

Wrong Locker

By:

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This book contains scenes with child abuse, domestic violence, mild language, a parent with mental illness, mention of attempt of suicide scars, and homophobic slurs.

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Book Cover by Author

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Prologue:

Sometimes, it's the little things in life that mean the most to us. To feel the breeze against our hair, to breathe in the air, and to have the ability to breathe again... and again. To be the calm in the middle of the raging storm. I never thought I'd ever have the chance to find my calm. My storm had been nothing but the violent shakes of metal on rooftops, the slammed trash lid as it flapped back and forth in the wind. The loud ring of the wind chime bells as they slapped into each other violently during a loud storm.

Cars lifted and beeped as they rolled around in the sky, sucked into the vortex of wind as they tumbled around like a leaf in a breeze. The crash of metal against the ground, buildings shattered into rubble, and the countless cries of those who were unhappy. The storm inside me was dark and enveloped me like a blanket. It suffocated me, drowned me, pulled me under. Then you came. You held out your hand, like a lifeline, and when I touched you, everything faded away, the calm. Once I found you, I realized I was already lost, like a blind man who wanted to take one more breath, then one more. Until all I could do was touch you, cling to you, desperate for one last breath, one last quiet, one last calm.

And to think, all of this started because of a single letter... and the wrong locker.

Chapter 1- Kinsley

As I sat in the classroom, desperately trying to pay attention to the lecture, I couldn't help but wonder if my teacher's voice was secretly a lullaby designed to put us all to sleep. My teacher's name was Mr. Duckett, and he was one of those teachers who were way too young to be a teacher. Sure, he was old enough, of course. Had his degrees, whatever he needed, but his personality? Well, he had the personality of a teenager.

"Rebecca! This isn't a beauty parlor, put your makeup away and pay attention. Do you even know what class this is?" he asked as he walked over toward the girl and pressed his hand against her desk. I noticed with a chuckle that she had the wrong textbook out and it was upside down and covered in different variations of makeup vials and powders.

Rebecca was one of the cheerleaders and showed it proudly by being one of those girls to constantly wear their uniforms every day all day long. As if we would forget she's popular if she were to wear the same regular clothes as everyone else. "English class, of course," she said, splaying her hand out to indicate the textbook underneath her flood of products.

He snorted with a shake of his head at her as he pointed at the board, which held different mathematical equations. "Maybe all those products are getting to you. Let's leave the chemicals out of the classroom," he said as most of the class gave a halfhearted chuckle. She was popular, so they didn't try too hard to laugh at her misery, but if it was someone like me who was getting cracked on, they'd probably be rolling out of their seats and dying on the ground. Rebecca ignored Mr. Duckett and continued to paint her nails while he went to the board and resumed talking. I continued to stare at the clock, wishing it would go faster so I could be out of here. I never really was one for math class. It was easy enough that I could get about a C without really trying and that was good enough for me.

A little rectangle-shaped paper popped onto my desk, and I turned towards the sender, quirking my eyebrow at her in surprise. My best friend -my only friend actually- Isabella looked at me with an impatient glance, her brown eyes already growing frustrated as it took me longer than a second to pick up her note. I sighed, already knowing what it was about and dreading it, but still opened it anyway. Of course, it was covered in the recent picture she'd been messing with. Isabella was a tagger. Her artistic nature was what drew us together at the start of high school.

That, and the newness of it all. I had not been popular in middle school, but I had a few friends here and there. That was until I accidentally hurt Roan, and everyone turned on me. So, when high school started, I was sure I'd continue having no friends until Isabella transferred in. She was new, about three days after the school year started, but it was still noticeable. We lived in a fairly small town, and most if not all of us tended to go to the same schools from kindergarten through high school. Maybe even onto the same old community college, unless some were brave enough to try and go somewhere out of state or a few towns over to Oklahoma Baptist University.

Not only that, but the fact that Isabella stood out. Our town was pretty much nothing but white, overly religious country hicks. When a pretty Latina girl popped out of nowhere, everyone seemed to notice. Stupidly enough, instead of wanting to get to know her, everyone avoided her. She sat close to me during lunch, and no one wanted to sit next to me, leaving the table wide open. I was drawing, I remember that. I always drew when I had free time. She scooted next to me, shoved her sketchbook into my lap, and from the start of lunch to the end of it we were best friends.

Although I was that loser kid who got bullied by the basketball captain and his lackeys, no one ever messed with Isabella. There was just an aura around her that screamed *'Mess with me and I'll fuck you up,'* and no one even tried to deal with that. They might whisper rumors about us dating or something under their breath, but they mostly left her alone. Being bullied was strictly my thing, apparently.

Isabella made an annoyed sound with the back of her throat as she tapped her short nails on her desk, trying to get my attention. I chuckled under my breath, sitting up enough to look down at my desk, and slowly slid down my hood so I could see the note. I would have taken longer just to aggravate her, but I knew from experience she'd start throwing stuff at me and I didn't feel like getting detention again. The last time I pissed her off, she threw her textbook at me and I dodged it.

The textbook smacked into one of the wrestling team jocks, I couldn't care enough to try to remember's name, and he punched me. He had thought I was the one who threw it. All three of us ended up in detention. That resulted in me getting beat up even more, and it wasn't really something I strived to repeat. I smoothed down the sides of the paper and read the words I already knew were going to be sitting there. *'Tonight, at seven, meet me at our spot.'* The note read.

I frowned, slid my hand into my hood, and pulled it all the way down as I scratched the back of my neck. I shook out my hair, and my blond hair fell into my eyes as I pulled my hood back up and wrote out my reply. *'I can't. Mom and Dad want to talk to me.'* I said to her, before simply handing the piece of paper back without caring to fold it.

Mr. Duckett didn't really care about notes. He wasn't the type of teacher to flip out about it or make us stand and read it out loud. As long as we weren't getting an F in the class and we didn't start getting loud and giggling loudly over whatever was being talked about like some of the cheerleaders did, then he couldn't care less. For example, right now he was showing a math equation to Rebecca by using her makeup vials. Not giving two fucks that she never listened to him, he was instead moving them around on her desk to show her how items could help with math.

Absently she was painting his nails and he wasn't even flinching, mostly telling her she could have picked a different shade. While the girls in the class started to discuss which shade would match his eyes better, Isabella once more flicked the little triangle towards me. I gave her an

annoyed look while I once more unfolded it gently, making sure I didn't rip it. So freaking dramatic for nothing. *'Is it about what I think it's about?'* She asked.

I looked up with a sigh at the front of the class and watched as the girls in the top row had sat Mr. Duckett down in a chair and stood around him, subjecting him to a makeup lesson. The guys in the class were getting up and forming their groups of friends. Clearly, the class was finished despite still having a good ten minutes or so left. Without a word, I scooted my desk up against hers since she sat next to me, and placed my elbow on my desk, pressing my cheek into the palm of my hand. She leaned close to me since neither of us was close to anyone in this school and didn't want them to know about our lives, and ignoring the stupid whistles of the guys closest to us, I nodded at her. "They kept pressuring me, bringing it up over and over again," I whispered to her, watching her face frown in annoyance.

"Estúpido," She breathed out, rolling her eyes. I snorted, knowing enough of her Spanish from being her best friend for the past three years to know that meant stupid. She knew I didn't care much for my parents, and honestly, she probably hated them more than I did. "Why are they so adamant?" she asked, her brown eyes staring into mine.

I moved some of her dark brown hair streaked with purple highlights out of her eyes, earning us another whistle. I wanted to throw something at them, but I was still recovering from Roan slamming me into the locker this morning. For people who didn't like me, they were always watching me. Though those two were friends with Roan, so it made sense, I suppose.

"Kennedy got a boyfriend," I said, talking about my little sister. She was in seventh grade this year, being quite a few years younger than me, and started her seventh-grade debut by getting a boyfriend right at the beginning. My parents, being the crazy people they are, started to give me crap about it. They wondered why I was sixteen, almost seventeen, and I'd never had a girlfriend before. I told Isabella this, and she snorted, throwing her hands up in the air and disturbing one of her recent sketches.

I grabbed it before it could fall to the ground, looking down at it with a cocked eyebrow, noticing she was trying something new. Still her same style, but this time it was of a little girl when before she'd been drawing older women. Isabella spent all her time drawing, and after school, she'd go home and make a stencil. It normally took her a few days to a week to make a stencil, and then she'd have me sneak out with her at night to find a new place to tag. I didn't do that stuff, I just drew to draw, but I still went with her.

It was kind of fun, and sometimes I did help her spray the background and stuff to make it go faster, but it never really was my type of thing. Isabella didn't even seem to care as I leaned over and slipped her paper into her sketchbook, making sure it wouldn't fall again, while she started to chant things in Spanish that sounded roughly like cuss words. Her hands were moving fast as they usually did when she was angry. A few people stared at her like she was crazy, but no one really knew Spanish, so it didn't matter to them.

Honestly, I probably should have known some by now, since we've been best friends for three years and her mother rarely spoke in English. It just didn't seem like an interest to me. It was already hard enough knowing two languages, since my mother's family is Italian and she spoke it quite often, so I never really had the overwhelming need to learn a third language.

Finally, Isabella settled down, though I could see by the anger burning in her eyes she was far from calm. Her eyes flickered over me, and I already knew what she was looking at. I had a lean, slightly muscular frame that I kept mostly hidden under the overly big black hoodie I wore constantly. I wasn't very tall, most likely because I was half Italian, and I was only about five foot eight, while most of the guys here were a lot taller, hitting over six feet tall easily.

My skin was permanently tanned with an olive tint, my mom's genes were strong, but my hair was light blond like my father's. I had a light scattering of freckles that dusted my cheeks and my nose, and it made me look younger than I really was. My wide light blue eyes didn't really help either. I was often called a freshman by those who didn't really know me, and I had gotten used to it by now.

I bit my lips, self-conscious of how full they were. One of those annoying things about me was that they were darker, making it look like I constantly wore lip gloss or something. A pretty boy. Isabella often called me Pretty Boy, or she'd call me her little pretty boy. "Are you even straight?" she asked, making me snort. I looked down at my hands. One was clenching the desk tightly, while the other was absently clicking the back of the mechanical pencil repeatedly, the dull click echoing loudly around me as my leg bounced up and down in agitation over her question.

It was a question I had been thinking about for a while now, back when Isabella first became my friend. She was gorgeous, and seriously smart, with one of the best grades in our year. Having a single mom, Isabella wanted to do her best constantly and always made sure to please her mom, even though she had an extracurricular activity her mother would never approve of if she found out. She had the right curves, and she wasn't dressed like a Barbie doll who wanted to show off every bit of her body in a cry for attention. She tended to wear skirts or shorts with tights underneath. I didn't think I had ever seen her wear less than two studded belts on her hips, no matter what outfit she had on.

Her shirts were always filled with band names, and she wore a camo jacket that was fraying at the sleeves, which belonged to her father. He had died during a camping trip when she was six years old. She and her parents were camping, and someone close by was hunting illegally. They were too close to the camping grounds and a bullet missed a deer and hit her father instead. Isabella was beautiful, confident, and amazing, and I had no idea why I wasn't attracted to her. But... I wasn't. "I don't know," I replied with a shrug. "Probably?"

"Well, it's an easy question. Do you like pee-pee's, or vaja-ja's?" she crudely asked, making me snort as I pressed my face against the palm of my hand to hide my face. She had no chill sometimes, I swear.

I turned back to look at her and shrugged again. “Not sure. Haven’t found someone I’ve been attracted to yet. But I don’t think gender matters to me. Girls are beautiful. Guys are beautiful. Whichever. I guess it really depends on who they are, probably.” I said, sighing.

Isabella nodded in understanding. “Sounds pansexual to me, to be honest. Or maybe demisexual.”

“I don’t really care enough to figure it out. I don’t want to feel pressured to label myself.” I admitted. It had been hard for me the past three years, trying to figure it out. Finally, I just stopped caring. “It’s less stressful to try and figure it out. Eventually, I’ll love someone. And that’s okay. Well, it’s okay for me, that is. But my parents...” I trailed off with my hands splayed to show my predicament.

Well, it was more than them. I wasn’t going to admit it out loud, but I was curious too. What did it feel like to fall in love? To be loved? I was romantic at heart. I read more love stories than I cared to admit when I wasn’t drawing. “We have to figure out what to do. They know by now that you and I aren’t going to get together, but, I don’t know. Just look around. Stare at the girls and try to find someone you think your parents will like. Look, there are a few girls on the swim team over there, and there’s one on the volleyball team.” Isabella said, pointing at three girls.

I sighed, nodding. It wasn’t hard to know the kind of girls my parents wanted me with. My parents were high school sweethearts. My dad was the champion of the football team, and if it hadn’t been for his shoulder injury, he’d have gone pro. My mom was a cheerleader, and they met during the championships. She was from another state, but they fell in love despite that and when they got married, she moved here to be with him. Dad’s family was always well-off, our family owned a few chain sports stores here and mom found a job in real estate, making us one of the richest families in town. They forced me to take up sports growing up, putting me in different ones constantly, trying to find one that I liked. That’s how I ended up hurting Roan.

By the time I was in middle school, it was fairly known that I was unhappy with sports, uncoordinated, and clumsy. Basketball seemed to be easier for me for some reason and I took to it for a little bit. My parents were over the moon about it, and my little sister loved the sport too, so she loved me. Well, for a little while, that is. Roan’s father was our coach in middle school and still is the coach over there. Roan hated me with a passion from the first day, probably because we both played point guard. His father gave me the position over him since he was better as a shooting guard than I was.

Roan was already picking on me, shoving me around, calling me shortie, and he made me anxious. During a big game, I tripped on air, literally. There was nothing there but air. I tripped at the last second and Roan fell over me, his knee slamming into the ground, and I swear everyone in the building could hear the loud crack of his bone. He was forced to sit out for the rest of middle school. So, he became my personal bully, even though he healed perfectly and is now the current captain of our high school team. This is the part where my sister hates me now. Roan’s dad held a grudge and refused to let my sister on the middle school team because of me.

My parents were forced to drive her to the next town over for a different basketball team. They often stayed away for a weekend so she could play with the team. After middle school, I refused to play sports anymore and my parents fell away from me, not having anything in common with me. It was frustrating, and the tension was so thick whenever we were all together at home that I could barely breathe.

I stared at the three girls Isabella mentioned with a sigh. Well, they weren't attacking Mr. Duckett with makeup, so they weren't the same as the cheerleaders. Honestly, I would have rather been with someone in the art club. However, since it only consisted of: Isabella, me, and a couple of freshmen that mostly went to hang out in the back of the classroom and smoke, that wasn't going to happen. If it was my choice, there was no way in Hell I'd ever date a jock. The fact that my parents wanted it made me hate the idea of it even more. But... I sighed. If I could do something to get my parents off my back, I'd try it. I just had to figure out which one.

