

## Early August

I woke up behind the wheel after the collision. It didn't seem like I got hit too hard, but the whiplash made me black out for a few minutes. I examined the damage on the inside, then looked to see if I had any bleeding in the rear view mirror. It was then that things took a turn for the surreal.

That wasn't my face looking back at me. No real damage, mind you, nothing that would scar. But the features had all changed. I knew that long hair. I knew the piercing brown eyes. The skin tone and the dimples were unmistakable. None of them were mine. The face wasn't mine.

I looked at the steering wheel. The hands weren't mine.

I did a quick inventory of where I was. The car wasn't mine.

I looked down at the floor -- those shoes weren't mine.

I checked my whole body. Some of those things definitely weren't mine.

"Okay, you're awake. Can you hear me?"

I looked around. There in the passenger seat was a familiar face, but there was a difference -- now she was translucent. Everything was what I saw in me, but it seemed almost like an illusion. There was so much going on that somehow this didn't even seem abnormal.

"What's going on? Why are you over there and I'm here?"

"Oh, you can see me too? Great. Look, I'm so sorry this has happened. It's entirely my fault."

"Slow down, Stef, slow down. What happened to me, and why do I look like you?"

Stef seemed to avoid eye contact as she spoke, perhaps out of guilt. "All right... we have a few minutes before people arrive. It's really complicated. So... you know you were in a crash, right?"

"Yeah... but I should be in a different car."

"Okay... um... I'm so sorry. This is all my fault. I'm sorry I did this to you. I... I lost control, and... and now this and..."

"Stefani, slow down. Are we dead?"

"Well... that's the tricky part," she admitted, looking at my car in front of us and my body limp against the deflated air bag. "You are. Or, rather, the you you're used to is. But since it's my fault, I made a wish as I saw it. I asked the heavens to take me instead of you, because it's all my fault."

I sighed and leaned back in the driver's seat. "And this is how they answered it."

"Pretty much. So now I'm no longer living and you are, but your body was too beat up, so you have to live through me. Basically, you're me now."

It took a minute or two of just trying to accept it before I replied. "So you're off to Heaven or Hell?"

"I don't wanna go. I put you in this mess, and I'm going to help you through it. Heaven... well, I don't belong right now. And Hell doesn't want me. I didn't murder you, just... an accident. So I'm stuck here with you."

I shook my head. "Do you know how out of place this is? I know very little about you. I don't know your family, I don't know your classes..."

"Relax -- you have access to my mind. You'll figure it out. But... I'm going to stick around, and if you have any questions, I'll help you out. I don't want to leave you hanging like this. I've already made enough of a mess... people are coming, I gotta go."

"Wait! Jump in control of you for a while. Let me observe and learn."

Stefani was taken aback. "Can I do that? Let me try..." She squinted to concentrate and reached into my/her chest. I quickly felt her invade and travel up the spine to the brain. I could sense myself being thrown to the back of the mind, as though in the back seat of the control panel. I watched as Stefani burst into tears while police arrived. I didn't know how long she'd wanted to cry, but I would let her, for now.

### **The night before school begins**

Stefani slumped down on her bed, refusing to talk to her family for the time being. She rested there, as if hoping to make the whole situation go away. I felt myself return to control as Stefani's soul/ghost left and stood beside the bed. I quickly looked up.

"Are you ready?" she asked me.

"I don't know... I guess you can't stay very long."

"I heard an angel tell me no more than a few hours a day, or it wouldn't be fair to you. So I can do what I can, but you're going to have to be me more than I am from now on. But I'm not going to leave you alone. We're in this together."

I rolled over on to my side. "Well... do I have to talk out loud to talk to you?"

Stefani thought about it. "I don't think you have to unless it's important. But it's early, so it's best we do it this way for now."

"Won't your parents think it's weird I'm talking to myself?"

"I'll make sure they don't. If we're in public, I'll be in the back seat. I can still help you there, but it's more useful like this. Look... get some rest. We've had a long day."

"C-can I even show my face at school? We're going to be the most hated person at school."

"We'll find out tomorrow, I guess. Listen... things are bad, I know. We're both going to go through a lot. But we can do this. I trust you with me, don't I?"

"...yeah..."

"So let's get through this. Just get ready for bed."

I rolled out of bed and looked for the toothbrush and soap I'd need to get ready. I quickly paused when the exact method hit me. "Uh... is it okay if I take a shower?"

Stefani laughed. "I have nothing to hide from you anymore, Petey. Heck, I was going to show you how to use tampons next. I get it. We're the same person now... let's get used to being that way."

### **First Day, Senior Year**

Between the introductions, the assembly, the moments of silence, and the wide range of responses I received, the first day felt like a blur. Fortunately, my guidance counselor agreed to leave an empty space in my schedule for the first week or two. (It's English Lit, I'll manage.) But in that space was a time everyone felt I... well, we... needed. The grief counselor they brought in blocked it off for me alone.

Even so, having it right after lunch meant I could hide while I eat and work through a very difficult situation. After all, what counselor would believe I had voices in my head?

"How do we phrase this? If he thinks you can hear me -- never mind what we're in now -- we're going to a mental ward."

"I think we can fake that," I heard her say in my head -- she felt no reason to manifest in front of the whole school.

"It's not a matter of fake... I mean, honestly, we're going through two different things right now. You're... you're the survivor. I'm not. I have no idea what it was like for you."

"So I should talk? I guess I can do that. I do get a few hours a day in control."

"Yeah, you should." I paused and realized something. "You're... awfully cavalier about this."

"Well, what do you want from me? To be a gibbering wreck? To make our body ruin the mascara and cry a river? Look, things happened and there's no going back and... and it doesn't matter if I could because... right now..."

I could sense her front was crumbling a little. If I could reach into my head I'd console her. "Listen... you've put up a brave front, I get it. Did you do that for me?"

"I just... you DIED. Who CARES what happened to me?"

"Some people understand it's been hard on you, too."

"Yeah, the ones trying to be nice to me while I hear about blood on my hands."

"...I'm sorry. My friends are still in shock. It'll sink in you didn't mean to. I'm sure of it. But for now... maybe you should talk to the counselor. I know I'm in no position to help you. But at least your feelings... you know, make sense."

"What about you?"

"You're the only one who knows I exist, right? I was never much of a social butterfly before, but... well, it's not like I can change matters. This is just the way it is. In time, the Stefani people know will become some hybrid of us, and I'll just be a memory."

"Whoa, whoa -- don't be so dismissive!" I could sense she was jumping up from her "back seat of the brain" to get my attention in my head. "You are me. We are me. Anything we do together... you live through. It's the least I can do."

I finished eating and checked the clock -- the bell for the next period would ring in five minutes. That was just enough time to get to the counselor's office. "Okay... good luck. Just know that... well, I forgive you."

I ceded control to Stefani and watched as she walked, tears in her eyes and trepidation on her mind, to talk about that fateful day.

## **After School**

"Stef? It's almost dinner."

"Can I eat later, Mom? I'm not hungry." Truth be told we were too emotional after today to be hungry. I had spent the time in charge telling classmates that it was still too soon to be myself -- a half-truth if ever there was one -- while she took herself back over and poured out all sorts of complex emotions to the counselor. How can you explain you see the person you killed and not make it sound like a hallucination of grief?

I just sat in the backyard, staring from the top of a hill at the sun. It was 7:30, my homework was done, and the September night was slowly beginning. I knew I didn't want dinner until all of them went to bed. I also knew that, while I could look at her -- well, our -- memories, it wasn't the same as knowing them.

Knowing a new family. Leaving my old one. It was all settling in. And so were the tears, just as they had for her before.

"Hey... Petey... what's wrong?" Stefani manifested next to me as she had before. "You're doing fine. C'mon, you sure you don't want dinner?"

I looked over my shoulder, but spoke quietly in case anyone heard my apparently one-sided conversation. "It's not my dinner. It's not my house. It's not my family. It's not my life."

Stefani sighed. "I mean, that USED to be my family and my life. Heck, I used to have my body. But... here we are. It's what we gotta do."

I paused, not sure if that was a shutdown comment or just an acceptance of reality. But I had to ask about earlier today. "Stefani... how are you so calm now? I know you hurt too. I saw it."

"...well, I've had time to adjust to... this. I told you, I went before Heaven and Hell and found out I didn't belong. Time means nothing to them."

"But why THIS?"

"For you, Petey. So you could live. I wanted you to have the second chance I was getting. You are now."

My mind, or what could be called MY mind, began to race. "For me? You gave this all up for me? You care about me?"

Stefani shrugged. "Dying does change how you feel about life." She looked out at the setting sun in the distance, causing me to turn that way as well. "You know, maybe you are right about being out here. Just... just look."

I wasn't sure what she meant for a few seconds, but the many hues of the sunset cinched it in for me. Under normal circumstances, I would never see this sunset. I would never have a meal with people who cared about me. I'd never see friends at school again, and I'd never realize how much I meant to them.

"Stef? You know how little I felt before this... when I was me?"

"...not sure I do. I mean, no offense, but I didn't think much about you as a person one way or another."

"That's just it... I... I thought of myself as a bit player in the world. I saw you and your friends as the stars and all of this as some... some play that I barely existed in. But now it's like... I wish I had the chance to have done more, to have interacted more."

"Well... I guess that's... what you have. You have more days. You have the days I have." I thought I felt Stefani lean on my shoulder even though she had no presence to be felt. "We'll figure this out. It's what we both need -- each other, time, and..."

I finished the thought as I looked out into nature's most beautiful portrait, a gift to humanity every night that I felt like only the two of us understood the value of. "And sunsets."

## Two weeks into the school year

Saturday had arrived. An early season of getting-to-know-yous, I'm-sorrys, early quizzes, fire drills, lunchtimes, and therapy had been excessive even for me. I had resolved to clear some time and look over my college applications before getting together with everyone for the Homecoming float design.

Stefani's worst fears were allayed a little: most of the school knew it was an accident, and they tried to comfort her and help her -- well, us -- move on from it. The school counselor had been extra helpful to her when they talked, and over the previous week or so I saw her even be cheerful when in control. I don't want to say she's over me; that would be impossible. But all the encouragement to keep living has been a big help.

After some sleeping in, my eyes fluttered open and I took in the smells of breakfast below. Admittedly, I ate a lot less as her than I did as myself -- sheer body size dictated that. But that didn't mean I didn't want to partake. I wanted to show I was mentally getting my head on straight, ready to continue with a life that had been gifted me.

And suddenly, just rolling over on my side became a near-impossible task.

I felt my face covered in a cold sweat. I felt an urge to stay in bed forever. My legs felt limp, if not slightly numb. I figured maybe I had caught the flu, except that one part of me was different. I couldn't even sit up because my abdomen felt like someone was tearing them apart with a chainsaw. I'd never felt anything like this before.

"I tried to warn you." Stefani manifested by the side of the bed. "I was counting the days, telling you we were running out of time, but no, you said you could handle it when it got here. Well, it's here. How are you handling it, hm?"

I glared in her direction. "You should know damn well I'm in no mood to answer that."

"Look, I'm not trying to mock you. I'm trying to tell you -- you're new to this experience. I'm not. I've put up with it dozens of times by now. So if you want to get through this, listen to me. Got it?"

"Yeah, you should know a lecture is the *\*last\** thing I want right now."

Stefani rolled her eyes. "I'm not trying to lecture you. We have to face this. You know when we're 30 or 40 we can't just call out sick for three days out of every month. We can't even do that now. I know you can get through this. I did. C'mon."

I pulled the covers up over my head. "Can't we just, like, sleep for a few more hours?"

"Hey... loo- I said I-" I heard Stefani grunt in frustration. "Could you pull the covers down so you can look at me? I can't exactly grab them."

I stuck one hand out from under the covers instead.

"I know, that's how I felt the first time it happened to me. That's why I'm trying to help."

I peaked out a little. "How long has this been going on?"

"Well, let's see... I think the first few were kinda light, but around the start of eighth grade..."

"Eighth grade?" I bolted upright in surprise, temporarily ignoring that it made me feel like the knife was twisting inside me. "You've put... ugh... you've put up with this for four years?"

"Yeah -- most of us have."

"Most of you don't look in pain!"

"Well, admittedly, it varies from woman to woman, but... hopefully it'll be more manageable with time. Now, c'mon. We gotta clean up."

"Clean... up?"

"Well, you didn't prepare yourself, and now you've left a mess, haven't you?"

Whatever negative mood I was in was replaced with panic. I lifted the sheets and looked -- sure enough, I could see the splotch of red even with the limited light coming through. I ripped the sheets off for a better look at the miniature crime scene between my legs. "Oh my god," I breathed in shock. Somehow, I made the connection and checked my pajamas and underwear, only to find they were ever worse.

"M-mom's gonna kill me."

Stefani tried to put her arm around me as she smiled. "Mom of all people will not kill you. Look, just get everything off the bed, shower up, and let her know what happened. After the last couple weeks, I think she'll know you lost track of days. We still have time for the rest of the day."

I slowly got up, trying to avoid spreading the stains any further, and got out of my pajamas. I grabbed the towel and, after thinking about it, wrapped it around me and between my legs just to be safe. I tried to walk with my legs tightly together, as if that would do any good. All it did was make Stefani laugh.

"That won't help," she said. "You're going to have to wear some shorts to cover up. Don't worry -- when this is over I'll begin the tampon lesson. This is normal. Everything will be fine."

"...I'm glad YOU'RE enjoying this."

"I'm not, really. I'm just remembering thinking the same thing you did. Now, let's get in the shower before we leave a trail."

## That afternoon

After getting a ride to the float-building get-together -- like heck Mom would let us drive after the accident -- I was greeted by Carolyn, Stefani's (and I guess now my) best friend. A big hug led to her usual mile-a-minute talking. "Are you okay? I didn't think you'd be here. What took so long? Oh, right, you can't drive? Well, is anything else going okay?"

"I'm fine, it's just... you got any Midol?"

"Oh, that, yeah... yeah, I do, and if you need anything else lemme know." She rooted around in her handbag and found the bottle, shaking out two for me. "I'm so glad you're here, I was worried you were gonna stay away from all of this. We don't want you going into a shell and just being nobody."

"I'm trying, Care, I'm trying. You don't just, you know, bounce back from this."

"We're here for you, Stef. C'mon, let's get to work. Maybe this'll help, doing things with all of us!" As Carolyn headed back, the thought crossed my mind: *Is she always like this?*

"Yes, yes she is," I heard Stefani's voice in my head. "You live with it."

"She seemed rather obviously perky."

"She means well... even if she's an airhead." Stefani giggled at herself. "Okay, two of these and let's join the others."

After popping them in and taking a quick gulp of water, I walked over to where the float was being put together. My first instinct was to get a hammer and nails, but one of the guys -- David, the school quarterback -- stopped me. "Yeah, I think you're better off making decorations."

Really, if I didn't give him a dirty look I'm sure Stef would've chewed me out. "And what does that mean, Dave?"

"Carolyn drew up the plans. You two would be happier just making the flowers. Leave the hammers and nails to us -- we got this."

"Oh, afraid I'm too delicate?"

"No, we're just afraid of putting you near sharp objects. Since, you know..."

I rolled my eyes. "I'm not suicidal, okay? I'm getting help, but I don't want to join him."

David finally had enough dancing around and waved his hammer in the direction of the bench. "Just... go with the other gals, will you?"



"I can DO this," I growled at him, causing him to back away slowly like I had just threatened to stab him. I grabbed a nail and a hammer and stomped back to the float. I set the nail with my left hand and raised the hammer.

"Wait, wait, wait!" I heard in my head. But I had too much momentum. The hammer struck.

"AHHHH! OW OW OW!" I dropped the hammer and grabbed my hand in pain. A quick check showed no blood, but a lot of redness forming around the tip of my index finger. Carolyn got up quickly and put her arms around me. "Are you all right? Anything broken? I'm sure it'll get better. The Midol will help. C'mon, I'll wash it off. Try bending your finger. Then we'll know if it's broken."

David just stared as I was being walked back, holding back tears of pain. "I warned her," he said to the other guys with a shrug.

### **Coming home**

That evening, as I was dropped off at home, I quickly checked my hand. No breaks, no signs of bleeding, but oh that one finger looked practically purple. I guess as long as I hid it from Mom and Dad I wouldn't have to answer any questions.

I sat down on the porch before going in, trying to shake some feeling back into my bruised appendage. Carolyn had allowed me to cry out the pain, and I spent the time getting water and making flowers -- the very thing I was told I was good at. In a way, I regret not listening; I was still learning who I wasn't and who I was, even two weeks on.

Stefani manifested next to me as I sat there. "Well, I do appreciate you standing up to that pig, but you shouldn't be so insistent."

"It was bad luck. I was seeing red -- maybe it's the hormones of... no, I shouldn't say that."

"Yeah, yeah, I've heard it before. I was trying to stop you because... well, I don't think you realize we're left-handed."

I did a double-take, then thought back to the math test I'd taken earlier in the week. Everything had seemed so automatic it didn't even register! Holding the heavy stuff on this side, my watch on the other wrist... how could I have gone through so oblivious?

I covered my eyes in shame and chuckled, some levity finally coming in a long day. "Why didn't I figure it out? I mean, I've done things that way already. But when it came to this..."

"Yeah, when it came to this, you were trying to make a point. You're in charge, sure, but it's like I said when we started... a lot of things about me you don't even have to think about. You just know them. I figured this was one of them. But I guess being mad does things."

"Were you like this before?"

"Well, I was never really talked down to like that before. The real worry I have is... was I ever like *him* before?"

"Not from what I've seen you do. Besides, that's the past. You're different now."

I shook my head. "Physically, yeah, but... it's still me being you."

"Hey -- some days are weird. Besides, now you know -- being the popular one isn't everything. It means you get attention from the guys in school you'd rather ignore. But that's for another day. Look, let's go in and sleep. It'll help us navigate."

She jumped back into my mind as I unlocked the door and let myself in. The last thing she said to me was "and don't forget to wear a pad to bed tonight. We're not doing that again."

### **One week later**

Stefani told me that when things were tough, a walk in nature was the best way to clear the head. One college application essay too many and I took her advice. I made my way to a meadow, with grass as far as I could see. I walked slowly, looking up at the sky as the clouds floated by. All the human problems seemed to fade away... leaving just the problem unique to me.

"Isn't it great?" Stefani manifested sitting down in the field. "Away from everyone, away from trouble... I should've told you about this earlier."

"I'm not sure I would have appreciated that."

"Do you now, Petey?"

"...yeah. Yes, I do. It's relaxing."

She stood up to run through. "C'mon, let's go!"

I tried following her, but the open-toed sandals I was in made a little difficult to run -- especially since my opponent here didn't have the burden of actual weight or anything else. "Wait up!"

"Kick off the shoes!"

I did as she told me and was more easily able to follow. She twirled and gazed high into the sky like Julie Andrews in the Sound of Music, waiting for me to catch up to her. A smile beamed off of her face as she felt like she was in another world, one without the difficulties, one where she wasn't burdened by guilt. I'd seen her laugh and I'd seen her smile, but this felt like a completely different emotion out of her.

I finally ran to and through her form, tumbling down and spinning to five feet away down the hill. We shared a laugh only we knew about as she waited for me to pull myself up. I lay down in the

field by the side of the hill in the meadow, just staring at the clouds, and within a few minutes she did the same so I could see her.

"Isn't it great? Just running through the world... the wind in your hair... the grass between your toes... we should do this more often."

"I guess we should..."

"Wait -- you're telling me you don't like doing this?" I saw her prop her spiritual self up on her elbow so she could give me a dirty look. "C'mon -- how could you not?"

"Well, it's not that, it's just... I haven't done it in... gee..."

"In what? In how long?"

"...I'm trying to remember. I must have been, like, ten or something. I just... stopped doing it."

"...you're kidding. Why? It's a great feeling."

"Stef... I guess this sounds weird, but it's such a girl thing to do. I mean, not to run through fields or something like that but... to be barefoot at all. I... I guess what I'm trying to say is... well..."

"...what? You were self-conscious of them?"

"...a lot, yeah. Just how I was. And not just the feet -- a lot about my old body. Like, basically all of it."

"Do you think I wasn't?"

"It's not the same. You women have to worry about being reduced to pretty, to being objectified. Men? Men are just... no. All function, no form."

Stefani began reaching for my hair as if to get me to face her. "Okay, first thing: you're one of us now, remember? Second, too many men sell themselves short, and you know why? You're basing beauty on what makes US look good, not what makes YOU look good. But you'll figure it out soon enough, I'm sure. Now, enough self-loathing for one day. We're here to forget, right?"

I sat up and stared into the distance. Somewhere out there was my new home, my new family, and my new responsibilities. If I looked hard enough, I might be able to see them. But we were in a different part of the county -- there was no way to see my old home, family, and life. Maybe she had a point. I wasn't doing well with one, and I couldn't go back to the other. But for now, neither one existed.

"Yeah... let's see where we can go." I stood up and waited for her to do the same. Together we walked along the grass in the middle of nowhere. And in that moment, I remembered what I had forgotten in the intervening years since the last time I did this. Grass under shoes wasn't special; grass under feet felt *perfect*.

## Early October

It had been two months of my life since I lost it, and five weeks of starting over as someone new. Within those five weeks, I had to re-learn everything I knew about my life. Even something as simple as the question "are you left-handed" suddenly made me pause. It would have been nice if Stefani could just take over during those times like she did with family or with the therapist, but rules were rules: her life was my life.

I had finally gotten the last part of my application off to State U. Dinner on this Saturday night was incredible, and it left me with plenty of time back outside -- where I'd taken to being alone -- to try and sort out the gameplan going forward. I was seriously hoping to tell Stef to let me take over more, maybe for the family events, but before I could ask her, she appeared again next to me -- invisible to all but me, as always.

"So," she said. "You like your new social circle?"

Not the question I was expecting at this time, but sure. "Yeah, they're pretty nice to me. It looks like people get it was an accident and I'm okay."

"Well, get used to a plot twist. You know the Homecoming dance is in three weeks, right?"

A quick check of our internal calendar in my mind confirmed that. "Yeah?"

"This was never one of my favorite times. I imagine you're going to get a few questions in the next few days. And it doesn't matter how you answer them; someone's going to be disappointed."

"Questions? What sort of..." *Oh, THOSE questions.* "Okay... I get ya. So, before we go any further, who are you hoping for?"

Stef scratched her head for a while before a smirk came across her face. "Well, that's the thing: I don't think they'll let me choose."

"They?"

"You don't seriously think this arrangement was MY idea, do you? I told you, Heaven didn't want me because I was supposed to live and Hell said no because I did nothing wrong. This got cooked up. So, yeah, THEY figure that this is the best punishment -- it's your call."

"Well... okay then. I mean I can think of a few I'd like to go to the dance with. Maybe we'll get lucky and they'll ask."

"Oh, like Carolyn, I'm sure."

"How did you... I mean, what's wrong with that?"

"She'd say no in a heartbeat to me. And she'd think it weird I even asked."

"But I'm... aw, man, you're right. I keep wanting to do things with this new lease on life I got and... it's not working out."

"Yeah... I keep telling you, you're me now. I don't know why you can't remember that."

"Stef... please. Does this mean I have to be you and not me, forever? Isn't there something I can do to be me?"

"Your body's six feet under, Pete; it wouldn't do any good."

"No, I mean... can I make decisions around here?"

"Oh, yeah, sure! But your decisions... I mean, you have a different mind, different upbringing, different everything. We can't just have you snap your fingers and you're a my mom's son instead of her daughter. That's why I don't mind being here. There are things you need to get used to. I can help."

"So... wait, you -- we -- like, have you ever had a real boyfriend?" I started thinking, digging through her memory. And then I found the answer. "Brian?? Him?"

"Shh! You'll get Mom's attention. Besides, I'm kinda not proud of it. He transferred; let's leave it at that, okay? Don't look further into that until I say you can."

"But... everyone knows what kind of a weirdo he was. I mean, he was the one leading that whole murderer thing; I'm glad he's gone too, but that's that, right?"

Stefani seemed to shudder. "You know how I try to keep you from some of my memories?"

"Yeah... you say it's best to approach this gradually."

"I guess this'll be the first real dating thing since and... you kind of need to know."

"Know what?"

"Brian didn't get kicked out because of what he said to you; that was just the last straw. Let me let you see."

In a flash, I was reliving her memories from junior year. Of being asked to Homecoming a year ago; of the dance going smoothly; of their first kiss; of exchanging Christmas gifts... and of conversations. Sure, she said all the right things, but I began to hear snippets in my head of Brian... not responding right. Not being as comforting. Heck, there were times I was nicer to her than he was, and we never met!

"Stef? He wasn't a good boyfriend, was he?"

"That's just the half of it. Now, hold on tight. This part can get... a bit bumpy."

"Bumpy? Wh-what happens?"

"Okay... let me show you." Stefani faded out as I felt her re-enter our shared mind. "Sorry to do it this way, but it's easier to control. I don't want you to say something they'll hear."

"How so?" I had finally figured out after a month how to use my inner monologue to talk between us.

"You'll know. Okay, so remember that big scene outside the gym back in March?"

"During lunchtime? I was kind of taking an AP test prep at the time."

"Oh... well, about a hundred kids saw it, thought you'd be one of them. Anyway... here's what happened."

The memory began to unfold in a way I could access it. I saw through her eyes as she was headed toward the gym area, lunch in hand. And there was Brian in her field of vision. The guy he was talking to had his back to her, but I could see him making some very suggestive motions. One indicating a female body. And then some more obscene ones.

"Whoa, whoa," I thought to Stefani. "Is he saying what I think he's saying?"

"Yeah, he was."

"But, wait... are we...?"

"YES WE ARE!" I was so caught off-guard I made the body flinch. "Sorry, sorry, defensive about that. He's lying; I would never do this until college -- we're too young now, and I was too young then."

"Yikes. Why in the world would you... okay, I know why he did. But what was he thinking? There's no way it wouldn't come back around to you, right?"

"The least of his problems. Keep going."

The memories were a little jagged, because I wouldn't expect every piece of information to be retained, just general emotions. But I could tell she was storming over to him and asking him what the hell he was saying. Then things got blurry. But the betrayal emotion felt very real.

"I can tell you're mad. But was that enough for you to dump him?"

"You can't hear what's said?"

"Memories usually aren't that..."

"Pay attention." Even though the memory seemed vaguer than I expected, I could hear a line come through loud and clear. It was in a guy's voice. It had to be Brian's. And I could clearly

hear: "Look, you whore, you know you want it." Not just that, but then I heard her scream "WHAT DID YOU SAY?" and as if in a movie, everyone in a 15-foot radius turned to look. Or it felt that way.

"Uh... Stef? Do I even want to see the rest of this? I get it, you dumped him on the spot."

"I wish it was that simple. I'll never forget what happened next, and you shouldn't either." The yelling continued. She was MAD, and even without hearing the exact words, I could tell she was letting Brian have it with both barrels. Everything was a dreamlike blur... until it all came into focus as Brian reared back, hand balled up.

When she saw Brian's fist, Stefani threw herself back into a wall and cowered. I heard the commotion -- a couple of guys must have gotten in between us and tried to stop Brian completely. One of the other girls, I couldn't see who at first, hugged me in a protective stance. I could hear Stefani's voice call out "Fuck you, we're done" as the guys all but dragged Brian out of the area for his own sake.

As I jolted out of memory and into reality, I still heard some hyperventilating. I looked down; just reliving that made us get short of breath. "Did anyone see that?" I asked Stefani.

"If they did, just say he popped into your mind. They know."

"Okay... I'm sorry you had to go through with that. But he's gone now."

"Well, he finished the year but I never saw him get near me or talk to me. That's just it; I can't imagine being expelled over taunting you -- me -- us. Something else must have happened, but I don't know what it could be."

"Why?"

"Look, I got knocked out in the crash. Right now I remember going to get my schedule, talk to my guidance counselor, and the next thing I know I'm at the gates of Heaven wondering how I got there."

"A concussion?"

"You think so?"

"Doctors would think so, if the body blacked out. It's possible. It would explain why you don't know anything."

"That's what scares me -- I don't know what happened. I feel like I must have been at fault. Your family must hate me."

"I don't know. I'm not about to find out, either. Look, Stef... you've been through more than enough without thinking of yourself that way. Hell didn't let you in; your conscience should be clean. So... just accept you get this chance to make it up to me."

