

Can I Call You Brother?

by

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ABSTRACT

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The following manuscript is a novel intended to explore the confusing nature of butch lesbian gender identity and the unique bonds of friendship butch women often share with one another. Lesbian culture, today, sometimes puts pressure on the term butch and pushes butch women to choose between transgender, femme and androgynous. The lead character in this novel, Sarah, struggles to come to terms with her own sexual identity amidst all this pressure to conform. She watches her friends and searches for a model of what butch is and is not but she continues to feel emotionally and physically cut off from the people she cares about. Ultimately, Sarah realizes she can move fluidly between many genders. When she stops trying to be a stereotype she is finally able to connect with the people she cares about.

DEDICATION

This manuscript is dedicated to my own butch brothers. Without them, there would be no manuscript. I also dedicate this work to my parents, closest friends and family. Not a day goes by that I don't feel the constant patient support of those who are closest to me. I am forever grateful to them.

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Prologue

I need to freeze this scene. I need to stop, take a moment and reflect. I need to detach from my friends, from what will happen next, from the purple, green, red and yellow hues that glow from the dance floor below this balcony each time the lights flash. From those hues that make it difficult for me to see my friends or to watch Cass's lips as they move and from the blanket of muffled conversation, bass and music mixing together to become incoherent noise in my head. Finding Cass's voice in this mix makes me want to yell out for everyone to "Shut the fuck up." But I don't want to be angry right now. This moment, I want to remember this moment.

So freeze it; slow everything down: the girl walking by, depositing a piece of paper in AJ's back pocket, the bartender spraying coke into a cup as she over turns a bottle of rum, the girl back there on the stairs, rounding the corner, shoving through two obese dykes who squish her body like a McDonald's hamburger patty between two Burger King buns. Slow her down; I'm not ready for her yet; leave her there, squashed and turned sideways, one arm extended as though if she can just get a part of herself through the rest will follow. I need to hear what Cass has to say. I need to hear this.

Raya is standing right next to her and she's not even listening. My freeze frame has caught her leaning over the balcony, her hands in mid tap as they drum on the bar that keeps her from falling over. She looks like she's getting ready to jump. Raya. Tall, red headed, Raya has been out for nearly a year. She's finally finished her transition. I've

watched her become one of us. I've watched gay become more than her sexual preference. I've watched it shape her identity. This is her first Gay Days. I guess I can understand her distraction. *Girls in Wonderland*: girls during the first weekend in June at Walt Disney World, going to parties, looking for a memorable hook up that they will be too drunk to remember tomorrow. I would know. It's important, I guess. She's young. I just wish someone could hear Cass.

Cass is talking too casually. Her fingers are stuck into the pocket of her jeans and she's half shrugging at us as if to say: "Eh, it is what it is." But I know Cass. I've known Cass for seven years. We went through boot camp together, before 9/11, before...everything. Our first acts at 18 were to vote for George W. Bush and our first acts at 22 were to vote for anybody but George W. Bush.

I'm not in the military anymore. We had just finished our specializations in the Marine Corps; we'd graduated; we'd been assigned to units, and then Sept. 11th. Our generations Pearl Harbor or so we say. And like Pearl Harbor, the young and brave enlisted, offered themselves to go to Afghanistan, or where ever they might be needed. In mid-September, at 19, Cass and I were packing our fatigues, joking around about whether or not to bring music by lesbian artists. It's almost hard to imagine, packing CD's, so cumbersome, so heavy. How did we survive before the I-Pod? And that's when I got a phone call telling me I could stop packing.

It's hard to say what we'll do until we do it. I was the fastest female Marine in my graduating class, no small feat, and I still say if Cass and I were in the same weight class I could have taken her in a wrestling match, but considering she has 40 pounds of muscle and 8 inches on me, I'll never have the chance to find out. I was a good Marine. I never

even got yelled at during boot camp as unbelievable as that seems. Just kept my head down and did as I was told. But instead of going to Afghanistan, I went to a meeting with my superior officer. Already in the office was a little Irish girl. I knew her. I've always had a soft spot for red hair and green eyes.

The previous week we'd been in the barracks. We'd met in the mess hall and snuck in while a team was out running drills. One way or another, my face had ended up in her pussy. Apparently someone walked in and found us like that. Her, with her fatigues around her ankles, her shirt and sports bra lifted up to reveal one nipple, her dog tags clattering over it. Me, fully dressed, squatting by the bed with two fingers lost inside her, my mouth descending. Neither of us heard the door open over the lapping of my tongue and her muffled "Oh Gods." They said the girl who discovered us was deeply upset. There would be a hearing: an investigation into our sexual preference.

At the minimum having sex on base, much less in such an open environment, was grounds for dishonorable discharge or at a minimum a note in our records for fraternization. But they played the gay card first. So, I stood up, made some grand standing gesture, told them good luck fighting terrorists after they discharge all the dykes. I think I slammed the door. My discharge came in the mail. The girl wasn't even cute. But secretly, I think we wanted to be caught, we hoped we'd be discharged. We hoped we wouldn't have to fire a gun or watch for IED's. When so many young people were rushing to join, we took the easiest and fastest way out.

I think I told Cass the girl was so hot I felt drunk by lust, that it clouded my judgment. It was cool then to want to take out terrorists and I must have expressed disappointment and asked her to eliminate a few for me. But this was a long time ago.

Perhaps my friends wouldn't even call me a coward today if they knew the truth, but that one will stay my secret. One way or another, all soldiers have a box under their bed where they keep their cowardice or their heroics or their tragedy. And, even if only for a few weeks, I was still technically a soldier and I reserve the right to keep my box.

The point is: I know Cass. I've seen her so exhausted she could barely carry herself to bed. Right now, she's saying something she thinks is profound but she maintains that casual look in case we've reached and surpassed her level of thought. In case we realized what she is sharing years ago and have moved on to some understanding that she is not ready to comprehend, perhaps our understanding cancels out hers. Perhaps she is wrong. That is what Cass's body language says. I only wish I knew what her tongue is saying.

Cass. For years she's had tight crew cut, only a small oval of 1/8 inch hair on top, just like the boys. She looked like a short man, not like the rest of us. Raya, Joey, AJ and I all look like little boys. Cass was the only one of us who could pass for a man, but the longer she lets her hair grow, the more boyish she begins to look. I don't think she's looking at us as she speaks. She seems to peer straight over Joey's shoulder, past the group of dykes standing in a circle behind us, past the stairwell, past the two girls with their arms wrapped around each other sleeping head to head on the bench below the window. It's not possible to see outside the window. There is a glare from the moving lights and this must be what she is looking at.

Either that or the stain on Joey's shoulder. Somehow, I still don't know quite how, the mustard from her earlier hot dog dripped off the end of the bun, curved mid-air and hit her in the shoulder. One of life's mysteries. It's too bad she wore white. Well, we

all wore white shirts, matching button ups with black ties and ripped jeans. It was Cass's idea to dress like this. If I could just hear her, maybe I'd understand why.

Cass is expressing an epiphany. I'm sure of it, but epiphanies are interesting things. They seem to come on us all at once, like information that was just zapped into our brains by some unseen God, and then we understand what only a minute ago seemed like advanced calculus. But that isn't really how it happens. Epiphanies begin long before the moment of understanding comes. Bits of information get dropped into our brains and then slowly we figure out how to connect them. Ever spend hours working on a puzzle and come to a point where you're convinced a piece must be missing? Then come back the next day, take one glance at the puzzle and find the missing piece right in front of your face? Finding the piece today depended on having stared, confused, at the puzzle yesterday. This is how we reach epiphanies.

I'm about to have an epiphany; I can feel it coming. If I can just hear what Cass is saying, but I'm not ready. This moment began nearly a year ago, in the fall of 2007, just after I turned 25. Quarter life crisis? I guess. Doesn't it all come down to "who am I"? Isn't that the answer we all want to know? Who the fuck am I and how can it make me rich?

So, who am I?

I'm Sarah. Pull up a visual of a butch or a dyke, add in a spice of boyish and keep in mind that I'm not fat, muscular or tall. I'm a dirty blond and yes, I have blue eyes. Combine that with my crew cut and I probably could play a 16 year old Nazi soldier, which only crosses my mind because I was born in Germany, on an Air Force base. Yes, I enlisted to make my father proud. No, he doesn't know the full story of how I was

discharged. Yes, he's outraged at the government and "Don't ask. Don't tell." He is a good father.

That is your first impression as you walk up to me. Take in your stereotypes, it's ok, stereotypes are a critical part of survival for a social species. I know, I know, stereotypes can be wrong, flawed; they can cross into prejudice or racism, but come on now. No one is in your brain to hear what you think and no one is asking you to act on them; let yourself have your own thoughts. Some of them are bound to be true. And just think, as you read and discover you were right, you can say: "Ah ha! I knew it." Or roll your eyes and whisper: "How stereotypical." Whatever ideas you have swimming through your mind please remember, I am a girl and this group of friends that surround me and have shaped the last year of my life; we are brothers.

Part I

Chapter One

I knew when...

This moment may have begun last fall, but I can't put together this epiphany without thinking about my childhood anymore than I can put together a puzzle without any of the edge pieces. Sure it's possible, but isn't it less confusing to begin with the borders, to contain the picture, to set the parameters? Sure it is and I already told you: I'm someone who takes the easy way out.

Gay people aren't so different from straight people. As much as we'd like to believe it, it's just not true. But there are a few things about being gay that straights don't really get to experience. These experiences are popular conversation topics over initial cups of coffee on first dates or in long car rides. Arguably, the most common of these is the moment of realization. If you're straight maybe you don't even know what I mean. After all, it's highly unlikely that you ever had a moment in your childhood or adolescence where you realized: "Holy fuck, I'm straight." And you certainly haven't shared that moment with your friends if you did have it. Don't go searching through your head now for some moment when you talked with your girlfriends about a crush on that cute boy in third grade who asked to borrow a crayon. It's not the same, unless, of course, you too were a boy.

And let's not confuse this moment with the coming out moment either. This isn't the moment of admitting to self and others. This isn't usually, although it is sometimes, the moment of the first kiss. This is the moment that got repressed and pushed aside but always remained there somewhere in our heads like a bubble of thought we couldn't pop. I'd like to be like all the cool lesbians and say I'm not defined by my sexuality. But it does define me. It has always defined me. This is where that begins.

It begins with six birthday candles.

I stared into the fire as it flickered over the candles on my birthday cake. The flames rose in thin lines, like bars, blurring the image of the kids watching from the other side. My friends licked their lips and rocked from toe to heel as they waited for me to release a gust of breath. Wax was dripping onto the cake. One of the candles started to lean and looked like it was going to fall into the icing. A skinny little girl, even smaller than I was, watched it, a little nervous. She fidgeted and bit her lip like she'd like to blow these candles out herself and just have it over with. There was a smudge of dirt on her cheek. They were all waiting on me, but I was pausing, holding the moment for some reason I didn't understand.

Finally, one of the boys heaved loudly to express his annoyance. He was already good at being rude without actually being rude. The flames shimmered. It looked like one might go out. I shut both eyes quickly and wished. The flames bent to my breath, leaving nothing but black smoke in their wake. Down the line, the first, second and third candle went out. The air in my lungs was diminishing. The fifth flame was reduced to an ember

and a final gust of breath accompanied with a little spit extinguished the sixth and final candle. But as I breathed back in, the fifth candle reignited.

I don't remember eating any cake. I remember sitting in my seat, staring at the burned tips of the candles as the smoke dissipated and watching the children on the other side. The little girl with the smudge on her cheek held both hands out flat in front of her.

I can still hear her saying, "Pink please," when my mother asked her what color flower she would like on top. "It matches the peppermint ice cream," she added.

I must have refused to eat the flowered icing because my mom spoke to the girl in a tone I knew was meant for me. "Sarah says she doesn't like icing. She doesn't know what she's missing does she? Too bad for her. More for us right?" The little girl nodded.

"Mom, I can't help that I don't like icing."

"Sarah." My mom shook her head at me. "Your friend and I were just having a conversation. It had nothing to do with you. Maybe she'd like to go for tea downtown next weekend?" Another thing I had been complaining about doing earlier.

"I could wear my new outfit," the girl said and my mom smiled, but not at her, not at the person she claimed to be speaking to, but at me, like all I needed was to hear another girl say she liked dresses and then I'd jump on the hopscotch bandwagon and perhaps even improve my handwriting.

Later, we all played cops and robbers. I was a robber and when that same little girl tagged one of the boys, I tackled her and told the boy to run for it. She started to cry. I said she should stop blubbering or go pick some flowers. The boys and I laughed at her as she walked away holding the elbow she'd landed on when I knocked her to the ground. It was a hollow laugh on my part. I felt guilty even as the words came out of my mouth

and I cried for hours that night. I still cry when I think about that little girl walking away from me, brushing dirt off her shirt, her head down. I'd like to apologize to her, to tell her I didn't understand why I was angry, but that she was beautiful that day, smudge and all.

I thought of that girl over a decade later when I read *Stone Butch Blues*. There's a moment when the young narrator, Jess, is getting sex advice from a seasoned butch. The butch shows her a dildo and she tells Jess that she can use it to give girls great pleasure or to hurt them like all the times they'd been hurt before. I was young myself when I read the book. I turned the pages anxiously ready to learn my role in making love to her. Being butch meant responsibility to the girl. It meant keeping her, the delicate one, from being hurt. I thought back to that moment when I was six years old, developing an identity and one of my first acts had been to hurt a girl.

I'd forgotten the reigniting candle after the incident with the girl, but it reemerged on the tip of my tongue the next night as I stood over home plate trying to keep my legs spaced apart and forgetting not to let my elbows drop.

"Please let me hit the ball, please let me hit the ball," I whispered continuously.

I must have dreamt of the candle reigniting because the image was burned into my mind. There was no pitcher, only a small blue ember on its way out springing back to orange life over and over it again. The reigniting candle seemed like a bad omen and then all at once the ball was released, there was no more thinking. My eyes were shut. It was time to swing. Contact. The metal vibrated through my hands and up into my elbows letting me know I had better open my eyes and run. It rolled straight between the first and second baseman and I ran faster than any player on the team to get to the base before the right fielder got the ball. The rest of the night, oddly, is a blur. I know I stole third base. I

suppose that this was about the time someone said to my parents: “Wow that kid can run.” And my road to varsity track began.

The candle was quickly forgotten, but fate and trick candles have a lot in common. First appearances aren't always what they seem and my wish to get on base was a wish to be useful, to contribute, to be a part of a game that would never have me; even if I could hit the ball.

After the end of the baseball season, I took to sitting on the front stoop watching Jonathan, my older brother, shoot baskets. When Jonathan was done I would go chase after his ball and try a few shots. They usually flew under the backboard or buried themselves in the bushes, but as my muscles grew some of the shots ricocheted off the rim, even occasionally making it in the basket without resorting to the humiliating “granny shot,” as my brother called it.

If all of my memories of watching Jonathan shoot hoops could be summed up in one day, it would be this day. He had slept until the early afternoon. His blond hair stuck up at odd angles where it had been matted against the pillow. I was already outside, on the front stoop, watching a worm freeze in fear as it crawled over my hand when I heard the front screen squeak open and saw Jonathan soaring over my head. He landed and kept running, a basketball ready in his hands. He jumped so high during his lay up that I thought I might actually see him dunk the ball. I ran my hand through my hair to scuff it up like his. It was a few inches too long to stand on end, but it could still be messy.

That day, I tried to focus on how Jonathan was able dribble the ball between his legs but my mind kept wandering. School would start soon, first grade. There would be a show and tell, mostly trophies and pet rocks decorated with glitter. During the end of

season baseball ceremony, all the teams had sat cross legged, clumped together in their uniforms, their parents standing in the back of the room looking on. Trophies sat on a long folding table at the front of the room. I had tried to blend into the carpet as other teams got first, second and third place trophies. My best friend got MVP for the whole league--that would definitely come up in show and tell. A few of my team members made the All Star team, which had a special trophy too.

There was a moment when I looked up from the speck of frayed carpet twirled tightly around my pinky finger and thought, the next trophy is mine. Visions of opening a box carrying this special trophy and showing it to envious six year olds swarmed in my head and I sat up straight watching the coaches, waiting for them to read my name. The trophy was moderately sized. They were talking about attitude and love of the sport. The name of the player was even engraved on the plaque. I got ready to stand as they read the name: Kyle Mehlman—a kid from some other team, whose ankle broke half way through the season. I couldn't help but wish my ankle had broken.

I got a little trophy, the littlest kind they had. There was a golden plaque on it that said: Participated Little League 1988. It fell off later that day, after baking in the car under the summer sun while the family went out for pizza. I hated that trophy. Maybe I'm guilty of an over active imagination but when I'd wake up in the morning I could swear I saw the tiny batter's lips moving and worse its voice seemed to echo and swim through my ears as I got dressed: "You couldn't hit a beach ball. A beach ball ball ball."

One morning, I set the trophy on a baseball tee, got out a metal bat, raised both elbows until they were even with my shoulders and squared my feet. With the bat pulled back, I stared at that little man, lined up the swing slowly, stopped the bat just before it

touched him and then brought it back to the ready position once again. I repeated this action several times, each time adjusting the grip on the rubber portion of the bat, first choking up, then flexing my fingers. With an eye pinned on the little batter, I made one final motion and swung the bat forward. It cut through the air, skimming just over the top of the taunting trophy.

“Missed me, missed me, now you gotta kiss me,” the trophy sang out in my mind. I picked it up and flung it with everything I had left inside against the tree in our front yard. Some bark chipped off the tree, but the trophy remained mostly in tact.

It was still lying in the grass where I had left it. The sun hit the metal and the glint caught my eye. Jonathan was faking out an invisible guard in the driveway and going in for a reverse lay up, only to rebound the made shot and take it behind the three point line, turn around in mid air and shoot the ball, again. The shot went it in. Jonathan always won trophies. His little league baseball trophy was twice the size of mine.

I looked over at the broken participation trophy and then back to Jonathan. Basketball season was next. It would be my first.

“And now, your starting guard and team captain, number eleven, Sarah Alexson,” I could hear the crowd roar for me as they did for my brother. Incidentally, my father’s name is Alex, Alex Alexson. Needless to say, I have interesting grandparents.

Number eleven was Jonathan’s number and he said it used be our dad’s too. With his number, playing for his old team, I’d play just like him. Like the last pick up game that I watched from behind the fence at a local park, I’d dribble forward at a guarding player and then turn around, passing the ball between my legs to cut around the player on the other side and land the lay-up.

“Look at that jump. Sarah caught part of the rim on that shot,” that’s what they would say.

“Hey spaz.”

I jumped off the stoop at Jonathan’s words.

“Want to shoot some?”

I stood and looked at my brother as he held the ball extended in his hand and wondered if this was a trick. My mind ran through the last several weeks thinking of things I might have done to acquire an act of revenge from Jonathan. Once, after squirting him with a water gun, he had dangled me off the roof by my ankle—all in brotherly love of course.

I stared skeptically at the nearly six foot mass.

“Well?” Jonathan continued. “Do you?”

I nodded cautiously.

“Alright, get over here.” He lobbed me the ball and my dribbles bounced nearly as high as my shoulder.

It was August, so the sun was blistering and I had broken a sweat just sitting on the stoop. Jonathan’s shirt was soaked as we played HORSE and when I got lucky, finally not just making a shot, but making a shot Jonathan then missed, giving him an H to my HOR, he ripped his shirt off with one hand. Sweat dripped down between his shoulder blades. He wore only a pair of tattered gray gym shorts with his outdoor basketball shoes and a pair of socks pulled up to his knees. My socks were already positioned just like his although one was stretched out and kept slipping down around my ankle.

His one handed shirt removal was pretty slick and I tried to do the same. The shirt caught some on my hair, but like Jonathan, I got it off and used it to wipe off the building sweat on my chest, then threw it next to his in the grass. The shirt had barely touched the ground when our mom came to the door. Those wide open suburbia windows had turned on me more than once.

“Sarah, what do think you’re doing?”

I almost looked back at her and told her I was playing basketball, but I saw her glance at the shirt. It was white and the first thing I thought was that my mom didn’t want it getting stained. I ran to the shirt, scooping it up, ready to toss it through the open door, an apology already on my lips. That was the sort of cool move Jonathan might make, but our mom came outside and the door shut behind her. She moved to me and tugged the shirt away. Her hands went straight for the neck hole, opened it up and slid it back over my shaggy hair.

“Mom, it’s hot out. Jonathan isn’t wearing a shirt. I’ll put on sunscreen,” I protested, but it was as if I wasn’t speaking. She pulled my two reluctant, but obedient arms through two more holes and then my mom’s hands firmly circled my tiny biceps, pinning them to my side. I wanted to shake her off of me, to run to Jonathan, but she was giving me the thoughtful sigh that meant I had better listen to what she was about to say. She looked up at my face from her position, kneeling in front of me, and I will never forget how she looked at that moment. She wasn’t wearing any make-up and she had on a white sweatband to keep the hair off of her face. There were long slits in her ears where earrings generally dangled from. A few hairs stuck out of her upper lip. It was gross and I tried to move a step back. She was sporting a half smile.

“Sarah, you can’t be like Jonathan.” The expression left her face. “Girls have to wear shirts.”

“But Jonathan...” I started.

“Someday you’ll be a woman and you’ll have breasts. Jonathan is a boy. It’s ok for him.”

I bit my upper and then lower lip slowly, but didn’t speak. Instead, I blinked a couple of times and stared at my mom, who was still holding my arms, but now one of her hands was rubbing the material of my shirt against my skin. It took a moment. For a moment I had no thoughts, but slowly I began to realize for the first time that girls become women and women looked like my mom.

“But, I don’t want breasts,” I protested, this time actually shaking her hands off and stepping back out of her reach.

“You will,” was all my mom said before getting up and going back inside. “You will.” I can still hear the words streaming through my ear, like it never fully processed, like a schizophrenic memory.

“But mom, I don’t have breasts now,” I shouted to her.

My mom was in the doorway. She turned. “Girls cover their chests. Don’t you take that shirt back off. Do you understand me?” She didn’t need to wait for an answer. She was gone and the door was closed on the subject.

To my mom I was a stubborn child resisting her, testing my boundaries. In 1988 parents didn’t look at their six year olds and consider the expression of their sexuality. It was enough for them to make sure I ate my peas.

When I finally turned back to my big brother, I kept my head down. I thought of

the sparsely attended women's basketball games I'd seen on TV and considered pathetic. I can still feel that moment, the heart dropping sensation, I first felt the week before when the candle reignited, returned. I turned back to my brother with my shirt on, my first taste of humiliation. I could strive and work and the best I could ever achieve was pathetic. My shirt hid my shame, the reason I would be forced out of baseball next summer and into softball. If I hadn't looked at my peers through birthday candle bars, if I hadn't seen in that girl something I didn't know how to be, if I didn't know I wouldn't get another chance to play Little League, I'm not sure this moment would have resonated with me the way it did. All at once, everything made sense. There was something different about me. I couldn't be my mom, I couldn't be the little girl drinking tea and happy about pink icing but my body would never let me be my brother. Jonathan didn't say anything; he just stood there, holding the basketball on his hip.

“Ready kid?” he finally asked.

I looked up at him and then at the basketball. I leaned forward and tried to grab the ball from Jonathan. He jerked it out of reach, and we played, but all I could think of was my mom's voice and the little trophy lying in the grass echoing her taunt: “You will.” And I knew at that moment I wouldn't.

Chapter Two

Raya.

That was then. Almost twenty years ago, I knew there was something different about me and I knew everyone would find out when I hit puberty. My breasts would grow, but the prophecy of ‘you will’ would not come to pass and then everyone would know.

I didn’t have the word for it yet. I didn’t know about sex and kissing was just a thing we teased each other about during recess, but I developed an awful dread over entering puberty, getting even a year closer to that day. I refused to have a party on my seventh birthday and spent the day sulking in my room. When grown-ups told me about how big I was getting or that I seemed so grown up I protested and argued until they took it back. I didn’t want to be taller. All of this led me naturally into an obsession with *Peter Pan*, but I never wanted him to come to my window and whisk me away to Neverland. I always imagined I’d find it, maybe somewhere in the attic. I would be a lost boy and Wendy could make me pockets.

It wasn’t until I was eight that I heard the word gay. We were out at dinner and my mom looked over at a table where two men were sitting side by side.

“Alex, do you think those men are gay?” she asked my father in a conversational tone like she was talking about some paperwork she needed to finish for work the next day.

Gay. I knew what it meant instantaneously. I closed my eyes and wished, like I'd wished on the candles: "please don't let me be gay." And the image of the fifth candle reigniting appeared, still burned into the back of my eyelids. When puberty arrived I repeated the wish as I drifted off to sleep, "Please don't let me be gay. I like her as a best friend. Aaron is cute. Aaron is cute. Aaron is cute. I want Aaron to kiss me. I'm not gay. I'm not gay." I tried to control my thoughts, but no matter how I tried my final thought before sleep was always: "I can't wait to dream about that girl again."

But I'm not struggling with my sexuality anymore. That ended when I came out at 15. And yet, I've run through these moments again and again over the past year searching for something else. They come to me when I'm online playing video games or driving home from work at eight in the morning.

It's really all Raya's fault. If it weren't for Raya the following couple of weeks would have gone differently. Raya, that girl with the red hair who looked like she was about to fall off the balcony. Twenty-two, just out of college, just out as gay. She is nothing like me. My first crew cut was at 16, my first fuck, 17. And yet, her arrival in Orlando during the fall of 2007 is also when all of this started. It may seem odd that my experience can be influenced by someone else's experience that I have never actually experienced. But Raya has an affinity for telling stories, the kind that have too many details, but the useless details we choose to tell often point to something that is being kept hidden. Maybe I'd have made a good scam psychic because I can read behind these lines. Raya is as awkward as she is slick and I can see more in her and her stories than she sees in herself or maybe I'm just projecting. Maybe the projection is the point.

Either way, I know that last fall, the same night I went on my third date with Shay, she stood in front of the mirror in her bathroom, naked, with tweezers in her hand. Her nose was almost touching the glass so she could view her eyebrows through the condensation left over from her shower. Her tweezers were at the ready and she adjusted her face into various expressions. One of Raya's eyebrow hairs has a tendency to pop out at an odd angle. When the hair finally showed itself she plucked it and then bounced around in a circle because it hurt more than she'd expected. The jumping caused her spiky hair, still soft from being recently molded with wax, to fall to the side creating a part down the middle. Only the pieces in the back retained their hold.

Three weeks before this Raya could have pulled her fine red hair into a ponytail but that night, as she ran more wax through her hair, it barely stood up above her fingers. Her attempts to re-spike ended with it lying flat and forward, except in the back where she had matted it down with heavy amounts of gel to keep her from looking like a redheaded Dennis the Menace. While the stylist ran scissors through the long strands of her hair, Raya had pictured shaving ten minutes off the time it took her to get ready. Instead, she'd added ten.

When the condensation fully receded, Raya watched herself in the mirror and put her clothes on. She's always been tall and lean and what's left of her feminine figure vanished underneath men's clothes; her small breasts gone completely under the baggy shirt. She touched her chest, flattening the shirt against her. In the mirror her breasts looked like pectoral muscles. Raya looked at the freckles on her face, unsure about the new sensation beneath her shirt. The tags were still on her jeans. She ripped them off and

jammed her legs into them. This was the first time she'd worn men's jeans and she was surprised that her hips could actually look any narrower.

When she pulled her new belt through its loops she realized she might have a problem. She wanted to make sure her belt was visible—it was the piece she was most excited to purchase. The wide, oval, metal buckle was engraved with the outline of a cowgirl--the kind who wears high boots, short shorts, a tied off button-up mid-riff shirt and a cowboy hat. It's the kind of girl Raya wanted to meet, but her new shirt hung down and encircled her hips. She tried tucking the shirt into her pants, but then the black splash pattern on one side of her shirt got cut off and Raya remembered a fashion article stating that tucked in was out, so she untucked it and tucked in just the front of the shirt exposing the girl on the belt, untucked it, and let it fall down around her hips, tucked it back in, untucked it, tucked the corners of the shirt into the sides of her pants, untucked it and finally settled on forcing the shirt to bunch so it didn't look tucked in but didn't hang down around her butt either. Glimpses of her belt could be seen as long as Raya adjusted the positioning of the bunching from time to time, but the girl, the girl was practically invisible.

Back in Maine, Raya had already planned this night. She moved to a big city precisely for this reason. She had an offer for a position in computer programming in Maine. It even paid better than her current job, but there wasn't much gay life there, or so she thought. Her early Internet endeavors led her to a few dating sites, which led her to a few dates, but, other than those dates and the people who happened across her picture online, no one knew, and sometimes Raya wished that even the girls she went out with

didn't know so they'd stop calling her. It had taken Raya a while to learn that if a girl doesn't have a picture online, the reason is probably not that her computer doesn't have the capability. Raya had to learn this and the meaning of voluptuous the hard way. It seemed to her that most of the girls in Maine were voluptuous. It seemed to her that in the lesbian world there was a little too much looking at the inside and Raya didn't care much about insides right then. After meeting with a particularly large girl who had an equally large nose, Raya swore to never try online dating again.

But then, that's like making a New Years resolution to never drive a car again. Before she accepted the position in Orlando, Raya was on the Internet, scanning profiles in the area. Forget the benefits package; Raya came to Orlando to meet *spunked8* and *velvetrabbit*. She smiled at them and each day she logged in to see if they'd smiled back, but they never did. Incidentally, those two girls never smiled back at me either. In fact, since moving to Orlando, Raya's profile has gone mostly unnoticed among the hundreds of others, although a cute girl in Maine did send her a short note. Desperation for her first kiss, first lesbian kiss anyway, finally gave Raya the courage to go out into the real world and find the lesbians.

On her laptop, the MapQuest page she bookmarked that morning displayed the directions from her apartment to *Southern Nights*, one of our local gay clubs. Saturday was lesbian night at *Southern*. She grabbed her keys, took one last look in the full length mirror, tucked in her shirt, checked to make sure her hair was still in place, licked her index fingers and then quickly brushed down her eyebrows. When she got to her car, Raya looked down at her jeans and untucked the shirt.

Orlando is big, sort of. It's hard to say where Orlando actually begins and ends. Facing east bound on I-4 (the main interstate), there's a sign, hanging on an overpass, that says "Orlando," but five miles back the other way is Winter Gardens and another five miles past that is Orlando again. Raya lives in the city of Orlando, which means she spends 15 minutes driving through other cities to get to Orlando but it's not an unpleasant drive. The billboards are always advertising something expensive, but at least they're flashy. Eastbound, heading away from Disney, they advertise the newest attractions at the Walt Disney World Resort; a space ship, a giant version of Stitch eating a car from Test Track and whatever the current Disney slogan is, usually something about magic or dreams or both. For the westbound lanes, heading towards Disney, Universal Studios makes a last ditch effort to get travelers to turn around by running their own string of ads that mostly just make fun of the Disney ads. Along the sides of the interstate are strip malls that sometimes have billboards larger than the individual stores. Sprawling stucco time shares are often just beyond the billboards and tall hotels are almost always visible from I-4.

After passing under the Orlando sign, it's another five minutes of driving before it's time to pull off onto one of the many toll roads that intersect with this section of I-4. A few broken toll booths and a lot of potholes later, the Bumby exit appears and it's a left on Bumby and .1 miles to *Southern*. As Raya sat at the light, waiting to make this turn, a Jeep Liberty pulled up to the right of her old Camry and out the windows of the Liberty a car full of girls were singing at the top of their lungs. They could be copies of each other, sporadic curls over their straightened hair, tank-tops and tattoos. The driver had sleeves that barely extended over her shoulders but hid part of a blue tat. Velvetrabbit has a blue

tat there and Raya ducked her head to peer at the driver more closely, but ultimately decided it wasn't her. This was finally it. Raya was about to be surrounded by other lesbians and these girls weren't voluptuous at all.

Southern Nights is the center of central Florida lesbian life. Stuck in a somewhat run down neighborhood, where the houses are the same size as the surrounding property and couldn't possibly be holding more than one bedroom, a living room and a kitchen. Their walls are thin and the music from inside *Southern* resonates out the door and no doubt through the windows they keep open to save on electricity. The bass probably shakes the homes across the street. Music plays on the patio too, albeit not as loud as inside.

Southern is attached to a shopping center, the kind where the owners move in and out several times a year. Most are vandalized, some are boarded shut, some have been around long enough to invest in steel gates. The strip mall comes with several small parking lots but if you arrive too late you'll end up a quarter mile back, and pay \$5.00 to park there. They also have valet and the best spots are reserved for those with the \$10.00 to afford it.

A girl covered in tattoos, with multiple piercings in each eyebrow and pink and purple hair takes \$8.00 per guest for cover, except on Thursday nights when Abercrombie clothes or a college ID gets anyone in free. It's an 18 and up crowd and a cop, usually a dyke, watches the transactions. If there are any male cops around they're usually outside, standing on the corner in a huddle, chit chatting and waiting for the after hours cat fight. There is always an after hours cat fight. About a quarter of the time someone actually throws a punch. No one gets arrested.

As Raya waited in the traffic of people trying to park she analyzed the girls waiting in line to get in. All the girls with short hair seemed to have crew cuts done up as spikes or faux-hawks. If she'd arrived in Orlando when I did, so many years before, she'd have seen blond tips on every set of spikes. At one point, I actually dyed my hair black, just so my blond tips would look right. Raya scooted up in her seat to check out her own hair in the rearview mirror. Several strips of hair were standing on end at the back of her head again. The car in front of her pulled into the parking lot and Raya got her first good look at the girl collecting money. She had short hair and a spike through her nose, but she was wearing a tight girl's t-shirt with what looked like baggy guy's jeans and a pair of boxers were visible just above the waistband. The girl had multiple piercings in both ears and Raya thought she could even see some eye shadow. Raya wasn't wearing boxers. What if despite the thick denim of her jeans they could tell she was wearing girl's underwear, panties even? It was time to pull the car forward. She let go of the brake and accelerated slowly. This girl taking money did not look like the lesbians she'd read about on the internet. The car behind her honked. Raya hit the gas and drove straight past the girl with eye shadow and spiky hair, turned right at the next stop sign and headed back toward the interstate, to the safety of her apartment.

Thirteen years ago Raya was only nine. Her parents had just gotten a divorce and her dad was asking Raya what his little princess would like for Christmas.

"I'm not a princess." Her usual retort.

"You have to be my princess or else I can't be king." His usual retort.

Her older sister, Helen, knew exactly what she'd like for Christmas and listed off things like a mini-skirt and a moped. Her younger twin brothers flipped through a magazine with kid's furniture and seemed excited about a page that had bunk beds like race cars. After her dad finished explaining to Helen that the only way she would be getting a moped was if she bought it with money from his life insurance, he turned his attention back to Raya.

“So did you decide?”

Raya shook her head.

“Are there any new Barbie's out this year?”

“Dad! I'm too old to play with Barbie's.”

“If you're so big, why don't you get your ears pierced and then you can get earrings for Christmas,” Helen chimed in.

Raya looked at her and started to rub her earlobe between her thumb and her index finger. She'd thought about getting her ears pierced, other girls in her class were bragging about getting their ears pierced over Christmas, but Raya wasn't sure how she felt about having permanent holes in her ears. But she also didn't want her sister to think she was afraid, so she kept her lips together and just rubbed her ear.

“Is that what you'd like, princess? We can go on Christmas Eve if you'd like.”

She nodded her head slowly.