Chapter 2- Kinsley

"So?" Isabella asked. I didn't say anything, pretending I didn't hear her. We only had three classes together, but now that school was over, we were sitting in the art room. Every class I had with her she'd been posturing me, pointing out new sporty girls to ask out. A few of them she knew from classes she had with them, and a few she'd done group projects with. I was subjected all day to annoyingly being forced to open her tiny intricately folded little triangle papers, or listen to her constantly whispered facts about girls in my head.

Honestly, it was stressful. I didn't even remember which girl the facts went to, and by now they were all buzzing around my head, overlapping each other. I wanted a break from it all, so when the bell rang, I practically sprinted there. My haven, my favorite place in the school. The art club was placed inside a classroom that had been abandoned. When I was still in middle school, there was a lab accident that made horribly smelly green goo splatter all over the classroom. No matter how much they scrubbed at it, it wasn't possible to get it all out.

The kids complained about the smell constantly, and the teacher had asthma and was constantly coughing. They ended up leaving the classroom alone, saying they'd clean it again later, and then forgetting about it. It didn't smell bad to Isabella and me, and the random freshmen that floated in earlier this year and just ended up staying didn't seem to care either. Not that they seemed to care about anything. They were always high within a matter of minutes. Isabella had to stop one of them from trying to jump out the window once, announcing he wanted to see if he could fly.

It was on the third floor of the building, overlooking the football field. Even then, as I pretended like my music was on, I glanced out the window and watched the coach yell profanities at one of the players while the others stood there waiting for more commands. Isabella yanked one of my earphones out of my ear and stomped on my foot, making me wince. She was so dangerous sometimes. "I feel sorry for your future boyfriend or girlfriend," I muttered, rolling my eyes at her.

She snorted but moved her hands in a *'come on'* motion, which made me sigh. "I don't know, Izzy. Honestly, if I wanted to date any of them, wouldn't I have been interested in them before now? Maybe I just don't like high school girls. Maybe I need to go to the community college and find someone,"

The look she gave me was a mixture of horror and annoyance. "Like your strict, religious parents are going to be fine with their sixteen-year-old son dating a twenty-year-old or older woman?" She asked, throwing her hands up in the air. The group of freshmen in the back lifted their hands and cheered, their eyes already bloodshot as they cheered for me to get with my imaginary girlfriend.

After a chorus of: *'You the man, bro!'* and *'Damn, son, getting some older woman fun time,'* Isabella lifted her shoe, turning to look at them all and silencing every one of them with a glare.

She huffed, sliding her shoe back onto her foot before flipping her hair over her shoulder and glaring at me. "Seriously, Kinsley. Don't make me throw you out the window."

I groaned, pressing my forehead onto the desk before lifting my head to look at her. She snorted, pointing out how I got the black lead on my forehead from my drawing. I didn't care, it was nothing new. I always had black smudges on my cheeks, and the bottom of my hands were always coated to the point I had to rub them with alcohol pads to get the lead off.

I looked up at the clock on the wall. It had a crack down the middle of it, and the time was three hours off, but it was still ticking away. Honestly, I was narrowing down my pick between the three girls she earlier pointed out in our math class. There was Peyton and Abby, the two on the swim team, and there was Allison from the volleyball team. I had seen Allison making out with a guy before the bell rang earlier so she was a no-go, but the other two were pretty calm. Actually, now that I remember, I think Peyton had a project with me when I was a freshman and she wasn't completely awful. "Maybe Peyton, I guess,"

I could remember how she always made a mess with her blond hair, pulling it up into a messy bun and complaining about how the strands hung in her eyes. I told her to cut it then and she stared at me like I was an alien. But she did participate, after all, so I guess that counts as her being a decent person. Usually, when I was paired up with someone, they tended to make me do everything so they didn't have to talk to me. "Oh! She's that pretty blond-haired one, right? I don't think she's seeing anyone. Why her? Are you attracted to her?" She asked, her brown eyes staring into mine.

I snorted, turning towards the window as the football players smacked into each other. I had no idea who was which number, but it didn't matter anyway. I never cared about football. I could see the basketball courts from here too and smirked as Roan missed the shot and kicked someone close by even though it wasn't their fault he missed. There were a few girls on the track team racing around the football field and I watched the coach pull off one of the players' helmets and fling it at another player, yelling at them to stop watching the girls run.

I shrugged, turning back to Isabella and her questioning gaze. "I guess she's pretty. I don't feel attracted to her or love or anything, but those things came when you got to know them, right? That's why people date first before anything else," I told her. It wasn't always true. As logical as it was, guys would walk up and down the halls as they talked about some party they had last weekend and the number of girls they banged in one night. It was like I was watching STDs walk down the hall. I was different from all of them, and honestly, I wasn't really bothered by it. Maybe other guys would be freaked out that they were almost seventeen and still a virgin but I didn't really care. It would happen eventually.

Isabella looked at me, lifting her finger and flicking me on the forehead. I groaned, rubbing my forehead and glaring at her as tears sprang unwillingly to my eyes from the sudden pain. "What are you, an old man? Were you my long-lost grandpa? Grandpa Kinsley," she said, earning a chorus of laughs from the group of freshmen behind us. One of them fell out of his chair and lay on his back looking up at his hand with wide eyes, informing his friends he had found all of his

fingers. "You know people have sex nowadays without really caring who it's with, right? I mean, I don't. But I'm not a guy," she said with a half-hearted shrug.

I glared at her, shaking my head as I put both my headphones back in. "Not all guys are the same, Izzy," I told her. She didn't used to be so bad about guys. The reason she and her mother moved here was because of her mother's boyfriend. He was fairly nice, and respectable, but his son wasn't. Isabella had a pretty big crush on him, and when they slept together, he moved out, telling his father he wanted to live with his mother instead. Isabella was crushed, and then her mother ended up breaking up with the guy anyway so she never saw him again.

I saw him once when I was forced to go with my family to my sister's basketball tournament and he had two girls under each arm giggling and kissing his cheeks without a care. Once Isabella found out, she practically hated all guys. I think she only liked me because I was already her friend before all of this happened. Well, that, and the fact that I walked right up to the asshole and punched him in the face. I got my ass kicked but it was worth it to see how happy it made Izzy knowing I stood up for her. "What about your crush?" I asked her, making her roll her eyes.

"I don't have a crush on them," she said, knowing instantly who I was talking about. Over the past year, Isabella had a competition. Everywhere she tagged, within the week someone else either copied over her work or put something beside it. When Isabella drew a girl, the other tagger drew another girl kissing her girl, and it infuriated Izzy to have her work messed with like that. All taggers had a signature, and the person Izzy was currently fighting with used an S as their signature. Even Izzy's old things were getting attacked and Isabella was constantly trying to fix it. "Don't even talk about that asshole," she said in a clipped tone.

I snickered at her, but before I could say anything the window was opened wider than we normally opened it and we groaned as we grabbed at our papers that were scattered everywhere. "Aw, dammit guys!" I yelled as the drawing I was working on flew out the window. I groaned as it landed near the bench with the football guys' equipment on it, banging my head on the window. I mean, it's not like I couldn't redraw it, it just sucked because I was really liking that picture.

I had been drawing the football players lined up in position on the field, the goalpost in the back, and even the girls running in the distance. I was hoping if I gave it to the coach as a present, he'd stop trying to get me to play basketball during gym class. Every time I played, they tried to get me to join the team and I didn't want to be even more under Roan's radar than I already was. I turned my head in time to see one of the freshmen try to climb out the window. "Really? I thought we realized last week we couldn't fly?" I groaned as I hauled one of them back into the classroom.

He laughed as Isabella helped me pull him back inside. She was muttering something about hammering the windows closed when the guy flopped down on the ground and grinned at me. "I wanted to get some of that cotton candy," he said, pointing at the cloud. I snorted, shaking my head as I dug my hand into my pocket and pulled out a few twenties.

“Go get some food, normal food,” I said to him, shoving the money in his hand. He looked at it with wide eyes before getting up and shoving one of his friends towards the door, whooping about how money flew out of the sky to land in his hand.

We stared in wonder as they raced out the door, both of us turning to look at each other before laughing. “I bet that *pendejo* thinks the money came from God,” Isabella said, making me snort out another laugh. We cracked the windows but only a little bit, just enough to try and get rid of the smell the group left behind. Isabella and I had never really smoked. Her mother wasn’t as religious as my parents but she would beat her ass if she found out she was smoking. Well, she’d probably beat my ass too if I was to be honest.

Her mother was as much hers as she was mine at this point, and more than once I’d felt the sting of her sandal on the back of my head. I looked out the window, watching with a frown as one of the football players grabbed my picture and stared at it, before looking up at the school. I couldn’t see who it was through his helmet. They couldn’t see me from up here, right? After a few minutes, the coach blew the whistle and the player folded my drawing and slid it into one of the bags, before running back out to the field. Strange, but whatever. He folded it, I didn’t want it back now.

I groaned, walked back to the table, and started a new drawing. “You really think if I draw something for the coach, he’ll stop hounding me?” I asked, staring at the field once more. The coach had a red face as he yelled at one of the players, throwing the football at him as he threw his hands up in the air. The one he was yelling at looked pretty short, so it was probably a freshman.

Isabella was humming, but she only had one of her headphones in, so I knew she heard me. It made me remember I hadn’t pressed play yet. I pulled out one of my headphones and hit play. As the melody of *Song of the Sparrow* by SayWeCanFly, my favorite band, played softly over the headphones, she replied to me. “Of course. I drew him a picture of a uterus exploding with blood and told him this is how it feels like when he tries to make us play when we’re on our periods. He hasn’t given me or any of the other girls who sit out crap ever again.”

I stared at her, my mouth hanging open as my pencil hovered over the paper, not sure if I should laugh or freak out. “Did you... I mean... how detailed was it?” I asked, choking out a laugh.

She looked at me as if she wasn’t entirely sure why I was laughing. “Of course, it was the same type of model they put on the walls, but I did add skin. And hair, and lips. Well damn, I guess I drew a vagina, but maybe this way he’ll know how to find one,” she said with a shrug.

I pressed my head down on the paper once more, my shoulders shaking as I laughed out loud at her. I lifted my head as I laughed, wiping at the tears in my eyes and she had the audacity to stare at me like she had no idea why I was laughing.

“Did you,” I stuttered out, taking a deep breath, my finger up in the air as if telling her to give me a second as I tried to calm myself. “Did you ask him if he found it?” I asked, snorting out another laugh as she smirked at me.

She threw her hands up in the air, and let out a sentence in Spanish that I couldn't even begin to translate, before shaking her head at me. "Of course not. Besides, he's terrified of me now. Won't look me in the eyes and will pretty much tell other people to tell me what to do instead of telling me himself," I could understand why. He was probably traumatized. We sat there drawing for a little while longer. I gave up on the notion of drawing a picture for the coach, I didn't think Isabella realized that it wasn't the act of giving the drawing that made the coach happy, but the fact that she scared the shit out of him instead.

He probably went home and cried after that, the poor man. This time I drew the scenery. From there I could just see the Quachita mountains in the distance and I chose that to focus on. The way the mountains rose and dipped, the trees scattered over them, and the stratus clouds sitting above the mountains. In a way, it was like the back of a camel lifting and dipping down, before lifting and dipping down once more. I was just putting in a few birds when Isabella tapped her finger three times on the corner of my paper to get my attention. She waited, knowing I wanted to finish the bird I was drawing.

We were both artists, and we understood how annoying it was to bother each other when we were drawing. So we simply tapped and waited, even if we had to wait for a few hours until we looked at the other. When you were making art, concentration was the key. Finally, after about five minutes, I lifted my eyes to hers, pulling one headphone out of my ear. I could still hear the drums going off in the song I was listening to, but it was muted as I placed it on the table. "Don't you have to be at your house today?" she asked, pointing to the broken clock.

I groaned, rubbing my face with my hand as I turned off my music. Normally, my parents didn't notice or even care when I didn't show up. They forced me to have family dinner with them every Sunday, but usually throughout the week, everyone was too busy to care. But of course, no work on Sunday, the holy day, so everyone was expected to be home and there for dinner. The rest of the week Kennedy was always out with friends after practice. Half of the time, since she had to go to another school's team, she ended up staying with the girl whose mother drove her back and forth for a few days.

I barely even saw Kennedy anymore, and I wasn't really all that upset about it. As for my parents, they never really came home either. Unless they were dealing with Kennedy, they were at the main office of Dad's shops. Mom has her own office there for her real estate and worked out of that, while Dad worked on his own company pretty much beside her. They said it was so they could stay close to each other despite always being so busy, and that was fine with me. It meant I could stay out as late as I wanted and do whatever I wanted, as long as it wasn't anything illegal. Well, as long as I wasn't caught doing anything illegal. Isabella and I were almost caught a few times, but we always seemed to run away in time.

She snorted at me as I put my drawing into my portfolio, put my pencils in their case, and slipped it all into my backpack. Isabella was the one who talked me into making a portfolio, even though it was pointless. Dad already had my future set for me. Go to college, get a business degree, and inherit his stupid sports shops. '*It runs in the family, Kinsley,*' he'd always say. "Unfortunately, you're right," I grumbled, standing up. She was already packed up as well,

closing the windows. Our club had a teacher as all the clubs did, but our teacher didn't want to come into the room saying it smelled bad, so we were usually always by ourselves and cleaned up everything by ourselves when we were finished. Here and there, a new student came, but then they realized it was just us and no actual club activities and left. Unless they smoked, then they stayed with the freshmen. There were about five of them now. "Are you coming with me?" I asked hopefully.

She snorted as she shook her head no. "I'm not walking in there with your family all there again. The last time they called me the devil's daughter for my hair. Did I tell you they called Mami? She laughed at them and hung up." I smirked but didn't say anything. I knew about that. They gave me a lecture about hanging out with a bad influence. Then a few days later, they seemed to forget all about it and told me to have fun with my friend at school. They really had so little care for me. "But Mom is working a double shift again, so you can give me a ride," she said, blinking her eyes at me.

I nodded, not really caring. Our town wasn't the poorest town there was, but it wasn't the richest either. I was one of the few juniors to have a car. Honestly, I was just glad Roan had one because he'd probably destroy my car in his jealousy if he didn't. Mostly the seniors had cars, and they tended to look like their parents' hand-me-downs that were all broken and rusted. My parents' having money was pretty common, and even though they couldn't bother to really care about me, they still wanted to make sure their image was intact. So of course, I had a car. The moment we walked out of the stairwell onto the first floor, I was shoved into a locker. I groaned, shaking my hair out of my eyes as Roan muttered, "Move it loser," at me.

