker when I heard Jason's voice behind me.

"What happened to you yesterday?" Jason actually sounded a little annoyed.

"I got a call from my dad, he needed me home." Would he buy that lousy excuse?

"He needed you home, for what?"

Damn he wanted more info. Who was he to be so nosey? Well, I did blow him off. What should I do, lie again?

"He needed me to...um...well..." I really couldn't think of an excuse. Come on, Sarah, think of a lie fast. But, yeah, some people, just aren't meant to be dishonest.

"I lied, okay? I don't like Dan, so I ditched. It's not that big of a deal. Besides I'm sure you didn't miss me. Anyways here are your sweats. Thanks again." I stood there holding out the bag that held his sweats, but he was making no movement to grab them.

"I let you borrow those on the terms that I could crash your study group. I took Dan with me because he likes Lin. I'm not taking them back until you make up for ditching me."

He then proceeded to cross his arms and stand there looking at me. Was he waiting for me to say something? — Because I had nothing.

"Uh...well, what did you have in mind?"

“The pep rally is tonight. Why you don’t meet me there?”

The pep rally? Was he Crazy? Apparently he did not get the newsletter this year about who actually goes to these things. Cheerleaders, yes, jocks, yes, school spirit freaks, yes, but a person classified as a nobody? I don’t think so.

“I’m not really a go team *kinda* person...” I said this while mimicking a fake pom pom in my left hand. Could I get any dorkier? Seriously.

“You owe me, so be there at seven okay? And I think you’ll do fine. Just make sure you are rooting for the right team.” He then mimicked my pom pom move and then walked away.

I stood there at my locker for a while, not sure what to make of what just happened and a little confused also at why he didn’t take the bag with his clothes in it. Before I could finish stuffing the bag back into my locker, Lin was at my side. She didn’t seem mad; instead she was smiling.

“Guess who has a date tonight?” She always said this as if she was surprised she got asked, but honestly she had dates all the time.

“Let me guess...you?”

“Yep.”

“And who may I ask is the lucky boy tonight?” I don’t know why I bothered asking—I already knew the answer. Probably just to appease Lin’s need to talk about it or brag.

“Dan Daniels. He and Jason just showed up at the café yesterday and wanted to study with me. Of course we didn’t actually study and Jason left after a bit, but still.” She said this with such enthusiasm.

“I take it you’re not mad I didn’t show then?” I had to ask—she might have been saving her rant till after she shared her good news.



"Nope, but Jason asked where you were. Odd, it was like he knew you usually met me there." She said it like a question, but she already knew the answer, so I pretended I had no idea what she was talking about.

"Did he? Weird."

"Yeah.....weird, Sarah, that was exactly what it was. Or it could have been that you told him to meet you there and then got cold feet, but what do I know. Right?" And with that she walked away.

Left standing at my locker again, I decided I, too, should start walking away or I was going to be late for homeroom.

When lunch time came, I personally had forgotten all about yesterday's lunch room trauma. Unfortunately for me the rest of the student body hadn't forgotten. So when I walked into the cafeteria, someone shouted "Protect your pudding" and laughter erupted from all tables. Was there no mercy? As I got closer to the lunch line, those who were now paying for their lunches were picking their puddings up off their trays and holding them close to their chests. You would have thought they were cradling a baby instead of a plastic container. On the plus side, yesterday might have upgraded my status from a nobody. Then again I didn't want to be known as the girl you should protect your pudding from either. They would forget all about the incident by next week, right?

Jason tapped me on the shoulder,

"It'll be old news soon. Someone else will be the topic of ridicule by next week," he said.

I didn't even know he had been behind me in line.

"I feel sorry for whoever that might be." I really would feel empathy for the person who would inevitably take my place in the spotlight of shame.

When I got to Sherry the lunch lady, she looked like she was about to burst into tears.

"I am so sorry about yesterday my, dear; I don't suppose you even want a pudding for today let alone an extra one."

"No I think I'll pass today, Sherry, but thanks anyways."

She walked farther into the kitchen and pulled out a tissue to wipe her eyes. She must have been more upset about the pudding incident than I was. I needed to say something comforting.

"Sherry, really it's okay. I think I will take at least one pudding today instead of the usual two."

This seemed to raise her spirits as she rushed back over to me so she could place one on my tray. I looked over to see what Jason's expression might be about me braving a pudding cup so soon. He immediately grabbed it off my tray and placed it on his tray next to his own.

"Just in case." He smirked when he said this.

"Thanks." And then I turned towards the register line and I added, "But you better not steal it from me."

"I wouldn't dream of stealing your pudding. Who knows what you might do," he said trying to hold back a laugh. "Did you want to sit with the team and me today?"

I pondered his question as I glanced over at the table where the entire football team sat. One look at Dan Daniels and I knew what my answer would be. "I'll pass." I couldn't believe I had just said no.

"Okay then, I'll walk you to your table at least."

Once I was seated next to Lin, he placed the pudding cup on my tray and then winked at me before walking away. What the heck does a wink mean? Anybody?

Lunch seemed to drag on, which is normally what one would hope for, but not today. People kept staring at me and whispering their comments about me to each other, that was if I was lucky enough to have the comments whispered. Then there was the staring I was guilty of. Why

couldn't I stop glancing over to where Jason was sitting? Thank goodness his back was towards me. I barely noticed the lunch bell ring; Lin had to nudge my shoulder to get me up. I dumped my lunch tray and headed towards biology. I was walking slowly because I really didn't want to make it to class before the last bell. I really didn't want to have to talk to anyone, especially Jason. Not that I knew for sure he would talk to me, but I wasn't taking any chances.

A normal day for me usually consisted of a locker stop in the morning to switch out books, English, geometry, and history class where I sat in the middle row, out of reach from the teacher in the front and the popular kids in the back of the room, and then lunch where I would talk for the first time all day when I saw Lin, then biology and gym. Once the last bell of the day rang I head out to the track to do laps. Since my pudding incident, my routine had changed a bit. I opened the door to the Biology room, and took my seat at one of the lab tables. I stared at the dark blue table top trying not to make eye contact with anybody.

Mr. Massey was showing a video for the class assignment, so I thought I was safe. That was until he stopped the video half way through to explain the group project we needed to complete by next Friday. Why do teachers always assign group projects? Nobody likes them and they cause more stress for the already stressed out teenager. Not to mention we never get to pick our partner. I have always got stuck with someone who is too lazy to do the work or Jeff Kimby who smelled like garlic the whole time. Imagine trying to make a solar system for three hours two feet away from someone who smells like burnt garlic bread. Granted this particular assignment occurred back in Junior High, but I'm still scared from the experience. Mr. Massey always puts half the class's names in a jar and has the rest of us pull out the white strips of paper with the names of our soon to be best friends as he puts it. Nobody likes this method very much. It mixes the social groups, and in high school this is never a good idea. Cheerleaders just aren't designed to work with someone on the yearbook staff; they don't mesh well.



I reached my hand in to pull out the name of the next Mr. Garlic. I was too afraid to look at it, so I waited until everyone else pulled out their white strip and teamed up before I began to unfold the piece of paper. By now whoever was my partner would know that they were teamed up with me, so I wouldn't have to call their name out loud across the classroom. No one was paying attention at this point; they already knew who they were teamed up with. I glanced at the name written in black ink across the white slip I held in my hand. You have got to be kidding me. Life is my enemy—it has to be. Dan Daniels? Why me? When I looked up from the slip, he was hovering over me with a miserable looking expression across his face. It probably matched the one on mine. Bet we looked like twins at the moment.

“Guess we're partners.” Honestly, I couldn't think of anything else to say and the moment required one of us to say something.

The classroom had grown loud from the voices of everyone greeting their new partner, but still Dan said nothing to me. He just stood there beside my stool. Yep, a man of few words; who would have guessed? He never seemed short on the lines when he was making fun of me in the halls. Guess I had to be the one to initiate a conversation about the project.

“So when do you want to meet up to work on the project? Sunday work for you? I'd like to get it done early. I have to do some extra training next week after school for track.”

“The game is Saturday night, so Sunday afternoon would work. Meet you at the café at about two? Oh and feel free to ask Lin to come along.” He didn't even let me respond before he walked off back to his normal seat in the class.

When I looked over at him, I noticed Jason seated beside him and Shay Shannons who must have pulled Jason's name out of the jar. At least those two didn't have to mix social classes. Football players and cheerleaders definitely belonged together. Honestly, though, I doubted the project would be very good or the grade that goes along with it. That could just be me stereotyping again— to be

honest I have no idea what kind of grades those two get. I know my own grades, a perfect line of B's and C's. It turns out that just because you're not popular doesn't mean you're an Einstein. Quite unfortunate, but at least I have track to fall back on. I'd probably get a scholarship off of that. Working with Dan Daniels on this project, though, better not drop my grade in biology; it's already kind of low after that "C" I got on the chapter three test.

My chain of thought was interrupted when the bell rang; everyone jumped up quickly and headed for the door. I picked up my bag and joined the rest of my peers in the hallway. Gym class was canceled today so that the school could decorate the gym for the pep rally tonight without having to step around students playing volleyball. This meant I had free period, so I decided to head out to the field to run laps. After I heard the last bell of the day I soon saw members of the football team making their way out to the field. I avoided stopping and continued jogging around the track. I did my best not to look in their direction, so I focused my attention on the heat waves going across the parking lot. That is the thing about Florida, it is so hot you don't just feel the high temperature but you see it as well. They had a long practice ahead of them since the game was tomorrow and there was no need for me to bother Coach Mann. I knew what I needed to work on; I didn't need him to tell me and he wasn't going to be giving me a player or the assistant coach to work with, not the day before the big game. You ever notice how all the football games are considered big ones? Funny, they can't all be big ones, can they? Great, a quarterback gives me attention and suddenly all I can think about is football. I picked up my pace and hoped that anything else would come to mind. It didn't. Instead I thought about the pep rally and how I was expected to act at one of these ridiculous events. I'd never been to one. What should I wear? School colors? Black and red weren't that bad, but I wore a green shirt and jeans today. I could go home. Or I could wear Jason's sweatshirt; it would be cold enough. Hmm. Maybe that's why he didn't take his stuff back this afternoon. It was settled; I knew what to wear. That's when Coach Mann blew his whistle at me.



"Hit the showers, Burton, you've been at that for two hours!" He yelled across the field, but I heard him.

"Ok, Coach!" I yelled back and then I headed for the locker room.

I had about an hour before the pep rally started and no idea what to do to kill time until then. I swung by my locker to grab a book, and then headed back out to the field to watch the rest of practice. I read it while practice lingered on. I was emerged into the world of Hemingway when I noticed Jason walking up the bleacher towards me. I'd like to say he looked attractive, but with sweat dripping off of him, not really.

"Hey..." he sounded out of breath. "What are you reading?"

"Some Hemingway novel." I don't know why I just didn't say the title.

"Hemingway, huh? I didn't think girls liked him much. Usually they find him too boring."

"He isn't one to avoid details, but I *kinda* like his rants on nature."

"That so? Ever read *Old Man and the Sea*? It's short, but he rants a lot in it." He seemed excited that I might actually like his book selection.

"Not yet, but I promise I'll read it next." I hesitated a moment and he stayed silent so I added "You are going to shower right? You smell pretty bad." Did I actually just tell him he stunk? He did, but you don't just say that to a hot guy. Do you?

"Yes, I'm going to shower; I just wanted to make sure you weren't going to ditch me tonight." He seemed amused by my comment—maybe he took it as teasing.

"I'll be there. No worries." Unfortunately, that was the truth. I would be at the pep rally tonight.

And with that he headed back down the bleachers and towards the locker room.

Okay, to say I lacked school spirit would be an understatement. I never wore Oaks High t-shirts, school colors happened to my wardrobe on accident, besides track meets I never went to a

school function, and I hated cheerleaders. No one should be that happy about a touchdown. None of that mattered because here I was sitting on the bleachers in the gym with school spirit freaks, and I was wearing Jason's school sweatshirt. It was your average gym with the walls painted with school colors and a giant picture of the school mascot in the center of the court. It had a wooden floor that was glossy so that when the fluorescent lights hit it, you'd almost become blind if you stared at it too long. Painted faces, large signs, matching outfits, and worst of all they jumped up every five seconds or whenever they heard someone yell Go Team! I'm exaggerating, but they did jump up a lot. Lin was there; I saw her on the other side of the gym looking perfect, waving to Dan every time he looked her way. He looked her way a lot. She reminded me of someone in a parade, constantly waving to the crowd of spectators.

My attention was suddenly drawn away from Lin as I heard Shay Shannons and the rest of the cheerleaders go into cheer mode screaming,

"Let's Go Bobcats! Let's Go! Go, Fight, Team! B-O-B-C-A-T-S! Go Bobcats!"

After the cheer ended, the football team, who was lined up in the middle of the gym, disbanded. Was this the end? Nope of course not, Coach Mann walked up to the podium to make his pregame speech. I zoned his speech out; I was paying too much attention to where Jason was headed to hear what he was saying. He was walking with Dan, of course, but they weren't headed to where Lin was sitting nor where I was seated either. Instead they were walking over to an open space on the end of the bleachers. Since I had never been to a pep rally, I had no idea how long these things lasted. Forever was apparently the answer. After the speech, the ROTC drill team came out, then the band, and now the drama club was doing some kind of skit making fun of the opposing team. I couldn't take much more of this, so I stood up and moved my way across the bleachers to the walkway down. I kept my word; I showed up and now it was time for me to leave. I made it out to the hallway, but the noise from inside could still be heard. I took off Jason's sweater

in a bit of frenzy. I was upset; not only did I hate being here, but he ignored me the whole time. What was it that Lin said, Jason is just being nice when he invites you to an event where hundreds of people attend and then ignores you. Why did I think that I would be the exception to this?

I headed over to my locker and shoved his sweater inside it. I then proceeded to lightly tap my head against my locker repeating stupid, stupid, and stupid to myself in a low voice. I jumped at the sound of my name being called out, causing myself to bang my head against the locker harder than I would have wanted to. I turned slowly with my hand pressed against my forehead to see whose voice was responsible for the headache I was sure to get. It was Dan Daniels.

“Uh, did you need something, Dan?” I asked the obvious, but I had nothing else.

“You okay? It sounded like you hit your head pretty hard just then.” He sounded sincere, but I did just hit my head so my judgment was probably impaired.

“Fine. Fine. I’m fine.” Could I say any other word? Maybe I had brain damage. At this point I lowered my hand down to my side to prove that I was, in fact, fine.

“Well, I saw you just as you were walking out of the gym, and.....” He trailed off into silence. Maybe he had brain damage; he did get tackled a lot.

“And.... What? You came out here to tell me I’m not cool enough to come to pep rallies that people like me should stick to books and study groups and stay away from popular people events.”

“No, I wasn’t going to say that. Actually, I was just going to ask if we could reschedule on Sunday for noon instead of four. I didn’t have your number and you don’t come to games, so I figured this would be my only chance to change the time.”

“Oh. I mean...well...noon is great, no problem. Noon. Café. Sunday. Consider it changed.”

“Great, and put some ice on your head. It’ll make it feel better.” Now Dan Daniels was



being nice to me. What the heck was going on? I don't know how long I stood there completely dumbfounded and embarrassed.