When the day finally came, Raya walked through the mall holding her father's hand. Helen came too and she was telling Raya that tonight she would show her how to do her make-up. Neither Raya or her father, both with second thoughts, were saying anything. As they walked through the mall, Raya looked around at the toy kiosks selling

helicopters and remote control cars, but then reminded herself she was too old for these toys and looked in the other direction, but in the other direction were only more toys. In the window of one store were a pair of rollerblades and Raya suddenly realized that this is what she should have asked for, but as far as she knew her father wanted her to have earrings and to look like a princess and her sister thought it was time for her to wear make-up. She watched the rollerblades. They had pink lightning bolts on the side.

As they walked past the store Raya looked back over her shoulder, now a pace behind her father who was pulling her along, both of their arms fully stretched out. She kept hoping one of them would look over and see what she really wanted, but no one did. Helen was busy remembering her first time getting her ears pierced and how excited she had been. Their dad was busy thinking about how both his girls were growing up and that he should find a weekend to paint the clubhouse with his boys before they were suddenly grown up too. Raya was the only one who knew she didn't want her ears pierced and she was the only who knew she wanted a pair of rollerblades.

When she returned to the bathroom where the tuck it in battle took place only an hour earlier, Raya looked at the small holes still in her ears. She rubbed them the way she had when she was nine. A filmy fluid squirted out of the right ear. She went into the hallway and opened a box labeled: "possibly give away." She moved around a series of tight shirts and skinny jeans that only a few months ago had been part of her wardrobe and dug her hand into the bottom. There she pulled out a small wooden box with three squiggly lines representing air and Aquarius--her mother's zodiac sign. I've seen the box. She kept it out on the counter after that night.

Her mother died of breast cancer when she was seven. She'd left this box specifically for Raya, her fellow Aquarius. Inside the box were a bundle of necklaces, so tied up that one chain couldn't be discerned from the others and a scattering of earrings. Raya took out a pair of small hoop earrings that used to be her favorites. She'd read on the Internet that butch women don't wear earrings, but some of those girls had definitely been wearing them. Raya slid the earrings back through her narrow holes and stared at the image of herself with short hair that stuck up in the back, no make up, earrings, boy's clothes and girl's underwear. "What am I?" she asked the mirror, but even when you live in Orlando, mirrors don't talk back.

Chapter Three

Sex, beer and...image.

Raya and I actually met that night, although we wouldn't realize it until much later when she was telling her story. Raya's famous for not leaving out any details regardless of their relevance, like if she forgets to mention her third trip back to the house to floss, she'll somehow mess up the entire sequence of the story.

“And then like all that wasn't enough for one day, I log in to play 'Call of Duty' on my PS two, right, and I feel like playing a team based mission so I log on and it's taking forever, right. I swear I spend more time troubleshooting my own technology. And I really don't want anything too involved so I just join a group doing some kill and destroy of some other team. It all goes good, one of the better teams I've been on really, we demolished all the other teams, just kinda clicked right, but I didn't write down any of their names. Anyway, there was this chick on the headphones and she's got to be a dyke, right, because who else is playing online like this and as if I hadn't had enough she's like sorry I gotta go, got a date. And it gets worse, the guys are like oh it's so late, where are you that you're going out right now? And she goes: Orlando.” This was where Raya paused. “Talk about fate rubbing in my face, right.”

“What's her username?” I asked thinking maybe I'd know her.

“Solen something or other with numbers.”

Solen803. 8/03, my birthday.

It was a late date. It was supposed to be an early date with indications that it might go all night. It was my third date with Shay, but I'd cancelled the dinner plans earlier out of a need to clean my apartment. I both wanted and dreaded the prospect of going on this third date, even more I dreaded being trapped in her apartment with just her and whatever ideas she had in her head. I would have been better off going to dinner and then coming back to "clean the apartment," but no, I didn't think of that. I suppose it's easier to lie over the phone. For instance, my apartment at that time did need to be cleaned, but I was not about to clean it. I enjoyed tripping over empty bottles of hard cider and cans of red mountain dew on my way to the shower in the morning. Like some kind of hard, misunderstood, tragic figure, scratching my stomach and stretching.

So, that night I'm sitting on a butterfly chair, reclined and staring at the *Call of Duty* menu screen. I pulled off the head piece I'd been talking into for hours, wiped the sweat off the earpiece and reached for one of the bottles of cider standing upright in the vicinity, but it was empty. There was more in the fridge. I always have some in stock. I like to pretend the hard cider is beer as I take cautious swigs and grimace when my lips part from the bottle, even going so far as to wipe my mouth with the side of my wrist. No one is watching. This ruse is all for me. Just like playing soldier in the game. I forget that I'm a girl and for a moment I'm just Sarah or Solen, brave Solen, obviously a lie, but I don't remember that until I turn off the TV and finish the last drop of sweet cider. I am not brave. I can't drink beer. My throat clenches around the stuff, gagging, rejecting it and no matter how I try I can't force it down without it coming right back up again.

I've been living in Orlando since I was discharged from the military. Cass and I had been living together in Southern Georgia, near the base, but there is nothing in

Southern Georgia for a dyke who's just been discharged from the Marines. Cass had recently met a girl, Amber, and Amber was a little bit older, already graduated from college and teaching elementary school in Orlando. She and I moved into a two bedroom, where she still lives. She got to get away from her roommates and I got a place to live, cheap. She got me a job as a secretary at her school. A position I promptly lost for reasons I still don't understand. They claimed I didn't have the demeanor to work with children. I think they were just sick of having to tell the kids I was a Ms. and not a Mr. But I never pushed the matter. After all, it only seemed fair. I orchestrated losing my job to my sexuality so this was like karma and god knows I wasn't in a hurry to field phone calls from parents calling their children in sick or filing paperwork for kids whose parents couldn't afford them. I took the unemployment and looked for a better field of work.

That's about the time I met Joey on Myspace. We'd been Myspace friends for a while apparently, but I didn't remember adding her. I posted a bulletin, something like anyone got a job for an out of work dyke? Joey replied: "Got a security license?" I didn't, but they're not exactly difficult to obtain. The rest is history, the irrelevant kind that is like a blur in my head. Like where did the last four years go? Did I turn 21 before or after I met Joey? It seems like I should remember if she was there for my 21st birthday party, but I was wasted so often then I can't remember which night of the nights I spent puking into the sewer was my birthday and I met her sometime around then.

I moved into this place last year, after I got a promotion to third shift security supervisor. Me and Joey, dykes in charge. We manage apartment complexes in the dead of night. Not glamorous, but the pay is good, so I finally gave Cass and Amber their space. Cass was coming down nearly every weekend, when she wasn't in Iraq. Her mail

was coming to Amber's. She was contributing to the rent. And I was the third wheel staring at my ceiling as the headboard banged against the wall and Amber tried to muffle her screams. It didn't seem right that she should have to muffle them in her own home.

This apartment is nice, I can live alone and the quiet is like every sad lonely moment on TV of some girl putting in a microwave dinner. It's perfect. The apartment is still barren because I can't afford to put anything in it and for all my faults, I do have one thing going for me: I refuse to put more on a credit card than I can pay off at the end of the month. I also like it this way, living with only what I need. The living room has a butterfly chair, a small TV and the night stand that the TV rests on. Across the floor are scattered video game cartridges, empty soda cans and cider bottles that lie sideways on the carpet and line the counter leading to the kitchen. It's not so much decoration as laziness. Until I start to see ants eating the left over residue, I refuse to see the point of picking up my collection and taking it out to the recycling.

My room is slightly more furnished with a metal computer desk, a computer and a futon. Even in the bathroom, I've hung a shower liner but I don't have a curtain. I like it like that: Spartan. I don't even own a dresser. There's freedom in not having stuff, like I'm not constrained by what I own. When girls come over and comment on all the things I need I shrug and sip on my hard cider. They like that, stoic.

Stacks of books sit on the floor, pushed up against walls. Unread religious texts sit next to a half read autobiography by Ellen DeGeneres's mom and *Stone Butch Blues*. *The Great Gatsby* lies underneath *Young Jedi Knights*. By my bed is the *Harry Potter* series. There are no pictures in my apartment, no cards, no knickknacks or figurines, no shot glasses or souvenir mugs, nothing on the walls except a loan samurai sword that rests

above my bed. I heart my samurai sword. Sometimes, typically after playing ninja video games, I take the sword down and pull it from its scabbard. I've only been taught to wield a straight sword in the Marines, but I've seen enough video games to know the basic mechanics and since there is nothing in my way but empty bottles and books, I have plenty of room to jump around in circles pretending I'm some great samurai.

I was just about to get the sword down, to put the scabbard over my back and run around the apartment like a ninja, maybe even hide under my own futon waiting for myself to get home so I could assassinate me for some reason I had yet to dream up, when the phone rang. I looked over at the mirror in my room. My hair looked like I'd just woken up. I shrugged at myself. I let myself know that we're too cool to worry about our hair. It was Shay on the other line, my date, probably wondering where I was. Somewhere between turning off my video game and looking at my sword, I'd forgotten. I didn't answer. First rule of getting a girl to like you: Don't answer the phone. Second rule of getting a girl to like you: Don't answer the phone. I should mention that on top of my Playstation is a worn out DVD of *Fight Club* and while I'm at it I might as well admit that the disc below *Fight Club* is a DVD of *Peter Pan*, not the Disney version, the new live action one that refocused the story on the hidden kiss that Peter secretly longed for from Wendy. "All children must grow up, except one." Classic. The one thing the little boy can never have is affection from a girl.

When it stopped ringing, I texted back: On my way.

Thirty minutes later, there I was, standing in front of Shay's door, staring at a frayed shoe lace while my knuckles hovered near the wood. I was suddenly nervous. It may seem odd, like wasn't I nervous five minutes before, but no five minutes before I

was cool, with my beer, then I'm standing there and I notice there's a red stain on my t-shirt from my mountain dew and if things go like they usually do, tonight would be the beginning of the end and I knew it. It always goes wrong, right here. So, suddenly I was nervous.

Shay wasn't the only girl on my mind and she definitely wasn't the hottest girl in there. That was Hailey, but my chances with Hailey seemed to diminish day by day, and Shay was getting to be all I had left in terms of girls who were interested in me. She's about two inches taller than me, which I hate because I often have difficulty picking up taller girls and there's very little more embarrassing than losing my balance during the middle of a kiss because I'm standing on my tiptoes. She's a personal trainer and that's something I find a bit intimidating because I know she must be stronger than me and it's only a matter of time before she realizes it. She doesn't look ripped. A small layer of fat lays over the cut of her muscles but it's not unhealthy, it's average. Thick with muscle, it has a look. There was just something different about it all and maybe I wasn't certain I wanted her, but I didn't want it all to end that night either.

I finally knocked and then quickly straightened the collar of my jacket. I touched the top of my hair to check the quality of my spikes and when I felt the dry soft touch of hair that was standing up in one section and flat in another I scrambled for my phone and tried to use it as a mirror to brush my hair into something less dorky. Shay must have been watching through the peephole because nobody has timing that perfect. She opened the door and I scurried to tuck my phone back into my pocket. She was smiling with that look of restrained laughter. I just stood there and shrugged meekly. My hand followed my phone into my pocket and I actually rocked back and forth on my heels. I might have

turned around and left with a quiet apology if Shay hadn't grabbed my pocketed wrist and pulled me inside so abruptly our lips collided together. I could not have pulled this off on my best day. As that kiss went on, it became clear Shay didn't have watching movies on her mind. And even though I'd thought about fucking Shay every five minutes for the last several weeks, this was exactly what I was afraid of.

"Scary movie?" I broke from the kiss and pushed her back a step when I saw a knife in a masked man's hand on the cover of a DVD case on the coffee table. A ding came from the kitchen.

"I made popcorn," she told me with this ridiculous smile on her face. The smile, even more than the kiss, betrayed how much she liked me. I ran my hand through my hair. Damn it's scruffiness. She wanted to be fucked, I'd fuck her. And I gave her a little smile back and stared straight into her eyes. Aggressive. I even added a slight eyebrow raise. And when I say slight, I mean nearly imperceptible. I am a master at keeping my facial movements muted enough to make the other person wonder if it was all in her imagination, if it was all some manifestation of what she wanted to see. If you can follow this logic all the way through, then you know, if she wonders if she is projecting her desires into me then what she sees becomes her desire. One stare fits all and it wasn't lost on Shay that night. She almost tripped over the floor piece to her own kitchen and she blushed. Shay. Just another girl to feel me drive into her. Just another girl to scream, seeing me in her fantasy, whatever that might be. And maybe she was so different after all.

But when we sat down for the movie, I made a fatal error. I sat down too far away. I sat down at a distance that I didn't know how to close. It was uncomfortable for

both of us. So, half-way through the movie the popcorn sat untouched on the coffee table, the smell of it had dissipated long ago. I knew it was my job to fill the gap. I could feel Shay looking at me from time to time; that stare I gave her earlier losing value by the minute. When something was about to get scary, the music got deeper, the tempo sped up or slowed down, but Shay didn't cringe, she didn't curl up closer to me. I hadn't set the scene up right for that. I wasn't even watching the damn movie. That night I only had one thought, how do I close this distance and not look like I'm closing the distance? Finally I got up to go to the bathroom, generic, but effective. I sat back down so our shoulders pressed uncomfortably together and of course I then had no choice but to drape my arm over the couch and then around Shay as she adjusted closer to me. I ran my hand absentmindedly through her hair, stopping every now and then when my fingers got tangled in a knot.

Shay turned her head to kiss me and that's when I pushed her down gently onto her back. This was well traveled territory. Girls. I knew this like I knew the procedures for evacuating a building in case of a fire or breaking up a party. There is power in being prepared for any scenario, knowing how to contain and control. My hand traveled naturally to the base of Shay's shirt, moving up her skin until I could feel her breast for the first time. The breast felt a little deflated, like some tissue was missing. I groped it with a tighter grip and the sense of deflated breast disappeared. Shay arched her back in approval and used one hand to guide my mouth to her lips. I gave her the look. The same look from before. I pulled back, a knee in between her legs, a hand on her breast, the other still wrapped up in her hair and my lips just out of reach. I stared at her, gave her subtle expressions she could shape into whatever she needed and I waited. I waited for

her to take that deep breath that tells me it's time to attack the girl's body, that she's ready for her shirt to be ripped off, for a hand driving inside her, for teeth on her neck.

But the breath never came. A smile crept against her lips and instead of sinking into the couch, she seemed to be coming out of it, holding my gaze. Her hands wandered up my sides, up the front of my body until I stopped breathing, until I tensed all my muscles at once, until the pupils she was staring directly at widened and then contracted suddenly, until her hand landed on my breast bound in its sports bra. I wouldn't even get to drive her, she would know and I wouldn't have that moment of smugness of being in complete control, of threatening to stop, of hearing her beg.

“What's wrong?” she asked.

“Nothing, just noticed the movie was ending.”

“I guess I was too engaged.” Shay gripped my breast and I actually tried to suck my entire chest into my body.

“No, I mean I need to go. I only had a few hours, I have to work tomorrow morning. I'm filling in. I don't have time for. I'm sorry.” I sat up and let my shirt fall back around my hips. ‘You will,’ my mother's voice took that moment to pop into my head. Well I bloody well don't, I told my mother, swearing in British because I would never swear at her in American.

By the time I was finished with my half completed sentences I already had a hand on the door. With one foot already on the outdoor welcome mat things seemed different. Shay had this hurt look on her face, like I'd taken, maybe not her puppy, but the last cookie in the jar. I think she was too afraid of the answers to ask any questions.

“Rain check?” I asked.

Shay nodded, still hurt, but now more like I was just holding the cookie hostage. She moved closer, I saw it, but the door closed before I could grab it. I could imagine her inside as I walked to my car. She was dumping out the popcorn in the trash and pouring herself a glass of wine.

I sat in my car reflecting on the incident for some time. This was new for me. I'd never run out on sex quite like that before. She'd out aggressed. Usually girls just lay beneath me and writher. Sometimes they dig their nails into my back or my head but more often they kept their hands to themselves or lock their fingernails in their hair. I couldn't help but think of a friend I had in New York City who told me about a new name emerging for dykes in poorer neighborhoods. AG or Aggressive. It's a phrase popular among the emerging young butches involved in hip hop culture. I know I can't fully understand that term. It's not of my time or experience, but I knew what it meant. Aggressive had replaced butch like the two were interchangeable. But fuck, Shay was AG and I didn't know quite what to do with that.

Chapter Four

Southern Gay Nights

As that week crept toward Thursday, I thought less and less about Shay and more and more about Hailey. Hot Hailey, with her red hair and green eyes. Did I mention I have a thing for red heads? I have a bit of a reputation for playing the field. I don't cheat. I haven't actually committed to a girl in years. I suppose that's why I have the reputation now that I think about it. But the fact of the matter is I am rarely the one doing the dumping, so I have to hedge my bets. I try to have three things going at the same time and hope that the ball lands on one of those numbers. Ideally, I'm dating two girls with one in my back pocket. But it's not like it's easy.

I was trying to make Hailey girl number two. She was more my type than Shay, but I was beginning to think Hailey might only go for femme girls because she'd rejected all of my advances. I thought I had her out on a date once. I was standing and I reached out my hand to help her up. It's a rehearsed technique I use to get in that first kiss. I pull them straight to my lips, but I always hesitate for a second, never more, never less. I have to be sure they want it, that I'm not putting my ego on the line. I hesitate when they're right in front of my lips and I give them a second to turn away. No girl ever had, until Hailey.

"What are you doing?" she asked.

"Nothing. You've got an eyelash." And I made like I was brushing it off her face.

Joey was helping me with Hailey. She'd convinced her to come out that Thursday for college night at *Southern*. We'd worked it out the previous week at work. She'd get Hailey there. I'd take her on a date to Disney World. We'd ride "Pirates of the Caribbean" and I'd whisper in her ear as the ride approached the right moment: "I want the red head." She'd look at me, she'd giggle, I'd kiss her. No hesitating, no chickening out.

I'd gotten there early so I'd already have a relaxed buzz on when she arrived. Before 11pm at *Southern Nights* the crowd can be thin, so on that night I hung out by myself nursing a Jack and coke and waiting for Joey. It could have been any night; the dance floor hadn't attracted anyone yet. Everyone was still somewhat sober, talking in tight groups of two or three. Drag queens roamed around trying to identify the straight men who were straight versus the ones who didn't know they were bi yet. Thursdays are always a mixed crowd of men, lesbians and straight couples looking to mix things up for a night. The only difference between tonight and any other night was the drag king show at 12:30. Why lesbians go crazy over a bunch of girls with sideburns, goatees, bound breasts and generally large "packages" has always been beyond me, but it's been a staple of butch culture for a long time. When there are no drag kings to take dollar bills from between the breasts of lesbians, the *Southern Nights* dancers perform and either way, money ends up tucked in some girl's breast.

But that's *Southern*, or any gay club for that matter; girls who wouldn't go to strip clubs do body shots off petite barmaids wearing what equates to a bikini and fish net stockings and on Thursdays when the crowd is mixed, buzzed gay men wander around a little confused, occasionally they come up on some hot boy in tight jeans, a cute little

spike clear from behind. They do the “unintentional bump” that has replaced the “May I cut in” of older days. On Thursdays it’s often a girl who turns around and startles him as he discovers boobs. Butches and gay boys should really get together and pick out two different hair styles. We can’t both wear crew cuts, it’s just too damn confusing. Maybe they can take mullets for a while.

I watched the lights move on the dance floor trying to discern if there was any pattern to it all. I know there’s not, but maybe if I found one it would mean I’m brilliant. Or maybe it just gave me something to do. That night, I remember leaning against the railing that circled the dance floor. The left side of my body hugged one of the pillars in the corner. My drink was still mostly full in my hand and I rested my forearm against the railing. The fingernail of my thumb was imbedded between my eyes, just above the bridge of my nose. I know this because there is actually a small almost imperceptible dent there from a lifetime of digging into the same spot. I was thinking about girls that night. Thinking about girls always draws my thumbnail to that spot between my eyes. I was also going for tough with a dash of emo that night, which was why I wore a black beater beneath my short-sleeved black button up. The fly of my pants were a series of buttons and when unbuttoned the inside said Lucky You. Every time I pulled them on and buttoned them, I thought of the girl who would undo them one by one and tell me, “I am lucky,” but the only one who has ever touched these buttons is me. Some player...

I hadn’t answered Shay’s calls since I’d left her place. First rule of keeping a girl interested? Hold back as much personal info as possible and don’t answer her phone calls. We’d texted. She’d call, I’d wait an hour and text her back: Sry. too busy. Call u back.

Really, this technique only works for three days. After three days you have to answer the phone or see them in person, but I was pushing it. I wanted to know where things stood with Hailey before proceeded to another step with Shay. I needed to know: was Shay my crush to keep me from romancing Hailey or was Hailey my crush to keep from latching onto Shay?

When Joey finally showed that night I was so lost in my thought that I almost turned around and broke the hand she used to tap me on the shoulder. She's lucky I had forgotten exactly how to do that.

"Hey sexy, what's up?" She says that every time she sees me.

"Where have you been?" I asked her already knowing the answer.

"You know it takes me forever to get ready."

I know what Joey meant was that it takes forever to do her hair. Her blond highlights have to be placed in specific locations to make sure they look optimal in her long spiked crew cut. Joey has always spent more time and money on her hair than anyone I've ever known, but it doesn't help. She really needed to spend some of that money on a gym membership or maybe pick up a fashion magazine because I doubt that wearing a long sleeve shirt underneath a polo has ever been considered hot. The two shirts together were tight enough to show that Joey had a fat roll and her breasts stretched at the material. When she spoke, the double chin came out. Really, what Joey needed to do was spend more time getting ready, like maybe a year.

"Where's Sasha?" I asked her to avoid expressing all these thoughts. She'd been living with Sasha for the past year. How she landed a Spanish model looking girl is beyond me. Not only that, Sasha had a job, a good job, with benefits, vacation and a

salary. I think it was knowing that Joey's last fuck was with this girl who could make all our mouths open when she hit the dance floor and my last fuck was with one of those girls whose fat doesn't pop out until their clothes come off, that made me want to puke the most when I saw her.

“She works in the morning. Did you bring that new girl? Shay or whatever?”

“No.” Joey didn't wait for me to ask why she would think I'd bring Shay when I wanted Hailey.

“Good. Hailey's here. Let's go out back. Cass texted me, said they'd be there.”

Outside the club, Raya was standing between two girls who looked like they weighed over 200 pounds a piece. She was probably repeating to herself over and over: “You can do this.” The bigger girls who stood around her were both shorter than Raya, but they still could have squashed her and for a moment Raya considered whether or not they were really gay or just too ugly to get a boyfriend. Raya and I share this disgust toward the obese, but when she told the joke later in the evening she followed it up by hanging her head and exhibiting a shame I really didn't find necessary. It certainly didn't add to the joke. She went so far as to clarify that she knows there are ugly straight girls. So gay.

I saw Raya before the others when I was standing in line to pee. Things weren't going well outside. Hailey had put the back of her chair between us as she straddled it. This was the first time she'd met Amber and Cass and most of the conversation was about the two of them. It was Amber doing all the talking. Cass hadn't said a word, not even a hello. She just raised her head at me when Joey and I approached. I needed a

break. I needed to walk away and come up with a new strategy. I needed more liquor and I definitely needed to pee.

I noticed the tall redhead wandering around the club when I got to the back of the line for the bathroom. She kept tucking and untucking her shirt. And since she was busy considering her shirt, she didn't even see two men making out right in front of her and almost ran head long into them. It was time for me to go inside the bathroom, but I paused, willing to give up my space in line to watch how this played out. She looked ready to run away. Men kissing is always shocking the first dozen or so times. I thought the girl might turn around and walk right back out. I knew then that she was new to the scene.

When I came back out I looked for her again. Sure enough she'd made her way deeper into the club, pretending she was searching for someone she knew. She kept checking her phone for fake text messages. I could just tell. When she moved closer to the dance floor I abandoned the scene. The lights over the floor flashed rapidly and, as I watched her, a collection of dots obscured my vision.

The patio was quieter, music from the radio, without the DJ mixing in a techno beats played and girls stood around potted plants or sat with large groups at small tables. I returned, with a new drink--a Smirnoff to replace my Jack and Coke. I like Smirnoff Ice because the bottles perspire enough to moisturize my hands. They were getting dry. I was coming back to the table, walking up behind Hailey. My big plan was to initiate some contact and squeeze her shoulder before I sat down, but as my hand went for her shoulder she leaned forward, oblivious to me, and gave a heads up to someone on the other side of the deck.

“I’m Hailey,” she shouted and when I followed her line of sight, there was the red head, leaning, half hidden, behind a pole that held up a canvas covering for the door frame. She was smiling at Hailey and then walking forward and then introducing herself and taking my seat. I did not want this red head.

“Raya,” she said as she sat down and then looked at the rest of us like we should respond, like we wanted her there.

No one else offered their names though. They saw me looking at her from a step behind Hailey. Raya had even sat in my seat. I glared at her from behind Hailey’s back and crossed over to another chair. When enough silence had gone by for it to seem rude, Hailey spoke up: “That’s Joey, Cass, Amber and, the one with the attitude problem, that’s Sarah. Cass and Amber are together, what like five years or something right?”

No one said anything for a moment and I realized that I must have been still glaring at Raya. Joey leaned back in her chair, tapping her thumb on the armrest, her left foot bouncing too fast to be to the rhythm of the music. Occasionally she leaned forward to take a bit of her drink, then left it on the table, leaned back and put both hands on her pant legs, pinching the material and pulling down as she rose slightly. It’s a ritual she perfected to keep from looking awkward in awkward moments. I sat next to her leaning forward, but not looking at anyone. I went to take another sip of my Smirnoff and realized that it was almost empty already.

“I’m getting another drink. Anyone want one?” I asked and stood up to head to the bar. No one said anything. “Raya, right? You want one?” Amber, Cass and Joey all exhaled at once.

Raya pulled out some cash. “Yeah, uh, just get me a Miller.”

“Yeah,” Joey said, slapping Raya on the shoulder. “None of this pussy Smirnoff Ice, like Sarah gets.”

“Fuck you, Joey.” I shook my head and walked off toward the bar.

Joey stood up and shouted back to me like I wasn't pissed at her: “We'll be inside. AJ's about to perform.”

Out of the corner of my eye I could see Joey, Hailey and Raya heading inside. I looked back. Amber was standing in front of Cass. I could see Amber hang back holding onto Cass's pinky out of the corner of my eye but I was too far to hear them. Cass tilted her head and Amber walked away. At the bar, I got two Millers. I took one of the beers and held my breath as I downed a mouthful. It was disgusting and I let about half of it tip into the trash can as I walked into the club.

Inside the club, back by the dance floor, the crowd was packed in. There was a general flow of movement from the patio, through the narrow doorway and into the cramped darkness of the dance floor. I caught up with Hailey, passing the beer to Raya through her so she could see I too had a real drink. Joey paved the way through the crowd with her bulk, but our group was so long that the openings began to dwindle by the time they reached the end. I'd moved ahead of Raya, who seemed to be hesitating, and I grabbed Hailey's hand to pull her through but when I looked back I saw Hailey had done the same for Raya. Raya looked down at the hand she was holding and noticed Hailey's cuticles looked like they hadn't been trimmed or pushed back ever. That was the moment that stood out the most for Raya months later when we were discussing this night. Raya had been told while getting her business degree to get manicures from time to time, even for the guys. Her nail beds were trimmed and her hands smooth beneath Hailey's

calluses. I guess the concept just fucked with her head somehow, but then this is Raya, she never forgets a detail.

Up onstage, a girl was quieting the crowd down. “Before our show tonight, there is someone here who would like to make a special announcement.”

The club was far from silent, but the mic carried over the chatter coming from the extremities of the crowd. The speaker leaned down and handed the microphone to a person blocked from view by the crowd. The crowd pushed back a little ways, to allow the new speaker more room.

“What’s going on?” Hailey asked Raya from a half a foot beneath her.

“I don’t know. I can’t really see. Whoever has the mic just bent over.”

Over the mic we heard a low voice, “Deb, will you marry me?”

If the girl said yes, it couldn’t be heard. The crowd immediately erupted in applause. It wasn’t a roar, just enough to sound politely excited, but even halfhearted applause from several hundred people can be loud enough to cover one small weak voiced yes.

Joey stuck a finger into her mouth, and my attention drifted from the stage to her to some commotion in the back of the club.

“Joey, come on, that was sweet,” Amber chided when she saw Joey’s reaction.

“Yeah, no. I mean maybe if she didn’t propose to some new girl every other week.” This is why I like Joey. She never pretends.

In the back of the club, the commotion turned out to be this big girl with straight jet black hair down to the middle of her back and bangs that covered half of her eyes. I knew her. This was about to get good. The girl made her way calmly through the crowd

until she reached the place where the two fiancés were presumably kissing. As soon as she got there the crowd stepped back and the girl yelled loud enough that no mic was needed to hear her clearly. When Deb, the proposee, looked up this girl clocked her and the fight officially broke out.

“You Fucking Bitch! You proposed to me in that same spot.” Her fists flew at Deb and made mostly solid contact to the girl’s sides and ribs as she forced her down on the ground, but her screams were directed at the proposer. Raya turned to me. I suppose I was smiling so smugly I looked like I knew I what I was talking about. Initially, I was tempted to ignore her question until I noticed Hailey watching and waiting for me to give a response.

“That girl who proposed, that’s Kylie. She used to date Tasha, the girl who’s attacking Deb,” I half shouted at them. At that point there were three security guards in the mix that had made their way from the sides of the stage to where Tasha was still beating on Deb. A few spectators were trying to help them pull Tasha off but the force of Tasha’s movement kept her out of their grip.

“But why is she fighting Deb?” Raya asked.

“Ok, so Tasha, she used to date Kylie, but before that Deb dated Tiffani, who was best friends with Kylie’s ex, Karen, which was just weird because they’re both butch. So Tasha had a crush on Karen, but then Deb cheated on Tiffani with Karen. When Tiffani found out, she broke up with Deb who immediately started dating Karen. That’s when Tasha and Kylie started dating. Then Karen broke up with Deb and Tasha decided to break up with Kylie, but then Kylie proposed and she decided to let her down gradually, but by the time she finally ended things with Kylie, Karen had decided to move to South

Carolina to be with some girl up there and Tasha was left alone. So she's really just been looking for a reason to beat Deb up ever since then because she thinks it's Deb's fault she never had a shot with Karen."

I was pleased to see, when I finished, that Raya had her mouth open and seemed a little overwhelmed. I shrugged. "Just typical lesbian drama. You know how it goes."

Hailey wasn't shocked though. She cut in almost immediately. "And how do you know all this?" she asked and raised her eyebrows for one full second with a slight head tilt.

I looked away. "I dated Kylie for a minute."

Raya nodded her head seriously as if she had seen this sort of love quadrangle many times, but I could tell otherwise. By the time I'd finished giving Raya her intro course in lesbian drama, the cops had already escorted the three girls outside to try and sort everything out and all attention was turned back to the stage. The woman with the mic was speaking again.

"And now without further ado, I give you the King of Orlando: AJ."

At least, I think that is what she said because as soon as she spoke a series of long high pitched screams were all anyone could hear, until finally the DJ turned up the music. A slow bass played, with words that were difficult to distinguish, connecting the beats. The techno lights flashed directly onto the stage. When the screaming girls finally fell quiet, the stage went black and in the spotlight a figure stood with his back to the crowd. He wore a brown cowboy hat and a jean jacket. As he stood there, facing away from us he popped his collar and the screams that were ebbing, increased as hands full of one and five dollar bills flew into the air. The lyrics started and he turned. He was lip synching,

which is why he could get away with running all over the stage, sliding against the floor and kissing random girls in the middle of key notes.

Hailey leaned in close to Raya. “Do you know AJ?” she asked.

“No, I’m new to Orlando.” Raya had to duck down to Hailey’s ear and repeat herself twice.

“Oh, well, that’s AJ. He’s the best drag king in Orlando,” she shouted back up.

At the moment, AJ was bent over, allowing a girl to stroke his side burn as he pulled a five dollar bill out of her mouth with his.

“He’s friends with Joey. Don’t let him fool you though. He’s all talk. Two years ago, he had long hair and only half as many girls on his arm. Now he claims he’s FTM,” I added into the conversation.

“Let’s go back outside. This is gay,” Joey shouted into my ear.

“You’re the one who brought us in here,” I shouted back.

“It’s too crowded.”

“Jealous much?” I asked because I really didn’t want to go, but if Joey wasn’t there, my right to stand with Hailey and Raya would diminish and I didn’t want to feel those please move along vibes.

Hailey moved closer to the stage and looked back over her shoulder at Raya. She wanted her to follow.

“Um, yeah, no. Not jealous. I just don’t find AJ sexy, but you stay Sarah, I know how much you like that look.”

I didn’t stay and as Raya moved up behind Hailey I heard her ask her, “What’s FTM?”

Female to male I said to myself. Raya was definitely in unfamiliar territory.

I looked back one last time as I followed Joey to the exit and noticed Hailey pulling Raya closer to her. Joey leaned into my ear from behind.

“Just let it go. You’ve got Shay anyway.”

I didn’t turn. “I should’ve just done it. I should’ve kissed her. Then at least I’d know one way or the other.”

“Yeah, but you didn’t. You’re a pussy. We’ve already established that.” Joey placed a hand on my shoulder and pulled me around to head back outside.

Inside the club the drag show went on. Three more drag kings graced the stage after AJ, but unlike AJ these bois didn’t cause much of an uproar. Two of them were on the heavy side and their breasts didn’t even need to be bound because they looked like man boobs. The other one couldn’t dance. Some girls stayed and cheered and passed out bills, especially when the four performed together, but the crowd thinned and as soon as the show was over, the club emptied. Hailey and Raya rejoined our group after AJ’s performance, but with nowhere to sit they ended up taking a step back to stand under a tree out of the main pathway.

Cass wasn’t saying much. She’d been staring at a poster on the outside wall of the club since we returned. A bartender came by and let us know that closing was in 15 minutes, but Joey didn’t make any move to go and we weren’t going to leave without her. Finally AJ came out. He was still wearing his facial hair but the slight bulge had been removed from his khaki pants.

The picture of us standing there must have been grim. I was looking at the floor because every time I glanced up, there was Hailey, flirting with Raya. Cass stared at the

wall almost with out blinking and Amber had her head on Cass's shoulder practically asleep. Joey was staring at the sky.

“It's a night club guys, not a meditation class,” AJ said as he grabbed me by the hair and lifted my head up. AJ must have been who Joey was waiting for because she smiled and jumped out of her chair with more speed than I'd known she could muster. The energy didn't last for long though. She went back to frowning and hunched her shoulders.

“Tonight was lame, let's just go to Denny's.”

At Denny's that night our group sat in a long booth. The restaurant was about half full of various sorts of people, but mostly the drunk kind. We were so packed in that AJ had to sit with one leg hanging off the seat; Cass was on the other side, knowing her she was more squatting than sitting and everyone else was in between. Amber was enveloped inside Cass's right arm, sleeping. Cass gave her a light kiss on the head and got a resounding roar of awws from the table. After the awws, drink orders, discussion about food and filling AJ in on the fight he missed, the table fell silent.

“So you're just out huh?” AJ shook a packet of sugar and added it to his iced-tea. His leg, the one under the table, jittered.

“Yeah sort of,” Raya's foot fidgeted. Their dual fidgeting caused the seat to vibrate on either side of me, but I imagine her foot must have brushed up against a shoeless Hailey because she planted it into the ground before Joey's keys could rattle off the seat. Her status as a new lesbian had finally come up as we were waiting for a table,

courtesy of me. Hailey turned to look at Raya, taking her by the chin and analyzed her features.

“You could make a respectable drag king. What do you think AJ?”

“Yeah sure, just let me know, I’ll set you up.”

“What do you think, Cass?” Hailey asked.

Cass looked up from her water. “What are we talking about?”