I looked up at him, frowning. He was just as tall as always, and his giant muscular form didn't help me much either. I'd think of him as one of the beautiful people if he wasn't such an asshole. He had his head shaved though and that wasn't really attractive to me. Everyone has an acquired taste, after all. Isabella was mumbling curses at him in Spanish as I stood, wiping my hands down my pants to straighten them. I wrapped my arm over Isabella's shoulder and started to walk her out the door. "Come on, let's get out of here," I mumbled, stopping her rants. She nodded, her eyes dancing dangerously down the hall to burn into Roan's back before she allowed me to pull her out the door.

Chapter 3- Kinsley

I walked into my house, shut the door behind me, and sighed in frustration. I didn't want to do this. I didn't want to deal with them all two days a week. Once a week was more than enough for me. I could smell the exquisite smell of dinner being cooked and frowned. Yeah, that was weird. Why was I annoyed to smell home-cooked meals? But for someone like me, it wasn't ever a good sign. A home-cooked meal meant the cook was here. She only ever came once a week to make our Sunday meals, but they took the time to have her come an extra day just for tonight. Don't get me wrong, it's not that I hated her cooking, I loved it. I didn't love what it meant. It meant I was going to be forced to sit there with my family.

"Kinsley! Is that you?" Mom called out from the living room. I rolled my eyes, biting my tongue to hold back the retort I had poised and ready to go, and walked into the living room. She gave me a once over, a frown on her face as she stared at me. "Honestly, I wouldn't even be able to tell under that ridiculous black hoodie. The hood is up, you could be a gangster for all I know," She said, holding her hand to the front of her chest dramatically. I stared at her, studying her. She had her hair cut into a bob, and it was a light brown color.

Like Kennedy, they both had light brown hair. Although, Kennedy liked to wear her hair long, and sit in the middle of the living room constantly complaining about how tangled it was after a match. My mom had on a black pantsuit, and I wouldn't be surprised if she had been working up until this dinner. She probably planned on going back to work afterward. Isabella would be fine to hear that. Then I'd be able to sneak out to help her.

"Hello, Mother," I replied in a mono-toned voice as I pulled back my hood absently. She clicked her tongue at me as she stood, coming to stand in front of me. I cringed as she ran her fingers through my hair, tugging on the ends of it painfully.

She sighed, waving her hand at me as she sat back down. "Consider getting your hair done, it's been too long since the last haircut," I nodded, even though I had no plans on cutting my hair. I was starting to like how it looked. I had it styled to fall over my left eye, and the longer it got the less I could see. It was even with the bridge of my nose for now, but I was planning on growing it longer. The rest of my hair was just resting like a wavy mess around my ears. Maybe I'd cut that part and leave my bangs long. Isabella would love it; she'd try to dye it.

She was always trying to dye it but I hadn't agreed to it. I just didn't want to mess up the light blond hair color. Who knew what it would look like after she ruined it with dye? "Also, I got you something to wear for dinner. Try to consider being presentable," she said with her eyebrow raised. It was probably her way of telling me I wasn't allowed to argue with her, but I wasn't going to wear it. I never did.

Without another word, I turned around and nearly collided with my father. He grunted in surprise as he grabbed my shoulder while he steadied me. I tried not to flinch at the sudden pain as he

let go. Despite his shoulder injury stopping him from going pro, he still worked out constantly when he wasn't working, and he had the body of a pro football player even now that he was older. Big and muscular, and about twice the size of me, if not more. Being close to him made me think about Roan and his friends and the flinch was pretty much automatic now.

"Hey, champ," He said with a grin. I frowned, already on the defense. Normally he ignored me or glared at me, never calling me names. Not unless it had to do with sports. He only called me things like champ when I was playing basketball. He rubbed his fingers through my hair and I grimaced, my legs bowing under his hand from the weight of it. He frowned, pulling his hand back as he looked at me. "You still have your muscles; I could feel it when I touched your arm. Working out again? Did you join the team?" He asked, hope in his voice. I tried to stifle my sigh; I knew it had to be about sports.

I knew what he was talking about. It was pretty obvious that the only sport I was good at was basketball. At night when I was home alone and bored, my fingers tired from the constant drawing, I would shoot hoops in the backyard since we had our own net back there. So, while I was keeping up with my lean muscular form, it was just for fun and to pass the time. There was no way in hell I could join the team again, not with Roan there. "No, Dad. I didn't join the team or any other sports," I told him sternly.

He glared down at me, annoyed. While my mother and Kennedy had brown eyes, Dad and I had blue eyes. It was the only thing about me that matched anyone since Dad had dark brown hair. Mom said my blond hair came from her mother. Sometimes when I felt really sorry for myself, I would lay there in my bed and wonder about how great it would be if some stranger came and claimed she was my real birth mom or these crazy people kidnapped me or something. Wishful thinking.

Taking a step back from me as if I had smacked him, he frowned, and instantly I was in the dark again. I knew that look, the look of disgust. Unwanted, disdain. They didn't have anything in common with me, they didn't understand me. They didn't want me. They probably counted down the days I graduated and moved out like I was. "Hurry up and get ready for dinner," he grumbled as he thundered past me into the living room. Almost like a light switch, he laughed as he pulled my mother into his arms. They said their hellos and kissed each other as if they hadn't been in the same building together all day.

Kennedy brushed past me, not even trying to talk to me as she gave me her familiar stink eye. She slammed her shoulder into mine and walked into the living room, adding to the nice and warm happy gathering. I turned to watch as Dad lifted her into his arms and called her his princess, and as she was placed back down on the ground, they watched her talk animatedly about her recent game and all I could do was sigh. It looked so warm over there. Where I was standing, all I could feel was the chill. I turned around and walked up the stairs, heading up to my room. I just wanted to get this all over with.

Our house had a fairly normal layout, but it was much bigger than we needed. All the houses in our neighborhood belonged to the richer crowd of our town, and Mom and Dad were friends with

most of them. A lot of them used to know Dad from school, and they had parties at each other's houses a lot. Those nights I stayed with Isabella and gladly slept on her couch. We had five bedrooms, which was ridiculously stupid for having two kids and parents. We only needed three bedrooms if even. But Dad turned one of the bedrooms into a gym and the other into another office for Mom in case she wanted to work from home. We had a kitchen, a dining room, and two living rooms, and everyone had their own bathroom. The office was downstairs, and the gym was on the other side of my bathroom. In a sense, I'd probably have to share my bathroom if it was a bedroom, but I was lucky it was made into a gym, I guess.

Mom had one of those long narrow tables down the whole hallway upstairs filled with various decorations, along with a mirror above it. Sitting underneath the table were a couple of bags indicating she took time to shop or made someone else do it for her. I sighed, grabbed the bags, and went into my room, shutting the door behind me. My room was bigger than I needed it to be. I had one of those L-shaped desks in the corner.

It was the most important place to me, because on one side of the table sat my laptop computer, and on the other side sat my drawing supplies. I had cabinets filled with drawing supplies propped up against the side of the desk and as much as I could feel my fingers twitching to grab something and start drawing, I knew it would have to wait. Mom had two dressers in here, but I only used one. She seemed to think I should have more clothes than I have, but I didn't spend all of my allowance on clothes, I spent it on art supplies instead.

My bed was a queen-sized bed, perfectly made not by me ever. Mom had a housekeeper who did all the cleaning. I kicked off my shoes and left them in the middle of the room, pulling off my socks and sinking my toes into the soft carpet. Probably the best part of this house was the carpet. There was just something about the feel of your skin against the carpet. The other side of my room was filled with a few bookshelves and two doors. One led to my walk-in closet, which was only half full, and the other went to my bathroom. My bookshelves were filled with books on art, and my own portfolios. I had about ten now since Isabella made me start keeping my drawings.

Every time I filled one in, I just started another one. I sat down on the bed and looked into the bags, pulling out boxes. One had a shirt that was light purple and buttoned up, with long sleeves. I guess I could deal with that, but it was too big. The pants were black dress pants, also too big. Even the shoes were too big, and I threw everything crumpled up back into the bags and chucked it back into the hallway, before closing the door once more. You'd think my own parents would know what size clothes I wore, but nope, they could never figure it out. I pulled off my hoodie and the rest of my clothes, threw them in my laundry basket, knowing the housekeeper would have them washed and folded for tomorrow morning, and went to take a shower.

My bathroom was just as extravagant as you'd think. There was a giant shower that could fit more than one person, and glass doors that were made to possibly show the outline of your body through the glass but not really much else. Trays filled with various body washes,

shampoos, and conditioners. I didn't take a long shower, knowing they were waiting, and stepped out pretty fast to dry myself off. I cringed, looking at my body in the mirror.

My side and my stomach had various healing bruises; my upper arms were covered with new bruises from Roan slamming me into the locker earlier. I had a tattoo on the inside of my arm that only Isabella knew about. It wasn't too big, a birdcage with a songbird trapped inside it. I frowned, running my finger over it, annoyed there was a bruise on it. With a sigh, I finished drying off and pulled on a long-sleeved black shirt, grabbed a pair of ripped jeans, and ran my fingers through my hair.

It was presentable enough to me, and they weren't going to pay more attention to me for five minutes anyway. If they tried, I'd just ask Kennedy about her latest match and they'd forget all about me. I didn't put any socks or shoes on. Something told me once the dinner was over, they'd all leave and I'd be alone again. Either I'd stay in and go to sleep or I'd go out and meet with Isabella.

The moment I walked into the dining room I was met with the delicious smell of ham, potatoes, and carrots. It made my mouth water and I couldn't help but smile to know there'd be plenty of leftovers for me to eat until Sunday. The cook only came for family dinners, after all, the rest of the week I either had to cook for myself or just heat up leftovers. "I think we should have another kid. Kennedy will be in high school soon, you know, and I've always wanted a boy," Dad was saying as I stepped into the room.

I sighed, very loudly, but none of them even cared enough to look up at me. "You have a son, did you forget? Or am I just a ghost?"

"Maybe he'll be a football player like you were," Mom said, patting Dad's hand with a soft smile. I rolled my eyes, mumbling under my breath as I sat down next to Kennedy and started to fill my plate. None of them waited for me of course. They had already started to eat as they talked about how they should add another child to their family. How lovely they were.

Finally, Dad looked up at me, his eyes pierced into me as he looked me up and down. I pretended like I didn't notice his strange creepy stare as I cut my ham and took a bite of it, quietly savoring the taste. Even when Dad looked under the table, probably cringing over my ripped jeans, before looking at me again. "Did you do the test?" he asked, making me sigh. I purposely took forever chewing my food, aggravating him. "Kinsley, did you pee in the damn cup?"

I rolled my eyes, swallowing my food. "Yeah, it's on the counter in my bathroom," I said, frustrated. "I'm not doing drugs though, so it's pointless. But have fun playing with my pee," I said, shrugging as I took a bite of my carrots. Every few weeks there was a new cup sitting there for me to pee in. At first, I fought it, saying it was stupid and they didn't trust me, but after a few years of that, I just accepted it and peed in the damn thing. It's not like I ever did drugs anyway, so it didn't really matter. Maybe a younger me cared that they didn't trust me but I was used to it at this point.

Dad gripped his fork tightly in his hand, annoyed with my words or my tone, probably both, and Mom cleared her throat to change the subject. "Why are you not wearing the new clothes?" She asked, a frown on her face. "Did you not like them?"

I wished tonight was already over with. "They were too big, mom. They're always too big. I keep telling you my size, it hasn't changed,"

She grimaced since I was still eating when I started to talk, but I was getting aggravated by all this scrutiny. Normally, they didn't pay this much attention to me. She quickly regained herself and straightened her spine, staring at me. "I do so much, Kinsley. I can't be expected to remember everything. It was the size your father wore when he was your age. Maybe you needed to start using the gym more, you always look so weak and skinny," she said with an exhausted sigh as if I made her life so hard for her. She could remember Dad's clothes size from high school, but not mine? Because that made so much sense.

"Did I tell you guys about my boyfriend?" Kennedy asked, batting her eyelashes at me. Of course, she wasn't even changing the subject much, just giving them something else to grill me about. The main topic of this stupid dinner after all.

For about twenty minutes, I was forgotten as Kennedy rambled on about some kid named Wyatt who was, of course, a football player. Dad told her to bring him over so he could give him some pointers and she was eating it up while mom joked about planning their wedding. Freaking seventh grade. If she stayed with him and married him when they were eighteen, I would be surprised. Eventually, everyone started to quiet down, and once again, all eyes were on me. I contemplated if I should grab the last four rolls and shove them in my mouth. Suffocate myself and knock myself out for the night, but I wasn't sure if they'd even attempt to save me.

I put my fork down and looked at them all. It was now or never, I guessed. At least I was somewhat prepared. Peyton. I was going to ask out Peyton tomorrow. "I'm actually asking out a girl tomorrow. A girl I've had a crush on for a while. I was waiting for her to be single; you know. Now that she is, I'm going to go for it," I said, shrugging like it wasn't that big of a deal. Half of that wasn't even true. Well... most of it. I had no idea if Peyton was recently single, I just knew she was currently single. And I never had a crush on her or even cared about talking to her if it wasn't for my stupid parents. They were quiet, just staring at me, and I knew what they were waiting for. "She's on the swim team," I added.

All of a sudden, everyone was excited. Dad even smiled and reached over the table, patting my back and nearly smashing my face into my plate in the process. "Way to go Kinsley! The swim team is really good! They had won for three years straight!" He said, grinning at me.

Honestly, I didn't even care enough to know that, but I gave him the fakest smile I could manage. "She's probably going to turn you down, you know," Kennedy added, and honestly, I wasn't going to argue with her. Peyton was probably going to look at me like I was a small bug and tell Roan to come to beat me up for bothering her. Oh God, I wasn't looking forward to this at all.

“Now, now, be nice. He’s a Bryant, he’ll do just fine. Who’d turn down a Bryant?” Mom said with a beaming laugh as she nudged her elbow into Dad’s arm while they laughed at each other. I wasn’t entirely sure if I could roll my eyes wide enough over how stupid that sounded, but I flashed her my fake smile and asked to be excused.

It was like me asking to be excused had unlocked the secret magic word, and everyone was instantly talking about how busy they were. Mom and Dad left to go back to the office, despite the fact that it was about seven o’clock now, and Kennedy went with them, wanting a ride to her best friend’s house for the night. It was funny, how I was the one who asked to be excused, but I was the last one sitting at the table. The cook, Gloria, came into the room and I stood, smiling softly at her. “Thank you for the delicious meal,” I said to her, grabbing the plates.