I began to walk towards the parking lot. I needed to get out of there before the cheerleaders gave me a compliment on my outfit. I had all of Saturday free of high school, and I couldn't wait to go home and wake up to it. I was too quick to hope. Jason was sitting on the hood of my car. Why? I was about to find out.

"Oh hey, Sarah, Dan told me you were leaving and I wanted to have the chance to talk to you before you went home, so." He was looking at his feet and drawing imaginary lines on the pavement as he said this. Was it possible Jason was nervous?

"Talk to me about what? Your clothes are in my locker. I can give them to you on Monday if that's what this is about. Unless you need them now and I could go get them."

"No, no that won't be necessary. I just wanted to ask if you were going to the game tomorrow. Are you?"

"No, I don't really do football games."

"Or pep rallies, but you came to one."

"That was because I owed you; I am no longer in your debt. One ditch, one pep rally. A football game doesn't really fit into that."

"You're right. You don't owe me a football game, but I was hoping you would want to come anyway."

"What so I could sit in the bleachers bored and ignored? I don't think so, Jason. You'll have plenty of other girls there to fawn over you; you don't need me there too."

"Ignored? I didn't ignore you; I looked for you inside, but I didn't see green anywhere. And I'm here right now at your car talking to you. "

"Green? I was wearing your sweater." Then I remembered that I had a green shirt on.

"Yeah, green. That is the color of your shirt. I took notice of it when you were on the bleachers. I didn't think you would wear school colors just to fit in at the rally. Seemed like too much school spirit for you."

"It's not like it matters to me that you might ignore me I just...don't do football games, that's all."

"Just think about it, okay? If you show, you show." He shrugged his shoulders as he said this and then he smiled. "It does matter to me if I'm ignored by you, though." He stood up from sitting on the hood of my car and started to walk away.

"Wait. I..." He turned to look back at me. "I...I might show up at the end if you want to get a victory bagel or something." Did I just ask Jason Todd out? Had I lost my mind?

"What if we lose?" he asked as a smile crept across his face.

"Lose? The Bobcats? Never." I couldn't help but laugh as I said it. They weren't always known for winning.

When I got home that night, I sat on my bed contemplating what had actually occurred over the past two days. Normal Thursdays and Fridays for me were never this eventful. I had somehow ended the week by asking Jason Evans out on a date. The most shocking part of that statement is that he said yes. How did I, a nobody, end up having a date with the star quarterback? I mean yesterday I humiliated myself in the lunch room. Why would he want to go out with the school klutz who everyone hid their pudding from? On another note, how does one know when a football game will end? I might actually have to watch a football game, or at least part of it. I needed to go to bed. I could keep myself up all night thinking about this if I let myself and I had to run in the morning. Lights out was definitely necessary right now.

The next morning after my run I called Lin to ask her if she wanted to go to the football game with me. I thought she had hung up on me she fell so silent after I asked. I listened intently for a dial tone to break out. Instead Lin decided to finally speak.

"A football game, Sarah, really. Are you feeling okay? Last night I thought I saw you at the pep rally. That was you, I saw you there." She gasped on the phone, apparently in disbelief.

"Yes....I went to the pep rally last night." I hated having to explain this. "And today I'm going to the football game. What's the big deal?"

"The BIG deal, Sarah, is that you never go to these kinds of things. You hate them. Is this about Jason Evan? Is there something I should know?" Lin caught on pretty quick, a trait I usually liked, but not when it was used on me.

"Well....yes...I *sorta* told him I would go." I paused here for her to jump in with a comment, but she said nothing so I continued. "And I *sorta* have a date with him after." She definitely would have something to say now.

"You have a date with Jason Evans! Oh my God!" She was screaming this into the phone. Her excitement about the date was more than my own.

"It's not front page news, Lin. We're not a couple and it's just for coffee and a bagel. If they win and they might not, odds are they will lose." I hoped that the light, free tone I was using would calm her down; it didn't.

"Sarah Burton, why are you not more excited about this? What are you going to wear? I'll be right over." And with that she hung up the phone.

I knew she was going to rush over, but what I didn't expect was for her to bring her entire wardrobe with her. What did she do, empty her entire closet out? I had clothes.

"I know what you're thinking, Sarah, but your clothes are so... tomboyish and well...mine aren't."



"I'm not wearing a dress or a skirt. So just count them out." I would have put up more of an argument, but Lin always got her way. Why fight her?

An array of outfits later, I finally had a winner. I ended up wearing dark jeans and Lin's grey cashmere sweater. It was still me, but with flare as Lin put it. I refused to let her do my hair, though; it might seem like I was trying too hard, so I kept it down. Walking from the packed school parking lot into the football stadium, Lin and I were suddenly greeted by Shay Shannons and her flock of idiots which included Molly Mitchell and Nikki Brown. Maybe calling them idiots was too harsh of a word choice for them. All three of them had blonde hair, so maybe I was stereotyping again.

"Lin! Hey! How are you and who's your new friend?" Nikki honestly didn't recognize me? Maybe idiot was the perfect word; I had gym with her.

"Oh you know Sarah." Lin said it instantly without much thought.

"We do?" Molly asked inquisitively.

At this moment Shay realized who I was. "Yes we do girls; she's the one who took the dive into her lunch." Shay Shannons never let people live down their embarrassing moments.

"Oh...you're her. I didn't recognize you without all that food on your face," Nikki said, with a bit of sympathy.

"Well, cafeteria food really isn't my look, so guess you'll have to get used to me looking like this. " I couldn't help the sarcasm.

"You mean you did that on purpose?" Yes, Molly actually asked that question. I was about to respond but Lin cut me off.

"We should really find a seat, right, Sarah? We'll see you girls on the sidelines." Lin said this while holding back a smile as she grabbed my arm and led me towards the bleachers. Once we were far enough away, we both broke out in laughter.

We barely found seats on our team's side of the bleachers. I had no idea this many people showed up for a high school football game. Track events weren't this popular. It was amazing really. Well, not enough that I would make a habit of showing up, but I wasn't as bored as I thought I would be. I decided I needed refreshments, so I made my way over the concession stands. The line was shorter than it had been when we first arrived and I stood there awaiting my turn. This is when Jeff Kimby saw me; he came walking over with a large camera in his hands.

"Sarah!" He stumbled a little when he yelled it out; I thought he was going to fall down.

"Hey Jeff, taking pictures of the game?" I gestured towards the camera in his hands.

"Yeah, you can't have too many pictures for the yearbook. That's what I always say. Want me to take one of you, Sarah?" He didn't even let me answer the question he just lifted up his camera and snapped the picture.

"Jeff! I didn't want my picture taken," I said in protest.

"Don't worry, Sarah. You're more photogenic than you think." He said it like it was a secret and then walked away.

I made my way back to Lin with the drinks and hotdogs. She, like usual, was in the middle of a conversation with someone. I had no idea how she could socialize so easily. I sat down and began to munch down on my hotdog, when everyone suddenly stood up yelling. Our team must have made a touchdown; I looked over immediately to the scoreboard and noticed that it must have put us in the lead just in time for halftime. Lin sat back down, picked up her hotdog, took a bite and with a mouth full said to me, "You might get your date after all. Did you see how Jason ran the ball all the way down the field for that last touchdown? It was amazing! He must really want to win tonight." She sounded so pleased, practically bursting with excitement for me.

I, however, suddenly had butterflies in my stomach. What if they really did win? I guess I might have been hoping they would lose.



"Sarah, you alright? You look a little nauseous." Lin moved a little over on the bleachers when she asked.

"I'm fine, Lin; I'm not going to puke, so you can move back over." I sounded pretty forceful.

"Okay, Okay, I'm moving back over." Lin said it in surrender as she scooted back over by my side.

The rest of the game went by so fast. Our team had the lead by two touchdowns after the third quarter and never lost it. At the end the crowd swarmed in all directions. I looked over to see what Lin was doing, but she had already left me to fend for myself. She probably yelled bye as she got up, but with the noise level I wouldn't have heard her. I sat there waiting for the bleachers to empty enough that I could walk down them without bumping into someone. Walking down I scanned the field for Jason, but so many people had made their way on to it; I couldn't make him out anywhere. What should I do? I didn't want to walk through the crowd looking for him. Did he shower after a game? I hoped so, otherwise he would surely smell, but shouldn't I find him so he knows that I'm here? I stopped at the bottom of the bleachers and glanced around, trying to decide if I should just leave and explain later I couldn't find him or if I should actually try and look. That's when I saw Dan Daniels and it appeared as if he was walking over to me. Was he going to change the time for the science project again?

"Sarah! Great game, huh?" He had the biggest smile on his face.

"Yeah, you guys played great." Honestly what are you supposed to say?

"Thanks, so are you coming to the after party?" He does know that he asked me, Sarah, that, right?

"After party?" I sounded like I'd never heard of it, but I had heard of the infamous after parties I'd just never attended one, or been invited to attend one.

"Yeah, it's at my house. You know where that's at, right? Well, Jason said you two were going to hang out tonight, so I figured that meant you were coming."

"Uh, ...maybe. It's the first I've heard of it so..." I sounded like a nervous idiot. I hate being caught off guard.

"Alright, well you should show. Look for me if you do." And just like that, Dan Daniels invited me to his party.

Before I could answer Jason approached us and joined in on the conversation.

"We might show, Dan. It hasn't been decided yet." Jason patted Dan's shoulder when he said this.

"I'll catch you guys later then. You should show, though, it's going to be awesome."

Dan said this and then ran off to meet up with other team members.

"So, Sarah, I think you owe me a bagel if I remember correctly."

"Yeah, I do, but if you'd rather go to the party, we can always get the bagel some other time." I gave him the option, but secretly hoped he wouldn't choose to go to the party.

"You want to go to the party, really? We can—I just thought you wouldn't be into that." He apparently took what I said the wrong way.

"No. Not me. I don't want to go to the party. I just thought you might want to go. Alone. Without me." I tried to stress the part of me not going.

"Oh. Well I'm not going to the party unless you come with me, so I guess it's going to be the bagel then. You wouldn't mind if I got a muffin instead, would you?" He stood there silent waiting for my response.

"A muffin, huh, okay. But you have to get the coffee." And with that we headed to the parking lot.

The café was pretty vacant. It usually was, that's why I liked it so much. People from school whisked in and out, but never stayed very long. I would sit there for hours, reading, doing homework, or just listening to music on my iPod. I never once thought I would be at the café on a date, let alone a date with Jason Evans. We sat down at my favorite table; it was in the far corner near the main window, so that you would have your privacy, but you could still see out on the main street. The waitress took our order and then we sat there silent, nodding our heads, and trying not to look at each other. Why did this have to be so awkward? I need to say something, anything, nothing stupid, but something. I was drawing a blank. I went with the first thing I could think of.

"It was a good game. I actually kind of enjoyed myself." That must have sounded stupid.

"Yeah, I'm glad you showed. Honestly, I was a little worried you weren't going to show up." He talked with such confidence. I wished I had that.

"So I ditched on you once. Are you ever going to let me live that down? I was at the pep rally." I emphasized on that last part. I hated pep rallies.

"Yes, you were there, even though I still think you hid in the hallways and didn't actually come into the gym." He said this jokingly, knowing that I had actually gone in.

"Now I should have done that, but instead I ventured in. Next time I will probably make best friends with the hallways."

"Next time?" He asked all surprised.

"Well, I mean...if we were...um...you never know. I could have to go with Lin sometime." Could I have said that any worse? I mean really?

"I don't know about Lin wanting you to go, but it would be awesome if you came to all of them. But you should probably sit closer to the team, so I could talk to you."

Before I could respond to this, the waitress came with our order. That wasn't all she came with either. She began to hit on him. HELLO—I'm sitting right here. Can't you tell he's on a date?



Wow. Why the heck did the green monster of jealousy show up at my door? Since when did I care if a girl hit on Jason Evans? He wasn't my boyfriend and last week we never even had a conversation with each other. Plus, this might not be a date, it was never labeled that.

"Sorry about that, Sarah. Girls like that just don't care."

"Oh, no biggie." I tried to sound like I hadn't really noticed.

"Really?" He paused. "Most girls would find it a big deal." He paused again. "You do think of this as a date don't you? I mean I hope you do. I guess I could have been more clear, but you..." He was mumbling that last part, but I had enough to go on.

"I know this is a date. Well, I know it now, before I was just hoping or rather wondering."

"Oh. Good. Cause it definitely is a ...date." And then he bit into his muffin.

"Um...yeah." That was all I could say. I was dumbfounded.

To say that the evening went well would be the biggest understatement of my life. We left the café after about an hour of conversing over simple things like movies, sports, and stuff like our favorite colors. He took me home, and as he walked me to the door, I was really freaking out. Was he going to kiss me? What should I do if he does? I've never kissed a boy before. I had never even been on a date before. Holy crap!

"So, I'll call you tomorrow," Jason said and took a step back.

"Yeah. Okey dokey." Did I really just say that?

Jason laughed a bit and responded with "Okey Dokey, Sarah."

I thought I was going to die of embarrassment, but he said it back in a way that let me know he thought what I said was cute, instead of just plain stupid. It did occur to me about a few hours later that Jason didn't have my phone number. How was he supposed to call me without it? Maybe he knew that, and wasn't going to call me. It wouldn't be too surprising, but if Dan Daniels was in on this being a joke, then working with him on the project tomorrow was going to be awkward.

Crap. I still had to work on the project. I had no idea what we were going to do it on, and I really hoped Dan was more scientifically gifted than I was.

I was headed to the café to meet Dan Daniels to work on the science project. The walk there took me past the veteran memorial park that has giant Oak trees surrounding it. It was my favorite part of our small town. All the houses were one story, square boxes with scorched grass lawns, and were barren any large trees. But the Oaks surrounding the park made up for the bleakness of the yards. They were over a hundred of years old and when they designed the park, they made sure to work the blueprint in a way that accented them. I brought books, construction paper, pencils, scissors, glue, and absolutely no clue what I was going to use the stuff for. The project was to be about some plant or animal and its life cycle. Honestly, I wasn't sure of any of the requirements, but I didn't want to turn in some poster board with pictures pasted on it from a magazine. I needed this project to be good, so I could raise my grade back up. You can't run for track with a low G.P.A. I wasn't stupid or anything, but my grades were nothing near perfect in science.

My train of thought ended when I realized my feet had reached the café before my head did. I looked through the window and remembered last night, last night when I had a date with Jason Evans. No time to think about that, though. Now was the time to focus on biology and how to get this project done with my partner being Dan.

"Sarah, over here!" Dan called this out as I walked in the door. Surprised I barely lifted my hand in response. Did he really get here before I did?

"Hey. So...how's it going?" I asked as I sat down across from him.

"Good, Sarah. Missed ya at the party last night." He said it casually and without missing a beat or looking up at me.

"Um, yeah, sorry about that, I'm not really into the party scene," I replied while pulling my stuff out and putting it on the table.

"Not a problem, I understand, you don't get out much. With Jason, though, you'll have to, he's a popular guy." Dan leaned forward as he said this to look at what I placed on the table.

"Construction paper? What are we going to do with that?"

"Well, I—don't. I have no clue, I just grabbed a bunch of stuff. Are we doing a plant or animal and which one?" I felt like such an idiot and I wanted this meeting to be over.