Silence in my mind; I could tell she was struck by how little I thought of her culpability. "Petey? Do me a favor."

"What is it?"

"...use good judgment when you say Yes for Homecoming."

### **Columbus Day – three weeks until the dance**

Three. And it's only Monday. I can't keep saying I don't know all week, can I? At least Carolyn told people to give me time to decide -- they all knew about the accident and about Brian's behavior. As I got home trying to focus on homework, none of it made sense. I told myself after the weekend that I'd know when the right person asked, but... there was no right person. It all seemed so artificial. What was I waiting for?

"Can I answer that?"

My eyes darted around, expecting to see Stefani's translucent image next to me, but nothing. "No no, now's not a good time. Just listen to me."

I sighed as I sat back at my computer to pay attention. "Okay, good. It's like this: are you expecting to find the right guy doing this? It's just not the way it happens. I know you went alone last year... you may want to do it again this year. Or at least go as a friend with someone. No one would blame us."

I was listening, but all I could think of is that there was some... I dunno, expectation for me? "I thought that for a while. Why do you think I stayed with Brian?" That jarred me out of my confusion and into full attention. "Thought that would work. Look, the night can be magical or special or whatever. It felt like the beginning of something. And then the longer it went, the more I felt committed to it. You don't want to admit months were wasted, do you? So here's the deal: don't put expectations on this night. Now, you gonna finish your physics homework?"

I was having trouble sleeping at this point. The lights were out, the covers were up, and it meant nothing. I just stared ahead, thinking about the people who had asked, and to each one I said "I don't know". I must have sounded like I was blowing them off.

"Okay, did you take in anything I said?" I rolled over and saw a silhouette. It had to be Stefani.

"Yeah, I know, it may not hit right away. But listen, you don't need to be concerned. This decision isn't going to affect anything in the long run."

"...you sure?"

"Yes!"

"It would for me."



"...okay, what? It's just a social event. Why are you acting like you're giving someone a lottery ticket?"

"Stef, um... do you have any idea what I thought of you?"

"Yeah, you and half our class. But that's why I'm saying you're trying too hard."

"...more than that. I hated Brian before you did. I just stared and wished and then when the time came I was too intimidated, but... damn. I kinda wish I had said something. Anything. Just... taken my chance, but I didn't want to hear no."

"Like I said, a lot of the boys would take a chance. You're sensing that now. I mean, what were you going to do, run up to Brian and demand he leave me so you could have me?"

Stefani had to giggle at the image, so I ran with it. "You! Break up with her! I love her, it's my turn, I'm the star of this movie! Seriously, do you see what that sounds like?"

"Y-you know what the silly part is? There might have been a time I'd have appreciated that. You know what he did."

"Well, by that time you were set on your own. I don't know. It's all so weird. Nothing feels right. You saw who asked -- got any favorites?"

"Sorry, not my decision. Maybe ask Carolyn what she thinks."

I quickly sat up in bed. "There's an idea."

"What is? Wait, no, you don't think... well... I mean... we could go in her group, sure."

"...yeah, that's, uh, totally what I meant."

"Pete -- you're not you anymore. What are you planning?"

"Well... doesn't Carolyn joke about how she's a little bi?"

"...joke, right?"

"You think so?"

"Well, it doesn't matter, Petey. I'm not."

"Not your decision, remember? Listen... I know it's weird, but I like who I like, right? My mind is still male. And... if anyone would understand why we'd need to see what the other side is like, she would. She's not going with anyone either right now. Why not call her bluff?"

"...your funeral tomorrow. I like having her as a friend. You screw it up, I'm kicking you out of my body and MAKING you go to Heaven. Got it?"

"As if you could."

"Pete, I'm serious! Do you think she'd love it? You're taking a heck of a risk here."

I closed my eyes as I felt her get back into my brain. "Why not? Everyone else is."

### **The next day**

I found her before first bell rang. "Carolyn, hey... how's it going?"

"Stef, hey! How's it going? Got anyone yet? I dunno why they wait so long to ask, but it's not like it matters, right? C'mon, you can tell me!" Ah, Flaky McMotormouth is at it again.

"Care, can we take it down a bit?" Stefani had told me that this was a way to get her attention. It's not that Carolyn was dismissive; it's more that she was so carefree she wanted to keep things light.

"...oh, is everything okay?"

"Yeah, yeah, it's just I... well, I dunno what to do. Can we get lunch today and work it out?"

"Oh yeah! Meet me at my car at lunch bell! Road trip!"

"Carolyn, we're only going to McDonald's."

"Hey, it counts!"

Carolyn skipped off to her class. As I walked to mine, several thoughts still whirled around -- would Carolyn understand? was I overthinking this? why didn't I control my emotions better? was I still a passenger in Stef's life despite being in charge? And one more thing--

"4 nuggets and medium fries," I heard from Stef's position in the back seat of the brain. Okay, I guess I do have a usual order. What, no Diet Coke? "Very funny; that's what our water bottle's for."

### **At lunch**

"So." Carolyn said as she popped a french fry into her mouth. "Sup?"

"Well... I know everyone expects me to be at Homecoming and I guess I do want to go, but I just don't feel right picking anyone who's asked so far."

"Really? Is this cuz of Brian?"

Sure, let's go with that. "Kinda? I mean, it's also cuz of Pete and... that."

"Okay, look, girl -- I know this is bad and all, but you think he'd want you to stop doing stuff? Is it just that seeing the guys talk to you has it in your head?"

"No, I get that! But... I dunno, the guys just remind me of him and Brian and... I think I'd rather not."

"Ooh, stag time! So you wanna go in my group?"

"...well, yeah, that would be great, but there's something else."

"Yeah?"

"Well, I was thinking about my luck with guys and then thinking maybe I don't need 'em, and then I know you've joked about it and I was just... I don't know. Do you think?"

Carolyn did a double-take. "Wait. Are you asking ME?"

"...yeah! Yeah I am. I'm getting ideas and I figure you'd be someone I could talk to."

Carolyn looked over. "Well, you are cute, I'll give you that."

"Yeah, so are you." I could practically hear the gasps in the back of my head. This felt like a moment of truth.

Carolyn took a deep breath and pulled over to a hidden spot in the parking lot. "Um, are you saying this for real, or because it's me, or just to show up Brian's old friends... kinda wanna know what I'm working with here."

I needed to choose my words carefully or risk losing a friend AND an ally. "Well, a lot of a lot. Like, I just wanna be with a friend, and you're that, but also I don't know about me. It's like the accident made me feel bad around guys, so does that mean I'm... you know..."

"I can find out." Carolyn undid her seat belt and began to lean over. I stiffened from nervous anticipation. Never did I expect this to be the outcome! As she came closer, I closed my eyes and waited... and waited. Waited for something that never happened. Almost as suddenly as the events began, I heard her adjust back in her seat and buckle up before starting the car.

"Yeah, you're not."

"...wh-how do you know?"

"If you hated the idea, you'd have said something, but if you enjoyed the idea, you wouldn't have gone all robo like that. Look, it's okay if you're not ready to date. You can still come with me. But you're straight. I mean, I totally would if you weren't, but you are."

Part of me sank inside, but part of me felt a relief that there was an understanding. "Okay, Care -- I'm sorry I..."

"No, no, no! Don't be sorry, silly! I get it! Boys can be stupid, you've been through a lot, and all that. But just because you ain't in the mood for guys doesn't mean you want girls. There's a feeling you get, you know? Like you said you had that night with Brian?"

The words out of my mouth were practically the same as I heard Stef say in my head. "Ugh... don't remind me."

"Yeah, you know it wasn't there, was it?"

"Well, we are friends and... eh, you're right. But you ARE cute, why didn't that kick in?"

"Uh, hello! Your body's all 'give me boys so I can get babies', right? I mean, everyone has questions, but that doesn't mean you're gay."

I looked out the window, wondering how I could explain why this bothered me so much. "Yeah... okay. We're still good for the dance?"

"Totally. I'll save you one!"

### **That night**

Everyone in the house was retiring for the night. I walked to the backyard, as far away from my house as I could. All I could do was sit down and consider what I'd discovered about me. Even with 17 years of being told that guys don't cry, I could feel all the tears coming.

"Well... at least we were right about Carolyn." Stef manifested next to me again. "I tried to warn you. Don't they always say it's not a choice, not a preference, but an orientation? Why are you hurt by this?"

Well, it was nice to know *one* of us wasn't fazed by this environment.

"Okay, okay, you're a little shell-shocked, I get it. But we can handle this! You can do the everyday school stuff and just let me decide what's going on in a social life! Do you trust me? I promise, kissing a guy isn't that bad."

I slowly looked over my shoulder at her, hoping to portray the "oh, really" thought going through my mind. I thought I was ready for this. I thought after six weeks, I could deal with every gender-flipping chaotic change. Hell, I even remembered to take Midol because the next period was coming soon! But this... this felt annihilating.

"Look, it's going to be fine. You're doing great. Just head there with Carolyn, get all prettied up, have a good time. You'll enjoy it! I promise!"

I finally had the idea of what to respond. "It's not this I'm worried about," I muttered.

Stefani paused. It certainly felt, somehow, like the magnitude hit her. "...well, what do you want me to say? This... I mean, at least you're alive. It's the best I could do."

Now I had no idea how to respond. Was I supposed to be grateful and just drop it?

"Would you rather just be dead?"

I snapped around to face her, doing everything I could to make sure my voice didn't wake up the neighborhood. "No, I'd rather be in MY life, with MY family, rather than having to spend all day cosplaying as someone who doesn't give a fuck how I feel!"

Stefani jumped backwards a full foot, despite being seated next to me. Her eyes went wide, and her mouth was stuck open, no words emerging. Her eyes drifted off to the side, with her head lowering a little. She used her hand to shade herself from eye contact -- whatever that meant for a spirit.

"I..."

"You what? You don't want me here? You're having fun turning me into you? What do you, Stef?"

"Pete, stop!" If it was possible to say a spirit was crying, she certainly was too. "I just don't know. I thought I was suggesting the right thing. I thought it would help, it would... make up for what I did. I didn't realize it was this bad! I... you're doing fine, you're doing great, and I... I just felt like this is what we deserved."

"Deserved? How did we deserve this?"

Stefani shrugged. "Well, I mean, I took your life, you take mine."

I slumped over, head in my hands. "I'm... not sure I should. It's pretty clear I've got different ideas from you. How much do I get to change you?"

"What's wrong with me?"

"You're not me."

Even if Stefani had never said anything, I knew what she was thinking: she didn't think this one through. "Do you mind being in this together? I'm sure at some point I'll start to fade away and you can be whatever you want. Or maybe you'll get to go to Heaven or Hell or a new life and I'll be here. But... right now, I guess I made a big mistake."

Now, no matter how guilty I felt, my instinct to comfort kicked in. "Stef, no -- you thought you were helping. We're in a weird situation, aren't we?"

Stefani was holding up her hands to stop me. "No, no -- this isn't about me. I've put you in a bad situation. I wish I knew how to get out of it, but I don't think I'm ready to leave yet. Where would I go?"

"You go to Heaven where you belong."

"No I don't... not if I... look, enough about me. Let's figure out how to make this work. For now, I can handle getting a date. You work on school, college, the rest. If this is the part that hurts you the most, we can save it for last."

"You'd do that?"

"Hey, it might be fun to be living. So -- that friend of yours, Matthew, who asked me out. What do you think?"

Oh no, what she doesn't know... "Well, if you want to, but I think it's going to go poorly. You might do better with Carolyn's group."

"And what could go wrong?"

"I'm not sure he sees you as you. He might be trying just to get the prestige."

"And if he is I will know, and we will let him have it. Besides, it's not like he's playing the field, is it?"

I wanted to let her know maybe, but I realized I was losing this argument over me. "Eh, go ahead. See if he can be a plus-one in your group. But don't say I didn't warn you."

### **Homecoming Dance night**

I stood in front of the mirror. I was never this nervous as the guy, but now, I wanted to make sure all the fabric was in place and all the curves fit. It was our first social event since the accident, and the most important part to me was showing I could move on with my life.

Still, I may have spent a few seconds too long making sure, because Stefani manifested again. "Out of your system yet?"

I blushed. "Too much?"

"Just a little. I get it, male brain excited. But... you've seen it all. Why does this hold extra interest?"

I smirked. "Listen -- it's not that you haven't been blessed with a wonderful body, but after a while, the novelty wears off. It's not that you stop looking good, but this is new! I've never seen or been you so formal. And it's wonderful! This suits you so well!"

"Well, that's sweet, but can we keep it friendly between us? Anyway, yes, it fits, it's beautiful, thank you. But what will Matthew think?"

Oh, right, our date to Homecoming. "Relax. He's going to say all the right things. I don't know if he's purely interested in you, er, us, um... anyway, don't go rushing in."

"Duh, I'm in charge tonight for a reason, Petey. Matthew's nice, but it's never happening. Hell, Carolyn's got a better chance of happening!" She laughed at her own reference, as if to rub in the reality.

"Hey, she's cute, it was worth a shot..."

"Yeah, yeah, you'll get over it. Now stand back. I got this." I felt her rush back into our mind and take over the controls. Stefani picked up her purse and slipped on her heels to head downstairs. But even she couldn't resist one last smile to the mirror.

### **At the dance, 9:30 PM**

Two hours in, and everything was progressing smoothly. The car ride was uneventful, the talk was small, and the meal was lovely. The first few minutes were a little lonely, though -- apparently, Matt hadn't heard about the concept of "fashionably late". Still, Stefani was game to play along. Then, while sipping her punch, she felt a tap on her shoulder.

"Care!"

"Steffy! You made it!" The two exchanged a big hug. "How's it going?"

"Slow. I'm glad you're here. His group isn't quite my drive."

"Hey, don't worry about it. Let's get him in our group. Oh, shoot, first let's fix that face." Carolyn practically pulled Stef by the wrist as they left the cafeteria where the dance was. The two snuck into the women's room and laid out their purses to clean up.

"So, what's he like?"

"Eh... he's okay. It's a good experience, but it's just not gonna happen."

"Too bad. I guess better this way. Does he know that?"

"Maybe? He hasn't moved yet. I dunno what to do if he does."

"Well, he's not another Brian, right?"

"No way! Wait, is this color too much?"

"Nah, it works."

"Thanks, cool. Yeah, I guess I can talk to him in a few days, but it's not like I'm feeling it."

"Hey, maybe he's freaking like you are. Bring him to us, I'll get a read."

"You would?"

"What are friends for? C'mon, let's go."

**10:45 PM**

It was almost time for the last dance. From my position observing, Stefani and Matthew were getting along fine, but not exactly at a deeper level. I'm sure they'd be Breakfast Club friends in another world, but the good news was that I didn't sense we had a boyfriend coming out of this. Still, things can change.

I watched our eyes dart around the cafeteria, but realized the problem: no sign of Matthew. I know I had to get all that punch out of my system, but I did expect him when I got back. This was odd. Fortunately, Shawn -- Matt's buddy -- was by the door.

"Stef, ask him," I muttered in my "back-seat" position. The rest happened.

"Hey, uh... Shawn, right?"

"Yeah. Stefani?"

"Yeah, nice to meet you. Uh, have you seen Matthew? I just wanna make sure he's okay, since he's my ride and all."

"Yeah, he told me he needed a smoke. I'm sure he'll be back."

"Thanks!" Stefani was about to sit down when I leaned forward to switch into control. I had her turn around and head out into the hallway.

"Hey, what's going on? I thought we agreed I was in charge, Petel!" Stefani's voice in my head was not amused, but then again, Shawn left me unamused too.

"Matt doesn't smoke," I intoned back to her in the internal dialogue. "I remember this from last year, but I didn't think that idiot would do it with you. Follow me." Now fully in control of us, I walked around the hallway and turned to face the exit door to the front parking lot. I knew what was next -- go through the door, see the bench on the right, and Matthew would be caught red-handed.

Just as I reached for the door handle, though, I heard a protest. "WAIT!" Stefani's voice indicated a panic. "I mean, it's no big deal; I don't have feelings for him."

I paused, our hand on the door. "It doesn't matter, Stef; it's best you see this."

"Do we have to? Can't I just note he doesn't smell of smoke and ask for the truth?"

"He'll say he forgot his lighter. Ugh, I was afraid of this. C'mon -- we gotta make him stop it."

"NO!" Stefani's tone of reply meant I, we, were still holding the door handle this entire argument. "Please... I don't want to go."

"We have to."



"I can't."

"It's for your own good."

"Not again."

The argument raged on between us in her head. We were poised to open the door to go outside, where I knew we'd find Matthew, our Homecoming date, with another gal. But my backseat driver Stefani kept telling me not to do it. So there we stood, holding the door handle, seemingly thinking of whether to go any further, while we argued over what to do next.

We may have been there for too long if it hadn't been for a voice shocking us out of our distraction.

"STEF! What's going on? You all right?"

I jolted back in control of us and turned to face the voice. Carolyn was staring at my arm outstretched for the door. "In or out, girl. It's like you got zapped."

"I... uh... yeah. It's not that easy."

"What? Why not?" As Carolyn questioned us, I waited for Stefani to jump in, but she seemed to be a little too quiet. I guess this whole situation may have been too much -- first Brian treats her horribly, then her next date cheats on her?

"Um... it's Matt. They told me he's outside getting a smoke, but... does he?"

Carolyn seemed to be figuring out something. "...I, uh... haven't seen him."

"Right. So... what's he doing?"

"...oh. And..."

"...well, I don't know if I wanna know. What if he... not again. All this work to get back to a normal life and this? I'd be a joke."

"No, Steffy... this isn't your fault."

"I don't care!" I wasn't acting the way I wanted to act, but knowing that Stef was so frightened by the very thought of being humiliated she couldn't even step in at a social event... well, I had to defer to her a bit at this point. Not enough to flat-out refuse, but enough to present her argument.

"Stef... don't let him walk over you. If he's doing this, you deserve to get back at him. The Steffy I know would want to see for herself and not be the sidecar, right?"

"...Care... I don't want to get hurt again. Please... just... tell me to go back to the dance." I heard a whimper in the back of my head as I asked. Clearly I was getting her mindset right.

"No, Stef, I'm not letting that dork do this to you. I know you're scared. But we're gonna do this. C'mon, I'll come with you."

Finally, my hand pushed the door. *I'm sorry, Stefani, but you got outvoted*, I thought to myself/her as we walked outside.

I motioned for Carolyn to peek around the corner first. She stuck her head around, ducked back, and nodded solemnly. That's all I needed. I stepped around the corner to see what I knew was there. Matthew was oblivious to the world around him, and on his lap was Serena, clearly happy to be there. And yes, they were kissing like the teenagers we were. I half-expected to gasp or to choke back a tear, like I heard in the back of my head from my co-pilot. But something else happened.

I. Got. Pissed.

"WHAT THE HELL!?" I yelled in their direction, causing both Matthew and Serena to whirl in shock and stare at me. Far from crying, I was fuming. "Just what do you think you're doing, anyway? You call this bitch a cigarette? Is that it!? How fucking stupid do you think I am? You worthless asshole think you can humiliate me? Take this!"

I was so into the moment of fury I was clutching my purse in my hand rather than hanging it over my shoulder. And the more I saw them, the more I saw red. Before I knew it, I had my arm over my head, purse in hand, ready to rain it down on that cheater and the other woman.

Before I could go any further, I felt someone grab my wrist and yank me backwards, nearly knocking me down as my heels got caught in the sidewalk. "LEMME AT HIM!" I bellowed, but it was no use. Two arms grabbed me and hugged around me, keeping me from getting up and trying to calm me down.

Matthew and Serena ran back into the cafeteria through an alternate entrance. I was seething, panting in rage, practically foaming at the mouth as I watched them run off, unable to escape the human trap I found myself in. The anger subsided and I felt myself return to a more human response, as if I was a lady Bruce Banner and the anger burned away. Adrenaline was replaced by... well, no serotonin, no dopamine, nothing. And with nothing, the sadness just flowed.

I finally heard a calming shush, like a mother to a child, from behind me. It was Carolyn -- of course it was. "Steffy... it's okay... it's going to be fine... everyone will know what happened. It's not your fault. It's not your fault..."

I wanted to say something, anything. But the emotional roller coaster left me just sobbing in my place. Two drops of makeup fell and stained my dress. I felt like collapsing into the earth, out of this body, and anywhere else. When the chips were down, maybe Stefani was right.

I looked up slowly. "So... what now?" I was slowly getting my emotion back. I had no idea what Stefani would've done different if she controlled herself, and it was clear she didn't want to find out either. I was on my own in this one, at least in my head. In the world, I had the best helper I could.

"C'mon -- that bench needs new people." We sat down, just the two of us, and she offered tissue after tissue for me. "It's okay. It's not your fault. But man, what happened to you?"

"To me? He happened!"

"Well, yeah, but you weren't even that mad with Brian! I mean, apparently."

"I... got pretty loud with him, you know."

"Not like that. You were screaming. You raised your voice before, but this was hooboy. That was freaky."

"...you're thinking it's freaky to be mad at getting humiliated like that?"

"Steffy... you were scared, then you were mad, and over some guy you didn't even really LIKE like. What happened?"

I had to stall for time to think of an explanation, even with Carolyn being such a close friend. It's not like she was going to understand, right? "Well, uh... people could see it, and... what would they say if I just melted?"

"Was he meaning something to you?" I couldn't exactly say I knew Matthew, because she didn't. "Is that it, Steffy? You liked him, didn't ya?"

"No...! No, I didn't! I meant it, it wasn't like that. I just... it was all..."

"Okay, okay, this is too soon," Carolyn waved me off. "Listen -- you're coming home with me. Call your mom and have her know. We're gonna talk this out tonight."

I giggled uneasily. "C-care, I... I just... got mad. It's not a big deal."

Carolyn looked around before continuing. "It's not just that, you know. It's all the... everything. The wreck still bothers you, and you can get on with it all you want but I can tell it's in your head. You're all over the place. It's like there's a whole bunch of Steffies up there trying to tell you what to do. Your head's out. I wanna help."

Before saying anything, I listened for the voice from Stefani's real self to tell me what to say. Eventually, I felt her switching into control again before choking off another sob. She had us look up at Carolyn and smile. "Thanks... I'll call Mom. I guess I haven't been myself lately."

"No kidding you ain't. We got a LOT to figure out. C'mon -- let's get cleaned up and say goodbye."

## **In the car**

Carolyn kindly asked her date to go to the back seat so that I could collapse in the front. I slowly slid in, buckled up, and threw my head back. The good news is that the others in the car were in our group, so no one was really separated from their significant other. Well, maybe me, but Matthew felt really insignificant right now.

As I closed my eyes and took deep breaths, I could hear Stefani's voice in my head. "I, uh... I guess you did all right after all."

"I had to do something," I thought back. "Not like he should get away with that bullshit."

"I know."

"...and thank God for Care here. She saved me a bunch."

"Yeah, she cares about us, doesn't she?"

"...well, you anyway. I don't exist, remember?"

"Yeah, I guess I was a little harsh there, and... I mean, you could if you wanted to."

"How?"

"Well... Carolyn's a real new-age type, and she cares a whole bunch about me, right?"

"Sure. What does one mean for the other? Oh, I know -- just make some passing metaphor about how you feel my aura all the time?" Stefani didn't respond right away. "That's what you meant, right?"

"Well, we could stop there, I guess..."

"Hold up. Are you saying I... introduce myself? Stef, I'd sound nuts!"

"Well, anyone else, yeah. But can you trust I know Care more than anyone here? She'd get her head on it."

"Yeah, and then she'd tell and we're in the jacket."

"She wouldn't. We tell secrets all the time. She told me something that would ruin her if it got out."

"What was it?"

"Well, the fact you don't know proves my point, doesn't it?" I could feel the smirk even within my mind. "And you're not ready for that secret. But that's not the point. The point is... I think she'd believe someone's spirit is still on earth. Especially if we tell her why."

"...I... I don't know. No one's supposed to know this..."

"Well, you still have to be me at school and stuff. But we need someone to be honest with. We need a friend. Did you know her much?"

"I, uh, knew OF her. A couple classes, the big spirit stuff... not like we were more than acquaintances."

"Yeah, that's what I thought. I guess I'll introduce you if I have to."

"Stef, I haven't said yes yet! I don't know if I can afford to do this! I don't want you to be schizo -- they'll try to pill me out!"

"I don't think we'll be like this much longer. Not forever. I don't know what'll do it, but something will. But for now... I mean, better to have someone than not to."

I calculated how this conversation was going. "I'm not talking you out of this, am I? This is because I acted just now?"

"Petey, this is not some give and take. We gotta think about what's best for whoever of us sticks around, or for both if we're both around. We won't tell everyone. But she's safe. I know it."

I couldn't reply. I felt pressured and overwhelmed. Was it worth putting my foot down? Didn't tonight make it clear I, we, would slip up and there's a chance we'd all know? What did Carolyn say -- I was lots of people fighting to take over?

"Petey?"

"This... feels so dangerous."

"It's okay. I know you're scared," she told me in an echo of Carolyn's words, "but it's something we have to do."

"So what do you want from me?"

"I know how to say it to her. You just wait and I'll bring you in when I have to."

"...wait, so we're both talking to her at once? Can one mouth handle that?"

"Well, don't step on my lines and we'll be fine. Anyway... look, thanks for doing this. It's kind of important I have someone to confide in, and you'll appreciate it too."

Something still bugged me. "...uh, couldn't we start with like Mom or something?"

"No way! She'd never get it. That's how you get pillled out! It's gotta be her."

"But I... don't really know her much."

"You will. She's great. You two will be fine. Oh, shoot, the car's quiet. We must be getting close. I got this."

Stefani opened our eyes. She looked up and saw the car turn into a familiar street and head for a familiar home. Stef had been here dozens of times -- it was Carolyn's place. Everyone else had been dropped off.

"Oh, cool, you're awake! Feel better now, Steffy?"

"...yeah, thanks. What did I miss?"

"Eh, nothing. We're all friends. C'mon -- you've had a rough night."

"Wait -- before we go inside, can I talk to you... here? Alone?"

"Is everything ok, Stef?"

I gulped hard from my place out of sight. What was going to happen? Would she believe I was even here? Would she take it well? Was this a good idea?

"Care, uh... something you said stuck with me. I think I need to tell you."

"What is it?"

"Well, you were saying I didn't act like the person you knew... I mean, you said I was like a split personality or something?"

"Yeah, it's like if a bunch of Steffies were all running around in there. What about it?"

"Well... I've noticed it too, since the accident. And... I need to tell you a secret."

Carolyn took her hands off the steering wheel and turned to face us. "What's going on?"

"Something happened in the accident, and... well, things didn't go the way they were supposed to, and... well, to be honest Petey may be gone, but he's still with me."

"Still with you?" Carolyn was clearly not used to putting clues together, especially ones that added up to something as bizarre as this. I was kind of hoping she'd think it all metaphor and I could remain safe. But for once, Carolyn's alternate worldview made her jump to the right conclusion.

"Stef... what does that mean?" She gasped soon after. "Oh, come on, are you saying he got thrown into your brain or something?"

"If I said yes, would you believe me?"

Carolyn's eyes went wide? "He IS? How? Like, how does it work? There's two of you? Oh my god, my friend's got two brains!"

"You DO believe me?"

"Sure! I mean, it would explain a lot. It's how you knew what Matthew was doing tonight, and it's why you thought you didn't like boys anymore, and... yeah, of course I believe you! Wow! Wait, does he know everything you know?"

"Not everything. He knows I have a secret of yours, but I'm not telling him anything. Other than, we kinda have to share everything."

"So, uh... like, he's seen you naked and stuff?"

"Carolyn! It's not a scandal! He's me! I'm sharing my body with him. Of course he has. It's a little weird, but I'm getting used to it. Though lemme tell you... he had \*no idea\* how to handle periods. It was so FUNNY!" Great, my first day with new friends and already I'm a joke.

"Aww, poor Petey... wait, is he with you now?"

"He's always with me."

"Is it okay if I talk to him for a while? Like, you know, because?"

Any panic I had multiplied when Stefani had us smile. "Sure... but he really was nervous about being found out. You know, cuz a voice in the head is crazy stuff?"

"Oh. Well..." Carolyn grabbed Stefani's head. "Pete, it's okay! I don't wanna hurt you!"

