**Chapter 1 - Kyle**

***Dear Kyle,***

***Welcome to my neighborhood. My name is Brendan, and I live next door to you now. I am 8 years old, and my mom said she thinks you are too. Do you want to be friends? I just got the new Lego Friend's set, but Andy won't play with me because he says they're a girl toy. But I'm a boy, and I play with them, so I don't know why he won't. He's just silly. If you aren't silly like him, you should come play with me. Mom says you can come anytime.***

***Sincerely,***
***Brendan***

**The question came on a beautiful October night. The kind of crisp, clear autumn night that rarely happens in the Northwest. Brendan and I were curled up in a pile of blankets, watching the stars from the backyard tree house we built the summer after 5th grade, when we realized that the tree dividing our backyards would be perfect for a treehouse.**

**By which I mean… it was a tree of reasonable girth.**

**We spent lots of time in the treehouse that summer and the summer after, but as time went on, the time spent in the treehouse dwindled, until, by the start of Junior year, we hardly more than glanced at it. I missed our time there, which is why I was so excited when I got home from work and saw the note hovering over my desk: "The stars should be bright tonight. Shall we open the roof?"**

**I immediately grabbed my warmest jacket from the closet and a bag of carrots from the fridge. Brendan had already propped open the roof of the treehouse, and the blankets we'd collected over the years were still dry, thanks to our solid treehouse design. I offered up my bag of baby carrots for snacking on, and Brendan brought out a thermos of hot apple cider and a couple of mugs. After 5 years, we had this down to a science.**

**It was, in fact, a fantastic night for looking at stars. Not a cloud in the sky, a new moon, and, with the high school stadium lights off and Seattle just far enough in the distance to be invisible, light pollution was at a minimum and we could almost make out the Milky Way. Almost.**

**After a while of peaceful stargazing (what other sort is there, really?), Brendan broke the silence.**

**"Kyle… have I ever mentioned that you're the prettiest girl I know?"**
**I raised an eyebrow at him. Not only did I, like any other girl my age, not see myself as**

**particularly pretty, I was pretty sure I wasn't his type. The only girls he'd shown an interest in were standard Southern beauties – blond hair, blue eyes, dimples… a chest. I had none of these things. Besides, something was just a little off about his tone.**
**"Actually, Brendan? You haven't. Why do you suddenly decide to bring this up now?"**
**"I just… I dunno…" A wave of something flashed across his face. "I wouldn't want to ruin our friendship or anything, and you know I'm not interested in dating right now…"**
**I nodded. Between the way his parents fawned over every one of his female friends (except me) with the seeming hope that one might be a love interest and our mutual agreement that high school relationships *ruined everything* and were totally not worth it after watching several classmates crash and burn, I wasn't surprised at all by this last statement. Yet it seemed like there was more to his sentence. "But…?" I prompted him.**
**"But I couldn't even begin to tell you how long I've been dying to kiss you. And I guess I was hoping… just this once… even if it never happens again…"**

**I'm not entirely sure how I reacted at first. I probably stared blankly at him for a while, because I'm sure that's the response every guy wants when he takes the time to ask a girl if he can kiss her, regardless of his motivations. I had just never considered Brendan as a potential object of any but the most platonic affections, never so much as considered that he might see me that way. I suppose it had crossed my mind once or twice that *others* might think we were romantically involved, but even then the possibility of such an involvement just seemed so farfetched, so outside the bounds of achievable reality that I really saw no reason to waste thought on it.**

**Except here it was. Facing me head on – for whatever reason, the person I had been friends with the longest had suddenly decided he wanted to kiss me. Everything I had ever believed to be true about this friendship was crashing to the ground, or so it felt. Is it any wonder that I reacted the way I did?**

**"Brendan… are you insane? How can you possibly think that kissing me won't do something weird to our friendship? How could you possibly think that I'd be okay with that?"**

**For a second I almost thought I saw him lighten, like he'd been worried about something and he actually got the answer he wanted to hear. Considering the circumstances, this didn't make much sense, but I was willing to roll with it.**

**"Yeah" he said, a little too enthusiastically. "I… I guess... well, don't worry about it. That's fine. You're a good friend, I wouldn't want to change that. Ever."**

**I smiled at him and said thanks. Maybe things would be a little weird for a little while, but we'd dealt with far worse. I could hear the story finishing in my head – they didn't kiss at all, shared the most wonderful friendship, and lived happily ever after. As friends.**

**If only it was that easy.**

## Chapter 2 – Brendan

***Dear Brendan,***

***Thank you so much for the k'nex set you gave me for my birthday. I really enjoyed putting it together. I hope you had fun at my party.***