She smiled softly at me, pinching my cheek. “I made sure to pack up a lot of leftovers for you, and I baked a cake too. Don’t tell the others,” she said pressing her finger to her mouth as she winked at me.

I laughed, helping her clear the table. “Of course not. They’re never home to go in the kitchen anyway,” I replied. After the kitchen and the dining room were clean, she left and I went up to my room, putting away the laundry that had been cleaned and folded as we ate dinner. I considered going out with Isabella, but I was drained after that ordeal. Instead, I lay down on my bed with a deep sigh as I closed my eyes. I dreaded tomorrow. I couldn’t help but wish there was a way out of it.

Chapter 4- Kinsley

"Kinsley Bryant, you quit flopping over your desk like a fish, *cabrón*," Isabella said. I grumbled as I rolled back and forth over the desk. The moment the first period started earlier that day she had been hounding me.

She wanted to know when I would ask out Peyton, and why I hadn't asked her out yet. If she wanted her to be asked out so badly, she should just ask her out herself. "*Sei un pesce*," I mumbled in Italian.

My arms were draped over the top of the desk, my face pressed against the cold surface as my hood fell over my head, masking me in darkness. For a second I felt safe and warm in the dark cocoon I had created, until Isabella started to poke me with her finger. "What did you call me?" She asked with frustration in her voice. I lifted my head with a sigh.

"I said you're a fish," I mumbled, earning a smack on the back of my head with her shoe. The third period hadn't started yet and there was only half the class in the room, but the smack was loud enough to make everyone turn to look at us, even some of them calling out their stupid 'Oooohs,' as if Isabella and I were about to fight each other. I merely rubbed the back of my head through my hood, cocking my eyebrow at her. "If you're going to talk to me in Spanish, I'm going to talk to you in Italian. It's only fair, you know," I reminded her. It was a fight we had since we first started to be friends in freshman year.

She threw her hands up in the air in exasperation, then slipped her shoe back on her foot. Seeming to realize we weren't actually fighting, the rest of the class went about their normal rumors, probably adding in a few more about how Isabella and I were having a lovers' spat. Then again, Roan had spray-painted the word '*fag*' on my locker that morning, so they might not think Isabella and I were dating anymore. It took me all of the second period to get the paint off my locker, but it had been there long enough for most of the school to gossip about it. "Just go ask her! It'll stop the rumors," she whispered with a frown.

"I don't care about the rumors," I reminded her with a shrug. I mean, I could end up with a boy or a girl. It was a mystery for me too. Kind of like those mystery grab bags in the dollar store; you grab one and you never know what you're going to pull out. "She's definitely not going to say yes. She was way out of my league, and now everyone thinks I'm gay. She's just going to laugh in my face. Can't I just tell my parents she said no and go on with my life?"

She shook her head sternly. "You know your parents aren't going to get over this. Look at their bright idea of you doing drugs. You've been forced to pee in a cup for years now. They stick to their strange commitments and you know it."

"If we can last until the end of this year and then senior year, we'll be out of here," I reminded her. "Both of us, getting an apartment together in New York."

Isabella looked down at her recent drawing. "You just want to go to New York because I want to go there. You can have dreams too, Kinsley. What do you want to do when high school is over?"

I traced the engraving on the side of my pencil as I thought. "My parents want me to-" I started to say before she cut me off.

"I don't give a flying rat's ass what those ingrates want! What do you want?" she nearly shouted as everyone turned to look at us once more. Whispers of Isabella being crazy were voiced throughout the room but one quick glare and the twitch of her fingers near her foot made them all shut up and turn away from us again.

I didn't reply to her question though, because thankfully the teacher came in just as the bell rang. I wasn't in the same class as Peyton for that period, and I was glad I wasn't being forced to stare at her in any way. It seemed like the moment I decided it was going to be her, I couldn't stop staring at her. She was pretty, had a slender athletic body, was well taken care of, and had messy hair that was always pulled up with just the most attractive messiness on top of her head. Her neck was nice and lean, which was mostly all I could see since the classes I had with her I sat behind her.

For some reason, I wasn't attracted to her. Of course, that didn't mean that we couldn't eventually be attracted to each other. I mean, sure Romeo and Juliet were instantly attracted to each other, but were all of the great romances of our lifeline?

There had to be some out there who chose to get to know each other first, and passion came second. The longer I dwelled on it, the more I didn't want to do this. I had no idea what I was scared of, it wasn't like I thought she'd say yes. I was absolutely sure she would say no. Probably threw Roan at me since the swim team had always been really friendly with the basketball team. Then, if it wasn't that, what was it? What was I afraid of?

"Mr. Bryant, do you know the answer to the question?"

"Obviously I don't, otherwise I wouldn't be sitting here dwelling on it," I replied without thinking. My cheeks heated up in embarrassment. Wait... class, teacher... good job me.

Mr. McCormick simply cocked his eyebrows at me from the front of the class, holding the ruler poised in between his fingers. He liked to slap it down on people's desks when they fell asleep, and one of those days I kind of hoped a piece of it would break off and cut someone so he could get fired; I hated this teacher. "Obviously, you have a lot on your mind, but would you mind pulling out your actual textbook and paying attention? It's page forty-three," he frowned. I swore he hated me because, despite everything, I still got the best grades in his class. English was so freaking easy for me.

I grumbled in annoyance as I pulled the hood further over my head and I opened my textbook to the right page, just as a perfectly folded little triangle slipped onto my desk. I nearly threw it back at her, as frustrated as I was. I hated how she folded these things. So tight and tiny, making me

have to try to unfold them so I didn't break the note. Couldn't she just fold it like a freaking square? Was it that hard to do?

I took a minute to close my eyes and counted to ten, knowing I was being incredibly unreasonable and shouldn't take my frustrations out on a piece of paper. Once I was sure I wasn't going to burn the whole room down just to kill this perfectly folded little triangle, I opened my eyes and pulled it under the desk to slowly unfold so Mr. McCormick didn't see. He was a really loud man, his country accent boomed so loudly sometimes that other teachers poked their heads in to ask him to keep it down.

I wasn't entirely worried about him hearing the paper rustling, but he'd notice me fumbling with it. Once it was finally unfolded, I smoothed it out over my desk and covered the top of the paper with my textbook as I read what she had written. To think it would take three exaggerated hours just to find one freaking sentence quickly pulled my frustration back out again but I ignored it. Of course, she was going to try and get me to ask her out during lunch. I quickly replied to her stupid message. *'There's no way in Hell I'm asking her out in front of everyone,'* I wrote, before folding it like a freaking square and throwing it back at her.

Her reply was fast, and thankfully she folded it like a square so I didn't have to fight with it anymore. Either she was being nice or she realized I was about to blow a fuse. I wasn't normally a violent angry person, but there was so much pressure on me. With my parents I tried to appease them, to keep them off my back. On top of constantly getting picked on by Roan and his friends, I just wished more than anything high school was over and I could be out of there. It didn't matter if I wanted to go to New York or not. Anywhere was better than where I am now.

'Then what are you going to do? What about a note? Write her a note and hand it to her. That way she'll read it all, and maybe she'll write you a note back so it's less scary?' She asked.

I stared at her note for the longest time with a frown. A note. Just like this piece of innocent paper in front of me. Mr. McCormick started to walk down the aisles with last week's test results and I quickly scooted the textbook over the note. Honestly, I was glad about the need to hide it, because I started to have an idea and I wasn't sure how to word it. Mr. McCormick handed me my paper, an A, with a permanent scowl on his face. He took so long handing out the tests that the bell rang. I jotted down the homework he had on the board really fast as I started to pack everything away and followed the flow of children out the door.

It was lunchtime, and while most people headed down towards the cafeteria, Isabella and I headed to my car. Our high school didn't really have many rules for lunch, and I think that was mostly because most of the students didn't really have cars. It was only the seniors and a handful of the juniors, myself included. As long as we were back in time for our next class, they didn't really care if we left. A few students were walking down the road towards the closest place, fast food, while those of us with cars usually took our friends to other places farther away. Roan always had as many people as he could fit in his car, while I always just took Isabella.

She used to complain about it. She hated how I always took her to get food and paid for it. Then she realized I had an unlimited credit card, and the more that was spent the less my parents had. Her hatred for my parents allowed her to accept whatever I was willing to buy her. I tended to supply most of her art supplies as well when her mother didn't notice. Isabella might not have had a problem with using my parents' money, but her mother didn't like it. As far as her mother knew, Isabella went to the cafeteria every day to get free lunch, but usually, we went to a cozy little cafe that both of us liked.

It wasn't too far from the school, kind of like a seven-minute drive without traffic, and they had the best sandwiches. We weren't really coffee drinkers, but we loved hot chocolate. It was another shared passion of Isabella's and mine, but while she drank hers plain, I tended to put whipped cream, cinnamon, and sprinkles on mine. She thought it was disgusting and I thought it was Heaven. We ordered our food, and as the waiter walked away, I could tell almost instantly that Isabella wasn't going to wait any longer for this conversation. I held up one finger, noticing the waiter was coming back with our drinks, and fairly enjoyed watching Isabella squirm with annoyance as she ran her fingers through her purple-streaked hair.

The purple was starting to fade, which meant she'd either dye it something else or re-dye the purple fairly soon. "Kinsley," she whined. I merely gave her a look, waiting for the man to put down the hot chocolates and the sodas we ordered, before slowly walking away. The blast of hot air filled the cafe as the bell over the door chimed, and in walked some of the football team. I frowned, fairly annoyed. They never really came here. There were six of them, which meant they either all piled illegally into one car, or Bobby Fisher was the one who drove them. He was another junior who had a vehicle, he had a flatbed truck. It wasn't hard to know who had vehicles, they tended to belong to all of the kids who lived in the ritzy neighborhood and whose parents were friends with my stupid parents.

I took a deep breath of relief as they chose a table far away from ours, and the moment they started to get loud the manager came to kick them out. It didn't surprise me; his wife always came to work with him and she had constant headaches; she hated loud noises. I waited for the football players to grumble and complain as they left. The manager took a minute to apologize to everyone for the disturbance before I finally turned to Isabella. "I have an idea, but you're probably not going to like it,"

She narrowed her eyes at me, her fingers twitching towards her shoe, but she stopped herself as she moved her hands on top of the table and cupped her fingers around her hot chocolate. I could tell she didn't like how it sounded but she was going to give me the benefit of the doubt. "Well?" She asked when I had grown quiet.

I lowered my hood with a frown for a moment as I raked my fingers through my hair. Out the window, I could see the football players attacking a hotdog vendor. They shoved each other around and laughed. One of them trailed behind the others. He had a flat-bill cap over his head to shade his eyes from the sun, and a spring jacket with the hood over the top of the cap. For a moment, I wondered about him. I couldn't tell which one he was, not that I really ever cared to

know who any of the football players were, but I was curious simply because while all of the others were loud and rowdy, he was quietly staring at a wind chime.

I wished I could see the expression on his face, but before I could really think more about it, Isabella snapped her fingers in front of my face to get my attention again. I pulled my eyes away from the random guy to stare at her. "Fine," I grumbled as the waiter came back and placed our sandwiches in front of us. We thanked him before I told Isabella my idea. "I'm going to write a note." She squealed quietly so she didn't disturb the owner or his wife. "Wait, there's more. The part you probably won't like," I added. Her squeal instantly died down and I smirked, already feeling the slap of her shoe on my head. Subconsciously, I pulled my hood back over my head to give it an extra cushion. "I'm not going to hand it to her. I'm going to put it in her locker."

She barely even blinked before telling me exactly how stupid that was. "What's the point of that? She's going to think you're a chicken! You have to be man enough to hand it to her, or else she might not even know who you are! Just writing your name on it isn't going to do anything. This isn't going to work, I swear,"

I tapped my finger against my chin with a frown. "No, wait. I don't think you understand me. I'm not going to put my name on it. Wait, let me explain. Obviously, she's going to reject me right away. Everyone thinks I'm gay apparently, or dating you. What if I sign it as a code name? It adds mystery to it all. She'll think it's romantic because a stranger is going out of their way to mysteriously tell her how much they're thinking about her. We'll get to know each other through secret letters back and forth through our lockers. That way, if we can't stand each other, we can tell them to stop talking to us and we'll never have to deal with a confrontation. But if we do end up falling for each other, then eventually we can see each other and go from there," I said with a smile.

She tilted her head to the side. "I mean, it might work. But it's not the kind of relationship your parents want. But then again, who knows, right? Tell them some lie or something. Everyone knows the swim team has a meet soon and they'll be gone for a few weeks before Christmas break. Just say it came early this year. Use it as an excuse to grow feelings, then after a few weeks, meet each other."

I didn't like that I only had a few weeks as a deadline, but nodded in agreement. If it was the best I had, maybe it'll work. I pushed my uneaten sandwich to the side and pulled out a notepad, turning it to the last page, the only blank page left, and pulled out a pencil. I didn't bring my school pencils with me and all I had was a drawing pencil. I was going to have to stop at the store to get another notepad after this. I wanted to write it down, while it was still fresh in my mind.

Hello,

How is your day going so far? That's probably a stupid question, pretty cliché, right? Obviously, that's the first question that gets asked. Though, when talking to someone who doesn't know

you, that tends to be the go-to. Scratch that. Literally, scratch that. I don't have an eraser to get rid of it and I don't have any more paper.

I'm sorry, I'm going to start over. Ignore the ramble, I tend to do that when I'm nervous. I just wanted to tell you that I've been admiring you. I don't really know you, and I don't think you even realize I exist, but I'm hoping you'll give me a chance to get to know each other. Besides, what could it hurt? We might be complete opposites, or we might have a lot in common. Maybe it's better to do it this way? No pressure, no names, nothing. What's there to lose? Maybe we'll end up hating each other. It wouldn't matter anyway though, because no names, right? Or maybe...just maybe...we'll end up falling in love. Maybe we'll be the type of romance that's talked about, the type of romance that everyone envies and wishes they could have. If you want to get to know me, if you're interested, my locker number is 342.

Sincerely, Sparrow.

I smiled down at the letter, admiring it, before Isabella pulled it out from in front of me and read it. "Sparrow?" She wondered as she stared up at me with her eyebrows raised.

I shrugged. I felt slightly embarrassed as she stared at my letter. "All I could think of was my favorite song right now. You know, from the band SayWeCanFly," I mumbled.

She nodded, seeming to accept that as she reread the letter. "Are you sure you want to go with this? We can get more paper and rewrite it,"

I grabbed the paper from her and ripped it out of the notepad. I folded it into a square twice and shoved it into my pocket. "No. I'm scared if I try to rewrite it, I'll throw up all over it and she's definitely not going to like that. Come on, I have to run to the store to get a new notepad. I'm going to get some envelopes too," I replied as I stood.