"Let's do a plant. My mom gardens a lot and she takes a bunch of pictures of her precious plants growing. I brought them." He pulled a stack of photos out of his backpack and placed them on the table. "There are a few in there; you can pick which one. I have research on hibiscus, though, but we don't have to do that one."

I was shocked. It was one thing for him to have pictures detailing the growth of plants that his mother had done the work for, but to have done research? I felt a cringe of guilt because I had accused him in my head of being a magazine cutter.

"No, the hibiscus sounds good. What research do you have so far?" I tried not to let the shock of his efforts show in my voice. I'm sure it did, though.

"Just a page or two. Here you can take it home and look it over." He handed me this packet of stapled paper far more than a page or two. "I highlighted what I thought should go on the poster board."

I flipped through the pages, reading some of the highlighted portions. "Wow, Dan this is pretty thorough of you."

He put his pencil behind his ear and then he dropped it. "So what do you have prepared, or did you just bring construction paper?"



"I— well, I have scissors too and glue. Plus a few books." I tried to say it with confidence, but it sounded flat to me.

"Um... That's good that you're prepared for fifth grade art class." He laughed a bit. "No, really, Sarah, that's fine." He lifted up his hand and took his pencil out from behind his ear. "Just take what I gave you and put it on a poster board, make note cards for the discussion, and we should be good."

Was he trying to make it sound like he was doing all the work in the project? Was I really being shown up by Dan Daniels? No, I don't think so.

"Look, Dan. We were meeting up today to talk about the project, pick a plant, animal, whatever, and then figure out the rest. We were assigned this yesterday..." My voice had gotten loud.

"Sarah, Sarah. Look I didn't mean any offense. Geez, calm down. I know we were told just yesterday, but the project is due Friday and I can't meet up again. What I did is only half. I just asked what you brought in case you had other ideas." He actually sounded apologetic for my misunderstanding. Damn this. When did I become the jerk?

"Sorry, Dan. I'll do the poster board and note cards, and bring them to school tomorrow."

"Okay, I'll stop by your locker in the morning then," he said. He picked up his bag, threw in his pencil, zipped it, and left the café.

I sat there stunned for a bit. First I had gone on a date with Jason Evans, and then Dan Daniels of all people was more prepared for a project than I am. My high school world had just flipped off its rockers or something. I was packing up my stuff to go when Shay Shannons and Jason walked into the café. Probably to work on their project, I don't know. Popular people meshing with other popular people? Not uncommon. They hadn't seen me yet, and I didn't want them to. It felt awkward to see Jason after last night and the whole I'll call you, but I don't have your phone

number thing. And Shay Shannon, well I never wanted to see her. I had all my stuff in my backpack, they had just got in line to order, so I figured while they weren't looking this way I could make it toward the door.

I almost made it when I saw Lin through the window. I walked a little faster to exit before she entered, but I didn't make it. I halted in my tracks a few feet from the door as Lin entered.

"Sarah, what's up? You leaving or do you have time to grab a coffee with me? You always have time for coffee." She grabbed my arm and pulled me toward the line. "My treat, we have to talk about last night. I want details—" She trailed off probably because she saw Jason in line and didn't want to embarrass me by letting him hear any more of the conversation.

"Lin, Sarah, what brings you to the café so early?" Shay Shannons would think that noon was early.

"Well, Sarah, here had a project meeting with Dan. And I was planning on interrupting it, but..." Lin scanned the café. "Looks like I'm too late. So I'm just going to get details from her about last night instead." She looked right at Jason when she said that last part. I could have died.

"Jason and I are here for our project meeting as well." Shay stepped forward to touch Jason's arm when she said this and he seemed speechless for the first time since I met him. Perfect. If there ever was a time to say something now was it. I needed out of there.

"Lin, I've had my fill of coffee for the day. Why— don't we head over to my house?" I needed to escape. One popular person at a time was enough to deal with, and so far I had run into three this morning.

"Okay, sure Sarah, but your mom has to make me coffee when we get there because *I* haven't had my fill." She turned to Jason and Shay and added, "You two have fun on that project now." And with that we both turned and headed for the door.



Jason moved so quickly he was at the door before we were, "Um, Sarah, I don't have your number. You think you could write it down for me?"

"Sure." I should have said no, but instead I found myself walking over to the nearest table pulling a napkin out of a dispenser and writing it down.

"Thanks." That is all he said when I handed it to him and then he walked back over to Shay. I had no idea what to make of the situation, but outside the café Lin had some opinions about it.

"Oh my word! Did you see Shay's face when he asked for your number? And her whole arm move that obviously didn't work. I take it the date went well last night. Wonder when he'll call."

I don't think she was really expecting an answer because she continued on answering her own questions about the event until we arrived at my house. I stayed silent the whole time. It's amazing how she can hold a conversation with just herself talking.

Once inside we headed for the kitchen where my mom was and asked her to brew some coffee for Lin.

"How did your meeting go? Figure out what you're going to doing for your biology project?" Mom was only interested in the project because she was worried my science grade might affect the district track meet coming up in the spring. Considering it was only November, she was definitely worrying too much about it.

"Dan and I are going to present on the growth of the hibiscus plant. Apparently, his mom gardens or something so he has a bunch of pictures of it." I really didn't want to discuss this with her. So I pretended I was more interested with an orange on the counter. It didn't work.

"Dan Daniels' mother plants...who would've thought? Well, honey, just make sure you do well on this one okay." She started the coffee pot and turned around with a serious look on her face. "I talked to Coach Mann this morning on the phone while you were out, and we discussed having

you do some more weight training to better prepare yourself. And I did mention how I don't like that assistant coach Chad is the one working with you all the time."

"Mom, Coach Chad is fine. Stop hassling Coach Mann all the time. And more weight training? Really?" I already did weights with Dad on the weekends. Did I really have to do it at school too in the weight room where all the members of the football team went? Didn't she know that would be torture for me? Mothers are cruel. And my dad went out and bought weight equipment so I could do it at home. He understood the pressures of high school; she obviously didn't.

"Yes more. Don't you think it's a good idea, Lin?"

Lin just nodded. She had courage, but not when it came to my mom.

"Plus you don't want to come in second again do you?"

Why even ask that? Nobody ever goes out to win second place. But before I could respond the phone rang and she went to answer it.

The thing one had to understand about my parents was that my mom was a popular girl during high school sort of like Lin is, and my dad, well, he was on the track team back when it was cool to be on it. He got a scholarship off it, helping him become the big time lawyer that he is now. But he noticed that I'm not exactly the social type that my mother likes to think I am, probably since I hang out with Lin. She was wrong. I did mention before that basically I was nobody, or I was up until last week anyway.

Monday mornings always had a way of arriving too quickly. Jason didn't call, and I had to meet Dan at my locker. Not exactly what I call plans for a great day. The poster board I made came out looking like something a twelve year old would make, and my note cards for the speech sounded worse than a low budget commercial. Oh well. Dan was standing at my locker when I approached it.

Apparently, he got to school really early; I had assumed I'd get there before him being that was an hour before the first bell.

"Sarah, that the poster board?" He had pointed to the poster board in my hand and asked the obvious and yesterday I gave him credit for being smart.

"Yep. I have to tell you it is not very good. I can keep working on it though. We have until Friday to turn it in." I flipped the poster board around so he could see it. He just stood there staring at it. I knew it was bad, but at least comment on it. His silence was torture. Suddenly I had become afraid that the old Dan Daniels, the one who got pleasure out of tormenting me, was about to surface. And even with that fear, I just stood there.

"Well, you're not exactly gifted in the art department. I'll tell you what. I can meet during lunch today, and most likely tomorrow as well to help you fix this."

What? I make one bad poster and suddenly I can't fix it myself. I had five more days.

"I can do it myself. Really, if I have more time..." I looked at the poster. Who was I kidding? Even if I took the whole week to rework this I wouldn't do much better. I had received a "B" in art last year and all I had to create was one stupid clay pot that didn't leak. I think I got the grade out of pity. It took me three shots and my pot still leaked. "Okay lunch then, but I still want to eat, so I'll meet you in the lunch line?" It occurred to me after I said this that Dan probably wouldn't want to be seen with me in the lunch line, not before my pudding dive and definitely not after it.

"Um..." he looked around most likely to check and see who might be watching. "Sure, just try to keep your lunch to yourself today, okay?" He didn't even let me respond—he just walked away. No bye, no parting remarks whatsoever. Oh how I hate the bad manners you experience in high school.

When lunch finally rolled around, I had almost forgotten my meet and greet with Dan that morning and the plans we had set, but I was instantly reminded when I saw him near the beginning



of the lunch line standing beside Jason. Guess I should have expected that. It wasn't like I was unhappy to see Jason, but rather unsure of what I should say to him, if anything. Date or not a date I still didn't know him very well.

"Hey." That's all I could say. I couldn't muster up a better word or words at least.

"Hey, so Jason and Shay are going to join us." Yeah, sure' cause I'd love to spend the next hour with Shay Shannons, Jason Todd, and Dan Daniels. I was beginning to miss the days I spent lunch almost invisible.

"That's okay with you, right?" Jason asked. "I mean you don't mind that we join you?"

I minded, I minded a lot, but I wouldn't be saying that out loud. So I said, "No, not at all. Let me just get my lunch and we can head out." I stepped past them and into the line for my tray. Jason followed, but said nothing. When I got to where Sherry was, she smiled and handed me the extra pudding. I took it this time, and turned to see Jason smile at the sight of it on my tray.

"So Jason, would you like an extra pudding as well?" Great, now Sherry was offering him another pudding. Was there no justice? Will popular people always get more?

"No, Aunt Sherry, that won't be necessary." Did Jason just say Aunt Sherry?

"Alright then, tell your Mom I said hi." Yes he did. I couldn't believe this. Sherry the cafeteria lady, my cafeteria lady, is Jason Todd's aunt. My mouth was slightly agape. I quickly closed it, but it was too late. Jason must have seen my surprise.

"Not many people know that."

I decided to play stupid and pretend I didn't know what he meant.

"Know what?"

"That Sherry is my aunt."

"Oh. Well, I mean it's no big deal. So what if your aunt is the cafeteria lady. I like her."



"I wish everyone thought that way. But honestly people here only see things black and white. You can't be popular and have the lunch lady be a member of your family."

Great, now Jason is one of those popular people who actually have feelings. Well, I didn't have any pity for him. The cafeteria lady was his aunt—so what? It wasn't like he had a mole on his face and smelled like Jeff Kimby who received a swirl every day of his high school career.

"Wow, so you don't tell people she's your aunt because it'd hurt your popularity. Gee, that sounds stuck up of you."

"Oh is that right? Well correct me if I'm wrong, Sarah, but how many people know what your dad does for a living, or how your mom was prom queen back in high school? You don't tell people for almost the same reason. You don't want to become popular because of your family, and I don't want to become unpopular because of mine. So don't judge me for the same thing you are guilty of." And with that he walked away from me. I couldn't believe him, implying that I choose to be invisible. Nobody chooses that.

"Hey," I walked quickly over to Jason who was standing next to Dan and Shay, "It's not the same thing. And I'll prove it." I got up and stood on a chair. I was mad and I knew this was going to be a bad idea. "Excuse me everyone!" The cafeteria did not fall silent. I yelled the rest anyway. "My dad is the head prosecutor for the state and my mom was prom queen in high school. Anybody care who I am now?" No one even acknowledged me standing there shouting except Dan, Shay, Jason, and Lin who rushed over to where I was.

"What the hell has gotten into you, Sarah Burton? Since when do you stand on chairs and scream out at people?" Lin actually sounded mad at me. I stepped down from the chair.

"Jason said that—well he said I kept my parents a secret and it was the same as him—" I was about to blab out to Lin, in front of Shay and Dan, that Jason's aunt was Sherry, but I couldn't.

"Same as what? Sarah, you're not making any sense?" Now Lin sounded worried.

I looked over at Jason, and then back to Lin and answered, "I just thought it might help my popularity. It didn't. I don't know what I was thinking. Trying to make the pudding incident go away I guess."

"What?" Lin questioned still not fully understanding.

"Nobody is going to forget your pudding facial. It doesn't matter who your parents are. You will always be a loser." Shay Shannon was right. And it didn't matter. Not to me anyway.

"Sarah, is not a loser." Lin stepped in front of Shay, and had Lin spat as she said this it would have gone all over Shay's face. Suddenly I wished Lin had an overactive gland.

"Geez, Lin, try a tic-tac sometime. I promise it won't kill you."

"Alright, Shay, I've about had it with you and your—" Dan grabbed Lin's shoulders from behind and told her to calm down.

"Lin, it's okay, I am a loser. I don't mind." I really didn't. And having Lin kick Shay's butt for calling me one would have been great to watch, but it was unnecessary.

"Sarah, you're not."

"She kind of is." Now Dan was chiming in.

Lin turned and gave him a death glare.

"She is a loser, a loser who can't draw, a loser who eats pudding off the floor, and a loser who Jason likes despite all of that." Okay, I hadn't expected that to come out at the end of Dan's list about me being a loser.

In order to get to the library, we had to take a path outside. I was dreading having to work with Jason, Dan, and Shay all at the same time. One popular person at a time should be a rule of thumb. I started sweating immediately. It could have been nerves, but I blamed it on the heat. Something about Florida weather has a way of making you soaked when you go outside, even if there isn't a midday rain shower.

"I hate being outside. I mean who likes it?" Shay's voice reminded me of the characters from a Valley Girl book I read when I was eight. She must have read them too only she probably thought they were a manual on behavior or something.

"I love being outside. Sweating, getting sun. Plus, it's really nice out today. Maybe we should work outside." Dan actually sounded serious about the idea. It was nearly a hundred degrees. I love the outdoors as well. I never understood how people could run on treadmills inside their air conditioned houses or gym, but working on school work seemed to require a cooler environment. Or at least desks.

"Um... No. I am not working outside. Where would I sit?" I was relieved that Shay turned down the plan before I had to. It didn't surprise me though. Most cheerleading teams worked on their routines on the field, but not our school's. Shay and her followers practiced in the gym. I'm shocked they even showed up for the games since they aren't played indoors.

"Fine, it was just an idea, Shay." I could tell at that moment with Dan's tone, he really didn't like Shay Shannons. I wondered if Jason felt the same way. Could football players really dislike cheerleaders? My high school world really had flipped upside down.

I had stayed silent the whole walk to the library. Once inside, though, avoiding conversation seemed almost impossible.

"So, Sarah, you made this?" Jason was looking at my poster board, and even he seemed shocked by the look of it. Really, I made it in one night, how bad could it be?

"Yeah. Why? It's not that bad." At this point I was getting really annoyed with all the popular people judging my school work. I never asked to be working with them. Never claimed I was smart or artistically talented.

"No, it's not. It looks better than the one I tried to make on the tomato plant," Jason said. "My mom threw it away actually."



I laughed a bit at the last part, but felt relieved that I had this in common with Jason.

"Look, Sarah, I really think we should just start over. And not just with this poster board." I just stared at him and nodded my head.

"We'll start by pulling off all the pictures on this board, and then type up what you have hand written here. Maybe even make borders for the photos, use a stencil for the heading. What do you think?"