***Thanks,***
***Kyle***

**There was a fluke when my neighborhood was built. In an effort to appeal to American consumer culture, the developers wanted to build houses as large as possible. However, the houses on my street back up on a wetland and forested area, and they also wanted to appeal to (and appease) nature lovers by not ruining too much greenspace, and by putting lots of windows in the houses so we could enjoy the views of nature all around us. What they didn't account for was the fact that houses were next to each other – when they built homes full of windows that inched within a couple feet of the edge of the property line, they created a lot of places where windows just looked into the neighbor's homes. I imagine this made the houses a touch less desirable and dug into the profits of the developers a bit, but for me, it was actually a great setup. Soon after Kyle and I became friends, we discovered that our bedroom windows faced each other. Had we been older at the time, this might have been cause for some concern, especially on the part of our parents, about the possible situations that could arise when a boy and a girl can see into each other's bedrooms. But we were young enough when we met that we'd barely encountered the word puberty, nevermind experienced infatuations, so we just considered it a fun coincidence… and our parents just started training us early to close the blinds when we were sleeping or changing.**
**At one point, Kyle had a fantastic idea – to set up a pulley system so we could send each other notes (or cookies, or small Lego structures, as the case may be) from window to window. It was entirely her idea, though if I'm telling the story when she's around, I'll say it was mine, just to get her goat. She usually figures out some**

**way to get me back later, though, so I have to be careful.**
**The pulley system has definitely undergone some updates, (It's surprising the toll that Washington weather can take on engineering projects), but we've been using it since the day we first created it. It's adjustable now, so it can bring things inside in the summer when we are okay with leaving the windows open, but stay entirely outside when the windows have to stay closed. I've definitely suggested some improvements, but Kyle has pretty much designed the whole thing.**
**The same was true about our treehouse – Kyle dreamed it up, we built it together, and then I was left in charge of decorating. There've been adjustments made to both the treehouse and the decorations over the years, but ultimately it's remained a nice, cozy place to hang out. So I guess it made sense that, when I found myself thrust into the unfamiliar territory of kissing girls, I desperately wanted to bring everything back into a place I felt was comfortable and familiar – our pulley system, and our treehouse.**

**Chapter 3 – Kyle**

***Dear Kyle,***

***We're having pancakes for dinner. Mom said she'd make extra bacon. Want to come over?***

***Love,***
***Brendan***

**The next morning was a Sunday, and I was intent on taking full advantage of it. I'd stayed up way too late the night before playing League of Legends, which had been going great until around midnight, at which point the only people online seemed to be the one who cared more about insulting their teammates than about actually playing the game. After a couple of matches that mostly involved carrying my teammates and having them type obscenities at me whenever I did, I decided it was time to call it quits and go to bed. Sunday morning, I slept in. By the time I woke up, it was late enough that Brendan might have gone to church already. His family isn't particularly religious, but he got dragged to the local Unitarian church on a regular basis, his parents figuring that it was a good way to raise their sons in a supportive and diverse community. There wasn't a note at my**

**window like there usually was Sunday morning, but I figured, considering the events of the night before, that I'd give him a break.**
**The weather was still nice, if chilly, and I knew the garden needed tending, so I trudged over to the plot of land that housed our neighborhood garden. When our housing development was built, they left one lot open to be a garden. Their hope had been that residents in the neighborhood would tend this garden and grow food, in order to increase the general sense of "green-ness" surrounding the development. It always struck me that they developed a bunch of undeveloped land with new houses that weren't really all that environmentally friendly themselves, and then tried to convince us that the homes were "green" because they didn't destroy too many trees, and there was a community garden. Because everyone wants to spend time tending a community garden.**

**Miraculously, though, it worked. It seemed that everyone from the neighborhood contributed to some stage in the growing process – and not just the eating, either. Sure, there were days I'd show up and it looked like some kids had had a rotten tomato war, and we still had a slug problem. The whole northwest had a slug problem. But on the rare occasion that I got to the garden and all the plants had been picked over, there was usually a note on the bulletin board, letting us know which house we could go to if we wanted some of the surplus zucchini or whatnot. Seriously though. Way too much zucchini. Usually someone would grab the rest of any given produce before it started to rot in the garden, and, from the looks of things, it appeared that most of the plants had been really well picked over. All that remained for the year was the pumpkins – nobody around me had to buy pumpkins anymore, ever since we started planting them.**
**Luckily for me, my desired task looked like it hadn't been touched in quite a while – weeding. The weeding gets done quite thoroughly over the summer, when the weather is nice and everyone wants to be outside. However, as soon as the weather turns, my neighbors usually barely trudge out to the garden to harvest the last of the produce. This meant I could easily spend an entire afternoon turning the soil and pulling out weeds and hardly make a dent in the expanse of the garden, all the while feeling like I was somehow managing to be productive. It was the perfect task for my day – I had a lot to think about, after Brendan's surprise from the night before. It was also the perfect day for the task. Fitting with my mood, a cloud cover had rolled in during the night and dropped some water into the ground, leaving the soil moist and soft without being overly muddy. My fingers rejoiced at the feel of cool earth, and the weeds came up relatively easily, no longer cemented down by the hard summer dirt.**