She had already finished her lunch so she stood up and stretched as I pulled out a twenty and put it on the table next to the receipt. I grabbed my sandwich and together we walked out of the cafe. The good thing about this cafe was the fact that it was fairly close to a bunch of stores. My parents would probably be annoyed to see a simple little dollar store purchase on my card, but I didn't really care. They always wanted us to shop in rich places, to show how pristine we were.

I walked into the dollar store and within minutes the shopping cart was filled with things we hadn't even come in here to get. Isabella had raided the stencils, spray paint cans and tape, more hair dye, and accessories, while I simply grabbed the notepad and envelopes. At the last minute, I grabbed a new pack of pencils for school, but mostly there was only so much a dollar store had. We grabbed some boxes of cookie dough bites and threw those in the cart too before checking out. "Do you even know which locker is hers?" Isabella wondered.

I nodded as I handed the cashier my card while we grabbed the bags. We pretty much moved everything to the next register to get out of the way of those behind us so I could put the note in the envelope. "Yeah, I saw her stand next to it earlier when we left. She had been leaning against it and everything," She nodded, seeming to accept that answer as the cashier handed

me back my card. Ignoring a grumbling old woman and her rowdy granddaughter, we searched through our bags to find the envelopes. I quickly slipped my note into it and tucked the top inside the envelope. I didn't really want to lick it and she probably would reuse the envelope if she replied back to me. It's not like people just randomly walked around with a box of envelopes to wait for someone to slip a letter into their locker.

We hurried back to school moments before the bell rang for the next class. Isabella went to her class on the third floor near our lockers. Mine was on the second floor, which was lucky for me because so was Peyton's locker. I had seen her at it when we were walking down the stairs earlier. Locker 213 was fairly close to the stairs. I passed my class and went to the locker and stared at it for a moment. No one was around since the bell had rung when I had walked up the stairs, and I creepily stared at it.

The cheerleaders tended to have stickers and magnets on their lockers, and I assumed most girls did, but it did not look like Peyton did. The locker next to this one was covered in pink and purple magnets, which was how I remembered without seeing the number. A strangely colorful locker like that stood out. I shrugged. I guess Peyton wasn't the type of girl to care about decorating her locker. I slipped the note through the three little holes at the top.

I started to freak out and regret it the moment I let go of the paper, but there was nothing I could do now. Taking calming breaths I told myself that she did not know my name or who I was. Once calmer, I clutched my notebook and pencil to my chest and went to class.

Chapter 5- Green

'Maybe I should try again.'

Those words echoed through my mind as I lazily laid my head against my right hand, my elbow propped on the desk. I kept remembering this morning, the screaming and the yelling, how my little brother ended up going to school with a cut on his cheek from a stray broken piece of plate my mother threw at my father. The plate broke against the wall, and none of them noticed he was bleeding. He didn't care, simply pressed a towel against the cut, and all I could do was stare.

Just the same morning, the same scene, over and over and over again. *'Maybe I should try again.'* The words echoed in my mind once more. Why not? What was the point? My left arm was lying lazily on the desk, the pencil perched in between the fingers of my right hand without care of the rambles of the teacher as they droned on and on in front of the room. I felt my left hand twitch and I stared at it with a frown. I wondered if it was remembering the memories of the past, or if it was anticipating the thoughts of what could happen in the future.

The bell rang and I got up and packed, moving like a robot going through the motions. Claps on the back, girls giggled hello, fake... all of it was fake. Would any of them really notice if I was gone? Sure, I was the captain. They'd notice, fake cry for the guy they pretended to know. But they'd move on. What would it feel like to have someone who actually cared? To have someone who actually loved me? Someone who didn't just cry when I died, but someone whose world shifted without me? Someone who couldn't breathe if I wasn't breathing. What would it feel like to have someone know me?

I wasn't sure I'd ever find out. Not me, not when I was only surrounded by fake smiles and pretenders. I swept my eyes through the halls, ignored the heys from the guys who saw me, and the shy giggles of the girls who thought I looked at them. In a sea filled with copies, was there actually someone out there who was genuine? *'Maybe I should try again,'* the voice echoed in my mind as the bell rang. I had taken too long, but I needed to get my books for the sixth and seventh periods so I lingered. No one cared if I was late anyway, not me. Not the star of the team. Just a big fake in a sea of fakes, hiding my scars under my sleeves and my sadness under smiles and nods.

I opened my locker and the first thing I noticed was a letter. I almost threw it away. It wasn't my first and it certainly wasn't going to be my last, but then I noticed something. It was simple, a simple plain envelope. No drawings, no heart stickers, no curly names, no reek of perfume. Just a simple envelope with the top folded inside. I sighed, curiosity getting the better of me, and I opened it. For the longest time, all I could do was stare at it. My eyes were wide as I reread it, over and over again. My hands shook as I took deep breaths, and looked around the halls- despite how empty it was- as reality crashed down around me.

Hurriedly, I smoothed out the letter and placed it inside my textbook. I pulled out a new piece of paper, sat down right there in the middle of the hallway, and replied to the letter. I felt the biggest grin tug on my face, and I realized as I slid an extra piece of paper and small little thin erasers inside the envelope, that it was a real smile. I sat there for who knows how long, but as the bell rang once more, I folded the note and slid it back into the envelope. I accidentally ripped the top of it in my haste as the hall quickly filled up once more.

My seventh period was on the third floor, so I didn't have a problem with the location of the locker. I stood up and stared at the hallway once more, my eyes scanned over everyone around me with a newfound light as I closed my locker and walked towards the stairs. Maybe, just maybe, there was someone here that would care if I died. Someone who would be destroyed without me. At least for now, the little voice wasn't echoing inside my mind anymore.

Chapter 6- Kinsley

To say I was freaking out would have been an understatement. Peyton was in my fifth-period class, but she didn't look bothered by anything, so I assumed she hadn't gone to her locker. I should have waited until after school so I wouldn't have to look at her face for the rest of the day. No, that was a bad idea, because then I'd lie there all night long unable to sleep for fear of what would happen the next day. I should have just run away and joined a covenant. Wait, wasn't that for nuns? Fuck, I didn't know anymore, I just couldn't stop freaking out. "Chill your tits," Isabella said, flicking me on the forehead.

Mrs. Gee and I glared at her, Mrs. Gee's finger pressed tightly against her lips as she shushed us once more for probably the hundredth time since detention started. Yes, we had detention, but on the plus side, Roan did too, so that was fun. Well, besides the fact that he was glaring at me from across the library. Isabella had accidentally tripped Roan, I mean she said it was an accident, but it was Isabella after all, and instead of letting him shove her, I shoved him into a locker. Honestly, I think he was just as surprised as I was. I had never stood up to him before, but I guess I could have if I wanted to. Those few years of karate and the fact that I had at least attempted to stay in shape did something. Though, not much, since he lifted me by my collar and slammed me against the locker -his fist poised to punch me in the face- before Mr. McCormick found us.

Roan's friends all tried to say I started it but conveniently left out the part of him trying to hurt Isabella first. All in all, Mr. McCormick didn't care who did what and threw us all in detention. The basketball coach stormed into the library, making Mrs. Gee raise her eyebrow in annoyance over the noise, but nonetheless, she said nothing as he spat at her. Literally spat. He was a short angry man who spat when he yelled, and most of the time people did whatever he wanted just to stay clear of the shower of spit. While they were arguing, I turned to glare at Isabella, ignoring the way Roan was looking at me like he was going to throw me off the roof later. "I don't think that saying applies to men," I whispered, trying to sound tough but failing horribly.

She snorted, lazily pressing her hand against my chest. "Fine, chill your nipples," she muttered. "It's just a note, and you did the bare minimum. No names, remember? If anything, she won't even reply to it. She'll probably think it's a crazy stalker that goes off into the dark corners of the halls and fills up too many socks in between classes with unborn children." I wasn't sure if I should be more horrified over what she said or the calm way she said it.

I glared at her after the minute it took me to get over the shock. "You said it was romantic and mysterious!" I hissed quietly.

The coach seemed to get his way, either that or Mrs. Gee decided she needed a shower after talking to him because she was busy wiping her glasses with a disgusted look on her face while the coach started to motion Roan to follow him. I would say I hoped the coach would punish him somehow for getting detention and missing half of practice, but the way Roan turned towards

me and flipped me off and the way the coach chuckled and pretended like he didn't see it made me know he wasn't going to do anything. Fucking jerks.

Mrs. Gee excused herself, glaring at us to make sure we behaved, before walking out of the room. I wouldn't be surprised if she came back with wet hair, I'd be scrubbing my face too after that conversation. The only ones left in the library were a few freshman boys crowding around a computer trying to get past the proxy to see porn, two sophomore girls who seemed to be working on a project together, and a handful of seniors with their noses shoved in books since college placement tests were coming up soon. Not bothering to whisper anymore, Isabella shrugged. "No, you said it was mysterious and romantic, I just agreed."

I simply laid my head down on the table, my arms spread out around me and sighed in defeat. I was so exhausted, and I didn't know what to do. "I wish I was sporty and straight and brainless like all the other jocks in this school," I mumbled. I mean, honestly, my life would be simpler if I could just fit into the perfect mold that made the Bryant family shine. Being one of the richest families in town made me stand out, but me being me... made everyone care less. I was ridiculed no matter where I went. The kids of the parents my own spent time with told their parents how ridiculous Kinsley Bryant was, and it just made my parents hate me even more. "I overheard my parents talking about having another baby. They said hopefully they'd have a boy because they've always wanted one. *'Maybe he'll be a football player like you!'*" I said, mocking my mother's voice.

I felt Isabella pat my back gently, all of her normal sass gone as she sighed. "Good for them. I hope they do get another child. I hope that child comes out crapping rainbows like the freaking tiger off of Uncle Grandpa."

I snorted so hard I started to cough as I laughed, making Isabella crinkle her nose as she muttered an exaggerated ew at me. Mrs. Gee walked back into the library in time to see me trying to cover and contain my laugh, and the seniors glaring daggers at me, and sighed. "Go away, detention is finished early, I'm tired of you," she said with a frown. I didn't need to be told twice. Isabella and I bolted out of the library, ignoring her screaming at us not to run, and tore off down the halls. The moment we stood next to my locker, all I could do was pace. In our high school, we had seven classes a day, lasting about forty-five minutes each, two breaks, and a staggered lunch. And by staggered, I meant three lunch periods.

Mine and Isabella's was the first lunch after the third period. Some had a second lunch after the fourth period, and some had it after the fifth. I was never cursed with the third lunch; I wasn't sure if my stomach would last that long. I never checked my locker after the sixth or seventh period, mainly because I didn't need to after the sixth, and I couldn't after the seventh since I was shepherded into the library for detention. "Just open it Kins," Isabella said, throwing her hands up in the air. "I have to get to work."

Despite the fact that I had no problem throwing my parents' money at her, her mother still required her to work to help with bills around the house. Her mother had this thing about how everything should be split since she uses it too. Isabella has to pay for her own phone bill, and

at the beginning of the month, her mom takes like twenty for each bill. After that, she'll put the rest aside in a bank account Isabella isn't allowed to touch, saying it's for her future, and gives her like twenty-five to live off of. Twenty-five dollars isn't nearly enough for her for two weeks, hence why I always pay for lunch and her illegal extracurricular activities.

"Hold up, I think I'm going to throw up," I said, holding my hand over my mouth. She crossed her arms over her chest, her foot tapping as she cocked her eyebrow at me. "Why is this school so weird anyway? I highly doubt she's going to walk all the way up to the third floor to put the reply into my locker. Why can't we have new lockers each year with our homeroom teachers?" I rambled, trying to stall. It was fucked up though. When we started high school, we got lockers near our homeroom class. The only thing was, those lockers were our permanent lockers for the rest of high school unless we traded with someone else, which ended up happening a lot. So, no matter where our classes were each year, our locker always remained the same.

Isabella sighed, clearly tired of my crap, and opened my locker for me. Yes, we knew each other's combinations. Isabella's locker was on the first floor, and I tended to leave my second and third-period textbooks in her locker so it was easier for me instead of going up to the third floor and back down again within five minutes in between classes. Plus, our art club was on the third floor, and my locker was littered with all of my and Isabella's art supplies that we didn't trust the stoner freshman with. We were still working on begging the teacher in charge of the club to let us get a safe or something in there to keep our stuff safe. I squeaked and threw my hands over my eyes as I shrunk in on myself. "I don't want to know, I don't want to know, I don't want to know," I chanted, shaking my head back and forth.

"Um... Kinsley..." Isabella trailed, her voice breaking me out of my thoughts as I lowered my hands and stared at her. She was standing there with wide eyes, holding the envelope. It was the same one, with the top shoved inside the same way I had done it, but I could see it. There was a slight tear on the top as if Peyton had ripped it by accident trying to open it. It had been opened and reclosed. Either she had read it and put it back in and simply felt the need to return it... or she had replied to it.

Both of us were staring at it like Isabella was holding a stick of dynamite. "What if she replied with hate mail?" I asked, my eyes wide with panic.

"Then switch lockers with Kylee?" Isabella suggested. Kylee was one of the freshmen in our club who kept pestering me about switching with her so she could be closer to her classes. Her locker was on the second floor and most of her classes were on the third. I was starting to think maybe I should take her up on her offer. Suddenly, Isabella's phone went off, and she frowned in frustration. "I have to go, Mami's here," she said, glaring at the envelope with frustration. She was probably mad that I took so long to get to the envelope, and now she'd have to wait to see what it said. Of course, making her mother wait wasn't an option. Her mother was scarier than she was. Plus, they both worked together at the meat market her mother owned, so if Isabella made her mother late to open the store, she'd never hear the end of it. "I want to know what it says, take a picture," she said, pressing the envelope against my chest.

I watched her walk away, staring down at the envelope in horror, before finally forcing myself to move. I threw my textbooks into my locker and pulled out the few I needed for homework, throwing them in my backpack and slinging it over my shoulder. I closed my locker and frowned, staring at the empty hallway and stairs in the distance. Everyone besides those in clubs or sports had gone for the day since we had wasted time in the library for detention, so the halls were empty. I didn't really want to read this in the quiet loneliness of my house and found myself moving my feet toward the art club room.

We never tended to meet on the days Isabella had work, and the freshmen seemed to think it was a normal club routine to always be off on Thursdays and Fridays and never questioned it. The club room was empty, and absentmindedly I slung my bag down on the table and went to the windows, opening one. Even with no one in the room, the smell of weed and toxic goo still slightly clung to the air, and it was hard to be in this room without a window cracked or two. I wasn't even sure why I was here, but this was kind of my happy place and the only place I could think to be.