After waiting several moments with Raya’s foot pressed up against her own, Hailey rested a hand on her thigh. I could see the hand and the goofy smile on Raya’s face out of the corner of my eye. On Hailey’s other side, I’ve been lightly bumping my knee against her. This was the final bit of rejection. She used to put her hand on my thigh all the time. I guess it was a friendly hand because it never crept as far inside my leg as her hand was with Raya.

“Food,” Joey nodded her head at the waitress heading straight for us and startled everyone. We all jumped, except Hailey’s hand which was now being held by Raya’s.

Hailey didn’t order any food of her own, but she rose off her seat to take French fries off Raya’s plate before the server even set it down. Typical, they were already acting like a married couple. Hey, I just met you five minutes ago, want to be my girlfriend? Lesbians. Raya never even let go of her hand. Amber woke up when the plate was set in front of her. Before turning to her own food she leaned towards Cass’s ear and Cass followed by shaking her head. Raya and Hailey continued to eat one handed and I pushed my own fries around on the plate. After about five minutes AJ spoke up again.

“So, you all coming out to see my show in Daytona next week?”

“Hell yeah,” Joey told him and nudged AJ in the arm. I was trying to get Joey to notice my look of bewilderment over her sudden turn-around about watching AJ’s show, when Amber elbowed Cass and everyone looked over at them.

“You’ve been quiet tonight,” I finally said to Cass when she didn’t speak immediately.

“Yeah.”

Raya and Hailey weren’t paying attention. Their minds were focused on the patterns they were using to stroke each others palms.

Amber wrapped her hand around Cass’s bicep. Cass took a drink of her Diet Coke before speaking again.

“I’m leaving for Iraq again in the morning,” she said and took another drink, catching some ice in her mouth before she set the cup back down.

“You’re telling us this now? How long have you known?” I asked. I really didn’t know whether to be outraged at her or the Marine Corps. “I thought you’d done your last tour for at least a year. That’s why you’re here isn’t it? That’s why you’ve been on leave all this time.”

Cass looked at her plate. She’d only taken two bites of her sandwich. She didn’t want to go back. I wondered if she ever wished it had been her instead of me in the barracks that day, but Cass doesn’t take the easy way out.

“You’re in the military?” Raya asked and we all closed her eyes. Stupid question.

No one else said anything.

“I didn’t want to make a big deal.” Cass was looking at me.

“I guess you won’t be at the show then.” AJ, always trying for the joke. AJ probably would have been great at interrogation. Nothing is ever a serious matter. He could have had them laughing at him, then themselves and later that night taken them to a local bar in Cuba for drinks. “We don’t want to kill you,” they’d tell him. “We just want to get rid of the American way of life.” And that sounds ridiculous until it’s rephrased: “We don’t have a problem you. It’s the gay lifestyle we don’t like.”

Cass smiled for the first time all night.

“Have you been before?” Raya asked and this time we all took a short breath as if we could collectively somehow take that question back. Cass didn’t answer. I did.

“Yeah, she’s been before. Once to Afghanistan. What is this? Your sixth tour in Iraq?”

“What do you do? Are you in the line of fire? Can women be in the line of fire?” Raya kept asking questions, but no one was looking at her. This time I didn’t answer and she got the hint, not the right time for those questions.

Outside everyone hugged, but something didn’t seem right. It never does when she goes off to war. Something is always missing, like we should have a parade or a big dinner. Maybe we should have prayed. Something was just missing. Joey, stupidly:

“Good luck.” AJ: “Don’t get shot.” Hailey and Raya: “Stay safe.”

“Email me this time.” I looked at her.

“I will,” she told me and then we walked awkwardly in the same direction towards our cars.

Chapter Five

Joey.

It's been almost fifteen years since Joey had her moment. Her best friend, a slumber party, an innocent kiss, sodomy, that is how it went for her. Something about bringing this girl to climax made her want to cut her hair and buy her friend with benefits a dozen roses. Her parents didn't even notice until three years later when they walked in on her with a new best friend, Rachel. They don't speak of the moment. Her step-father mostly ignores her existence and her mother, when she is forced to acknowledge it, complains about not having more daughters. It doesn't seem to bother Joey though. Nothing ever seems to bother Joey, which might be one of the key reasons why 'fuck you Joey' rolls off my tongue so easily.

Rachel, that girl she got caught with, had a getting caught problem. They were also caught by her parents, whose approach was more honest than Joey's parents but equally bad, and when Rachel had no place to live, she turned to Joey to pay her bills and buy her expensive things. When the debt began to match her student loans, Joey filed for bankruptcy.

Joey has nothing to show for the debt she acquired with this girl, all the furniture in her apartment belonged to her girlfriend. The 38 inch flat tube, the bed, the blender, they all belonged to Sasha. The most expensive thing Joey owned was her hair. The blond highlights that ran like zebra stripes through all four inches of spike cost Joey

\$100.00 a month. That's more than their cable bill, which Joey didn't pay. Sasha worked as a legal assistant, she had one day, before she met Joey, seen an ad for an associates and left her job at some generic retail chain to pursue a career.

Sasha comes from a Hispanic family, her dad came from Peru and her mother from Argentina. She's small and one of Joey's arms can easily wrap around and encompass her waist, but Joey mostly just complained about her hair. She'd find it in the shower, in her car, on her clothes. It got into the sink and she'd sometimes find a stray hair resting on the toilet seat. The bedding came out of the dryer with hair still embedded in it and she even pulled them off the TV.

With Joey on third shift, she didn't come home until 8:30am, long after Sasha needed to go to work. It hurt their sex life, something else Joey complained about. When Sasha came home, she'd usually find Joey still in bed and sometimes she'd crawl under the covers to wake her girlfriend up, but Joey wouldn't have sex unless they both showered first and since planning sex ruined the mood for Sasha they usually only ever did if it was in the shower and even then, Joey made Sasha pull her hair back so it didn't stick to her face.

It was four am when Joey returned from Denny's. As she pulled into the parking lot she looked up at her normally darkened apartment building and noticed a series of lights on. It had been so long since Joey had been home when Sasha got up for work that she assumed her girlfriend must be up getting ready, but when she walked through the door Sasha was already gone.

“No wonder she’s always tired,” Joey said out loud before she turned off the lights in the living room. It didn’t take long before she was out of the shower and into bed, happy to find that there was no hair to remove from the drain or shower walls.

It wasn’t until the next afternoon that Joey woke up and finally realized that Sasha didn’t just leave to go into work early. Half of the closet was bare, missing even the hangers and Joey should have noticed the previous night during her shower that Sasha’s toiletries were gone. As she wandered into the living room she stopped, wondering if she was really wasted enough the previous night to not realize that the entire living room and kitchen were devoid of decorations, including the TV. Only the cable box remained sitting on top of the entertainment center. There was even a note on the table to the effect of: “I couldn’t do it in person. I did love you. I’m sorry. Picking the furniture up tonight while you’re at work.” It ended without a signature. “The lease is up this month. You can renew it if you want.” Joey sat down at the table and then stood back up. She took the note and let it fall, leaf style, into the trash. She almost cried, but didn’t and went back into the bedroom where she looked over at Sasha’s side of the bed. Maybe other girls had been sleeping in this bed while she is away at work. When she lay down, she held Sasha’s pillow to her face and a hair caught on her lip.

Gross.

Joey chucked the pillow back onto the bed and grabbed her phone. It was not a phone call she liked to make. Things are okay between her and her mom as long as they only see each other once in a while. She and Joey’s step-dad mostly ignore their daughter’s friends when they’re forced to see them. The step-dad mostly ignores Joey

altogether. He's retired military turned cop and although he's pre "don't ask don't tell," it's his model for how to deal with Joey. He doesn't look at her and he can pretend she doesn't exist. When Joey used to live there, he piped up once or twice to tell Joey to get the damn bag of pretzels her mother was asking for, but mostly it was because their petty argument was reminding him of her presence.

"What did you do?" her mom asked in response to Joey's request to move home.

"Nothing, why do I have to have done something?"

"You've always done something."

There was a mutual silence before her mom spoke up again and said she could move her stuff back, but she'd have to wait until after five when her step-dad went to work.

Joey's next call was to me.

"Sasha left.

"What?" I asked, still half in my dream about a girl in bed, was it Hailey, Shay...

"She left."

"Left as in left left, like gone, like left you left?" I woke up.

"Yep."

"Damn. Are you okay?" She didn't sound very upset.

"It's good, you know, I've been thinking I need to focus on me."

"And fucking some new girl?"

She didn't respond to the question right away. At first she just went on a tirade about coming home the previous night, about hair in her apartment.

"I'm done, no more girls," she finished her rant.

“Sure.”

“I’m moving back home.”

“What, why?” I asked her, this time hearing something legitimately surprising.

“I can’t afford the rent.”

“How can’t you afford rent? Get roommates. Isn’t it better than living in that house?”

“What do you mean?”

“Joey, they hate you.”

“They do not.”

“Last Easter your mom told you she wished she’d known earlier that you were going to turn out gay so she could have had another daughter.”

“Not every parent can be like yours.”

“Not every parent can be supportive and loving? And you’re okay with that? With them not liking you?”

“I don’t care what they think.”

“Whatever, I gotta get going. I’m meeting Shay before work.” Why Joey’s callous attitude made me want to hit her I’ll never understand.

“Yeah, how’s that?”

“I don’t know. You think Hailey will hook up with Raya?” Conversation change #2.

“Maybe.” She didn’t want to discuss it “Next Saturday, we’re going to AJ’s show in Daytona to celebrate my singleness.”

“What? You’re really going out to Daytona?” I didn’t wait for a response. “I told Amber I’d stay with her and watch movies.” I didn’t want to see Joey single again.

“So bring her.”

“Do you really think she’ll want to go out to the club so soon after Cass leaves?” I still didn’t want to see Joey.

“Whatever.”

“I gotta go. See you at work.” I would have to see Joey anyway.

I hung up the phone leaving Joey alone on the couch staring at where the TV used to be.

Chapter Six

What happens in Neverland, stays in...

My parents are nothing like Joey's. I couldn't strip my shirt off when I went outside, but they slowly learned how to respect me. I liked sports, I wasn't afraid of getting smacked in the face with the ball and I was willing to kill the spiders that both my brother and my dad found revolting. My own arachnophobia didn't onset until at least nine.

In my home there was a secret door behind a bookshelf in the guestroom or at least I thought it was a secret door. It was flat with the wall, but on one side there was enough room to pry it open with small fingers. I believed the door to the attic to be a great adventure. Maybe my parents had read me the *Narnia* series one too many times. The attic was large and lined with planks that led to dark corners and were lined with boxes. The first time I had gone in there I'd gotten caught. My parents expressly forbid me from going back into the room, which they called an attic, claiming I could fall through to the garage, but come on, I knew better than to stand anywhere that wasn't secure and after all I'd discovered the roof around the same age and hadn't fallen through that yet, no matter how many balls I had to retrieve from the gutter.

By ten, I'd realized that the attic was just an attic, and worse, the spiders I was slowly growing to fear, lived there in greater numbers than even the basement. It was not an access point to Neverland and Tiger Lilly would not be popping out from behind a

piece of plywood. I wouldn't have gone in there anymore at all if it weren't for a discovery I had made two years before. Inside one of the boxes surrounded by stuffed animals there was a plastic container with paper inside. I had taken out the container, opened it up and slowly began to remove pieces of cardboard that were cut perfectly to resemble people. Underneath the people were items like shorts and skirts and dresses that weren't cut quite as perfectly. They had small tabs all around the edges and as I held up a pair of shorts to the cardboard boy I realized why. If I pushed each tab in, so that it hugged around the cardboard, the clothes would stay on the doll.

I never told anyone that I had discovered the set of paper dolls. I hid it carefully in the box and only came in to play with them when I felt sure my parents wouldn't find me. Anything involving the word doll was a point of contention in our household. My grandmother had one year surprised me by giving me, what my parents had called an expensive baby carriage and I had given my Grandmother a half-smile and a quick peck on the cheek, before running away to the basement to play a video game. To go with the carriage she had also gotten an American Girl doll that had my same name and wore what I thought was a funny dress.

People were always giving me dolls and I was always refusing to play with them. This exasperated my mother who would say: "You could at least try and play with them." When my mom commented that the GI Joes and Ninja Turtle figures I loved so much were really dolls with a different name I didn't have anything to say back.

"You can always pretend Barbie is a ninja if you want," she told me, and I had sulked away not knowing why it wasn't fun to pretend Barbie was a ninja but feeling that it just wasn't right.

Lately, we hadn't had to fight so much though, at least not about dolls. My grandmother, the very same one who had bought me the baby carriage had given me a great big gift that year for Christmas. I had been nervous to open it. It was a probably a car seat to take the doll with on trips. That would be the worst. Kids at school would tease me, well a few of the girls would probably be jealous, but I would have teased me if it was me. I slowly opened the packaging, and then I saw the letter G in green and quickly ripped the rest of the wrapping paper away.

My mom called to me behind a camera. "What is it, honey?"

I sat with my mouth open for several minutes staring at the unwrapped side of the package and said nothing. My grandmother, sitting in the rocking chair across the way, smiled down at me.

"Mom, it's a GI Joe American Hero Tank. I've been wanting this my whole life. It shoots real missiles and you can attach my GI Joe with zip line and it moves just like a tank and has a gun and defense systems and a moving cannon at the top and, and look!"

I ripped the rest of the packaging off. It was gigantic, a brown tank that when removed from the box would be as tall as my knees. My mother just stared surprised and then looked at her own mother who was fielding me as I leapt into her arms declaring it the best present ever. After that, the rest of the family followed suit and I got nothing but ninja turtles and baseball cards.

If anyone had found out that I was playing with these paper dolls, all that had been gained that year would have been lost. People would insist I play with dolls that needed to be fed or wet their pants or something equally gross. This had to stay my secret. I didn't really know why I liked playing with the paper dolls so much. As I sat in

the attic I'd whisper quietly to the dolls, telling them about my day and listen for the door downstairs to open or for my parents' footsteps on the stairs.

Chapter Seven

Something about raccoons.

I visited my mom last month. Most parents comment on how thin their kids have gotten and offer to feed them food. My mom narrowed her eyes and cupped her hands around my face.

“Honey, your eyes. Have you started wearing make up? You look like a raccoon.”

Thanks mom. Because enough isn't changing at the quarter life, now I have to worry about premature eye sagging. I'll look like a Goth boy by the time I'm 30 or maybe a strung out run-a-way. Raccoons. I rolled my eyes, but she didn't stop there. And how bad must it be for her to assume I'd started smearing black eyeliner on myself?

“You have such nice skin, Sarah, I don't know why after all this time you'd decide to start wearing make up. If you're worried about the signs of aging talk to your father. He uses a cream. Honey tell her.”

My dad cleared his throat and turned a page in his book. I walked out of the room, mortified. My mom gave up on the prophecy of 'you will' a lot more quickly than I did.

“What?” I could hear her saying when I was half way down the hall. “I don't understand why men don't want to talk about these things.”

That's how it is in my family. It's not just my mom. My dad, when we're not talking about beauty products, also enjoys the occasional father/son moment. Maybe it's because I have a younger sister and Jonathan is always gone in the Peace Corps. My

father, the fighter pilot, couldn't understand his son the pacifist and he almost seemed happy when I came out of the closet in high school.

“Keep your head held high, son,” he told me after showing me how to tie a tie. “God made you this way and he's proud of you.”

I just nodded and then went to my bathroom. They were taking things too well, like they had expected this all along. I checked my vagina. Was I a hermaphrodite? Did they have to make a choice at birth and cut off the wrong part? Son? But son I was from that day forward. Changing the oil in the car, mowing the lawn, rescuing my sister when her tire went flat, opening jars. I was someone for my dad to watch football with. I've never had the heart to tell him I don't really like football. It was my dad, not my mom, who sat me down at 18, just as I was enlisting in the military.

“Sarah,” he said getting serious. “Whatever decisions you make in this life, your mom and I will support you.” I nodded silently, but he went on. “If you want to get a sex change.” He stopped there. I froze mid swallow. Did he really just say that? I didn't look at him. I just nodded. Then he switched to an equally embarrassing topic. “Now I know you have this girlfriend, but I'm going to give you a piece of advice. I told Jonathan the same thing when he was a young man. Until you can support yourself and I don't mean financially, until you can support yourself emotionally, don't even think about getting into anything serious with a girl. You understand?”

I nodded and finished swallowing. I don't think I have ever been so grateful as when he got up and walked away. Becoming a man. Is that what I wanted? It wouldn't be the last time my parents mentioned it. I spent a lot of time in the bathroom after that, flattening my chest and turning my body sideways, checking my chin wondering what it

would be like to need to shave. I was reading *Stone Butch Blues* and thinking of the first time I would kiss a girl. Jess, the boyish girl in the early parts of the book, was me, young, heading out into the world. And Jess eventually has her breasts removed. She takes hormones that drop her voice and help her build muscles. She becomes a man. Was it time for me to become a man? If I am like Jess, then is that what was right for me? Should I learn from her experience? Am I more than butch? It's not something I've ever discussed with Cass or Joey. Sometimes I wish I knew AJ better, to ask him how he knows. Somehow, I don't think Cass or Joey are truly like me. They don't have stone butch blues. They don't even know what it is. It's the reason I don't sleep. It's the reason I've got raccoon eyes.

I wasn't feeling very confident in myself since the whole Raya/Hailey meeting. I'd used Cass's departure, my work hours, laundry, everything I could think of to get out of my next few dates with Shay. Like my father had said, if I wasn't emotionally stable there could be no relationship. But Shay was more persistent than any girl I'd ever dated before. She'd discovered me, sleeping at home, before work.

But seeing my mom the other day and listening to her worry that I might be wearing make-up didn't remind me of Shay. It reminded me of the nights I used to spend in the back of property at the apartment complexes, watching raccoons forage for food. One night in particular, I watched a small raccoon clamber into a covered trashcan. I stopped and listened to the buzz of a flickering street light and the usual hum of cars driving along interstate four in Orlando. It was four am and the morning dew rising through the air was thin and cold. In winter the air will drop ten to fifteen degrees from just after mid-day to just after midnight. The security team, at the complex, had broken

out their jackets for the remainder of their shift. Joey and I were both on duty. My initial intention of heading to the back of one of the properties was to escape her.

Joey had moved onto some new girl, having decided only two days after Sasha left that she was not done with girls. Apparently the girl could go all day and did some of the “freakiest shit” Joey had ever experienced. They’d met at *Southern* on the Saturday night after Cass left. I guess AJ set them up. I had spent the night watching movies with Amber, which was all the better because, according to Joey, Hailey and Raya had gone out again and Raya could apparently even dance better than AJ. I didn’t stick around to hear the details when Joey came in thirty minutes late for her shift. I immediately left to deliver notices to each door of the hundreds of apartments and had been finding excuses to stay away from the gate ever since. Every few minutes I called in over the radio, “Rear Gate checked” or “Work Order needs to be placed for light outside building 19,” just to keep up appearances. That light has needed to be replaced for nearly a year.

I sat in the golf cart, my legs propped up on the small dashboard, watching the raccoon. This is what I remember. I don’t remember Shay earlier. I only remember thinking about her. I picked at my chapped lips with my stubby fingernails. They smelled like Shay. I can always smell a girl on my hand for days after I’ve had it inside her. I know it’s all in my imagination, but it’s an intoxicating smell I’d like to taste again. After a month of dating, this was the first time we’d had sex. Shay had tried strip teases and sensual massages, but I kept finding reasons to leave, citing Blockbuster movies that needed returning, timeliness of the month, muscle weakness and of course, work.

Shay had finally had enough and that day, at eight pm, she was knocking on my door. I was still asleep. The night shift didn’t start until eleven. I answered the door in my

boxers and a t-shirt and before I knew who it was, Shay had her arms around me and was pushing me back into the bedroom giving me a kiss that made me think Shay either couldn't smell or didn't care about my breath. It wasn't the way I had wanted things to happen, but I'd waited too long and this was how it would have to be done.

It's not that I don't like sex. Having a girl in an arch before me with her head thrown back and her hands buried into my hair, both pulling me closer and pushing me away is almost an addiction for me. There was a time when I would sleep with anyone. I loved to feel the soft skin of a girl and to discover how much pressure was too much as I bit down. My hands were always eager to run themselves along the curve of a girl's body, but as I've grown older, I've discovered that sex, for me, usually ends the possibility of having a relationship and I didn't have any back up at the time for Shay. Hailey was with Raya and there were no other prospects. If Shay split, I'd be alone.

My problem manifested itself the first time I ever tried to have sex. I was a teenager. Natalie was a girl from a neighboring high school. We both did the 100 meter sprint. I kicked her ass every time. She was everything I had dreamed about. Her hair was soft, blond and long, but not too long or too blond. She was skinny, tan and short, but not too short and not so skinny that she didn't have breasts. It was all just right. My tongue had found its way around her body. She'd screamed and everything had felt natural.

Then it happened. Natalie's hand came up to my shoulders and with a gentle push and a roll of her hips, she was suddenly on top. My shirt was coming off over her head, my sports bra followed as if it was attached. Her hand was on my stomach and I was watching her, eyes wide, mouth open still recovering the breath I had held when Natalie

bucked against my mouth. My arms were lying awkwardly on the bed, not doing anything. Natalie's hand moved its way up quickly and eagerly and she bent over to kiss me; her long hair fell on my shoulders as her hand finally cupped my breast. And then everything stopped. I didn't kiss back as Natalie, unaware, tugged at my lip with her teeth. My hands, around Natalie's back, froze and my breath caught. Natalie went on and moved her mouth down to my breast kissing it. The lips were too much. I didn't have any thoughts. I didn't know what I felt. I just wanted it to end. I grabbed hold of her wrists and flipped her, pinning Natalie's arms to the bed. It all happened so fast. I felt like a blur of motion and then there I was staring down at her, wide eyed, no longer holding my breath, just breathing short.

"You're scaring me," Natalie finally told me as she looked up at the intense stare I was giving her from above.

"I'm sorry." I let go of her arms. Natalie rubbed her wrist where I had gripped her.

"I needed you to stop," I said.

"You could have just said so."

I got up and retrieved my clothes from the floor, eager to be covered and forget about the breasts that had betrayed me.

"Are you not attracted to me?" Natalie asked so softly I almost didn't hear her over the sound of fabric being pulled past my ears. I looked at her. Natalie was staring at the bed.

"It's not your fault."

With my clothes on I felt ready to come back to the bed. I wrapped my arms around Natalie until we fell into a spooning position. We laid together in silence a while. Our own breathing seemed too loud. When Natalie decided it was time to go, she looked over at me and must have seen the tears on my cheeks, but said nothing. When we hugged, I whispered “I’m sorry” over and over until Natalie looked at me, wiped the tears away and said: “It’s okay. We’ll figure this out.”

It wasn’t the last time we had sex, but subsequent tries went much the same. Natalie would try to touch me and I would try to handle it. I’d hold still while Natalie explored my body kissing her everywhere and it was more of the same. Natalie told me I needed to take part; I needed to move my body. We had fights about it. Eventually Natalie stopped touching me all together. She stopped kissing my ears and running her fingers through my hair. Eventually, shortly before I fucked the girl in the barracks, I broke up with her. When I did Natalie wrote me a long letter that ended like this:

Every time you sleep with someone else think of me. Think of how much you hurt me when you pushed my hands away. Think of how painful it was to see the look of horror on your face the first time I tried.

I did think of her. Not being able to receive sex had ruined most of my would be relationships. It was part of the reason I always dated more than one girl at a time. Better to not get my hopes up. Tonight, the same scene had played with Shay. My shirt was off. Shay had started to unbutton my pants. I momentarily wished they were my lucky jeans. If they were my lucky jeans I might have let her to continue, just to see if she said “lucky me.”

“There’s no point.” I reached for her hands to stop her.

“What do you mean?”

“I can’t.”

“Don’t even try telling me you have to go to work.”

“No, I mean, well I do eventually, but I just can’t have sex.”

Shay took a moment to look at me, running her hands over my partially naked body. Finally she spoke.

“But you like giving, right?”

“Yes.”

“Ok.”

“So you’re ok with me not being able to have sex?”

“Yeah. I’m ok with that.”

As I sat in the golf cart calling out the last of the buildings I wondered if I was ok with Shay being ok with me not being able to receive sex. After all that build up, she gave up so easily. She had no desire to touch me. Maybe she was just being open minded. Maybe I wasn’t the only girl she dated with this issue. Maybe my body was hideous and she was relieved that she didn’t have to touch it. She was willing to give up the ‘you will’ prophecy as easily as my parents had and I didn’t know what I wanted. Someone to tell me it was ok to hate everything female about myself or someone to tell me I should learn to love my body the way it was, to embrace my breasts. Both answers were wrong. I was shaken out of my thoughts by the raccoon. He had almost finished pulling himself out of the trashcan when he got startled by a pair of small headlights and fell back in with a thud that made me look up. Joey’s golf cart pulled up alongside mine.

“What’s up with your radio?”

I checked. “Sorry, the volume got turned out.”

“Nice property check.”

“You like that?”

“I’m going home. That girl I told you about, she’s waiting in her room for me, naked. You should see the things she’s saying she wants to do to me.”

Chapter Eight

Voluntary duties

Everything I know about Cass's time overseas is from what she's told me or written about in her emails. Honestly, it's not much. A few comments here and there. Cass has never been one for words which is what makes the speech she's giving right now all the more important. It wasn't her first time in Iraq and it wasn't our first time missing her. Before she'd even reached hostile borders Amber and I had returned to the club scene. I tried not to think about it. It made me feel guilty. It should have been both of us over there. I spent most of the Iraq war feeling guilty. It seemed there were always soldiers on the flights I took and the passengers were always applauding them. I was supposed to have been one of them. I'm sure of it. I haven't exactly done anything worthwhile with the life I saved by getting myself kicked out of the marines.

Women aren't allowed on the front lines. That's what the recruiters told both of us when we signed up and Cass has since confessed to me that she might have thought twice about enlisting if he'd told her she'd be on a front line. Cass liked firing her M16 as much as any soldier, but being at the receiving end hadn't sounded like much fun, neither did killing someone. Clearly, I could relate to that, but it didn't make me feel better to know my friend didn't want to be in harms way or give me relief to know she understood my fear. She was fighting terrorists and I was worried about raccoons.

Frontlines. When we signed up, the phrase was useful. In World War II there were no women on the beach at D-Day. That was a front line. Since then the frontline has been become more circular. Strictly speaking, Cass's job was to keep the tanks working. She also worked on the humvees and jeeps. The first time she went to Afghanistan she wasn't concerned for her life. It'll be fine, she'd told Amber. I'll be at base camp day in and day out. They don't let women on the frontlines, she'd told her. Cass didn't lie. She believed it when she said it and she has never said it since. Shortly after her first week in Afghanistan, a humvee was spotted a few miles away, driving quickly toward the base. A marine on top was rotating around with a heavy machine gun. Inside, two more men were watching the ground closely, a critical job. A detail from the base was dispatched to meet them in a medical jeep to provide the fastest care possible to the wounded. A woman, not someone Cass knew, someone she'd seen on the plane ride over from Italy, someone she'd eaten with at the mess hall but not really spoken to, had run to the jeep, carrying a stretcher and driven off away from the base. As they approached the humvee, the front of the jeep went up into the air, a cloud of dust could be seen from the base by the naked eye. When they emerged the marines that had been in the humvee were carrying back their wounded plus the dead bodies of the medical staff.

Still Cass's job was simply to fix the trucks. There shouldn't have been any need for her to fire her gun at an enemy. She didn't need to go out onto the frontlines because her job was at the base, but the Iraq war posed new problems. The ratio of women to men overseas heavily favored the men and each time a team moved into a city with intent to search Iraqi citizens they needed a woman. By Muslim law, only another female could touch a female, but then some of the Iraqi's find it insulting that women are soldiers. The

insurgents aimed for women and Cass had never been so happy to be a freak. Muscular, 5'8", the standard jarhead haircut and gear that flattened her breasts--she'd never be picked out as a woman.

At the base camp, her home for the next six months, she pulled out her personal affects to place them by her cot. Her last tour had been in the summer and she waited impatiently for the sun to set and the temperatures to drop each night. This time it was cold and a rain cloud was rolling in. Cass looked up at the sun and wished winter days were longer. She had twenty minutes to put her stuff away and get in gear before she was to report for her orientation briefing. That was what the email said. She pulled out a picture of Amber and then pulled out the only book she brought and stuffed the picture inside. Cass doesn't read much, but this tour she had brought along Sun Tzu's Art of War. That wasn't in the email; I just noticed it was missing from her bookshelf.

The briefing was mostly boring. More like an orientation. Here's a map of the base, this is when you can eat, here is what you can do if you have some time off. Here are the computers. Yes you can charge your I-Pods there. (Everyone has I-Pods). Most websites are blocked. You cannot access Myspace or youtube. This is the medical area. This is where your unit will work. The base had an airport for bomber planes. The area for fixing planes was right next door to where Cass worked. That was in the email and instead of guilt, that time I felt a twinge of jealousy. She also noted that this commander was not a jerk like the last few she'd had.

During her second tour in Iraq, the briefing, based on her reports, ended like this:

"One last thing," the officer told the group, "It is considered some kind of abomination against Allah for a man to touch a woman so any unit without a female

already a part of it will need women to volunteer to go with them for any mission that may involve contact with Iraqi citizens. As if it's not an abomination against God for a woman to touch another woman. I think these faggot Iraqis have it backwards."

The men laughed, even the man sitting two seats down who smiled at Cass earlier, a smile that said me too.

"Anyway, don't put it past these fuckers to hide weapons on women and children. We have to search them. So the women here, you are welcome to sign up and go on some of these missions."

And that was it. Her second orientation briefing in Iraq ended with discovering they now put women under fire. That was the point of these missions. Go find the insurgents, when they fire at you, fire back. Search the towns for their hideouts. When Cass went to work during her first day of that tour, the women were talking about it. Fixing trucks and tanks day in and day out could get dull. They talked about the missions like it was a break from the mundane.

"You signed up?" one of them asked Cass.

"No."

"You should go. You can move up faster, better pay too."

"I don't really want to be shot at."

"It's not the bullets you have to worry about. You got gear for that. It's the IEDs. And you have to worry about that when we go out on tows."

The other women made it sound so easy, so she signed up. She and thirty Marines left the base and slept in a field outside a city with suspected insurgent supporters. They could have gone in and slept in a house, but this commander didn't want to force

hospitality on the Iraqis. He suspected they resented them even as they offer them meals. They'd be heading out in four hours to start a series of night raids in questionable areas within the city. No one was allowed to talk. Every now and then a guy got up and peed right in front of everyone else. Some of them slept with their heads resting on their packs. Cass was awake, staring at more stars than she had ever seen in her life. That was in the email. They're the same stars she saw at the base, but sleeping in her tent she rarely noticed them. The bugs flying by her ears and resting on her arms were a nuisance she'd learned to ignore. She listened to her I-Pod and thought about home. The I-Pod died right in the middle of a Melissa Ferrick song. They'd be moving out soon she knew. A few lights were on in the city they'd camped outside of. They look like stars that had settled near the earth.

Cass had to pee. That was in the email too. The guys may feel okay pulling down their zipper and letting it out, but Cass would need to expose a bit more, plus, she needed to change her tampon. If the guys knew, they'd never let her forget it. They mostly ignored her. She barely outranked most of them, so no one said anything about her, but they didn't tell her what was going on either. They'd be on this mission for a week. She moved off in the darkness a ways until she thought the starlight was diminished enough to hide her frame and did what she needed to, unnoticed by the guys. She picked her gun back up and felt the metal, cold from the desert night. It was loaded, as always, and she knew the trigger is heavier because of it. Cass had never fired a weapon at another person before that night. It took her three tours overseas to reach this point. Her father fought in Vietnam and for a moment, standing there knowing they were going to move in soon and

that this trigger would take all of her strength to pull, Cass didn't hate him. That was in the email too, sort of.

When they entered the city, it was just like in training. They moved in formation, not quite like a SWAT team, but close. Cass followed the men as they moved to a building. It was abandoned, looked like a business and then they searched two homes, also abandoned. They broke off into pairs to search the floors, but unlike a SWAT team, partnering doesn't mean moving together. He searched one room, she searched another. Some of the men moved back outside. Some were in other buildings near-by. Out the window Cass saw dust come up from the road and heard a rock hit the building. The soldiers were moving inside, climbing the steps.

"Get the fuck down from the window," one of them shouted at her. She did and the window to the side of her shattered.

"Thank God these fuckers have no aim." The marine opened the window and slid his gun into the frame watching the street. Cass did the same. More bullets hit the side of the building, but none of the Marines fired back. Up ahead, Cass could see bright lights flashing from outside a house. The group that moved ahead was engaging. The sounds of the gun fire were distant and she couldn't see who was firing even with her night vision turned on. The two at the window watched. Cass wished she was a lower rank. She wished the guy would tell her what to do. They watched the street and saw nothing. Their own sniper was up on the roof searching for the Insurgent. He couldn't find him. They exited the building, slowly, and move forward. Cass had her gun at her shoulder, watching, her finger on the trigger. She thought she saw something move, a flash of black

in the green background of her night vision and then gunfire exploded, the other marines fired. She could see the tracers on their bullets moving towards the motion. It was only her and her gun. Her feet, sweating in her boots and the bug bites on her arms no longer existed. There was only the gun and her finger on the trigger as she pulled it, joining the fire. She was too late, the man had already fallen. The guy to the right of her noticed her delay.

“Shoot anything that moves,” he whispered and she had to read his lips because his voice was too quiet to be heard over the silence that echoed after the round of gunfire.

Cass had heard other Marines express worry about killing unarmed civilians or armed children. Most of the marines with her that day were not much more than armed children to her. She was just an armed child when she'd enlisted and went on her first tour, but she never had to fire. The men all fired together. No one knew who killed the man up ahead. When they got there, no one stopped to look at him. They hesitated at an intersection between themselves and the forward group. Each of them scanned sections of the crossing. Something moved, a bullet hit the building behind them, Cass fired, it stopped moving. They went on like nothing happened. They didn't find anymore fire. They located the area where the sniper fire came from. They didn't find any weapons.

The forward group was holding up a family who looked as though they'd been dragged out of bed. One of the women spit on Cass during her search. In other houses they thanked her in English. They said USA and smiled. The spitting seemed more natural.

It's not just these thirty marines. Most of the city was occupied by Army, but insurgent strongholds had been popping up and giving them trouble. When Cass's unit

finished their week of raids, she noticed a U.S. sniper on the roof of the woman who spit on her. It seems unlikely that they offered their home to the military. In the jeep, Cass was one of three in her vehicle watching for IEDs. It took them one full day to return to base. They had to stop frequently for all possible IEDs. The roads in Iraq are littered with litter. IEDs hide under anything from rusted hubcaps to clothing. It's worth it. They found and disabled one IED. When a gas truck joined them, they moved even slower. Other men watched for insurgents. At night a few flashes of light came from the distance. They were tracers. Cass had her weapon ready, but she didn't need to fire. The gunners had already fired back and the insurgents disappeared. Exhaustion set in towards morning, but they were near the base. Sand covered the pavement. If it weren't for the litter the drivers would have trouble seeing the roads at times.

When they finally arrived back at camp and Cass was told she had an hour before debriefing, she couldn't decide whether to shower or eat first. At her bunk, where she chose the shower, one of her fellow mechanics was there reading a magazine.

"You guys got back ahead of schedule," she said surprised and waited for Cass to respond.