"Care, stop! He hears what I hear, you know!" Stefani leaned back and closed our eyes. I heard her say "your turn" to me. I hesitantly jumped into control and sat back up. "Hey, Care," I said before catching myself. "Can I call you Care?"

"Petey? Is that you? I... you're still alive? Oh my god!"

"Yeah, I am, kinda. But... we didn't exactly do stuff together before. Is it that big a deal?"

"Yes! Steffy's been feeling so dumpy about what happened! You're here!" Carolyn gave a big hug. "Oh my god, what's it like in there? Tell me all about it! How did you get in?"

As I began to explain, I felt the place behind me abandoned. I turned around and saw Stefani manifest in the back seat, watching. Carolyn saw me looking behind me and was curious. "Don't worry -- it's just us, Petey." I don't think she saw Stefani's ghost.

"Well, it's a long story, but basically I think I wasn't supposed to die. So Stefani felt all guilty and said I could have her life, but I didn't want to do that, and... well, here we are."

"So how does it work? Do you just tag in and out?"

"More or less. Some situations I'm better at, some she is. I can't really say how you'd know who was in charge... we're trying to make sure it's not obvious, you know?"

"Oh, yeah, don't worry," Carolyn nodded while making the "lip zip" hand gesture. "Well, we got all night to talk. How about the two..." she paused and stifled a laugh. "How about the THREE of us go inside and talk over a movie?"

### **Two Weeks Later**

"Carolyn, hey! What's up?"

"Hey, Steffy... wait, you alone?"

"Yeah, in my room, why?"

"...who am I talking to?"

Huh. This was new. Most of the time Carolyn called -- and she would call a lot -- she just kept up the charade. She'd talk to one of us about school, music, boys, friends, whatever was on her mind. The conversations could fly all over the map over the course of a single call, but there was always one constant: she assumed we were talking together, or at least the right one of us was talking to her.

I quickly checked the hallway to make sure I had full privacy before closing and locking the door behind me. "Care, we've told you," I started, able to use the right pronouns for once. "It doesn't matter, we both know what goes on."

"No, this is important," she pleaded, cutting me off. "I wanna speak to Petey."

"...why? Care, where are you?"

"I'm in my car; it's chill. Now, who are you?"

Gosh, I hope this doesn't blow it. "Petey; why? What's going on?"

"Okay... look, I know you gotta be doing her thing all the time and that's gotta suck, so I think tomorrow we should hang out, me and you."

"Wait... will her family allow it?"

Carolyn seemed amazed I even asked. "Duh, how often have we done this before?"

"Well, it was always a school thing. Has it ever been us? Or you two?"

"Oh yeah, it's fine. We're good. Just go to the mall, movie, lunch, stuff. We're good."



"Well... thanks! I'd love to! What time?"

"Twelve. See you then!"

"Thanks, Care. I'll be ready."

"Hey, I'm happy to do it. Bye!"

As I hung up and sighed happily that for once I'd found someone who gave a darn about the real me, I felt Stefani manifest behind me. Judging from the look on her face, she wasn't as thrilled about Carolyn's idea as we were.

"Rule One: this is not a date."

I just stared blankly back at her the way she was at me, hoping she'd realize how unnecessary her words were. "Did you hear me?" So much for that idea.

"Yeah, I know. I mean, we're straight, right? She knows we're straight!"

Stefani seemed to be thinking hard, as if she wasn't quite sure how to phrase this. "Um... Pete? She knows *I'm* straight."

I nodded in understanding. Of course! At the time she dismissed us as not really interested, she didn't know I existed yet. Now that I'm on her radar, all the old Homecoming concerns were flooding back. Especially since she wanted me, not us.

"Uh... you want me to say no?"

"No to what? The whole day? Nah, you're good. You're usually me anyway. But don't you DARE make a move. She's our friend, and that's all she can be."

"Whoa, okay, okay... didn't realize you were so scared."

"Scared??" Oh, that was the wrong word. "Are you calling me a homophobe? That's not it at all!"

"Stef, please... why have you been so worried about me and Carolyn? Not just now, but for Homecoming."

"Because it'll never work and you know it. We can't be like this forever. At some point, this ends and there's one of us. And I'm just saying, if I let you do this now, the future is gonna suck for whatever happens. Oh, about that -- NEVER tell Mom and Dad that she's bi. Got it?"

"...yeah..." I nodded slowly. There had to be a reason "the future will be bad" was right next to "don't talk about Carolyn" in her mind. What in the world was... wait...

"Mom and Dad are like that, huh?"

"I mean, aren't they? All they ever talked about was wanting to find me a good husband. Nothing else." Stefani shrugged. "So I guess I gotta find a guy to spend my life with. I mean, besides you; no offense, but you don't count."

I giggled. "Duh. But have you ever asked them?"

"No... I, uh, didn't have to. I'm straight."

I hated to do this to her all over again, but... "I know, Stef. Does that mean I'm gay?"

"...can we talk about this later? We got homework to do. Just... remember, don't start anything." Stefani jumped back into my body as I sat down to begin writing my short essay questions to Honors Government. While the answers were pretty easy early on, it meant my mind could think more about what we were talking about. Was I really trapped by a family into being someone I wasn't? How much could I be me while I wasn't me? Would anyone understand? Were we really still in an age where parents didn't want their kids to be different?

"Hey, hey!" Oh, right, she can hear my thoughts. "I, uh... look, it's nothing personal. I'm happy with how we're doing this, I really am. But I'm scared you'll screw up and make her upset and then I never get to be her friend again. That's all; I promise." That's ALL? Why didn't you start with that?

"Honestly... because I didn't want you to think I thought you would. I'm sorry... just try to be a friend first. Don't rush things." I breathed a sigh of relief. Nothing was personal, it seemed. But somewhere in my mind a question was forming. I didn't realize it was a big deal until I heard her gasp and stammer. It appears I had written it on the computer.

What if she does?

### **That Saturday**

"So what did you think of the movie?" I wanted to gauge her reply before giving one; it was a bad habit of mine with culture.

"It was... different," she said as if confused. "Like, not what I expected at all. A detective with a split personality who was also the killer? Doesn't that seem a bit far-fetched?"

I knew Carolyn was referring to the plot needing to be shoehorned in for a twist that didn't deserve it, but the fact of my situation meant I thought she was forgetting something. "Yeah, I know," I said with a sigh. "Whoever heard of two opposites in the same brain like that? That never happens!"

Carolyn went beet red when it hit her. "No, no, no! I didn't... oh god, I'm sorry!" She was too busy laughing at herself to be truly upset, and to be fair, so was I. We giggled together the way any two girls would as we walked back to her car.

After we got in and could be to ourselves, Carolyn looked over at me. "Feel better, Pete?"

"I needed this. Thanks... can I call you Care?"

"Sure! Everyone does! It's cool -- like, they know I'm everyone's big ol' care bear." Big was right: maybe Carolyn was lanky, but at her height she had been asked throughout school if she was interested in the volleyball team. Heck, I'm pretty sure she was almost my height when I was alive!

"You got a good attitude. How do you laugh off all the stuff?"

"You gotta -- life's too... wait, bad choice of words. Sorry, Pete! I mean, why be angry?"

"Well... because you realize you give a damn about your new friends and hate to see what your old ones do."

Carolyn understood I meant Homecoming all over again. "That was you ready to kill him, huh?"

"Yeah. Yeah, for some reason everything just got to me at once. And the thing is, Stef was in my head saying she didn't want to hurt again. I mean, the shit I told you about why I was just there... it's true. I am her, after all. I have to do what she'd do."

Carolyn paused. "Like, totally?"

"Like, enough," I said. "What would happen if the it girl of the school acted all boyish? Wouldn't make any sense. I'm dead to the world, she's not. Her life, right?"

"Is that what she tells you?"

"...well, no. She gives me time to be me, but we both know it's not a good idea to do it too much."

"You want me to talk to her?"

I sighed. I knew this part would take the longest to get used to. "She can hear us, you know. There's no secret between Stef and me. Not anymore."

"...wait, did she tell you mine?"

"Oh, no, no she hasn't. I'm saying that anything we go through we both see and hear. Like, I know that's all blech and stuff but it's the deal."

"Oh... yeah, I can handle that. You're both like this with me, got it?" She crossed her fingers for emphasis.

"Thanks, Care. I do appreciate that."

"Hey, no big. So... I gotta ask: that WAS you asking me out, right?"

"Yeah..."

"I thought so. I know she ain't that. Well, she wasn't that. I mean... I don't know anymore."

"Hm. Let's think it out. Tell Stef she can join in." Immediately I could feel a little jostling in my mind as both of us wanted to get control of the words we said.

"Okay, we're both here. Sup Care?"

"Hey Steffy! How's he holding out going all undercover?"

"Oh, he's fine. I just don't want to get put away. I'm already a mess, why have people think I'm cray?"

"I hear that! So... what about us?"

"Care, you're my bestie. I just don't want him to scare you off!"

"...well, he won't, trust me. I mean, the whole thing's totally cute! He's so sweet and so meaningful. Dude, he tried to kick ass for you!"

Stef hesitated, so I jumped in. "...yeah, she doesn't seem to think I should've done that." "It's not the first time he got in a guy's face when I wouldn't have."

Carolyn giggled. "Mid-air switch, nice! Hey... you know I stand up for you. You can do it for you too. Why is it different?"

"Because you don't care and I don't want to be the bad girl."

"Steffy... everything is gonna be fine. Believe me. I'm glad you told me. I feel so awesome being a part of this little thing here."

"Yeah," I joked. "Mind of a dude, body of a babe. Best of both worlds, you'd say?"

Stefani gasped, but Carolyn laughed it off. "I do say that, yeah. Yeah! Think of it that way! Two heads are better than one... well, it's one head, but... I dunno, there's something here, right?"

After leaning us back, Stefani and I exchanged signals inside her head. This was something we both wanted to know, and now's as good a time to confirm as any. "Hey Care... uh, about that time I asked you out."

"Yeah, Pete? What about it?"

"You said you would if I was real, didn't you?"

"Yeah, you were totally faking it. I could feel the robo."

"Well... you thought she asked, didn't you?"

Silence. Carolyn seemed confused. "Uh... and?"

"Carolyn... it's not a joke, is it?"

Carolyn stared ahead, nervously tilting her head. "Uh... do I have to answer that? Like, does it matter?"

Stef jumped in. "Care... how long have I known you? Since first grade, right? Nothing has mattered. You're still my girl. You always will be."

"Well... I guess if I joke about it I can say it. Yeah. And yeah, if you would I would. But you wouldn't, and I could tell you wouldn't. So don't worry."

"It's not that!" Stefani freaked out as I jumped in and soon we were both talking loud enough for the words to come out. "Pete, no!" "It's gonna be okay!" "You're gonna ruin it for us!" "But the more she knows the better." "This isn't right, she said don't worry." "Look, she already cares about us, why not be honest?" "You're just going to pressure her!" Back and forth we went as Carolyn quietly drove on, listening in, until reaching a stoplight jolted us into reality. We were staring straight ahead, talking to ourselves. We slowly looked over to an amused Carolyn.

"Do you do that a lot?"

"No! No, no. Not like that. Not really. I mean, yeah, but no. We have a way. Yeah, a way." Now we were both freaking out and talking over each other, which made us sound even crazier.

"Okay, one thing at a time. Pete... be honest... do you like me like that?"

"I, uh, I do like you. It's kinda too soon to say like that, but maybe... but I'm not me. She is. And I know she doesn't."

"And Stef? Is he allowed to?"

"...well, I'd rather decide who to date and, honestly? I don't want him running you off. What if he did something and you got offended?"

"Nah, that ain't me. I know he ain't you. But, if you wanna be with boys, I get it. I'll try to spend time with both of you."

"Thanks, Care. That's all we need."

"Hey, what are friends for?"

**The next afternoon, Sunday**

"Should we call her now?"

"Should? What do you mean?"

I sighed internally; clearly the things Carolyn said meant more to me than her. "Well, she seemed to treat yesterday as a date, so you call the next day, right?"

A frustrated grunt began her response to that. "Don't remind me. If you think you should, go ahead, but I wanna talk to her too."

I stopped before picking up our phone. "Okay, Stef... what is it?"

"You know what it is. What happens when things go wrong? And what about me? Do I get a say in my love life?"

"All right, fine, I won't call. How's that? You can talk to her, I'll just listen. Then it wasn't a date, right?"

"Thanks." As we switched off, I heard her sigh and get the phone for herself before pausing. "Pete, I just need you to understand what this means to me. I can't have Mom and Dad think we're with Carolyn; I don't want to know what they'd do to me. I can help you out a little, but there has to be a line."

And this is when it hit me: maybe I was crushing on Carolyn! Something about being Stef had extinguished any emotional feeling for her. It should have; we were co-workers now, practically twin siblings. But Carolyn? Someone who was popular enough to be a status symbol and kind enough to care for a nobody like me? Was I letting my heart outrace my head?

"Calm down," I heard Stef relay to me as she dialed. "You can still be friends."

"Hello?"

"Hey Care, it's Steffy Stef!"

"HEY! How's it going, girl?"

"Well... you alone?"

"Oh, oh yeah, gimme a minute... okay, I'm clear. What's up?"

"Uh... he just wants to say thanks for yesterday and sorry for being so awkward."

"Hey, I loved it too! He was fine, really. You're good."

"Okay... uh... I just don't want to get you in trouble with my family. Or me."

"Hey, I get it... I don't want to make too much out of this either. We got lucky he's in your head. We're already besties. But... uh... I mean... if this got out I don't know what it would do to me."

"To you? Why?"

"Well, you hear the boys talk about Julie and Jane, right?"

Ohhh, geez. I'd heard enough of Matthew's banter to know what she meant. And I knew Stef had heard it too, so I just hoped Stef understood what I did.

"Yecch." Yeah, starting like that meant she'd heard it. "John's such an asshole about them. Like, no, they want each other, not you! Back off!"

"And you know other guys feel that way." Hey, I don't!

"Yeah, seriously. They can be such pervs." Okay, I'm not arguing that one. "Ha! Even Petey agrees!"

They were both laughing, at least. After a pause, Carolyn spoke a little more seriously. "So yeah... I mean, right now, you're the perfect one. We're already friends, and he's such a sweetie... but I can't. And besides, between this and the other thing, I don't want people to think THAT of me."

Other thing? "Hang on... Pete, that means our secret, so stop asking. Sorry, Care."

"Ohhh... he still doesn't know, eh? Maybe I'll tell him someday. Wait, can't he just pick your brain to find out?"

"No! I keep some things locked away! He didn't know about Brian til I showed him."

"Whoa, trippy... so you're like roommates in your head?"

"I guess so. And that's why I'm not sure about you two. You're the only one who'd get what happened to me. I don't want to lose you!"

"You won't! I promise! Hey, I applied to State as well. If we both get in, let's be roomies!"

"Sure! Did you do it early?"

"Yeah, you?"

"Yeah!" That was a relief to both of us. Applying early meant we could have our college decision finalized before Christmas. With how this was, the fewer things hanging over our head the better. "Wait..." Oh, here it comes.

"What?"

"Let's see what happens before then, but... are you trying to be my roommate or his?"

"Can't I like both of you?"

Stefani went silent. I resisted temptation to take over and just waited for her to get the words out.

"I mean we... what do you mean?"

"I told you, if I thought you were interested I would. And I know he's interested. And no matter what happens with the two or three of us, I will always be there for you as a friend, okay, Steffy? Stop worrying."

"...you sure?"

"Sure sure!"

"...okay... thanks, Care. I'm sorry. I trust you."

"Thanks! See you tomorrow!"

"Yeah..." Stefani said her goodbyes and hung up. If only I could manifest next to her to talk. All I could do was wait for her to lie down and tell her, over and over: "You matter, Stef. You matter more than you know."

### **Three weeks on (Thanksgiving holiday)**

"Stef! It's almost time to go!"

"Coming, Mom!" Truth be told, I was stalling as long as possible. Thanksgiving should've been a great time off to recharge, but of course it also meant time with family. And by family, I of course meant hers. Not mine.

I paused before opening the door to my room to join family. The situation was eerily similar to Homecoming, but now the roles were reversed. I had no desire to open that door. I had no desire to remind myself of what I'd lost on that fateful day. All the reality was hitting me hard, and it took everything I had not to cry.

"Wait, stop, you're gonna ruin the makeup!" Stef manifested outside of me. "We're gonna be even later than normal! Pull yourself together!"

"...I'm sorry, I... I just..."

"No, no, I get it. Look, you've done great so far -- if you're not ready for this, I'll do it."

"...you will? All day?"

"Yeah. I can see how it is."

"But I thought you were on a time limit. Didn't the angel say that?" Stefani's glance away from me made me realize something was up. "Stefani? What's the deal?"



"Well... you know how I said this was set up by them? That's only kinda true."

"Kinda?? What's going on?"

Before Stefani could say more, her mom called up the stairs again. "Stefani! Let's go!"

"I said I'm coming!" Good grief, did that come out of me? "Okay... take over. Explain to me on the way over. We can talk while we wait."

"I'll see what I can do. I'm gonna be talking to family a lot. But yeah... I didn't mean to trick you, I promise." Stefani jumped back in and took over the controls. We finished getting ready, made sure the makeup was still in place, and headed out to spend a day with an extended family I never knew.

### **At the family gathering**

As it turned out, we never really had a moment to ourselves. Stef may be an only child, but her parents had quite a few siblings. There were at least 10 cousins in the house for a huge family gathering. This was the type of thing I was ill-prepared for, if only because I kept in small groups when I was alive and mostly those I knew familiarly.

Stefani, though, was a professional at this. She easily glided from one conversation to another, answering without hesitation about college choices, getting back in school, dealing with what happened with us, re-learning her driving, and just about anything in between. Not even her Dallas Cowboy fan uncle could faze her; she just asked about why the people were in whatever position they were and let him talk.

When dinner came around, everyone was of course asked what they were thankful for. Stefani's took a more somber tone. "Well, first, I'm thankful to be alive," she began. "I'm... thankful for a wonderful support system at school. I'm thankful for therapy. I'm thankful for my mom and dad's understanding and forgiveness... and I'm thankful that all of you care enough not to hold it against me." One thing was clear: no matter how often you told her otherwise, she still thought she was at fault.

As dinner continued, this became my concern. How could I tell her there was nothing to worry about? How could I tell her that it was, in fact, an accident, and it's not like she sought out to kill me? I knew survivor's guilt was a big deal, but at some point, how many people had to tell you you were okay before you were okay?

Alas, I never had the chance to say anything. When the family has 30 or so people gathered together, there's not much time alone. It took all the way to the end of the day, all the way after the drive home, and all the way to our room before we finally had time alone.

"So, how do I get out beside you?"

"Wait, don't! I'm not sure you can get back in!" Stefani's urgency caught my attention. "This isn't your body; I don't know if you can enter and leave at will. Sorry, I figured that was obvious. So don't worry about it. Maybe in the future when you've been with me long enough -- we'll see."

"Well," I said after enough of a pause to indicate disappointment, "then let's just talk now. And let's start with this: I do forgive you. Please, stop beating yourself up over this!"

"There's more to it than that. Pete... no one should know this. Not even Carolyn. You understand?"

I paused. "This may be something the therapist needs to know, but go ahead."

"It's not. It's that... I'm pretty sure we were both supposed to die."

I took a deep breath. "How do you know?"

"Pete, when you first saw me, I was out of my body, right? There's a reason for that. I don't know how the crash happened, but I do know it had to have been something I did. So as we were leaving our bodies after the crash, I... I grabbed you and threw you into mine. I didn't want you to lose out because of me."

A long silence followed as I thought about that. Ideally, I'd be me; I'm supposed to be me. But to think that she wanted me to continue life? And her life? Why hers? Nothing made sense.

"Okay... uh... why you? Why not me?"

"I tried that. You wouldn't go back -- the body was too damaged. You should've buckled up before you started."

Oh, yeah, I completely forgot that. "You know that? But you don't know how we crashed?"

"I'm trying to remember, I'm trying. I did get knocked out too, you know. Anyway, I do remember what happened in between. When I got up there, they wanted me to go back. Yeah, I was out of my body, but you kept it alive and I could return."

"So... you did. And here we are."

"Not that easy, sorry. They told me to kick you out and jump in. I didn't want to do that. You deserved to live more than I did. And I said I was willing to give up my life for you... but you can't fight an angel, can you? The best I could do was this. But I wanted it to be YOUR life, not mine. I took your life, after all -- you deserve mine in return."

"...so you pretended you couldn't be you?"

"Yeah... yeah, I did." Stefani sighed, hard enough for us to sigh in our room. "At least now you can live the way you're supposed to."

"So wait, wait... lemme get this straight. You had an out of body experience, you gave me a chance to be you, and even though you were told to let me go, you wouldn't?"

"...yeah?"

"So how long is this going to go on?"

"...I don't know. But I do know that I'm okay sharing my life with you. I owe you. And no matter what, that doesn't change."

I tried to take it all in. "I could be in the grave now. But instead I'm in you. And... and there's nothing I can do to get out. I mean, I... I got that part, but... I thought we HAD to do this, not that you were asking to."

"How would you react if I told you the truth right away? You're... you're not sure. I swear this wasn't some trap, I thought I was doing the right thing. I threw you up into my body to give you that chance. I'm not expecting a thank you or anything. I, I... may have been wrong. But it's done. I fixed my mistake."

"Stef..." I weighted the next part. My emotions were complicated, but the end result was the same no matter what. "I guess it's done. But... I'd have never become your friend or Carolyn's or anyone's, really. This is my life now. And... I may need more time to adjust to it, but it's better than nothing. I think you did more good than harm, Stef. Thank you."

"Really?"

"Really. Let's get some rest. I know Carolyn will want to hit the mall this weekend."

As our eyes closed and Stefani swapped me in control to sleep, I realized that there was another secret I had. Secrets seemed to be everywhere with the three of us: my existence in her head, Carolyn's bisexuality, whatever Stefani knew and I didn't. And now I knew something she didn't, and I was afraid to say -- because then she'd kick me out.

And Stefani has no idea how much she saved me.

### **Three hours later**

"Hey... hey Pete... why aren't we asleep yet?" Stefani manifested herself in the dark next to me as I tossed and turned. "Did we eat too much? Is that it?" I shook my head. "Are you mad at me?" I gave a non-committal face, as if to say sort of. "What's wrong? C'mon, we need to talk about this."

"It's not what you did," I finally coughed up. "It's what you said."

"What do you mean?"

"You told me how you chunked me into this situation, but there was a word that didn't make sense. You said you threw me up at you."

"Yeah... I did that, why?"

"Which way were you going?"

Stefani sighed and thought back. "Well, I was floating, and then I got you and tried to get you back before putting you in me instead, then I went to the light above, and... why?"

Granted, I shouldn't have expected it to hit her out of nowhere, so I guess spelling it out was the way to go. "Stef... you were going up. Which way was I going?"

She gasped and was too stunned to reply for almost a full minute. I just looked at what I could see in the dark of her eyes. Even without being in the same headspace as she was, the thoughts that flashed through her were clear. I just nodded my head as she stared in disbelief. What else did I have to say -- she did me a bigger favor than she realized. Now I just waited to be told to get out.

But that didn't happen right away. "...why do you think you were...?"

"I'm not sure," I muttered. "But I have a bit of an idea. It's pretty clear you were raised to know the Bible and care about other people and so on. I've seen you have friends with everyone. I guess back in the day I'd say you were one of the good idiots."

Stefani revolted. "Idiot?"

I hid my/her face. "Exactly. I was one of those guys who mocked people. Couldn't just have a belief of my own; had to act all smug and superior to others."

"Oh. I see. So you think that's why?"

"Well, I'd hope whatever God there is -- and from what you've told me, there IS one -- wouldn't hold a tough decision about how we got here against me. But... being a jerk and bully? That would keep me out of Heaven, wouldn't it?"

Stefani slumped against the bed. "Maybe, but that's not important right now. And I don't think it matters that you're going to services on Sunday either. Just... now you know better. You have a second chance to be a good person; take it."

I leaned over the bed to make eye contact. "Yeah, but there's so many rules I'm not sure about. Like, do I have to get married to a guy and raise them that way? Or is that gay? But if I find a gal, that's also gay... but then if we let you decide, do I ever have a point and..."

"Hey, hey... calm down. You're thinking too hard about this. We're helping Carolyn, right? You've helped me with studies. You're doing fine."

"Okay..." I lay back in bed, and as I did it felt like my body was slightly lighter. After making sure I wasn't floating out of her body and to my judgment, I smiled to myself. Maybe this was a happy accident. Maybe some invisible sky dad (as I'd dismissively say back in the day) really was watching out for me in a unique way.

"Wait..." Stefani looked up, and in that moment I saw she was smiling. "Does that mean I saved you?"

"I guess so. I told you not to feel guilty."

"Ohmygod... I..." She would have hugged me if she physically could. "Thank you." There was a long pause as she gathered her emotions. Eventually she began looking around. "I'm still here."

"Well, yeah."

"Oh, I, uh... I guessed that there was something holding me back and I thought maybe it was me. I guess this is going on for longer than I thought. Well... I guess now we can get some sleep with a clear mind. We're in this for the long haul."

"Does it bother you?"

"Pete, it was my idea. Does it bother YOU?"

"Not anymore. Thanks, Stef. I guess I had you all wrong. You're not just all talk like... well, that's not important."

"No, I know, I know... I try to act, too. I get it. Thanks. And deep down, you are a good person. There's no need to put others down to stay up."

After a bit of a pause, I felt her re-enter my mind. My last thought was: "I'm glad we're friends now."

### **That Saturday (November 26)**

"Man, everyone's here today!" Carolyn's search for a parking space had taken up all of 15 minutes so far. "C'mon, the sales can wait! Chill out! It's just a Saturday! Don't you all have like football to watch or something?"

I sighed in the passenger seat. "This is why we stayed home."

"Oh, come on, you need to get out more! You're one of us now! It's how it goes!"

"Okay, so what are we doing here?"

"Just gonna do movie, lunch, and store-hopping. You brought a credit card?"

I quickly checked her purse, but as I did I heard her tell me "I'm buying, got it?" "Yeah, yeah..." I instinctively said out loud.

Carolyn giggled upon hearing me. "What did she say?"

"Oh, uh... yeah, she said she's making the decisions about what to buy. But here it is! Plastic ahoy!"

Carolyn smirked at me. "Did you really just say that?"

"...what?"

"You sound like my dad!"

"Eh, men do enjoy a corny joke sometimes. Anyway, point is, we're working out the deets. I think we can handle who's who. So who's gonna be here?"

"Lots of us. You'll know them. Finally! A space! C'mon, get ready."

"This isn't a show, Care, but... okay..." I took a deep breath. "Let's do this."

### **At the mall**

As we chatted and ate in the food court, I looked around at everyone I was hanging out with. Dave, John, Kristy... all these people I considered above me as a nerdier guy interested in math. Now I was one of them, and nobody questioned it -- or, to be fair, knew. They knew her, and they were cool with her, but me? Well, as she'd tell me, I was her and so on, so don't think too hard about it.

"Hey Stef... so what happened at Homecoming, anyway? I heard you screaming."

Oh, geez, Dave was probably setting me up, but heck, why not. "Well, I caught my date with another woman. That will do it to anyone, won't it?"

"I guess any chick would go crazy over that."

"And any dumbass guy would stay on their date! Or do I have something to tell Emma?"

Carolyn and John both covered their mouths in shock. Apparently Stefani wasn't known for her quick wit or for throwing it back at people. To be fair, I was too busy smiling at him and waiting for him to backpedal. But he didn't even blink. "Not yet, but would you like to give her something?" I was very much not amused at this jerk.

Fortunately, John stepped in. "You just did, dumbass. You were kidding, right?"

Dave popped his head up and looked around for Emma, but saw she was nowhere to be found. "Eh... what she don't know don't hurt."

"I'll pretend you were kidding," I told him, adding a smug smile to indicate that I was more than willing to ruin him if he crossed me the wrong way.

"Oh, come on, don't take it so seriously. Like you don't get it from everyone." At this point I felt Stefani manifest outside of me -- after the first meeting with Carolyn, she knew no one would know she was around. She began miming eating popcorn as everyone stared at Dave. I barely kept a straight face from her antics, but fortunately, if you get enough practice acting like someone else, you can shrug most things off.