Honestly, I thought it was a great idea, but I really didn't want to admit that. I bit my pride. "Sure. Sounds like a plan." I liked Jason even more now that I knew he was smart. It seemed unfair that he could be both popular and intelligent.

"Sarah, why don't you work on the borders, do the stencil, glitter whatever, while Dan types up what you have written here? Shay, you and I will work on coming up with some research on the tomato plant, so we can make a poster board too. What Sarah has here is a pretty good bullet list off of what Dan found, so hopefully she can do that for us too." Jason just gave me a compliment and took charge of the situation. Where did that come from? I stared at him for far too long in shock when Dan's voice called me back.

"Here is what I pulled up off the internet last night." He handed me a stack of stapled papers. "What do you think?"

I sifted through the stack in silence for a bit of time before I came back with my answer.

"Should work, but you might want to consider finding a more credible source than Wikipedia."

"Yeah, I guess so, I'll keep looking."

This was about the time that I noticed Jason and Shay were doing the tomato plant.

"Um, isn't that plant a bit boring?"

"Yes, but it's simple," Jason said.



Dan leaned in really close to me. A definite bubble invasion and added in a whisper, "But when you have Shay in your group, you have to keep it simple. She's not exactly the brightest individual and they have to present."

Dan had a point. Guess my stereotype on cheerleaders not being the smartest was right. Not everything I knew about high school had gotten messed up this week.

"Right. Well, okay, use these." I pointed at several pictures in the magazines and Jason began cutting them all out and pasting them on his poster board.

It was nice working one on one with Jason, but the whole time I was in the library, I just kept thinking about how Dan was so different from what I had thought. So was Jason, I suppose. He had asked me out and his aunt was Sherry the lunch lady. It would figure that I would get the quarterback's attention and all I can think about is the linebacker. I needed to focus. When the heck did I become a girl who worried about boys? I had track to think about.

When I arrived home from school, my father called me into the kitchen. Not an unusual occurrence, except my father was home early from work. He was standing in the kitchen wearing a suit and tie, with the neck line wet from sweating.

"Your mother tells me she got Coach Mann to agree to some weight training at school."

"She sure did. I don't think I need it, but—" He cut me off. My father cuts everybody off. Call it a professional habit.

"Sarah, we have to discuss something."

"What?" I hated how parents never got to their point quickly.

"The school called me at work today. It's usually to get a check to fund track, but this time they were asking for something else." He wiped his forehead with the kitchen towel. "And well without more students joining track they have been receiving pressure from the school board to close the program."

What? How could they do this? They don't even give any funds toward it. Why would they want to cancel something they don't even have to pay for?

"But, how I mean...I—" words alluded me. Track was all I had. Working on this project made me realize that I needed track more than ever to get a scholarship. My grades alone were not going to get me into a good college.

"Listen, Sarah, I know you're upset." Upset was an understatement. This was my year to come in first place. And if I didn't have track, I really was a loser, and I couldn't stand the idea of being a loser in track, in popularity yes, but not track. "Your mother and I have been talking to Coach Mann all this afternoon, and if he can recruit other students to join, then the program won't be closed."

"Nobody likes track. That's why it's just me." I couldn't help but think that if I had come in first place last year instead of second the school board wouldn't be considering this. I would have made our district look good, instead of making us look like the first loser.

"Sarah, I'm sure there are some students who would like to join. The school board feels that without more students in track, it shows favoritism. They said we only need to get one other student to join, and they won't close the program. It has nothing to do with funding, which surprises me. Some parent must have called and complained, probably one of those parents of the football team. They've become quite hardcore."

"Who am I going to convince that running in Florida is fun, Dad? This is hopeless."

"What about your friend, Lin?" Ideally yes, Lin would work, but her idea of physical activity was sunbathing. I'd have more luck asking a cheerleader.

"No, Dad. Lin won't do it."

"Well you'll find someone. Just ask around. I loved track and so did the seven other people on my team, and it was just as hot twenty years ago, but we all still ran."

"I'll try, Dad." I had to, but who could I ask? The phone rang and my dad picked it up.

"Sarah, it's for you."

"Hey Lin. What's up?"

"This isn't Lin." Lin was the only person who ever called me.

"Oh. Sorry. Um, who is this?"

"Jason, can't ya tell?"

Actually I couldn't. Honestly his voice didn't sound all that young. I would have sworn it was Coach Mann.

"Hey. Yeah, um what's up?"

"Well, I said I would call, didn't I?"

"I guess I thought after my performance today, you wouldn't want to."

"It's okay. Just like your project, we should start over."

"I guess we can do that. It's not like we've known each other that long."

"You busy right now? Want to meet up at the café?" I just hate talking to people on the phone. No facial expressions. They're like half the conversation."

I agreed to meet him. What's the worst that could happen? I'd already made a fool of myself twice and he still wanted to hang out with me. I decided in my infinite wisdom that jogging to the café was a great idea. Get some practice in and burn off some stress. I didn't think about how gross I was going to look, or how bad I was going to smell when I got there. On my run to the café, though, I got a little winded. I had got slightly dizzy, and had to walk the rest the last two blocks there.

When I got to the café, Jason hadn't arrived yet, so I ordered a large glass of water instead of a coffee like usual and sat at my normal table. I kept thinking about track and who I could find to



join, so that I would have a chance at first place this year. I was in mid-thought when Jason sat down in front of me.

“What are you thinking about? I called your name when I walked in, but you were so deep in thought apparently you didn’t hear me.”

Should I tell him what was happening? My dad said it was probably a football player’s parents who made the complaint. What if it was his dad or his mom? What if he had told them to do it?

“It’s nothing really.”

“You sure? You can tell me; I’m a good listener or so my mother tells me.”

“Well, now that I have it on good authority...” I laughed a little. “Everyone’s mother would tell them they are a good listener. It’s like written in the parents’ handbook.”

“Yeah, maybe it is, but really, Sarah, what’s bothering you? I’m making an effort here, but you got to open up a bit and stop pushing me away just because I’m a jock.”

He was right. I was pushing him away. That’s what you do to popular people because every instinct in your body tells you to so that you won’t end up as the star of some prank.

“They’re going to cut track because I’m the only one on it.”

“What? Why? Don’t your parents help fund it?”

“Yes, but they say it’s favoritism or something like that and a waste of Coach Mann’s attention for just one student. I really think I have a chance at winning state, but not if I can’t compete. I train all year round. This just isn’t fair.”

“Don’t you know someone who can join?”

Why does everyone ask this like there is a line of people who have been waiting for me to ask them to join? There isn’t.



"There's no one I know who will join. I'm not the only one on track because I don't want anyone else on it. I'm the only one because nobody else is interested in it." Jason was silent.

Awesome, I open up with my problems and he's speechless. Yeah he's a great listener, but bad on the advice portion.

"Track meets aren't until spring, right?"

"Right." Where was he going with this?

"I normally play basketball during that time of year, but Dan doesn't. He hates the game, but he still tries to be athletic. I know he runs a lot, he's fast—I mean, hell, he's the fastest linebacker this school has seen. Look my point is, he might do it."

"You expect me to ask Dan Daniels to join track? I know he's been nice to me the past week or so, but he basically said it today in the lunch room that it's only because you like me. He thinks I'm a loser."

"He's not a bad guy. And if he's not interested, I'll join."

"But what about basketball?"

"I'll just sit the season out, or ride the bench. Coach Mann will be okay with it. He won't want track to be canceled either. Or maybe there is someone else. Who knows? Either way you'll have me if you can't find someone. You deserve this opportunity. The only issue is I need basketball for a scholarship. I'm good at football, just better at shooting hoops."

"So should I ask him, or do you want the honors?"

"You should. But enough talk on that, let's talk about something else on our date." He said the word. I guess it was official—I was dating Jason Evans. The Jason Evans that would sit out basketball to help my track career. How could I get this lucky?

Friday came quick enough. I still hadn't asked Dan about joining track. We had to present our project today, so I had put it off. A lot had changed since Monday. Jason called me every evening to meet up at the café. I hadn't had dinner with my parents all week. We didn't hang out that much at school, but that wasn't a big deal. I still had Lin to sit with at lunch, and my assigned seat in class was on the opposite side of the classroom from Jason's. Coach hadn't let anyone out of practice to run with me since his assistant was back. I walked into biology after lunch and looked around for Dan. I brought the poster board with me. It looked pretty good after I listened to Dan's suggestions. He was quite the student and apparently the salvation I needed for track.

"Hey, Sarah, I got the note cards. Does the poster board look good?" Dan swooped into the seat next to me. The one Jeff Kimby normally sat at, but today everyone was seated next to their partners.

"Actually it does." I unrolled it and presented it with pride. "Your suggestions were great and my mom helped with the glitter." He smiled. Maybe this would be a good time to ask.

"So Dan, I have a question for you."

"What?" Again Dan is a man of few words. Wow, was I nervous about this. The boy who has made my life hell for years is now the one I need the biggest favor from. Life seemed full of irony.

"Um...what do you think of the track team?" I held my breath.

"Not really a team if you're the only one on it. You asking me what I think of your second place trophies because I would say they aren't as good as first."

Perfect, he's going to be nice about this just like normal.

"Right. Well, Jason said you don't participate in school sports during Spring and I was wondering if you would change that and join the track team." I said it. It was out there. Now I all I

had to do was wait for his answer. If it's a no, should I plead? I had Jason to fall back on, but I would hate to ask him to sit out of basketball and what if he didn't like me in two months?

"Sarah Burton, you want me to join track, whatever for?"

"Without another person on it, the school board is cutting it."

"Why should I care?"

Of course he would ask this.

"You shouldn't." Yeah, great way to start convincing him to join, Sarah. "But, if you don't, Jason will join it. Meaning he won't play basketball. And I shouldn't care about that and you shouldn't care about that... except he needs a scholarship to pay for college. We don't since our parents have money, but Jason's..." I probably said too much. Dan and Jason were good friends, but I have no idea if Dan knew about Sherry or his parent's financial status being about the same.

"You know about Sherry, huh? He must trust you. I'm the only other person who knows." He took a long sigh, pushed back his chair and stood up. "I'll do it."

"Really?" I couldn't believe it. He just said yes.

"Yes, really. Jason and I have been friends since kindergarten, and he has a scout watching him for a basketball scholarship. He doesn't know that, my dad set it up. I'd like to keep it that way."

Unbelievable, not only was Dan a good friend, but a modest one.

"Well, thanks. I'll tell Coach Mann today and my parents can make a call to the school board."

"Alright Sarah, now let's do this presentation and get an A." Wow, if I could get an A on this project I'd work with Dan Daniels on projects from now until graduation, teasing welcomed.

Shay and Jason went first. The tomato plant was still as boring as I thought it would be even if Jason was the one talking about it. Dan and I rocked the hibiscus plant. Mr. Massey was quite



impressed with the glitter and the sequential pictures of its growth. When class ended, I headed out the door for the gym. Jason caught up with me and asked about what Dan said.

“He agreed. He’ll join.”

“That’s great. Really great, Sarah, I knew he would.”

“Well, I’m about to go tell Coach Mann.”

“Yeah, yeah good idea. But before you go...” I turned back to see what he wanted. I went to say yes, but before I could utter the word Jason Evans kissed me. Jason Evans kissed me in the school hallway. My hands dropped to my side, and I stood there frozen in the moment, the whole time thinking I have no idea what I am doing! And then he pulled away and said something that sounded like I’ll see you later, and walked off down the hallway. I must have stood there for a while because the bell for the next block of classes rang and startled me out of my daze.

Things were great for the next few months. Dan and I practiced together in the afternoons, and at night I either met up with Jason or talked with him on the phone. Suddenly the seat Lin saved for me at lunch was surrounded by jocks and cheerleaders. I was no longer invisible. I kind of missed it, the quietness and the free time of it.

I had just changed my clothes to practice shedding off some time from my mile’s average when I saw Dan already doing laps on the field. This was strange because as dedicated as he was to track, which let’s just say was not a lot, he never showed up to run on Saturdays. I began a slow pace, and when he eventually rounded the field to where I was, I kept an even pace with him.

“What are you doing here? Couldn’t be that you like running on the weekends all of a sudden?”

“I knew you would be here at some point today doing laps, so I got here early.”

“Okay, you are trying to beat my time then? It’s not going to happen, but I like the effort.”

Dan was fast, but he really only excelled at short distant runs; longs runs were my specialty.



"Actually, Sarah, I wanted to talk to you when I knew Jason wouldn't be around." Odd, why would Dan want Jason to not be around? I slowed my pace and came to a stop, Dan followed suit.

"What's up? What's so important Jason can't be around? Oh you're not quitting are you? Look, Dan, I know you're not that into this, but please the meet is next week. I just need two weeks and then—"

"No! No, I'm not quitting. I just needed to tell you something."

My minor panic attack came to an end as soon as he said this.

"Spill then, I'm wasting time I could be using to run."

"I don't know how to, um, say this, but..." And remember that time Jason kissed me without my expecting it. Dan did the same thing. I didn't stand there frozen, even though I was shocked, I pulled away quickly.

"What the hell was that, Dan? Why did you—"

"Why did I kiss you? Because, Sarah, I like you, I like you a lot. We've been running together and talking and I just. I just like you."

Well, this couldn't be any more complicated could it? Dan Daniels the jerk of the high school likes me while I'm dating his best friend. Great, just great. I miss invisibility.

"I can't, Dan. I'm with Jason. And you don't like me. You hate me. I'm a loser remember? A loser you tolerate for your best friend."

"That's not true. Look, Sarah, I've liked you for a while. Why do you think I always teased you? And, I didn't just join track for Jason. I mean that was part of it, but—"

"But what, Dan? I mean really? What am I supposed to do here? I'm with Jason and while I find you a very nice guy as of late..."

"I know you're with Jason." He began running his hands through his hair. "But he only noticed you the day you fell into your tray, the day he noticed you were nice to Sherry."

"And...?" I was aware he noticed me that day, everyone did. I made a fool of myself.

"And Sherry is my aunt not his!"

What? What? What? No, that couldn't be true.

"But he calls her Aunt Sherry."

"Yeah, he does, but not because she is his real aunt, but because he's known her since he was five and she babysat us."

"Wait, so he doesn't have financial problems? He doesn't need a scholarship? He could have joined track? He didn't have to tell me to ask you? And why did you tell me about your dad and the scholarship?" I was flustered. There were too many questions and too much to take in. All I wanted to do was run, and just keep running, but I stayed put. My heart was beating faster and faster, I could feel it pounding in my ears. I was fighting back the urge to just take off.

"There is a scholarship, and no his parents aren't well off. My dad is a scout, and I don't have financial problems either. My aunt Sherry is just the cafeteria lady. It doesn't mean we are poor."

"So then there wasn't any lie?" I crossed my arms and waited for his answer.

"What do you mean?" A look of confusion crossed Dan's face.

"I mean Jason said he needed a scholarship, said Sherry was his Aunt, and he calls her that, and he did have a scout watching him, so it was better to ask you."

"Yes, but he lied." His arms flung up and out in front of him as he yelled this.

"Not really, I inferred from the scholarship and the Aunt thing that he had financial problems which I never asked him about, but told you, so you were the one that came closer to lying. You're the liar because you never corrected my thinking when I asked you to join track. And now you're hitting on your best friend's girl."