"Really?" Cass looked at her watch. They were early, they were expected to arrive at 1700 hours and it was only 1100 hours. But Cass didn't say anything else. She also didn't sign up to go on anymore missions. It didn't matter. The one mission gave her combat experience and it's awfully difficult to respectfully decline requests from your commanding officer when words like bravery and honor are on the line. Cass went on several missions every tour, although during the last tour, she never had to fire her gun. I

hoped her emails would indicate profound boredom, but it wasn't just because I wanted Cass to be safe. It was also because I didn't want to feel anymore guilt.

Chapter Nine

No apologies

Maybe I've made Cass into too much of a hero. But that's what she is to me. She's a rock. She pays both her bills and helps with Amber's. She's a butch's butch. That girl could walk into the men's room and no one would bat an eye. She's good people too. Amber is only the third girl she's ever been with. Cass has never cheated on her. I don't think she's even thought about cheating on her. She's the kind of person who drops a dollar in the hat of every homeless person she meets or drives by at an intersection. If everyone would just give a dollar she says and I think it's a good thing she doesn't live in Miami. But she's not all hero. Cass has had her moments of cowardice. She doesn't speak to her family. When I used to live with her, sometimes I'd get a phone call from her mom at the apartment, but she would never return the call. They'd had an altercation when she was sixteen. She doesn't like to talk about it, but over the years I've been able to piece together the details.

Scowling at her over his paper, her father had been noticing Cass's clothes becoming increasingly baggy and her hair shorter each time she got it cut for the past two years, but when she came down the hall from her room sporting one of his ties, he finally folded the paper and readied himself for a fight. It wasn't the first time she'd worn the tie. She'd snuck it out in her bag the previous month and worn in through the halls of her school. She could have done the same today. She knew if she wore the tie to breakfast it

would start a fight but she was angry about something elusive and felt like yelling at her parents.

It was a pretty standard stand-off. Her father blocked the front door she was trying to go out of, her mother shouted with her to be rational and Cass shouting back at both of them saying they were ignorant white trash. She had to dress up for school, there was a basketball game that night. As far as she was concerned, that meant wearing a tie.

“What’s wrong with you?” Her dad pleaded when she tried to push past him. She shoved him, pushed her hands into his shoulders, mostly just because her muscles felt restless, but it escalated the fight. He had fought in Vietnam and even with his own daughter his body reacted violently to violence. He grabbed her by the throat and threw her into the wall causing a picture of Cass and her old dog, who had died the previous year, to fall off its hanger.

“You can’t wear my tie. You are not a boy. When are you going to understand that?” He let go, closed his eyes and brought the hand that had held her throat to his mouth.

“Honey.” Her mom tried to bring down the tone of the fight. “You don’t want people to think you’re, you’re some kind of lesbian do you?” She said the word as if the neighbors might hear, like a lesbian was an evil creature that would not be found in their home. She might as well have said you don’t want people to think you have snakes growing out of your head. Cass stared at them both from the wall.

“And what if I am?” She stood, calmly before them, and spoke in an even tone. They looked at her like she did sprout snakes from her scalp.

Her mom went over to Cass to try and stroke her face. “You don’t want to be gay honey. You’re a beautiful girl. You’re just confused, we can get through this.”

“Get off,” Cass warned her when her mom tried to give her a hug. Her mom had the right sentiment, but the wrong words and Cass wanted all or nothing at that moment.

When her mom didn’t get off and continued to try and comfort her and turn her head to tell her how beautiful she was, Cass grabbed her mom’s wrists and pulled them off of her. She shoved her mom’s hands away. She just wanted her to see that she was serious, that comfort wasn’t good enough. But she pushed too hard. Her mother fell into a cabinet resting in the hallway. Inside a figurine toppled and broke, her mother started crying and Cass felt a wave of guilt that almost dropped her to her knees but she refused to let on. Cass is stubborn that way. It doesn’t matter what the emotion is, she tries to not let anyone see her wearing it. It’s like forced stoicism. She hadn’t meant to hurt her mom.

She didn’t have long to consider what had gone wrong. The shattering figurine clinked against the glass in the cabinet and the next thing, Cass saw her dad’s fist in the air and her world slowed down. She stood paralyzed. She thought, duck, but her body didn’t make any movement. His fist landed on her cheek, missing her nose just enough to avoid breaking it. Everything sped back up and she held her face in her hand. It felt like all of her teeth had just been knocked out. He grabbed Cass by throat again and threw her towards the door where she landed on the floor and noticed that her lip was cut. Blood dripped through her hand onto the hall carpet.

Cass stared into her father’s eyes and began to stand, refusing to break his gaze. She wasn’t thinking about what she had done to her mother. She wasn’t thinking about

her father's dual feelings, about how he had reacted to protect someone he loved against someone he loved. She only thought of him as betraying her.

“Get out of my house.” Her dad's voice was calm now. “You get out now.”

She looked at her father one more time before grabbing the picture of her dog and walking out the door.

Cass went to live with Tyler and his mom who didn't seem to mind that Cass kept her hair short and occasionally wore a tie. For the most part she just existed through school. There were questions when it came time for college, financial aid that couldn't be received without her parents' income information, an assumption that they could help her. She didn't even bother asking them. When the Marine Corp recruiter came by her school, she signed up to take part in the pull up competition and she and several of the other strongest girls in the school were heavily recruited. The recruiter called them several times. He told her four years of her time in the service could be spent studying, paid for by the US government. Cass joined in April when she turned 18. She spent the following fall in boot camp with me. Her goal was to serve a few years and then finish in college. She'd return as an officer, but the recruiter hadn't counted on a war when he passed that information along to eager high school students, just like he hadn't counted on women being in the line of fire.

She wrote her father an email from Afghanistan during her first tour. It was short. She thought he might be proud of her now.

He replied back with same brevity: I wish you'd stop making all my mistakes.

Chapter Ten

Play on

At my insistence, Amber agreed to come out to *Southern* for the first time since Cass left for overseas. We got a table on the patio again and Joey was, as usual, looking around for girls, although I believe this night she was mostly looking for one specific girl. Amber was sitting in the same location she was the last time she was at *Southern* except this time her hands were buried under her thighs and her shoulders had a tensed look about them that countered the flow of the club. Hailey had her back pressed up against Raya and her head was resting on her shoulder as they swayed to an oddly slow hip hop remix. I kept trying to catch Hailey's eye, but she was somewhere else.

"Who wants another drink? I'm buying," I asked when I noticed that Amber was also glaring at their display of affection and looked about ready to vomit. She never looked at me, just kept watching Raya's arms as they moved around Hailey. When the beat morphed into a more typical techno form they continued to sway just as slowly until Raya took Hailey's hand and led her into the club presumably for some more serious dancing. Their movement finally shook Amber's stare and it was as if she just heard the question I asked over a minute before.

"Yeah I could use a drink."

"Joey?" I asked.

“No, no alcohol for me for at least a month,” Joey told me over her shoulder as she moved toward some person she seemed to know.

Amber continued to sit on the bench and stared at her feet. It was the wrong thing to bring her out. I hadn't seen this coming. It usually didn't bother her so much so soon. She'd pretend that Cass was just in south Georgia. It usually took more than a month for her to get to this level of depression. Something was different. The last time Cass went to Iraq I was living with her. I suppose in the quiet of her apartment, the lie didn't last as long. I reached out my hand and pulled her to her feet.

“It'll be ok,” I told her but she didn't hug me back. It was a little like the kiss I tried to give to Hailey. She just tensed up. I hugged Amber tighter as I realized I needed a hug too.

We went inside to get our drinks and I downed a Smirnoff Ice faster than Amber could chug her beer. The sweetness of it almost caused me to vomit, but instead I set it down and nodded over at a busy bar tender.

“How's Shay?” Amber asked as we waited for our next drink.

“Good,” is all she got from me before the bartender rushed by and deposited our drinks without looking. They spilled some and I moved my elbows from the surface quickly.

“She couldn't come tonight?” Amber led, trying to get me to open up. Sometimes I wonder if she has happened into the least verbally expressive group of girls on the planet. I am at least readable. Try as I might I can't ever seem to successfully hide my thoughts. Cass never gives up her feelings; she's a pure stoic. And Joey never seems to be

present for any conversation. For a moment, I thought maybe Amber wished Raya and Hailey were back. They could at least hold a conversation.

“I didn’t ask her,” I said. I knew there would be follow up questions to anything I said. I didn’t have any real answer. Shay and I had been out a few times. I’d been down on her a few times. She liked going to the arcade and I liked beating her at air hockey. There wasn’t much else to say.

“Look at them. It makes me want to vomit,” I said and pointed to the dance floor where I’d spotted Hailey and Raya. It was a last ditch effort to change the subject and it worked.

We watched them, until finally I turned to Amber. I was drunk enough to dance.

It’s embarrassing to me now to think of how I must have stood out among the others moving beneath the flashing lights. I’m told that when I dance I appear to be standing still, but I know one knee is always bending to the rhythm. Amber was holding my hand and jerking it forwards and backwards, as she danced in front of me. She tugged on my arms as if this would somehow trigger movement from the rest of my body. I suppose I wanted to make Hailey jealous. I don’t suppose, I know that’s true, but in a sober state it sounded so ridiculous that I didn’t believe my own memory. At least I have a memory of Amber laughing. That’s a positive even if the laugh was at my expense.

The truly interesting stuff that night involved Joey. Over time I would piece together what happened after she walked off in the other direction.

Joey has many club friends. They’re the kind whose numbers sit in her phone but she never calls. Occasionally she gets a Myspace event invite from them requesting her

presence at the club if they are having a birthday or anniversary. The club friend she walked off towards, when Amber and I went for drinks, had been filling her in on all the gossip Joey was currently involved in. She had apparently heard through the Myspace grapevine that Sasha would be there that night with her new girlfriend and as if on cue Sasha walked onto the patio and lit up a cigarette. Her face was glistening with sweat and some of her hair was matted against the edges of her forehead. Joey almost looked away in disgust when she saw her replacement. Standing there, with one arm around Sasha, was a butch in a black beater. The beater hugged her abs, something Joey wasn't sure she even had. The girl's biceps created a visible edge on her skin.

"I hear she plays Rugby for UF," her friend told her as they both watched the girl and made an effort to tuck their stomachs back under their belts. Apparently Sasha had been leaving comments on this rugby player's board begging her to come down to *Southern* for weeks. The scowl on Joey's face was part sneer, part awe and the other part displeasure at herself. The blond stripes that ran through her hair appeared like the strange fad they were in contrast to the new girl's perfect dirty blond spikes. Sasha looked over at Joey and put her hand around the new girl's waist.

"I'm going inside," Joey told her friend without turning to look at her. She had to brush past this new girl on her way in and she shoved her shoulders forward in a hunched walk without looking at them attempting to fake indifference.

The noise inside takes a moment to adjust to, but the darkness eased her into the harsh flashing light on the dance floor. She checked her phone. No word from the new girl. As she looked around at the groups of girls clumped beside the dance floor, she saw about one girl per group whose name she knew. This is Joey's specialty. This is how she

can get any girl to try and wrap their arms around her body. No wingman needed. She picked the largest group, six girls. On her way over she gave a one handed light shove to the back of any girl who moved in her path, a confidence builder.

“What up Cameron?” she asked leaning into the group and tapping the girl on her bicep with the backside of her hand. The girl turned. They’d never met in person. Cameron added Joey to her Myspace a few weeks earlier and hadn’t so much as left a comment on her page, but Cameron, who was being loud and dancing on every girl who passed through their group was obviously intent on appearing social and so when she responded she hugged Joey like a best friend she knew in high school.

“Yo, Joey, what up? Hey,” she said to the group, “this is my girl Joey.”

Joey nodded to their hellos and chose the last girl her eyes landed on. The girl was only a little smaller than her, but she was wearing fishnets, which is always a sign of an outgoing girl. Joey didn’t move her head. She pointed her eyes at the girl’s feet and then brought them up to her face.

“Damn, you’re sexy.” When the girl smiled she grabbed her hand. “Dance with me.”

It wasn’t exactly the picture of sexy Sasha brought in with her. When the girl’s fat backside brushed up against Joey’s fat front side they couldn’t have been farther apart. Well, they could have been. There were a few girls on the dance floor who were, but it was still pretty bad, so they danced facing one another, not touching, until a few songs later when Joey caught a glimpse of Sasha and ran a hand over the girl’s thighs up to her rib cage. When Sasha turned away Joey gave herself back one point for dignity. She reached into her back pocket to check her text messages again.

I'm here, the text message read.

The girl in front of her, whose name she didn't know, had taken Joey's touch as permission to run her hand down the middle of Joey's chest. Joey looked around. She knew how this would look. She grabbed the girl's hand and held it away from her. In the middle of the dance floor, she spotted the girl she was supposed to meet. The lights had started flashing green and Joey could barely make her out, but she knew it was her because it was the only girl not moving, just staring at her. She had on this pair of tight jeans with a pink belt.

"It was one of those Playboy bunny belts, I think, with sparkles," Joey would tell me later. She never shut up about that damn belt. The girl held her phone up in the air above the crowd and Joey looked down at her own again.

One new text message: I told you, I don't play games and I don't date players.

When Joey looked back up from her phone, the girl was gone.

A week ago, Joey talked about this new girl like she was just some chick whose only true value was her eagerness to experiment in bed. After that text message, after the girl walked away, she got elevated to "the one." She even got a name: Alyssa. Joey started sending "Alyssa" flowers and doing all the stereotypical things young butches, who are eager and more importantly insecure, do to convince girls that butch is worth something.

"This is why you had to declare bankruptcy. Remember?" I asked her one night at work when she was debating on whether or not to send the Alyssa a bear and chocolates with the flowers. She glared at me but also canceled the entire order.

Sometime, probably around when Joey moved out onto the dance floor, the drinks finally hit me hard enough that I started to pick my feet off the ground in an attempt to dance, but I also discovered that I was no longer sober enough to move without losing my balance so Amber and I did the only natural thing we could think of at that moment, we moved toward the bar and Amber ordered us another round of drinks so we'd have something to sip while we leaned against a bar stool and watched Raya and Hailey. Raya's entire body was involved in some popping movement and it was clear she was trying to hold herself back so Hailey could keep up.

"I wish I could dance," I finally said and leaned the side of my head against Amber's. Amber was silent a moment, still watching.

"You know Cass dances?" she asked after a minute.

"For real?"

"Uh huh, she's not great, but at home sometimes I catch her when she thinks she's alone." I could feel her nodding her head.

Hailey and Raya moved to the other side of the dance floor, on their way back outside.

With nothing to watch, we fell quiet. I could sense the missing sound brought on by the broken conversation despite the deafening noise around me.

"I got a letter the other day," Amber finally said.

"A letter, like hand written?"

"An email."

"Doesn't she write like everyday?"

Amber didn't respond.

“What did the letter say?”

“I’m worried about her.”

Here it was. This was the reason she seemed so off. Amber pulled the print out from her front pocket and handed it over to me.

Lovely,

I hope you are having a fantastic morning. It’s late in the afternoon here and I am on lunch. It’s cold and rains more than any other tour I’ve been on. I’ve even been wearing gear to sleep at night.

I was outside the base the other day, routine stuff, and on our way in we drove right past this old dig site. It looked like it could have been thousands of years old, but you know that’s never really been my thing. Some of the guys wanted to take a detour and drive closer, but I told them we shouldn’t, we could accidentally run over some pottery or something ;). I know how much that sort of thing upsets you.

I’m not going to be able to write to you again for a while. I’m not entirely sure how long, at least a week, maybe more. Don’t worry if you don’t hear from me. I’m just going to a different location and I can’t communicate from there.

I love you,

Cass.

When I finished reading the letter, Amber put it back in her pocket and I pulled her in for a hug. Again, Amber didn’t return the hug, but she sank into my embrace, her hands were in fists at her sides. From the shallow breath I knew that her tears were building. It sounded very black ops to me, but I didn’t tell her that. Cass wasn’t trained for that kind of mission. Her security clearance wasn’t even that high. I kept telling Amber it would be ok as I stroked her hair, but I wasn’t sure of that and I wished someone would lean into my ear and tell me the same lie.

“We should find Joey.” She broke from my hug and wiped up the mascara mess on her face as best she could without a mirror.

I pulled out my phone. One new text from Joey: Left club.

“Fuck.”

We found Raya and Hailey in a corner out on the back patio. I stared at Hailey’s leg coming up off the ground and circling around Raya’s body. When we asked for a ride, Hailey offered sure before the question was even out of my mouth.

“Thanks for driving my car home for me.” I looked over at Hailey. “I don’t think I’ve even reached the drunkest point of my night.”

“Don’t worry about it.”

I rested my head against the passenger side window of my own car and stared at the road.

“So you two are like in a relationship now?” I let the disgust creep into my voice, knowing I could blame it on being drunk.

“Yep.” When I didn’t have any follow up questions Hailey continued. “Raya’s sweet,” after another pause she added, “just really sweet.”

“I’m sweet.” I didn’t mean to let that slip. “Why aren’t we together?” I asked, figuring it was out so I might as well go all the way.

“You know why.” I didn’t know why. I didn’t know what Hailey was talking about.

“I bet I’m better in bed than Raya.” I tried to smile, like I was kidding around, but I wasn’t. I was certain I was better than Raya and I felt that should count for something.

“Raya’s new...”

“Yeah, aka: she sucks!”

Hailey laughed at my joke.

“Sarah stop... You’re such a boy sometimes.” She shook her head, but kept laughing.

I did my best to give her what amounted to a boyish grin and a shrug.

“Isn’t Raya a boy? Does she strap it on for you?” I asked her and then thrust my hips to emphasize the point. Hailey laughed again. Two points in a row, but then she spoke.

“Raya can be a boy sometimes.” She put emphasis on the word boy, she was using it as a euphemism for the other half of my question. “But she’s not a boy like you,” Hailey went on as she pulled in front of the building I lived in. I thought this was good news for me, I out boyed her, but she wasn’t done yet. “You’ll always be my little stone, Sarah.” She kissed me on the head. It was time to get out of the car. Raya had taken Amber home. She would be along any minute to get her girl.

I opened the door and threw up on the pavement.

How the fuck did Hailey know I was stone?

Either the girls I’ve dated talked to their friends about me and their friends talked to their friends and everyone in Orlando knew about stoneness or Joey told her. I was leaning toward the second option and visions of kicking her in the gut popped into my mind until I realized she had too much fat surrounding her organs to feel it. I replaced the visions with the image of her head making contact with the brick side of the building.

Hailey would have found out regardless, I guess, but it always made me feel better to be pissed at Joey.

Chapter Eleven

“Stand by Your Man”

It's not an excuse, but I was still pissed at Joey the next day and I hadn't had an opportunity to confront her yet. Plus, after having spent the last 24 hours vomiting alcohol, the last thing I wanted to hear was: “You shouldn't drink so much Sarah.”

It was Shay. I'd invited her over, but was regretting it within minutes of her arrival. She was right. I drank too much the night before, but the irrational defense part of my personality turned back to the refrigerator to pop open another hard cider, like that would show her. The light from my bedroom, minimized by the partly closed door, created a soft glow in the living room. Despite feeling mostly recovered from my alcohol purge the previous day, a full blast of light would have been enough to trigger my suppressed headache. When the refrigerator door opened I shut my eyes and reached in blindly for the cider. Shay sighed when she saw it in my hand.

“You want one?” was the only indication I gave that I'd heard the sigh.

“Yeah, sure,” she said. I had to go back. I'd already shut the fridge, assuming she'd say no just to make her point about my drinking. Maybe I did like this girl, but it didn't matter. I was looking for the girl who could touch me and Shay was the girl who didn't even want to try.

They're twist off caps, but I grabbed the bottle opener for effect. One quick jerk at the cap and it flew off splattering my hand with cider. Shay laughed. I looked up and

smiled at her and thought about Hailey. Maybe Hailey wasn't so hot. Her teeth reflected in the dim light. Hailey's were stained, an off white. Shay's glistened. When I splattered more cider on my hand opening the other bottle, Shay grabbed a hold of my sleeve and pulled me back into the living room.

"Come here," she said as she took the bottles and set them down near the TV. "Let me see your hands." But Shay didn't wait for me to show them to her. She grabbed each of them and brought them to her lips sucking on the cider. "Salty."

My breath caught in my throat as I watched her lips move over the top of my hand. I wanted to see what she would do next, but I knew the answer to that question was more than likely, she'd wait for me to make a move. That was a signal or the request. It was my job to respond.

"That would be sweat you're tasting," I said taking my hands back and wrapping them around Shay's waist.

I brought my lips to Shay's. She parted her's, ready for a kiss. Instead, I leaned down and kissed her neck, ran my hands up the sides of her body and pushed Shay backwards into a wall. Her legs wrapped around me.

"Let's take this too your room."

I carried her through the door and flipped the lights. There was some light coming from a streetlamp outside, but before my eyes adjusted it was pitch black and I tripped over one of my shoes and dropped Shay onto the futon.

"Shit. Are you okay?" I asked when I heard the metal in the futon frame clang from forceful contact.

Shay didn't respond. She sat up on the bed. She grabbed me by my belt loops and pulled me down on top of her. My hands went through the steady work of moving across Shay's body, looking for all the spots that would make her moan or drop her head back, my hips thrust lightly into her opened legs. Shay's body was squirming beneath me, but it wasn't like it had been in the past. Each of her hips pushed up against me alternately and her hands were shoving against my ribcage. I stopped all my movement and looked down at her.

"Roll over," she told me and pushed hard with one hand and one hip so that I finally understood the gesture.

"We've been through this." I rolled to my side.

"I want you to let me try."

I was part happy and part disappointed. I wanted her to try to, but it was unlikely to work. "I thought you were okay with it."

"I am, but I want you to let me try."

I rolled the rest of the way to my back. Shay ended the conversation by kissing my stomach.

I focused on feeling Shay's kiss. Hailey had called me a stone butch. Stone. An almost outdated term that implies the butch does not want to be touched. I wanted this. I wanted her to push me on my back and touch me with all the passion she had inside of her. I wanted to feel her. I keep secrets. I don't let the girls I'm dating know that I have other love interests, I'm a proven coward and I let people think I'm stone. But I'm not. I wanted to feel her. I thought about Shay's lips against my stomach and let her take my shirt and sports bra over my head. I closed my eyes and could feel my skin move beneath

her lips and hands. It reminded me of having stitches, like when the anesthesia had numbed the area and I could feel only the tugging of the thread moving through my skin. Finally there was a complete absence of feeling and I looked down to see Shay kissing my nipples.

I let her continue. My heart was building speed and I'm sure Shay took that for arousal rather than panic. How could I not feel? My body was stone, but my mind didn't want to be. And this is the real *Stone Butch Blues*; wanting desperately to connect, whether it's to society, gender, sexuality, and not being able to achieve even the simplest of connections, not being able to feel the girl on top of you who cares about you enough to tell you: you shouldn't drink so much. This was my stone butch blues.

I tried to move my own hands; to move them over Shay's back when she was near me and through her hair when she moved down to unbutton my jeans. They were the lucky you ones this time, but I wasn't feeling very lucky. I tried to get there mentally, like all the girls had told me before, but I didn't know where to go. When my boxers came off I shivered and pulled my elbow into my body, covering my nipples with my forearms. I looked over at Shay's clothed form. She didn't know it but this was improvement from that first try almost a decade ago. I was doing better. The panic I felt inside wasn't manifested in my actions. I was controlled, but my upper body was tense and that just sent waves of goosebumps over my body, over my nipples. They shriveled, covered in bumps. It was disgusting.

I brought one hand to cover my face as if I were watching a scary movie, peaking through my fingers. Shay kept moving her hands over me and when I looked down I could see where they were touching me. Shay looked up at me and smiled before moving

a finger into me. My face was contorted trying to hold my breath. I could finally feel something, but it wasn't good. This part was never good. Shay gasped when the light from the window showed my face and she stopped moving her finger, but left it inside.

“What’s wrong?”

“It hurts.”

“You’re really wet.”

“It hurts.”

“It’s not even all the way inside you yet.”

“It’s like it’s burning.” I tried to keep my voice even.

Shay pulled her finger out and kissed me on the inner thigh. I hoped she wouldn't look back up again or that I wouldn't have to speak because I was crying.

“It’s okay,” she said.

She moved her lips and I could feel the tugging again as Shay's tongue moved against me. I wanted to squirm away because it felt wet and slimy. I didn't look back down to watch. My eyes were open at the ceiling. This was wrong. I could feel Shay's hand as it moved back up my sides. I knew the hand was stroking me and was comforting, and yet there was no sensation. The lights from outside had lit the room up in sections and I thought in the corner a miniscule dark shadow might be a spider. I focused on it, squeezing my eyes tight and opening them again, a trick that can sometimes give me average eyesight: 20/20 perspective. I know because I used the trick to read the eye chart on my driver's test. It wasn't working on the alleged spider however.

It took me a moment to realize Shay had stopped and was staring at me. I could still feel her saliva over me. It was still slimy. I sat up, leaning on my elbows.

“I’m sorry, but I told you, I just can’t. I tried.” I reached for the boxers that Shay deposited next to me on the bed, but she grabbed my hand.

“You didn’t try, you just laid there.”

“What?”

“Sarah, you can’t lay there and expect it to just happen.”

I heard this before. I jerked my hand free and grabbed my boxers moving my body out from under Shay.

“You have to close your eyes.”

With my boxers on, I jammed my breasts back inside their sports bra.

“I can’t,” I said to Shay and reached for her jeans.

“You don’t know that.”

When I heard the tone of accusation in Shay’s voice I stood up and finished pulling my jeans on. It was hard for me not to start screaming at her. I looked down at Shay. She was still sitting on the bed.

“I told you. It doesn’t work for me.” I moved toward the light switch. I wanted to know if there was really a spider in the corner.

“Of course it doesn’t.” Shay got up to follow me, her shirt still bunched up against her belly button ring. “It’s not going to work if you make the other person do all the work.”

The light went on and when I saw there was no spider I moved into the darkness of the living room and grabbed my cider.

“Why are you shutting me down?” Shay asked as she followed me and grabbed the hand that wasn’t pouring cider down my throat. “I like you a lot,” she punctuated the words. “I just want to help you with this and I really think your problem...”

But I cut her off. I reversed Shay’s hold on my wrist. It wasn’t even something I knew I could do. I had always thought she was stronger, but I’d been through boot camp. I took her wrist and pushed it against her chest, spinning her body around and slamming her back into the wall. Fine thing, I was prepared to go war and the first time I’d used my skills it was against a girl. Shay’s head followed her body and made a second thud against the drywall. I blinked. In that blink all the thoughts that I had wanted to rage at her momentarily left my mind. Instead I hear Butch Al from *Stone Butch Blues* talking to young Jess. “You can give her immense pleasure or you can hurt her like all the times she’s been hurt before.” I could see that little girl at my party walking away with tears in her eyes. And there was Natalie, my first, and her shocked face when I bruised her wrists holding her against the bed.

Before I grabbed her I wanted to say I had heard it all before. That she wasn’t the first girl to say this to me. I had wanted to say that apparently my mind would rather think about spiders on the ceiling than about her mouth on my pussy. That I didn’t like her a lot and then I’d punctuate each word as she had so she would know that by a lot I meant I didn’t see a future with her. But I didn’t. I caught the words in my throat because I thought they might hurt her. Because I knew how it felt to hurt a girl and I didn’t want to feel that again no matter how angry I was. I left them there, swallowing them until they were in my hands and I still believe the words would have hurt more. Shay was pressed

up against the wall, her eyes blinking erratically like she was trying to refocus her vision. I wanted to apologize. To tell her I just didn't know how.

"You don't know a god damn thing about my problem," was what came out instead.

Shay looked down at the hand on her chest and then looked over my face. I had let up, there was no pressure against my arm or against her body. She could move if she chose to, but Shay stayed.

"I'd like to."

I took my hand off of Shay and set my drink down. I didn't look her. It was what I wanted to hear, but I also didn't believe it was worth the effort.

"I can't receive sex. The end."

Shay took a step toward me, but then must have been worried I'd come back at her because she promptly took the step back.

"I hope that's not true, because I've thought about it and I can't be with you if you'll never let me touch you." Shay settled for taking a half-step off the wall. I almost smiled at that moment. I almost smiled because yet again a relationship was ruined before it started. And I almost smiled because Shay was the first person to say it would be too hard to be in a relationship with me and not be able to touch me. I wanted those words to come out of a girl's mouth. I wanted a girl to voice that. But Shay was like all the others: impatient, expecting immediate results. It wasn't going to work like that.

"Well, then I guess this is good-bye cause there's nothing to do about that."

"You have to work at problems Sarah. You can't just expect them to magically fix themselves. I'm willing..."

And the anger I swallowed and put into my hands was back and still taking residence in my extremities. I turned toward Shay sharply and caught her across the throat with my forearm. I shoved her back into the wall. My fist followed closely behind, and when it bashed against the drywall next to her head, it took all of my strength to keep it pressed and not let it bounce off the wall.

“Fuck,” I yelled and then added “you” to keep Shay from knowing it was the pain that made me shout. I could feel her breathing race beneath my arm, but she stayed quiet. I stared at her for a moment. She looked afraid. I’d done it again. But I don’t think she was as afraid as I had been in the bedroom. I’m not brave. Of course my body retreated from her touch.

When I lightened pressure once again Shay ducked under my fist and opened the door. I turned away and took another drink of my cider, really trying to sell the image of callousness just in case she turned back around--so much for avoiding those guilty feelings. The door closed and I set the cider down.

Back in my bedroom, I turned the light off and reached behind my bed to pull out a dingy stuffed lamb. I had my computer out, playing “Stand by Your Man” by Tammy Wynette on repeat. The song appears repeatedly throughout *Stone Butch Blues*. Leslie Feinberg either had an obsession with Tammy or she felt the song said something representative of the atmosphere that surrounded the butch-femme dynamic in the late 1960’s and 70’s. It was a song attacked my feminists, much the way butch women themselves were attacked. I wouldn’t know about that song or that atmosphere around it. Men aren’t allowed to expect that from their wives anymore and in the late 80’s and early 90’s butches struck a deal with the feminist community. It wasn’t the kind of deal that

gets settled in the conference room. We repeated “we don’t want to be treated like men” enough times that they finally believed and we’ve making small adjustments to that contract ever since. “We don’t want to be treated like men, except in the case of ‘boys night out.’” And so on.

I turned to *Stone Butch Blues* when I wanted understand the butch inside of me. So it shouldn’t be a surprise that I turned to a song within the book, when I’d let my fear be overcome by my anger, like a stereotypical man. I didn’t want Shay to forgive me. I wanted to take it back. I want to unhurt her. But there was still something in the song that resonated deeper than the words.

I placed the lamb under my arm and rested my head against it. I doubt Shay realized there were tears on my cheek while she was going down on me. The air conditioning had dried them so my eyes felt heavy from the extra weight of dried salt. As I drifted to sleep, I imagined myself slow dancing in a dingy bar. The song played over a jute box and when Tammy’s voice softened and sang “After all he’s just a man,” I leaned my head forward against the girl’s shoulder, she held close to her and I drifted off to sleep.

Part II

Chapter Twelve

Another Secret Box

I have a strange habit, if you haven't noticed, of considering my friends' actions when they're alone. I like to envision the details they would never tell me about, to see the moment maybe not as it was but how it must have felt. Joey told me later, the evening after the event took place, that her brother came over and announced his engagement. It's not really her brother. It's her step-brother and they've never lived together which is probably why they've been able to maintain a friendship. He takes Joey out to strip clubs and Joey gives him tips on how to move his tongue to best please girls. They've been friends for ten years. Joey stands good potential to be his best man, but when she told me there was something flat in her voice. I've known Joey for five years. I know her well enough to say that her behavior around this time was unusual. She still told me more than I'd like to know about her affairs but it was almost as if she didn't seem interested in her own words and for some reason that got me get interested.

So for instance, I know that inside her mother's kitchen that day at eight in the morning, Joey was alone. Her mother's collection of miniature dog figurines were lined up along the edge of the linoleum siding that extends from the back of the countertops. Joey had her head stuck in the freezer, searching unsuccessfully through chicken pattie's and frozen vegetables for a box of Eggos. When the frost had numbed her face enough to

prevent her from feeling snot as it dripped down onto her upper lip, she gave up the search and turned to face the line of miniature dog breeds, but on the counter an anomaly caught her eye and almost caused her to trip over the trashcan which had been moved to the middle of the kitchen (no doubt as a hint to Joey or her step-father to take out the trash). There on the counter, a set of puppy dog eyes were staring up at her, the body they had broken off from was missing. The artist had placed a little dot, meant to be a glimmer but now looking more like a tearful plead for help, in the corner of one of the eyes. After catching her balance on the tottering trashcan, Joey grabbed a paper towel and covered them. Porcelain or not, the watchful eyes creeped her out. The eyes blinded, she picked up the Coke bottle that clattered around on the floor when the trashcan tipped and listened for movement from the back bedroom.

When she squeaked the front door open after coming home from work, she could hear the snores of her mother's three dachshunds coming from that back room, a sure sign her mom had yet to wake. She had slipped her shoes off and carefully placed her keys in the sole of one shoe so the jingling didn't activate her mother's barking alarm clock. Joey waited for it to go off after she'd all that noise, but all was still silent.

With her step-dad already off at work, this time in the morning is one of the few moments Joey spends alone. Even her normally buzzing phone finally quiets around dawn. With no Eggos to be found, Joey removed a Hot Pocket from the pantry and placed it in the microwave. Then she waited. Watching it spin in circles, she meditated to the microwave's hum.

It had been a few months since she'd had a date, an actual date with hand-holding and kisses on the cheek. The humming of the microwave drew her mind to the absence of

vibrations coming off her phone and then to the girl who stood in the middle of the dance floor holding up a cell phone, Alyssa. Alyssa was wearing her Lucky jeans (the ones with a hole in the knee) and that sparkly pink belt. Joey could still see her eyebrows raised in daring and her mouth turned down in disappointment. The image had stayed with Joey, engrained on the back of her eyelids before she drifted off to sleep and in the temperamental flashing light of the microwave. If it hadn't been for Joey's reputation, Alyssa probably would have stayed and asked Joey what was going on. She probably would have given her the benefit of the doubt, but Joey's to blame for her own player image. It was carefully crafted by her when she was young, just after her first relationship ended. When a girl started showing signs of wanting commitment, Joey would turn her phone off for one night and then add a new person to her top friends on Myspace. The new add was noticed instantly by any girl who may have been waiting for her to call them back.

Girls accused her of cheating in the middle of Southern and she would stare at them, waiting for them to finish, and respond: "Are you done?" And then she'd walk away, never denying anything. Joey has never actually cheated. She doesn't know that I know this. She wants us all to believe that she's some gifted player but I know Joey. Joey falls in love every time she goes out on a date. She looks at me seriously and nods: "You know, I really think I like this one. This could be the one." The one, the one to change her player ways, to get her to settle down and I just nod. Yeah Joey. She's the one, the next one.

But I understand. Girls, or at least the girls Joey knows, seemed to like her more if she was an asshole. Like the girl she had before she went home that morning. The girl

Joey didn't think I knew about. She lived in the apartment complex and had been bring Joey late night snacks for several weeks. The girl, Joey made park off property because her plates were expired and then refused to help with the golf cart when she had a trunk full of groceries. That girl, after Joey didn't help her, started bringing Joey full on meals and staying at the gate an extra five minutes just to flirt. It had started innocently even before Sasha left Joey. At some point, the girl had started making flirtatious jokes whenever Joey talked about work, like "she had a key jammed in her door, did she?" Anything, if said with the appropriate tone, could make Joey blush. But despite popular opinion, Joey doesn't sleep with more than one girl at a time, unless it's at the same time, or so she has told herself, should that situation ever arise.