"Most people I 'get it from' are looking for a better half, not a third wheel. I'm not about to ask Emma for that, and honestly, if you had half a brain, you'd drop it."

At this point, I saw John lean over and tell Dave, "Dude, she's serious. What's with you anyway?"

Dave shrugged. "Just thought I'd shoot my shot."

"Air ball," John retorted. "Sorry, Stef. He's on it today."

"Whatever," I replied while rolling my eyes in my best I'm-so-over-this impression I'd seen the other girls do. Dave went back to eating, but not before I heard Stefani mutter "asshole" while jumping back into my head.

Fortunately, the awkward moment was the exception, not the rule. After lunch was over and we were ready to hit more stores, we saw Julie and Jane walking to the movie theater, hand in hand. "Hey, my favorite duo," John said with a bite of sarcasm. "Gotta rub in that they're too good for men."

"Well, they're too good for you anyway," Carolyn jumped in as I detected a hint of personal bile in her comment. "You go ahead." Carolyn grabbed my arm and pulled me to them. "Hey, you wanna invite 'em over for a night?"

"What, a slumber party?"

Carolyn giggled. "Well, yeah, but that's such a little girl thing. Same idea, though."

"Sure. I'm down." We headed over to them as they were lost in their own world and gave each one a hug in turn. "Hey girls!"

"C-carolyn? Hi! Uh... so nice to see you, I... guess?" Julie began scanning for everyone as Jane stammered her reply. "What's up?"

"Whoa, it's okay -- we're getting away from them. The guys are being stupid today. Anyway, we wanted to do something for you!"

"Us? Really?"

"Sure!" Carolyn took over here. "You all wanna spend the night at my place? Big dinner, games, and stuff?"

"Wait... your folks just LET you invite people over?"

"Sure! C'mon, the four of us, it'll be awesome!"

They looked at each other with a smile. "I... sure! C'mon, let's talk about it before the movie!" And with that, two new friends and two old friends walked off to discuss a night of branching out.

### **At the girls' night that night**

"Wait, he said THAT?" Jane's eyes went wide as I talked about Dave's little attempt at playing the field. "Oh my god, how could he? Does she know?"

"Nah, she wasn't with us today. Should I tell her?"

"YEAH!" they both said at once. "I mean, whoa, if Jane did that to me, I'd want to know." "Hey, what does that mean?" "Well, I know you wouldn't." "Aww..." It was pretty clear they were one of those couples. I got a feeling they'd be together long after school.

Yes, Stefani, I know, like us and Carolyn. Don't remind me. But that's totally different.

"Oh, we're gonna have some dra-ma on Monday," Carolyn said with a laugh. "So, uh, I just wanted to know... how'd you get together?"

"Oh, it's a long story," Julie said although indicating she was happy to re-tell. "See, I figured it out sophomore year, but I didn't wanna tell anyone. But you know, Mom and Dad had to know, and they were so supportive, and they said there was this pride meeting in town."

"And yeah, I went there too, and we saw each other and got to talking about what it was like and what we could do and all that stuff and then we exchanged numbers and here we are."

"And it was Jane's idea to come out together last year. I was so scared that people were gonna get mad at us or beat us up or..."

"Wait, DID anything happen?" Maybe I shouldn't have interrupted, but given how scared Stefani was of her parents, I wanted to find out what was awaiting for us.

"Uh... kinda, not that bad or anything, but you know, people still look at us funny." "Yeah, especially that John guy."

Carolyn groaned in disgust. "You know, I keep telling him it's not a big deal, but he's such a dick about it. I bet he's gay and compensating or something."

"No way!"



"Yeah way, why not?"

"That phobe?" Julie's mind was partially blown. "Not a chance! The guy wants to get both of us, I know it. That's why he's so obsessed."

"Dave all over again," I joked.

"Ew! No way! We'd never!" "Yeah, it's not what we want. Besides, we got us, who needs him?"

### **An hour later**

"Hey, whatcha got there, Care?"

"Some candles and rope -- I got an idea. But you gotta do it." Julie and Jane were off calling their parents to confirm they could stay the rest of the night, so it was just the two or three of us for the time being. "Stef, Pete -- this would be awesome if we can pull it off."

"Uh-oh." We paused, then Stef stepped in to add "We both said that."

"Hey, easy, it's okay. So I thought we'd give them a funny scare. You in?"

It didn't matter which of us spoke, we were both thinking the same thing: "What's the plan?"

"Okay, so you know how Julie said she always wanted to talk to a dead person?"

"Whoa, whoa, whoa -- I was scared enough telling YOU I existed, I'm not spreading the word."

"Nonononononono" Carolyn's panic in her voice made it clear she wanted to stop me from getting any wrong ideas. "We'll just say you're pretending. It's an act!"

"So... who's doing this?"

"You decide. C'mon, it'll be a way to show they're cool with us."

"...gee, I dunno..." I guess I could see the appeal of entertaining them, but at the same time, what if Julie believed this was real? What if she figured it out? How long before everyone knew? Wait, why would she think it was real? What was I so worried about? "Eh, I guess. But neither of us know her too well."

"That's not the point! Just make things up. It'll be great!"

I smiled. Maybe it was the chance to get away with being myself around a crowd and not get anyone in trouble, but there was a part of me that found it appealing. "Yeah... I can do it. Let's go."

### **Later that night**

Carolyn had arranged the ropes in a circle and pentagram, with five candles, one at each point. Julie and Jane returned, with full permission to stick around, and stopped in their tracks mid-telling us upon seeing the arrangement. "Uh oh," Jane finally said. "What's this?"

"Oh, I wanted to try something. Julie, you said you wished you could talk to a dead person?"

Julie's eyes went wide in excitement. "Yeah! Who'd you have in mind?"

"Well, how about Petey? See how he's adjusting to the other side?"

"...hm. I mean, I had classes with him, but it's not like we were close... but hey, sure, why not?"

"Julie, you really think that they..." "Worth a try." Jane rolled her eyes and sat down with us as Carolyn lit the candles. She leaned over to me and whispered, "I never got used to this thing she had."

"Hey, what's the worst that could happen?"

Jane sighed as Carolyn turned off most of the lights. She sat down and lifted her head back. "Petey... hey, buddy... can you hear us? Come on out..." It was so over the top Jane had to stifle laughter, which she did upon seeing Julie's eyes dart around looking for signs of my presence. After a few sounds that became "did you hear that"s and giggling, I leaned forward to talk to Carolyn. "I, uh, don't know if it's worrrr... whaaaaaaa...."

By leaning forward, I was inside the circle. I began to breathe heavily before falling in and shaking a little. Julie shrieked in surprise as Carolyn did a pretend freakout. "Steffy? What's going on?" I just kept hyperventilating as I avoided hitting the candles, hoping Julie would make the leap of logic to play along with our idea.

"Ohmygod, he's possessing her!" She did. "Stef! STEF! Are you okay?"

I stopped convulsing enough to sit up, grabbing my head. "Wh-where am I?" I said, acting like I was in a new location. Every little bit helped. "Hey... you're Julie, aren't you? And... Carolyn, I've seen you around... what's everyone looking at?"

Jane was the first to talk. "Stefani? Are you okay?"

"Stef...?" I looked around at myself. "Eek! What the hell? How did this happen?"

"Uh... you fell into the circle while we were trying to talk to our old classmate Petey?"

I gasped and made my eyes as wide as possible. "Oh... oh wow. That's what happened. Yeah... one minute I'm up on a cloud playing some video games and now..." I looked down at our body. "Gotta say, this is not what I expected."

"Petey!" Julie went to give me a hug. "You're here! This is awesome!"

"Wait, stand back or he'll jump to you," Carolyn said as if this was some hard and fast rule. "Petey... what happened?"

"Uh... well, I had just gotten my schedule and books, and I was pulling out of the parking lot... and I guess I hadn't buckled up yet -- always do that -- so when I pulled out a little too fast and, yeah, boom." I then looked down at myself. "Thanks a LOT."

"Aw, I'm sure she didn't mean it," Carolyn threw in. "But what's it like up there?"

"Well, uh, it's just free time all the time. No work, no study, just hanging out and playing all day! It's awesome! But... well, I do get a little lonely up there."

"Awww, why?" Julie looked legitimately concerned. "What's wrong?"

I shrugged as if the answer was obvious. "You're all still alive. I'm not. I had to go make new friends, see new people... and honestly, I kinda miss you all. But... I can't go back. That's the whole point."

"Can't they do something about that? I mean, you saying Heaven would leave you lonely?" I don't think Jane was as amused as Julie or Carolyn were.

"Well, you wanna join me?"

"NO! No, that's not what I meant! Like, can't they invent friends for you?"

"Maybe? It's just that... I..." I sighed as if looking for the right words. "Suppose I got copies of you in Heaven for me. Wouldn't that be weird?"

Jane shrugged. "I'd never know, would I?"

Julie, on the other hand, was practically bouncing up and down. "Whoa, that would be wild! Am I up there? Can we be part of this?"

"...you don't mind?"

"And I'll vouch for me and Steffy!" Carolyn knew when she had an opportunity to steer this. "Four girlfriends for you!"

"Now that's Heaven!" Everyone laughed. We kept this up for another 30 minutes or so before I told them I had to go. Quickly, I leaned back, falling out of the circle, before Stef jumped in and sat herself up. "Did it work?" she asked innocently as the laughter continued. Julie walked over and gave us both a thank-you hug. I guess we made new friends.

### **That night, around midnight**

Carolyn's parents, hosting veterans they apparently were, had given us a slew of blankets, pillows, and sleeping bags for the night in the basement. Carolyn slept on the floor. She insisted

I take the couch. Julie and Jane were given sleeping bags, but they couldn't resist the opportunity to share one. As I rolled onto my side, I saw them curled up together, smiles on their faces as they nodded off.

"Hey... hey, you up?" Carolyn popped her head up into my field of vision, startling me. "Oh, did I wake you?"

"No, but don't just jump up like that!"

"Oh... sorry. Uh, just wanted to say thanks for playing along with that, you two."

"Hey, as you say, what are friends for?" I smiled. "So you think they bought it?"

"Who cares? They had fun."

"Honestly, I hope they didn't. You know, cuz..."

Carolyn shushed me and smiled. "You worry too much. It was a game. So, uh, you think we can bring 'em in like with you?"

She had to mean me and not Stef, but Stef answered anyway. "Different thing, Care. He had to be here. They... I mean, it's nice and all, but you know how the boys would be."

"Ugh, right. Well... what do we do?"

"Just be their friends?"

"...sure. I can do that. Anyway, g'night, Steffy!" She leaned in to pat me on the head before dropping back down to sleep.

### **Sunday morning**

As everyone was packing up the next morning, I stopped Julie to talk. "Hey... I had a good time. I'll try to see you more."

"Thanks! Me and Jane would love that. Someone like you accepting us? It would be great."

"Any time," I said. "I had a blast. Especially seeing how much you got into that whole Petey thing."

Julie smiled. "You did your best. I dunno if he'd be like that, but it was fun to pretend. So how did you know what to say?"

Stefani hesitated, so I jumped in and gave an answer. "Oh, you know how boys are -- I just went with what they do and guessed for the rest."

"Ah. You ever thought of doing a school play?"

"Nah... too much work. Acting's not my thing." Of course, acting was entirely my thing ever since this arrangement started, but it's not like I was going to tell her that. "See you soon!"

### **An hour later**

As Carolyn was taking me home, she pulled over to get lunch. Before getting out, though, she made it clear she wanted to talk to us. "Hey -- Petey? Can I ask something personal?"

"Yeah, I mean, why not? We're kinda sorta dating, right? Ow!" yes, I said Ow out loud after Stef smacked the back of my head in our mind.

Carolyn laughed. "Maybe not. That's not important right now. I was wondering, like... what really happened?"

"You mean... that day?"

"Yeah."

"Um... okay, I'll do my best. I mean, the accident is what I said it was. And I don't remember much else about being out of my body. So, like, when I woke up, I was already like this and... yeah, those first few minutes were kinda freaky."

"Yeah, but... did you just know, or what?"

"Uh... it took a couple seconds, but I was worried I was bleeding and checked the rear-view mirror, and that's when I saw her where I was supposed to be. And then I checked the rest of me to make sure, and, yep, I'm a girl."

"Okay... so what about her?"

"That's the weird part. She was next to me."

"Next to you? Like in your head?"

"No, next to me in the car. See, when I wound up in her body" -- I added a hasty "for some reason" at Stefani's insistence -- "she gained the power to jump in and out. Mostly she just gets my attention with it, but sometimes it's because she wants to see what I'm gonna do."

"Whoa, trippy, out-of-body! How come she doesn't do that with me?"

"Well, uh... she has. But I'm the only one who can notice. Like, remember that first night when I looked behind me all of a sudden?"

"...not really, but okay?"

"Yeah, she jumped into the back seat to see what would happen. You saw me looking back there and, nothing. You even said nobody was there."

"Ohhh... aww. I kinda wanna see double. That would be awesome!"

Stefani jumped in. "No, I don't want you to see me, Care. Sorry, but if you can, they can, and then what? I'm crazy enough with two voices, you wanna go to the bin with me?"

"No way! Okay, it's part of the secret, I get it. So... Stef, what was it like for you? Like, did this just happen to you?"

Stefani looked back at me; I encouraged her to just say it.

"Care... uh... well, I know what Petey said last night, but honestly, I screwed up and ran into him, so, uh..."

"Whoa -- it's in the past, it's an accident, no one's paying for it, right?"

"Whatever. Point is, I heard this voice tell me that we weren't supposed to die, but his body couldn't take anyone. So I just offered mine and said I'd go away."

"Nooooo -- you didn't!"

"Yeah, I did."

"So why are you here?"

"They wouldn't let me. I'm not ready to die and I'm not really a bad person. There's nowhere for me. So they sent me back and told me what I could do, like the pop in and pop out thing."

"So when you woke up, you're looking at... you?"

"Yup. It's all messed up. So I caught him up and we went on doing this."

Carolyn was clearly processing everything. "Regrets?"

"No. No, none. I've learned a few things. We're getting along like this."

"Until I started thinking about him, huh?"

"Care, wait, it's not like that. You know Mom and Dad. How am I supposed to tell 'em I'm dating a girl?"

"...tell 'em?"

"But I'm not! It's not like that! We're friends, I swear! I still wanna be a wife and a mom and all that, okay? It's just... how I am. I like boys. Is that bad?"

"...well, I like you. And him. And, like, is that bad?"

Stefani leaned forward in despair. "Are you mad?"

"Not like that... look, this is all weird and new and stuff. I don't know what I'm doing, you don't, he doesn't. We just gotta... fly it out there and hope. But you know what? I'm willing to give it a try. Like, not just now, but in college, too. We need each other. Friends can need, right?"

Stefani leaned back, a little drained, so I stepped in. "Well, she may not know, but I do. I kinda do need someone I can be me around. And whether it's dating or friends or whatever, I know I'll have you for life. And you know what? Maybe I'll get used to being a mom. I'm almost used to having a period as it is."

Carolyn giggled at the awkward transition. "See, Steffy? I know you hear me. It's gonna be all right, Stef!"

"No need to shout. But yeah... it'll be all right. Her life... I'm just here."

"Hey -- as long as I'm here, you're not just here. What are friends for?"

"I thought that was your line for her."

"Nah -- just a thing I like to say. Reminds me to be there for my peeps. And you're one of them now, Petey. You're one of them."

### **November 30**

With tests coming up on Friday, I was hoping to take that Wednesday away from everyone else to study. I had the books spread out and was sitting under the stairs to the second floor of school, desperately trying to remember which article of the Constitution granted what power to whom. I even had a long sheet of paper with three columns to put each item under, as if writing it would help me remember it.

"Stefani? Hey, you need help?"

I looked up. It was Jason, another guy from our group. I didn't sit near him when we were all together during breaks and for lunch, so I rarely heard more than a few sentences from him, but I knew enough to know (1) he was a good enough guy, unlike Dave or John, and (2) Kristy had the hots for him, big time.

"Sure. Thanks, Jase! You got your Constitution memorized any better than I do?"

"Pretty sure I stopped paying attention after We the People," he laughed. For the rest of that lunch period, we filled out the list and quizzed each other. As time went on, I became more confident in my knowledge and more understanding of who did what and which amendment went where. Jason seemed happy to help, too. Everything felt great.

And then, two minutes before the next class, he dropped a bombshell. "Hey, uh... look, this time was awesome and I know this is kinda sudden, but -- you doing anything Friday night?"

Oh. Okay then. Before having us answer, I took a quick look behind me. Sure enough, I was getting full-on encouragement from my other half. Well, here goes...

"Really? Why do you ask?" I said innocently, which had the unintended consequence of throwing Jason way off his game.

"Oh, uh... should I, uh... is this bad? I just figured, you know, I... well, I was hoping..."

"Easy, Jase, you're fine. I know where this is going; yes, I'm free. Now... you ask." This was meant to be disarming and get him back on track; apparently, I forgot I had some aura of being a big deal.

"Okay, yeah. Sorry. Stefani, I'm also free Friday. Would you like to do something together?"

I'm not saying I blamed him for being nervous; I would be too if I was asking... well, asking me, I guess. Heck, we both knew that if I ever asked Carolyn out I'd be like this, and she was already a great friend! Anyway, I gave my best innocent smile, making sure not to put the words into his mouth. "Oh, I suppose. What did you have in mind?"

"I, uh, I didn't really have anything real in mind yet, but, uh... I mean, we'd have a couple days to work it out, but I was hoping that, uh, you could..."

"Spit it out, Jason, I'm not going to get mad."

"Okay." He took a deep breath. "Stefani, will you go out with me on Friday?"

"Sure! Now was that so hard? Here... here's my number. Call me tonight and we'll work something out." I scribbled my number down on a torn corner of a page and handed it to him before watching him stick it in his pocket with a huge sense of relief and excitement. As he headed to his class and I packed up, I waved to him and smiled. He may have just walked to his next class, but I'd been there; he was walking because he couldn't fly.

### **That evening**

That night, after hanging up with Jason, I practically floated over to the bed and lay down on it. After a contented sigh, I felt Stefani manifest next to me. "Well," she said with a smirk. "You certainly took to dating guys a lot faster than you thought." I just smiled and shrugged. "If I didn't know any better, I'd say you already liked him." If she was trying to get me to snap out of it, it wasn't working yet. "Hello? Petey? Is there a boy in there?" I faced her and stuck out my tongue playfully. "But seriously, what happened to being afraid you were gay?"

Okay, that needed an answer. "Maybe you were right; maybe the body and hormones overrule the mind. All I know is that this idea is exciting. More than with Matt, too, although there's something similar." I sat up quickly and looked at her. "You think maybe it's just being social again? How big a part of your life was this?"



"Okay, yeah, last year being in a couple was great... while it lasted," she said, her voice dropping off to an understandable bitterness at the end. "And I'll admit it; Matt may not have been the guy you wanted or the guy I wanted, but being back at Homecoming felt like a return to normal. You don't think that's part of it, do you?"

"So what if it is?" I said in a singsong voice. "Seriously... it's nice to be wanted."

"Well, maybe so, but don't read too much into it. You were able to keep a distance with Matthew and we both were better off for it. And that was in public."

"Stef, what are you afraid of?"

"Look, it's not anything about Jason; he's a good guy, it's clear he values you, and he'd never be that evil. But the fact remains that most guys are bigger, stronger, and more persistent. And that means--"

"Whoa, wait!" I had to swallow my voice practically because I couldn't believe what I was hearing. "Are you saying he... he'd do that to... to us?"

"That? Oh, god, I hope not! I got no reason to think he would, anyway!"

"Whew."

"But even so, he may ask us to go along with it. And I promised myself not until college. You're going to follow that. Got it? And I'd say the same thing with Carolyn, before you ask."

"I... uh... wasn't about to..." I paused and blushed a little. "Well, maybe in a couple months or so... but..."

"I thought so. Anyway, just protect us and be careful with him. You need any help, I'll be coaching you. And one more thing."

"Yeah?"

"Have fun, hot stuff." She mimicked punching my arm before jumping back in and helping me giggle and smile myself to sleep.

## **Friday, December 2**

Okay, so I have to admit going to a mini-golf course was not what I would have done -- I always thought a dinner-and-a-movie routine was good enough -- but certainly I appreciated that Jason was willing to try something different and fun rather than the usual. I will grant it was harder than I remember as a guy. Maybe because I didn't have the arm strength. Oh, who cares? It's not about the score. It was about chatting with him and sharing time.

After turning in our scorecards and sharing some fries and a burger in the shop, we walked back to the car. "Hey, thanks for this, Stefani. I can't believe it's gone so well so far."

"Well, why wouldn't it? You've been a gentleman. You've been sweet. Why would anything go wrong?"

"Well, I... I've been meaning to ask you for months, and... now it's happening, and... I just... thanks. This is wonderful."

I giggled and hugged him from the side. "You're so cute. Don't worry. Everything went fine." I looked up into his eyes as we stood outside his car. In one moment, things seemed to make sense: he'd felt this way forever, I'd felt a need for someone since I got here... no wonder I was so giddy when he asked.

He leaned in. I leaned back, finding myself against his car door. I didn't care. There was no one around. I closed my eyes. I let his hands go to my back. I was ready. It happened. It was enticing. It was... what we needed.

When time stopped standing still, we looked into each other's eyes. I found myself smiling in a way I hadn't in months. His smile no longer was a nervous, laughing one. It looked and felt genuine and truly happy. "Does this mean we're going out now?" he finally asked.

I nodded. We kissed again. We got in the car and began to head home, as he drove with one hand on the wheel, the other in mine. Every once in a while, I'd feel his hand slide up my arm, pushing away my sleeve. "Hey now, keep driving. I don't want to be in another accident," I told him. All the time, Stef's voice in the back of my head was happily laughing and sighing along with me. Yes, I know; you win.

When we got to my place, the lights were out except for the one in Mom and Dad's room. Jason parked in our driveway and turned off the car. He looked into my eyes and leaned over, kissing me again. "Um... I don't wanna say goodbye yet."

"Me neither," I cooed. "What were you thinking?"

"Do I have to answer that?"

I burst out laughing. "You're such a male. Well, no, I don't do that. Sorry."

"Yeah, that's fine, of course! We couldn't anyway. But... is there anything?"

I smiled a little and invited him over to my seat as I leaned back. "Outside the clothes for now," I told him as I felt him holding and kissing me. As we held each other and enjoyed each other's company, I could hear Stefani's voice in my head: "this is so much better than Brian ever was..."

After we finally said goodbye, I practically skipped back to my room, a smile sandblasted onto my face. Everything felt right again. I felt alive again. And yeah, if you'd told me a boy would make me feel the happiest I ever had, it would have taken me a long time to come around to understanding that.

"I told you we were straight," came a teasing voice from Stefani as she appeared next to me, both of us lying down. "Now wasn't that so much better than just working your way up to Carolyn?"

"You're welcome," I replied with a sheepish grin. "Don't think I didn't notice you were pulling a few controls."

"Hardly. You can connect with someone's mind all you want... the body wants what it wants. You knew that already. You could have kissed Carolyn by now; why haven't you?"

"...because it didn't feel right."

"Exactly!"

"But who's to say it wouldn't have?"

"Oh, stop trying to argue. Your heart isn't in it, is it?"

"...well, we didn't say those words, you know."

"I noticed. Do you love him?" Stefani propped herself up on one arm and looked at me. "No, seriously, is this love now?"

"Was it with Brian?"

"Oof... Uno Reverse, huh?" She fell back onto her back, both of us staring at the ceiling as we chatted. "Okay, I thought it was at the time. But I kind of figured out that what I felt was attraction. You probably feel it that way too. Honestly, I haven't dated as much as you think. Brian was my first kiss."

"Really?"

"Yeah... so I don't blame you for feeling all warm and fuzzy. We don't have much to go on."

I paused and thought about what I really felt -- maybe she was right, we were just attracted for now. Maybe love took time. Maybe he knew that too. But I knew that whatever it was didn't change how incredible tonight was.

"Still hot, right?"

"Oh, totally. Can I kiss him next time?"

### **The next day (December 3)**

"Sorry, Care." Not the way I expected to begin our conversation as we had our mall trip this week, but it was the first words out of our mouth. We agreed that just breaking the news to her

would be the best, since if I didn't exist that's exactly what she would do. Even so, beginning that way even caught me a little off-guard.

"Sorry? Why?"

"Well... I know you and I are cool and all, and we've been clicking and all that since I got here..."

"Oh, you're Petey, okay," she said, nodding as she drove.

"Yeah. Yeah, but... well, something happened last night."

Carolyn gasped in surprise. "You and Jason? Really?" After I nodded and blushed, she continued in a burst of energy. "Oh my god, I can't believe it! I knew he was trying to talk to you, but I was certain he was gonna blow it and instead you're saying it worked? You're going out now, wonderful! What's he like? Is he a good kisser? Tell me, tell me, tell me!"

"...you're not disappointed?"

"Why? What would I... oh you mean us? Hey, look, I told you -- you find someone, go for it. Besides, who made the decision, anyway, you or her?"

I knew what she was expecting me to say, but... "Well, that's just it."

Carolyn's enthusiasm plummeted. "Wait, really? How?"

"Are you mad?"

"I... I'm confused. You? I thought you wanted a girl."

"I... well, you know how you saw how nervous I was that one time? There was none of that. Everything felt right. It was just... real. And I'm not saying it couldn't be, you know, if we did that, but like... it happened."

"Ohhh -- you fell in love, huh?"

"Um, Care? I'm not using that word. Not after what happened with her and Brian."

"Oh, I get it! Like when I first dated John sophomore year! Yeah, I know the feel, girl. Does he get it?"

"Well, he didn't say it to me, so... maybe?"

"Good. Sounds like you're learning how to be one of the girls, Petey."

"Oh, god, that sounds so messed UP!" We both laughed out loud at the absurdity of... everything, really. "I'm not some spy or something! I'm just a... I dunno, brain?"

"Hey... you're a happy brain. That matters."

"I guess so, yeah. This felt great. But I was wondering how it would feel with you... before last night, anyway."

Carolyn tilted her head. "Didn't you say you'd do this for her?"

"Yeah... I guess I will."

"Would she do it for you?"

I waited to hear her answer. "She says she doesn't know. I get it. It's her life I'm in."

By this time we'd made it to the mall, but Carolyn paused before opening the car door. "No, Stef/Pete. Far as I see it, you're in it together. If that means you start watching football for him or kissing boys for her or... anything in between, that's the way it is."

"Well, what would you know?" "Stef, shh! Not cool!" "No, I'm serious -- you can say you get it all you want, but you don't because you're One Person and I'm not! I have a voice in my head, but I'm still me! Don't tell him to take this away from me! Yeah, I watched last night, but it felt so good I want it to last and I don't want to hear I have to give this away because of some good deed I did for him that means my opinion means shit now! Please... just let me be me..." Stefani was close to making us cry.

Once again I felt that comforting, mothering hug from Carolyn. It was a similar comfort to Jason -- one that meant that as long as it was the two of us, things would be fine. "Stefani, you're right. It's not the same. But you know what? He knew what to do when the time came. So will you. You're a team -- you wanted him to live, right?"

"Yeah... I guess I did..."

"Okay. So he's got his chance. No backsies, right? But look -- he gave you a boyfriend! What's wrong with that?"

"I don't know... I... I'm just scared that he's gonna take over and then what am I?"

"Would you, Petey?"

We sat next to each other by the controls, and while our body echoed what I said, I meant it for her and not Carolyn mostly. "No, Stef. You have your family to be you, we're with your friends, we do your activities... I'm learning to be you, but I can't do it as well as you do. You've given me a little more life than I deserve. I won't be greedy."

Carolyn looked at us. "Is that cool, Stef?"

We gulped hard before she responded. "...you're right. And I guess if I discovered something about me, you're there to go there. But I got Jason now... can I keep him?"

Carolyn smiled. "I'm not jealous. I can still be friends with the both of you. It's chill. C'mon, let's go get lunch and you two tell me all about it."

I got a little nervous at the emphasis on all. "Like, all of it? Care! I thought that was a guy thing!"

It's not often you hear laughter inside and outside of your head, but as we headed to the mall, it was clear I hadn't learned everything about my life. And that, in some ways, boys and girls were way more alike than I'd thought.