**We had a few groundcovers and other viney plants to deal with, but mostly the weeds at the moment were the common and easy ones – dandelions, maple tree sprouts that just didn't belong (I always felt a bit guilty pulling these up, knowing what beautiful trees they might one day make), and occasionally a vegetable spreading into territory that didn't belong to it. And moss. Lots and lots of moss.**

**After a few hours, I'd managed to turn most of the ground around the vegetable patches from a weedy green to a soft earth brown. I wiped off my hands on my pants, accomplishing nothing but dirtying my pants, because the best dirt never actually washes off anything. As I carried the bucket of weeds over to the compost bin, I saw Andy sauntering into the garden. Psh. Andy. He was full of himself, and generally pretended to be a friend just long enough to get some juicy gossip to spread around the school or to find another reason for his holier-than-thou, stuck up tendencies. Fitting his usual attitude, I ignored him as I stirred the weeds into the compost pile and headed for the chicken coop to check for eggs.**

**Unfortunately, by the time I got there, he was already leaning against the roosting door. Clearly he knew my habits, but seeing as he'd lived in the neighborhood longer than me, I couldn't be surprised.**

**"Hey there" he called. "I hear you have a love interest!"**
**I raised my eyebrows at him. "If you'll excuse me, I'd like to check for eggs before I head home for dinner."**
**"Oh, I'm sorry" he said, not a word of pity in his voice. "Am I in your way?"**
**I turned around. "Nevermind… I'll deal with it later."**

**But he wasn't about to let me brush him off. I could feel him behind me, staring me down as I walked away. It wouldn't surprise me if he followed me until he got his answer. And, honestly, I wanted to know what he was talking about, seeing as there was no way he'd know about me and Brendan's evening… nevermind my fresh eggs. After a few more steps, when I couldn't shake the feeling, I turned back around.**

**"Okay, Andy. What do you want from me? Why are you here?"**
**"Well…." He drew out the words evil-ly. "A little birdy told me that you may have had some… interactions, lately?"**
**I did my best blank look. A long awkward silence ensued. Mostly awkard for me – it was pretty obvious that Andy still had the power in this conversation, and I was desperate to steal it from him. So I spoke first.**
**"You sure that little birdy wasn't talking about Kaylee?" It was surprising how often our names got mixed up.**
**"Heh." He grimaced a little. Just a flash, maybe even one of the micro-expressions that they talk about on cop shows, gone a little too long. "I'm pretty sure they didn't mean Kaylee."**
**I gave him my best innocent grin. "You sure? You know what they say about her!" Kaylee was often rumored to have gotten around, but seeing as I never knew any of the guys, I tended to disbelieve it. Nevermind how she acted around the boys I did know – it nearly pained me to spread the rumors, since they gave my male classmates so much hope and yet she seemed so disinterested. Not in the stuck up, you're not good enough for me way either. Just… like she didn't even notice that male flesh was a thing in the**

**world.**

**I apparently hadn't succeeded in embarrassing him out of questioning me, though, because he started walking towards me – or maybe it was around me, to block my escape. Nonetheless, it was enough space for me to walk nonchalantly over to the chicken coop, and check for eggs. Enough space, and just the right time – the chickens had all dropped down to the lower part of the coop in the time being, leaving their roosts unoccupied and, unfortunately, eggless. Better luck next time, I supposed. I turned to head back home, but apparently I was right about him not letting me leave. While I was busy perusing the chicken coop, he'd snuck up behind me. Now he was towering over me, somehow attempting to look soft and sweet in spite of his threatening figure.**