Joey had been to her apartment that night. The girl had called and asked for Joey specifically to come and remove a lizard from her living room. Joey, who wouldn't help her with her groceries and squirmed at the thought of touching reptiles was going to get a lizard out of her apartment. I looked at Joey when she told me she was leaving to help a resident with a pest issue. I rolled my eyes, but Chris, the third guard at the gate that night seemed to buy it.

"Are you sure your roommates won't be coming home?" Joey asked as she walked into the girl's apartment and took her work flashlight out of its holster, setting it down on the coffee table.

"What you're not even going to ask where the lizard is?" The girl backed up to the edge of the living room couch. Her gym shorts were more like large bikini bottoms

and her bra was missing beneath her green beater. Any suspicion that she might have called about an actual lizard was gone.

“I think we both know I’m the wrong person to ask for when you have a lizard in the house, but if it’s a lizard, I’ll get Sarah back here.” She reached for her radio. “110 to 104.” 104 is me. With the radio mic off she turned back towards the girl who called her. “I specialize in, cough, other services.”

The girl rolled her eyes and pulled at the front of Joey’s belt.

“Go 110.”

Joey looked at the girl while responding.

“This lizard is on the ceiling, it might be a bit.”

“10-4.”

Joey had to look down a full head below her to see the girl’s face. She didn’t smile, she didn’t raise an eyebrow, she just stared at the girl forcing her pupils to dilate or grow smaller or whatever they do when she stares intently. When the smaller girl let go of her belt and started to smile she leaned in, kissed her and grabbed a hold of her hips. In her hands she felt the hips of the girl she was dancing with when her intended date caught her. She saw Sasha’s hips, rolling as she danced with the rugby player.

The girl unbuttoned Joey’s shirt and dragged Joey button by button into her room. When Joey went for the belt and climbed on the bed over the girl, she puts her hand on Joey’s.

“Leave it. It’s sexy.”

And Joey left the belt there, her keys jingling and scraping against the girls abdomen as she kissed her chest and reached a hand down into her waist band. It moved

like clockwork. The girl occasionally grabbed onto her breast through bra and beater. Joey had one hand holding her body up, the other hand moving between her legs. After a few minutes of this, Joey's hand went numb. As she adjusted, she caught a look at her watch while the girl stared at the headboard. She'd been gone ten minutes. She thought about the gate and how Chris, the new guy and I had probably started a debate on socialism. We had been discussing it every night for a week, driving Joey into the back more and more, which was honestly part of the reason I picked fights about a subject I didn't understand. Two security guards, arguing politics. It was pointless. Two nights before Chris had looked ready to take a swing at me and as Joey moved over the girl she had visions of arriving back at the gate to find one of her guards in handcuffs arguing to the cops: "but he's an idiot."

When the girl screamed, Joey looked back at her face and then realized her fingers had curled inside her. Maybe she'd found the g-spot. She took a moment to run her fingers over this area, committing the texture to memory for future use. Sex used to mean something to Joey, even if it was just about new experience or momentary passion. Like I said, Joey fell in love with the girls she fucked, every last one of them. Trashy moms or busy lawyers, she loved them. This girl. She didn't mean anything. The scene had become too familiar, too easy. The girl had an expectation of how Joey would behave and Joey fulfilled that expectation. These girls, their expectations are always the same. Joey knew she'd have to leave out her indifference when she recounted this to AJ and I later and she would tell us. That was the whole point.

When the girl made another loud moan, partially faked no doubt, Joey looked back at her face and couldn't help but wiggle her tongue around in front of the girl's

closed eyes. She moved from a wiggling tongue to every facial gesture she could think of. Finally the girl held her hips up for a moment and then it was over. Joey pulled her fingers out and the girl kept her eyes closed. She wiped the webs off on the sheets and headed for the bathroom to wash her hands. In the mirror Joey looked at her hair; it was still in place. She splashed water on her face to get the sweat from the night off and stared at the faucet for a minute. There was blond hair wrapped around the drain.

“Do you want me to return the favor?” the girl asked when Joey returned to the room.

“No, I’m all sweaty. I gotta get back to the gate anyway. Sarah will wonder,” she said as she re-buttoned her shirt and looked over at the now open-eyed naked girl on the bed.

“Thanks,” she smiled.

“Night.” Joey let herself out.

“110 to gate: lizard evicted.”

“That was fast,” I teased her over the radio.

Joey is the best pretend player I’ve ever known. The only conclusion that I can draw is that she really is an asshole, where as AJ and I really do date several girls at the same time, we are not assholes at heart. Well, I don’t really know AJ well enough to say that, but I at least feel bad after doing something assholish. Joey has it down to an art and the girls line up to talk to her, double chin and all.

I can’t help myself but try to let Joey know she’s not really all that. She’s not really a player, like it’s my responsibility to put her back in her place. After having a few

drinks we usually gripe, which is often disguise for bragging, about girls and how they want too much of our time or we spend more than we could afford on necklaces and lingerie. We take turns one-upping each other. I will never forget the image of AJ sliding a pool stick between his legs, pointing at it with two fingers and saying: “And then I said, suck it Bitch,” conveniently leaving out what happened next. I laughed. I couldn’t top that. I wouldn’t have the guts to say that to a girl even if I wanted to. So I laughed, I took my shot and added a piece of wisdom I hoped made it sound like I knew all about it.

“You know they like it. Tell a girl you can’t live without her, she’ll be out the door telling everyone you’re not a real butch. Hear it all the time. ‘Oh Sarah it’s so nice to be with a real butch; the last girl I dated wanted me to use the strap-on on her.’”

Back in the kitchen, the hot pocket burst a hole, and cheese squirted the ceiling of the microwave. The popping sound interrupted Joey’s thoughts. Joey’s first relationship was with the second girl she slept with. The one she’d gotten caught with, Rachel. It had only lasted nine months but Joey was sure she was in love. Her first day at college she’d gone to an out-and-proud meeting on campus and she’d met Rachael, another freshman. They were both living at home. The girl wasn’t gorgeous, a little on the chubby side and at the time her teenage acne hadn’t completely cleared up, but she’d say hi to Joey. The next day Joey brought a dozen roses to Rachael’s dorm room and they were an instant couple.

Joey saved up enough money for an engagement ring. She planned to propose in a cave just north of Orlando during a diving trip. Rachael did things like buy Joey colon and pink orchids, but as time went forward Rachael became more and more interested in

seeing Joey in drag and practicing Kama Sutra poses with their strap-on. Finally, just in time for finals during their second semester, Rachael decided she needed the real thing and the sex stopped altogether. Joey had known that she frequently visited a professor's office hours. What it took Joey awhile to realize is that he wasn't Rachael's professor. It's been over ten years, but Joey still keeps the ring in the back of the top drawer of her nightstand on the left side of her bed at home. Joey sleeps on the right side. Incidentally, Joey has never appeared in drag since.

The microwave beeped. She reached in for her meal and stared at the steam emerging from around the cardboard. She was nearing 30, alone, in her mom's house, fat. The Hot Pocket still steaming hit the bottom of the trashcan. Her mother's little dogs yipped from the backroom, their nails scratched as they scurried over the hardwood floor and the front door squeaked open. Joey turned and took two steps toward the door, glanced at the cabinet where her step-dad's old revolver sat. A tall shadow ducked down, and the face of her step-brother peeked out from around the corner.

“Shit man you scared me. I almost shot you.”

“Thanks. I'm good, how are you?”

“How are you Dan? Now what the fuck are you doing here?”

“I have news. Your mom here?”

Her mom opened the door to the backroom at that moment and the dogs came yipping down the hallway and skipped over Dan as they sought out the smell of cooling Hot Pocket in the trash. Joey's mom wasn't far behind the dogs, with only a bathrobe wrapped around her—it was a fact Joey learned the hard way when she was younger. Her mom looked like she hadn't even bothered to open both of her eyes yet.

“Joey, I know you’re not having people over at this hour.” But then her one opened eye caught the height of the person standing in the doorway and looked up at him, “Dan?” She reached out her arms for a hug and he bent over to embrace her, almost forced to pick her up as he did.

“Sorry to wake you mom. I have big news for you two though.”

Joey’s mom opened up her second eye.

“Anya and I are getting married.” Anya took that moment to step into the house from where she’d gone unnoticed on the front porch. This was the first time Joey met Anya. One circumstance or another had always kept them from meeting at family functions. For instance, they went to see Anya’s parents over Christmas, and the pair had only been dating for six months. As Joey shook her hand and felt her soft skin she looked over the rest of her creamy flesh and could see why Dan chose her. Although, six months didn’t seem like a long enough time. It’s very lesbian of them, Joey told me and I’m sure she’d mentioned it to Dan as well.

As happy as Joey was for her brother, her mother’s robust excitement and inability to stop mixing pancake batter quickly became too much for her to bear. Joey crawled into her bed and laid awake on the pillow hoping for sleep. The pride flowing off Dan’s smile as he kissed and hugged his girl, who blushed and showed her mom the sizeable diamond, combined with the three dogs all running around in different directions taking in the various emotions of the room, made Joey feel like she was caught in the calm of a hurricane. She watched it swirl around but was never truly affected.

It wasn't even the knowledge that somewhere in her mother's mind she was thinking that now she would have a real baby producing daughter that bothered her. Joey rolled over to her side and took the ring out of the back of the drawer. She had felt love and passion for Rachel. The stone seemed smaller than Joey remembered it. The band, made for Rachel's ring size also fits Joey and she slipped it on and held her hand out to observe the look. It'd been so long ago. She never felt that way for Sasha or any of the other girls she'd been "serious" about. They'd just come and gone and she can't even remember the last time she was excited about anything.

Chapter Thirteen

River.

When Joey returned from the girl's apartment that night, Raya was there. She must have noticed the green Civic parked in the lot because from across the street she yelled: "Sarah, you didn't tell me Raya was here."

Raya was leaning against the island that existed just outside the main security office. She'd come with coffee. This was when we discovered that we'd first met on *Call of Duty* the night I went out with Shay. Raya was telling me all sorts of things about her past that night, about earrings and first dates. I asked her about Hailey. She seemed evasive. Trouble in paradise. I tried to press her for details while pretending not to really care and she proved forthcoming as usual.

Raya had woken up at Hailey's, as usual. Her palm was pressed hard against her forehead and her fingers were tangled in the front of her hair as she tried to pry apart the layer of crust that had sealed her eyes shut. It was Sunday, which meant it was Monday for Hailey, but Sunday was just Sunday for Raya. She'd woken up early, around nine, but that was still long after Hailey had gone to work. Hailey's two cats had jumped on the bed and tag teamed her, one sat on Raya's chest, the other gently kneaded her eyes. It was really a far better way to wake up than the beeping of an alarm clock. And Raya really woke up, aside from having trouble parting the crust on her eye, it was one of those rare mornings where waking up includes all aspects of the body and she felt like she could

have done a somersault out of the bed, but she didn't. Instead she petted the cats, who, realizing their goal had been accomplished, jumped down off the bed and walk out of the room. When they reached the door, they turned to look back at Raya.

"I'm coming, I'm coming," she told them.

Raya followed the cats, into the kitchen until they stopped abruptly and stared down at their food bowl.

"Did Hailey forget to feed you?" she asked them half rhetorically and half skeptically wondering if they had already eaten their share and were now hoping for another. They were looking up at her, with practiced eyes that were wide, even for a cat and pupils that looked like they belonged in a dim room rather than one where the sun was cutting through sideways and forcing Raya to squint.

"Alright, I'll feed you. Just don't tell Hailey."

Raya looked around her girlfriend's apartment. It seemed Hailey had time for very little lately. Clean clothes were in heaps in the living room after being tossed out of the dryer to make room for new laundry. The litter smelled from across the room. Raya realized that the gnat circling her head was probably born there. A bag of trash sat by the door, hinting at Raya to take it as she left. The sink was full of dishes. It was only a quarter past nine. Hailey wouldn't be home until at least three. Raya set to work. She cleared out the old litter and wiped down the container where the bag had ripped allowing excrement to get in between the lining. The dishes got cleaned and put away, the sink wiped down, the bed made, clothes hung up and bathroom scrubbed. It was only 11:30 when she finished.

Despite spending most of her nights at Hailey's, Raya kept her own apartment. They had both agreed that Raya should keep her stuff at her place, but sometimes that became a pain. After all her work, she had to drive home, shower and drive back. Adding in checking her bank account, playing a few fast rounds of *Call of Duty* and picking up some red Mountain Dew, Raya didn't get back to Hailey's until nearly three and it was only ten minutes later when she heard a key in the door. Hailey stopped in the doorway when she saw Raya standing in her kitchen, grinning. Raya moved towards her, but her initial attempt to give her a kiss and hug ended with Hailey sidestepping into the kitchen to set down her briefcase. When Hailey pulled a water bottle out of the fridge and didn't say anything Raya went through a list, highlighting all the things she's done for Hailey, searching for a reaction, but she didn't get one.

"You're sweet," Hailey said when Raya'd finished and turned back to the fridge.

"Love me?" she asked and reached behind Hailey to hold her and nuzzle her neck.

Hailey brushed her off. "What do you want for dinner?"

Stepping back, Raya allowed the change in topic, chalking up Hailey's response to another bad day at work.

"I'm in a pretty impartial mood. What are you in the mood for?"

"Raya, I don't care, I've had a long day, just pick something."

"Ok, We still have tuna helper?"

"Fine."

"I'm good with anything if you don't want that."

"I said it's fine." Hailey grabbed the left over bowl of tuna helper from the fridge.

"Sometimes fine doesn't mean..."

“Raya.” She paused. “It’s fine.”

Raya walked into the family room and sat down on the couch. The cats joined her and she busied her time by throwing small beanbag balls around the room while the cats took turns pouncing on them and giving them soft bites to ensure that the balls had not come to life during their flight.

It wasn’t long before dinner was done and sitting on the coffee table in front of Raya. Hailey turned on a reality TV show that Raya didn’t like and they ate in silence. When they were done, Raya picked them up and headed into the kitchen where there were food stains all over the counter and several dirty pots. She quickly put the excess in the fridge and started washing the dishes.

“What are you doing?” Hailey asked.

“Just getting the dishes done.”

“Leave them.”

Raya did as she was told, but not without letting the dishes drop loudly against metallic sink. They watched TV and during this time Hailey pushed the cats off of her twice and Raya tried to kiss Hailey once during which time Hailey picked up one of the cats. Shortly after that she stood up, leaving the TV on, and announced: “I’m going to bed.”

Raya continued to stare at the show, unsure how to react, until a few minutes later when Hailey came back from the bedroom.

“You can go home or stay if you like.”

“Which would you prefer?”

“Please just do what you want.”

Raya left, but she didn't go home. It was still early. She wandered around town. She went to the mall and tried to get up the courage to hold a few ties against her chest, but never succeeded. She was sitting in a Starbucks, playing a game on her phone when she decided to visit us at work. She'd brought us coffee a few times throughout the winter, but had never actually gotten out of her car to chat before. When I heard Raya's story I couldn't help but my raise my eyebrows at her. Thankfully she wasn't looking. It was like listening to butch romance gone psycho. Raya needed to chill out and back off. She clearly had been picking up too many of Hailey's phone calls. You don't tell people that though. Even people who you want to see succeed in their relationships. You don't tell people they're smothering their partner unless you want a quick who the fuck asked you or mind your own business. Raya expected me to take her side. I gave her the typical advice. "Girls suck, man. Fuck 'em."

"Where's the sweetheart?" Joey shouted over.

"Sleeping. She went to bed at six."

Joey crossed toward Raya and leaned on the table, opposite her.

"Wow, it's like after midnight. Guess it's almost time for her to wake up then."

This joke played into how Raya felt about the situation and I almost turned around to go inside fearing that Raya was going to restart her story for Joey, but a voice called from the darkness of one of the buildings.

"Joey, is that you? I didn't know you were working tonight."

River. Hot, tan, Puerto Rican, River with her freckleless skin and textured pixie cut, who came down to the gate at night to talk to us while she waited for AJ, who

claimed they were just friends. God, River was drool inspiring. I knew I didn't stand a chance with her the day she leaned close to me and brought her thumb to my lip.

"A little spittle," she said and winked at me.

She was all flirt and tease though. Joey and I didn't even believe she was gay-- we'd never actually seen her with a girl. Raya turned and looked at the approaching girl.

"Hi, I'm River." She walked directly to Raya.

"Raya." Raya goes to shake her hand, but gets a hug instead.

"You new?"

"No, I'm just visiting."

She didn't even say hi to me, too distracted with the red head. I took that moment to step inside the office and Joey followed me. Inside, Joey looked over at me sitting at in the chair behind the computer. She grabbed a cup off the window sill and squirted her hands with disinfectant all in one motion. I yanked the keyboard tray out and moved to open the shift report.

"What's your problem?" Joey asked.

"Need to sanitize your hands after your fuck?" I wasn't mad at her, but it seemed easier than yelling at myself for losing Hailey to Raya, Shay to stupidity and now River to something new and shiny. I'd really never had River to lose, but the sentiment suited my mood.

I watched as Joey filled her cup in the water dispenser. She ignored my question.

"How are the other properties? And where is Chris?"

"Properties are quiet. He's delivering notices."

I peeked my head out the window to watch River and Raya.

They appeared to be silent. Raya was looking into the darkness of faux woods that sat catty-corner to the complex. It was really just a series of trees ten feet deep and fifty feet wide. River was staring at Raya.

“You’re cute.” I thought she said because Raya responded by blushing and then she probably said something lame like: “My girlfriend thinks so too.”

It would give them something to talk about.

“How long have you been together?”

“Almost three months.”

“Wow, that’s like three years in lesbian time.”

Then Raya stopped speaking. They stood in silence longer. She looked over at the door for us.

“Well, aren’t you going to return the compliment?” I could hear River’s voice this time.

“What?” Raya looked back to River and analyzed her face closely.

This was too good to miss, so I walked past Joey and whatever she was meandering on about and leaned between the wall and window. The door was partially opened so I could hear them.

“I told you you’re cute. You this one-sided with your girlfriend, just taking all the time?”

“Huh, no. You are cute. I just thought you’d think it sound false if I said it right after you.”

Poor Raya.

“Well, duh, if you say it like that. I went first. I get to be generic. You have to be more creative when you go second.”

River was playing with a pen chained to the desk not looking at Raya.

“You do have nice legs,” Raya ventured. She tried to make it sound off hand, and not like she’s been ordered to give a compliment.

“Thank you. Now was that so hard.”

“What would your girlfriend think if she knew you liked my legs?” River went on

“She’d probably be really jealous,” Raya responded quickly and then there was a smack like she’d smashed a mosquito against her arm.

“Well, that’s stupid. It’s not like you hit on me or anything.” The comment confused me and probably Raya because hitting on River was precisely what she seemed to be doing. I turned and watched them through the window in time to catch River grabbing a paper towel from the shelf outside the office and wiping blood from the squashed mosquito off Raya’s arm.

Inside the office, Joey was still talking on.

“You’re not even listening to me. We should go back outside.” She grabbed a box of sunflower seeds from a drawer in the desk.

“Why? So I can watch Raya pick up another chick I like?”

“Because you’re not watching her now? Stop being so gay. You know if you bothered to actually talk to the girls you like maybe you’d get somewhere. Besides, you have Shay.”

“I haven’t seen her…” I started to say, but Joey walked out the door. The sound of the air conditioning blasting into the night caused both Raya and River to turn. River still had the paper towel against Raya’s arm.

“Are you picking on Raya, River? I swear you’re impossible,” Joey said as she moved over to a stool.

“Now see that’s a creative compliment.”

Raya looked at her, with a half smile, her mouth partly open, shaking her head.

“What’s a creative compliment?” I asked and then understood the comment at the same moment so didn’t wait for a reply. “I’ve got to go check out this hole in the fence first shift found.”

“Oh Sarah, don’t let anything jeopardize my safety.” River clutched at her heart in a dramatic fashion.

“River, don’t you have something better to do, don’t they give homework to college students these days?” I asked. If a girl isn’t in to you, make sure she knows you aren’t in to her.

“Nope. No Monday classes and I’m not even hung over because no more *Southern*. AJ’s supposed to take me to see a movie.”

“Wait, what happened? *Southern* closed?” Raya looked from Joey to River to me.

“Yeah, where have you been?” I asked.

“In bed with my girlfriend apparently.”

I stared and blinked at her for a few moments. It’s a fairly typical butch thing

to say. If Joey had said it, I would have assumed her need to posture came from how little time she spent in bed with her girlfriend, but coming from Raya, even with the recent problems I know about, I'm not sure.

"It was pretty sudden. They were open one day and the next all their workers were told not to come back," Joey said and I turned to grab a flashlight off the wall.

"What are we supposed to do without *Southern*?" Apparently Raya suddenly felt a need to go out for the first time in months.

"Go to Faces, Pulse, Tampa. I hear there are some really good clubs in Tampa," I responded and walked a few feet toward the fence before turning back. "Or just stay in bed with your girlfriend."

Joey choked on her laughter.

River reached across Raya to grab another pen she didn't need.

"Yeah and there's that ghetto club just east of Orlando too, but who wants to go there," she said without looking at me.

"I know, right? That's what I keep saying," Joey popped a sunflower seed that had been resting in the palm of her hand. "I can't believe they closed."

River continued talking to Raya.

"It was like last month. We showed up and there were boards on the doors. Apparently people knew because only a handful of us showed up. It matches the surrounding décor now."

"I wonder what the dyke who works the hot dog stand is going to do now," Joey asked.

"Oh she was still there," River said with such a straight face that it crossed my

mind that she was being truthful.

AJ's headlights made us turn. He had the brights on but shut them off as he approached the gate. Joey took off to the driver's side and leaned her head into the window while I walked off to find the hole in the fence.

"Night love," River yelled and blew Raya a kiss as she heads to the car.

It was 1:00 am when Raya went back to Hailey's apartment. Next to her, still asleep on her side of the bed, was Hailey. Wrapped around Hailey's head was a mat of orange fur they called Shiloh. Their other cat, Hobbes, was hidden underneath the blankets. Raya watched Hailey's face lit up by the streetlamp outside. Her eyelashes were touching almost imperceptibly; her skin was relaxed, without lines marking tension; her mouth curled into a slight smile, but Raya knows that beneath those soft features, Hailey was angry with her, even as she slept.

I love this girl even though we are having a hard time right now, she reminded herself. Raya could see that the harder she tried to hold Hailey, the further away she felt, but she couldn't stop. Hobbes noticed that Raya was sitting up and emerged from under the covers for an ear scratch. If I could make her happy again things would be better, I think they'd get better. Hailey, still asleep, pulled the covers tight around her neck and Raya noticed that her jaw was clenched. This is not the girl I fell in love with. I don't love this girl. Shiloh woke to Hailey's movement and opened one eye before turning around on the pillow and settling back in and falling asleep. Raya bent over and kissed her shoulder, careful not to wake her. "I love you," she whispered and eased herself under the covers.

Chapter Fourteen

Malts vs. Milkshakes

Sometimes I like to lie with my legs and lower back on the bed and the rest of my torso dangling off, my head supporting me on the floor and my arms resting on my stomach or tickling my chest. I have back problems. I remember doing this one night in particular; I was looking at a speck on the floor that could have been a spider but was probably just lint. From the window, a parking lot light shined mimicking the light from the moon, only it, turned off periodically when no movement was detected in the lot for several minutes. My body hung there, on the bed, trying to get up the motivation to stand. I'm not entirely sure if this was before or after Raya met River.

But inside my pocket there was a vibration. I didn't move. I thought it might be Shay, but it vibrated again and started to play a general ringtone, assigned for unknown numbers. Curiosity convinced me to pick up the phone. I'd applied to work for the CIA once. Maybe they were calling me back all these years later. They'd been following my work at the apartment complex, how I got the Ukrainian kids with no VISA to leave quietly. I ran through several, half-played out, scenarios in my head until I got myself excited and jumped on the phone with a short high pitched "Hello."

Of course, it was not someone calling to inform me they saw me walking down the street and would like to offer me a role in a movie nor was it a hot girl who saw me at

work and tracked down my phone number eager for a date. It wasn't even the CIA. It was Joey. It's always Joey.

"What number are you calling from?" I asked.

"My mom's cell. Mine's about to die."

"Alright, well, what do you want?"

"Come out to *Pulse*."

"Dude, I don't like that club. It's too rednecks try to do West Hollywood."

"I know, but just come, please. I need a wingman."

"No. I'm supposed to go out on this date anyway."

"Shay?"

Shay had backed off after...that one night. She'd called once or twice. After the third call, I'd stopped answering. I could tell that Shay had been dating other girls, ones who probably let Shay touch them and didn't throw her into walls, normal ones. The phone calls were mostly silent and ended with her saying she had to go "somewhere" and do "something." I knew what that meant. I can't blame her though.

"No," was all I told Joey.

There's not a long list of girls who will go out with me. The shy, short, butch combo doesn't really work to my advantage. Oddly, when I find one, I generally find two more instantaneously so my process includes having not even a kiss for months, meeting a girl, meeting a second girl, resurfacing feelings for an old girl and then fucking them all at the same time, provided that they're all reasonably fit and not too tall. I don't like to hedge my bets. I had recently found one who seemed fairly interested in me and I wasn't surprised. After all, she should have been the third. There should have been Hailey and

Shay and then this girl to top the cherry, but things had gotten a little fucked up this time around and generally the third girl is never my favorite. This was no exception.

We were about to go on our third date, which would probably mean sex and knowing that I couldn't turn to some other hotter body to get this girl out of my mind was bothering me; I really wasn't interested in touching her. On our first date we'd stood outside for nearly two hours until I got the nerve to kiss her, but it wasn't nervous nerves it was more I don't want to do this nerves. I just kept staring at the girl's pig nose. It was taking most of my energy to fight the urge to vomit. Beggars can't be choosers, I'd told myself and lunged in for the kiss.

When the conversation with Joey was over, it was getting to the point where I could no longer ignore the impending date. To ready myself I chugged down a cider. My beer or rather cider goggles would be ready to go when I got there. Within seconds of walking out the door I felt an itch on my calf. As I reached down I felt the bulging of a new mosquito bite. Only in Florida can you get you get bit in February.

"Fucking mosquitoes." I shouted and kicked the railing with all my force causing a wolf spider to crawl out and see what the commotion was. At the sight of the spider, I jumped down a full half flight of stairs and was inside my car in under thirty seconds. I hadn't been angry at Shay or that damn mosquito. I still don't know what the fuck gets me all riled up like that. I know better. There's a whole nest of the fucking wolf spiders outside my door. I wished they'd just eat each other.

In the corner of the pool hall, my newest date and I were shooting pool. It was one of those places where the music plays just loud enough to find its way into your thoughts, but not so loud that conversation couldn't be carried out, provided we were on the same

side of the pool table. I watched the balls on the table and noted that my date held her cue in the professional fashion, without looping her index finger over the top. It hadn't been helping her though. The girl missed another shot and I wondered if she was even trying to make it.

I stared at her as she smiled and laughed at the missed shot and then took a drink from her beer. The drink lasted a little too long and I analyzed the bottle. She'd been doing this since we arrived. It appeared that she wanted to be drunk quickly and I felt momentarily offended that she should need beer goggles to sleep with me. After all, give me four more inches and some dance moves, couple the reputation of my tongue and I'd be the most eligible bachelor in Florida. Surely she was just trying to loosen up so she could make her move on me.

Before stepping up to take my shot, I checked the time on my phone, we'd been at it for nearly an hour. Another hour meant more money, but we'd just started our second game. I surveyed the table and wished I hadn't been so smiley on our first date. I bent at the knees, eyed the trajectory I planned to send the white ball on until I got distracted by the Exit sign and started thinking of excuses to leave. I bent at the waist over the table and wished the shot could be anywhere but in front of my date as I felt the girl's eyes on my ass. I never completed the shot. I stood up and turned around to look at her and as I did I tripped a little.

"Whoa are you okay?" she asked.

Perfect.

"No actually, I've been dizzy all day."

She looked concerned.

“Do you want to call it a night?”

In the parking lot, we stood a foot apart between our two cars. She looked up at the sky.

“It’s dark out.”

“Night does that.”

The girl took a step forward.

“Do you want me to follow you home and take care of you?”

I took a half-step back and leaned against her driver’s side window.

“I have to get up early. I think I’ll just pass out.”

“Oh. I feel like I should follow you home at least.”

“That’s really ok.”

I opened my car door and slid in, not even waiting for the girl to move before turning on the engine. As a last minute thought, I blew her a kiss. I didn’t want her to know I was blowing her off. Then I closed the door to take off in reverse before the girl could follow me.

I didn’t go home. The radio wasn’t on. I listened to the sound of the road, uneven from being recently half paved, cars with loud mufflers and sirens that wailed from time to time. When I parked the car I was at Universal CitiWalk: a collection of shops, restaurants and night clubs along with a movie theater just outside of Universal Studios. I hadn’t been thinking as I zoned out to the road, or rather, I had been thinking but I couldn’t remember what about. I couldn’t remember the drive or paying for parking. I go

to CitiWalk to shop at the Quicksilver store so I can only assume I was thinking about Quicksilver.

As I walked down the pathways, girls shuffled by in groups wearing heels and making last minute checks of their make-up and clothes. Guys walked by, usually with one arm hanging around some girl's shoulder. The guys rarely walked in groups without girls. There were a few groups of guys that must have been 15, maybe 17. I only saw them because they were staring at me. One of them hit his friend on the shoulder and laughed. Then they looked away.

I don't normally pay attention to the crowds at these places. Normally I stare at my shoes or not necessarily my shoes, but a foot in front of my shoes to ensure my actual shoes don't step on anyone else's shoes. That night I was noticing everything. The teenager with her parents who checked me out. The old lady in the bathroom who jolted in surprise when she saw me and then blushed when she realized I had boobs. The group of college age girls, with crosses around their necks, who were there when I emerged from the stall. I could see them moving their eyes from my shoes to my hair and they raised their eyebrows at each other.

It was exactly what I needed: an all straight crowd. Because I wasn't feeling other enough. Sometimes I wish there could be more Gay Days so I could go do things with people and not be reminded that I'm different from the majority of the population; that I'll never impregnate a girl and then buy her an ice cream cone as we sit and relax from a day at the park. I keep my head down when I go into a bathroom just in case some girl gets the wrong idea over a casual glance and starts making wild accusations. These days the odds are one in a thousand that it would happen, but remember, I'm not a risk taker.

For example, I don't wait around in the locker room for my friends because I don't want the Hispanic towel lady to question what I'm doing after my eyes accidentally glaze over a naked girl who just stepped out of the shower to dry herself off. True story.

Most people are used to gays these days though. Some are so used to gays that they don't even know I'm gay when they meet me or see me shopping in the men's section Quicksilver. Because so many straight girls walk around wearing crew cuts and boys clothes and top it off with an absence of make-up.

“Can I help you find a size?”

“Maybe, I'm not really sure.”

“Well how would big would say his shoulders are?”

I left without responding. I couldn't really afford any new clothes anyway, at least not from Quicksilver. Music played over the speakers at Citiwalk. The noise made me feel more hidden the longer I was in it and I know it might be easy to think that if I didn't want to be noticed I'd just grow my hair a bit longer and put on a pair of girls jeans and a t-shirt, but I won't do that and I want to be hidden, strange though it may seem. The longer I meandered through the smaller I felt, more invisible. Everyone walked, passing each other, brushing shoulders in the bottlenecks, double checking wallets as they reemerged, but otherwise oblivious to everyone else.

A 50's diner sits across from the waterway. It's the kind of place that serves greasy burgers with extra grease and thin fries. They have malts and fudge brownies. I don't like greasy food. I'd never eaten there, but something about it felt familiar that night. I took a seat at the bar. When the waitress came over she smiled at me and I smiled back politely before looking down at the menu and going back to pretending I was

invisible. I imagined she knew I was there only by the rotating motion of the stool I was sitting on.

“Can I get you anything to drink, hun?” She paused. “Take your time.”

The second statement threw me off guard. She wasn't asking quickly as she walked by to help another table, expecting an immediate answer like I am accustomed to from servers. The waitress's smile was turned down on one side and she appeared to have made a physical effort to soften her eyes. I looked around and realized I was the only one in the entire restaurant other than a family of four who already had their food. My voice came out more timid than I'd meant it. I looked past the waitress and then back down at the menu. I ordered a chocolate malt and a hot dog. I did my best to avoid the server's gaze as she wiped down the bar stool next to me.

My inclination was to fidget on the stool, to rock it back and forth but I didn't want to draw any more attention to myself. Instead I played with the ring on my hand, and kept my face expressionless. The stoic butch or stoic boy, depending on how close the servers and guests were looking. Either way, it's ennobling. Something about the stillness of my body makes me feel less lonely, connected to something familiar. A few minutes later the server came back and dropped the order on the counter.

“Hey sweetie, your malt will be done in a minute.”

She was young, maybe younger than me, but my size in combination with my t-shirt and its colored sleeves brings to mind a boy of 12 or 13. Only my waxed eyebrows with several hairs growing back in could give me away. Well that and my boobs. I leaned my elbows against the bar, an effect that minimizes my breasts. It's an appearance I often strive for. Looking like a young boy makes life easier at times. It helps to ensure people

don't judge me for being alone or being unsure of what color shirt can be worn with black jeans. It's only a problem when I need to use a public bathroom.

"Thanks," I smiled.

When it came, my malt was actually a shake. I have been ordering malts for well over a decade now, but I've only ever gotten shakes. I didn't even know what a malt tasted like. For at least seven years I thought they must be the same thing. I still wish I'd gotten the brownie. The shake wasn't very good. I suppose I could have just asked her to take it back and bring me a malt, but I didn't want to be rude. She probably thought they were close enough to the same thing. I pulled out my credit card to be ready when she came back.

"Are you here alone?" she asked when she picked up the card.

I looked up and then away and then back to the server.

"Yeah, just wanted a shake. My friends are all off somewhere," I added on motioning to the abyss outside. I guess it was true. I had friends and they were out there somewhere, *Pulse*, Iraq, home grading math tests, it was all somewhere.

The girl was standing in an apron and a paper version of a sailor's hat behind the counter. Her brown hair was pulled back into a tight ponytail that didn't even reach her shoulders. Two strands had slipped out on either side. I had just taken the final bite of my hotdog. The entire meal felt oddly familiar.

I considered asking what time she got off and no sooner had the thought crossed my mind than I remembered why this moment felt so comfortable. It was a scene I was already familiar with. In *Stone Butch Blues*, the main character, Jess, goes to a diner and ends up at the home of his (or rather her) server. They have sex and the woman never

knows Jess is a girl. Jess's orgasm is seeing the other woman's pleasure. Perhaps she enjoys the feeling of the dildo grinding into her, but this information isn't relayed in the novel and, try though I have to position a strap-on so it provides pleasure to both parties, it has never worked.

I can't imagine half of what Jess went through in an intolerant and violent pre-Stonewall era, but I knew something about being stone and it was Jess who had been sitting next to me, on the stool the waitress cleaned off. That entire time she'd been quietly eating her meal. She gave me a knowing nod when I finally saw her sitting there. We share our stoneness, our inability to know someone else's touch, to be truly connected. Jess never reveals whether the feel of another girl's touch was missing from her life or if the loss of her breasts ever bothered her, but then, stone was more typical then. The term was used in actual speech. Today it is becoming obsolete and every girl I've encountered has a different idea of just how much or how little stone they wanted in their butch.

I watched the server ring up the credit card and noticed the half smile turn more and more into a frown. No matter how disconnected I got, I always have Jess and I wished at that moment I could share her with this woman who called me sweetie.

Chapter Fifteen

We woke to sleep

When the phone rang at seven in the morning, Raya and I were still awake from the night before. She pressed the pause button the Xbox 360 she'd bought the previous week and we put down the headsets we'd been using to play online. Her eyes had been burning for several hours and Raya had them locked open in a zoned out stare. She wasn't as used to staying up all night as I was.