## **Tuesday, December 6**

While I had dated before -- if you count asking someone to Homecoming and leaving it at that as a date -- having a date turn into anything like a relationship was a first. But here I was, walking down the school hallway to lunch, holding hands with Jason and just living in the moment. I know other couples would talk, but this early on I wasn't sure what to say. Just... this. In spite of my reservations, this felt right.

Our little bubble was burst soon, however, when I heard a sob by one of the lockers. I turned to see Julie, head in her hands, crying, while Jane sat next to her and consoled her. I stopped and got Jason's attention to get him to stick around. We bent down next to Julie to talk to her.

"You okay, buddy?" Jason wasn't as familiar with them as I was.

"Julie? What's wrong?" I then whispered to Jason their names to avoid awkwardness as he nodded in comprehension.

"...I didn't get in. I let Dad down."

"Didn't get in to where?"

"Dad's school in Houston. I wanted to be smart enough to follow him, but... I got the rejection letter yesterday. I don't wanna tell Dad I wasn't good enough for him."

Jane hugged her girlfriend. "There, there. I know your dad will understand. You still got other schools, right?"

"Yeah... Carolina Tech, Cambridge U, and of course State and Tech if that falls apart."

Jason thought. "Well, Cambridge is a long shot, but Tech? That's just a jock school, right? You'll be fine."

"Jason, just because they do well in sports doesn't mean they're a jock school." Truth be told, I was looking at Carolina Tech in my life, so I was a bit of an expert on this. "I think Houston was her best chance to go out of state." I turned to Julie. "Hey, I'm probably going to State. I'll look you up. You'll have friends!"

"I... I guess, but... I should have! I know it! I had the grades, the essays, everything!" Julie pounded the locker with her fist, drawing some attention that Jason and I had to tell to move along. "I was so looking forward to it; I got my hopes up."

"I'm sorry, Julie." Jason patted her on the head as I offered a hug. "You're gonna do well. Don't worry."

She sniffled. "Th-thanks. I gotta get together before class." Julie took some deep breaths as we walked on, but before we could get anywhere Jane, stopped me. "Hey, uh, we need to talk. I think something's up."

Jason and I looked at each other before talking to her. "Um... a competitive school not taking a student isn't something up, Jane."

"No, I'm serious!" The junior's insistence meant we at least had to listen. "Okay, I don't know much about how this works, but she told me she had to get reference letters from teachers, right?" We both nodded. "Okay, so she told me she got her old history teacher to do one of them. Mr. Janikowski -- he teaches me this year. And he was going on about a country under God and blah blah blah and then he talked about Manifest Destiny and so on and... well, he then asked to speak to me after class." Hm. She could've started there, but okay.

"And... what did he say?"

"First he asked if Julie and I were still 'doing that stuff'. I don't know what he's thinking, but... he then said to remember that sometimes bad things happen to bad people."

Jason was mad. "Oh, is that so? C'mon, Stef, he's gonna hear it."

Before I could protest that he didn't have to get involved, he was marching to Mr. J's room, my hand still in his, meaning I practically had to run to keep up. "Jason, wait, wait!" I began.

"What? This is bullshit what he did."

"We don't know he did it!"

Jason stopped in his tracks. "I wanna find out," he finally said. "If he's dumb enough to taunt her girlfriend, he's dumb enough to tell us, right?"

"Isn't this a thing for the principal?"

"If he did it. Let's find out." I wasn't winning the argument right now, and Julie was a friend of mine, so eventually I sped up to keep up with Jason as we headed to see if Mr. J would be that cruel.

**In the history classroom**

Mr. Janikowski was one of the new teachers in school, fresh out of college. He wasn't yet 30 from what we could tell, and he certainly dressed like a throwback -- button-down shirts, full suit, and slicked-back hair like something out of Wall Street. Everything about him was a business look, save for the cross he wore around his neck on prominent display. "Hm, no Jesus on it," Stefani noted to me as we sat down.

"Sir... um, we heard something and we just want to know." Jason was taking the lead in this one. "You familiar with Julie Bryce?"

Mr. J smirked. "Yeah, I know her."

"Well, uh, I just want to warn you she could use your re-assurance right now."

"Mine? Why?"

"Well, she asked you for a reference letter for her college application to her dad's school and she just found out she didn't get in. She's really hurt."

Mr. J rolled his eyes. "Look, if I apologized to every kid I wrote a letter for who got rejected, I wouldn't have time to teach, would I?"

"I-it's not that," I jumped in. "Someone's getting in her ear and blaming you for tanking her."

Mr. J looked around the empty classroom before sighing and looking right at us. "C'mon, gimme a break," he said. "You telling me she can't take no for an answer, so she and her qxxxr bxxxh are gonna make me the bad guy? Just like those, right? Can't fit in, so they gotta be the victim. You don't believe them, do you?"

I saw Jason's teeth grit as he went to lean in on him and get in his face across the desk. Quickly, I threw myself between the two of them. After turning around to calm Jason off the edge of doing something he'd regret, I turned back to Mr. J. "For the record, I do now." I looked at the necklace. "Would Jesus approve of what you did?"

"Oh, little miss Death Race 2000 is telling me what Jesus thinks?" Mr. J's attitude changed from cordial to formal, now to defensive. "I did nothing wrong. Unlike you."

Now Jason had to practically put me in a headlock to get me to calm down. As I did, his arm slid down to my shoulder in a side-hug. He glared at Mr. J. "We're done here," he said in a tone of someone imitating a TV character before leaving the classroom with me.

As we caught our breath outside his room, we didn't even need to exchange glances. Each of us independently was headed to the principal's office.

**In the principal's office**



Mr. Bryant gave us a sympathetic ear about the whole thing, but shook his head when we were done. "I don't like how he spoke about a student here. I will definitely write him up for using the language he did, and for his implication against you. We know it was an accident."

"Okay, I understand for me," I said, a little insistently. "But this is about what he did to Julie."

"Well, unfortunately, all you've given me is circumstantial evidence. I didn't see his recommendation and odds are I won't unless I contact Houston College. And I don't know if they'll release it. I'm sorry, but we don't like punishing people without going through the process -- student or teacher."

"We're not lying!"

"Jason, I'm not saying anyone is lying. I'm saying that there's a gap between accusation and proof. I don't know how to fill that gap. Now, I'll talk to Miss Bryce's guidance counselor and see if she can do a follow-up. That's all I got. I'm sorry."

Jason and I sighed in defeat. "Well... I'm sure she'll let us know how it goes. In the meantime, tell him not to be such a d... not to talk like that." Jason caught himself before he went too far.

"Absolutely. Thank you both for bringing his attitude to my attention."

### **After school**

"Hey, Julie."

"S...stefani?"

"Yeah. Just wanted to tell you that I don't think it's your fault you got rejected."

"It... it isn't?"

"Look, Jane told me she had this idea that..."

"Oh, yeah, she said it was a fuckup by a teacher, yeah. Nah, that's nice of her to think that, but I just wasn't good enough."

"...well... I'm not sure. We talked to the teacher and he, uh... said some bad shit."

The silence on the other end of the line told me all I needed to about how this was registering with her. "What did he say?"

"I'm not telling you the words, but... yeah."

"...oh."

"We already told Mr. Bryant about it. He's gonna get in trouble for what he said, but... I mean... all I got is a thought."

"I thought Janey was just being nice. Oh god. This can't be happening."

"I'm sorry, Julie. Is there anything I can do to help?"

"N-no, I... I just... I gotta talk to Dad, I'm sorry. Bye."

"Yeah... bye."

The abrupt disconnection on the other end of the line left me holding a phone for no reason. I imagined Julie was going to tell her dad that she got cheated, and they'd have a long talk about how it's important not to blame others but you don't understand this really happened I know it hurts dear... the usual. But I did hope the key would be that her dad was still on her side.

Soon the phone rang again. "Hello?"

"Steffy!"

"Care! Hey! Hang on, Jason's texting me. Lemme just reply..."

"Aww... so you're both okay with this?"

Fortunately, I'd made a habit of closing my door when on the phone. "Yeah, she was right, I guess. I'm just... this is awesome!"

"Well, good for you! Hey, so I saw you two were in the principal's office today -- what happened? You get caught?"

"What? Care!" Her laughter indicated she didn't really believe that.

"Gotcha! But seriously, what happened?"

"Well, it's a long story, but basically that history teacher, Mr. Jani... Jan..."

"Just say J, Petey, we all do."

"Right. So Mr. J said some bad words about Julie and we reported him for it."

"Yeah, he's bad news. Sooner he's gone, the better."

"Tell me about it. I wanted to strangle him."

"Now, now, Pete, no being a caveman. You two are better than that."

"Yeah, I know. But it's not like Steffy was trying to stop me. He's a dick!"

"Oh, you have no idea."

"What do you mean?"

"...uh, I'll explain later. Just wanted to see if you two were good! Send him a selfie -- he'll love that!"

"Okay, Care, thanks! Bye!" I ended the conversation and saw Jason's warm compliments about how I was today. I quickly positioned the camera to catch our face before adding the caption "You're making me blush" and sending it. For now, I guess I was living her life.

"Oh, look, you even got my good side!" Stefani was suddenly next to me, looking at the picture. "Thanks!"

"Yeah, well, I guess we're more you than me."

"Why, this? I don't know. When you and Carolyn are talking together I can feel how happy you are too. I don't think either one is the real us. Or, like, we both are, somehow."

"...so if Carolyn and me were to, you know..."

"...yeah, I think I would've been surprised. But I'm guessing. That's not important. Jason's here." We both stared at the phone as we texted. "He doesn't talk much, does he?"

"It's not like I'd know what to say to me either, Stef."

"I'm sure he'll figure it out." Stefani jumped back in as we both smiled a dizzy smile at the phone in our hands. Sometimes it didn't matter that we said nothing. Just having that window open was like having him by us. And right now, that was enough.

### **Wednesday, December 7**

Seeing as how Julie had already received bad news, I knew that State's early application responses had to be coming soon. As I walked back from the bus stop -- Mom promised we could drive again after Christmas -- Stef had us do a quick check of our mailbox. It was empty; someone beat me to it. I was anticipating another day of anxiety as I entered my house, but my place at the kitchen table had a big surprise waiting for me.

I didn't think I was capable of producing such a high-pitched squeal of delight, but to be fair, I didn't take into account her vocal cords. Or her way of expressing excitement.

"MOM! MOM, I GOT IN!" Stef raced us to her in the living room as we gave her a big hug and practically jumped out of her shoes. "I'm going to college!" The next few minutes I just sat back and let her the two of them celebrate together and talk about how much it meant to her mother that she got in -- something her mother never got to do. Tears of joy were falling from our eyes as we raced upstairs. Homework could wait; this was important!

"CARE! CARE! I GOT INTO STATE!"

"Ahhhh! ME TOO! We're gonna be roomies!!"

Much as I wanted to, I couldn't follow the excited conversation they had for the next few minutes. I don't hear that quickly.

Anyway, after they were done discussing their plans for the next four years -- I think -- Stef hung up and stared in delight at the package she had received. Sure, there was also a letter attached to it, but opening and reading it was a formality. Of course it welcomed her to the school: if the letter said she hadn't gotten in, why send a package of information?

After reminding her to open the letter just to confirm what we already knew -- and yes, it welcomed her to State -- Stefani's heart slowed down and her adrenaline began to subside. She sat back in her bed and smiled to herself, holding the package to her heart. Finally, in the calm, I felt I could speak to her.

"Well... that was quite the reaction."

"What's the matter?" Stefani thought back jokingly. "You've never seen a girl freak out in delight before?"

"Nothing like that, no."

"You don't have a sister?"

"Not now, I don't -- we're an only child, remember?"

"I meant... oh, forget it. You're saying you wouldn't be that excited?"

"...well, okay, I would be, but I think my reaction wouldn't have been that over-the-top. Maybe because I'd be more like Julie and hoping for a more prestigious school." After realizing I had accidentally insulted our achievement, I hastily added, "Well, I mean, getting in anywhere is something, but..."

"Yeah yeah yeah, I know. If Julie was stuck going to State that would be a disappointment. I heard you were in that group."

"I didn't mean anything by it, I promise!"

"I'm not mad, okay? Anyway, now this IS where we're going. And Carolyn's going to be with us. We won't have to start over. And she'll be there for us."

"Yeah... you have a point. Congratulations, Stef." We hugged inside her mind just as her phone buzzed from a text message. It was Jason. "Someone said big news?" he wrote.

Stefani looked back at me. "Can I talk to him this time?" I nodded and smiled -- hey, he's her boyfriend too -- and just watched.

"Care and I got into State!"

"Awesome! Congrats!"

"u?"

"I didn't apply early, need the grades."

"rooting for ya"

"Thanks, babe (heart)"

After an awkward pause, during which I'm sure I saw Stef tilt her head in confusion, she continued:

"I wanna celebrate"

"Cool -- Fri?"

"Yeah :)"

"I'll plan something, tell you tomorrow."

"can I help"

"Oh yeah (doh), got any faves?"

After the two were done hammering out our next date, we headed over to work on our homework. As we tried to puzzle out our problem sets, Stefani manifested and got my attention. "Hey... something seem off about Jason?"

"Like what?"

"Like I had to suggest doing something Friday."

I shrugged. "I'd have thought Mom and Dad would do something Friday first."

"Well, yeah, but you know them; he doesn't. He could have asked."

I put the pencil down and looked in her direction, not trying to be dismissive but still nonplussed. "What do you want us to think?"

"Well, okay, don't you think he'd be ready to meet us to say congratulations and all that?"

"...we'll see him tomorrow."

Stefani rolled her eyes. "You guys are all alike! Shouldn't he, like, be happy for me?"

"He is, trust me. Guys just don't go crazy like that. You get told often enough you're scary when you're emotional and you listen."

Stefani did a double-take upon that line. "Who said anything about scary?"

"...oh, maybe that was just me. Anyway, uh... well, I was taller than Carolyn and probably could've played football if I wanted to. So someone like me getting unbridled? People would get hurt. So I just tried to be subdued. Maybe Jason's the same way."

"Hm. I guess it's possible. Still, he can be that way over text, right?"

"You're thinking too hard about this, dear. Let's just finish math."

### **Thursday, December 8**

The whole way on the bus ride to school, I could hear Stefani grumbling in the back about how aloof Jason had been. For her, this was a warning sign; no amount of re-assuring her that guys just don't get that emotional was going to change anything. Had she already forgotten about Brian, or was that more her type of guy? Well, hopefully school would get her to take her mind off of this.

When we got to our locker, we were met with a bit of a surprise: a big State banner decorated the door! No sooner had we stopped giggling than we heard Jason's voice: "Hey there, big brain!" I spun around and practically leaped up to hug his neck. He caught me and held me off the ground as we kissed. All those concerns evaporated.

"Jason! Awww, this is great! You shouldn't have!"

"Eh, I didn't want you to think I didn't care."

"Thank you! I'm taking this home for my wall... you're so nice."

"Congrats, darling." He gave me a quick kiss on the forehead and headed to his first period class. I carefully rolled up the banner off my locker and put it inside before floating down the hallway (or at least it felt like that) to my own first class. As I walked absent-mindedly, I checked in my head with Stef.

"Okay, you were right," she conceded. "We'll talk about this later, okay? We have to -- WATCH OUT!"

I snapped back into attention inches away from knocking over an equally oblivious Julie, who was crossing my path in the hallway. "Oops!" We both said with a laugh. "Sorry, sorry," I added hastily.

"Oh, no, it's fine. Congratulations, by the way." Oh, she must have seen Jason's efforts.

"Thanks! Don't worry, you'll get in..."

"I hope so -- I can't remember what other schools I asked him for."

"Julie, calm down. You're going to get in, and it's going to be a lot bigger than I did. There's still time for you."

"...time, I'm gonna have to wait for March now! I don't want this! I was supposed to be IN by now! That bastard! And now everyone else is... and I... I..."

Before Julie could finish her thought, I was grabbing her arm and pulling her to Carolyn's locker. As expected, she was still there. Also as expected, she was excited to see me.

"STEFFY! Roomie!"

I quickly rejected her hug and got her attention. "Emergency, Care. Trip for 4."

"Oh..." Carolyn looked at Julie, who was feeling out of place amidst all the State kids being excited about the fall. "Yeah, get Jane, meet us in the parking lot, we're going to lunch."

### **At lunch**

"Wow, do you seniors do this all the time?" Jane asked, somewhat wide-eyed from the back seat as we ate. "I feel like such a rebel."

"Privilege of eighteen, baby," Carolyn told her in a celebratory tone. "Being one of the oldest works out for me!" Carolyn's October birthday meant her parents had a difficult decision: would she be one of the oldest in her class or one of the youngest? Fortunately, that kindergarten idea a long time ago paid off here; well, as far as she was concerned.

"So like when's your birthday, Janie?"

"January. Why?"

"Just wondering -- I like to know things about my friends."

Jane gasped. "I have older friends!" Everyone laughed as we ate our fries.

"Oh hey, let's do some stuff Saturday night, you all down?"

"Sure! No dead stuff, though."

"Doesn't quite work the second time, Jul." I said with a wink. "Anyway, I'm down; don't want you to think I'm like some arm candy or anything."

"Wait," Jane interjected. "...what do you mean?"

"Oh, she's started dating someone," Carolyn reassured her. "And yeah, it's really awesome to be around them all the time, but you can't just have one friend, you know?"

"...am I doing that?"

"I dunno, are you?"

Jane suddenly looked around as if she was in a panic. "Maybe...?"

"Well, you got friends in your class, right?"

"Well, yeah..."

"So don't worry about it! You're spending weekends with your girl, that's awesome. No one's giving you crap for it, right?"

"No. I just... the way she..."

Well, I'd inadvertently caused this forest fire, so I might as well try to put it out. "Janey... Jason and I only started dating a few weeks ago. We haven't used the L yet. Yeah, he's awesome, and being in his arms makes me feel so good and all, but it's not like we know we're gonna be together forever. Look at you two! How long have you been dating? Almost two years, right?"

"Something like that, yeah."

"It's totally different. Don't be ashamed of her. You make a really cute couple, I promise."

Julie had taken Jane's hand and squeezed it lovingly while smiling at her. Jane blushed. "Well... okay. I think I get it."

"Yeah, don't worry," Julie reassured her. "If you wanna take time to be with your classmates, tell me. I'm not gonna get jealous. It's pretty clear you'll be here for me."

Both Carolyn and I gave an "Awwww" in unison for backup. In the back seat, our guests kissed and shared their fries.

### **As school was emptying**

As I was heading to the bus depot, I felt someone tapping my shoulder. "Hey, wait," the person said as I turned around. It was Jane. "Can me and Julie drive you home? We owe you."

"Um... yeah, thanks!" I walked with her to the parking lot. After a few seconds, she looked at me.

"So why aren't you driving? I thought all seniors did."

"I could," I said with a hesitation, "but, uh... don't you know?"

"Know what?"



"That boy who died before the school year; the one I pretended to be that one time."

"What about it?"

I sighed. I guess there was just no avoiding this. Even though everyone in my class knew it, it's not like seniors were celebrities. "Well... I was the other driver."

Jane stopped dead in her tracks, and for ten of the longest seconds I remembered, all she did was blink and comprehend. "Oh... shit... I..."

"...yeah. So, uh... yeah. But it's like I had him tell you -- no seat belt. He should be alive. Well, that sounds bad, like I don't care. I... let's just go. Julie's waiting."

"Right, yeah, uh..."

"I'll talk there, okay?" We walked ahead in silence to the parking lot. Julie met us and unlocked the doors. I piled into the backseat so the two lovebirds could be next to each other. After giving Julie my address, I took a deep breath. Do I just start talking? Do I have Stefani explain?

"Julie, did you know that she..."

"Petey? Yeah, we all knew. It's not something you bring up."

"Don't get mad, Julie, she asked an innocent question and I told her."

"Yeah, I just wanted to know why she rode the bus! I never would have guessed!"

"It's okay, Jane," I said while putting a hand on her shoulder. "Look, it's like I said that night. He wasn't wearing a seat belt, and... well, I don't remember anything myself because the air bag knocked me out. But it's not like his family's suing me or something. It's just... something I have to live with."

I couldn't see Jane's face as she looked forward, but I just knew she was overwhelmed by the conflicting feelings of not hurting me and wanting to know more. But whether she was searching for the right next words or hoping there would be none, I couldn't handle the silence. "But you know? Acting like him kinda helped. And I've been talking to people and... look, I can't take it back. It's not like I can kill myself and bring him back or anything. Mom says the worst thing I can do is give up on life over this. You think he'd want me to collapse into a ball of emotion?"

"No, no!" Jane snapped back to the conversation. "No, of course he wouldn't! I just... I can't..."

"And I hope you never have to. I'm sorry, Julie, I didn't mean to be like this, but better now than Saturday, I guess."

"No, I get it. Has Carolyn helped?"

"Yeah... Carolyn's been awesome, and Jason has, and Dave and Kristy and everyone. A lot more people get it than don't."

"Good. That's what matters. Hey, we're here! See you tomorrow, Stef."

I retreated to my room to begin homework on my bed as soon as I walked in the door. While working out the latest math problems, determined not to let midterms destroy the good news we received, Stefani popped out and slumped on the bed next to me with a loaded sigh. I checked over to her; while I hadn't cried, she had. "You wanted me to hear that, didn't you?"

"Um... I was talking to Jane. I don't want her to think we're a trainwreck."

She paused. "How much do you know about what I tell my therapist?"

"...I mean, that's between you and him, right?"

"That's nice of you, but I think by now you know you count. He doesn't know about you, of course, but... there's one part you got right. I do think about what you could've done. And honestly, seeing how well you've put up with a situation you didn't ask for... I should've."

"...if that last part means what I think it does, I don't ever want to hear you talk like that again. We're both alive; you didn't take anything away. And if what you said is right, you more than made up for it. I'm not used to your family or to your body shape or size or... but I have time. And you've welcomed me."

"I took you from your family and your friends, didn't I?"

"Well... yeah... but my old mom would tell me a story about what growing up would be like. She told me to imagine I was planning to move to Paris. I'd spent all my time learning the culture, the customs, speaking French, you know... and then I go to Europe and get off the plane, and I'm in Holland instead. And it's not what I planned, but it's what I got... and there's a lot to love about it, isn't there?"

"Well, the people are friendly, the scene's pretty, and I've heard they're kinda laid back about other stuff."

"Exactly. Stef... I'm in Holland now. And I'm making the most of it. Life does this. You're in Holland too, even if you wanted to go there. I'm just... trying to do what's right. It's still you in charge, I promise. You tell me, and I'll just watch your life."

"No, I wouldn't do that! Pete, it... I just meant you're right. The best thing we can do is live this out. And I know we know that... I still had to hear it from you. I mean, it is kinda fun to check out sometimes... I guess I'm worried I'm taking advantage of you."

"...how?"

"Well, like, I'm making you do the work for me without getting to decide anything."

"Hey, who said yes to Jason, me or you? I've gotta trust you more. Now... let's get this problem set done. We won't have time to feel sorry for ourselves at State."

### **Friday, December 9**

Mom already knew we were going out after the school day. Jason said he wanted to catch the 4:30 showing, just the two of us. While admittedly I was a little amused at the fact we'd settled for the movie/dinner combo, at least as a second date it was something. Besides, I didn't want to give or get ideas.

Just as we were heading in to catch the movie, my phone lit up. I checked; Julie was texting me furiously. At first I figured it could wait; she'd get the message that I was occupied, right? But then I saw that she sent me a picture and captioned it "LOOK AT THIS!!!" Clearly, whatever this was, it was important.

"Hey, Jase, gimme a couple minutes."

"What's wrong?"

"Something important with Julie."

"Okay, I guess I'll play second."

"It's not that! She's being urgent. It'll be quick, I'll just tell her that... whoa."

"What? Is she okay?"

Almost as soon as I read what was written, I felt myself getting yanked out of the controls. Stefani jumped in and saw what I did before turning to Jason, clearly feeling she could find a more diplomatic answer. "Gimme five minutes. This is... kinda fucked up."

"Okay, yeah... do I get to know?"

"When we're done." Stefani frantically texted back about what she saw, as much in disbelief as I was. The picture Julie sent us was a letter on Cambridge U letterhead. Since she didn't apply for early decision or anything from there, a reply this soon didn't make sense on its own. Then more photos of the letter -- or, rather, of parts of the letter -- flew across the screen. Stefani's thumbs flew back and forth across the keyboard on the screen as I tried to keep up. I figured out enough to know this was unusual.

Eventually, Stef excused herself and put the phone away. She caught up with Jason. "Yeah, you're not gonna believe this, but Julie got told by Cambridge her application was incomplete."

Jason was puzzled. "Doesn't sound like her to be careless."

"She wasn't -- they disqualified one of her teacher recs. For her sake, they said."

"Oh, goddammit, him!" Jason practically spat as he talked. "I guess we know how Houston fell through. What a fuckin' asshole." He didn't have to tell me who he had in mind, either.

"I was afraid of this. Don't think too hard about it. It's being fixed, right? She'll get in."

"I hope so." Jason shook his head. "Those Jesus freaks are the worst." In the back of her mind, I cringed at hearing my own words used by someone else. No wonder I was headed to Hell -- if this was any indication, I sounded like a horrible person!

Stefani just calmly corrected him. "Some of us, anyway."

Jason's mouth opened, but it took a few seconds for words to come out. "I... no, I... not like that! Not you! I meant... I meant..."

Stef held a hand up. "I know what you meant, I've seen them. You're not in trouble. But you gotta be careful, okay? Don't just say things. We're mad at him, right?"

Jason covered his face in shame with one hand. "...yeah, you're right. Sorry, dear. I should be more careful."

We hugged him as we entered the screen room. "Don't worry about it. Now, back or front?"

"...what's the right answer?"

Stefani laughed. "You're learning," she joked as we sat in the back.

### **After the date**

As Jason drove us home, Stefani decided it was a good time to bring up the near future. "Hey, I'm not trying to sound like I'm high-maintenance or whatever, but, you know, for the next date, you wanna do something fancier?"

"Wait, really? Uh..."

"Is something wrong?"

"I just... I... how do I say this... I dunno if we're there yet."

"There? There how?"

"Well, we're just dating, it's not like we're like Dave and Emma, right?"

"Oh, you're asking if we're serious?"

"...I gotta admit, I want to be, but I'm too scared to ask."

Stefani paused and began to wonder the same thing. "You know, if we have to ask, we're not there yet, are we?"

"Yeah, no."

"Okay... that's fine. I don't wanna mess anything up. But, you know, we seemed pretty close during the movie."

Jason gulped visibly. "Did I go too far?"

"You didn't hear me stop you, did you? It's just weird. And not you weird, but I feel it too. Like I wanna enjoy so much but I... it's way too soon, isn't it?"

"But the others do."

"If Dave's the one you're thinking of, they've been together for like three years now. We've had, what, three weeks? You don't have to take me somewhere fancy just because I ask."

"But I wanna make you happy."

"You already do, Jase. Thanks. I'll pick the movie next time." We pulled into the driveway at our place as I got my books and things together from a long day. "I'll see you Monday," she threw in, giving him a goodbye kiss. She walked backwards to the door, waving all the way.

## **10 PM**

As Stefani got us into bed for the night, I figured I'd talk to her. "I'd pop out if I could, Stef, but Jason... I mean, didn't that seem weird?"

"Not really," she thought back. "People have all sorts of different definitions of where they are."

"Oh, there's that, but... look, he's admired you for a long time, he's trying to be deferential, and he was willing to do something even though it would've meant too much to him. He's letting us run things. Isn't a relationship a partnership?"

"What are you getting at?"

"Well... well, put it this way: what do we think of him?"

"He's a great friend, he's sweet, he cares for us, and just being near him makes all sorts of trouble go away, right?"

"Yeah, I'm not arguing that; you were... so happy tonight."

"...yeah..." Stefani's voice and focus seemed to drift off; not that I blamed her.

"But that's not it, it's... he's part of us, not bigger, not under... he's..."

"I don't understand."

I sighed. I was worried this would be too dramatic, but it was the only way. "I think we're still on a pedestal in his mind."

"Ohhhh... yeah, maybe. He'll figure it out. Don't worry. Give it time. There's still this... honeymoon feel to the whole thing, right? I remember it with Brian. I don't want him to feel with me like I did with him after a while."