I wanted to be alone, and somewhere safe to open this. Maybe if it made me cry, at least no one would be around to see it. I had a sinking feeling in the pit of my stomach that even if the message was something stupid like *'I hate you'* or *'Let's get it on,'* I'd still cry simply because I got a reply. All of the stress of this was crashing down on me, this forced confession and these forced feelings and this forced life that I wanted no part of.

I sighed, closing my eyes for a moment as I sat down at the table, and listened to the steady sound of the whistle blowing on the football field. I wasn't entirely sure why that comforted me, but for some reason, it gave me the motivation to finally open the envelope and pull the letter out.

Hey, Sparrow.

I'm assuming Sparrow is your code name? I'm curious to know why. Is it because your favorite bird is a Sparrow? Love. You talk about love like it's the endgame. Maybe it is, but for now, love is the last thing on my mind. Romance talked about through letters? That's a funny one, but who knows? Someone who's been admiring me. There are probably a few, to be honest, I know my standing. Being on a sports team that does pretty well will draw a certain crowd so I'm not entirely surprised. Though if you're only interested in me because of my skills then you'll be surprised to find there's a lot more to me than the brainless jock label most of us have. So if you're searching for a brainless jock, I suggest you search elsewhere. As for love, I'm not sure what to tell you about that. How about friends? If you're fine with starting there, I'm fine with this charade. More than anything, it would be nice to have a friend. You seem to already know my locker, but in case you forget, locker 213.

Sincerely, Green.

P.S. I included extra paper and an eraser, in case you're still in need.

I stared at the letter, rereading it over and over again. After a few minutes, I pulled out my phone and took a picture of it. I sent it to Isabella for her to read as she had asked, before putting my phone on silent. I wanted to have a minute to just stare at it because everything felt...wrong. It felt wrong, but so right, all at the same time. I could barely remember Peyton's personality but I never would have expected her to write a reply like this. Honestly, I had expected her to freak out about me being a creep, especially after what Isabella had said. The more I read it, the bigger my smile got and all I could feel was butterflies fluttering around inside my chest. Green, she had labeled herself as Green. Strange, but maybe it was her favorite color.

I wasn't sure, but I was going to ask her. She had asked me about mine after all. After I had reread it at least three more times, I looked at my phone, knowing Isabella had said something about it. *'I didn't know Peyton was that deep but dang, maybe you guys are a match made in heaven. Good pick, Kins! Write a reply! By the way, she gave you a piece of paper and an eraser. How cute is that?'* her text read.

I shook my head, feeling like if I smiled any bigger, my face would get stuck like that. Distantly, I was aware that the sports teams were heading inside to get changed, and I decided to linger to avoid Roan. Plus, if I was going to reply to her and put the reply back into her locker, I'd rather know I wasn't running into her. I took a deep breath, reached into the envelope, and pulled out the extra piece of paper and the erasers. There were two of them, thin and shaped like a smiley face, and for a moment all I could do was laugh. It really didn't seem like something Peyton would have but I couldn't stop laughing over it. How simple, how useful and cute the gesture was. To show just how much she wanted me to reply back. She had even gone so far as to supply a piece of paper, what was she going to do next, throw in a pencil?

That might have been pretty hard to slip through the holes of the locker. Suddenly, all of the panic I had been feeling earlier faded away. I was left with a giddy feeling, a wanting feeling, knowing more than anything I couldn't wait to see what she said next. I hadn't expected to be this excited over a simple letter, over a forced confession, over feelings that were starting to be less forced. Maybe everything would work out in the end. Maybe I would get the sporty girl my parents wanted me to get, we would get married and have sporty babies, and they would finally smile at me the way I had always wished they would. Maybe I would give basketball a try again. The future might be filled with all of these maybes, but right now all I wanted to do was think about the here and now. The letter, and the blank piece of paper, an envelope waiting for a reply. I pulled out the piece of paper she had supplied, smoothed it down, and smiled.

Hey, Green.

You asked about my code name first, so that's the first thing I'll answer. I chose it because of my favorite song. Well, my favorite song seems to change constantly, but right now it's Song of the Sparrow, by SayWeCanFly. So, I guess I get to ask why you chose Green? It's fairly simple, but there's nothing wrong with that. A favorite color maybe? I'm going to be honest with you. I have no idea anything about love besides what I read in the books. After I graduate, I plan on moving far away, anywhere, really, I don't care where, as long as it's far away from here. The idea of

falling in love with someone in this town and being tied here for the rest of my life horrifies me. My parents wanted me to be in a relationship and this was honestly the best I could do.

To hand it to someone, to look them in the eye, to talk to them...the idea terrified me. But code names, the secrecy of the fact that we don't really know each other, it was appealing. So yes, Green. Simply friends is fine with me, more than fine. And I'll have you know, I never cared for the brainless jocks either. I couldn't care one way or another for the sport itself, or the skills required to play it. Knowing you're more than a brainless jock makes me want to keep talking to you. By the way, thanks for the paper and erasers, but I'm good now, I bought more. Looking forward to your letter, thanks again, Green.

Sincerely, Sparrow.

P.S. I'm not going to forget your locker number, I have a feeling it's going to be something I'll never be able to forget, even years from now. Hopefully, you won't forget mine either. 342, and sorry for it being so far away from yours. Maybe I'll switch with someone else to make it easier.

I smiled down at my note, rereading it over and over and over again. I was proud of myself for the depth of mystery and calm that radiated from my letter. It was filled with ease that sounded like I was sure of myself, despite the fact that I rarely was and that I was calm and confident in myself. I folded the paper and replaced the envelope with another one. Then I placed the letter I received from Peyton back into the slightly torn envelope and slipped it into a free sleeve in my current portfolio. I was sure Isabella was wondering what I said, but somehow... I didn't want to take a picture of it for her.

It felt too personal now that she had replied to me, and now that I couldn't stop smiling over her. I never would have expected Peyton to sound like this, to reply like this, but if the next letter and the next were just as personal as this one, I was sure it wouldn't take long for me to have feelings for her. It felt wrong that I knew who she was, but she didn't know who I was. But for now, she seemed fine with this, and if it was okay with her, then it was okay with me.

I put my portfolio back in my bag, placed the envelope with the new note in it in my pocket, and left the room. I walked to the end of the hall past the stairs to look out the window towards the parking lot. I almost sighed in relief to see almost everyone who was on the sports teams was filling the parking lot. Some were waiting for their parents to come to get them, some were standing at the corner near the bus stop, or some were piling into the seniors on their team or the rare few juniors who had vehicles. I could see Peyton standing with a few of the other girls on the swim team standing next to Roan and his friends on the basketball team and I frowned, wondering how she would feel to know someone she was friendly with was my bully. Maybe it was best she didn't know who I was right now, or anytime soon.

I could see some of the football players piling into a few of the trucks and the cheerleader girls trying to sit on their laps. I cringed, slightly worried, unsure if the truck could even handle that many people riding in the bed of it. Soon enough it sped off, and so did Roan and his group, and so did Peyton and hers. Once I was sure they were gone and I wouldn't have to deal with

running into her or Roan, I walked down the stairs to the second floor, sliding my finger down the rows as I smiled.

I probably looked crazed, my hood pulled over my head, wearing all black, and an oversized hoodie to hide the bruises painted like a canvas over my skin, but I didn't care. I couldn't stop the smile from tugging at the corners of my lips as I found her locker, the big 213 standing there over the plain metal locker next to the overcolored one next to it. I tapped on the locker a few times, chuckling under my breath as I looked side to side, despite the fact that no one was around. I felt like I was the holder of a great big secret, the biggest secret, the secret that was mine and mine alone, and as I slipped the letter into the locker, all I could do was laugh and press my hands to my mouth to try and contain my crazy. It was hard to stop the happiness, despite the fact that this was venturing dangerously into the unknown.

Chapter 7- Green

All throughout practice, I was impatient. I couldn't even count the number of times I got smacked with the ball. Guys and the few girls on the team crashed into me constantly every time I glanced at the doors. Normally during practice, all that mattered was the ball. The teamwork, the footwork, the stance, and the play. The rush of the wind in my hair as I ran, the feel of the ball in my hands, that's all that mattered to me. Now, all I could think about was the letter. Though this afternoon, I wanted the time to move forward, to make practice over, as ironic as that was. Normally, I wanted it to never end so I never had to go home. I wanted to just live here outside with the grass and the trees and the feel of the ball in between my hands. It was different now.

After practice, I took a shower, faster than usual. If anyone noticed, they said nothing, though I wouldn't be surprised if they had. Usually, I lingered outside and took the longest showers. My feet shuffled as I walked into the locker rooms and tried to make it last just a little bit longer. The feel of hands clapping against my back drew me in and out of my languid thoughts of the letter, and I wondered if it would be there or if all of it had just been a dream. I couldn't quite place my finger down as to why this letter was so different, why this girl was so different.

I hurried up the stairs to my locker, excited. My heart pounded in my chest, my hands shook, wet with nervous sweat. The moment I opened my locker, however, my smile fell. There was nothing there. I tried to tell myself nothing was wrong, but who didn't check their locker after school was over? I moved down the stairs and outside slowly, and if someone noticed how I went from happiness to sadness like the flick of a switch, they said nothing. More than once, I stood still and scanned the crowd of jocks. I wondered if any of them were missing or lingered inside for too long. No, as far as I could tell, everyone was here. The basketball team and the swim team were together near one car, while the football players were near another with the cheerleaders. There were others, the volleyball team and the swim team, who walked off in groups towards their few cars or the bus stop at the end of the road.

More fake heys, good throw, great pass, you're the man. Patted on the back, and people sucked up because I was the captain. None of them really mattered to me. It seemed like after I read that letter, all I could think about was how fake everything really was around me. I just wanted to play the sport, I didn't want the friends that came with it or the slutty girls draped over our laps that came with the title. We all piled into one car and as it pulled away, I stared up at the building with a frown. To say that I wasn't disappointed would be a lie. Hopefully, nothing was wrong. Hopefully, I hadn't angered her, whoever she was. Hopefully, it hadn't all just been a dream.

I checked my locker before practice the next morning. I never checked my locker before practice. What was the point of coming to school early and going to your locker? Despite the strange looks, I ran up the stairs to my locker. I ignored the stupid decoration Peyton had on her locker next to mine and opened it. I was surprised to see there was a letter there. Did the girl who wrote it play a sport after all?

Surely, I wasn't the last one out of the building yesterday. Maybe an athlete that came to school before the others tended to? Or maybe she was one of those kids who got dropped off early and had to wait for school? I frowned. I knew the coach would have a fit if I was late, but I wanted more than anything to read the letter, to see what she said. I put back the letter with a sigh. It would have to wait until after practice.

Practice sucked. I couldn't think of anything other than the letter that sat in my locker. One of the guys slammed into me because I hadn't paid attention. I knew the side of my body would be covered in bruises before the day was over. Despite this, I smiled as I walked into the classroom and slid into my desk before the bell rang. My homeroom teacher looked at me like I was crazy, but I couldn't blame him.

I was never on time, let alone early. Who fucking cared about English class? It was my worst subject, and the fact that I had it first thing in the morning did nothing to make me want to hurry to it. I tended to take long showers after practice, to drag it out as the hot water kneaded my muscles. The teachers disliked the jocks, especially the football, swim team, and basketball players because they were winning teams. The principal said more than once to be more lenient with the winning teams' students. Plus, not to mention detention wasn't on the principal's agenda either, not when it took us away from practice.

I smiled as I pulled out the letter and read it. I reread it, ignored the comments of my friends as they slapped my shoulder and asked me who the lucky girl was that gave me a letter. I ignored the teacher as the bell rang and we started into today's lesson. I pulled out a piece of paper and wrote a reply to the letter, placed the second one with the first inside the same textbook as before, folded up my letter, and slipped it into the envelope.

I couldn't help but turn around a few times shyly as I searched for eyes that lifted to meet mine, a soft feminine blush on a student that had apparently admired me. However, none of the girls really seemed to stand out in ways of a curious anxious gaze, nothing in the way the few looked back at me told me they anticipated a reply to a letter.

My second period was on the third floor, so it wouldn't be a problem for me. I pulled out my phone and pulled up my iTunes account, typed in the band and the song, and purchased it. I probably should have listened to it first to see if I liked it, but I had a feeling I would. There was something about this girl already that tugged me. The excitement I felt just to talk to her told me I'd probably like anything she suggested just because it was her.

Swiftly I pulled my headphones out of my pocket and slid them under my shirt, put them in my ears, and hit play. It was an emo band, and I had to lower the volume so I didn't get caught. I honestly didn't expect to like it, but I was glad I did. It wasn't something I usually listened to, but I would be now. Without care for the teacher or the class, I laid my arms on my desk and lowered my head on my arms, closed my eyes as the song repeated. I wondered if I put it loud enough, if it would drown out the storm at home.

Chapter 8- Kinsley

“Who crapped in your cereal this morning?” I lay on the desk, my cheek pressed against the cold surface, my hood covering my face as my arms were splayed over the side of it. This seemed to be my go-to position when I was frustrated. “Kinsleyyyy,” Isabella sang. She poked her finger into my hood and tapped my cheek gently. I considered whether I should lick it or not, but she’d probably beat me. “What are you doing?” She asked, curious and slightly annoyed I hadn’t answered her.

It was stupid. I knew it was stupid, but I was frustrated anyway. “I’m meditating,” I mumbled. She snorted. Isabella seemed to realize I was in a mood and left me alone for a little bit. She mumbled something about crazy pretty Italian boys under her breath as she cussed me out in Spanish. I just knew without needing to look that those around us inched a little farther away from her, worried they were the cause of her angry Spanish rants. I didn’t want to tell her why I felt the need to sulk because she’d laugh at me. There wasn’t a letter in my locker this morning. Obviously, there wouldn’t be one.

Logically, I told myself, I waited for her to leave school before I wrote my reply. She wasn’t going to walk up the stairs to the second floor when she got to school in the morning, she would have gone to her swim team first. Even if she did go up the stairs to check for a reply, what was she supposed to do, reply while she was swimming in the freaking water? I was being ridiculous. Even though I knew all of this, I still pouted. Was I the only one happy about all of this? She sat there in front of the room with some girl who looked like an Olsen twin. They laughed over something on her phone, and all I could do was listen to her laugh. Shouldn’t she look shy? Curious?

She walked into the homeroom and didn’t even try to look around the room. Shouldn’t she be curious enough to look around the classrooms each class and try to see if someone tried to secretly stare at her? I know I would be if I got a letter from a secret admirer in my locker. The bell rang for the first period, and since the homeroom was always the same as the first period, there was no point for any of us to move. I lifted myself off of my desk with a dramatic groan as I attempted to pay attention.