She was back at the apartment complex last night. Hailey was working the evening shift and wouldn't be home until after one in the morning. She hung out with us for a while but it was after midnight and River hadn't shown. Raya was about to leave, she was just checking her watch and listening to me quip at Joey over the radio, when River arrived in her bikini dead set on going swimming and dragging Raya in with her. Twenty-two is supposed to be too old for skinny dipping in the middle of winter. That's the sort of thing teenagers do because they don't know any better, but Raya hadn't had a chance to be young yet. She'd been on the sidelines wondering what all the fuss was about when her girlfriends were sneaking out to be with guys in high school or getting wasted at fraternity parties in college. She'd never gone out dancing, made out with strangers, jumped in a river in the middle of the night or welcomed the morning with a lover on the corner of the street as the sun split open a nearby alley. This was her first chance to be young and instead she'd chosen to get involved with responsibility,

commitment, routine and so what if she went into the pool, it's not like she was having sex with the girl.

It couldn't have been as sexy as Raya first imagined. She stripped her jeans, leaving them on the deck and her boxers rode up from the water. She kept pressing them down while her t-shirt bubbled out and River poked at it.

"Boxers?" River asked. "You should try boxer briefs, better for skinny dipping."

Raya didn't say anything to River's logic. She was distracted. River had a way of touching all around a person without actually touching them. I would know. Whether it was picking lint out of her hair or playing with Raya's shoestrings as they sat on stools by the gate with their legs propped up on other stools or poking her shirt and stopping just before she reached her ribs. But when River poked her a second time it went deep enough that her finger actually made contact with Raya's side and she squealed, following it with a squirm. I could hear the squeal ring out through the night. It's the sort of thing that gets filtered out during the day when squealing is expected but it rings clear for a mile in the middle of the night.

"Not very masculine," River teased her and Raya blushed. "I suppose you're getting cold now too." She jumped out of the water and headed for her towel. "Here you can warm up under my towel."

It was freezing in the water and since it was still the middle of winter, the air outside the pool wasn't much warmer. Raya could see the goose bumps popping up all over River's skin as she spoke.

"No, I'm ok. You use the towel," she told her as she climbed out of the pool, but the towel in question was already flying toward her.

“What will you tell your girlfriend when she asks why your boxers are soaking wet?”

It was that question that led Raya back to her own apartment, sitting in wet boxers beneath damp jeans with a towel around her shoulders, zoned out to a video game. Before River arrived Raya told me about her Xbox 360 and I bailed early on Joey that night. It was quiet and she owed me for all the times I'd covered for her. I could smell River on the towel or rather River's detergent, but it was practically the same thing. Kicking the crap out of Raya in *Halo* appeased my jealousy somewhat though and I was only mildly agitated that the towel wasn't around my shoulders.

Outside the sun was coming up. Time to head to bed it said to me. Most people were waking up and I was heading off to sleep. Raya had to go to work that day, but I imagine she spent most of the day sleep walking. The phone call wasn't Hailey and Raya let it go to voicemail. When she played it back, it was River's voice on the other end. We listened while Raya moved to the bathroom and splashed water on her face.

“Hey there sexy. I miss you. Call me back.”

Raya frowned at the voicemail and then smiled and then frowned again when she saw the time on the phone. She didn't have time to shower before work. She splashed water onto her hair until it was wet enough to mold and then studied the look in the mirror. She was in desperate need of haircut. If she combed down the sides in front of her ears they would have looked like male sideburns.

Under her eyes large black circles seemed more evident than usual. She resembled me. We could have both gone to see my mom and gotten lectures about doing our make-up to look like raccoons. Maybe her tired eyes were part of what made Hailey

so quick to go to bed. I watched as Raya stared at her face. Creepy? Yes. Her face will probably wrinkle. Freckles on red heads aren't cute forever. She looked strung out. Men must deal with these signs of age in some manner, but then maybe they don't care. My dad uses a cream. I didn't know that then, but now that I'm thinking about it I wish I made him tell me the other day.

“Do you ever worry about what we'll look like without make-up when we're fifty?” Raya asked me.

“Forget fifty, have you seen Joey's face? I'm worried about thirty.”

She laughed.

“We're butch. We don't care about these things. You don't want wrinkles, eat more fish,” I told her and shut off her game system.

Raya turned back to the mirror but she furrowed her eyebrows. She cared. I cared too, but I think she cared more. I think she wanted to open the box next to her sink, the one with the squiggly Aquarius lines. She kept shooting it glances. I think she wanted to wear her earrings, but instead she pulled some gel through her hair and finished getting ready.

Dressed, she took one last look at her shirt. Raya pulled the fabric away from her stomach to decrease the effect of her breasts. The shirt really needed to be ironed, but there was no time for that so she tugged at it hard willing the wrinkles to straighten as she tucked more of the shirt into her pants. Raya wears black shoes, socks and pants with a black belt to work everyday, except on Friday when she wears brown shoes, white socks, khakis and a polo shirt. When Raya first moved to Orlando, she didn't own many guys' clothes and no matter how much she transitioned in her personal life, her professional life

looked much the same. Instead of boxers she continued wearing panties, sometimes even a thong if she feared lines would show through her pants. Her shirts had two seams along the side meant to emphasize her waist as they hugged her ribs. Occasionally, she wore hose and a small heel.

Hailey had put an end to that. She told Raya, she liked her butches butch and her femmes femme. So they went shopping and got Raya some men's pants that would allow for boxers and a few shirts that were really too baggy even though they were smalls.

"Now doesn't that feel better?" Hailey had asked her before her first day of work in her new uniform.

"Oh my god, yes. I feel so strong." Raya had gone to scoop her up and kiss her, but lost her balance and fell back on the tiled floor bringing Hailey down on top of her. That about captures the essence of Raya.

We rambled down the stairs together and Raya's phone vibrated on her belt. She showed me. Another text from River: u r coming to *Pulse* tonight right?

"Drive safe," I told her when we parted.

I knew the dangers of driving asleep. I felt like a vampire in the morning. My skin looked pale when the sun hit it because I never spent anytime outside during the day. I lived my life at night.

In one of my English classes when I was a kid we were given an assignment. We had to write a poem and the first line of the poem had to be a line from another poem that was on a handout we were given. Basically, we were encouraged to plagiarize. The poems were all strange. I couldn't understand any of them. But they'd been photocopied from a book and at the bottom of the second page there were two lines. I knew the

teacher didn't intend for use one of those lines, but when I read it, I knew they would be the beginning of my poem. "The Waking" it said. "I wake to sleep, and take my waking slow." I didn't know it was by Theodore Roethke. I didn't know any of the other lines. I probably wouldn't have used the poem if I'd read the rest of it at that time. It would have been as confusing as all the others, but I could deal with just that one line. I didn't even really understand the line. It just resonated with me and I carried with me for years.

I didn't know how to use the internet back then. There was no google. But a few years ago the line popped back up inside my head and I looked it up. I'd been on third shift for a while and I'd noticed that each morning the sun rose and the heaviness I carried throughout the night left. No matter how much I slept, at 4am I was barely able to keep myself awake and then no matter how little I slept, I was wide awake just after sunrise. It didn't last long. By 7 or 8am, depending on the time of year, I'd be dropping off, usually on my drive home when I was stopped at a traffic light. After I read the poem in full, I realized Roethke was speaking about death. But each morning for the past several years, I've woken up only to fall asleep. Raya was following mine and Joey's example. We slept while we were awake and we didn't wear make-up to hide the resulting bags under our eyes. The fifth stanza of "The Waking" reads:

Great Nature has another thing to do
To you and me, so take the lively air,
And, lovely, learn by going where to go.

We understand poetry best when we can share its experience or maybe we manipulate its experience to suit our own. "I wake to sleep, and take my waking slow." I read: death is coming. Our body is born only to die. Each morning we wake and move one sleep closer to death. Eventually we will wake up and find ourselves dead. I'd say

that's pretty good incentive to take our waking slow. We live our lives in the waking. But I doubt Roethke ever had to work the night shift. We just wake to sleep.

Chapter Sixteen

The code

I often cry in the shower. I feel a bit foolish admitting to this, but it seems important. I let the water beat onto my face until I don't even notice the difference between it and my tears. With only water to cover her body I'm totally exposed to the tiled wall of the tub and the clear shower liner. Damn their judging eyes. I take hot showers to increase the steam. It's like letting my emotions escape through opened pores. The first thing I do when I get out of the shower is grab my towel to cover my body and I throw on clothes as quickly as possible. I never linger naked and yet it is naked when I feel the most free. Without a bra tightened around my ribcage, I can close my eyes and feel the image I carry of myself in my mind.

I cried as I got ready to go out to *Pulse*. I cried from the moment I turned the water on until I could no longer feel the stream of water merging with my tears to cleanse my face. I stood in the shower and let the last few pellets of water drip from the shower head. My towel was around my shoulders and I had my arms extended. I searched for something to give me confidence. I looked at the ceiling and for one moment I forgot that when I bend down to dry my legs there will be two pieces of flesh dangling from my body, pulling against my skin. Sometimes I hold a breast in one hand and feel its weight. Sometimes I wish I had a scale to weigh it on, one pound, three pounds, I'm not sure.

They're not mine. They're removable pieces of celluloid. My only awareness of their presence is the sensation against my palm or the fabric of my bra and that's just fine with me, unless I'm having sex.

Jess was one of the early butches to lose her breasts. At the end of the novel a date tells her its awful what society did to girls like her. It's awful that she'd been pushed into losing her breasts and Jess is agitated about this statement, but that's the only indication she gives that she was happy with her decision so many years later. Sometimes I hold a breast in one hand and shut off the feeling so I know my hand is holding something but I can't quite connect that it's my breast. I think about my parents offer to pay for the surgery. I think of being called Sir by waiters and then hating it when they correct themselves and call me ma'am. I think of how right daddy feels and how wrong mommy does. I think of how I am not a girl. I am a boy. A lost boy. But then if I couldn't hold these things attached to me in my hands, I think a piece of me might be missing and I don't believe Jess's outrage at that woman's question. I want to push her to admit that maybe it could have gone differently. Maybe she could have been happy with her chest. Maybe it would have just been an alternate future. Jess stopped taking hormones, she stopped growing facial hair, she stopped being a man, she went back to being a boy and I just don't believe in these moments when I'm stepping out of the shower and feeling free of my breasts that she never regrets her decision.

My parents once sat me down at the kitchen table, just after I'd "left" the military and asked me again if I ever felt I should have been born a boy. I almost said yes, but then I thought of having a dick between my legs, not a plastic thing an actual flesh and blood penis. A moment later I imagined not having breasts but having a vagina, a half

breed, scars from the surgery or constantly needing to work out to make A cups into pecs. I'd seen the shows on MTV. I thought of facial hair and as often as I've felt my skin before remembering that the hair wouldn't grow there, I knew I didn't want to lose my boyish looks to scruff. And then I thought of *Peter Pan* and how what I would really like is to be a little boy and to never grow up and flying would be cool too until I thought of joining the air force and then of my lack luster eye sight and then of leaving the Marines and finally I stood up from the kitchen table and told my parents: "No."

In the future, when girl's have asked me, after sleeping with me, during the diagnosis portion of the talk, as they try to fix me or figure out what's wrong, I look at them and calmly reply: "No." And then I turn my head and rolling her eyes. What butch girl hasn't, even for a moment considered being a guy even if it was just to get a shiver in the base of their spine and cringe with the heebie jeebies, but I can't tell them that. A few times I made the mistake of saying 'yes I'd thought about it' to a girl who was particularly inquisitive and seemed open to the idea. I have only been met with two responses. The overly supportive response that assumes thinking of changing my sex means I should change it and the 180 response that tries to talk me out of doing something I never planned to do in the first place. Still, there is no argument more annoying than "you're such a beautiful girl." And selling 'but I don't want to be a girl' is a lot easier than selling 'but I want to be a girl who looks like a boy.'

All internal struggles aside, I am happy with my ironically large breasts. If it weren't for them I'd probably get thrown out of the woman's restroom, as it is I often get double looks or even a "you're in the wrong restroom." To which I respond lamely: "I'm

a girl,” but I’ve always wanted to respond: “Maybe you’re in the wrong restroom.”
Someday. Maybe. If I ever grow a pair, I’ll say it.

The night I am recalling at the moment was a big night. I didn’t have time to consider the male version of myself living in some alternate universe. It wouldn’t be long before Joey arrived with Raya, AJ and River in tow. I’d need to be ready for the crowded club of girls bumping me as they tried to make their way to the dance floor and in the process shoving me closer to the wall. I’d need to be ready to see Shay, who would be there just because fate hated or maybe loved me.

I was just putting the final touch on my hair when they knocked on the door. When I opened the door, Raya stood in front of me with her hands posed like she was about to knock again and Joey leaned up against the door frame where the wolf spiders lived. She rolled in and I checked for spiders on her shirt. She wandered past me and towards the fridge where she pulled out a cider, popped open the cap and started drinking. She was spider clear. Joey was almost finished with her first sip by the time I had moved aside and motioned for Raya to come in. AJ stepped to the center of the door frame and followed her.

“Where’s River?” I asked.

“In the car, doing her make-up,” Joey said and took another sip. “These are good.”

“Pass me one, you want one Raya? AJ?”

They nod and Joey tossed one to each, the bottle pointing towards them, but Raya fumbled it against her chest and it fell to the carpet. She tried not to blush as she picked it up by the head. Joey, AJ and I exchanged a look and chuckle down another sip.

“Alcoholic Cider? No beer?” she asked me deliberately (I’m sure of it) to get the attention off of her and I blushed.

“Sarah can’t handle beer. You’re just a baby butch, aren’t you, Sarah?” Joey asked as she walked over and ruffled the hair I’d just finished doing. I was naturally forced to grab her wrist and spin it around her back. Cider sloshed onto Joey’s clothes.

“Baby butch fuck yourself;” “fuck, you got it on my new shirt,” we said at the same time and I set down my drink and headed for the bathroom to fix my hair as Joey moved into the kitchen sink to fix her shirt.

“Meeting someone hot?” Raya asked Joey.

“Never know,” Joey said.

When I came back from the bathroom, she was blushing. I’d never seen her blush like that about a girl. I brushed it off and turned to Raya.

“You look hot. Planning on finally kissing River?”

“No, I mean there’s Hailey,” Raya fumbled and was picked up by AJ, “Of course she is.”

“Maybe you should talk to Hailey...” I said.

“Fuck that, you know it takes months to end a lesbian relationship. River will be moving on by then. Don’t listen to Sarah, she’s not one for being noble anyway.”

I looked at Joey and cocked my head to the side, but then smiled and looked at Raya. “It’s all true.” I took another sip of my cider.

“Amber and Hailey don’t even know each other so you don’t have to worry about that. And as far as Sarah, AJ and I are concerned...”

AJ put it best. “What River? The Nile river.”

Raya smiled and looked over at me. I nodded my head a few times.

Chapter Seventeen

Another night out

Pulse is in downtown Orlando. There is so little parking in the area that it becomes a choice between carpooling and getting towed; which is why that night, we chose to ride in AJ's SUV. The club consists of only two rooms. The bar is in an all white room, where videos play on flat screen TVs set inside the ceiling panels and booths. On top of a center booth a go-go dancer was getting into her groove as the ten sober girls in the room ignored her. Raya turned to me.

"This place is nice. I don't know why you don't like it."

The bartender placed a Malibu and coke in front of Raya, "Ten dollars."

"That's why." I smiled. "Actually hold off on that drink. We're getting wasted tonight. Five shots, Yager."

"You know getting wasted isn't going to help your game and get you laid right Sarah?" Joey looked over at me.

"Make that four shots," I said to Joey but while the bartender was away.

"Sarah." Amber, who we picked up last, leaned close to my ear. "I don't really want to get drunk tonight."

"That's why you're getting drunk."

"What if Cass calls?"

"Cass isn't over there fighting so that you can not enjoy life. Take the shot."

But I put my phone on vibrate at that moment. I didn't want to miss a call from Cass either. It had been months since her last email and Amber and I checked the news and official reports for new casualties everyday. Amber walked around with panic somewhere between her stomach and her chest. She was constantly in limbo. It would be good for her to get drunk.

But buying shots is a dangerous business because before the end of the night everyone wants to return the favor. Joey had sent out a Myspace bulletin to her entire friends list that lesbians were taking back their night at *Pulse*. "Don't make those go-go dancers dance for a bunch of guys who don't appreciate them," she wrote and when another large group of lesbians came in there was another round of shots and another \$50 being dropped. It's always someone's anniversary and someone's birthday and so and so's girlfriend wants to buy me a shot for their girl's birthday and then I buy everyone and the girl a shot because that's the protocol that has to be followed and I always follow shot protocol. Amber's protests about getting drunk ended around her third shot and as we downed our sixth we looked at each other and clinked our plastic cups knowing six was three too many too soon, but we were already too drunk to remember that we should care. The whole group was wasted before 11:30.

Before I headed into the dance area with Amber, I noticed Joey sitting up against one of the booths. Her head rested on the ledge of the booth and as she watched the spinning flat screens some girl she'd apparently hit on at the bar tried to get her to stand up. Between the both and the bar, River danced between AJ and Raya who were both sandwiching her. She leaned into Raya's ear.

“Somehow I just knew you’d be able to dance.” Her tongue flicked against Raya’s earlobe as she spoke and Raya stumbled backwards into some big butch girl in a tie and 40’s style gangsta hat. It was one of those nights in a lesbian club where even in a big city like Orlando, everyone knew everyone from Myspace or two degrees of separation. Raya knew this girl from Joey’s Myspace and they hugged before the girl offered to buy Raya a shot.

Shots reached \$75.00 and when I passed back through the white room to take a piss, Raya and River were leaned up against each other for stability. Alcohol poisoning is a very real side effect when a socialite like Joey invites her entire friends list out to the club. The same girl was still trying to get Joey up to dance, but AJ tapped her on the shoulder. They apparently knew each other because the girl smiled when AJ’s hand fell onto her hips and walked her back into a corner where they started trying to have sex in public, but the security team was already on them and kept on AJ, telling him to keep his hands in visible sight. When I came out of the stall, AJ had dragged the girl into the bathroom to keep the security team from getting irritated enough to throw him out. Outside I looked over at Joey. She looked like she was about to be sick.

About now, inside Raya’s pocket her phone was vibrating and straining to be heard over the music, but Raya could only feel River’s hands. They shared a shot, each holding the shot glass to the other’s mouth and through their linked arms Joey saw a pink belt. I looked from the pink belt back to Joey. She was standing up and looked better already.

Back on the dance floor and I showed my drunkenness by actually trying to dance. I even moved more than just my knee but it was still awkward. I tried to get the

attention of a girl I was dancing behind. Finally Amber, who actually holds her liquor better than I do noticed someone watching us and leaned over to me.

“Who’s that?”

I looked. That was Shay. I stopped moving or at least I thought I did. I was probably still swaying a little and stumbling as the flashing lights made the room spin.

“I think that last shot is finally hitting me,” I told Amber.

“I think that’s the third shot finally hitting you. When the last shot hits us we’ll probably be lying in the middle of the road puking.” And something about this made Amber giggle hysterically.

“Don’t say puking.”

“Who is that?”

“Shay.”

Amber shoved me lightly.

“Go.”

I could barely stumble through the crowd. At one point some older butch caught me and started in on a lecture about getting too drunk, but stopped. I looked at her.

“Jess?” I asked and then I caught Amber’s giggling fit.

“Hey,” was all I said when I reached Shay and leaned in to her ear. My giggles were promptly held under control.

“I thought you worked,” Shay opted for shouting over the music rather than leaning in to me. That hurt.

“I got it off. We’re celebrating.” Her face was impossible to read. “Want to dance?”

“Not really. What are you celebrating?” She said it so quickly, running the two sentences together, that it took a few seconds for my brain to separate the words and find the meaning.

“I don’t remember.” I started giggling again but stopped when I didn’t see Shay’s mouth so much as smirk. “Want a shot?” I asked realizing there was a problem between our different levels of drunkenness.

“No.”

We both stood there for a moment before someone bumped me and Shay had to catch me. Her hand lingered over my elbow as she tried to steady my balance.

“Why didn’t you ever answer my phone calls?” she asked and then looked at me like she didn’t mean to say that.

I didn’t say anything.

“I should be the one avoiding you,” she added.

“Why aren’t you?” This was the question I wanted answered.

“You’re too drunk.” That wasn’t the answer.

“Why aren’t you avoiding me?” I asked again.

Nothing.

“I was an ass. You should be avoiding me.”

Nothing.

“Who are you here with?” I changed directions, quick to give up. It’s my M.O.

Shay looked at me for a moment before answering. I must have stopped swaying because she let go of my elbow.

“People.” That couldn’t have been more vague.

“I’ve missed you,” I let out, knowing I could blame drunkenness later for being stupidly sappy. When Shay didn’t say anything I got manipulative. I am a girl after all. “I’m going to get a drink.”

Shay grabbed for me again as I turned away just like I knew she would. Mission accomplished: she was touching me.

“Uh, no, you’re not. I doubt they’d even serve you right now.” Her hand caught my bicep and I could feel the fabric of my shirt move as Shay’s fingers caressed the material. When she realized what she was doing, Shay jerked her hand. I looked around the room to introduce her to Amber, but spotted Raya instead. She and River had moved onto the actual dance floor.

“Look, that’s my buddy Raya.”

I pointed to where Raya and River appeared to have regained some soberness.

“Who’s she with? That girl has like no clothes on.”

“That would be River. River’s like 20, shhhh don’t tell, she’s drinking, she’s really wild.”

Inwardly I cursed myself. I’d held the vowel in wild too long. I must have sounded stupidly drunk, but then watching River run her hand along Raya’s side just made me break out in laughter once more.

“Raya has a girl,” I blurted out but stopped short of friend second guessing whether or not Hailey and Shay might know each other. When Shay didn’t respond I continued down a different track. “I’m looking for Amber. It’s really sad, her girlfriend is in Iraq.”

“How long as she been there?”

This was good. She was definitely making effort to continue conversation.

I looked over and spotted Amber leaning against a wall with her eyes open. She stared at the disco ball in the center of the room and wasn't blinking.

“Too long.”

I looked back to Raya. She seemed to have forgotten about Hailey for that moment. She'd forgotten why it was wrong to have River's hands on her body. She moved her own hands over River's ass testing out the boundaries. They moved opposite of each other. Moving one part of their body in as another moved out. Raya's face got close to River's only to roll away. The same underlining techno beat had been mixed into the last several songs. They'd mastered this rhythm. Raya and River were dancing close enough that when they breathed their chests met in the middle and their mouths opened to kiss but then closed as they backed away. It was hot. Even Shay was watching them speechless.

Raya told me later, all she could see was River's body. Beyond her was black. The other bodies swaying about them had been filtered out of her mind. She wasn't thinking about anything when she moved in and this time actually kissed her. Their lips closed together but no tongues exchanged, almost as if they had fallen forward and caught the other by the face.

“Do you use Blistex?” Raya smiled at the thick sensation covering her lips, but as she moved away and she remembered why Blistex was so familiar. A girl, trying to make her way across the floor, pushed against Raya's arm and she fell into the back of a stranger. When she looked back up, River was looking at her with one eyebrow raised as she moved within the small box she had carved out for herself on the dance floor. Raya

brought both her palms up to her eyes and presses them there, massaging her entire face. Finally she looked at her phone. Twenty missed calls. One text message from Hailey: Turn on the news. It's Cass.

I watched as Raya returned to the white room.

A short time later the music in the club stopped. The strobe lights moved and the strange effect of being inside them without sound caused a few people to fall over. The DJ came on over the mic.

“Sorry about that folks. We just need Amber Galloway to please make her way to the back bar in the white room.”

She turned the music back on in the main room. I left Shay behind without a good-bye or explanation. I had never longed to be more sober and I pulled what I could out of me as I caught up with Amber.

“What’s going on?” I asked.

Amber shrugged. The gesture has stayed with me, like the reigniting candle. A simple thing, a little shrug, one side of her mouth turned down and her eyebrow went up, her little shoulders hunched forward for one full second before they fell back down. It was carefree. Every gesture after this moment would be tainted. We looked up at the screens. A tired anchor lady sat behind a desk with one missing earring. We read the scroll at the bottom.

“Our own correspondence reporter and camera man have been taken along with six American Marines. Among these marines include Private First Class Garrison, Farmers, Lance Corporal Marquis, Corporal Wollock...”

Corporal Cassandra Wollock. A picture of her from her last promotion showed up on the screen. Amber didn't immediately react. I looked around and saw Raya moving toward us. More and more lesbians were crowding into the white room. The dance floor was emptying and the space in the smaller white room became nonexistent as everyone stared up at the ceiling, silent. Finally the club owner, who Raya had informed after reading her text message, turned off the music in the main room and we could all clearly hear the news anchor:

“...they were ambushed on a non combat related mission to interview former insurgents. It is unclear who is behind this attack. The videos were uploaded onto the Internet around ten pm eastern time and emailed to this station shortly after. Our prayers go out to our own reporters, the soldiers who were captured in the process of protecting them and all the family and loved ones who have been affected by this tragedy.”

I watched Amber. She was still just staring up at the TV. She looked confused. I reached out to wrap an arm around her. Amber shoved against me, but I found the stability to hold her closer and we both hugged inside the circle of onlookers. Amber wrapped her arms around me, but there were no tears. We just held on and looked up at different TV's.

People from the club slowly exited. Those who knew Cass or Amber expressed their prayers and those who didn't touched our backs as they moved out of the club. Raya watched but didn't say anything.

“I'm going to go find AJ,” River told her but Raya just stared at Amber and I holding each other. Joey finally made her way over.

“Amber, I’m sure Cass is fine.” No one said anything so she continued. “We should probably get out of here. Do you want to eat or talk?”

Amber ignored her.

Joey touched Amber’s shoulder like one of the people who didn’t even know her and she put her arm around Alyssa, the girl with a pink belt.

“Joey...” I started in but didn’t finish.

She leaned into my ear. “I’m going to go. I’ll just be in the way. I don’t even know Cass that well.”

It was bullshit. Joey was leaving to go get fucked. The noise of gunfire was coming from the TV. I moved Amber in the direction of Raya and when I peeled Amber’s arms off from around my waist, they latched onto Raya’s.

“What the fuck is your problem? That’s our friend up there.”

Joey gave me a blank expression.

“You could feel bad,” I said.

“I do.” Joey raised her voice and quieted down again. “An hour ago you didn’t even know if she was alive. At least, now you know.”

I didn’t react. I made a decision. I paused for a full five seconds. Then my fist made contact with Joey’s eye. Her body reacted although she was too drunk to feel the pain from the punch. She stumbled back and moved to walk behind me, leaving the girl she had been so eager to eat behind as she clutched her eye.

“Just cause you’re a fucking coward,” I shouted after her. I wasn’t even sure what that meant. When I turned back to Amber, Shay was standing there. She looked at me, shook her head and left without saying good-bye.

Chapter Eighteen

POW or hostage

Cass wasn't on "black ops" missions, just like she wasn't on the "frontlines." She'd done well on her mission, particularly when it came to communicating with the Iraqi families. She'd picked up some broken Arabic and used it when she could. She was friendly and treated the people like humans. To Cass it was her job. To her superior officers it was above average work. They pulled her out of her unit. Told her she tell her loved ones they wouldn't be hearing from her for a while. Unbeknownst to George W. the military had come up with its own plan to stop the insurgents and it didn't involve firing a weapon. They were actually paying them off. Putting the insurgents on the payroll. It was working, but it wasn't a permanent solution.

These were men with families, mother's, sister's, wives and daughters. They pulled Cass away to talk to the women. Her job was to visit the homes of turned insurgents once they were located. She was supposed to check in on them, make sure they were comfortable and listen. If they spoke to her, if they told her anything, whether it was about the war or the best laundromat, she was supposed to listen. Men talked to the insurgents. Women talked to their families. The end result was an established line of communicate and a way to keep an eye on the new members of the government payroll. They told Cass that if she did well there would be more training and it would lead to a position in the CIA.

The media caught wind of the turncoat insurgents. They wanted to come in and interview these men. They wanted to hear the words come from the working man, rather than his leaders. They'd done a few sets of interviews. Cass was assigned to join them on another. They were going in to the city to speak with the family of one of the turned insurgents. Everywhere they went, twelve soldiers followed. It seemed heavy handed to Cass. The biggest threat to her during this tour had been IED's.

They were thirty miles from the base when Cass felt her first sense of ill ease. There was no other traffic. Cass was used to driving with a larger team or during busier hours and the farther they pulled from the base, the more the desert seemed to swallow them. The driver finally called back.

“There's a road block 100 yards ahead.” He was calm, but slowed the vehicle.

Cass turned and looked through the windshield. She could see it.

The officer in charge spoke with the same calm as the driver. “Everyone out of the truck.”

The situation didn't warrant panic. They use the regular roads and regular roads sometimes undergo construction. Intel normally warned them when and where they could expect delays, but sometimes Intel didn't know. Cass looked around, the truck was the only real cover, but if it was a hostile situation, they would take the truck out first. Private Taylor scanned through a set of binoculars, the news crew had their cameras on and were filming.

“You two,” the commander called to the reporters. “Fall back, and get down on the ground. Just in case.”

They obeyed and continued to film as they laid against their stomachs on the sandy road. The reporter's voice faltered some. Cass made the call into base, giving them their location and waited for a response, but nothing else needed to be said.

“Shit,” Taylor shouted and the enemy RPG hit the humvee. It's the kind of rocket they use to take out helicopters and a direct connection with the engine sent glass and motor parts flying through the air. A door flew off and landed in front of Cass. It was bullet proof, so she heaved it upright and bent down behind it, supporting it with her weight. Taylor fell in next to her and fired his gun around the frame in the direction of the blockade. Cass did the same, but the explosion caused a pillar of smoke. Bullets fired through the cloud were hitting the pavement in front of them. They were taking aim at an enemy they couldn't see. A soldier Cass didn't know was falling back towards them to get behind the door, but his gun fell out of his hand before he can make it. He fell to the side of the road and his blood stuck to the sand.

When the fight kept going, Cass knew they were out numbered. Skirmishes like those never lasted that long. They came up on either side of the truck, and things slowed down for Cass. She watched as one of them emerged through the dissipating smoke and pulled the trigger of his assault rifle. She could almost follow the path of the bullet as it moved through one soldier's head only to exit and catch another in the chest. He went down. Cass couldn't be sure if his vest had caught the bullet. Her gun was firing towards the truck that had come up on their left, the one they had never seen coming, but she spun it over to fire at the man who just shot two of her peers with one bullet. As her head turned she could see the reporters lying face down in the sand with their hands over their

heads, the camera pointed towards the action but the camera man had his head buried in his arm. Private Web crouched over them. He fired towards the truck to their right.

Motion may have slowed down, but the sound of the rapid gun fire and the shouts in Arabic moved quickly. There was so much dust in the air Cass couldn't see clearly to fire and then the butt of an M-16 hit her between the shoulder blades and she dropped from her knees to the ground. Her weapon flew out of her arms and landed in front of her as her face hit the road and motion returned to normal speed.

The men were surrounding the fallen American troops, kicking them to test for life and firing extra shots into the bodies of the dying. Cass could feel the weight of one man's body pulling up on her shoulders and she readied herself for the coming shot, but it never came. Wire was slipped around her wrists and if she moved it cut into her skin. Someone pulled a sack over her head and the sounds of the world around her died down. The total amount of fighting had only taken five minutes. It would be two more minutes before the air cover arrived, but by then, the trucks would be out of sight. They disappeared over sand dunes as the rainstorm moved in and covered their tracks.

The insurgents weren't known for taking prisoners. But then they weren't known for taking bribes either.

Chapter Nineteen

Whoops

The sun eventually came up as Raya, AJ, Amber and I sat on the steps outside of Amber's apartment. AJ had already taken River home. She had class in the morning. Watching the sunrise when you haven't slept makes the air taste stale. I'm accustomed to the sensation, but dawn wears on the skin of people who have not been to sleep. We'd been outside Amber's apartment for hours. We were sitting holding her on either side. She refused to go in.

"I bet they already know where they are and have a team out on an extract mission." I finally voiced the hope that had been lingering with me for a while now.

"Yeah, maybe," Raya said speaking a little lighter and the mood brightened a notch, or maybe that was just the sun rising another mile.

"I hate the military," Amber echoed the sentiment she'd been carrying with her for the past six years.

When she finally fell asleep, Raya unlocked the door and I carried her into bed. "I'll stay with her. Take Raya home," I told AJ.

It wouldn't be until much later that I would heard this story in enough dimensions to piece together a full picture of what happened. I had finally fallen asleep holding

Amber close to me, trying to make myself feel like Cass so she could forget about all this in her dreams but I knew my body would never be big enough to fill her side of the bed.

Finally back at her apartment, Raya walked inside, deposited her keys on the table in front of the door and paused to look for a moment at the photo frame that held a picture of Hailey. For a moment she felt hollow inside and imagined arms wrapping around her waist from behind, whispering in her ear that everything is going to be okay. But Raya still had a lot to explain before she figured Hailey would even speak to her again. She pinched the skin on her forehead together between her thumb and fingers as she moved across the room to sit on the couch. With her free hand she unbuttoned and removed the shirt she'd been wearing for over 24 hours. In her wife beater and khaki pants she sat down on the couch, slouched, then doubled over and rested her elbows on her knees, but no matter how she sat she still couldn't seem to cry and she didn't want to sleep.

Raya made one last attempt to squeeze her eyes together; she tried to collect enough moisture to send a tear down her cheeks, something to encourage the other tears to fall and release the tension in her head. It wasn't Cass she was thinking about. She worried about Cass, but it was Hailey who was keeping her awake. She turned on the TV. The sun was cutting through the blinds, hitting the screen and illuminating the dust that had come to rest there. Raya briefly considered getting a rag to wipe it off and then wondered if that would scratch the screen and decided against it. Between the sun and the dust, the picture was faded, but it didn't matter, it was just the news, again, and Raya could hear it just fine. CNN had now finished rolling out of bed to cover situation with their panel of experts.

“Well, Ted,” the expert spokes to the news anchor. “The thing you have to keep in mind here is that this is a very atypical attack. I think this has been planned for a while, the target being the civilians...”

The anchor’s voice got a little excited. “How would this group have known that a camera crew would be part of the unit they captured? Are you suggesting that our militaries Intel had been compromised...”

Raya turned the TV off. All she’d heard about all the way home was how the US military expected the maximum extraction time to be 48 hours. They assured the American public that they were not going to back down from terror. They were calling the soldiers heroes, the civilian’s quest to deliver the truth, brave. And Raya didn’t care. Cass, hero or not, was sitting in some hole, undergoing torture that Raya couldn’t imagine and there was nothing that could be done. She had to go about her day. Go to work, come home, pay bills, drink coffee and the biggest thing on her mind was still how to deal with Hailey. Nothing in her life changed.

Raya looked down at her hands, her fingernails dug into the skin between the knuckles. She stopped when it got too painful and headed toward her office, intent to log onto the Internet and figure out something she could do for Cass or Amber. If she couldn’t sleep, she could at least be useful, but she wasn’t even half way down the hall when there was a knock on the door. The sound made her heart drop. It was surely Hailey. She opened the door slowly, but it wasn’t Hailey’s short frame that she found.

“River? This is a really bad time.”

“I know.” She reached out and ran her hand through Raya’s hair. When they kissed, it was surreal. Raya felt herself leading River towards her bed and moving on top

of her but the rest was a blur until they found themselves curled up on the bed ignoring Raya's alarm and drifting off to sleep.

Chapter Twenty

Really?