"I just wanna make sure we're not in love yet."

Stefani paused. "You think I am?"

"We act like it."

"Well, are you?"

"...never felt like this before; I don't know. You have. I need your help."

"Okay. Okay, fair enough. No, we're not there yet. It's like you said, we haven't said it to each other. It's too soon to talk to him about it, but if this keeps up, I will. I know what it's like to be in his position and think you're dating out of your league and have to erase yourself for the other one. I won't let that happen. I promise."

### **Saturday, December 10**

I hopped out of the car and waved goodbye to Mom as I ran to Carolyn's house. She was waiting for me and waved me in as we headed to the basement. Julie and Jane were already there; popcorn and snacks were waiting for us. As, I noticed, were a couple of older things attached to the TV.

"What's that?" I asked.

"It's a Gamecube," Carolyn said with amusement. "It was my older brother's back when he was my age."

"Wait, your age?" Jane did a double-take. "How old is he?"

"Thirty. I'm the youngest of four."

"Okay, I got that -- your parents look a little older than mine. So he's the oldest of the other three?"

"Actually, no, he's the closest to me. My two older sisters are 33 and 37."

Jane's jaw dropped. "That's crazy!"

Julie was a bit more direct. "You sure those are your parents?"

"What the hell, Julie? What does that mean?"

"Oh, I read about some actor back in the day whose sister was his mother and stuff. Like, his sister got pregnant with him and so after she gave birth they moved and her mom said he was hers and..."

"No, no, that's not what happened," Carolyn interrupted. "See, my older brother was supposed to be the youngest, but you know... things happen."

Jane paused. "I guess so? Just kinda surprised."

"Why's that?"

"Well, if they didn't want another kid, there's ways, right?"

"Ewww... don't make me think of my dad wearing a condom!" We all freaked out at that image before dissolving into laughter. "But yeah, I asked Mom about that, and she thought about... it, but I'm here instead."

"Glad you are," I said, crawling over to give a side hug to her. "Best friend ever!"

## **Nighttime**

It was about time to turn in for the night. There was a full bathroom in the basement level we could use so we didn't have to sneak upstairs after 11. Julie and Jane had both brought not just a change of clothes, but their pajamas, soap, toothbrush -- everything. Meanwhile, here I was just putting on the same underwear I had all day under a T-shirt and shorts. I guess in some ways I still thought like a guy.

"Okay, Julie, I'm out," I told her.

"I thought I was out," she said with a laugh. "Okay, okay, I'll get ready."

As she gathered her things, I noticed Jane doing something similar out of the corner of my eye. Julie started towards the bathroom, then looked over her shoulder and saw Jane stand up as well. Julie's eyebrows raised; so did Carolyn's.

"Oh, uh..." Julie stammered. "You... sure about this tonight?"

Jane nodded. "Please, babe?"

Julie looked over at Carolyn, half in anticipation and half in panic. "I... I kinda figured this could happen, but not here." Carolyn made the lip zip move and smiled... which is when I found all eyes on me. Julie quickly headed over to me, sitting down in front of me as if I was her guardian.

"Julie? I... honestly, it's none of my business, but this is pretty risky of you, isn't it?"

"Look, I'm not scared of getting in trouble with my parents. But you know what would happen if... he found out?" At this point, Mr. J was further in Julie's head than I was in Stefani's.

"Who'd tell him?" I then paused and realized who would. "Oh. Don't worry. I get it. Jane is kinda cute. I mean, I'm not ready to, but if you two are..." I shrugged. "Just keep it quiet so her parents don't know."

"They won't!" Carolyn rolled her eyes. "Dad snores so hard. They won't hear a thing."

"So... it's okay?" Jane looked at us with hope and a smile that practically begged for permission.

"Stef, let's go get some extra pillows out of the laundry, okay?" Carolyn winked at me. I nodded and followed her. "This might take, like... 20 minutes? 30? I dunno, those pillows are hard to find."

"Riiiiight." I followed her, making sure not to look over my shoulder as Julie and Jane entered the bathroom together.

As we waited in the laundry room to provide plausible deniability, Carolyn and I sat on the floor by the dryer. "So, uh... Pete? Can we talk?"

"Okay... what's on your mind, Care?"

"So what's it like being a girly girl with a boyfriend?" Carolyn smiled and stifled a laugh, but I laughed enough for the both of us.

"It's... it's not what I thought. I mean, I know it sounds shallow, you know, but I like being in with the in crowd."

"But that's not what I meant."

"Oh, right... you know, Stef and I have talked about it. I think at the end of the day, we're kind of both steering this ship anyway. I dunno if the body's getting used to both of us or I'm used to being a girl... I guess what I'm saying is I don't know how I'd feel with you. Besides, right now I'm with Jason."

"And that's okay with you?"

"It really is." It suddenly struck me. "Are you jealous?"

"No! Well, a little. I got my hopes up. I mean, it made sense. You're hot, I know it, we're best friends, and now you've got a mind attracted to girls and... well, I dunno. I'm stupid."

"Care bear... no... don't beat yourself up. Honestly? It's how I felt with Brian and... her, me, whatever. It's okay. There's time for us. But, well... I don't wanna get anyone in trouble."

"Trouble?"



I paused. "Do your parents know you're bi?"

"I've talked about it hypothetically."

"Okay... Mom and Dad won't feel the same way. They expect me to be a wife and mom. Always about they hope I get a husband as loving as Dad is, you know... so... I don't know what they'd think of you, and if they thought I was... well, even here, they'd lose it."

"So... we're just friends? Aren't you interested?"

"I'm dating someone, Care. This isn't the right time to ask."

"No, I mean... weren't you interested?"

"Okay, yeah... but I was too nervous and afraid of getting between you two. Look... Jason and I aren't capital-S Serious. It's only been two dates. But when we're at State, maybe I'll have more time to be me and not her. I don't know. We've talked about it."

"You seem to be doing well so far."

I scoffed. "We're winging it, Care. I have no damn clue what I'm doing. I just wanna get used to this before it ends."

At that moment, we heard a knock on the door. I put my finger to my mouth and motioned Carolyn to the door, quickly getting back into being their friend. Carolyn checked the door, where Julie and Jane were standing by in their pajamas. "Thanks," Jane said to us.

Carolyn looked around innocently. "For what?" she asked with a smile.

## **Monday, December 12**

A rough day at school was just a reminder that even though Christmas break was on its way, there was no overlooking my classes just to get there. Yeah, we made college, but if things went too far downhill we could lose it. Not to mention there was still the whole "one misstep away from being seen as crazy" thing still weighing heavily on both of our minds.

And to be honest, there was a feeling of jealousy running through me. Stefani was being celebrated for her college admission by her family. Julie and Jane were thoroughly in love and got to express it, even in secrecy. Yeah, there's Carolyn, but Jason kind of took that out of the equation. In everything, what I had, others had more than I ever would.

Stefani was filling the bathtub and throwing in the bubble mix as we waited. "You sure this'll work?" I asked her from in the back of our mind.

"What? You need this as much as I do. It's so relaxing, just to lie in the water and feel the bubbles and just... think. It's always worked for me."

"...I, uh... I guess so. I haven't taken a bath in years. I kind of outgrew the tub at home."

"Yeah, there is some benefit to being 5'5," she said with a chuckle. "It'll be great, trust me. Ooh, I think this is good." Stefani tested the water temperature with her foot, swirling around the bubbles to create an equilibrium. Satisfied, she discarded her robe and led us into the tub, lying down perfectly as her feet were by the faucet and her head on the slope of the opposite side. Bubbles covered her up to her neck as I felt the warm water calm our muscles. "Yeah... see? This feels great..."

"You're right. So... how long you got?"

"Eh... homework's done, dinner's served, parents are going to bed... obviously not all night, but we got time. So what's wrong, Petey?"

"I think this is all getting to me. Just feeling a little alone."

"...yeah, I guess I'm surprised it took this long. I mean, you adapted well, but I can't imagine how I'd feel if I was in your mind. What can I do?"

I knew she was sincere in asking, but that question still felt like a 'gotcha' to me. It's not that I didn't have ideas, but the ideas were literally unfeasible. I had to be her little secret, hidden from the world and basically becoming her if anyone was with 20 feet of us. I had to just be friends with Carolyn, and the endorphins and feelings that arrived with Jason were a consolation, not a substitute. I had to assist others, and even the little assertiveness I had brought in made people wonder if Stef had had one of those 'life is too short' moments at the crash. Too many "had"s that countered every "would like".

"That's just it... I don't know," I finally spat out. "... I get it. I just don't always like it."

"You don't wanna be here?"

"Well... better than the alternative, but not always good."

"So... this just..."

"It sucks, okay?" All this time I was capping my emotion so that we wouldn't be throwing a tantrum, but with her at the wheel, everything just spilled out. "Who even am I right now? Am I me, am I you, am I just some fucked up hallucination... do I matter? Your family wouldn't want me around, your friends would make fun of me, your boyfriend would leave you in a heartbeat... I'm... I'm an actor. I'm a fake. I'm... I'm a nuisance, aren't I?" Thankfully I wasn't in charge; real tears would have flown.

"No, no! Petey, no..." I thought I felt her hands around me. Looking up, it was real: she left her control space to embrace me, much in the way Carolyn would embrace us. "You've made me better for having you. What nuisance would do that?"

I tried to get my emotions back into balance as I heard her inner voice. "You... I have? How?"

"If you weren't here, I'd have been a total zombie. Maybe just been trying to help everyone, or trying to stay away, I dunno, but... well, you've made me be a part of my old life just to catch you up, and I'm so happy you did."

I looked upward. "H-how?"

"Okay, so... I don't think I'd have had a Homecoming date at all without you. And yeah, it turned out really bad, but would we have had Carolyn without it? And Jason... you saw what he wanted to do, you encouraged him! And then you're the one who agreed to meet Jane and Julie, right? I've made new friends."

"...yeah?"

"That was you! You started all this. And I'm getting better grades, too! I know it sounds like we're mixing it up and you're just... there half the time, but you have helped me."

"So... no regrets?"

"Nope. Thanks, Petey."

My temper had steadied from hearing what should have been obvious if I'd thought about it. Stef returned to the controls, moving around her arms to cover our body with bubbles and smile to herself. "Don't ever think you're worthless, Petey. Ever."

### **A few relaxing minutes later**

After drying off and climbing into bed, we did one last check of our phone for any late messages. As Stefani scrolled through to see which ones needed replying to, I thought about her. Whatever stereotype the "it" girl has in people's minds, this was the opposite. She was clearly blessed with kindness and openness -- I guess anyone who stuck through the crap Brian gave her would be -- but she also didn't seem insulated. She was everything that someone would want. No wonder Jason felt intimidated!

"Feel better back there, Petey?"

"Yeah, thanks. You're so sweet -- do they tell you that?"

"They?"

"Our friends."

"Some of them. Care does; Jason does. Why?"

"Because they all should. If they knew, they'd understand."

"Maybe... if they accepted I was telling the truth, they would. But... really? You think I'm that sweet?"

"Yeah! Thanks." I paused a bit. I knew what I was about to say, and I'd certainly thought it before, but how would it come out? Would I be breaking whatever agreement we had to say it? Oh, heck, she'd probably know what to say. "I wish I'd had the guts to meet you in life."

Stefani made us smile out of reflex hearing that. "Yeah... but we know each other now, right? Better late than never."

"No, I know, but... what do you think would've happened if I did?"

"...good question. Uh... well, I don't know. When are we talking about, because Brian would've never let me."

"Ew. How did you ever?"

"Because I didn't know what love meant. But... okay, so take him out of the way; how would we even cross?"

"Tutoring?"

"Maybe, but would you have done more than that?"

"...Yeah, you're right; I dunno if I would've risked it."

"Risked what?"

"Well, I..." Okay, this next part was probably going to sound dumb to her, but if we're doing this, there's no harm in confessing. "I'd be afraid you wouldn't want to be near me. Like, that I'd scare you."

Even if I hadn't seen Stefani turn around to face me in her mind, I'd have known the contortion on her face just from her tone. "You? Scare? Oh, c'mon, how."

"...You saw how big I was, right? And if it seemed like I was just trying to use it to get into your life, you'd cut that shit out."

"Nah. I get it. You think I'm not in on my own body? You see the younger kids look at us. Dave said I coulda been Homecoming queen if I wanted. I GET it. I'd know how to handle it."

"So you'd have said no?"

"I mean, I'd have said to slow it down and try to get to know you first if that's what you mean. But... well, I can't say I haven't thought about it before Jason came along."

I gasped as I did a virtual double-take. Did that sentence mean what I thought it meant? No... it couldn't...

"You mean you... me?"

"Sure. You're nice, you're friendly, you've helped me; now, I'm not saying we could NOW, but yeah, I've wondered."

I thought about it. "So what do you think would happen?"

"Not sure. What about you?"

"Well, I guess I'd have been really excited about it, and maybe did it all wrong. Like, oh my gosh, I'm dating HER! I can't believe it! The whole thing would sound so big. And like, you're more than that, you know?"

"If you weren't excited about being with me, I'd be more worried I didn't attract you," she said with a smirk. "So relax, that wouldn't be a deal-breaker. Anything else?"

"Well, I'm not really inventive when it comes to dates, but I know I would've done that fancy restaurant thing you wanted."

"Willing to listen? Cool. What about... well, what about alone time?"

"Is that important to you?"

"Talking on the phone away from everyone, texting, and stuff... yeah. You've felt it."

"Oh... I thought you meant, uh..."

Stefani nodded in realization. "Oh, makeouts? Yeah, I get it. You don't hear me complain about Jason doing it, do you?"

"Well... okay, to be honest, I think I'd have wanted to get around first to second with you after a few dates."

"And then what?" Stefani had her chin in her hand, listening to me, as our body was beginning to fall asleep. "C'mon, tell me. Be honest."

"I guess it would depend on how that went... but I get the feeling I'd be asking you to do stuff you didn't want to."

"Yeah, and when I say no, are you gonna be like Brian was?"

"No! I'm not gonna say that shit to you! I'm not gonna lie! I... I guess I'd just keep making sure I was doing okay."

Stefani thought about it. "Well... I'd say it wouldn't last, but Brian didn't last either, and Jason probably won't, so... eh. At least it wouldn't have blown up."

"Ringing endorsement there, Stef."

"Oh, come on. I'd have let you down gently, I promise!"

"I guess..." I leaned back as we were sleeping. "Well, a boy can dream."

### **Between Monday and Tuesday**

Around 2AM, our body woke up suddenly. I had taken the command because things were beginning to bother me. As I caught our breath, Stef popped out and sat on the floor by the bed. She, too, seemed thrown off.

"Did you dream that?" she whispered.

"I thought it was your idea!"

"Who was... you think we got into each other?"

"Yeah... uh... so, that was..."

"...it was, yeah," Stefani interjected, wiping her brow.

"I didn't mean for that to go that way."

"No, no, it... it's fine, I..." Stef caught her breath. "Do you guys..."

"Yeah, I think so. Uh... you've never..."

"Not before! Okay... lesson learned. Talk to me if you, uh..."

"Yeah, yeah, of course." I paused as we caught our breath. "Sorry."

Stefani looked up with a bit of a grin. "Oh, it's not bad. Just... warn me next time." She jumped back in as we fell back into our bed, this time with a smile as we fell asleep.

### **Tuesday, December 13, lunch**

"Okay, lunchie," Carolyn said as we ate our fries. "What's up?"

"I think I got a taste of his world."

"What? How?"

Stef shifted a little in her seat. She figured it was only fair to share after all of the laughter they had at my expense, trying to get used to being a girl. "Did you know guys have, uh, really vivid dreams?"

Carolyn nearly choked on her fry from the burst of laughter coming out. "REALLY? You... you had THAT dream?"

"You know?"

"I have a brother. Yeah, that happens with guys. Sometimes they can't help being perverts, you know?"

"I do now..." Eye contact was not very high on the priority list in this conversation, but as awkward as Stefani felt, Carolyn was trying to be just as re-assuring.

"Hey, what's the problem? You're part guy too, right?"

"...well, yeah, but I guess I never thought of it that way because, you know, he always changed to me."

"Yeah, I know. It's why I'm here, right?"

"Uh, NO... it's because we're friends, and you figured it out."

"No I mean, like, he can be himself with me and you can be you and you two don't have to be some weirdo mix-up."

"Wait, is it that obvious?"

"Eh... I mean, you are a little different, yeah, but it's not like people have figured it out. If I thought they were thinking it, I'd tell you."

"Thanks, Care." Stefani turned and smiled for the first time. "I mean, Petey and I were talking last night about how weird this all is and how much he's done for me."

"Awww... good for you, Petey!" Carolyn gave us a friendly pat on the head and hair ruffle -- which was basically her thing with us. "So what else do you talk about? Is it all business stuff like what he's gonna say for you or what you're gonna do?"

"Eh... not as much anymore. We're kinda into a rhythm and stuff. But we should talk more about us."

"Us?"

"No, not you and me, me and me."

"Ohhh, right, yeah... so is that what he was dreaming of?"

"Uh, no! He wasn't in it, but he put me in it!"

"Awk-ward!"

"Ye-ah," Stef said in an echo of Carolyn's sing-song. "Well, kinda. I did feel better for it, I guess."

"Yeah, that's what my brother would say. So don't worry about it. It's normal. I sometimes have dreams like that."

"No you don't," Stefani said hastily. "How far do you get in them?"

"Get?"

"You know... get. With the guy."

"Oh. OHHHHH... uh, yeah, no. Not asleep, no, that's different."

"Well, yeah... we got."

"Hey, like I said, it happens."

"I'm not sure I want it to."

"Well, there's a way to..."

"I know! But I don't really feel right when he's... you know..."

"Well, that's for you two to figure out, okay?" Carolyn finished her fries and began to drive back to school. "But it's not like he's going away any time soon."

### **At bedtime**

That night, Stef waited until her parents were asleep before popping out and sitting next to me on the bed. "So, I guess we have to talk about this?"

I shrugged. "It's gonna happen. Us guys don't like talking about it."

"I'm sure. But I never thought I'd have 'The Talk' with the other half of my brain." Even without looking at her, I could hear her air quotes. "So what do we do?"

"Well, you said I should warn you, right?"

"...yeah, but what would you do? Would you... like, me?"

I scratched my head. "Is there an alternative?" We both went silent for a long time, with the occasional idea crossing one mind or the other before instantly being shot down without even being said. The drawing board of our lives was running empty. This was, amazingly considering we're two teenagers, something we never thought about before now.



Finally, I just decided to talk her into it. "I mean, I've seen you, I'm wired into you, it's not like you're hiding anything. If last night's anything to go by, you'd enjoy it."

"Okay, can you see why I'm not excited by this? It's like you're doing it, not me. And honestly, I get nervous when it's me, too."

"Why?"

"Well... check my memories from girlhood. You'll understand. For now, though, can you promise no dreaming like THAT tonight? Or, no trying to, anyway?"

"It's gonna be okay, Stef. The system doesn't refill that fast. I'll talk to you tomorrow. Get some rest."

### **Wednesday, December 14**

I woke us up around 5AM, hoping to have extra time to talk about what she directed me to. Stefani grumbled in bed and muttered, "Can this wait a few minutes?"

"Hey, I saw the memories. I wanted to talk."

That got her attention. Stefani sat upright in bed and stretched. "Eh, one bad night of sleep won't kill me. So... you get it now, right?"

"No wonder you're waiting for college. I don't think your Mom remembers what being a teen is like."

"Not fair, Pete. It's more like you grow up in a conservative religious family like I do and she did and so on... you don't really get much of a say. You follow The Rules."

"Wait... I mean, I know we go to church, but... that religious?"

I could feel the dirty look she'd be giving me if she was out-of-body. "Did the last name not give it away?"

...DelVecchio? Right. "But... but I thought Italians were lovers!"

"Married Italians are, dude. There's a lot of sweet talk and a lot of hugging and stuff, but that's all it is. I mean, why do you think I asked you keep it modest with Jason?"

"...in case your mom saw us?"

"Yeah! I can excuse the two of us in a passionate embrace a lot easier than... the other stuff."

"Okay, okay, so Mom's really protective of us. I get it. Do you think she thinks we and Jason do stuff?"

"I hope not! I mean, probably not. She trusts me. It's always everyone else who's dirty."

"Yeah, that sounds like a mother," I said with a quick laugh. "So she doesn't want us to be active. Fine, I'm cool with that. It's your body, your call. But... what does that have to do with our private time?"

"What if she walked in?"

"She's gonna knock, right?"

"And see me in bed with a bright red face and the covers up to my neck? She'd figure it out."

"Then tell her to go away!"

"That's not gonna work and you know it."

"So she won't take a hint?"

"If she ever hears us talking, she WILL ask who I'm talking to on the phone. I guess I have a few answers for that, but still. My life is her business."

I felt a little sick hearing about this. "Well... not sure what to say here."

"How would you handle it?"

"Well, I'm a guy; guys needing... time isn't exactly a secret. Plus, Mom walked in freshman year and never again."

"She DID? Oh my god, that must have been SO embarrassing!"

"Wasn't fun, if that's what you mean, but you know, just get told to lock the door and everything's fine. I think parents know about our adolescence a lot more than you think."

"Well, yeah, but that's not it. She just doesn't... want it."

I was a bit dispirited, until I realized something: her memories were from girlhood! "Stef... was that the last time you talked about it with her?"

"Yeah, why?"

"You're like 13 in this, aren't you?"

"Yeah. It was when my periods were getting regular and she felt the need to give 'The Talk'."

"Well, I think we can both admit she'd be horrified of a 13-year-old being... well... but you? You're 17. Have you tried again?"

"...you think it would work?"

"Worth a shot. Worst that can happen is she lectures you."

"Okay, I guess... I just... I don't want her to tell me I'm going to hell or I should break up with him."

"You're not asking to sleep with him. This is much less serious. I'll help you if you wanna know what to say. Next time you and Mom are alone, we'll do this."

I could hear Stefani try to avoid it, the breathing of the body and a little sweating just from the idea adding to her non-committal noises in place of words. "Is this... is this normal?"

"Talking to your parents about your sexual curiosity? Sure. Who else are you gonna talk to?"

She sighed. "All right... I'll do it. I just really don't know what's normal anymore."

I smiled and tried to hug her. "Stef -- you having urges is the most normal thing about us right now. Next sleepover thing, you can ask."

### **Monday, December 19**

Friday was December 23, the first day of winter break. Before we could get there, there were extra tests and assignments. And in the case of social butterflies like me/us, there was also setting up things to do with an entire week off. This wasn't going to be some major trip, of course, but balancing meeting the other girls at Carolyn's place with meeting with family members or meeting with Jason was going to be a small balancing act.

"You do this all the time?" I asked Stef as she started making marks on her internal calendar while our body rested that prior Sunday.

"What, like it's hard?"

"Maybe not for you; you seem to be all about your social status. I can't imagine being stretched this thin."

"That's because you didn't practice. Do you think the "in crowd" or whatever you would call us just knows how to do this from birth? Everything needs practicing, not just chess problems."

"Yeah, just don't lose track of time and forget to read that book assignment for Lit."

Stef paused and checked the calendar. "I think I know when we do that. It's not a long book, is it?"

"Nah -- it's supposed to be a 19th century story. Did we get our pick yet?"

"I don't think we've gotten the options yet, but I'm sure once we do it'll be obvious which one to read. Don't worry about it, Stef; I'm sure we can put a report together easily."

"Maybe. It's not like we can multitask this one, you know."

"So? You don't think they know we had a few assignments postponed? It's not like we..."

"Yeah, yeah, they know what happened. Doesn't mean they've thought about it."

"Well, our friends know, right? Carolyn, Jason, Kristy, so on..."

"Oh, yeah, no, yeah, of course, Pete. But I just wanna leave a day or two to be sure, and does that mean we miss time with family or do we skip a date or what?" She made a few more marks on the calendar. "How fast could you read?"

"Oh, I could probably go cover to cover and write in one day."

"Okay, that makes things easier. I admit it might have taken me longer to muscle through. If you can do this, I owe you one."

I perked up. "One what?"

"Hm. How about you ask and I'll decide if it's too big or not."

"I think I have an idea what it is. And you know she wouldn't object either."

"She?" Stefani looked at me in curiosity before it occurred to her. "Oh, Carolyn? Oh... oh! Look, you know why I can't just agree to that, right? What would Mom and Dad say? Or Jason?"

"Stef... I can wait. I can wait for months. I'm not going anywhere. We're all going to be together at State, we can ask then, right?"

"Well... don't assume this is a yes, but... I guess you're right that it shouldn't be a no, either."

### **Lunchtime at school**

Monday at lunch, we were all sitting together in our group. Much to John's concern, Julie had been invited in by the rest of us girls. "Whatever. I guess everyone's weird in their own way," he muttered as he ate. "What's wrong with dudes, anyway?"

"If they're like you, a bit," Julie retorted. "But Mike and Dave and them? Nothing's wrong. I just get more feelings with Jane. Why's that so bad?"

"Because he wants all women to like him, right?" Kristy jumped in as we laughed.

"Whatever, weirdos," John said dismissively. "I don't need this." He walked off to head to his class early, leaving a space in our group in the unofficial lounge area. Jason switched over from where he was to sit there, allowing me to lean against him as we talked, much like I'd seen Emma do with Dave. Carolyn let out an almost involuntary "aww" as I did, although Kristy had to break eye contact for a few seconds.

"So," Carolyn finally said. "You two doing anything for Christmas?"

After checking the internal calendar, I shrugged. "We might see each other quickly, but... you know, family and stuff. Besides, spending Christmas day together seems a bit much for where we are." I squeezed his forearm around my waist as I said this to let him know I still cared.

"No, that's cool. Jewels?"

"Oh, yeah, our moms will be meeting for lunch Monday and bringing us. Lot of talk about how we're going to work out when I go to college. Well, if."

"You're going!" I said in a combination of encouragement and disgust. "It's just one school; you've got this."

"I hope so."

Carolyn turned to Kristy. "How about you?"

"Probably... Mom and Dad are on a business trip right now and won't be back til Saturday, so I don't know what we're doing, but it'll be nice to see them for more than a few days at a time, yeah?" In the movies, Kristy would have been the kid who hosted half the school in the unauthorized house party. Her parents were top executives and were always going from conference to conference, so even though Kristy's college place could be bought and paid for, it was practically by strangers since she arrived at high school.

"Wait... you're stuck alone?"

"Well, kinda... my brother's back from Old Jersey so there's that, but you know, we're brother and sister. Wish I could get away."

Julie and I made eye contact and nodded. We were both thinking the same thing; of course, we couldn't say it. I motioned for Julie to whisper it to Carolyn, and as she leaned over and got Carolyn's attention, I saw my friend's eyes light up. "Yeah, sure!" Carolyn replied enthusiastically. "Hey, we're doing stuff at my place Thursday night into Friday, wanna join us?"

"Really? Sure! Thanks!" Kristy hugged Carolyn and Julie in turn. I didn't need the hug, but I knew if she knew, she'd be thanking me too. Besides, I could tell just from a quick look that Kristy still wished she could be in his arms instead of me. It was for the best not to mention anything.

### **That night**

After dinner, I returned to my room, phone in hand, and settled down to chat with Carolyn and Jason for the night. I put my backpack on the floor, with my reading assignment hanging out of it. I was about to check in with Jason when Stef stopped me. "Wait... did you really have to choose that book?"

"You're only now bringing it up?" I thought back at her.

"Did you want me to make a scene? The point is, why that one? Do you really want to pick something that hits close to home?"

"Well, it's about the themes in the book. I figured the idea of having someone you couldn't control do things that you'd get blamed for would be something you'd be familiar with."

Stef sighed. "Maybe I am, but you do know I can't say that."

"I'm not asking you to say anything about me. Just to examine why people in Victorian times would have a desire to get away with stuff."

"You know much about this time?"

"Enough. Plus you can discuss how people made excuses. Look, there are options to show you can dig deep into this whole thing, and maybe we'll figure out something about us, too."

Stefani grumbled. "Maybe. Well, you're reading and writing. I'm not sure I wanna touch it."

"How about this?" I offered. "You still haven't talked to Mom about that topic." Yes, by this point even I was calling her parents my parents; they basically were. "I'll agree to do the whole assignment if we talk to her tomorrow after school. We need to do this."