"No, it's not like that. It's not. I thought Jason had told you the financial thing. I thought he had lied. And I can't help but like you, Sarah. You don't act like other girls."

He was right I didn't, but girls who acted like me didn't date jerks like Dan Daniels. Jerks that make moves on girls they shouldn't.

"I've got to go, Dan." I needed to get out of there.

"But what about your run?"

I didn't even answer—I just kept running.

I ran. It's all I could do. I had never been in a situation like this. I liked Dan, but not like I liked Jason, and I was in shock about what just happened. The temperature was high, maybe in the upper 90s. I had left my bag at the field, the bag that held my water. It didn't matter; I didn't have time to stop. The pavement ahead was so hot a mirage of water appeared because of the steam coming off it. I flew by the café where I noticed Lin inside drinking coffee. I didn't stop. What would I say? I just kept running, I felt like Forrest Gump, and I was in a way because I didn't know where I wanted to stop. The pounding of my heart beat, the sound of my feet slapping against the pavement, the sweat trickling down my face, and the lack of thoughts I could produce while paying attention to my breathing were all welcomed. I turned down the road that led to my house. I had no intention of going home, but as I rounded the corner near my house, I became very dizzy. My legs muscles started to cramp and I stumbled over my footing. I grabbed at my forehead in the hopes of minimizing the dizziness, and was shocked to feel a dry forehead. What happened to my sweat? Suddenly the oak trees in my vision began to swing back and forth and looked as if their branches were waving at me. And the next few moments happened in slow motion as the mailbox in my view suddenly became higher off the ground than my line of sight.

I woke up in a hospital room. My father was in the chair beside the bed reading some briefs for work. I moaned a little and he looked up.



“Oh thank goodness, Sarah. You gave us quite a scare.”

Quite a scare, really, Dad, that’s what you say to me as I wake up in a hospital bed. Why not tell me what happened?

“Um, so how did I get here?”

“You had a heatstroke, Sarah. On Saturday, I found you on our street corner on my way home from work.” On Saturday? How many days have I been out of it?

“What day is it, Dad?”

“Tuesday, honey.”

“Tuesday!” I sat up quickly in my bed. Three days in bed? Three? This can’t be happening. Not now, I have the track meet in four days. I have to get out of here.

“Yes, you’ve been in the hospital for observation, Sarah, you were dehydrated and that brought on the heatstroke. It could have been a lot worse.” What could be worse?

“Dad, the meet, it’s in two days. I can still compete, right?” He looked down at his shoes.

“Dad, I can compete, right?”

“Sarah, you’ve had a lot of strain on your body.” He shook his head. “I just don’t think it’s possible for you to compete this year.”

Not possible? But it’s my year. I wanted to shout, to scream, but it wouldn’t do any good.

“What does the doctor say? Have you asked him? Ask him, can I compete?” I needed an official opinion, not just the thoughts of a parent on the situation.

“Your mother is talking with him now; I’ll go ask, but Sarah, whatever he says, I’m against it.”

When my dad returned, my mother rushed in with him and hugged me until I couldn’t breathe. Patient here, need oxygen. I wasn’t in the mood for hugs; I just wanted to hear what the doctor had to say about me competing this Saturday.

"Ms. Burton, your parents tell me you wish to compete in a track competition this Saturday. I can't say that I recommend you doing that. You just woke up from a severe heatstroke. We might not even release you before this Saturday."

"Keep me, why would you keep me? I'm fine, I feel fine."

"We will wait till we get a full work up done and then I'll advise you on what I think you can do, Ms. Burton. Get some rest. The nurse will be in shortly. I'm glad to see you awake."

I looked over at my parents.

"I have to compete. I have to."

The nurse came in and did the whole work up or whatever the doctor called it. According to all their tests, I was fine, but the doctor still recommended that I sit out the track meet. He didn't understand. I had to run. Yes, I made a stupid decision, but this was my year to win. And what if there was no track team next year? What if me turning Dan down makes him quit the team? I need this year's track meet more than anything. I was in the middle of this train of thought when the sound of Jason's voice pulled me out of it.

"Hey there loser, get any pudding with your lunch?" I laughed at the memory.

"No, just jello. Even they heard about my cafeteria performance."

Jason walked over and kissed my forehead.

"I was worried. A heatstroke. I mean, man, stuff like this only happens in movies, right?"

"Guess not."

"Yeah, guess not. I'm glad you're awake now."

"Me too. Hopefully not too late, though. The track meet is in two days."

Jason looked at me like I was crazy.

"You're still thinking about competing?"

I didn't have time to answer him because Lin blew in the room.

"Sarah, oh my God you're okay." She hugged me like my mother had. "You're okay, you're okay!"

Did she know any other phrases?

"I'm okay, now stop saying that. I'm fine really."

"Sarah Burton, why the hell didn't you hydrate yourself properly?" Leave it to Lin to ask the ultimate question. But how do I answer that? Do I tell them I was under emotional stress or lie?

"That's a good question. Dan said you just took off from the field. Next thing we all know you're in here." Jason took my hand waiting for a response. Of course Dan didn't come clean. And what was I supposed to do, expose him for liking me?

"I was upset and running calmed me. Calmed into a hospital bed, but still calmed me." I went for the humor, maybe not the best idea, but it was all I could come up with. No one laughed or even smiled.

"Upset? What do you have to be upset about? Things are great for you right now; well they were till you got upset and gave yourself a heatstroke." This was probably the first time I'd ever seen Lin mad at me. Not a pleasant experience.

"Upset? Sarah, upset about what? I didn't do anything, did I?" Jason had no idea, and with his face so apologetic I was reluctant to tell him about Dan. It certainly didn't help that Dan was dating Lin as well.

"I was running away, running away because Dan kissed me." There I said it. The truth was out. Now if only I could get out of this bed, out of this hospital, and get back to training. I didn't care about the Dan thing anymore. I only cared about the track meet. Why couldn't everyone understand that?



"He did what?!" Wow Lin's voice can get shrill. This is a hospital, quiet down. Jason didn't say anything. He just stared. Not at me, not at Lin, but into space. His silence was eerie. And then he just walked out of the hospital room.

"I'm sorry, Lin, I didn't mean for it to happen. I don't know where it came from."

"Don't you say sorry, Sarah. You didn't do anything. Look I'd love to stay around, but I have a linebacker to find, and I'd kill him, but I'm pretty sure I'm second in line for that." She must have meant second in line to Jason. The situation was awful, but I was more interested in talking to the doctor about me going home. Lin left and I never even said bye to her.

My parents came back in the room. Their faces weren't happy. I wasn't sure what that meant.

"So my tests came back normal. Can I go? Can I compete?" I must have looked so pathetic asking them while still in a hospital gown.

"Sarah, your stamina is probably not where you think it is." My dad said this as he sat down on the side of the bed.

I knew this, I hadn't been training in days, just sleeping. What a waste of time.

"Look, if I can leave here, then I'll do a test run. Please Mom, Dad, you know how important this is to me." They both looked at each other for a long time. They knew, I know they knew how important this was. That's why they paid to keep the program open and nagged Coach Mann about practice time and weight training.

"Alright, Sarah. They are going to release you, but, and this is important, young lady. If we feel like you're pushing yourself too hard, you're not competing this Saturday." My mother said this as she crossed her arms and shifted her weight from foot to foot.

Oh thank you for miracles and understanding parents!

By the time I made it home from the hospital it was dark outside, but I didn't let that stop me. My dad watched me as I did some weight training and ran on my mother's treadmill. They wouldn't let me run outside, not while it was dark. I seemed fine, I felt fine. My time was a bit off, but I wasn't sure if that was because of my heatstroke or the fact that I was on a treadmill. I didn't take phone calls or visitors all night. I just kept running on that darn treadmill until my parents said it was enough and I should go to bed. They didn't understand. I slept for days. I was done sleeping. How could I sleep when I should be training?

The next morning my mom drove me to school. It was the last thing I wanted to do, but she said if I could run, I could sit through classes. She had no idea that these were entirely different things that tested my ability. I was thankful that until lunch I wouldn't have to see Lin, Jason, and especially Dan. I had no way of knowing what happened yesterday between them when Lin and Jason left the hospital. I wouldn't take their calls, so basically I left myself in the dark. Again not my brightest idea. I got in the lunch line, and Sherry looked chipper as usual.

"How you feeling today, dear? I was quite worried about you when I heard the news. Can't tell you how wonderful it is to see you awake and back in school." She placed an extra pudding cup on my tray. I smiled and shook my head thinking about how all of the drama I was going through was caused by one of these extra pudding cups she gave me. How different things would be if it hadn't slipped off my tray. I turned to see that Lin, Jason, and Dan were not sitting at the normal lunch table. Instead the chairs were empty. I went and sat there anyways, and was actually kind of relieved that they hadn't showed and worried slightly by the reason why that was. The bell for biology came quick enough. I dumped my tray and headed to Mr. Massey's classroom. When I stepped through the door, again no sight of Dan or Jason; perhaps they were just running late.

"Well, well, well, if it isn't the sick girl." Gee, of course Shay Shannons couldn't come up with a more original nickname.

"What do you want, Shay?"

"Oh, nothing. So I guess you've heard about Jason and Dan, haven't you?" I hadn't and although my curiosity was peaked at the moment, I didn't want to ask for the information from Shay.

"Of course." I lied.

"Well, leave it to a dweeb to cause the quarterback and point guard for the basketball team to break his hand. You know, I just don't understand. Why punch Dan? Jason and him have been friends since diapers or whatever. Anyways they both got suspended. Looks like your friend Lin did too." I hated how smug she sounded about the Lin part. I can't believe they all got suspended. What did that mean for Jason's scholarship, or the track meet? The school wouldn't let Dan compete now; could I still compete without him? It was probably the most selfish thought I had ever had. Shay walked away before I could respond.

The rest of the school day dragged on. And as soon as the last bell rang, I was out on the field running. I made sure I had plenty of water, or rather my mother did. She packed like eight bottles of water in my gym bag. Made it awfully heavy to lug around all day; she probably hadn't thought of that or she'd have given me a wheelie bag. Because they had got suspended and I was running on school property I didn't have to worry about dealing with the drama of the current situation. All I had to do was focus on cutting seconds off my time. I saw Coach Mann walking out towards the field and I slowed my pace to meet up with him at the finish line.

"Hey Coach, what's up?"

"I'll tell you what, you are one determined athlete. You sure you should be out here doing this?" He kept shifting his hat on his head. I didn't know if that meant good news or bad.

"I'm sure, Coach."



“Well, alright then. I talked with the school board and they’re going to let you compete tomorrow even if the Daniels boy can’t.” This time he adjusted his belt buckle. “I ain’t never seen two idiotic boys in all my life, one had track and the other a basketball game.” He shook his head. “Well at least you got your head on right. Now drink plenty of water and I’ll see you bright and early tomorrow morning.”

Just like that it was happening. I knew I should feel some guilt for the Jason, Dan, and Lin suspension thing, but I was just too excited that I was going to be able to compete tomorrow after everything that had happened that I didn’t care. I kept practicing for a few more hours and then I decided to walk home. My mom offered to pick me up, but I turned down the offer. I was passing the café when Lin busted out the door.

“So I’m not allowed on school property or school functions, but I promise I will be there tomorrow, no matter what. I smell a first place trophy.”

This wasn’t exactly the response I expected from Lin after her being suspended, but I welcomed it.

“I’m worried.” I was too. That new freshmen the other school had was good, and she hadn’t just woken up from a heatstroke yesterday.

“You’ll be fine. So I’m sure you heard about Jason’s hand. Very sad, but you should see Dan’s face. I feel bad for him a little, but then I think about the kiss and the heatstroke, and the pity goes away.” It was amazing how chipper she sounded. “Look I’d love to stay and chat but my mom is pretty pissed about the suspension—she barely let me out to go get coffee. I’ll see you tomorrow, and kick some butt, Burton!”

I sure hoped that I would. I kept picturing what Dan’s face looked like, and how Jason’s hand must feel. I tried calling him, but Jason’s Dad said he couldn’t talk. Guess that means he was in

trouble too. Not exactly the impression I wanted his parents to have of me; they must be thinking I was a bad influence. Perfect.

Sleep did not come easy. I was so nervous about the meet, upset about the drama of the whole situation, and worried that tree branches might wave at me again. I kept telling everyone I was fine, but honestly I wasn't even sure. I just knew I had to compete. I had to. When I woke up the next morning my parents were both in the kitchen drinking coffee and reading the newspaper. As I walked in, they barely glanced in my direction. I guessed we weren't going to talk about the giant elephant in the room, and I was fine with that.

"Any milk left?" I asked the question as I opened the fridge door. The answer immediately answered by my eyesight.

"Yes." My mother didn't even look up from her paper. I heard the crumpling of paper being folded and the culprit was my dad.

"You sure you're up for this kiddo. I know you feel like you have to compete, but you don't. There is still next year. You're only a junior."

"I'm sure, Dad. I got to. For me." I was pouring the milk into my cereal bowl when the doorbell rang. My dad got up to answer it and when he came back Dan Daniels was following him into the kitchen.

"Hey, Sarah, can we talk?" The words came out of Dan's mouth, but it was hard to pay attention to him when all I could focus on was the giant back eyes and cut above his left brow. No wonder Jason broke his hand.

"Sure." I agreed but I didn't make any motion to leave the kitchen that was occupied by my parents. Last time I was alone with Dan I took a six day nap, no way was I going to offer privacy. My parents though noticed the tension in the room and got up and left me there. Great, perfect time to not be protective parents I thought.

"I'm glad they are letting you compete still."

Yeah, I thought, you're lucky or I would blacken your right eye and make it a pair.

"Yeah." Now I was the one with few words. The situation was just so awkward.

"Look, I know you don't want to see me. I'm sorry about the day on the field. It's my fault you took off and ended up in the hospital."

Talk about speaking the obvious, but he wasn't completely to blame for my heatstroke. I knew better.

"Is this an apology? Because it's unnecessary. You really just owe one to Jason and Lin."

"It is. And I already apologized to Lin and Jason, although Jason and I didn't make it to an understanding without some physical contact, but we're cool now."

That was the understatement of the year.

I took a bite of my cereal and the only sound that could be heard in the kitchen was the sound of my teeth chomping down on Captain Crunch.

"Listen, Sarah, I'm sorry. I hope we can get past this. If not, well I guess this is goodbye. Just take into consideration that if I hadn't joined track, you wouldn't be competing today even if you do have to run two days after a heatstroke." He walked out of the kitchen with me still chewing. I couldn't believe this, Dan Daniels just use his 'I joined the track team to help you out' card. Popular people just suck. And on top of that, did he just say him and Jason were 'cool'? Guys forgive awfully easy.

I finished my cereal and got ready to leave. My dad drove me to the meet; my mom said she just couldn't watch me do this. I figured she'd act this way, so it didn't bother me much. At least she wasn't trying to stop me. Coach Mann and his assistant were already there when we arrived. They walked over and greeted us at the car.

"This smells like a day to take home first place."



"You bet, Coach."

"Well, you take it easy. You feel anything weird at all while running, you stop. Not going to have you back in the hospital on my watch."