I wasn’t surprised to get a note handed to me. I was, however, thankful that it was simply folded like a square. The way she looked at me with a worried expression made me know she knew I wasn’t in the mood for her stupid triangles. I opened the note and wondered if she would actually be nice since she had a worried expression. A soft chuckle spilled out of my mouth at the audacity of that thought process. This was Isabella, when was she ever nice or subtle? *‘Are you on your period? Do you use tampons or pads? I got you, girl,’*

I looked at her, and of course, she sat there with a tampon in one hand and a pad in the other, as if it was perfectly normal to sit in the middle of an English class and try to hand a boy sanitary products. Mr. Duckett stopped talking mid-sentence, and I turned to look at him. I felt a blush of

embarrassment spread over my cheeks as his mouth moved without words coming out. His eyes were wide as he stared in horror at the products in her hand, and I couldn't exactly blame him. "Isabella! Put it away!" I whispered to her as she rolled her eyes at me.

Isabella did what I told her without a fuss. When Mr. Duckett started to talk again, a more scared and hesitant tone as he quietly stood there and questioned if I was secretly a girl or something. I wasn't surprised in the least when Isabella pointed at the note. I looked down at it with a frown, I knew she wouldn't quit until I explained my mood. *'First, I'm not a girl. Second, I'm stupidly stressing out over the letter, okay? Maybe she didn't like what I said and decided to throw it away. Look! She doesn't care, she's over there painting Ashley Olsen's nails and hasn't looked around curiously or anything. Isn't that weird?'* I replied to her before handing her the note.

I wished we could just text, but Isabella hated to text in class when it wasn't necessary. She said the written word was more romantic as if that mattered for us. It wasn't like we were even together, so why did it need to be romantic? It wasn't long before her reply came, and I read over it with a snort. *'You're smitten,'* she had written. It was in big bold letters, curled and decorated like graffiti to make it stand out more. Even little swirls and dots scattered over it to indicate the word smitten as if I wouldn't have seen it unless she made it massive. Underneath it, she wrote: *'Chill. Don't get your panties in a twist, maybe she's just trying her best to think of a reply. Maybe she's not smart enough to write so deeply and needs help. Maybe Heather is helping her figure out what to write. That did seem pretty deep for her, but who am I to judge?'*

I looked at it, then at her in confusion. I mouthed the name Heather at her like a question, and she pointed at the Olsen twin. I never cared enough to figure out her name. Isabella snorted knowingly and shook her head at me like I was incorrigible. *'I don't think I want to talk to her if she has to have help from one of the Olsen twins to figure out what to say to me.'*

Isabella read the note and shrugged, a simple nod of her head. Since her WordArt of the word smitten took up most of the page there wasn't any more room left for notes. It didn't matter, the class was almost over and she had her next class with me. On the third floor near my locker. I gulped, as I scratched the back of my head. Then again, Peyton's next class was next to this one. I had seen her go in there enough times to remember that at least. Unless she replied to me earlier, there wouldn't be anything there, right? Maybe she was scared to drop the note in the locker. She didn't want names either, so I could understand her being worried about when I'd be there to notice. What if there wouldn't be anything there till after the end of the day?

I started to have a mini panic attack and forced myself to calm down. I tried to understand why this bothered me so much. Friends, we were just going to be friends. She knew I was fine with it and it's what she wanted too. I was honest with her; I wasn't interested in love in this small town. I needed to stop acting like a middle schooler with a crush. I pressed my hand to my forehead with a sigh as the bell went off. Because there was a pull. It was just one letter, but I couldn't get the words she had written out of my mind. The way she had written them, the meanings behind them. I felt connected to her on a level I wasn't entirely sure I was going to feel, and it startled me. I just wanted more.

Honestly, if I was brave enough, I'd walk up to her now and talk to her face to face. I was scared she'd back down when she saw who I was. No, I needed to calm down. Keep going the way I had been, and if there was a letter at some point in my locker, then great. But if there wasn't, then that was fine too. I'd get past it, it wasn't like we were instantly bonded to each other, right?

"Can we stop by your locker? I left my science textbook in your locker," I said as the bell rang. Isabella shrugged as she popped a piece of gum into her mouth and slid her things into her bag. I copied her as I followed her out of the room. Mostly it was the girls who wore giant purses so they didn't have to carry their books all the time, but Isabella and I carried messenger bags filled with mostly our art supplies and a few books. I still carried most of my textbooks in my arms so I didn't mess up my art supplies, but Isabella refused to carry her books. Either she didn't bring them with her or she stuck them in her bag, despite how heavy that made it. She had designed a cool design on my black bag at the beginning of the year and it's been the same bag I've been using since.

Isabella started to tell me about a fight that happened between two customers at her job last night as we walked up the stairs. Honestly, I only half-listened, one of my headphones in my ear as I listened to my current favorite band. As we headed towards her locker, I only nodded. It was fairly close to Peyton's locker and I couldn't help but feel nervous, but I watched her duck into her next class on the first floor so I knew she wasn't up here. There was no point to look, no point to care.

Isabella pulled out her phone to show me the spot she wanted to go tag next and I glanced at it as I opened her locker and pulled out my book. I couldn't help but peer at Peyton's locker, the bright 213 in bold numbers, but I figured it wasn't touched. She was already in class, so why did it matter? I shut Isabella's locker as she moved on to another picture. She had started to talk about which one would be easier to do and which one was watched by the police when I was shoved into a locker. I gasped as his hand cupped the side of my head through my hood, and he turned my face at just the right angle that when he slammed my face into it, the lock cracked into my cheekbone.

The pain shot through my body as I was thrown towards the lockers on the other side of the hall, straight into a group of football players. "Damn, Roan, what'd he do to you?" A boy with a thick country accent asked as I apologized for falling on him. I mean, it wasn't his fault he became my landing site.

I looked up at him as Roan growled, annoyed to be interrupted while he tormented me. Another boy on the football team stepped in between Roan and me, his head down as he shuffled his feet, and I realized it was the quarterback. The number one was big and bold on the back of his jersey, his hood over his head. I was confused, while all of the others started to joke around with Roan and the few basketball players that were with him, this guy was planted firmly in front of me. He waited in a patient position as he quietly hid me from view. Why? Why was he different? "He's a faggot, why should it matter what he did?" Roan spat as the bell rang.

I wanted to correct him, but it didn't matter. It didn't matter what he thought, what any of these assholes thought. Roan muttered something about how I needed to stay out of his way and I sighed, absentmindedly poked the aching knot under my eye as Isabella screamed at Roan in Spanish. One of the football players held her back as they laughed and called her a spitfire.

Roan turned to face me, his expression morphed with anger as the quarterback took a step back and to the side. He covered me completely from Roan's view. I stared up at his back in wonder, confused, unsure of what he was playing at. Maybe he didn't realize I was here. Yeah, that was it, probably. He searched inside his bag for something, a black plain backpack as he whistled a soft tune I didn't recognize under his breath. Finally, Roan seemed to give up when the teachers started to shout at us all to go to class. The basketball players left and Isabella promptly flipped them off even though in their strange way they helped me.

One of them asked her for her phone number and she kicked him in the balls as the others oohed and laughed at him. "Come on, bro, what are you doing?" One of the guys asked. The quarterback jolted in surprise. He pulled something out of his bag and without turning around he handed it back to me. I studied it and he shook it impatiently, and when I took it, he walked away.

"What's that?" Isabella asked as I unwrapped it and stared at it.

I lifted my head to thank him, but all of them were gone. All that was left was us and a few stragglers. I looked down at it again and shook the pack back and forth. I pressed the icy coldness to my cheek with a content sigh. "It's an ice pack. He's an athlete, they probably all have them,"

She stared at me under my hood and I lowered it as she stared at my cheek. "I'm going to kick his ass one of these days," she threatened as we walked together up to the third floor. We should have gone to the nurse and got a pass, but Mrs. Masters would understand once she saw my cheek. "Locker?" She asked with a tilt of her head toward it.

Isabella knew I didn't need to go to my locker. I already had my science book, but then I remembered the note and a blush spread over my cheeks as I nodded. I was glad for my hood, the overly large hoodie to hide my body, and my blush. It saved me the trouble of explaining to her why my cheeks suddenly decided to turn a deep red. I wasn't even sure why I started to blush. Friends, Peyton had said. We were just friends. These were just letters, nothing big.

Despite that, when I opened my locker and saw an envelope, I felt a grin spread over my cheeks. It sent a jolt of pain through me as my cheekbone throbbed. She must have dropped it off before homeroom started, or maybe she had a friend drop it off. Was that weird? Was it weird if she told people about her secret letters? I wasn't sure if I was happy with that, I wanted these to just be between us. Especially since I didn't show the contents to Isabella anymore.

Isabella and I didn't sit near each other in science class, Mrs. Masters was strict. We had to all sit in alphabetical order by our last name, and I was thankful I got to sit in the back of the room. I didn't like to sit back there because I was one of the troubled kids, I got a fairly steady B in her

class, but I liked to be in the back if I was going to be all alone. Mrs. Masters started to grumble when we walked in late until she saw my eye.

She was big about the health of the students. Her daughter had a disease that she didn't talk about, but it was something that we all picked up from rushed conversations here and there during the school year. She was absent a lot and sometimes needed to rush out of the classroom because of it. After a few minutes of her fingers jabbing against my cheek to make sure my cheekbone wasn't broken, she allowed me to sit down. Isabella had slid in without notice when I was being babied, and as I walked past her to get to my seat, she gave me a thumbs-up and a wink.

Almost immediately, I sat down and piled my books at the top of my desk. I pretended to be a good student as I turned it to the right page. I pulled out the envelope and slipped my headphones back in my ears when she turned her back and started to write on the board. I always concentrated better with music. The taps of pencils, the scratch of the lead on paper, the bounce of feet, and the scuffle of chairs were distracting. While we normally got in trouble for headphones, mine were never really noticed, black headphones hidden under a black hoodie. I turned it up just loud enough to erase the annoying noises but not enough to block her voice out in case she called me. I pulled out the note, and my heart raced as I read it.

Sparrow.

I have to admit my reasoning is really simple and lazy in comparison to yours, and I feel slightly discouraged to tell you. However, if you must know, I chose green simply because my eyes are green, and I couldn't think of anything else on the spot. Though talking about your code name, I have to admit something. Do you know how they say when you like someone you start to like what they like? I'm not saying I have immense feelings or anything for you. But, I listened to the song you mentioned before and now I can't stop listening to it. Maybe it means nothing, maybe it means something. But when I close my eyes and listen to it, I think of you. Silly, right? Thinking of a person I've never met.

When I hear this song, I think of you, and everything looks a little bit brighter. Anyway, what you said about your life, I can't relate to that very much. Your parents want you to date so they're forcing you to ask someone out? It's funny, I wonder what it would feel like to have parents that cared enough to notice I'm not dating anyone. Anyway, I understand what you mean. I would be horrified to be stuck here forever.

Oh, you don't have to worry about switching lockers. I know my locker is on the second floor, but most of my classes are on the third floor this year, with only a few on the other floors. Plus, I don't mind running up the stairs to deliver the letter. If it's something worth it, I don't mind the extra effort. Anyway, talk to you later, Sparrow.

P.S. Cause what's a letter without a PS? How are you planning on telling your parents about this? They're wanting you to be in a relationship, right? This isn't really a relationship.

I stared at the letter, my heart beating faster and faster, as I read her words. It was so different from what I'd expected from Peyton. I frowned, feeling like something was off. Were her eyes green? I couldn't remember, but they were, right? She wouldn't have said that if they weren't. I took the letter she had written and put it back into the envelope, slipping it into my portfolio with the other one. I thought about her question and how best to answer it. I wanted to be honest with her, but at the same time, I didn't want to push her away.

This had all been so new, and despite how new it had been, I had been scared of it ending so soon. She had said this wasn't a relationship, and I knew it wasn't, but at the same time, I had to wonder if this really was what one felt like. Besides the fact that she didn't know who I was and I can't exactly go talk to her. I pulled out a new piece of paper and a new envelope from the box I still had in my bag, and took a second to study Mrs. Masters. I turned the page in my textbook to a new page she had written on the board, then leaned down and started my reply to Peyton.

Dear Green,

I'm sorry that your parents don't care enough about you to notice your lifestyle, but at the same time, I'm going to have to say I'm kind of jealous. I wish my parents paid less attention to me, or tried to pay the right attention to me, honestly. They barely talked to me, but they always seemed to know everything about me from what they heard from their friends. They only seem to care about what I'm not, instead of what I am, if that makes sense. But I'll never be the person they want me to be, as much as I wish I could be, so in order to keep as much peace as I can, I'm trying my best. As for your question, that's a hard one. I don't know what I'm going to do. You're right, this isn't really a relationship, and they are expecting one.

I don't know what I'll tell them, but whatever it'll be will be a lie, obviously. Whether I make something up like the person I asked out has a lot of practice and I can't bring them by until after the season is over, I don't know really. I guess by the time they start giving me crap about it I can say I got dumped. Sure, it'll lead to them wanting me to try again, but...for now, I'm not too concerned. They only really talk to me once a week anyway, and I'm sure I can escape their scrutiny with some sort of lie for at least a few weeks, if not a month.

Ps. I don't want you to have to worry about it, because then you'll probably feel bad in a way, but none of it is your fault my parents are crazy. I like things like this, I like this just the way it is, and I don't want to stop talking to you. I hope you feel the same. I really like being your friend, Green, and who knows, maybe something more, one day. But for now, I'm very much content with the way things are.

I smiled down at the letter. I folded it and slipped it into the envelope, then into my pocket. With a raised hand, I asked to go to the bathroom, trying to hide my excitement. This was so new, but it felt so good at the same time. It was nice to have another friend and a secret hope that one day maybe something more. I went down to the second floor, looked around to make sure the coast was clear, and slipped the letter into the locker. I gave it a soft tap of my knuckles against the metal, grinned, and walked back to class.

Chapter 9- Green

My mom had manic depression. I wasn't sure if it was my father's fault, or if he just made it worse. She was fine sometimes, and other times she faded away. Her new job loved her so they understood as long as she went to a therapist and proved she took her medicine. I was the reason she lost her last job, though strangely no one really blamed me for it. Or, if they did, they didn't mention it. They didn't really talk about it, despite what happened for her to lose her job.

I knew by the way Dad banged on the bedroom door and yelled for her to unlock the door and come make dinner that she was in a bad state. My little brother barely stayed at home anymore. He went to his best friend's house most of the time, so it was only me. I could have done it too, but I didn't have best friends. I didn't have a friend's house to go to, or someone to talk to, I just... existed.