"I'd almost rather do the report," Stef blurted out, the anxiety lowering her mental voice. "Why do we have to?"

"Listen to yourself, that's why! Look, I know you're the one in touch with feelings between the two of us, but ever since Jason came along you've been acting like any interest I show is going to get you evicted. And with that dream we had, it's clear something in this body is telling both of us this isn't gonna work if we clam up. It's been four years. You're not the same person, and not just because I'm here. And honestly... I'm worried about you."

"You mean us?"

"No, I legitimately mean you. You're living scared of your parents. What kind of relationship is that? You're scared, you're nervous, you're anxious... don't you want to know your parents don't just want to help you, but that they LOVE you?"

"They do!"

"Then Mom will listen. Right?" Stefani was searching for the riposte that would get her out of this. "You know I'm right, right?"

"...maybe? I don't want her to think I want to sleep around."

"That's not even what we're talking about. Ask about the dreams, ask about getting urges. Make her suggest things. Okay? Please? I don't want to take over all the way because you're too done to act."

"What makes you..." before she could even continue to protest, I had my body reach up and grab at her hair. After a quick swipe, I held her hand up, showing a few hairs between her fingers and floating down onto her bedsheets. Admittedly, someone with long hair will have a few loose strands, but the timing made Stefani gulp hard.

"Get it done. You'll feel so much better."

### **The next night (December 20)**

It's okay, Stefani. I'm right here. If you need to know what to say, I'll help. But let's get this done. Just take a deep breath. You're 17, not 13. Act like it.

"Mom? Can we talk?"

"Well, uh... something weird happened the other night and it kinda scared me."

"So, uh, I was in this field in the park, and Jason and I were sitting and all alone, and then I looked at him and we were holding each other close, and suddenly we just... you know... it happened!"

"No, I said in the dream!"

It's okay, Stef, don't panic. Don't turn this into a shouting match.

"...no, I... I didn't mean to... it just..."

"You... you're not mad?"

See?

"Well, I... I didn't think it would go that far... I don't think it ever did before."

"No, Mom, I won't! I don't even let him move my outfit! I promise!"

"You... you do?"

Of course she trusts you, Stef, you're family!

"Well... I, uh... thanks, Mom."

"No, it's that... you told me what you'd do if I did anything, and..."

"You meant what?"

You thought she meant what? Sorry, sorry, being quiet.

"N-no, I didn't want permission to go all the way with Jason, Mom. I'm not ready for that."

"Uh... well, like I said... anything."

"MOM! Yes, I do! I have hygiene! I just don't... do that!"

Here we go, moment of truth...

"...really?"

"Uhhhh... I guess not..."

"So if stuff builds up, that's why I had the dream?"

Ah, here we go. Imagination is not evil, Stef. That's what you needed to hear from her, I'm sure.

"So... I'm not in trouble?"

"Thanks, Mom. I understand. Thank you."

Stef steered us back upstairs to finish our homework and make sure we had all the plans for the winter break festivities. Time with Carolyn and the gang, time with Jason, probably a little time with her cousins, time to read, and of course keeping New Year's Eve open just to be safe -- her calendar was already mostly scripted. It was now just a matter of getting there.

As we were rapidly communicating with Carolyn, I made sure to let Stefani hear in the back of her head: "Was that so bad?" Rather than respond to me, she just made sure I read the conversation with Carolyn going on. Sure enough, Stef and Carolyn were chatting away about how she totally misread her mom and about how she is seen as more of a grown-up in her parents' eyes than before. Carolyn was sending the same vibes I was -- how this meant she could be trusted more away from home and how Jason wouldn't be seen as a threat.

"Oh, and this means when you get the keys back, more time on your own!" Carolyn added.

"OMG ur right"

"Yeah" "More trips for us"

"lol totally"

"See? ur good"

"Thx Care"

"Wait, did Petey help?"



"Oh yeah" "couldn't do it wo him"

"what a guy"

"it's weird" "i think since he got in my head" "i've been better"

"stef XD" "ur just urself again" "well some of him too"

"yeah but if he went away 2moro" "id know what 2 do more"

"so it all works out?"

"4me anyway"

"cool" "so see you tomorrow Steffy" "bye :)"

"bye Care"

"oh" "gonna dream of Jason?"

"maybe ;)"

### **Start of winter break, December 22**

Carolyn picked me up Thursday shortly after school. We got the overnight bag and ran to the car, ready to begin another wonderful night of being a teenager. Stef had us toss the bag in the back seat as she jumped into the front seat and buckled up. "Ready?"

"Let's go!" Carolyn mimicked flipping down sunglasses and headed out back to her place. "So it seems like you've really gotten a lot better the last few weeks. Not as nerved up or like all to yourself."

"Yeah, I know. Some of it's Jason, but some of it's that... um... well, Petey told me I helped him. That like he was going down a bad path before the accident and just having to be me is making him better." Okay, that wasn't exactly the truth, but mentioning that she dragged me out of hell might have been too much for even Carolyn to believe. Besides, I am better. I got that second chance, and I hope I'm doing it right.

"Great! So hey, what's your fam doing for Christmas?"

"Probably visiting cousins again. Gotta be on my toes and all!"

"Ew. You gotta get on your own, girl."

"Uh, Care? I can't, remember?"

"Oh, that doesn't count! Don't you ever take time just for yourself?"

"Well, uh... not really, no. I was wondering what Mom would think."

"Got a mother hen?"

"Kinda, yeah. But I hope she's seen I can handle myself. I guess it's just college coming up."

"Oh, totally -- my parents are like 'oh god, we don't have much time with you anymore' and I'm all 'I'm not DYING, you know!'"

"Oh, so dramatic! Do your folks know we're rooming? Got the paperwork?"

"Yep! Made sure State knows! I can't wait!"

"This is gonna be so fun! So... you think Kristy will fit in tonight?"

"Why not?"

"I dunno... we do kinda get weird. I mean, she's... normal next to us."

"Care, it's okay not to be straight; that doesn't make you weird."

"Well, not that! I mean, they're always getting close to each other and then I'm doing strange ideas and you... well, you."

Stef shrugged on our behalf. "No such thing as normal, is there? Everyone has a freak side. Just who you show it to. Like, him as me to you." Hey, are you "Yes, I'm saying it's weird when you're in charge, Petey."

"Getting it out of your system?"

"Getting what?"

"Well, I see you in the hallway a lot just walking dead ahead and your eyes going back and forth and your face all acting up... you two are talking then, right?"

"Oh. Um. I, uh..."

"No, it's cute, really! You look like you're all conflicted and trying to solve stuff!"

"So I don't give him away?"

"Nah. And everyone says you're more helpful now, like with Julie and the whole college thing. You're fine, girl. Chill."

"Well, like we said, we couldn't do it without your help. I'm kinda glad you found out. Better you than Mom."

"Or the teachers or Dave or Chris or..."

"Yeah, I know, I know! You're special that way. Thanks, Care."

### **At Carolyn's house**

Kristy ran in and gave all four of us a big hug in turn. "Oh my god, thank you for inviting me! I brought games!"

"Oh, you shouldn't have; we got a bunch as it is," Carolyn mentioned as she pointed to a shelf. Kristy walked over and checked them out, quickly getting up on her tiptoes to reach the Monopoly game. "Wait, no, stop! I'll get it! You'll just bring down all the games at once."

"Not really -- watch." Kristy put one foot on the lowermost shelf in order to boost herself up enough to grab the game.

"NO!" The shock of four people at once stopping her was enough to get her to jump off. Carolyn walked over and, raising her long arms to the top, gently pulled the Monopoly game out of the middle of the stack. Stef walked us over to Kristy and had her lead her to where the game would be.

"...I coulda got it. I don't need help."

"That's not it. I don't think that's real wood they use for the shelves... it might not have held your weight, and then you fall through and get all cut up and stuff. And break it."

Kristy looked back over her shoulder. "Huh. I guess so. I guess I'm used to mine. Sorry, Carolyn."

"Hey, nothing happened. We caught it in time. Now... who's the banker?"

### **During the resultant no-holds-barred Monopoly game**

"So, Kristy... what's it like not having parents all this time? Must be great."

"Not really. It's not fun being alone all the time. And phone calls are nice, but you know, it's still tough. A big ol' house and no one to share it with? Especially with Rick -- my brother -- with Rick at college? What's the fun in that?"

"Yeah, but won't you be on your own at college soon?"

"No! I'll have people my age! I'll have teachers! I'll have alums checking in on us! Old Jersey has this huge network of people that still check in on the school, you wouldn't believe it! But... but this? It's just me. I could go crazy all alone."

"Why not host us next time?"

"No! I can't! There's a lot of really expensive stuff in there! If something gets broke, I'd be in trouble for life!"

"Aww... we'd be careful." "Jane, she said no." "Okay." "So... that why you're in all those school activities?"

"Yeah... I think I do too much. I'm just glad I can relax here! WAIT, WAIT! That's three doubles!"

"Ugh, you're right. So do you keep your grades up?"

"Yeah -- I'm trying to be valedictorian, duh. Gotta make Mom and Dad proud. Sorry, Julie, I'm winning this."

"I don't know, there's a few people besides us trying. Besides, get high scores and that's fine, right?"

"Maybe for your parents. I got Fortune folks -- can't be a black sheep. Don't you know what would happen if I slacked?"

"...no, because I don't have parents who don't know what I can do. Are they at least gonna be home for Christmas?"

"They should be. Why?"

"Maybe talk to them. I had a big worry about what my mom wanted from me until a couple days ago when I finally talked it out."

"...I dunno... I... Rick never did."

"Talk to Rick then! See if he can help!"

"It's no big deal, really. Two houses, please."

"Are you nuts? You gotta talk to your folks!" "Yeah, I couldn't wait to tell Mom and Dad about Julie!"

"I said no. I don't wanna talk about it right now. I just wanna play."

"...holy crap, you're all tensed up. You're gonna splode if you keep this up."

"What do I do? My life is planned. I'm going to Old Jersey, I'm going to do business, and Rick and I are taking over."

"And that's it? Kristy... you are not your parents' second life. They're wrong. You gotta be you. Can you do that?"

"Maybe. I think so. I've been on my own enough. But I can't do anything now, can I?"

"Well, no..." "Not really." "You can decide to do it."

"Sure. I'll talk. And if you never see me again, you'll know why. Now, whose roll is it?"

## **Nighttime, December 22 or 23, around midnight**

After games, pizza, and games, it was getting to be time for sleep. Carolyn went in and took her shower first. As she washed up, we found a video party game and were taking turns playing it. It didn't even matter who was which player -- we just handed off the controls as we felt like it.

"Yes! Winner! I knew it!" Kristy danced after the game declared she had pressed the action button the most times in 10 seconds. At this point we were all a little loopy from a long day of school and all the talk, so seeing her giddy about something made us all cheer. Her bright smile reminded me of the one Stef had the first time she ran us through the field -- genuine carefree excitement; the kind you can only get when everyone helps will all your troubles away for just a few moments.

"Okay, I'm done!" Carolyn emerged from the bathroom, already in her pajamas, and sat down with the rest of us.

"I'll go next," I volunteered, basically getting the same order as last time. I walked over to my overnight bag and got all the stuff I'd need out. Soap was in there. Shampoo was. Tomorrow's clothes. The toothbrush....

...uh oh.

Carolyn must have heard me gasp and seen me rummage around in futility, as though I couldn't already tell what was missing and that it was, in fact, missing. Carolyn got up and headed over to where I was, which caused everyone else to pause the game and rubberneck.

"Stef? What's going on?"

"I forgot my pajamas."

"What?"

"Pajamas! They're gone. I don't have 'em. I, uh... I guess I'll just sleep in this and shower in the morning. Julie, you can go instead."

"Wait, you sure?"

"I, uh... I don't have pajamas to change into, so I'll just sleep in this and wash in the morning. Save a step."

"Wait, wait!" Kristy got everyone's attention. "So what if you don't?"

"So, uh... I mean, I don't have anything to wear tonight."

"Is that all? Just don't wear 'em." Kristy's eyes lit up with a bright idea. "Hey! these things are itchy and long and kinda restrictive anyway... who needs 'em? How bout we all go without 'em tonight?"

I quickly did a double-take at her. "R-really? Like, what?"

"We got underwear, right? Why not? Look, I know it sounds funny, but... why not? Nobody got nothin' we don't know about."

Julie shrugged. "I'm in."

Jane grinned. "Yeah! Let's do it!"

Before I could react, I felt myself getting yanked out of control and practically thrown to the back, with Stef jumping back in to take over. "I dunno, girls. You're not gonna stare or anything, are you?"

"No more than you will," Julie teased. "Care?"

"Well, I'm down if she is. But, uh, no pressure, Steffy. You wanna cover up, I get it."

"Why would... oh, right." Kristy caught herself on seeing Julie and Jane in each other's arms. "Sorry, I guess I wasn't thinking about..."

"Oh, no, no one's in trouble," Stefani hastily sputtered. "Um... well, oh, what the heck, it could be fun. At least I got a set of that to put on!" She grabbed the rest of our stuff and headed to the bathroom to get ready.

As soon as the door was closed, Stef shared her thoughts. "Sorry, Pete, but this time you don't get a vote."

"Can I at least jump back in after the shower?"

"...oh, why not," Stefani replied with a sigh. "We're gonna be dreaming again tonight, aren't we?"

### **12:30 AM**

That night, as the others were getting ready to sleep -- be it alone or in pairs -- Kristy came over to me. "Hey... wasn't so bad, was it?"

"Yeah, you were right. Plus, you know, it was kinda fun knowing people saw me."

"You're making too much of it; I have bikinis more revealing than this. Hey, can we head over there and talk?" she asked, pointing to the laundry room.

"Sure. We're out of the way." After walking over and closing the door, Kristy began to get a big smile on her face. "So what's suddenly making your day?"

"What's he like?" Kristy emphasized with her hands that she wanted as much information as possible.

"Jason?"

"Yeah!"

"...well, he was really nervous when he asked me out, but I figured I'd give it a chance and everything went really well, and you know, I get the calming fuzzy feeling when he has my hand or he has his arms around me, and..." I sighed. "It's so awesome..."

"So, what, do you love him?"

"We don't say that. I don't wanna get there yet -- it's only been like a month, right? Not even. We've had like two dates. I mean, it feels great and when I'm with him I don't want him to go away, but... you... you think that's love?"

"Close enough," she muttered. "I dunno, I guess I was hoping it was all a show."

"Sorry, we're together for now."

"Okay, okay... so, uh, does he kiss well?"

"I think so," I whispered, trying desperately not to blush at the thought.

"Like how? Anything special?"

"I don't think so," I replied before immediately proving I actually thought otherwise. "He's just so gentle and doesn't force anything. And I told him like no going under the shirt and he didn't even argue. The guy cares so much for what I want!"

"So he's not like Brian?"

"Nothing like him! Oh my gosh, he's the total opposite! He waits for me to get into position, he doesn't act like I'm some thing he deserves and he's always telling me how lucky he is and how much he wants to make me happy, I can't believe it! He treats me like a princess! I mean, I can tell he thinks I'm hot and he wants it, and that's cute too, but he doesn't wanna act if I'm not ready. A guy holding himself back for you? How in the world did I get so lucky? Everything has been the best so far, and yeah, it's just getting started and I'm sure eventually this'll all wear off like with Brian and I'll have to like open my eyes and try to make it work and make sure he wants to, but right now it's still... it's still so new and fresh and sweet. Ahhh..." Was I rambling? Oh gosh, I was rambling.

"Aww... that's... wonderful," Kristy slowly replied, losing enthusiasm as the sentence went on.

"...what's wrong?"

"You don't know? You can't tell?"

Well, I'd heard, but at least she wanted to make sure I knew. I guess because getting it out in the open means that she no longer feels the need to act like it's a dirty secret, I dunno. "Kristy... yeah, I know. Was I supposed to ask you when he asked me out?"

"No no! I... I mean, I... I just wish I had asked him first. Maybe having a boyfriend Mom and Dad approved of would mean I didn't have to do the rest of that stuff. And then, you know, I could say that I wanted to be his wife first and hope Mom understood."

"Do you like him or just need him to get you out? Would you still want to date him if you thought they wouldn't approve?"

"Absolutely."

"Good, there's that. But... uh, what do you want me to do now?"

Kristy blinked as she struggled to come up with what she thought would be a satisfactory answer. "You're right." She slumped into my arms. "I'm so sorry."

"It's okay." I'd have told her I'd been there, but I had and Stef hadn't. "This happens to lots of people. You'll find someone who wants to take a chance on you -- maybe not here, but I know in college you'll get someone's attention. A smart girl with financial independence and a strong spirit like you? Guys would dig that."

Kristy looked up. "So why do they go to you?"

"They? Just him. He's only, like, the second or third guy I've wanted to date."

Kristy pulled back and pouted. "The guys like you more. Maybe if I stuffed my shirt."

"Kristy! Stop obsessing. You obsess over your parents, your schoolwork, your future, me, him... it's not healthy. Life happens. You think I planned that car wreck?"

"What? No!" Kristy seemed to be confused and offended I'd even ask.

"Exactly. You're going to be fine. Besides," I added, finally allowing myself to add something I would say and not her, "look at yourself. You think a guy would turn that down?"

"Wait, you think so?"

"I think there's a mirror around here somewhere," I said, scanning the room. My memory of the time Carolyn and I were making ourselves scarce included being able to see our reflection, but maybe that was a memory jumble... aha! "Here we go." I shoved a bunch of hangers and clothes down the rack they were on to create space and brought her over. "Look at yourself. Not at me, you. Do you see it?"

Kristy tilted her head and looked from the side. "You sure?"



"Trust me. In that? They'd be lining up for you!"

Kristy's turn became a little slower, then she moved her arms to strike a pose. Then another. Soon, she was beginning to see what I did, lost at looking at herself from every angle. "Hey, I guess you're right! Why didn't I notice?"

"Well... no one's around to tell you at home, right? But we're here. C'mon -- you need beauty rest." We giggled as we headed back to lie down for the night.

### **Christmas morning**

Our eyes opened around 6AM, long before sunrise. There was a rush of adrenaline in us that I hadn't anticipated at this age. But I guess Christmas does that to people. Fortunately, we didn't go bounding downstairs to see the presents; instead Stef turned us over for a little more sleep while she got my attention for a chat.

"Hey... Merry Christmas, Petey."

"Hm? Yeah, Merry Christmas, Stef."

"Not excited? What's wrong?"

I gave her a funny look; maybe being together for four months was making her forget a few details. "Well, what do you do on Christmas? You celebrate and you spend time with family, right?"

"...oh yeah. Geez, I... man. That sucks."

"Yeah, you think? I mean, I didn't want to say anything for Thanksgiving because honestly your family's way bigger than I woulda handled, but... now it's just you and your parents, right? And it's... it's just... I remind... I..." My breath was becoming labored as I tried to keep my composure.

"Aw, Pete... I'm sorry."

"I... I'm gonna be fine, I swear..."

"No, let it out! It's just you and me!"

As if permission changed everything, I could feel myself curling up in a ball and trying to cry. "I guess I've been so busy... so much trying to be you that... that now it's all just... I mean I thought I..."

"Shhh... don't try to make excuses, Pete. Everything's fine. You're allowed to be upset, even if it is Christmas. I promise."

I choked back sobs as I found myself lost in not just my emotions, but the reasons behind them. "Not today, I'm ruining it for you."

"Pete, the day's just started. Better to get it out now."

"No, but... it's been how long now? Months? Why now?"

Stef put us back to sleep and walked back to where I was. "You can't control that. All this time you've been doing work at school and been with friends and you can't even talk about it. But... I didn't think you wanted to."

"Well... with you? What could I say that isn't a guilt trip?"

"It's not about me right now. Just talk."

I sighed. "Well, I... I guess I've just been so taken in by how new all this is, and then with the family stuff I didn't wanna step in so you did that, and... really, I was too excited about Carolyn and then your other friends and Jason and... I just kept saying I had it great and you were the one struggling."

"...so you basically threw yourself away for me?"

"You don't have to make it sound so dumb!"

"I'm not trying to... you thought you had to. But I didn't do this just for you to do nothing! I want you to live. I'm trying to help you live. And I... I know it isn't the same, and it never will be. But we're in Holland, right?"

I couldn't even think of a reply.

"So all those times you were saying things to Jane and Carolyn... were you lying for me?"

"I... not really? I do like having new friends and being popular and stuff, but it doesn't mean I don't miss my family."

"Yeah, I get it." She paused for a while as I choked out a few more negative feelings in my sobbing. "Maybe we could..." she began for stopping herself. "No, that wouldn't work."

"Hm?"

"Well, I was gonna say we could visit them, but, uh, I don't think that would make anything better."

"Yeah, they wouldn't believe you. Thanks for offering, though. Just hearing that does help."

"Hey, anytime. I guess I don't appreciate you enough."

I looked up through clouded eyes. "Really?"

"Yeah, really! I can talk about how I'm different or Carolyn can notice it or other people can say it, but people like us more. And that's you. And I... I want to tell people about you, but I know I can't. But it doesn't change anything. Thank you, Petey."

"No... thank you." We embraced and rested, waiting for the sun to rise so we could get up for real.

## **10 AM**

Once everyone in the house was awake, Stef and her parents exchanged presents and enjoyed a restful day together. Stef also had a few presents from uncles or aunts -- some music, some clothes, little things like that -- but the big present was the smallest. It was a tiny package that her parents had placed in the tree and helped her find.

In it were her car keys.

"Thank you!! Thank you thank you thank you Mom, thank you Dad!" Stefani was euphoric as she hugged each one in turn. She practically danced around the room in excitement before running over to put the keys back in her purse. I could feel the excitement surging through us as Stef continued riding on the proverbial cloud nine.

## **4 PM**

When everything settled down and all gifts were opened, I finally communicated to her. "Well, back to normal now?"

"Yes! Okay, kinda. Well, normal is... I mean, can't I be excited?"

"What? Yeah, of course! Just be careful. I don't think there's room up here for three people."

"...not funny yet."

"Sorry."

"Look, I'm excited to drive again, but I'm not going to be reckless. Probably just use it for school and to get to Care's house or the mall. You know, familiar places."

"Not Jason's house?"

"Well... maybe. Eventually. Sure. But I always thought meeting the parents was for when things got serious. Like I didn't meet Brian's mom and dad for a couple months, you know?"

"So that's for when it's love, huh?" I paused, because what I'd experienced and told Kristy sounded too emotional to be just physical. "Wait, how is this NOT love? It feels so..."

"That's attraction. I had attraction for Brian too and I called it love. I learned pretty quickly love doesn't act the way he did."

"So it doesn't count unless he behaves?"

"Well, yeah -- love's mutual. You're thinking of affection."

"Brian really knocked you for a loop, huh?"

"Well, not literally, but yeah. And love isn't just for boyfriends. Carolyn's the sister I didn't have. I love her that way too, you know."

"So that explains the gift card exchange at the last night over. By the way, what about Jason? You think that scarf will be enough?"

"Well, I can't think of anything personal... and he's probably just as worried about this as I am. It's something, right?"

"Maybe -- and yeah, the school colors are a nice touch -- but why not the one with the J's on it? Personalize it you know?"

"What? No! Like if we were dating since the September maybe, but that's way too soon. That's basically saying 'you are mine'. That's not how this works."

"...there's a scarf code?"

"Trust me."

"...okay, but he doesn't know that, I promise. So he'll probably get something more."

"How do you figure?"

"Don't tell me you haven't noticed. He was scared to ask us out, he doesn't fight any restrictions we have, and he's always waiting for us to go to him. Now, the last one may seem like he's taking us for granted, but I've seen this before."

"Yeah?"

"He's dating scared."

"Sounds a lot like me and Brian. Yikes. Well, let's not take advantage of him, but I don't think I want a guy who's a puppy dog. But everything's so much better around him..."

"Yeah, I know. Just keep an eye on it. Hopefully at some point he'll realize he can be an equal."

"Stef! Jason's here!"

Our little conversation was interrupted by Mom calling to us from downstairs. Jason? Here? He never told us he was coming! We let out a tiny "eek" of surprise and locked up for a split second.

Stef quickly recovered and called back "Gimme a moment" before jumping into the controls full-force.

"Oh dear, oh dear, we gotta look better. He can't see us in this outfit and looking like this and... what do you think, pink or red?"

"Stef, calm down! You sure we have to get all made up for this?"

"He'll notice! It's important!"

"I think you got this all wrong. Guys don't care if they see you without your makeup on, I promise."

"Okay, hold up. You've seen me for real without makeup, right? I look different from the 'without makeup' look most guys think of, don't I?"

"Yeah, but how long does it take?"

"The longer you argue, the longer it takes! C'mon, let me do this!"

After a few hasty minutes of makeup and finding something slightly less casual than we were wearing around Mom and Dad, Stef bound us downstairs, gift bag in hand, to meet Jason. After giving him a quick hug, Jason and I excused ourselves to head outside. The cold air made his cheeks turn a beautiful red, and he noticed the same about me as he put his gloved hands on my face. Our hands went on his to keep them there, trying to extend every moment.

"Merry Christmas, babe," he finally said. "Thank you."

"Aww... Merry Christmas, J. Here... I got you something. It looks like you need it." She picked the bag up and handed it over. Jason quickly looked inside and pulled out the scarf, smiling as he did. Without saying a word, he wrapped it around his neck, adding it to his look and shrugging as if to say 'how is it?'. "Looks great -- does it work?"

"I can feel it working, yeah. So, uh -- I didn't get anything fancy like this, but I got some guys in the metal shop to put it together. I hope it works." He reached into his pocket and pulled out a small box, presenting it to us. "Go on... I'm sorry if it's kinda silly."

Inside the box was a long necklace, designed to hang down below our collar. It was still new, more silver than metallic as the muted light from the winter sun shone on it. A standard clasp kept it together in the back, while in the front, two charms hung from it, seemingly handcrafted and usually more seen on a bracelet than a necklace -- small enough to be personal, but big enough that if necessary they could be seen.

"J". "S". Us.

"Ohmygod..." Stefani could barely speak as her breath tightened. A single tear of joy threatened to freeze on her cheek. Her mouth involuntarily turned into a wide smile as she looked back into

his eyes, then at the necklace. I could sense emotions in us stronger than ever before; Stef herself was so overwhelmed she might as well have been looking at a ring.

"Is it okay?" Jason finally asked after what must have felt like an eternal pause.

We immediately pulled the necklace out and, dropping the box it had been in, put it around our neck. We kept eye contact with him as we put it on, turning it so the J and S were front and center. Only then did Stefani respond. "It's... perfect. Thank you..." Arms went around his scarf around his neck and we exchanged a long kiss. "You're amazing."

## **9 PM**

After dinner, Stefani glided upstairs and picked up her phone from where it was charging. She took a few pictures of herself to call attention to the necklace before opening up a conversation with Carolyn. The first thing she sent was a picture highlighting the necklace, captioned "best gift ever". I watched all of this with amusement as Stef was still starstruck in her mind.

"OMG!! What a guy!" Carolyn was as impressed as I was.

"Ikr? He had this made for me!"

"He must be serious!"

"He's the best :)"

"So this is real now?"

Stefani got snapped back to reality for the first time since she received her gift. Yes, it was wonderful he went through all this trouble, and yes, a personalized gift meant everything to her... but were we there yet? Just a few hours ago she was saying Jason was showing warning signs, and now she'd spent all this time fawning.

"Stef? Hello?"

She quickly got back to texting. "yeah?"

"So this is real now?"

"more than it was"

"oooh, lovebirds!"

"hey, slow down :P"

"he clearly wants you to be real"

"yeah i know"

"so?"

"i dunno" "i'm always in charge when we're together"

"yeah, and"

"well... i don't wanna be brian"

"How?"

"you know, i just did his thing, no talk"

"seems like he took a chance here"

"yeah :)"

"so why not be real?" "brian stuff?"

"it's too soon" "i told brian right away" "and he used it"

"J won't do that"

"he won't" "but"

"but what?" "you?" "ur not like that"

"but he is like me"

"look" "if that's a thing" "talk to him" "but don't leave him hanging"

"k"

"i'm serious!"

"i'll talk, ok? sorry"

"good"

There was a pause in the conversation, and I used the advantage to get Stef's attention. "So... you wanted to, didn't you?"