"Of course not, Coach, but really I'm fine." And I was too, except for the nerves. I couldn't exactly tell anyone I felt like puking my brains out. Excuse the expression. I started doing stretches to prepare for the 5k, my first event. I looked around the crowd of spectators for Lin and Jason. I knew they weren't allowed to show, but I hoped both of them risked it. No sight, not yet.

"Burton! Get over here, they're about to start."

"Sure thing, Coach!"

"Good luck." My dad would say the cliché line, but I welcomed it.

"Thanks, Dad."

At the starting line I got into position. It was so hot out; my shirt was already wet from sweating. I had hydrated myself really well this morning and there were water stations set up around the trail.

I heard the sound of the starting gun and I took off. I had never felt the wind hit my face this way before. I knew not to start off too fast, but my legs were not under my control. It was as if something else had taken them over. I was in the lead. 1k down, then 2k, I couldn't look behind me to see where the other contenders were, I just kept looking forward. My heart was beating so loud in my chest I couldn't have heard pounding footsteps coming up behind me if I tried. I rushed by a water stand and grabbed a cup out of the hand of one of the volunteers. I gulped it down. I knew too much water would cause nausea so I skipped the next few stations. The next thing I knew I saw the 4k sign and realized I was in the final sprint. I was still in the lead but when I glanced over my shoulder, I saw the briefest glint of green, the freshmen's school colors. I thought about Jason, and Dan, the coma, and Lin telling me she'd show, and about the wish of good luck from my dad, and I

suddenly got a last surge of energy. I took off running faster than I ever thought possible. The world record for finishing the 5k is twelve minutes and forty-six seconds. I completed it in sixteen minutes flat. Everyone else came in at least a minute behind me. Even if I came in second in all my other , I would still win first place. I had set a new record for the state finals.

When I crossed the finish line, there was a loud uproar of cheering. I came to a stop and put my hands on the back of my head to slow my heartbeat down. I glanced at the crowd and saw Jason running towards me, with Lin close behind. This was the best moment of my life. Even if I never registered on the high school Richter scale as anything above invisible, even if my relationship with the quarterback came to an end, even if I failed biology, no one could take this moment away from me. And it may never have happened if I hadn't had a heatstroke, which was caused by events that started my junior year when I said hi to Sherry the lunch lady and complimented her on new hair net.

## NELCHINA

I had waited months for September 15<sup>th</sup> to come around for the last weekend of Caribou season. I had my four-wheeler and gear ready, and all I had to do was go pick up my friend Gary. I latched the trailer to my jeep and headed out. It was fall still so snow hadn't arrived yet, but autumn in Alaska isn't as colorful as states that have maples and oaks. Sure those grow up here, but not where I live. Instead all I had to look at on the ride to Gary's was spruces and firs which have a dull gray bark and needles for leaves.

I was driving from Palmer towards Anchorage down Glenn Highway. In the foreground, Twin Peaks and Pioneer Peak were to my left with snow streaked across the tops, gray clouds looming about. In front of Pioneer Peak was where "Ghost Forest" grew which had eerie dead spruce trees lining the edge of the forest, barren of branches and bark. Every time I see them I get this sinking feeling in the pit of my stomach. They have their own kind of beauty, but they are a reminder of the Great Alaska Earthquake in '64. The quake caused the ground to sink and the roots of the spruce trees to hit salt water, ultimately causing them to die and begin decaying. Their pallid bark and leafless limbs send chills up my spine. The thin gray cloud that condenses around them this early in the morning made the ashen trees of the forest look all the more mystifying and sinister. It just reminds me of the bad times my dad has told me about, but for some reason when I passed them the sinking feeling in my stomach was worse. At five in the morning the drive was dreary, long, and fog lingered in the air.

I pulled into Gary's yard and to my surprise his four-wheeler wasn't out of the shed and the house looked as if its occupants hadn't awoken yet. I honked my horn and



stepped out of my jeep. My dog Kodi, a golden retriever with a hyper disposition, leapt over the front seat and followed me to the doorstep. I pounded a few times, rang the door bell. I heard the door unlock and eventually it creaked open. Gary stood before me, undressed. Unlike me Gary had blonde hair, was short, and wore glasses, but we were both sixteen.

“Why aren’t you ready, man? I want to make it out there before it gets too late.”

“I’m not going... I can’t.” A yawn directly followed this.

“What do you mean you can’t go? We’ve planned this trip for months.” This was so unlike Gary; he never bailed on a chance to hunt.

“Look, man, my girl, she wants to see me this weekend. You understand.”

I didn’t understand. She could see him Monday. Why did she have to see him the last weekend of caribou season?

“Bethany can see you when we get back. Get dressed. We’re wasting time.”

“I can’t.” He rubbed his forehead with his index finger.

“Gary, man, it’s the last weekend of caribou season. I can’t go by myself.” I shouldn’t go by myself, but that didn’t mean I wouldn’t. This was the only weekend I could get off from my job in the produce section at Carrs grocery store.

“She said if I go, she’s going to call it quits. Something about a third month mark being this weekend.” He was rubbing away the sleep from his eyes as he said this. Obviously,

he knew he wasn't going and yet hadn't bothered to call and tell me before I drove all the way there to pick him up.

I was pissed. The trip we had planned was taking us out hunting in Nelchina which is 150 miles from anything you could call civilization. The whole city had a population of like seventy one, and not all of them were out in the woods hunting or owned businesses or anything like that. In fact, if you wanted to go out there you needed to take enough fuel with you, so you could drive there and drive back, plus fuel for the four-wheeler. It probably wasn't a good idea to go by myself, but just because Gary had to see his girlfriend this weekend didn't mean I was going to miss out on *my* hunting trip.

I asked to use his phone, so I could call my dad.

"Dad, you won't believe this but—" He cut me off like always.

"You forgot your rifle. That is what you're calling about, right?" He sounded annoyed with me—nothing new.

"Uh—" His news about my folly threw me off track.

"You know I don't like the idea of just you and Gary going off hunting together, but I agreed to it. Then you go and leave your rifle. Haven't I taught you better than that?" He had taught me better and with a mistake like that I couldn't just tell him now that Gary wasn't going. He'd say I couldn't go myself.

"Yeah, Dad, but Gary has an extra one so I'm just going to use his." I covered the phone and let out a sigh. I thought that one up fast.

"Alright, guess that'll do."

"See you when I get back, Dad."

"Yeah." And just like that he hung up. No goodbye or nothing. That was my dad.

"Gary, I need to use your rifle."

"What? Why?" He shook his head in confusion.

"Because I forgot mine and you won't need it so hand it over." I put my hands out as a gesture for him to go get it.

"You're just going to go by yourself?" He crossed his arms and took up a stance.

"I wouldn't have to if you went along with me." I don't know why I bothered. Gary put Bethany before everyone since she was his first girlfriend.

"I can't." His facial expressions turned hard causing his eyebrows to almost connect in the middle.

"Whatever. Give me the gun. And don't tell my dad or yours. You owe me that."

"Fine. I won't say anything." Gary shook his head in disapproval.

His tone gave away how he thought this was a bad idea. I didn't care. If he didn't want me to go by myself, he should've packed his stuff to go with me like we had planned.

Once Gary gave me his rifle, I got back into my jeep and headed for GunSite Lodge. It's this place where I can unload my four-wheeler and leave my jeep. The closer I got to the



lodge, the more colors I began to see. The trees out here were birch and alders that had yellow or amber red leaves in the fall so the sight was amazing. I could feel my adrenaline pumping faster and faster, and I had long forgotten about the ashen trees of "Ghost Forest."

I pulled into Gunsite Lodge around nine a.m. and unloaded my four-wheeler. I grabbed the rifle and handgun from inside the jeep. I slipped the handgun in the back waistband of my Carhartt pants under my parka. The rifle I tied off on the back of the four-wheeler. I grabbed the blue cooler from the backseat, and latched it as well. Kodi jumped up onto my sleeping bag that was wrapped in a blue tarp in the cargo basket. I gunned the gas pedal. One way to get back at Gary for not going along and to prove to my dad I could handle this was to shoot a decent-sized caribou.

The rev of the four-wheeler was the only sound I could hear. I was driving into the Nelchina Valley, the area my dad referred to as the other Virginia because it's roughly the same size. I knew the farther I drove out the better chance I would have of seeing a herd and shooting myself some real game. I went pretty far. At first there were trees everywhere. White firs that puffed out so far you knew they'd never fit in your living room for Christmas, and pine trees that had such vibrant orange needles because of the fall months. Birch trees were more common farther out, but a few miles later all the trees vanished and what was left was an endless stretch of flat land; vibrant red wooly lousewort, with their feathery leaves, sprouted up everywhere. The rest of the plant life took on a sort of greenish brown color, and the turf was thick and dense with roots. Any heath areas I saw, or rocks, were covered in lichen consisting of the colors green, yellow, and even gray. Eventually, the area turned into tundra, a treeless plain that stretched far and wide. Thinly spread out areas of birch trees were possible to see, but they were few and far between.

At the edge of the Big Nelchina River I came to a stop. It was nearly the size of a football field across and I wasn't sure how deep it was going to be. Knee deep in the middle, I thought? I was only forty or fifty miles out at this point, and that wasn't far enough. I could drive to an area not as wide and cross it, a spot where I could tell how shallow it was, but I thought about how the Little Nelchina River was shallow, and I was feeling impatient. So I began to cross it. I was about midway when the water rose up over the area where my feet were normally placed, so I lifted them up onto the plastic over the wheels. I needed to keep my feet dry. The front of my four-wheeler began to float because the water got too high and it didn't have the weight of the cargo. The four-wheeler was designed that way, so it won't sink, but it sure made going across the river a challenge. Since the four-wheeler was all wheel drive the back wheels kept me moving forward, and the whole scene must have looked outlandish as I crossed the river doing what one would call a wheelie. I didn't want to jump off the side and drag it the rest of the way across—it wasn't snowing but the temperature was cold enough that being wet would be undesirable. The water sprayed up around the side, a least a few feet high. I eventually made it across.

Directly on the other side of the river was a hill, one of the random higher elevations out here in the tundra. I was half way up the hill when the rev of my engine didn't sound quite normal. The sputtering turned to a squalling and then it just turned off. My four-wheeler just quit on me. I hit the brake quick because I started a slight roll backwards down the hill. This was so not good. I jumped off to the left side of it, still holding the brake and I yelled for Kodi to get down. He listened and casually stood and gently jumped off the back. His reddish fur was a bit wet from the river—I hadn't noticed until then how high the water sprayed up.

"Sure Kodi, take your time. It's not like I'm doing anything important here." I didn't expect an answer from him—it wasn't like I was crazy or anything—but I generally talked to Kodi like he was a real person.

It took me a while, but I finally inched the four-wheeler down the hill to the edge of the river bank so I could determine what the problem was. I checked the fuel tank to make sure I wasn't out of gas. That was my first guess at what caused it to stop working. It wasn't empty; I still had half a tank of fuel in there. The emergency tool kit my dad had stored under the seat had spark plugs in case that was the issue. My dad kept a few of those in the kit, and he taught me how to change them out when I was eleven and got my first four-wheeler. I remember what he said to me: "No son of mine is going to be unprepared and stupid when he's riding a four-wheeler. You're going to learn how to fix things on it or you won't ride it."

Well, the spark plugs were wet, which meant the engine couldn't fire, but after I replaced them, the engine still wouldn't turn over. I stared at the darn thing trying to figure out what would've caused it to quit when it hit me. How could I be so stupid? I had flooded the engine when I crossed the river. Why didn't I think of that? If my dad could only see me now, I could only imagine what he would say. "Kasey, if I've told you once I've told you a million times, don't cross the Nelchina at a point where its width is too wide to tell how shallow it is. You flood your engine; you might flood your fuel tank." At the thought of this hypothetical lecture, I checked the fuel tank again, but this time for water. Sure enough there was water in it. I hated how my dad was always right at times like these.



This really wasn't a huge problem because my dad had taught me how to fix something like this. All I had to do was drain the fuel tank (which I didn't have a hose or bucket for), replace the fuel filter (an item I didn't have either), refill it with fresh fuel, and wait for the engine to dry out. But the flooding of the engine might have caused more damage than I could tell at this point. I couldn't worry about that, though, first things first. I emptied the cooler and then drained the fuel contaminated with water into it. I had to take the fuel filter out and then I laid it out to dry in the sunlight. It was the best solution I could come up with since I didn't exactly have access to an auto parts store. I got down under the four-wheeler to drop the fuel tank so I could drain it. I got it unhooked and pulled it out and glanced around looking for Kodi. I grabbed the cooler and that's when I noticed him.

"KODI! Bad dog, bad! Stop it right now! You hear me?!" He was eating the darn food I took out of the cooler. I practically threw down the fuel tank (not a smart idea) and ran over to him. He began to cower; he obviously knew he did something wrong. I couldn't believe him. He never did stuff like that. I trained him better than that, or at least I thought I did.

I grabbed at the ripped plastic that had held the salmon jerky and picked up the empty containers that the tuna sandwiches used to be in. The eggs I didn't even bother with, the cracked shells would decompose. All Kodi left was the cans of soda and a few candy bars. I hadn't packed that much food since I figured I would camp one night and head back to the lodge for more supplies.

"Great. Just great Kodi, if I don't get this working, you might cause me to starve to death. Is that what you wanted? No, it's not 'cause then you'd have no one to take

care of you. You won't starve, though, no not you, you ate all of the food. You'll be fine, no need to worry about you." I grabbed a candy bar, ripped it open, and ate it in a very aggressive manner, chomping and staring at Kodi who was now whimpering for forgiveness. Well ,I wasn't ready to forgive him, not until I finished my candy bar. The sugar rush from it should suppress the anger I was feeling.

I shoved the last piece of the snickers bar into my mouth and went back to draining the fuel tank. If I got the four-wheeler working it wouldn't matter all that much that Kodi ate all my food. I watched the black liquid quickly fill up the cooler, the whole time thinking please God let this work so my dad won't have to find out. I waited until I got the gas tank back in before I got the spare can and filled it up. It was easier to hold up and latch in while it was empty. I was holding the key in the ignition hesitating to turn it in case the water had done more damage. I held my breath, closed my eyes, and prayed as I turned the ignition switch.

Silence.

There was no sputter, no whine, and no sound of the engine trying to at least turn over, just simply silence. I thought maybe I had forgotten to reconnect the fuel lines, but when I checked, they were intact. I tried the ignition switch again, but to no result. The four-wheeler just wasn't going to start. The water had to have done more damage and I had no idea where to start looking. My dad was going to be so pissed at me.

"Well...looks like we are going to have to walk our way out of here, Kodi. It's not going to be fun, but we can do it. Perseverance, that's all we'll need, boy." I was trying to be optimistic, not to fool the dog, but to fool myself. I had done plenty of hikes with my dad

through the Denali National Park. How much different could this be? Well for one, I thought, I don't have any food, and for two I'm by myself. No wonder my dad would never let me go hunting by myself. Why had I been so stupid? Why had my intelligence made a run for the door, when common sense would have kept me out of this situation?