I went to school early every morning, all of us piled into one vehicle as we hurried to get to practice before Coach got angry. I was the captain, I had to be there early anyway, to set the example for the others. After practice, I would float through the haze of fake smiles and heys, an easy fake grin plastered to my face to hide the fact that on the inside all I did was scream. Then there was work, long hours in the garage while I worked on cars. I enjoyed it. The feel of the grease and the smell of the oil, the way the engine purred when I put it together just right. It was messy, but I loved it. If I didn't go pro, I considered going to college to be a mechanic so I could own my own garage one day.

When my shift was over, I went home. Always home, to the house that wasn't entirely a home. To the storm that raged around and around inside pretty walls covered with a layer of white paint and soft flower arrangements to hide the fear that was trapped inside. I hated going home, but I had nowhere else to go. I couldn't make close friends, they would want to come over. I couldn't invite anyone over here.

After my shower, I locked my bedroom door. Always lock the doors in this house. I was hungry, but if mom was having a bad day, then it looked like another day of no food. Father didn't let the guys in the house cook, he said it was a woman's job. From the way he yelled, I knew he wasn't going to leave anytime soon for me to go downstairs and make something. It wasn't the first night I went without dinner, and it wasn't going to be the last, either.

I pulled the letters out of my textbook and read them over and over again. I wondered what the next one would say. I grinned as I lay down on my bed and closed my eyes. Even as the screams echoed through the house, the sound of something glass being broken, and the tremor of hunger that gripped my stomach, I smiled. I scooted under the blankets as I stuck the letters back in the textbook and put them in my bag. With my headphones in my ears and the song Sparrow had talked about full blast through the speakers, I was glad to see that it was loud enough to block everything out. I chuckled quietly under my breath as I pressed my hands to my eyes and sighed. I actually had something to look forward to now.

Chapter 10- Kinsley

When the first-period bell rang, I was already packed up and ready to run out the door. It had been a little while now since I had started mystery letters with Peyton, and I had started to feel torn by everything. We had gone a good two weeks of writing back and forth before Christmas break came. Those few weeks without being able to talk had been torture, but the first thing we did when we came back was flood each other with letters from the time we'd missed talking to each other, and it made up for it once it was all said and done. Fortunately, my parents hadn't had another dinner with me since the last one, since both of them had been really busy with work for the holidays. I didn't have to try and give some crappy explanation as to what I had started with Peyton or how my dating life had been. Honestly, I wished they'd stay away forever but I knew it was a matter of time before they came back to bug me.

They'd remember, of course they would, because I was the eldest. While they were disappointed in who I was, they weren't going to forget about something that would make them look better. I wouldn't be surprised if they wanted me to get with a sporty girl in hopes she'd motivate me to go back on the basketball team. They were obsessed with the idea of it since it was the only sport I had ever been any good at. It didn't matter though, because as long as Roan was there, I doubted I'd ever be able to. I hadn't been as focused as much as I should have been on what my parents wanted, or on much of anything lately. I'd only really been focused on the letters.

I still found it strange how Peyton acted in school. She never looked around, never cared about the others around her. No matter what we had talked about in the letters, she never looked unconcerned or curious. She just came and went the same as she would have been before. I started to feel like the letters were probably the most important thing to me, and it scared me. They could just stop or fade away and I didn't want them to. Maybe this was all a joke to her. Maybe it had started off as something simple and unconcerned for me, but the more we talked to each other, the harder it was to stop. I didn't want it to stop.

As strange as Peyton had acted during school hours, the letters still came as fast as ever. It wasn't really on a regular schedule, and at first, it was simple questions about things. Like our favorite colors and how our day had been so far, the way two strangers tend to talk until they get comfortable with each other. However as a week passed, and then another, I started to want more. I started to linger at Peyton's desk when I'd stand to go to the bathroom. I'd stare at the top of her head as I passed her, her eyes lowered over her phone or her textbook as she bluntly ignored me. I wanted to write her a note and slide it onto her desk when she wasn't looking, saying something mysterious, or even something from the letters to see how she'd react.

I had written in the letters that I knew who she was, but she didn't know who I was. The more I wanted to talk to her face-to-face, the harder it was to stop myself from the need to approach her. She didn't want that now, not yet, she had said. As hard as it was, I was patient. This would

have been easier if she showed even some remote amount of interest in it outside of the letters, but she never seemed to care about anything except herself and the Olsen twin who hung around her constantly. Hilda, or whatever the heck her name was.

It was Friday now, and I already dreaded it. I was pretty sure my parents would come home this weekend, but I hoped they wouldn't. I wished they'd just stay away. I knew sooner or later they'd show up again now that it was January, and the holidays were over. As silly as it was that my mother couldn't even remember my clothing size, they'd remember that they wanted me to ask out a girl no matter how long it had been. A little while ago, Peyton had asked me in the letters what I'd tell them, and despite the few weeks I had to think about it, I still didn't know what to say. Maybe I could tell them it was still new and she was shy. Or maybe she had another person who was interested in her and approached her at the last second.

From what Isabella had told me, this was the first time she had seen Peyton single for so long and I had to wonder if that was because of me. Maybe the letters had affected her in some way. I had to hold on to the hope that even though we weren't really together, maybe I had made some impact. I tried to remember what I had written in my last letter to Peyton, but honestly, they had started to blur together now. What she had written to me I remembered clearly, the words she had written were memorized in my mind. Even when I was at home I'd take them out and reread them constantly. I felt enamored with a stranger I barely knew face to face, but I had started to know soul to soul. We had begun to talk about songs again, our favorite bands, and our favorite songs. So far, she hadn't really said much about hers, but she had started to ask about mine. She had told me she wanted something loud and deep to listen to when she needed to be surrounded by something else.

I wondered what that meant, to be honest, and what her life must have been like at home. She had said once her parents barely cared about her existence and I wondered if she realized just how similar we were even if our parents had a different way of showing how little they cared about us. If someone had told me even a month ago I'd see similarities between myself and a jock I would have laughed in their face. The more she wrote to me, the deeper we got, the more I compared our lives. Not the same, but similar, in a way. "Locker time?" Isabella asked me as she pulled me out of my thoughts.

I realized I had followed her to her locker and then back up to the third floor for our second-period class without noticing. Both of our textbooks were balanced in my hands as if she had handed me hers to see if I'd notice. I grinned at her as I looked down at the textbook in my hands. "Of course, always locker time," I used to never give a shit about my locker but now in between every class I checked it, and even during class sometimes if I could get away.

My teachers probably thought I had bladder problems, and even Mrs. Masters asked me once if I needed to go to the nurse to get checked out, but I didn't care. I couldn't stop the excitement I felt when I saw that little letter in there waiting. As much as human Peyton bugged me because she didn't really seem to care much, the letter version of Peyton seemed to be just as invested in our letters as I was. She'd complained about how long the weekend was on Monday and admitted to how much she missed the letters despite it only having been two days of a break. "I

noticed your textbook was with mine. You know, in my hands. I wonder how that happened?" I said sarcastically as I opened my locker.

She hummed under her breath as she looked around the crowded hallway. "I don't know, I think it was lonely. It wanted to be with its best friend. It was sad, it had been lonely." She said with a fake sigh. I grinned as I gently picked up the letter from where it sat and slipped it into my textbook. The last letter I gave her was a list of songs, bands I liked, and songs I was currently obsessed with. Like a current band called SYML that had a softer and calmer sound to it.

I added that one to the list too but made sure to tell her it was calmer since she had specifically asked for something loud enough to drown out the sounds around her. She had also asked for my current favorite song since it changed so often, and since it changed to Better by SYML, I had no choice but to add it to the list.

I shook my head at her as the bell rang, my large hood hiding my grin as I shut the locker. "Of course! You are so kind to think about your textbook's feelings like that," I said with a soft laugh.

Isabella stopped me before we went into the classroom, a soft smile on her face as she lifted her hand into my hood and pressed her hand against my cheek. A chorus of oohs and awes flooded the hallway from those who slid past us into the classroom, but we ignored them. "I like how happy you've been lately, Kins. I have to admit I was really worried about this plan. It really pissed me off that your parents were forcing you into a relationship you weren't ready for, but you're happy, Kins. I'm glad you're happy,"

I was also worried. I was worried I had fallen too fast too hard for someone who didn't know who I was. The moment Peyton and I decided it was time to see each other face to face was the moment I knew all of this was going to crash to the ground, and I was scared of the inevitable. For now, Isabella was right; I was happy. "I know, but if that happens, I'll be here for you Kins. I'm always here for you," she said as if she could read my mind. I grinned down at her until the teacher started to talk, and we were forced to split apart and head to our different seats.

As always in this class, hers was in the front while mine was in the back, and I handed her the textbook that was hers as I headed to the back. I slipped into my seat and slid my book onto the desk. The windows were cracked open, and I could smell the scent of rain in the air, a smell I had always loved, and couldn't help but smile over it despite how dreary the darkened clouds were in the sky. As Mrs. Masters started the lesson, I opened my textbook. I slid the letter out of the envelope quietly and set it down on the desk. For two weeks now, this had been the tradition, and honestly, I was surprised I still made fairly decent grades. I needed to try harder; I knew my parents would find out if I made anything less than a C on any subject. However, when I had a letter in my hand, it was hard for me to concentrate on anything else.

Hey Sparrow,

The list is awesome, I bought all of the albums, even the one you said was calmer than the others. It's a really good band, to be honest, it's probably more of what I listen to, or at least before I met you. Now I've kind of gotten attached to the Screamo songs, mainly because of

how loud they are and how they block everything out. I like the rhythm of them and the lyrics too. But SYML is a really good band as well, and the song you said is your favorite? I love it. I've probably listened to it on repeat this whole class period. I'm going to have to work a few extra hours to make up for the amount of money I spent on all of those albums but it's worth it, don't worry.

Maybe this would have been easier if I had the confidence to meet up with you in person, to go over to your house and get the songs from your computer like you suggested, but I know neither of us is ready for that yet. Two weeks seems like such a long time but it's really not, at least, not for me. Maybe that makes me a coward, but I can't help it. I've never told anyone the things I've told you, not really, and while I haven't really told you much, it's still more than anyone else. I really enjoy talking to you Sparrow, and I know this can't last forever but I hope to hold onto it for a little while longer, even if that does make me a coward.

P.s. Because a letter must always have a P.S. I know you keep making fun of me for it, but I can't help it. Letters without a P.S. are boring. I'm curious to know what you are, like... label-wise. You have no care for sports and you're different from all of the people around me. Honestly, judging from your favorite song I'd assume you're a quieter kid, more to yourself. You can learn a lot about someone by their favorite song, even someone like you who changes their favorite song constantly. My favorite song is Sara, by We Three. What does that tell you about me?

I shook my head with a smile as I stared at the letter. A quieter kid, huh? That was a nice way to say she thought I was an emo kid. I had to admit that while black was probably my favorite color, I wasn't really sure what else besides that made someone emo. Maybe I was, I don't know, it didn't really matter to me. I never was one to fit into a single stereotype, I was just me. As I thought of the letter, I pulled out my phone and typed in the song she wrote in the letter. I wanted to hear it before I replied back to her. I had plenty of time since class had started not too long ago. She said she had spent a lot of money to buy all of that, and I kind of felt bad. I didn't even know she had a job, and I hoped she didn't need to pay for rent or something like that.

It would probably be creepy for me to offer to pay for it for her. We barely knew each other after all. She'd probably think it was weird if I slipped a few hundred dollars into an envelope and slipped it into her locker. The least I could do was listen to her song since she had listened to all of mine. I purchased the song and listened as I stuck the letter back into the envelope. I'd never heard this song before, but the band was slightly familiar. It didn't take long for me to realize this was a type of song I needed to pay immense attention to.

It was fast, and I never was one for faster songs, but these lyrics... My hands shook as I put the envelope with the others in the portfolio, pulled out a new sheet of paper, and stared down at it. I tapped my pencil on top of my desk as I listened. I was surprised when I felt tears start to gather in my eyes. This was a song about someone who had tried to kill themselves. For it to be her favorite song meant she resonated with it. It meant she had tried as well, at some point, or she felt like she was going to someday. I felt my head jerk up so fast that I stared at the back of

Isabella's head in the front row. I wondered distantly if she could somehow feel my sadness, the tears brimmed in my eyes as I took deep breaths.

I was quiet, and if anyone noticed my sudden tears, they didn't say anything. Then again, I was blessed to be in the back. No one behind me could see my shoulders shake, and those in the back row with me looked to be mostly asleep, so that was a plus. To cry for a song, I never thought I would. All I could see in my mind was a pair of sad, scared green eyes, wrists cut open as the song played. I looked down at the paper and noticed a few drops of tears had ruined it already, and I closed my eyes as I listened. I put it on repeat and sent Isabella a quick text to tell her I was going to skip my third-period class as I crumpled the ruined paper and pulled out a new one. I tried my best to steady my hands as I replied to Peyton.

Green,

I don't know what to say. I'm not going to lie, you shook me. I didn't expect that, and you're right, you really can learn a lot about someone by their favorite song. I have questions, but I understand if you don't want to tell me, or if you want to tell me when you get to know me more. You're right, two weeks is a long time, but it's not long enough and I don't want to pressure you. If you want me to tell you what that song tells me about you, then I think the best way I could, is if I showed you. I don't know your classes, I barely keep up with remembering mine, but I have history with Mrs. Yank on the second floor for the fourth period.

I'm not telling you this to make you feel uncomfortable or to try and figure out anything but, underneath the chair in the last row, there will be an envelope taped to the bottom of the chair. I think that'll show you how the song makes me feel about you. Also, funny thing, it'll answer your question about what kind of person I am.

P.S. Because what's a letter without a P.S.? What happens if we can't think of a P.S.? Does it not count as a letter? Also, don't think you scared me away just because of your song. It just makes me want to know more, so much more.

I went through the familiar motions. Folded the letter, pulled out a new envelope, and placed the letter inside it. It was tricky, my idea. Anyone could find it, and she might think it was stupid but it didn't matter. I'd skipped the third period and ate lunch in the art room. Then when the fourth period started, I would put the envelope under the seat. I wrote a quick note to beg Isabella to get lunch and take it to the art room, raised my hand, and asked the teacher to go to the bathroom. Mrs. Masters gave me that look again like she was five minutes away from writing down the name of her daughter's doctor to have me checked out for bladder problems, but she simply nodded and waved her hand at me to go ahead.

As I walked past Isabella's desk I slid her the note, my car keys, and my wallet, then went down the stairs to locker 213 and slid the envelope inside it before I could change my mind and rewrite everything. After all, what was the point of doing this, if I wasn't going to be entirely myself? I didn't want to hide any part of me from her. I was going to show her every part of my

soul, and when she was ready, I'd show her who I was as well. Hopefully, by then it wouldn't matter, but for now, I wasn't going to back down.