Joey didn't go straight home. She drove around for hours but it didn't do anything to appease her mood. When she reached the door to her home, Joey didn't bother with the process of being quiet. She shoved her keys into the lock, daring the dogs to bark, and pushed open the door, tossing the keys on the table in the dining room and didn't flinch when they clanged against the wood and the dogs started barking. Her shoes were still on when she crossed into the kitchen, looking for something cold to put on her eye. Her mom was already up, she was sitting at the kitchen table with Jonathan, but Joey just nodded a hello and opened the freezer. Her mom watched her cross the room and when she saw Joey put a cold pack on the side of her face she opened her mouth to ask what's wrong, but Joey clenched her jaw and stared at her. Her mom got the point. Don't ask.

“We were just going over some of the things for the wedding. Jonathan was just telling me some of the dates they were thinking of...”

“Actually Joey, I came to ask you something.”

Joey sat down at the table and pressed her hand to her face dramatically.

“We haven't been able to hang out a lot since Anya, but I'd like you to be in the wedding.”

What Joey wanted to say is: “Do I have to wear a dress?” But the question, the

one that will be the first question AJ and I will ask her, seemed like an odd thing to say to a straight crowd so she opened her mouth and closed it and then went for a second attempt but her step-father opened the door and the question was forgotten.

He came in silently, unloaded his belt on the counter of the kitchen, including his gun, still in its holster. There was another one on his ankle that he didn't remove. He set each item down, his handcuffs, taser, small flashlight, one by one. It's a routine he's developed to give himself a moment of silence. They watched him, following each item from his belt to its place on the counter. Looking forward at the cabinets and away from the table he addressed Joey.

"I heard the news this morning."

Joey didn't say anything. Her mom looked at her husband quizzically.

"News?"

He went on like she didn't say anything.

"Please express my condolences to Amber."

And that was all he said. He turned to the pan of eggs on the stove and helped himself to a plate before sitting adjacent from Joey who just stared at him as he looked down at his eggs, as if it wasn't a shocking revelation that he not only knew Cass's name but her girlfriend's too. They had been over to the house only once, on the 4th of July that year. Her mom looked from her husband to Joey and back.

"Who's Amber?"

"No one mom."

Chapter Twenty-one

Family

A knock on Amber's door made her look away from the TV. She'd been scanning for further news on Cass. She noticed that John Stewart wasn't smiling on *The Daily Show* but turned the channel before she had time to see that change. The knock continued and she got up from the couch. The movement triggered more tears. Before I had left for work Amber had felt she was out of tears. She had moved onto worry, resolving not to cry until she knew how bad the situation was. A smiling woman stood beyond the door, but as Amber opened it her smile turned to concern.

"Hi," she said with her voice going from high to low. "Are you Corporal Cassandra Wollock's roommate?"

Roommate. Amber nearly let her tears become vocal sobs.

"Yes."

"I'm so sorry. This must be such a difficult time for you. I'm Karen. I'm from the Alliances for Families and we are trying to contact Corporal Wollock's family to lend them any support we can in this time of need."

Amber looked past the woman and stepped outside some to keep her from coming in. Alliance for Families. That was a right wing Christian group, the sort of people who supported McCain and would vote yes on the amendment to the Florida constitution to ban gay marriage in November.

“I don’t really know Cass’s family or where they are right now,” Amber told her.

“Surely they’ve been in touch?” Karen stepped forward and Amber closed the door more so her body blocked the view of her apartment.

“I appreciate your sympathies, but I’m sorry, I don’t think Cass is very close to her family.”

The woman looked at her for a moment and paused before running her eyes over Amber’s frame. I was walking up behind them and I almost rushed in and threw the woman out of the way. Her voice was soft but her body language screamed aggression as Amber stood there hugging herself.

“Hey Amber. What’s going on?” I asked in place of violence.

“This woman, I’m so sorry what was your name?”

“Karen, that’s quite alright,” she said and her eyes fell on my feet like the huddle of girls’ eyes had in the bathroom, she gave me the same toe to hair look.

“Karen is from the Alliance for Families. They’re looking for Cass’s family,” Amber told me.

“Oh,” was all I said and I ran my hands through my hair as though I could suddenly make it look less gay.

Karen turned back to Amber.

“Listen Cass doesn’t talk about her family. I really don’t even know where she was born. Thank you very much for your concern. Have a nice day.”

Amber moved to let me inside. A picture of her kissing Cass was momentarily in plain sight, but it had happened so fast, I don’t think the woman could have seen it.

“I see. Yes. Well let me know if they do contact you.” She left her card and turned away without further condolence.

With the door closed safely behind us, we looked at each other and then to the door where the woman stood.

“That was weird,” I said and we both giggled. It’s the first time Amber had smiled since she’d heard the news, for me too. My lips felt stiff which made me want to giggle even more. Still giggling, I cupped the side of Amber’s face and stood on my tip toes. I tilted her head down and kissed her on the forehead. When my lips pressed against Amber’s skin, I could smell the oil from the bath she must have been soaking in earlier. Amber stopped giggling. Her body relaxed. I pulled away and stroked her cheek with my thumb, rubbing at a tear that had fallen despite the giggling. We looked at each other and then she fell into my shoulder. With me holding her, she began to sob again.

Part III

Chapter Twenty-two

New York, New York

It only takes one winter in Florida to spoil the blood. Raya remembers standing outside in Maine, four feet of snow on the ground, waiting for the bus, only slightly shivering with her jacket mostly unzipped. Or so she tells us when we're all sitting around outside in the middle of the night with our coats zipped up to our lips and bouncing around to get warmth to our extremities. Forty degree weather is nothing to mess around with, but I know what she means. I vaguely remember growing up in the north and thinking forty was warm.

It was actually sometime after Cass came back, or maybe it was around the same time. All I know is she and Joey both split for a bit around then. They left at the same time too. So I guess that means it was after Cass came back. Raya had to go to New York for some conference thing. The annual March Computer Programming Conference. Sounded fascinating, but Raya assured me it was nothing like the E3 Expo for video games. It was however a free trip to New York City and I think that's worth spending a few hours a day listening to motivational speakers talk about Microsoft Vista versus Microsoft XP with service pack 3.

When she came back, I wanted to know about the things she did. She'd gone to this club called *Vertigo*. It was the first time Raya had a story I actually wanted to hear.

But of course, she didn't start with "and so I was there in *Vertigo* when." Raya started with the weather. She started with "It was cold there. I mean like the type of cold I forgot about, you know?" So she wasn't ready for twenty degree weather when she stepped off the plane in New York City with her fellow co-workers. At the hotel she could feel the gusts of wind slide through the door and move down each of the halls, chilling the lobby and the conference rooms. It was a three day conference. But day one was just orientation, coffee and name tags. She read a book in her hotel room before putting her head on a pillow to fall asleep, but the co-worker she shared the room with still had the light on, so got up and continued reading. She was reading *Twilight*. I had to stop her.

"*Twilight*?"

"My sister teaches high school. She said it was really good, how was I supposed to know it would be a chick book."

She stayed up so late reading...*Twilight*...because she wanted to get it...over with? I'm not really sure. On day two though, she overslept. The conference was at 9am in Ballroom B. It was 8:45am when she sprung out of bed and threw her clothes on. The conference was supposed to be in the hotel she was staying but a quick glance at the map revealed there were no Ballroom B's and according to the front desk attendant there were no ballrooms in the hotel at all. They were all in the partner hotel across the street. It was already 8:55am. No time to go back for a coat. She followed the signs in the lobby to the door that faced the other hotel. Inside, the lobby connected to a Starbucks and Raya cursed as she looked from the line to the street outside. She looked at her watch to double check, 8:57am, no time for coffee.

Snow was bunched up on the edges of the street outside. She closed her eyes and pushed the door open catching her breath on the gust of cold air that she swallowed. Her hands jammed in her pockets. Raya's jaw shook, the way it used to when she was bundled up in the middle of February in Maine during sub zero temperatures. It was 20 degrees in New York. She'd gone soft living in the sunshine where even the rain is warm. She jaywalked across the road staring straight at oncoming taxi drivers who appeared to be, for a moment, impervious to the stare down method of getting cars to not run her over. She was so busy staring at one taxi driver who wasn't stopping that she didn't notice her foot about to land in a snow bank near the curb and snow piled into her sneaker. She gave a small nod and pursed her lips as the snow instantly melted and was absorbed by her sock. "Fantastic."

The slush, still present in the sneaker, was making her foot go numb as she rushed through the right hotel looking for Ballroom B. With every step her foot seemed to absorb a little more. She was already three minutes late. As she found the doors, she cracked one open and slid in. No one noticed her late entrance. She took a seat in the back and removed her shoe, dumped its contents on the ground and peeled off her sock. A few people look over her to see what exactly she was doing as she rubbed her foot and looked up at the presenter who was discussing running Mac OS on a PC and how it could be beneficial in the office environment.

The hall wasn't full. The back rows were mostly empty. There was no one at all sitting in the two rows in front of her. Most of the attendants were flipping through their phones, sending text messages and emails, playing cellular games, perhaps connecting via Bluetooth to share their boredom. Raya looked over at her sock. It was going to be a

bitch to put that back on and the sole of her shoe was still soggy. She held the sock against her body, hoping to warm it, as she did a little water was squeezed onto the floor. Raya looked around to see if anyone noticed and that's when she saw the two girls in casual business attire, one with a nose ring as an accessory, sitting in the row just behind her and six seats to the right.

Raya watched them out of the corner of her eye. The one nearest her was wearing a skirt. She bounced a crossed leg and the skirt crept up her thigh. Raya draped an arm over the chair next to her to allow a better view in her peripheral vision. They were leaning in and talking low over some flier. When they look back up, one of the girls nodded over at Raya and they giggled quietly, but Raya couldn't tell if they had noticed her looking. When she looked back they were gone and the flier was sitting on the chair.

It took her a few minutes, but she finally put her wet sock back on. She stood and quickly exited, walked behind the row with the flier and scooped it up as she headed back to the Starbucks. Screw the stupid meeting and the wet insole of her shoe. The pink paper had glitter compressed into it and two female symbols stood side by side. They looked like stick figures holding hands. In block lettering the words were simple.

March 15^h

Club Vertigo.

Pink Party.

Raising Awareness for Breast Cancer.

And then it gave an address. March 15th was that night.

Raya looked into the reflective display case at Starbucks. Her hair had grown too long and was perking up in the back. She had planned to get a hair cut before the trip, but

playing *Call of Duty* had ultimately seemed more important. Every day for two months she'd gotten up and told herself she needed to get a haircut and every day she found some reason not to. She matted it down, grimacing and then quickly looked around to make sure no one saw her. There were teddy bears on display at Starbucks. She picked up a bear, soft, warm from sitting near a radiator. She held it close to her cheek, noting the smell of coffee beans.

“Hailey always wanted one of those bears,” she told me and took a minute to pause in her story.

It took a while to piece this next part together. The parties involved never had much to say and I can only conclude that's because not much happened. The day after we found out Cass had been taken prisoner, Hailey went searching for Raya. She was worried. She hadn't heard from her all night. Raya and River were lying side by side on the bed naked, Raya's hand traveled over her hip, and there was a knock on the door. Then there was a key in the lock. No one said anything. Raya was halfway dressed when Hailey walked in. River pulled the sheets over her body and didn't look at Hailey. And then Hailey was gone. She left the key on the table and walked back out as calmly as she'd come in. Raya didn't chase after her. She didn't turn back to River either. She just stared at the key on the table. Eventually River got up and let herself out the door. No words were said. No glances met. No pauses or stuttering and the entire three minutes couldn't have been more dramatic.

It took Raya a few days before she went back to the apartments. Joey and I were both away that day, but she called River and they sat on the patio of her apartment,

smoking pot and laughing at the images in the leaves. They spent two weeks inseparable. Then, she went back to Pulse with River.

In the car, River said: “I like you.”

“I like you too.” Raya put her hand on River’s.

“This is fun. You’re having fun right?” She didn’t wait for Raya to reply, “I get bored easy though. You know?” Before she got out of the car she ran her hand over Raya’s bicep. “You should really think about working out.”

River got bored that night when she saw AJ leaning against the bar. When they all left, River went in AJ’s car and Raya could see her grabbing his bicep and kissing his cheek as they walked away.

Raya set the bear back down and placed her order.

“Raya?” A voice called from a booth at the Starbucks. “Come sit.”

Her co-worker, Jen was sitting with Mark, the guy she’d been trying to get on a date since Raya started working there.

“I know Raya will be there tonight,” she said to Mark. “You’re going to be the only one sitting around the hotel.”

“Alright, if Raya’s going then I guess I’ll have to go,” this Mark guy said.

They got to the bar at ten and it was crowded with suits. Being only a block from the hotel, it seemed that everyone had left whatever conference they were attending at the end of the day and ended up at the same bar. Raya was in her jeans, she’d gone back upstairs to change before having a quiet dinner alone at a café around the corner. She was the only one in jeans. Her co-workers, who all went to dinner together, stayed late having

after dinner drinks and then met her at the bar. Raya had told them she wanted to take a quick nap, but really she was thinking about the pink party and considering that her designer jeans might go over better than the cheap black pants she bought at Wal-mart for work.

Jen carved out a spot in the crowd and was moving to the music in front of Mark. She leaned over and grabbed his hand a few times, moving it with her, but Mark stayed leaned up against one of the pillars next to a booth and insisted he didn't dance. They were playing a fast song, hip-hop and Raya felt about ready to start dancing with Jen herself. Whether it was, her jeans or her hair cut or a mix of both, she kept catching people staring at her though and she was hesitant to draw any more attention.

One of their other co-workers came back to the group with a beer and shouted that fake shout people give when they're trying to get excited and took a long drink. A few people looked over at her and she started scanning the room.

"So who's hot here?" Raya's co-worker asked her.

"I don't know, they're all straight so I didn't even look," Raya said over the music.

"They're all bi when they're drunk," she said taking another long drink of beer, "even me." As Raya watched her giggle at her own joke she wondered if she was being hit on. Her co-worker was cute, small waisted but a little on the short side. Raya sized her up and gave her an ambiguous smile. When she told me about the ambiguous smile I grinned at her so wide she stopped and laughed like she missed some joke and then when she realized she didn't miss a joke she just said "What?" Ambiguous smile. Everyone

gives ambiguous smiles from time to time, but her telling me she gave an ambiguous smile. Raya was well on her way to bragging.

“I like that one,” her co-worker finally said and nodded to a girl over by the pool table in a mini skirt and then she turned to another co-worker, leaving Raya to look at her toes. She didn’t want to be caught scanning the girl’s legs. Raya blushed. She thought maybe her co-worker had a secret crush on her all this time, but the girl at the pool table was clearly femme and Raya is butch and you can’t be attracted to both butches and femmes at the same time. Her co-worker looked back over at Raya and winked. Or can you?

I stopped Raya there and assured that while rare, it did sometimes happen.

This was the first straight bar Raya had been in since she came out. As she looked around, she wondered what the appeal ever was. Groups of girls stood together and danced. They gave the groups of guys who stared at them quick glances, but otherwise ignored them. Raya used to be one of those girls. She and her friends would dance and know they were catching stares, but refuse to return any.

A few of her co-workers gathered in a circle around her. They were all talking about work gossip, stuff she was interested in around the water cooler when she was procrastinating returning to her desk, but at that moment it was just irrelevant data. One of them just got back from her honeymoon. She’d been filling them in on details of her wedding as she remembered. Weddings. There’s a conversation Raya has never had with us. Some of the guys were talking about college basketball. Raya doesn’t follow it. She knows her friends aren’t really any different just because we choose to discuss different

topics, but there's something different about this, like maybe these people don't understand her at all or maybe and straight people are just really boring.

"Maybe it was just that you were wasting your chance to meet lesbians," I pointed out and she moved on with her story.

Raya was out the door and had the pink flier out of her back pocket before she realized that her feet were moving. Back inside one of her co-workers texted her: Hey where u go?

Raya texted back: I'm tired, turning in early.

The cold hit her and she zipped her coat up, put on her gloves, but chose to deal with the wind on her face rather than put on her hat, even as she got to the fifth block and still hadn't found a subway station. She didn't want to mess her hair up. I could relate. The wind made the gel in her hair feel like icicles, but at least it would hold in place. Her fingers were numb through the gloves and her ears burned and felt like they would shatter if someone touched them.

Inside the subway, the lack of wind made it more bearable and she looked along the maps for the location of the club. One block south of the NRQ line, East Union Square exit it said. She was lucky. The NRQ line picked up at her location. One block south of the East Union Square stop, Raya watched for a sign that said *Club Vertigo*. She checked the address and discovered a bar. Unlike the last bar, this one was more designed for eating, with actual tables, menus and even waitresses. At the hostess stand she looked around and walked outside and then back in and then back out and almost returned to the subway, but changed her mind. Raya took a deep breath of cold air into her lungs and walked up to a hostess.

“Do you know where Club Vertigo is? It says...”

“Downstairs,” the girl told her and walked away.

Off in the corner a guy stood with his arms crossed. Raya approached him with her ID out. He looked it over and nodded at her. She walked down the stairs and was half way down when she finally heard the music. As she paid the cover she looked around the club. Most of the crowd was wearing pink, but not everyone so she felt safe in her orange shirt as she slipped her coat off her shoulders. The girl at the coat check was busy, handling a line of people waiting for a number in return for their jacket and she didn't even look up at Raya's face as she grabbed her coat from her hand.

There were two squares that dipped into the ground, surrounded by benches that lined the squares like low walls from where girls could perch and analyze the crowd mingling in the middle. A walkway ran through the squares like a bridge over a moat. In one corner a pole reached from the ground to the ceiling, atop a small stage. A girl in short booty shorts danced on the pole. Raya looked at inside of the coat check to see if anyone had checked their pants. At quick glance she couldn't see any, but no one could survive outside in those shorts.

The bar was along the far wall. The entire club was in this one room. Girls danced down in the pits. They danced on the benches. There were no flashing lights, just a constant state of dim. One girl was lying on her back and had a leg wrapped around another girl who leaned down over her and kissed her collar bone.

With a drink in her hand, Raya surveyed the room again. She moved to the outer edge of the benches. Over half of these girls looked like River. They had small sleeveless shirts that barely reached their pants. Some of them were in skirts, but most wore black

pants with the pinstripe look and heels. The more Raya looked around, the more she realized that even those who were wearing jeans had on heels. Their hair looked straightened or scrunched up or generally like they'd spent an hour on it.

“Sounds hot,” I cut in.

But Raya went on like I had spoken. The few short cuts in the crowd had long pieces that ran over their eyes, cupped their chin or stuck up at funky angles. There were no crew cuts. There were no guys' clothes. She moved through the girls and tried to find one to start a conversation with, but they seemed to turn away just as she looked at them. She downed her drink for courage and danced near a girl she thought might be interested, but the girl never scooted her way and the general movement of the floor eventually pushed Raya towards a wall. In the corner, Raya finally saw a butch girl, a little overweight, she wore black pants and a polo, she had her hair in a faux-hawk. She sipped her drink and watched the girls and didn't appear to know anyone.

“Damn, sucks to be butch Manhattan. I bet all the dykes hang out in Brooklyn.”

Raya glared at my comment. When she got back to the hotel, her co-workers were still out. She laid under the covers of her bed and watched out the window. Snow was falling. She watched it settle on the red sign for the Radisson across the street. She wasn't butch enough. She wasn't femme enough and Hailey, the person who guided through her transition, she was gone.

Chapter Twenty-three

Welcome Home

The news of Cass's capture had died down after a week. They extracted the soldiers and civilians through means that were not released within forty eight hours. Amber had been glued to the news; she'd called in sick to work for the entire week. If they weren't discussing on TV, she was looking for information online. It was the only way she could know anything. They all came back alive, but reports said a few of the soldiers appeared to be in critical condition. They didn't release the names of those soldiers. They expected everyone back in the U.S. within a day, but Amber didn't hear from Cass. Internet reports said they were being held for debriefing. A blog from a sister of one of the other soldiers described hearing from a government official who told them her brother was fine but wouldn't be able to contact anyone until the official debriefing was over. No one knew to contact Amber.

Joey and I were there when she finally heard from her. I never apologized for hitting her and Joey never apologized for being callous but she did come over to Amber's with dinner every night. I was practically living at Amber's. I could avoid her at work, but I couldn't escape her in the small apartment. We didn't speak for a few days. Finally I asked her how her eye was. "Better," she told me. And everything was fine.

Amber's voice was even on the phone, but tears were falling down her cheeks. It was Cass. I sat down on the couch. It was like I had been winded and finally able to catch my breath.

"When can you come home?" The conversation was short. There was a period of silence when Amber looked like she was about to speak but didn't. "I love you," she said.

Joey chewed on her tongue as she leaned against the couch on the other side of the room and watched Amber set down her phone and wipe her tears away.

"I have these cruise tickets. I was supposed to go with Sasha, but you know. You and Cass can have them," Joey told her before she left.

"No, I think she'll just want to be home for awhile."

Back at home, Joey logged onto her computer and sent out a bulletin.

Tuesday March 20th.

Pulse. Be there.

Cass is back from Iraq.

Cass said she'd be back on the 18th. She sent another text to Amber: Pulse on Tuesday? Try and get Cass to come? Welcome her home?

Amber replied a few minutes later: ok.

I didn't come by the apartment on the 18th or the 19th. Amber and Cass, I think, needed some time alone. On the 20th, I pulled into the parking lot of the apartment complex I used to live in. I drove so slow that I hardly noticed when my car rose and fell over the first speed bump. Part of me still didn't believe any of this was real. When she

left, we thought she'd be gone until summer, possibly later. She was back early and I sat there in the car, trying to picture her inside with her feet up on the coffee table and Amber sitting over her lap. I didn't know anything more than what the reporters said and I thought for a moment maybe they had the wrong soldier. How was I supposed to treat her? I didn't have an answer. So I sat there in the car and folded an old receipt for a package of M&Ms in halves until it would no longer bend. Then I unfolded it and read the price: \$2.33. Candy inflation. I wondered if, maybe, when we were done securing our oil, we could look into the cocoa bean market. Gas prices had just dropped and I could actually buy a gallon of gas for the cost of my small bag of M&Ms. Or maybe it had been a big bag. The receipt was from January. I couldn't remember. But I tried. I fished through other receipts in the side pocket of my car door looking for prices to things I never paid attention to. How much did it cost me to eat a sub from the 7/11? \$6.85! I was outraged. No wonder I had no money left over at the end of the month for my savings account. The calculator on my phone was up and running, crunching numbers \$6.85 (sub), \$2.50 (juice), \$3.00 (vitamin water), and the list went on. I'd spent over \$50.00 on odds and ends in the past week. More than \$10.00 a day. That was \$200.00 a month wasted on nothing.

A car honked and I realized I had at some point put the car in reverse and held the brake down. They must have hoped I'd be leaving. Was I considering leaving? Why was the car in reverse? I am never eager to stay and sit in the car. I usually open the door at the same time the car goes into park. I pull the key from the ignition as I step out and lock the doors. It's a five step process done in two steps. It's a fast procedure and most passengers who ride with me end up getting locked in, but it's habit. I can't slow this

process down. If I want to sit in the car I have leave the car in drive and push the brake down. So when I move the care from reverse to park, I'm outside standing by it with the door locked before the guy who honked can squeal his wheels and drive off annoyed at his luck.

I've been up and down these stairs so much over the past month it's almost like I've been living there again. I come over after work, when I know Amber is teaching and pass out watching morning talk shows. Amber has a plasma. She comes home in the evening and Joey comes by with dinner. Then I go home to shower and get ready for work. That was all over now. Cass was home. I didn't know if she'd even want to see me or more accurately I didn't know if I wanted to see her. I'm a coward, remember. I came to grips with that at 19 and this seemed hard. There would be awkward silence.

I could hear talking on the other side of the door.

"I'm so glad you're back."

No response.

"I don't know what to say except I'm just happy to have you home."

No response.

This was great timing. I rolled my eyes at myself and knocked.

No response.

"It's probably Sarah. Answer it."

Delay. And then Cass was at the door. She stood a few feet back from it and I stood on the other side of the threshold. I tried not to react, I'd seen wounds before, it didn't look as bad as it had probably been a few weeks ago, but it was real. She had a collection of bruises scattered over her face and her lip was swollen slightly like it had

been busted and beaten. There was a scar running straight through her eyebrow and it made me think of when I was 14 and shaved a line through my brow because I somehow thought it made me look cool. I had thought that maybe it would be hard to look at her, but it wasn't. Her face wasn't blown out of proportion, just a little discolored, her lip a little tender. I stayed on my side of the doorway.

"Hi." I wanted to smile, to tell her I was so glad she was ok, but I'd seen the movies. She would lash out. "Ok? I'll never be ok again." And I'd feel like an insensitive ass. I tried to give her a version of my look, the one with the facial features that are up for interpretation. I think it just made me look goofy though because Cass laughed and then Amber, who had been nervously twisting her lower lip beneath her teeth, broke into hysterics.

"Come here Sarah," Cass said. "It's good to see you."

We were laughing. My body collided with Cass's and I wrapped my arms around her pounding her on the back as we clasped together.

"Damn Sarah, the insurgents didn't hit me this hard."

I tightened my grip and jumped. Cass caught me under my legs and threw me onto the couch.

"So fucking glad you're back man." I ran back over the edge of the couch and tackled her. "So now's probably a good time for me to wrestle you, huh?" I poked at her in places I thought wouldn't seriously hurt and if they did she didn't wince or give any sign. "Where are your sensitive spots? Huh? Huh?"

Some people come back from war messed up for the rest of their lives. Cass had come back again and again. She'd never been messed up and each time she returned we

held our breath, worried, maybe this would be the time, but she was fine. Lots of people come back from war fine. We remembered every time she came home. This was Cass. POW had nothing on her. She was butch and I was proud.

When we got to *Pulse* everyone was already there. Cass had held us up. At the last minute she decided maybe she should put some make up on over her gash. We spent thirty minutes talking about the pros and cons of that. I don't think Cass has ever worn make-up and I've never seen her obsess over her appearance like she was. Then she wanted to stop for a McDonald's cheeseburger. The things are disgusting, but that was at least something I could understand. When we walked in, on the video screens, where we had seen Cass's picture, Britney and Madonna were kissing. I don't think anyone ever told Cass that we'd seen her picture there or that everyone there knew her that night because she'd been all over those screens. We all had a hundred new Myspace friend invites and were constantly getting questions about how she was.

"Thanks for bringing everyone out," Cass told Joey as she hugged her.

"I wasn't sure if you'd want to be alone," Joey shouted back as they broke the hug.

"I've been alone for weeks," she shouted and then was caught up in hugging Raya. It was a string of hugs as Cass made her way through the crowded club. We lost her in the wave of hugging. Amber stood on her toes to look for her and then rested her heels back down.

"I guess she'll be alright," she said.

But Cass was right back by us a few moments later with the club owner in tow.

“She says drinks on the house,” she told Amber and then looked to me. “But not for you, I heard about the shit that happened while I was away.” She smiled and pointed two fingers at her eyes and the redirected them back to me as she took Amber by the hand and led her into the dance room. I followed and stopped in the doorway, leaning against the frame, watching.

“Wow, Cass can’t dance,” I said to who I thought would be Joey, but turned out to be much shorter.

“Hailey. Hi.” She caught me off guard. I was excited for a moment to see my old crush, but then I remember River and Raya. I looked away.

“You don’t call, you don’t text...”

“I thought maybe...”

Hailey leaned into my ear again.

“You didn’t cheat on me.” When she leaned back she continued. “Besides, you were my friend before her. I have seniority.”

“Oh, so you get me in the divorce?”

Raya looked over at us and Hailey placed a hand on my shoulder as she walked into the dance room. “Call me.”

But even while she was walking away, I was thinking about Shay. She didn’t appear to be there. I thought for sure she would. I hadn’t heard from her since *Pulse* last time. I suppose it would have helped if I’d called her, but I didn’t know what to say. If she had called, I probably wouldn’t have answered the phone.

I looked over at Raya and Joey sitting together on a booth in the white room and gave them an up nod. As my head went up they stood and followed me to Cass who let go of Amber and grabbed me by the hips.

“Come on, let’s see those hips move.” She moved them in a circle a few times before backing off.

I tried, I really did try. I figured I couldn’t look more ridiculous than Cass, but I just ended up nodding my head to the beat and moving my shoulders a little. Raya grabbed Amber’s hand and spun her around. Cass leaned into Raya.

“You’ve got to teach me to do that.”

But as everyone danced on the floor and Cass looked over at Amber smiling and laughing as Raya spun her in a circle, she stepped back out the crowd. It was like vertigo, except instead of being forced to the ground there was a force gripping her around the spine and tugging her back. When she looked up again, she’d lost us, her eyes were unfocused and she was next to the bar. A shot was sitting in front of her.

Cass blinked at the drink. She downed it.

“It’s free, so keep it coming,” she told the bartender.

Another shot went down.

“What is that?” A tall, slightly overweight girl, wearing a top that did nothing to hide her stomach, leaned up against the bar facing Cass. Cass looked at her and shrugged. She pointed to the glass and the bartender returned with a bottle in his hand.

“Ask her.”

The girl didn’t ask, but as Cass went to take her next shot the girl’s hand stopped her and rested on her forearm.

“Wait for me, we can do it together. I’m Kristen.”

Cass held up her shot glass in mock toast. When the girl got her drink and held it up they clinked them together.

“Cass,” she told her just before she downed the hot.

As the shots fell onto the table, Cass looked at the Kristen. She blinked as she had before taking her first drink. She leaned up, stood and kissed her. Kristen didn’t object.

I saw the whole thing from the doorway to the white room. We’d all gone looking for Cass when we noticed she’d slipped away.

“Cass!” I pushed myself between her and the girl like I was breaking up a fight. I held my arms out between them to keep maximum distance. I looked at Cass and then looked over to the dance floor in the other room, scanning for Amber through the door. Raya, thankfully, had seen the scene too and she’d turned on Amber and pushed her back into the crowd, claiming to have seen Cass at the other side of the room. It appeared to have worked. I was about to ask Cass what the fuck she was doing, when she turned away from me and rushed out of the club.

By the time I got there, she was doubled over a curb, puking into the street. Joey was right behind me as we ran out to her. On either side, we held her arms and tried to lift her up, but she kept herself crouched and her puking turned to dry heaves.

“Cass,” I called out, but it didn’t seem like she could hear me.

“Come on, get up.”

Cass shook her body to the left and then right, throwing is off of her, but she stopped puking at least and fell back on her ass against the sidewalk. She brought her knees to her chest and folded her head into her legs, hugging herself. Joey and I watch

her. We listened to the sounds of sniffing and breathing changes as she cried. It was how I imagined it might feel to see my parents unable to walk up the stairs. Cass never needed anything from me and now that she did, I didn't know what to make of it. I sat down beside her, wrapped my arm around her shoulders and her knees. I knelt uncomfortably on the ground. Joey did the same. Her body fat pressed into Cass as she slid her hand around her waist and held her as closely as her body would allow. Cass let her head fall into my arm and her tears subsided. We sat there on the ground outside of *Pulse*, listening to the patterns of bass that escaped the club.

We held her until Cass lifted her head and relaxed her knees so she was only hugging them loosely. Joey and I kept an arm around her shoulder. Cass stared at the hair on her arms.

“I'm not in the military anymore.”

We stayed silent, but squeezed our hands against her. Amber had already told us about her discharge.

“I don't have a college degree.”

She swallowed and looked up, clenching her jaw as she stared at the clouds.

“I had a choice, quit or section 8.”

Joey and I squeezed a little tighter and when Cass didn't continue. Amber hadn't mentioned that part.

“What's section 8?” Joey asked.

“Don't ask, don't tell. Someone told.” Cass stood up, freeing herself of our arms and walked a few steps away, then leaned on the trunk of a near-by car for support. She kept her back turned to Joey and I and we stayed sitting on the sidewalk, now hugging

our knees like children waiting for the end of a story we've just realized won't end in happily ever after.

"They gave me a choice. Take what I have for service, pension, part of my GI bill, veteran's benefits, take my medal of honor and an honorable discharge," she paused as she spit out the word honorable, "for injury or face an inquiry that would end in a dishonorable discharge, aka, losing everything."

"That's so gay." The words slipped out of Joey's mouth and I could tell by the way she never fully ended the last syllable that she hadn't meant for it to slip out that way, but Cass just turned and looked at us sitting on the ground.

"That's exactly the problem."

We stood to go to her, but kept a small distance.

"What am I doing back here?" she asked us.

I desperately wanted to tell her it will be okay. Whenever something goes wrong in my life it always turns out okay. This will be okay, I could hear myself saying the words but they seemed to imply it should be okay and that is not what I meant. While I debated this saying, Joey took a breath to speak.

"Amber didn't see anything," she said, for once not putting her foot in her mouth.

"I can't lose her," Cass stared through the doorway of the club so intently that I turned my head to see if Amber was standing there.

"She doesn't need to know," I added.

In the car, heading back to Amber and Cass's, I once again didn't know what to say. They were both quiet, sitting in the front seat, while Amber is drove. It sounded like

a pretty good deal to me. Cass got out early. She could finally live without her life being interrupted by war, but it didn't seem like Cass viewed it this way and since I couldn't understand, I stayed quiet. When we were standing outside the car and Cass reached over to hug me good-bye, I opened my mouth to say something, but 'it will be okay' was once again there on my tongue so I closed my mouth and just watched Cass walk away. Amber stayed behind. She lingered in her hug with me until Cass was out of earshot.

"She doesn't sleep." She stepped back and looked at me, scanning my face for an answer maybe. "I thought maybe tonight, she seemed better. She just paces and blasts the TV. I came home today and she was finally asleep, but I could hear the TV from down the stairs. When I opened the door she jumped up, grabbed a pillow and I think she started to point it at me before she realized it wasn't a gun. Then she was fine, kissing me. I thought she slept and she was fine..." I wrapped my arms around her. "but she's not fine is she?" I rubbed her upper back.

"You'll both be fine. She's been through hell. A night of sleep isn't going to make it better."

"I know, I just." Amber looked down at the ground. "I hoped she wouldn't be able to remember. I don't know how to deal with this."

As Amber walked away I called back out to her, getting her to turn and look at me. "It'll be okay," I said.

Chapter Twenty-four

Grand Central Station

Sometime after the party at *Pulse*, there was a knock on my door and when I opened it I found Joey standing on the other side. She'd been crying for so long that snot dribbled down her face.

"She's been cheating on me," she said.

And she fell forward into my arms. I had to widen my legs to support her. I didn't know what to say. She was sobbing. It was vocal. I went the logical question.

"Who?"

She just sobbed louder. Joey didn't have time to be dating someone behind my back. We spent most of March together when we weren't sleeping, although we did have alternate days off some of the time. I stepped back and guided her inside. I shut the door. I've known Joey for five years or more and this was the first time I'd seen her cry.

Cass, Joey, crumbling into tears after so many years. God, Raya would be next.

"Get a hold of yourself," I told Joey. "Fuck her, whoever she is."

When she didn't stop leaning on me I wrapped my arms around her and gave her a squeeze. "I'm sorry. Stop crying now. Be strong."

Joey stood back up. She wiped her tears and snot away.

"It's Alyssa," she said and started crying again.

"When did you and Alyssa..."

“You never want to hear about her. It was since *Pulse* that night we found out about Cass. I called her the next day. Sarah, she was perfect.”

“Joey, she’s not fucking perfect if she cheated on you.”

“I’m not fucking strong.” She sat down on my couch and continued. “I’ve been thinking about dating this butch girl.”

“Sick.” My gut reaction got spit out.

“I don’t know Sarah. Maybe I’m sick of taking care of these girls. You know Alyssa didn’t even pay her bills or clean and then she’d get annoyed when I left my shirt on the floor. I don’t know how she even noticed with all the clutter she had every where. What was one more shirt?”