It was getting late, and I figured it would be best to camp where I was for the night. It didn't help much that it was the time of year when the shift from eighteen hours of daylight to eighteen hours of night was occurring. It meant I'd have no way of really calculating how long I could keep going before I should stop. It's one thing riding on a four-wheeler when it's dark; it's a whole other ball game when you're on foot. You can't just speed past the bears. The sun appeared to be setting so making camp where I was seemed like something my dad would do. I grabbed the tent bag. I thought I was going blind because of the failing light and began fumbling through the tent bag looking for the poles. It just couldn't be possible that they weren't in there. I must be having a moment, one of those incidents where what you're looking for is right in front of your face, but you don't see it. I flipped the bag over and shook it. All the contents would have hit the ground. Instead nothing came out. All I had was the tent with no poles to stand it up with. Could this really be happening? What good is a tent without poles? Useless, it's completely useless.

Kodi was looking at me, his tail shaking, and I stared back at him wondering what I was going to do. I stood up quickly and started walking around. If I could find some sticks—, or some string in the cargo basket maybe I could rig the tent to stand up. After going in a circle about ten times and rummaging through my stuff for twenty minutes, I realized that plan wasn't going to happen. I was in the middle of tundra where trees were sparse and sticks were unavailable. The pines that lined the river bank had branches alright,



about ten feet above my head. I wouldn't be reaching those. Not to mention I wasn't exactly the string carrying type of guy and that may have been the one thing my dad didn't pack into the tool kit. And the rope I had to tie the stuff in the cargo basket down was too thick to be of much use.

I didn't panic though; I had my tarp and sleeping bag so I figured I could rough it under the stars. All I had to do was lay the tarp down on the ground and place my sleeping bag on top of it. The tarp would keep the moisture away and I would just pull the other half over me. The stress of the day had made me pretty tired, so I pulled Kodi inside the sleeping bag with me to keep warm and fell asleep pretty quickly. Now I had on my Carhardt pants and parka, my white bunny boots built for twenty below, and I was also inside a sleeping bag built for forty below weather. Despite all of this, I was cold when I woke up and the tarp felt pretty heavy.

I didn't think much of it and flung it off me like I would a blanket. That was a bad idea because snow plummeted onto my face and Kodi, causing him to squirm his way out of the sleeping bag. I was left squirming from melting snowflakes that had found their way down the neck of my parka. The first snow fall of winter had come during the night. Unbelievable. Suddenly, I felt the same sinking feeling I had when I drove by "Ghost Forrest." Apparently, the feeling had been a bad omen considering all that happened yesterday, but I became worried that since the feeling returned this morning, something worse might be on its way, something worse than two feet of snow fall.

I didn't have a backpack to carry the extra sodas, the tarp, my sleeping bag, the little shovel, and some other items that I might need. The tent bag was too small, so I rolled

everything up in the sleeping bag, wrapped the tarp around it, and tied it up with the cargo rope and made loops for my arms to go through. My handgun was still in the back strap of my pants, and the rifle I kept in my hands. There was a lot of wildlife out here, from caribou to bears all the way down to the stuff that can't harm you like snowshoe hares. I wasn't going to be taking any chances; I'd be ready to take a shot at anything if I needed to. I was thinking about this when I saw a herd of caribou crossing the river about two hundred yards away. They were beautiful, and of course I couldn't shoot any of them because I had no way to carry them out of there. Great. Just great. Their massive bodies moved with ease across the thinly iced river. The width of the stags' antlers and the height of them rose up several feet above their bodies. The white fur around their necks made it look like their brown backs and heads were detached because of how they blended in with the snow.

I didn't have a container for water, but it didn't really matter since the river water would probably give me beaver fever. Nothing like having diarrhea from a parasite that causes you to have no control over your bowel movements and can last for weeks. I'm pretty sure my dad said he had a bad fever when he got it too, which would be bad to say the least when I had a two day walk out of here. I had to make sure Kodi didn't drink the water either. Crossing the river couldn't be avoided. Getting wet though while it was cold enough to snow outside wasn't good, so I needed some sort of plan.

"What should I do, Kodi? Build a raft out of imaginary sticks? Or strip from the waist down and walk across? Don't look at me like I'm crazy, you'll be dry either way. I've got to *carry* you across the river."

Stripping from the waist down seemed like my only option. I kept my boxers on and rolled up my long johns above my knees. It was better to have dry clothes to put on when I got to the other side than to be walking about in wet ones. The biggest issue I had to deal with was my feet when crossing. My bunny boots kept my feet moisture free, but they weren't going to be water proof when the water rose above them. I had water proof socks on that my dad had purchased for me at some army surplus store, but I'd never tested how effective they were by crossing a river in them. They did great keeping the moisture of melted snowflakes away from my feet. I could cross the river with no shoes, but there might be something sharp like a rock on the river bed. I decided to take my socks off and keep my bunny boots on. That way my feet would be protected and I'd have something dry to put on my feet when I got to the other side. Plus, I was quite confident that the waterproofing of my socks would keep the moisture of my wet boots from making its way through to my feet.

I rolled my clothes up into the sleeping bag and reformed it into a backpack. I hadn't even stepped into the icy water and I was already freezing. This was going to be fun. I squatted down and lifted Kodi into my arms. He needed to stay dry. I didn't want him to catch hypothermia from wet fur.

"Dang, Kodi, you're heavier than I thought." He must have gained some since the last time I picked him up, or it was all of my food he ate. I moved carefully across the river. The width across that seemed so appealing before now seemed to be taunting me. The weight of everything I was carrying began to catch up to me half way across. My feet were so cold, almost numb, and the water was up to my knees and still rising. I took another step forward, but the river bed took a slight decline. My feet were slipping and my body started to wobble. I was sure Kodi and I were about to take a dive, but somehow I managed to keep



balance. My long johns got slightly wet in the process, but they weren't too bad. When I made it to the other side, I practically threw Kodi out of my arms and collapsed on to the side of the river bank. I quickly rolled down my long johns and pulled off my boots. I unrolled the sleeping bag faster than I ever thought was possible and pulled out my Carhartt pants and socks. Once I got fully dressed in my snow gear I began to feel my legs again. My theory about my socks proved true, thank goodness. My feet were completely dry and the wet spots on my long-johns were barely noticeable through my Carhartt pants.

I looked around unaware of which way I should go. I had made so many twists and turns when I was driving out here I wasn't sure which way was going to lead me to GunSite Lodge. I pulled out the survival knife my father gave me for Christmas one year that has a compass on the end of it. The needle was bouncing back and forth and I remembered what he told me after I opened it up. "There's a nice compass on the end there, but something you might want to note is true north doesn't work here in Alaska. Cause it's so far up on the globe you don't get a true north so you don't get a true south or anything else. Just head in the middle and you'll be okay." The Nelchina River ran east to west across the state for the most part, and GunSite Lodge was southeast as far as I could remember so I headed in the middle of what I could guess was southeast.

All that stretched before me was a flat surface of land covered with snow, and the wind whipped and danced around me. My steps were slowed down by the two feet of snow I was forced to walk through. I felt snowflakes wisp and hit the only exposed skin on my face. Kodi had been a few steps ahead of me, but his pace slowed as we came upon one of the many rolling hills of a slightly higher elevation that we would be trudging up. I was out of breath, and I stopped to get a soda out. A slush of ice filled my mouth as I took a gulp. It

was almost completely frozen. I attempted to pour some into Kodi's mouth, but he winced and shook when it hit his tongue. He seemed content on eating snow instead.

In the distance I saw a random area of sparse spruce heads and alders. It was the only growth I'd seen for miles, and I didn't know how long it would be until I came upon another area like it. My dad took me out hiking one day when I was fourteen, and when I asked why we weren't packing a lunch like we normally did he responded with, "You can't always rely on a bagged lunch, son. And today you're gonna learn just what a man can eat when his food runs out." The whole day we scavenged for all this plant life to eat and all I could think about that day was the stuff I could have been eating that tasted way better than flower petals and berries.

How I had come to appreciate that lesson as I approached this area of growth. At the base of one of the trees I began to dig through the snow in hopes of finding some rosehips, or black berries. All those plants I complained about eating before were going to be the salvation I needed because hunger had long set in since this morning. I found them several tree bases later. They were frozen, and tasted disgusting just like I remembered. A bitter aftertaste followed the rosehips, and the black berries had no taste at all, they were too frozen for any of the juices to spark my taste buds. At least with my dad the plants weren't dead when we ate them. I needed the nutrition from them though. It was still snowing, and beginning to come down harder. The night was going to be extremely cold. My father's voice ran through my head again telling to me to stay where I was, collect wood for a fire while I was near some, and to dig a hole in the ground to sleep in. "Don't be stupid," my dad would say, "use the shelter nature provides when she gives it. She ain't likely to provide

it again later and you don't want to be caught with your pants down when a snow storm comes in."

I hadn't traveled very far, but I couldn't risk continuing on. Dad would have had us stop if he was here. How I wished he was, or even Gary. Something about the solitude of the situation made it that much worse. Kodi was great company, but the conversation was definitely one sided. The wagging of a tail isn't the best answer to every remark. I kept thinking about how if I hadn't left my gun then I would have confessed I was planning on going alone and my dad would have stopped me. The 'what if' game wasn't a good idea to be playing right now, but it beat the level of introspection that was beginning to set in. I was still playing the 'what if' game as I tried to use my magnesium stick to light the wood I'd gathered. Most of it was slightly damp from the snow so the process was taking longer than usual. The sun had gone down and the snow had let up, but it was still cold. I had to take my gloves off to get a spark. My hands ached and shook from the cold making the process harder than it had ever been before.

When I finally got it lit, I pulled the shovel out and started digging a snow trench for me to sleep in. The ground was too frozen to dig so I had to use the snow on the ground to build walls. It was yet another thing my dad had taught me to do. The hole would keep the wind from hitting me, and provide more shelter than just lying on the ground. Typically, you don't build a trench near trees because snow tends to accumulate near them, but I needed the branches from the trees to lay on the bottom of the hole so I could keep my sleeping bag dry while the tarp draped over the top. I was about done when I heard Kodi growling. I looked up to see the fire light catch the beads of two tiny eyes. I jumped a bit at the sight. When I got a hold of myself, I took another glance. There they were staring right at me.



Kodi's growl got deeper and my shoulders tensed. The rifle was out of arm's reach. I was afraid if I went for it, the sudden movement might make the thing come at me. I say thing because I wasn't sure what type of creature those red eyes belonged to. I shifted my weight and the movement caused the back strap of my pants to push against the handgun I still had placed there. I started to breathe lighter knowing that I had a gun, even if it was just a small one to protect myself. I slowly moved my right arm behind my back and up under my parka. I never turned my head; I just kept looking straight in the direction of those beady eyes. I didn't stare straight at them; the feeling that swept over me when I did made me too scared to keep it up. I got the gun pulled out and aimed it straight at the eyes. Kodi's growl lowered, as if he knew I was aiming for the shot.

BAM! I fired without much of a hesitation. I sat back from the squatted position I was holding and wiped my forehead. Sweat had managed to accumulate there from the stress of the situation. I took a deep breath and let it out. The beady eyes were no longer catching the light of the fire. I pulled a piece of tree branch from the fire and walked over to see if I hit my target. Sure enough, red snow appeared the closer I got and that's when I saw it. The creature that had got my blood pumping, the creature I just blasted away was only a squirrel. I had decapitated it, blew its head straight off. My dad would have been so proud of me for the shot. "That's my boy. Aiming straight and keeping one eye open. Darn good shooting." I wasn't as enthused as my dad would have been. If I had known it was a squirrel, I might not have taken the shot. Still the little thing would make for a nice dinner.

I took out my survival knife again, but not for the compass. This time I was using it to skin the fur off the squirrel and to gut him out. I placed him on a twig and roasted him

over the fire until he was nice and ready. I pulled a piece off and fed it to Kodi and then took a bite myself.

“Tastes like chicken don’t it, Kodi?” He just wagged his tail and whimpered for more. “Fine, one more bite but that’s it. Remember you ate yesterday, I didn’t.”

I crawled into my snow trench and zipped Kodi and me into the sleeping bag again. I had thrown a few more branches onto the fire. The heat from it was slowly making it in to the area I left open for air to get in. It kept us nice and toasty until it died out in the middle of the night. The sun rose pretty shortly after that, so I decided it was time to get up and start hiking the rest of the way out of here. I had gone probably fifteen or so miles yesterday. That left at least twenty if not more. I packed up my gear and headed out. It had to have been below freezing because the sweat was freezing on my face and in my hair. I felt ice form inside my nose; the cold never allowing the snot to drip its way out.

The snow had gotten higher; instead of two feet it was around four. Trudging through it got harder and harder for me and Kodi. The clouds had cleared so it at least looked as if the snow had stopped falling for the day. There was nothing in sight but wide open spaces of snow covered land. The wind whipped at and tore around me. I was walking so slow, and shivering. Kodi was practically consumed by the snow and he was lagging behind me. I knew I might have to carry him soon, but I didn’t know how long I could make it holding his extra weight. My lips had dried out and were splitting. The rest of the sodas were frozen solid this morning, so I had nothing to drink. I cupped some of the snow and took small bites of it for water. It had been hours and we hadn’t made it very far. We came

upon another area of growth, but the snow was too high and the ground too frozen to dig for plants. I leaned up against a spruce tree and Kodi laid his head across my lap.

“What have I got myself into, Kodi? What if we don’t make it out of here?” I was so out of breath this came out in huffs and puffs. Kodi just looked up at me with his brown eyes.

It was at this moment that it occurred to me that I might die out here. I might freeze to death because I hadn’t wanted to miss out on a hunting trip. I thought about how guilty Gary would feel about not going and not telling anyone I went alone. Wonder if his girlfriend Bethany would think it was all her fault for making Gary stay. Would my death end their relationship? And what about my dad—what would it do to him? It was just me and him these days. My mother left when I was younger. She needed a warmer climate and my dad was too stubborn to give up his wilderness for sandy beaches in Florida. No. He always said a man can’t be a man if he’s never tested by nature, so he needed the cold; it was a part of him. He tried to make it a part of me as well. I guess that’s why he had been teaching me how to shoot, how to fix the four-wheeler, how to skin animals, how to work a compass, how to know what plants to eat in the wild, and basically how to survive if this type of incident occurred. I realized that I wasn’t thinking about myself at this moment. I was thinking about others. Weird. I would have thought that when my own death was presented to me, I would only be worried about myself. Instead I kept thinking about Gary, Kodi, and mostly my dad.



If I couldn't make it out of here for me, then I had to make it out of here for them, especially my dad. He hadn't passed all his wisdom down on to me just so I could waste it during the time I needed it most. No, I was going to get out of here. I was going to live.

I stood up and lifted Kodi up in my arms. I started walking out of there. My pace wasn't any faster than it was before and I was certainly out of breath, tired, and cold, but I kept walking. I would put Kodi down when my arm couldn't take the weight anymore and let him fend for himself through the snow until I could pick him up again. I made a mental note to put him on a diet when we got out of here. The sunlight was starting to fade, but I wasn't going to stop for the night again. I needed to keep moving and it wasn't that late yet.