"Kinda, yeah. I almost did. Caught myself, thankfully."

"I would have."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. You've done everything but say it. You feel it. I know you do."

"It was just the moment! It doesn't mean that much."

"Stef... if you're worried, I'll stop you. You can tell him. Do you believe it?"

"Can I answer that later? I just wanna be happy."

"Yeah, I'll tell her." I switched in charge and picked up the phone. Carolyn had sent a few "still there" texts.

"p here"

"oh hey :)"

"We shouldn't put any pressure on her about Jason, okay?"

"you know she loves him :)"

"Not important. Something is holding us back. If I knew I'd tell you."

"brian was kinda bad" "but that was a long time ago"

"No timeline, C. I feel it, but I won't make her say it."

"u feel it? :-o"

"Why not? I'm here."

"i get it" "just weird" "cuz ur a boy and he is"

"Yeah, but she can tell how I feel about you too."

"wait" "are you"

"No!" "I mean, she can tell I really like you."

"oh" "i mean" "u know i would"

"Later, Carolyn. We're kinda taken. :)"

"i know" "so just let her say it when she's ready, right"

"Right. I don't think it's set in for him yet. I get why she's holding off."

"ok" "get her back on"

I switched places and watched. "hey again :)"

"stef" "sorry" "take ur time"



"thx :)" "i'll let u know" "merry christmas"

"you too, Stef" "see you soon"

"not soon enough :)" "bye"

## **December 28**

"Well, that's the story." Before I began writing our reply, I wanted to make sure Stef understood it as well as I did, and wouldn't be as confused or put off as she had been. "So what did you think?"

"Well, I can see why it was so popular," she conceded. "But it still feels like you were making a statement about us choosing it."

"I get it. I didn't mean anything by it. I thought it would interest you."

"Kinda? But I thought everyone knew about that plot twist."

"They do now, kinda like how everyone knows about the murder in Psycho. That was meant to be a twist, too."

"Huh, today I learned. And I guess I did see a lot of Carolyn in all this."

"Oh, the two investigators covering for their friend? Yeah, I get it. But she's not protecting someone from getting in trouble... at least, not the way they did."

"Even so! Think about where we'd be if Carolyn wasn't on top of things. She caught us being obvious about talking to each other at school, right? Imagine if a teacher saw that." She pause and shuddered. "Imagine if Mr. J saw that."

"Oh yeah, ol' High and Mighty would have me obliterated with meds in a heartbeat. Ugh -- what I wouldn't give to have some dirt on him."

"Focus, Petey. He'll get his, I'm sure. But... if this story applies to us, who's who?"

"Well, I admit I didn't think that far ahead, Stef. But they say there's a few things I do that you wouldn't, right? Only instead of dodging the responsibility, you accept it."

"Because the stuff you do helps me. It's not like you're indulging in evil for no reason."

"Okay, but suppose I did. Think about it; between your parents and some of the school teachers, you've acted like you feel like you're in some restrictive society where there's a specific way to act. You know, like high school."

Stefani paused. "You may be right. Didn't the assignment talk about how the setting relates to our lives? That was one of the options, right?" We quickly double-checked the assignment page. "Yeah, see?"

"Great! Now, even if I didn't exist the way I do now, Stef, think about how you got treated by some of the guys when you got back."

"Mostly Brian and stuff. Ugh."

"There were others who didn't get it. Nerves still raw. At least the teachers we talked to understood... most of them."

"Him again -- Pete, stop thinking about him. He's one guy, and in one more semester he'll be in the rear view mirror."

"Okay, but not before darn near ruining Julie's life. There's no place for that."

"And what do we do, civil servant ghost boy? How are we supposed to do something about him?"

I paused, looking back at the book cover. "People like that have a dark side in them, Stef. It may not be another name like us or the book, but they have it. He's projecting so much about who he claims to be -- some holier-than-thou angel on earth -- that it has to be compensation."

"Is this gonna be one of those 'every fundie is secretly gay' things?"

"No, but you notice the ones who yell the loudest have the biggest skeletons. I mean... lemme put it this way: you're genuine. You don't trumpet what a good person you are, you just... are. I'd say you have nothing to hide, but I guess what I mean is you have no dark secret." I hesitated. "I'm not dark, am I?"

"No, you're good. Look, if I thought we could, I'd tell everyone you're still with us. But what's the point you're getting at?"

"Look at the story: a guy wants to indulge in evil and get away with it. So he basically creates plausible deniability, right? Then he keeps his pristine image while behaving like a monster. Is that not Mr. J and how he treated Julie?"

"...yeah, Julie, yeah."

"Someone else on your mind? Did he do something to you?"

"Not me. But I get your point. And given how he feels about me... you think we can make an essay out of it?"

"I'm willing to try. You willing to risk the grade?"

Stefani smiled so wickedly that the body gave a smirk. "Let's do it." With that, she swapped me in control and let me work on comparing our reading assignment to a hurtful teacher who projected being better than that.

Name: Stefani DeVecchio

Story: "The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde" by Robert Louis Stevenson

Theme: Hidden evil among us

**December 29, noon**

"Hey, Stef!" I was expecting Carolyn at first, but the voice was familiar even if it was a different member of our crew.

"Hey Julie, what's going on?"

"You hear that Kristy's not gonna be with us on Friday?"

"You sure? She seemed to like the last one."

"No, she did, totally! But she said she had to study. Like, who studies over winter break?"

"Yeah, no kidding. You want me to check in on her?"

"Well, I thought it would be better if you did. Jane's too young, Carolyn's the host and would seem needy... give it a shot?"

"Why not you?"

"I tried, but she's all 'you would never get it' and seemed kinda mopey. I dunno, I want to know it's okay. Give it a shot?"

"Sure, why not. I'll let you know. Bye." Stef hung up and began to look up Kristy's number in her phone. As she did, she looked up in the mirror and shook her head -- ever since Carolyn told us we were zoning out, we tried to work out signals to each other to get attention so we could talk and act at the same time. "Pete, you hear that?"

"You know her better than I do; is this how she behaves?"

"Well, she is always the one with the book in our group, but I can't imagine she wouldn't want to take a day off to be with friends."

"So this isn't like her?"

"At all. She gets her great grades and she gets her activities and she spends time with her friends. She does all this... stuff and she usually knows how to balance it. Okay, here's her number. Let's figure this out."

Stef hit dial and waited. After a few seconds, Kristy could be heard on the other end. "Hello?"

"Kristy? It's Stef. Everything okay?"

"Yeah, I'm fine. I just need to work on my math a little. Sorry I won't be there -- someone told you, right?"

"Yeah, Julie did. But... you can take a night off, right?"

"You don't know how bad I need this. That last test kicked my ass. I totally misread a section and nearly failed. I gotta make up for it here to keep my grades up."

"What do you mean, nearly failed?"

"B-minus."

"Kristy, that's a perfectly good grade!"

"It's not enough, okay? Maybe after the next test when we get back. I just need to take a couple weeks to make sure--"

Mid-sentence, I heard a loud pounding on a door on her end. I could hear her mother yell at her about something, but couldn't make out what. Then I heard Kristy respond, "Mom, she called me!... I'm telling her why I'm not available, okay?... What do you mean, that tone?... No, you can't do that! Give it ba" The line went dead.

We fell back into our old habit of being stunned motionless while processing what happened -- fortunately, we were in Stefani's room and could do that. After a few seconds, I finally said something from the back seat. "Well... we know now, don't we?"

"Yeah... wow. That's horrible." She paused longer before snapping herself back into action. "We gotta do something about this."

"What do you have in mind? You think her mom and dad will listen to us?"

"Yeah, but we gotta cheer her up!"

"I don't see how, but if you have an idea, run it by me and the rest of us."

"Wait -- I gotta let the people know." Stefani quickly pulled up the text window for Julie and began typing hurriedly. She was sending so much information and tapping so fast she was having to send multiple full texts at once. Julie clearly was waiting for the burst of idea to end, as there was no indication she was trying to get a word in.

I tried reading everything I could. Stefani was going off about how unfair the whole situation was and that her parents were essentially grounding her over a grade most of us would be happy with. The big one came right at the very end: we had to get her to be a part of the evening, somehow, somehow.

Finally, after a few minutes to make sure we didn't have any further ideas, Julie replied. "Don't do it."

"Julie, what's wrong with you?" Stefani said out loud as she protested over text. But everything she said was just met with Julie making it clear acting wasn't the right call this time. Finally, Stef gave up and called Julie.

"Stef?"

"Yeah, you just gonna let her suffer like this?"

"Stef, it's not that. Look -- I get it. I think this is bullshit too. But you know what happens if we try something? We don't see her again, EVER."

"Oh, don't be so dramatic."

"Dramatic? If what you told me is what happened, her parents could easily just call her every hour to make sure she's still home or send her to a boarding school! Your heart's in the right place and all, but... we can't do anything."

Stefani wanted to protest, but I got her attention first. "She's right, you know," I whispered to her. Stefani asked Julie to wait before turning to me in surprise, but I shushed her and kept going. "Kristy's freedom comes in September. We gotta just help her get through it. Tell Julie you get it."

"B... oh, fine." She turned back to the phone. "Okay, Julie, I'll... I'll back off. I just wanna help her."

"Yeah, me too. Well... I guess we should just plan without her. Oh, hey, you and Jason doing anything for New Year's?"

"Um... no, I hadn't thought of anything yet. Why?"

"Oh, there's a dance being held at the marina about an hour from here. I got two extra tickets! Me and Jane are going!"

"Oh, sweet! Text me the deets. I'll bring it up."

"Got it! Can't wait!"

"All right, here it comes! Talk soon!"

**December 29, 5PM**

We darted out the door with our overnight bag and headed to the car for our first excursion as driver since the accident. (This time we were told to leave the pajamas at home; "A new tradition," Carolyn joked.) I threw the bag into the passenger seat and ran around in excitement. As I put the key into the driver's side door, Stefani contacted me. "Wait, let me drive."

"Aw, you have school to drive to, can't you let me have this?"

"That's not a good idea, Petey. You've never done this before."

"What?" Now I had to stop her. "Of course I've driven before! Where do you think I was when we collided?"

"Yeah, but you've never driven AS ME before."

I paused. "Is it that different?"

"Well, I'm not as tall as you were, my legs are a little shorter, you've never had to press pumps against a brake... it's enough to make me think we ease into it, you know?"

"Hm. You may have a point. Does that mean you do all the driving from now on?"

"Well, not from now on, but for now. It's okay, Petey. Better this way."

I shrugged, then switched off. "So do you need me to be quiet or anything? How serious are we taking this?"

"You're fine. I'm used to a voice in my head by now. Oh," she added as we turned on the engine, "is it okay if I talk out loud?"

"Would it make it easier for you?"

"Yeah," she said -- and this time, SAID said. Fortunately, no one thinks much of a driver talking to no one in particular nowadays -- there's usually a cell phone plugged into the speaker system. "Okay," she continued as she pulled out of the driveway, "so what do we do to help Kristy?"

"We can help her study. Seems like the test is the only way out of it."

"I was afraid of that. Jeez, her parents are so rough! Makes me appreciate Mom and Dad more."

"Yeah -- I mean, there's a difference, right? Your parents want what's best for you -- hers want what's best for them."

"Yeah... someone ought to slap some sense into them. Maybe Rick's gonna step up."

"Doubt it -- he would have by now."

"I thought brothers were better than that! Wouldn't you stand up for a sister?"

"I'd protest, yeah, but stand up is a bit much. I mean, what do you want from him? Suppose Rick does that -- suppose he tells Kristy's mom to lighten up. They'd just punish him, too. You can't reason with a fanatic. You saw it with Mr. J."

"But that's different!"

"Only in what they are fanatics of. Her parents worship money and social prestige. That can be a lot harder to get someone to soften on."

"So... what does that mean for Kristy?"

"I don't want to speculate. But if they think pressure creates diamonds, they need to be careful. There's lots of cases in history of people who had pressure on them and didn't respond well."

"Should I pray for her?"

"Couldn't hurt, I guess." In the past, I'd mock this sentence, but when you've been told there's a heaven and hell, it's not worth doubting. "Maybe she does need divine intervention. But right now, she needs an A on her test more than anything. We'll see her when school starts up again. There's time to comfort her then."

"...you know, even since you came along and helped me, I don't like not being able to help."

"I'm pretty sure you never did. This is just a spotlight case. But it's not like there's anything here we can do. It's okay to be worried. I'm worried too. But then... I mean... you know... we're stuck. We're not gonna see her til school anyway. Look, if it's on their mind, talk about it, but otherwise just enjoy the evening, right?"

"...I guess so. We're almost there. Any last thoughts?"

"Yeah... it's nice of you not to be mad about this tradition thing Carolyn mentioned. Especially with how you were last time."

"Yeah, I guess you're more of a girl than I thought." She added a laugh. "I mean, you've had your periods, you've kissed a boy, you've had emotional moments -- you're practically one of us, right?"

"...uhhh, yes?"

"Cool! Only took like three or four months. Sorry, I'm teasing. But you know, I guess I'm used to this by now. You?"

I thought for a second and smiled. "Yeah... yeah, I guess I am. And I'm glad it's you -- you've been a great host."

"You're not a parasite, Pete. I'm glad we're in this together. Wait, I gotta do this." As she pulled up to Carolyn's house, Stef leaned on the horn to alert everyone inside. Carolyn was the first one out of the house, with Julie and Jane soon after. All three ran to the car as Stef parked and got out. Everyone cheered that Stefani had gotten some of her freedom back, and the friends all hugged together.

## **11 PM**

Julie and Jane had curled up in their sleeping bag as usual by now. Carolyn was trying to get comfortable on the floor while I looked on from the couch. Something felt off. I quickly whispered something to Stef, who agreed and switched places. Stefani then got Carolyn's attention.

"Hey, Care... you okay?"

"Eh... I'm trying. I mean, you're the guest, take the couch."

"You don't have to be like that. C'mon up."

"What, you'll sleep on the floor?"

Stefani smiled wryly. "Well, he's already resting, so... who said I had to do that?"

Carolyn covered her mouth in surprise. "You mean it?"

"Is that ok?"

Carolyn quickly crawled over so the other two wouldn't accidentally overhear her. "You're not worried that I'm... you know..."

"Yeah, yeah, it's fine." Stefani then paused and smiled at Carolyn, pointing to the back of her head. "I mean, with him around, I kind of am too, right?"

"I thought you were gonna wait for college to do anything."

"Look, Jason will never find out and it's not like you're going to be feeling me up, Right?"

"Yeah... there's room for both of us without that. It's not like a sleeping bag. Hang on... I think this folds out to hold two." I got up as she went to one end of the couch and I the other. We slid the couch further out from the wall, then pulled it flat -- turns out it was convertible after all! We adjusted the covers, piled on the pillows, and both climbed in quietly. Unfortunately, we weren't quite quiet enough.

"Better two than one, right?" Julie smiled at us. "Got a secret to share?"



Carolyn quickly waved it off. "Nah -- she just didn't want me sleeping on the floor."

Julie seemed to be observing our body language. "Yeah, I guess you're right. We can't all have good taste." She kissed Jane on the forehead, who responded by sighing happily. "Good night."

### **New Year's Eve, six hours left in the year**

"Hopefully you don't have to look as much as last time," Stefani joked as I was straightening out our dress. "Remember, you're a girlfriend today." She had popped out to keep an eye on me while I got us ready. She still handled the makeup, since the first time I tried it I applied what can best be described as "way too much", but brushing hair and keeping clothes neat were still things I could do.

"I know, I know. This isn't like last time. I don't even want it to be like last time. This has a chance to be a special night. I just have this... feeling, you know? Like he's going to say those three little words this time."

"Well, let's not get our hopes up. Jason's been trying hard, like you said. If he thinks he'd risk it by saying so, he won't. You know this."

"I do, I do, but... maybe I want this for you or for us. Look, it's been a rough few months. You've been able to move on from the crash. You've gained friends. You've impressed people. You've gotten into college... and before all that, you survived Brian. You deserve this."

Stefani smiled and would have blushed if she were corporeal. "Well, that's really sweet of you. If it happens, it happens. I'm not saying I don't want it to happen, just that... don't expect it."

"Okay, I understand." I paused and checked the back of the dress, then as much of either side as I could. "But if it does, you'll be happy, right?"

"Ecstatic, totally," Stef admitted. "But that's later. I'm trusting you. Remember, stay out of his pants!" She jumped back in as I blew our reflection a kiss. The only thing left to do was wait.

### **Five hours left**

When the doorbell rang, I practically raced to the door, or as much as I could in high heels. I put on my coat and opened the door to see Jason standing there, in a pristine suit, holding a bouquet of flowers. "Hi... you... you look amazing." He extended the hand with flowers in it.

"Hey... oh, wow, thank you!" I gave him a quick hug and took the flowers to the kitchen table, looking for something to put them in. Mom quickly showed up with a vase and water, as if she knew this was coming, and I put the flowers inside, smiling in a glorious daze. I walked back to Jason, making sure to pull the necklace he gave me out so people could see the J and S on it -- and so his eyes would see it on me.

"Oh, you wore it?"

"Of course I did. Why wouldn't I? Jane and Julie are going with us -- I want them to see it."

Jason seemed surprised. "Wait... Julie and... Jane?"

"You didn't know?"

"Well, I mean, they're your friends. I didn't pay as much attention to them. But... okay. Will the dance object?"

"She got the tickets; I'm guessing no. Okay, we'll take my car -- I got directions to Julie's. You ready?"

Jason took my arm and walked with me. "I've been waiting for this for years."

#### **4.5 hours to go**

We arrived at Julie's house, parking in front of it so she could get her car out when it was time to go. Jason motioned for me to wait, then got out and walked around to open my door. "Oh, what a gentleman," I said with a laugh. "How sweet." We walked up to the door arm in arm, matching our strides and smiling at each other, then upon arriving at the door I knocked. Within seconds, a woman who had to be Julie's mom opened.

"Oh, hi," she said to us. "You must be Jason and Stefani. Julie said you'd be here. Come on in."

"Thanks, Mrs. Bryce!" We walked in and sat down in the living room, where Jane was already waiting for us. Her strapless green dress, seemingly designed to get attention, contrasted with my more conservative red number. Jane gave me a big hug as we sat down.

"Glad you're here, you two. You excited?"

"Oh yeah... a big formal date like this? It's going to be great."

Jason smiled at me. "I was nervous until I saw you."

"Aww..."

From upstairs we heard Julie's voice. "You better not be having fun without me!" Julie headed down the stairs, shoes in hand, wearing a sequined dress of a similar color to Jane's. They wanted everyone to know they were a couple, from the looks of it.

Jane stood up and headed to Julie. The two exchanged a longer kiss and looked into each other's eyes, whispering to each other and laughing. Jason, seeing all this for apparently the first time, looked back at me. "I guess they are," he said in a low tone, hoping no one would judge his obliviousness or think he was disapproving.

"For a long time. I think they're for life."

"Sure," he said, not really trying to present an opinion. He stood up as the happy couple joined us, but Julie indicated he didn't have to bother. They took a seat in a single chair, Jane small enough that they could both fit. "So," Jason asked hesitantly, "how long have you two been together?"

"Like a year and a half, maybe... more?" Julie began, and Jane jumped in as they began to do their verbal tennis. "Yeah, cuz we met in like March that one year, right?" "But we didn't date right away." "No, but, wait, do we count it from when we went public?" "That's what I was doing." "Yeah, year and a half. At least."

They both began laughing, more at Jason being astonished at their ability to complete each others' thoughts. When I turned around to see him, it caught me as funny too: Jason was blinking slowly, eyes otherwise wide, jaw open. This was a type of unity he'd never seen before. "What's wrong, Jason? Waiting for me to start?"

"No! I mean, I... do we do that?"

"No... and we don't have to. You just get used to them being able to do that. It's like they're the same person with two minds. Whatever that means." I was pretty sure I heard a "whew" from Stef in the back of my mind on that line.

"Hey, kids -- can I get pictures?" Julie's mom had a camera with her. "C'mon, my daughter and her love first!"

Jane and Julie got up and walked hand-in-hand to stand where they were directed. After about ten minutes of posing and smiling and pretending this was totally spontaneous, we said our goodbyes and piled into Julie's car. "Okay -- the marina's like 50 miles away. Hope we're all comfortable!"

## **90 minutes to go**

After a long drive, a quick dinner, some dancing, and reserving a table -- not necessarily in that order -- we were all seated to save our strength. It was 10:30 PM, and we were a little early, but they had a live band so we weren't about to be bored. Jason returned with a soda and gave it to me. "Thanks, Jason, but... where's yours?"

"Only one drink at a time. Stupid stamp. Well, at least they're thorough."

"Yeah, probably better. There's gonna be enough drunk people on the road; better if we don't join them. I've had enough car wrecks in my life."

Jane jumped in. "Hey, that's not nice to say about Jason!" Everyone laughed.

"No, he's fine. He's great." We exchanged a quick kiss. "But if you must know, the guy before him I had last year was a total jerk. I hope I never see him again."

"Do I know him?" Julie asked.

"Probably not. I hope not, anyway. He's not at school anymore."

"Well, so much the better. Hey, what's that around your neck? I don't think I've seen it before."

"This?" I quickly slid my hand under the two charms so they stood out. "He got this made specially for me for Christmas. Check it out."

Julie took a closer look, her eyes and mouth going wide in surprise. "Wow -- I didn't know you had that in you, Jason! Oh my god!"

"Oh, it just felt like something I could do. I didn't know what to get her and it popped into my head. Is it really that big a deal?"

"You had this custom made!? Yes, it's a big deal! It's awesome! It looked wonderful!"

"Oh..." Jason seemed to be taken aback at how much the gesture meant. "Did I, uh... was that too much?"

"Jason, don't be silly! I love it!"

Jane interrupted us as she pointed out to the bay by the docks. "Hey, look at the view! C'mon, Julie!"

Julie followed her gaze, as did I. I saw a lonely pier surrounded by a fence and gate to keep people from falling in. It seemed to offer a beautiful view of the entire waterside. No boats were docked at this time -- I guess anyone who had one was out on the water celebrating -- which left a lot of room and not a lot of company.

"Wait, isn't that place off-limits?"

"Aw, live a little! Let's find out!" Jane got Julie out of her seat and the two walked in that direction. As I got up to get Jason a drink and return the favor, he followed and took my hand. His eyes were still following our companions as Jane stepped over the fence and beckoned Julie to do the same.

"So did we ever find out more about her college stuff?"

"Hm? Oh, uh... no, not yet. Probably not until March or so. But if Cambridge let her have a redo, that's a good sign, right?"

"Yeah, I guess it is. Still, it would be better if she got better teachers."

"Hey, let's not think about him, dear. This is our night, right?" We returned to our seats and sipped our sodas as we listened to the band. "So... is it really that bad having a formal date after all?"

"Well, I wouldn't have thought about it, but... something told me this would be different."

"Different? Have you done this before?"

"Well... I have dated before, if that's what you mean. Just that the last time I was all dressed up to meet the girl, I went home alone."

"Oh, no, what happened?" I gave him a hug and leaned into him as if there was any doubt I would never do the same thing.

"Well... I finally got up the nerve to ask her to a big fancy dinner, and we were enjoying our meal, and I was hoping she'd be so taken by it that, well, that we'd still be a couple today. But when the bill arrived, she said she didn't bring any money, and her meal was a little more than I anticipated..."

"Ooh, ouch."

"Yeah... turns out an hour of dishwashing is not romantic. She was so embarrassed she called a cab home."

"How was she going to pay for it?"

"...yeah, that thought crossed my mind too. I think she made up her mind before the date. But it still hurt a lot... you remember how I was basically quiet a bunch after that?"

"Not really... I mean, I was kind of coming off of my own problems with Brian."

"Oh, right, sorry."

"No, no! Jason, you didn't do anything wrong. Is this why you're so nervous with me?"

Jason gulped. "Well, some of it. I mean, you were our class Homecoming rep last year and all that. Everyone likes you. Guys all think you're too pretty. And then when you got here you weren't exactly in the mood, and I... Well, truth be told, since the first day of freshman year when we had our first class I kinda wanted to ask you out someday."

"Whoa..."

"You're surprised?"

"Um... well, I'm not dumb. I know the guys think that of me. But it's still wild to hear of someone who thinks you're his ideal and have been since you met."

"Yeah, well... Now it's happening. And it's all so... so much like a dream. I don't want to wake up." He's practically telling me he's intimidated and we're a couple? I waited to see if it would hit him how weird that is, listening in the back of my head in case Stefani wanted to chime in. She relayed something to me, and I repeated it.

"Uh, you don't have to worry. Right now, we're together. And even if we're not together in the future... you were my friend then, you'll be my friend again. As long as you don't do something totally heinous, you're safe."

"Yeah, you can say that... but I.. well, thanks." He put his arm around me as I moved my chair next to his and rested on his shoulder. "I hope you're right."

"Trust me. I am." As I sighed contentedly, I saw Julie and Jane slowly walk back to the table, defeated. We quickly sat back up as they sat down, each one carrying a drink that they tried to swallow all at once.

"Well... at least we weren't kicked out."

I smirked. "Get in trouble, you two?"

"Apparently if the gate's closed the whole thing's closed. Can't imagine why that didn't sink in."

### **The last minutes**

The DJ told everyone that there would be fireworks at midnight and said anyone who wanted to see it would still be able to hear the countdown. At 11:45, the four of us headed to the docks -- Julie making a show of NOT crossing the fence this time -- and waited as we danced to the music that could be heard over the PA. As the slow dance began, Jason pulled me to him and we swayed back and forth to the romantic melodies. I thought I could hear his heart beat as we danced. I'd like to pretend I did.

Jason had his hand in my hair as we danced. His other hand was on the small of my back -- well, slightly higher, as he seemed worried about crossing lines. I looked around him at Julie and Jane, so close together their green dresses almost seemed like one fabric, staring in each other's eyes and their hands touching wherever they fell. I guess some people are just closer than others -- of course, they did have at least a year's head start.

Jason took me over to the railing by the docks. From there we could see the boat load up, with men going over last-minute instructions as to the timing of the fireworks. The rest of the water was still, as if contrasting intentionally with the atmosphere we were in. We were on the border -- society and isolation; surrounded and alone -- as if we had carved out our own world.

"This feels like a miracle after my last relationship," Jason admitted.

"Kinda does for me too. I was scared everyone would stay away from me cuz of the accident. But, you know, so far it's been about faith in humanity restored."

"I'm glad you're not alone. And I'm glad I'm the reason you're not."

I sighed happily. "Thank you..."

The DJ was all over the PA and had our attention, announcing 30 seconds to go until the new year. "If you all wanna make a wish, now's the time to do it because we're beginning the countdown!"

I held Jason's hand in one of mine, using the other to scratch the back of my head. I relayed to Stef as the countdown began: "I wish for both of us to be happier together than we ever were apart."

"You and me, or us and Jason, or what?"

"You and me. Thank you for saving me."

"And I wish for you to be happy in this life as you were in the last one. Thank you for forgiving me, Petey."

As the count reached 15, I looked up with excitement at Jason. "Here we go! It's time!"

Jason and I faced the main hall as we saw the screen by the band flash the numbers. We heard dozens of people outside and hundreds inside counting down, all in unison. What had been the most difficult year of her life was almost over; what had been an ending of one existence for me turned into the beginning of one I could still love and enjoy. Holland never looked so beautiful.

"5! 4! 3! 2! 1! HAPPY NEW YEAR!"

As everyone cheered, some couples exchanged their New Year's kiss. Jason turned me to him and added us to the number. We stayed this way, embracing and kissing, for what felt like a full minute as the fireworks display began behind us. We stopped and stared into each other's eyes. Unbeknownst to us, Julie saw us and was waiting for us to resume kissing, the fireworks in the back framing our moment of bliss just right.

We smiled into each other's eyes as Auld Lang Syne played in the background, loud enough for the whole neighborhood to hear but essentially a million miles away. As the song ended, we kissed again, longer and more meaningfully than before, ignoring the fireworks, the cheers, the camera flash from Julie, and more or less the entire world. We were the world for those few minutes.

Finally, as we looked at each other again, I heard it. "I love you, Stef."

I closed my eyes and readied to hug and kiss some more, but not before I responded.

"I love you too."