Good old Joey, she was coming back. Distraught quickly turned to pissed off.

“See, she’s not perfect.”

She didn’t say anything.

“Girls, Joey. Fuck ‘em. Fuck ‘em all.”

The break up song.

Break up and move on. I knew Joey hurt when girls left her. I knew about the ring in her drawer and I could tell how empty she felt each time another girl turned away from her. But it’s not like she was perfect. Joey was an asshole to Sasha. Maybe she forgot who took care of whom in that relationship. I never saw her with this new girl, Alyssa, but I can’t imagine she was much better.

“You should really clean this place,” she told me after a few minutes. “Have you ever liked a friend?” she asked me as if it was a common thing to say after telling a friend they’re a slob.

There was another knock on the door before I could answer.

“Hailey?”

Her stomach was showing. It looked like she’d gotten a bellybutton ring since the last time I’d seen her stomach. She was holding a stack of t-shirts in her hand.

“Um, I just wanted to know if you’d pass these on to Raya?” she asked me.

She had half a leg inside when she saw Joey and stopped.

“Oh,” she said and handed me the shirts which I took as an answer to her question.

“Hi Joey.”

Joey stood and smiled her hello.

“I’m going to get going,” she told me.

I still hadn’t said anything. I nodded at Joey and she walked out the door.

“Was she crying?” Hailey asked me when the door closed.

I nodded again.

“That’s so like Raya. Always so sensitive…” Hailey started to rant and I zoned out watching her, giving her a nod as she walked toward the fridge and grabbed a drink.

“That’s what I always liked about you,” she said at one point. “You might be a mess, but you’d never break down on your girlfriend over something stupid.”

‘A mess’? It was like when she called me stone. Who was she talking to that she knew these things about me? I cut her off in the middle somewhere. She might have moved onto some other topic, I’m not really sure. My brain was still a few steps back.

“I’ve never seen Raya cry,” I said.

It took a moment for her to back up to that comment.

“Oh my god Sarah, you have no idea. Every month she spent a week breaking down. She is such a femme in butch clothing.”

A wolf in sheep’s clothing. It’s more than just bad. It’s intentionally manipulative. Like a spy, a wolf in sheep’s clothing is a spy. A wolf cannot wear sheep clothes. If they try they will be found out and they will no longer be a sheep. A wolf here was a femme. A butch was a sheep. That seemed backwards.

Hailey kept talking.

I was busy thinking about sheep.

There was another knock on the door.

“Goddamn, you’d think none of my friends owned cell phones,” I said as I opened the door and saw AJ standing there.

“I’m going to go. Get those back to Raya?” Hailey asked before AJ could speak.

“What am I revolving door?” I said to her.

“I’m sorry Sarah. I’m just mixed up.” She paused as AJ turned to the side to let her pass. “I’d like it if you called me.”

AJ came in and closed the door.

“What was that?” he asked but didn’t wait for me to respond. “Do you know where Raya lives?”

“Yeah, but couldn’t you have just called me?”

“I wanted you to come with me. In case she’s pissed about River.”

“Fucking weird night.”

I said I’d go just because this was one of those nights where it seemed best to see where it led you.

“Do you know if she’s home?” I asked.

“River says she’s always home, plays a lot of video games or something.” He paused. “She said you’d be home too just cause you’re too chicken to grab a date. Maybe she was wrong about that last part.” AJ raised his eyebrows at me looking for details on me and Hailey. “Maybe you’re the wrong person to bring with me. She might deck us both.”

I laughed. “I think we can take Raya.”

There was silence.

Raya welcomed us both in to her apartment, but she gave us the same look I’d given my three drop-bys. The look said: Why didn’t you just call?

When we walked in AJ and I both paused and looked Raya over. There was a box open in the middle of the floor with clothes inside and it appeared that Raya had pulled on some kind of halter top. We both must have given her a look because she grabbed a t-shirt and threw it on.

“Yo. Raya.” AJ eventually said. “Look man, I wanted to apologize for that mess with River.”

“No, it’s totally...”

“River, you know, she flirted with me a lot, but I don’t know, I never went for her until then. I’m sorry, it was shitty how that happened.”

“It’s ok,” Raya told her. “River was just...”

“Hot?” I threw in.

“Yeah...” Raya paused. “Is that what you came here for?” she asked. AJ didn’t answer immediately so she continued. “AJ, are you still transitioning?” Raya’s expression switched to something between surprise and confusion.

I hadn’t noticed, but I did then. AJ had boobs. For the last year, he’d been binding them tight to her chest. His front was always flat and now there was a small bump up top.

AJ started to speak, stopped and released his breath again.

“I don’t know man, I don’t know.”

“Change of heart?”

“No man, it’s just, well you know.” His cheeks were flushing, he looked at me and back at Raya. “If I’m a guy, I’m not a drag king am I?” He said it like that made all the sense in the world, but continued when our expressions didn’t change. “If I transitioned. You know, like where would I fit in?” AJ shrugged his shoulders like he was rolling off the thought. “And that binder, my boobs fucking hurt wearing it all the time.”

When we laughed, he continued.

“Drag is actually why I’m here. Our troupe lost a member. Raya, do you want give it a try? We could really use someone who can dance. No offense, Sarah.”

I don’t know what Raya was up to before we got there. I can only imagine her sitting in her apartment and thinking about the femme girls in New York. She put on that halter top just to remember how it felt. Her hair was still too long. It covered portions of her ears. She could put her girl’s clothes back on. She could let her wardrobe match her personality. She could wear her earrings again before the holes closed back up. But that person she was in Maine wasn’t quite right either. She could wander around somewhere

between butch and femme looking for the medium that was her. Or she could be our brother.

Raya nodded at the offer and I got to spend the rest of the night staring at her breasts as AJ taught her how to bind them.

“What’s that box?” I asked her at one point.

Raya grabbed some tape and sealed it up.

“Nothing, just some shit for goodwill.”

Chapter Twenty-five

Into the ocean

Last August, Joey and Sasha decided to take a cruise in April of 2008. Then Joey tried to sell the tickets. Then she offered them to Amber. Then she invited Alyssa. And then she went alone. She wasn't going to go at all, but she'd already put in for the vacation time. Out in the middle of the ocean the reception on Joey's phone was obsolete. She checked it as she woke up everyday anyway. From her bed she could see through the porthole but all she had was a view of the sky and that's just fine with Joey because she was a little worried about getting seasick. So far, she was okay.

The first plan of the day was to head to the game room where she had noticed *Guitar Hero* during arrival. If there were any lesbians on the ship, they'd be there. In board shorts and a tank top, Joey's body took up most of the space in the small hallways. She squeezed sideways against the wall to let people pass and watched the girls in bikinis to see if they gave her any signals of familiarity. They didn't.

When she didn't find any lesbians in the game room, she headed to the pool where she met a couple of guys the day before. They drank rum runners and watch the girls in the pool. At the bar was the sign up sheet for the activities on the islands and Joey put her name down for a diving trip on the last day.

That night, the guys invited Joey to their cabin for a game of poker. The five of them sat on beds with cards laid out on a small moveable table. Joey was breaking even.

She got lucky early on when a few of the guys tried to call her bluff and lost. They didn't call her bluff again unless they had something really good. She played in their cabin each night. All of them struck out with the girls during the day. It was the second to last night, the day before her diving trip and it was late.

“I think I'm going to turn in,” she told them after losing a hand.

“No, you can't turn in. You have my money,” one of the guys said and another followed with: “Yeah, you have to help us finish off this faggot here. He's playing it too safe.”

Joey looked over at the guy who had been folding nearly every hand and watched him blush. The other guys didn't seem to notice. After a moment the guy who made the faggot comment added: “No offense. Sorry, you know lesbians are all good, but faggots are a different story.”

“No, yeah, I understand.” Joey stayed and played a few more hands just to prove she didn't take offense to the term or what they said. She worked to make them feel better about their own attitudes.

“Why do you wear guy's clothes?” one of them asked as they tried to cover up their excitement over having a good hand. Joey folded.

“I don't know. Why don't you wear girl's clothes?” She shrugged.

“Because we're not girls,” two of the guys said at once.

Joey was silent a moment as they played out their bets.

“What's a girl?” she asked.

The same two guys brought their hands up to their pecs and moved them up and down as if they were jiggling boobs. They weren't really listening as they flipped over another card, but Joey went on.

"I don't know how to be anything but what I am."

The guy who wasn't betting earlier, went all in during the round and lost all his money.

"See, I knew you had some balls," the pot winner told him. He smiled. Having balls was more important than losing his money.

The sun came through Joey's porthole around six and nailed Joey in the eyes. It had been a few years since Joey had been on a dive, but once certified, always certified and Joey remembered, for the most part, what to do.

On shore a little hut with scuba gear rested before the giant dock. The smallest boat in the area was docked just in front of the shack. Scuba diving centers are never nice places. Salt clung to everything. Anything nice would only be destroyed. The water in the Caribbean gets cold in the winter and while a full wet suit isn't necessary, it's preferable. Still, Joey elected to wear one of the short-sleeved suits. The odds of finding a long one big enough to fit her were slim. She was running behind because she had to try on several different sizes before finding one big enough to fit her. Before grabbing an oxygen tank and joining the rest of the group on the boat, Joey took a moment to spit in her mask, rub the saliva around, and rinse it off in a bucket. She remembered that much about diving. Saliva kept the mask from fogging up. Putting the BCD on was another story. There

wasn't anyone left inside the center so Joey grabbed her BCD and tank and took it to the boat.

Joey couldn't tell whether the guide was annoyed or worried about her struggle with the BCD, but with only a few corrections she got everything hooked up right. All the oxygen tanks were stored in the middle and everyone sat facing the ocean, side by side, on either side of the boat. The current looked a little rough and after about forty-five minutes of boat ride and silence, they slowed down so speech could be heard.

“It's too choppy to dive at the reef today.”

A series of groans and concerned faces erupted among the passengers.

“We're going to do an open water dive. We'll have to cut it down to one dive. We have to travel a ways to get away from the Tiger Sharks. Because of its location...” and Joey zoned out as the guide began providing specific information that was too technical for her to understand. The gist she got. There was no concern that she would be eaten. That was all she needed to know.

It took another two hours to reach the tiger shark free location. Joey and her buddy, a middle aged man who she had yet to speak to, nodded at one another and then joined the line of people exiting the boat. They rolled backwards off the side and Joey followed suit although it is her least favorite method of entering the water. She's always concerned that her tank will connect with the boat and bash her in the head. Once in, the group headed towards the buoy placed by the guide and gradually they disappeared into the ocean. The buoy had a weighted rope that could drop as far as 50 meters, but it was only at 30. Joey watched as her partner descends. Once he was a body's length down she let the air out of her BCD, put in her mouth piece and began her descent.

This was Joey's first non-reef dive. On a reef dive, the boats go over an area of reef and the divers jump in, look down and there it is: thousands of fish. This dive was different. For one thing, the visibility wasn't as good. Whether it's the open water or the current kicking up dirt, Joey could only see well for about 10 meters.

Her partner had stopped moving. She almost kicked him in the head with her fin, but looked down just in time to see him holding his nose. He must have had ear troubles. She waited as the group sank down from above bypassing her and her partner. With nothing else to do, Joey tried to turn her head from side to side to dislodge water from her ear. The water, generally cool from the body, warms in the ear canal and stays there trapped, until it gets dislodged by surfacing or replaced by cooler water. The sensation is like feeling warm earwax leak out of the ear, but she couldn't quite make it happen at that moment. Her partner signaled that was ok and they finished their journey down the rope and kicked off together in the direction of others from the group.

The breath of a diver can be heard by some sea creatures more than a mile away. As they floated in the middle of the ocean, moving back and forth within the current, Joey could understand how. The sound of her own breathing consumed her. She held her breath for a moment to hear the quiet that allows sound to travel so far. All she heard was other divers breathing.

There was nothing in the water but shadows. Each shadow held a shark to the divers and they darted about in circles close to one another. The bottom of the ocean appeared rocky and a strand of brown weed stuck up, bending in the current, as particles in the water floated by like tumble weeds. If she looked up she could see the surface and the boat, a shadow with a bright halo of sun surrounding it. They swam out farther until

the floor dropped off. Joey almost vomited in the water when she looked down and found herself swimming over darkness. Like the Wiley Coyote when he runs off the cliff and hangs for a moment before plummeting to his doom, she waited for the drop. But it didn't come and Joey scrambled to return to the safety of the 30 meter floor where no monsters from the deep were going to emerge from the darkness and eat her.

They didn't see anything but water and the one weed during their thirty minutes below the surface. They ascended slowly, looking in each direction for something to remember from their dive in the Caribbean. There was silence as they surfaced and removed their respirators. No one spoke on the journey back and Joey stayed quiet during the remainder of her stay on the cruise ship. She didn't stop by the guy's bunk to play poker like she'd promised. When she closed her eyes she saw the blue water mingling with the black unknown. She felt like she was in the mouth of the ocean, too afraid to let it swallow her, to move out into open water and really find what she was looking for.

What Joey did next, I didn't see coming. Ironically I was as blindsided by her next decision as Jess was when she returned home and saw the changes in the lives of the butches she grew up with. I always thought, Joey, there's one butch I'm braver than. But I don't know anymore. I think it might be her journey more than the others that is influencing this moment for me now.

Chapter Twenty-six

More on sex, your News at 8.

Cass and I found a little hole in the wall during her first leave while I was living in Orlando. It's our favorite bar. The kind of place that usually has a constant cloud of smoke, thin enough so we don't cough or tear up, but thick enough that the place seems hazy. Cass claims it helps her pool game. I just like that they have cider on tap. It's a straight bar, but sometimes it's nice to get away from people you know. I've never beaten Cass at pool, but three of her balls were still left on the table and I only needed to chase down the eight ball. It looked like my time had finally come. We hadn't spoken much. I mentioned how annoying Joey was being and how grateful I was that she was on vacation and Cass nodded. Otherwise we mostly talked about gas prices.

I was about to sink my winning shot. I lined it up and moved the cue stick through my hand.

"We haven't had sex since I came back," Cass said, and I missed, just grazing the side of the white ball.

"You did that on purpose." I wheeled on her and Cass grinned.

She took a quick shot and watched the 11 ball go into the hole and then bounce back out because she'd hit it too hard.

"Why haven't you had sex?" I lined up another shot at the eight ball, looking around the table for feasible angle.

“It’s me.”

“Yeah?” I missed.

“I mean I want to. I want to touch her, you know feel her muscles tense up,” Cass blushed and missed another shot.

“So what are you waiting for?”

We each took another couple shots. Cass hit two of her three balls in and I cursed when she missed an easy bank shot. My win was slipping away. I was so focused on the game, I’d already forgotten we were in the middle of a conversation.

“Alright if I tell you this, you can’t ever mention it again. I mean like never, Amber would flip.”

“Ok.” I stopped and waited since she made it sound so serious.

“We usually have strap-on sex, but she really.” Cass paused. “I mean really likes sucking on my nipples while I do it.” She said the last part so fast that I burst out laughing, first because I couldn’t understand a word of it and then, even louder, because the words finally registered.

“Fuck you.” But Cass was laughing too.

“No, I’m sorry.” I attempted to take the smile off my face but laughed a little more. “It’s just how is that even possible?”

Cass’s face turned visibly red from the other side of the table and she put her stick in front of her as if she could hide behind it. “It’s not like the whole time. And you know, I am longer than her.”

I took my shot and sunk the eight ball.

“Holy fuck I beat you.”

Cass ignored it and re-racked the balls.

“So like, you don’t want her sucking on your nipples anymore?”

She didn’t blush that time. I noticed for the first time that brown hair was growing in around the sides. She’d had it shaved the entire time I’d known her.

“Sometimes I’m not there. Sometimes. It was burlap over my head and I could smell my breath and my sweat. I couldn’t feel my arms. They wouldn’t let me sleep and I screamed ‘where are my arms?’”

Cass kept moving the balls around inside of the triangle as she spoke.

“I passed out and then I was under water and when my face came back up, I took a breath but there was no air. I just sucked the bag into my mouth. At night, sometimes I wake up and I think I can still taste the burlap.”

Cass spun the balls until each of the numbers were facing up.

“Anyway, it’s your break,” she said.

We didn’t say much else. Cass hit in three shots in a row, making her solids. I went for a stripe and watched as the solid it was next to rolled into the pocket.

I didn’t know what to make of that conversation. I listened like I was hearing something about someone else, like it was a fictional account. I was glad it wasn’t me.

It was nearly 11pm when Cass and I parted ways. It was my intention to go home, but I turned the car in a different direction. When I pulled into Shay’s parking lot, I almost lost my nerve. It was late, Shay might have company, but I jammed my keys into my pocket anyway. I was intent on not retrieving them until I’d at least knocked on the door.

I only made one round of light knocks before I dug my hand back into my pocket. Shay opened the door before I could get there.

“Hi,” I said in a short burst of breath. Shay looked like she was ready to go out. Her eyeliner matched her vest, which was doubling as her shirt. She had her hair down, but the front was pulled back with bobby pins.

“Hi.” She stepped away from the door making room for me to come in.

Shay leaned back on the couch and stared at me, but I didn’t say anything.

“Is there a reason you came by to see me at 11pm?” she prompted.

“Right.” I looked away from Shay as I spoke. I scanned each of the photos to see if there were any new faces. I didn’t see any. I looked at Shay. “I’m sorry.”

Shay crossed her arms.

“What exactly are you sorry for?”

“For that night, pushing you against the wall, but even before that and after for not calling you.”

I thought all was lost. She rolled her eyes and shook her head. My brain scrambled for the right answer.

“I’m sorry that I didn’t trust you. You wanted to know me. You gave me yourself. I’m sorry I didn’t even try to give you anything in return.”

Her lips were pressed together now, but her face didn’t reveal any expression. I noticed her purse was sitting on the edge of the couch beside her and her keys were sticking out.

“I don’t want to keep you...”

“You know what I’d like?” but she didn’t actually wait for a response. “To watch a movie.”

We sat on the couch again. Shay wrapped my arms around her and this time we put the bowl of popcorn in her lap. It was gone before the movie was half-way over. When there was no more popcorn, Shay twisted her body to look at me. She was still sitting in my arms but she distanced herself so there were a few inches between our faces.

“It’s not okay you know.”

I tensed my arms but didn’t speak.

“I like you, but I’m scared to try again. You scared me.”

“I’m sorry...” I started.

“Don’t apologize. I just want you to know.”

“But you’re willing to try again?”

“Slowly.”

Shay pressed stop on the movie we were no longer watching and stood up. She grabbed my hand and led me down the hall to her bedroom. I noticed that another door was open and clothes were scattered all over a bed.

“I didn’t know you had roommates?”

“They’re never here.”

“Maybe I should go.” I paused in the doorway to Shay’s room.

“No, I want you to stay.”

Shay rested her head on my shoulder. I leaned over to kiss her, to turn her body so my arm could wrap around her waist. Shay grabbed my wrist and stopped me.

“When you’re ready.”

“I don’t know if I’ll ever be ready.”

Her arm crossed between my breasts and she tickled me absentmindedly below my neck. My arm fell asleep from the weight of Shay’s body, but she didn’t move. Eventually, we detached our bodies from each other and rolled in opposite directions to fall asleep.

We were supposed to be starting anew, but it felt pretty much like before.

Chapter Twenty-seven

A leaky box

Cass stared up at the ceiling. Her body shuddered as she clenched her stomach to try and stop herself from sobbing. She'd gotten out a picture of her dad, a picture of her kissing Amber in her military uniform before leaving for Afghanistan and a picture of her team, before the mission, with the camera crew. There are no guns in the picture, one of the guys had picked Cass up and thrown her over his shoulder, something he could do easily despite her size. He was one of the survivors too, but she hadn't spoken with him. When they were rescued they didn't look at each other and in the hospital Cass turned her head to the side and she saw him with his head to the side. They caught eyes and promptly turned away. Cass didn't want to know what happened to him, if he endured more or less, if he cried or heard her cries. She couldn't decide which picture was hurting her more. She wanted to swallow them all, swallow all the pain they brought and get it over with. She just wanted to move on and not think about it.

A knock startled her. She jumped up and stumbled over the shoe box she had pulled out to put the photos in. If it had been gun shots instead of knocking she would have died with all her fumbling. She quickly put the pictures away before she answered the door but she wasn't sure why she was ashamed of them. She opened the door, blocking the opening with her body.

"Cass," the man on the other side of the door said.

Cass looked at him with a blank stare as she ran his face through her mind. It seemed like she should know him.

“I’m Joey’s step-father, Tom.”

Cass closed her eyes and when she opened them she smiled.

“Right, I’m so sorry. I’ve been a little...” but she didn’t finish and he didn’t seem to mind. She opened her body, allowing him to step inside and he walked around to take a seat on the couch.

“I served,” he said, with his back to her. Cass is still held the door open.

“Vietnam.” She shut the door.

“I think Joey mentioned...”

“Anyway. I heard they gave you a Medal of Honor.”

Cass walked around to face the couch but continued standing. He looked up at her and she nodded.

“In a box, tucked into the back of your pants drawer?”

Cass looked at him, blinked. “Under the bed.”

He nodded.

“You leave it there.” He looked up at her and stood to face her. “Not worth reminding yourself that you’re a hero.”

When Cass didn’t say anything he continued.

“Let your kids,” he stuttered. “Or I mean nephews or whatever, discover it when they’re gone and hope they never have to know what it really means.”

Cass sat down and breathed in like she wanted to say something, but there was nothing for her to say. Tom sat back down.

“I’ve talked to a few people about your discharge, Cass.”

He got to the point and Cass got ready to object, but she wasn’t sure what she thought he might say.

“We don’t think it’s right. The Sheriff doesn’t think it’s right,” he went on. “He’d like to offer you a job, a deputy. There’s a career here if you want it, Cass. FBI, anywhere you want to go, you’re young.”

He pulled an envelope out of his back pocket.

“Just fill out the paper work in here and come down to the department.” He put the envelope on the table and stood. Cass stood to face him and followed him to the door. She opens it and he turned to face her.

“You think.” She paused. She was nervous she was pushing her luck, dreaming to far, like everything could just go back to how it was. “The CIA?” she asked.

“Why not,” he said and held out his hand to hers.

Maybe some things could go on like they had before. They shook once and she put her hand on his arm and looked him in the eye.

“Thank you,” she said.

He nodded and then he was gone.

Cass turned back inside and opened the box where she put the three photos. She took the one of her comrades and walked up the stairs. She felt her knees crack. It didn’t seem like they did that before she was captured, but maybe she was just getting older. She reached under the bed without looking and pulled the lid up from a shoe box, behind the bed skirt. She slipped the picture inside. The lid fell back on the box and she walked down and to consider the two remaining photos.

Cass reached in her back pocket for her cell phone. She dialed a number she will never forget. It rang and she almost hung up.

“Hello?” A man’s voice greets her.

“Dad?” Cass said.

Chapter Twenty-eight

A Gay Day

So these events all led up to Gay Days. We went as a group, just the boys and told the girls to meet us there. The girls were really only Shay and Amber at that point. We almost told Joey she couldn't come. AJ and River hadn't lasted very long. Apparently, the reason AJ never worked it out with any one girl is she wasn't really interested. I try not to think about it. There are many communities in the lesbian world. There's punk and andro, butch-femme, femme-femme and many others including butch-butcht. Of all the communities, butch-butcht remains the hardest to understand. There's pride in having a hot girl on your arm and butches who go with butches, give that up. Joey made the initial advance when she came back from her cruise. She almost told me about it, but I couldn't sit still. I just jumped up and down around the office at work shouting "Eww" and flicking my wrists. I've never met anyone who said butch-butcht was hot, but I suppose they're out there. It's a brave thing for any butch to admit to. Joey liked femmes too. She just wanted AJ more and AJ, well AJ claimed she never liked femmes. It amazes me that she could have kept something so base hidden for so long.

On our way in to the "Girls in Wonderland" party, we stopped at a stand in Downtown Disney for the hot dogs. White shirts, black ties and jeans, we could have been a mo-town group. Boys to Men, ABC, I sang out. Joey and Cass laughed but AJ and

Raya looked at us like we'd lost our minds. Apparently they weren't familiar with Boys to Men. Young people.

We still got there before the girls.

Joey looked over at the amount of butch women on the balcony versus the dance floor.

"Butches don't dance man."

"Hey I dance," Raya said.

"Like I said, butches don't dance." AJ raised an eyebrow at Joey. "Ok, Ok, dykes don't dance."

"What's the difference?" Raya asked.

"A dyke is a butch that can't dance," AJ said. "Joey is a dyke." And she kissed her on the cheek. I almost lost my hot dog.

We laughed but then stopped laughing as the truth in the statement sunk in. Pretty fair definition really.

Standing in a circle following silence inspires fidgeting.

"What is that?" Raya asked me and pointed to my drink.

"Diet Coke," I told her.

Joey finished the statement for me, smirking as she said it. "Shay asked her not to drink." I tried to shrug off the statement but turned red as the group looked at me and my drink. I didn't want everyone to know I was doing as told.

"That's so gay," Raya said trying on Joey's phrase.

"What makes it gay?" Joey asked and we all looked at her and raised an eyebrow.

This is when Cass started to speak. I couldn't make out all of it. She'd been quiet the whole night and now she had something to say. I heard the first part.

"It's not the expected response. That's why we're gay and they're lesbians." She gestured toward the girls on the floor and they laughed.

"My step-dad was saying, the other night, you could probably fight your discharge." Bad timing Joey. I tried to send shut up waves at her. We were having fun.

"I chose this. People have already made statements against don't ask, don't tell. They know we're here. It's just taking some getting used to. The most important statement I make is when I walk out the door each morning."

The music seemed to get louder or Cass got softer. I couldn't make out what she was saying. AJ wasn't paying attention. A girl walked behind her and pushed a piece of paper in her back pocket. She turns her head to watch her walk away. It's a femme. She reaches in her back pocket and takes a look. I can't see the writing. Poor Joey. AJ's drink is empty. She turns to head toward a trash bin and the cup falls in with a piece of paper floating in after it. I guess this butch on butch thing has something real to offer because I'd never seen AJ throw out a number. No one was going to be able to tell me what Cass said.

"...someone ratted me out. Probably that Christian woman, but if she hadn't no one would have ever known. Your step-dad and the Orlando Sheriff are pro gay rights...this church heard about my discharge, they saw right through it and that family website had timed it with an article about gays in the military. They wanted me to know they withdrew their donations. All that because I was out."

She said one more thing and stopped talking. I missed it. Something she said was supposed to be critical to my epiphany, but there was no epiphany and Shay had long since slid through the obese dykes and ascended the stairs. I feel her arms wrap around my mid-section. She whispers in my ear and pulls away.

“I’m going to step outside,” I say.

Joey coughs. “Whipped.”

Raya pulls her body back from the balcony and laughs.

Outside the club I take a deep breath and inhale the air straight off the lake at Downtown Disney.

“You’re sweating,” Shay tells me and wipes away some moisture that’s accumulated on the top of my lip. I wish Shay would lean in and kiss me, but she doesn’t and I almost lean in to kiss Shay, but I don’t. We walk down the path until Shay shivers. I lean in and wrap my arm around my girl’s waist. Shay wraps her arm over the top of my shoulders and we stumble along trying to walk casually, connected to each other, but our individual swaying pulls us apart. It’s nearing mid-night and off in the distance fireworks go off.

I look to Shay and smile but she rolls her eyes. “How cliché.”

We walk along, I turn my head to watch a bit until Shay stops and we almost completely disconnect as I continue walking.

“That is the sweetest thing I have seen all weekend.”

“What?” I look around for something sweet until I see what Shay is looking at. Up ahead one man has his arms wrapped around another man’s shoulder and he is nuzzling his head into his partner’s neck.

“And here I thought all gay men did was fuck then look for their next fuck.” Shay shakes her head slightly, smiling on. “Refreshing.”

I thought about it. It’s a common stereotype that is true from what I’ve witnessed, but it’s easy to judge actions without looking for motivation.

“I think men want affection just as much as women,” I say.

“When did you turn into such a sap?”

I blush and turn my body into Shay’s hair as it hangs over her shoulder. I bury my face there and wrap my other arm around her waist. Shay bends her chin to kiss the top of my head and brings one hand to my hair, stroking it, the other pulling me closer by the middle of my back. The fireworks are still a whisper in the distance and Shay pulls back from me enough to kiss my forehead and get me to meet her eyes.

“Maybe tonight I can show you some affection?” she asks, raising her eyebrows and I bury my head back into her hair.

I need this. I need Shay’s arms around me. I need her to hold me. The epiphany washed through my body. Stereotypes bound us together. They connected me with my friends, but I need my girlfriend to let me be a girl.

Chapter Twenty-nine

(Afterwards?)

It's fall again in Orlando. The air has recently shifted and while it is still warm, some of the humidity that bakes the body in the summer has left. I feel comfortable walking outside in jeans, which is good because the classrooms at the University of Central Florida are continuing to blast the air conditioner as if they are trying to cool down the Sahara. Working 3rd shift has proved to be a good schedule for morning classes. I blend in with the other students who can't keep their eyes open. I've found a way to take my waking slow.

I enrolled in classes at UCF with an intention to study Political Science. My SAT scores had expired though so I was only allowed to enroll on probationary status. If I can pass these courses I'll be admitted fully into the school of Liberal Arts. It's not something I am worried about. At 26, I'm ready for a calmer life and even enjoy my periods of study during my lunch at work. Sometimes Joey opens the door to the break room to see if I'm still really in there, but when she finds me studying she just shakes her head in confusion and walks away, closing the door behind her. In my current class there is only one man, a young guy, in over his head among a montage of liberal women who really wish they still had somewhere to march and declare their rights. I don't speak up much, I don't really want the attention of the feminists, a few of them look at me unsure, like they don't know

whether I'm in the wrong for mimicking a man or they're in the wrong for expecting me to conform. It's a confusing time for tolerance.

When a girl walks in wearing a knit hat with a ball on top of it, I look up and smile at her. She takes a seat next to me. The girl's shirt is just a knit sweater, it's unclear what she is wearing beneath the sweater because she has it buttoned up so high. I watch her with my head cocked to the side as she gets out her laptop and sits up ready to take notes.

"Is it really that cold out?" I motion to the ball on top of her cap.

The girl stops what she's doing and looks at me.

"Are you sure you're in the right class?" she asks.

"I hope so, if I'm not then I've been wasting a lot of time writing this paper for nothing. American History, right?" I wink and the girl rolls her eyes.

"Are you a feminist?" she asks.

"Sure."

The girl nods at my clothing. "Then why do you dress like that? You don't dress like a feminist."

"I left my knit hat at home."

The girl smiles at me and raises her eyebrows. "You're just conforming to some false idea of masculinity. I bet if you wore girl clothes they would start to feel right on you too."

"15 years wasn't enough?"

"They're just clothes."

“Exactly.” I pause then go on. “It’s only your prejudice that defines me as a man because of the way I dress.”

The girl turns in her chair and smirks at me. “So if we went out for dinner you wouldn’t offer to pay. Or what if I was cold, would you suffer and be cold because you felt some need to make me warm?”

“You think that wearing girl’s clothes might make me less inclined to do that?”

We stare at each other for a moment.

The girl finally breaks the silence turning back to her computer. “What are doing Saturday night?”

“Buying you sushi.”

The girl looks back at me. “I guess you’ll expect to have strap on sex.”

“I’ll tell you what, I’ll let you wear the strap on, just this once, as long as it stays our little secret.”

She blushes and leans in to kiss me on the lips, “What’s the matter? Don’t want your boys to know you get fucked by your girl?” Shay lowers her voice as she finishes the sentence.

“No, they would think it was gay.”

“Maybe we should actually buy a strap-on one of these days,” I add on.

We do go for sushi that Saturday but rather than going home, we head out to the club after dinner. It’s a year after Raya walked in and spotted Hailey. The group looks pretty much the same. We’re minus Raya now. She left for Portland a month earlier. She

met a girl at Gay Days and moved out there two months later. They've already broken up, but Raya stayed and reports that she's joined a new drag troupe.

We sit on the patio of the new *Revolution*, which is just *Southern* under new management. Out east, in West Palm Beach, a club called *Kashmir* closed. It seems between that and the Orlando expansion the crowd at *Revolution* has changed. It's gotten older. Like the 40 year-olds in the city up and decided it was time to stop going to the dive bar, *Faces*, and checked out the new club. It's also more culturally diverse. Orlando is still butch-femme, but each culture puts a different spin on that concept and they mingle together in the new *Revolution*. It's like the same old faces being swallowed by new stereotypes.

Joey's lost weight over the last several months and her spine is fully straightened against the back edge of her chair. AJ is off somewhere getting ready to perform. It's the longest she's ever been faithful to one girl, but I think Joey still has that box in the nightstand by her bed.

Earlier we were all analyzing the crowd on the dance floor.

"Too many new faces," Shay had said and wrapped her arms around me. "This is the only face I care about," she said and she kissed me on the nose.

Joey and Cass had looked at me and snickered which prompted me to head to the bar and order a beer. I've been nursing it for the last hour, it's only half way gone. With every sip I feel like I'm going to puke but I close my eyes and swallow it anyway.

Shay gives me a look when she finally notices and takes the beer in her hand.

"Trying to look tough?" she whispers in my ear and I just let her take it and watch as she chugs it down.

Cass sits in the same spot she did last year when she was thinking about leaving for Iraq, when she was hoping that if she never mentioned it, it wouldn't happen. Her arm is wrapped around Amber. She looks tired. Raccoon eyes for sure.

"You guys realize it was right here last year when we met Raya?" Cass asks.

"Ugh, Raya." Hailey rolls her eyes. When everyone looks at her she continues. "She was the femmest butch I ever met. I mean, I swear I'm more butch than half the girls I date. Can I be butch?"

I laugh a little but Cass responds. "Sure Hailey, you can be butch."

But we all connect eyes and shake our heads because Hailey will never be butch. She will never be asked to simultaneously be a boy and a girl. She will never have to justify the way she dresses or her decision to not become a man or explain that looking like a guy isn't the same as being like a guy; that sometimes cross dressing is just cross dressing. She won't have to search for a girl who will climb on top or take the lead now and again.

Amber and Cass have taken to sleeping on pillows with no pillow cases, but Cass still wakes up in the middle of the night, ripping a bag off her head. When she does, Amber rolls over and clutches her around the midsection while Cass curls into a ball and cries. Hailey will never understand the shame Cass feels when she asks Amber not to let go.

I study the faces of Cass and Joey. My two brothers. Girls whose tears I've dried with my thumbs as I held them, as they sat on the curb, as they fell apart in my doorway. These two dykes, no not dykes, not fancy lads, not butches, not a poor imitation of men and not women; brothers, we will always be there for each other, no matter how bad we

fuck up and that couldn't be more important than now because it's time to grow up and there is no model for us. We are not becoming women and we are not becoming men. We are not the butches that came before us. This is gender fucked.

We are constantly reshaping our identity because all we have are stereotypes, because you can't define something this vast. There is value in our crew cuts. We need our false identity to feel like we belong.

Being butch, it's not killing spiders and wearing strap-ons. It's not boxers vs. panties. It's constantly fluctuating, like a game of pong, bouncing off the walls of male and female and never being enough of either, for yourself, for your girlfriend, for you culture. It's about feeling like a boy and being a girl.

I spent so long trying to reconcile myself with Jess; trying to figure out what was stone, trying to look into the future to see who I would be. I'm not Jess.

So my epiphany, who I am? It was never in a book or a girl or my haircut or living up to others expectations or in what I'd done or felt before. It was always right in front of me. It was always in the next step I took.

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