I had just put Kodi down to rest my arms when he started growling again. I took a defensive grip of my rifle and turned in the direction he was facing. I stared in disbelief, and then took a step back with the rifle aimed at the thing. I thought it was a black bear, but they weren't common in this area, and definitely not during this time of year— a grizzly bear sighting was more likely. It kept moving closer to us, and Kodi stopped growling and started making his way towards it. The moonlight hit this thing's quills and almost blinded me. It was what my father called an Alaskan thorny pig. It looked bigger than Kodi, and those damn quills scared the hell out me. I knew that the quills came out with contact. We weren't that far apart. I hesitated too long pondering.

That darn porcupine darted towards us. "Kodi!" When it darted, Kodi darted and then its quills came in contact with Kodi's face. All I could do was watch it happen. And then suddenly I turned around and I wasted the damn thing. I hadn't even realized I took the shot until I felt the kickback in my right shoulder. The handgun would have done the job

with less of a mess, but it was too late now. Red snow covered the ground for the second time. Kodi was whimpering in pain. I rushed over to him. I cringed at the sight. He had seven quills along the right side of his face and going down his neck. Another one of the things my dad taught me was that their quills expand and contract with warm skin and that meant he would be in constant pain until they were out. I fumbled through my pockets, hoping that I had left the pliers in one of my pockets from when I worked on the four-wheeler. If I hadn't, I wasn't sure how I would get those quills out of Kodi. They were in there pretty deep and I didn't think my bare hands were going to do the trick.

"Hold on, Kodi, I'm looking for something to get them out. It'll be okay, boy." Why did my parka have to have so many darn pockets? I mean there must be about twenty, and I kept finding ones I didn't know I even had, and it was the not the time to be making new explorations with my parka compartments. Where are the pliers? I need the pliers. Then I felt my fingers hit metal, and I wrapped them around the item and pulled it out. I have never been so ecstatic to be holding a pair of pliers. I only had a moment of respite, because now that I had the pliers I had to begin pulling the quills out.

"Alright, now stay still boy, this is going to hurt like hell." I took hold of one of the quills with the pliers and pushed down on Kodi to lessen his squirming. His whimper when I pulled the first one out made me want to cry. His whimper became higher pitched as I moved on to the next one and then the next one. God, why did that thing have to get him with seven quills? Tears began streaming out from my eyes and freezing before they made their way down to my chin. The blood that was coming out of the holes in Kodi's face from the quills was freezing also. This would help make the blood clot, but the sight of it was disturbing to say the least. When I managed to get all of the quills out, Kodi lay there

motionless, no longer making a sound, and his red fur was matting up because of the blood loss. I ripped both of my thermal shirt sleeves off and bandaged him up the best I could with them. I had always viewed Kodi as invincible, but as he lay there whimpering and vulnerable, his face wrapped up in white cloth with blood soaking through it, I knew that I had been wrong.

I looked over at the porcupine cadaver; the meat was useless because of the where the shot hit. Not to mention trying to skin the darn thing with just my survival knife would have been the biggest challenge of this whole situation so far. I knew Kodi wasn't going to be able to go any farther so camping for the night seemed like my only option. If I had calculated right, I should run into Glen Highway at some point the next day. I had to carry Kodi about half a mile so that we would be far enough away in case the blood from the porcupine attracted something bigger. I was worried that since Kodi was bleeding, it might not do too much good, but I figured it was less of a risk if we moved.

The snow trench didn't take me as long to build this time since I had some practice from the previous night. There weren't any tree branches around, which meant I had to lay the tarp down and fold it over us, but more importantly no branches—no fire. It was going to be a cold night for sure. Kodi fell fast asleep, but I couldn't go to sleep as quickly as I had last night. I was worried about Kodi, about both of us really. Not to mention I was shivering my butt off.

The wind was really blowing. It would hit the tarp causing it to shake violently. The snow I had placed on top of it to keep it weighed down wasn't working all too well. The howling of the wind was continuous and at a time throughout the night I was sure I heard

growling, but I never bothered to check it out. I figured it was my imagination and my being paranoid. The next morning when I climbed out I realized that hadn't been the case. There were fresh paw prints in the snow. Paw prints that belonged to a grizzly. They led up right to the edge of the trench wall; there literally had been a grizzly right beside us during the night with a thin wall of snow between us. Who knew how far away it was to us now or rather how close. The snow was still high even though it hadn't snowed, so I still had to carry Kodi even more so now that he was injured. Having him in my arms meant I wouldn't have the rifle ready to aim. All around us was tundra, so at least there wasn't anything blocking my view except the few and far between rolling hills I couldn't see over.

It was the third day and I hadn't seen a person or heard another's voice. I was beginning to question the accuracy of my compass reading. Had I been going the wrong direction? Should I turn around? I decided that if I didn't make it to the road by the end of the day I was going to change directions. I had started second guessing myself and panic was becoming an unwelcomed visitor. I started to console Kodi who was getting heavier and heavier with each step, but I was trying more to console myself. "We are going to be okay, Kodi. We'll make it to the road today. I just know it."

The sun was high, but it didn't warm us. The windswept over the open area and smacked against us since we were the only two things getting in its way. Because there hadn't been any fresh snow fall for over a day, the remaining snow on the ground had begun to harden making it easier to walk through. Kodi didn't sink as much, and even though his face must have hurt, he managed to keep up with me when my arms gave out and I had to put him down for a while. I kept looking around, making sure the grizzly wasn't following us. I had Kodi's face wrapped up pretty good, but grizzlies have a good sense of smell and the



wind could carry the aroma of blood right to it. My dog was not going to turn into bear meat, and neither was I.

The silence of my situation was more than I could take. I could hear my feet crunching into the snow, the weight of my body sinking into it and causing indentations. My breathing was regulated to the point of being annoying like the sound of a ticking clock when all you want to do is sleep. Kodi's occasional whine could almost be timed down to the minute. My heartbeat pounded in my chest sounding like a hammer against a nail. I was paying attention to these noises when I heard the whirring of what sounded like a truck. I ignored it, blaming the whirring of the wind and my imagination for the foolish hope. But then I heard it again, and again. It couldn't be. I stopped where I was, turned frantically to the left and right, then completely around trying to find the source of the whirring. Kodi whimpered and stepped back a few steps trying to figure out what I was doing.

"You hear that, boy? Do you hear it too? It's the highway—it's gotta be." I kept looking but I couldn't see anything before me except a huge stretch of flat ground covered with snow. I kept moving forward, and the sound of the whirring got louder and louder. It had to be the highway. Soon I heard the squeal of brakes, and then I knew we had to be close. I still didn't see anything. That was when Kodi started to bark, and I saw it. A semitruck flying across my line of sight. It was the road. We had made it to the road. We were going to live.

"We made it, boy! We made it." I mustered up all the energy I had and scooped Kodi up into my arms and started walking as fast as I could in the direction I saw the truck. Another one flew by and another. To my left I saw a patch of trees that lined the edge of the

road right. There was on open space between them that gave drivers a view of where I was walking. They were covered in snow, but I recognized them as the alders that I'd seen when I was driving out to the lodge. I made it to the edge of the road and plopped down. A few cars flew past and I probably should have tried to wave one down, but I didn't. I just sat there. Tears burned in my eyes and froze half way down my cheeks. Kodi rested his head on my lap and we stayed like that for a while.

The feeling of relief that I felt when I sat down next to the road dissipated quickly when I realized that as soon as I flagged down a vehicle and made it back to GunSite Lodge I was going to have to call my dad to come get me and the four-wheeler. My trip wasn't over yet, and I knew my dad was going to be furious with me. I guess that was why I just sat there on the side of the road for so long. So long in fact I didn't even get the chance to wave down one of the passing vehicles when a truck pulled off to the side of the road. The guy inside slowly rolled down his manual window, and leaned out over the door frame a bit. "You need a ride there, pilgrim?"

I just nodded my head yes.

"Well get in here, then. Your dog, too. Just hop up here in the cab. It's damn cold out there. You must be freezing."

I walked around to the passenger side; I took my backpack contraption off and threw it into the bed of the truck. I opened the door and Kodi and I climbed in. The warmth from the heater hit the bare skin of my face, the only skin exposed. The heat caused it to burn and ache. I pulled off my gloves and my hands began to throb as the heat hit them.

Kodi made himself comfortable and welcomed the heat. I cursed it a little in my head; defrosting was a painful process.

“It ain’t much of my business, son, but you mind telling me what you and your dog was doing out there? And if you’re feeling real generous maybe telling me what happened to your dog’s face?”

I stayed silent for a moment debating on where to start.

“Well,” I began, “a thorny pig got my dog. Darn thing was huge, about the size of Kodi actually. And as far as why I was out there, my four-wheeler broke down about forty miles out near Big Nelchina and I had to hike out. Took a few days.” The driver of the truck just glanced over at me then put his focus back on the road.

“Thorny pig, huh? Near Big Nelchina. Walked out.” He repeated my story as if his repeating it would help let it sink in better. “Well son, you look about fifteen.”

“Sixteen actually.”

“Sixteen, mmhmm.”

“I’m Kasey by the way. In case you were wondering.”

“I wasn’t, but the name’s Mitch if you were. Your parents know where you’re at?”

“Well, my dad knew I was going out to GunSite Lodge to hunt.”

"Yeah, well when I get you there, ya call him up. Get that dog to a vet. And tell him ol'e Mitch, who gave you a ride, said he's got one hell of a son to make it out of the valley there, thorny pig attacks and all."

"Sure thing. Thanks again for the ride." If my dad would actually think the way Mitch here did, then the next few months or even days of my life would be easier. I'd tell him what ol'e Mitch said, but I doubted he'd give two cents for the opinion of some stranger.

We pulled into GunSite Lodge about fifteen minutes later. I hadn't been too far off on my calculations as to where it was geographically. I had walked out of Nelchina Valley about twelve miles east of the lodge. Kodi and I hopped out of Mitch's beat down Chevy truck and walked over to the place where I parked my jeep. I unlocked the door, threw my stuff inside, and headed inside to use the phone. My first thoughts were to just eat, get a room, shower, and sleep, but I needed to call my dad and have him start the drive out here. Food was a necessity and so was water, so I figured after I got that I'd ask if there was a vet office nearby so I could drive Kodi there and get him looked at.

"Excuse me, can I use your phone?" I asked the lady at the front desk. "I gotta make a call to my dad." She didn't even respond, just placed the phone up on the counter and went back to typing. I pushed the numbers to call home as slow as possible. I had never felt this kind of dread listening to each ring.

"Hello."

"Dad?"



“Who else you expecting to answer the phone?”

“No one I guess, um, listen Dad—”

“Don’t tell me you and Gary did something stupid now.”

“Gary and I, no, and I wouldn’t exactly say stupid, Dad, but um—” I hated how he always cut me off. It was hard enough trying to tell him what happened, but worse every time I had to start over.

“Get to the point now, I ain’t got all day, ya hear.”

“Well, Dad the four-wheeler broke down about three days ago forty miles out, and I wasn’t able to fix it so I hiked my way out of the valley. I need you to come help me go get it.”

“Hike out of there? Did I hear you right? Gary too selfish to put you on the back of his four-wheeler? I know— Wait what aren’t you telling me here, son?”

“Gary didn’t go with me, Dad. He bailed and I went alone. But I’m okay. Kodi needs to see a vet, but it’s nothing too serious I promise.”

“We’ll talk about it when I get there. What’s the problem with the machine, do you know?”

“ I flooded the engine crossing the Big Nelchina. I changed the spark plugs, but it still wasn’t firing, so I checked the fuel tank. There was some water. Guess I didn’t have the cap on tight enough. You know how it doesn’t screw on right. I drained it out, put in fresh

fuel, but still the engine wouldn't turn over, so the water must have done some damage I couldn't figure out."

It was silent on the other end of the line for a while. I knew he had to be disappointed and furious at me. Some parents only hit you with one of those emotions, but this was a special occasion.

"Combustion chamber's dead volume must have been reduced by the water in the fuel tank. This puts too much pressure on the starter motor, so it won't turn over. It's not an easy fix, but it can be done. You get that dog to a vet and rent yourself a room out at the lodge. I'll be out there in the morning with Gary's dad to haul the thing out of there."

"Alright Dad, I'll see you in the morning then." He didn't seem all that angry which worried me. I hung up the phone and asked the receptionist if there was a vet nearby. She just put the phone book on the counter. Apparently, she wasn't feeling too social. Wonder what could have possibly happened to her in the last three days to be in such a mood. I welcomed people, loved the noises that they were making, the pointless conversations, and the warmth that the building gave. I was glad to be alive and unharmed.

I found a local vet not too far away from the lodge, but food and water were the priority of the moment for me and Kodi. I went into the gift shop and grabbed some snack bags and a few bottles of water. I headed out to my jeep and chowed down after pouring some water into a bowl for Kodi. He didn't drink much of it. His face was that sore. I turned the key in the ignition and the engine fired up.

I left Kodi at the vet's office over night. They numbed him up and cleaned the wounds. The doc said it was best he stay overnight to get some x-rays to make sure the quills were completely out, and because his bowel movements might be uncontrolled with the meds they gave him to numb the pain. I agreed. All I wanted to do was sleep. Back at the lodge I got a room, showered in the hottest water my skin could bear and then plopped down onto the bed. I was out in no time.

I awoke to a pounding sound that came from the door. Groggily I walked over to unlock and open it. I knew it would be my dad, and sure enough he and Gary's dad Marvin were outside the door.

"I need you to show me on a map where you left the thing." He began unfolding a piece of paper that I assumed was the map I was to mark.

"I can just go with and show you where it's at, Dad." I started putting my boots on.

"No."

"Wouldn't it be easier that way? Besides I want to help bring it in. It's my fault it's out there in the first place. I shouldn't have crossed the river where I did and shouldn't have been out there by myself." Did I just admit to being responsible for this whole situation? I had sort of expected myself to blame Gary for not coming with me or something, but those words never made it out of my mouth. In fact they were far away from what I was thinking about the situation as well.

"I taught you well and if you thought you were ready, I guess you were." He walked over and sat next to me on the bed. "A lion has to know when to let the cub go. You think

that was just chance, a good run of luck that you made it out of the valley during and after a snow storm on foot?"

"But, Dad, I disobeyed you, lied to you, flooded the engine of the four wheeler—"

"Yes you did. First thing you'll learn about becoming a man, son, is you can only learn from your mistakes cause you're sure as hell gonna make em." He squeezed my left knee and stood up from the bed.

"So I'm not in trouble then?" I stood up too, right boot in hand.

"We'll talk about that when we get home. Marvin and I got this. You get your dog and head on home." He handed me the map to make the mark where the four-wheeler was.

"Alright." I took a pen and marked the spot where it was by the river.

On the drive back home to Big Lake I thought about what Mitch said before he dropped Kodi and me off at the lodge. Tell my dad he has one hell of a son. Was he right? I had thought the whole time I was out there walking that my dad was going to be furious, pissed, and that I had to make it out of there for him. And I had made it out of there, but I realized in the moment before my dad walked out of my room at the lodge that I hadn't made it out of there for him, but because of him. All those annoying lectures, skills that he taught me, weren't for him to be able to say he was proud of me for being like him, but for me to survive. For me to still be standing even through the worst of circumstances, sort of like those trees. They may have had their roots attacked by salt water, but they hadn't stopped surviving, they continued to stand. They adapted to their circumstances, just like my dad had taught me, so I could keep surviving.