**"You know, Kyle," he whispered, taking my hand. I tried to pull it away but his grip was a little too strong, and I was a little too startled. "If you don't like him… if you don't appreciate his advances… I'd be happy to fight him off for you. You know… you know I'd do anything to make you happy."**
**I yanked my hand away in disgust. "Even…" I stuttered. What was this? Was he professing love for me? Was everyone I never thought would ever be romantically attached to me suddenly deciding they'd been madly in love their whole lives? Or did he somehow know about Brendan? Somehow think that putting up an act of valiant knight might make an impression on me?**
**I took a deep breath, trying to gather fiery words threatening to spew themselves all over the boy in front of me. "Andy… all I really want right now… is for you to leave me alone. I've had a rather crazy weekend, and I came over here so I could start trying to process it. Not so I could find myself rejecting yet another…"**
**I caught myself just in time.**

**Almost just in time.**

**A slow smirk spread across his face as he ran his fingers through his soap-soft, mouse-brown hair. "So you admit it? Something happened last night?"**
**I sighed. He softened his smile. For a second I almost thought he looked caring. "Don't worry about it, babe. You know I'm always here for you." He winked at me, and sauntered off, not once glancing back to see me leaning against the chicken coop, dirty hands, eggless, and with another load of confusion resting on my shoulders.**

## Chapter 4 – Brendan

***Dear Brendan,***

***Mom wants me to make chicken pot pie for dinner. You know I don't like cooking alone, so do you want to come over and help? I'd love to get the chance to dump flour in your hair… I mean...***

***Thanks,***
***Kyle***

**I have a summer birthday. While all my friends with school-year birthdays always envied me, since I never had to do homework or to go school on my birthday, I had a different problem. My family always travelled for the summer, since my grandparents pretty much own an island out in the middle of Lake Erie. Come my birthday, I was usually stuck on an island with my extended family instead of around my friends so I could celebrate in the usual way. Don't get me wrong – I love my family. But when you get to watch all your friends have a fancy birthday party and open piles of junk wrapped in pretty paper every year, and know that you don't get to do this because your family is so awesome that it owns an island… well, I guess I shouldn't complain.**
**But when I was little? I sure did. When my mom asked me what I wanted for my 8th birthday, I told her I wanted to go home so I could have a birthday party with my friends. Naturally, there wasn't really any way my family was willing to do this, since the island was tradition and all, but my mom promised me that she'd make it up to me somehow. My mom always holds good on her promises.**
**Come January, she decided that she was going to plan me a half birthday party. She admitted much later that she'd always felt a little bad about my not having a proper birthday party, and, while she told me she wasn't going to go all out and spend lots of money, I could invite friends over and we could do the whole presents and cake and lots of games thing. I was unbelievably excited. Of course, I was also 8, so it's actually pretty believable. But even so, I couldn't wait to experience a day all my own with my friends.**

**There was one condition, however. She wanted me to invite Kyle. Our elementary school was already small as it was, with only one class per grade. We all knew each other well, for better or worse, so things were already hard enough for a new kid. To make things even crazier for Kyle, she'd moved mid-year. Suddenly jumping into a classroom culture without getting the initial introduction to how the classroom was going to work was challenging at best. She handled it pretty well, I**

**suppose, since it wasn't the first time she'd moved mid-year. The problem wasn't her at all, it was everyone else: 8 year olds are vicious, and besides a couple of girls who thought her tomboyishness was intriguing, our classmates were mostly ready to jump on her every slight mistake. She wasn't really finding friends. My mom was hoping that, as neighbors, we could be welcoming and help her have some good experiences with her peers as well. (I know Jesus and Mr. Rogers both say things about being nice to your neighbors.) I knew in my 8 year old heart that she was right, but I didn't really want to be inviting a girl to my birthday party. I worried the other boys would make fun of me for it, and I was already seen as failing in my masculine duties, whatever those are when you're in third grade.**

**But, of course, being the planner and financer of the party, and my parent, my mom got the final say on my guest list. Kyle was coming. And there wasn't a thing I could do about it. Which, I guessed then, was fine because I did like her – I was only resistant to invite her because I was still holding onto a few fading threads of fears that my male friends would berate me for it. And it was fine, I realized later, not only because it turned out that she fit in well with my group of friends, who after an hour or so didn't care in the least that she was a girl, but also because it ultimately solidified our friendship. The party was a blast – the sky had attempted to spit out some snow the night before, so we attempted to have a snowball fight in the backyard. When the half inch of patchy snow failed us, we resorted to mud. I'm pretty sure my mom regretted the whole ordeal and the amount of cleaning up she had to do afterwards, but for the rest of us a new February tradition had been formed – Mudball fights.**

**Not that we, of course, restricted our mudball fights to the month of February. If anything, the neighborhood children quickly began to use every winter rainy day as an excuse to ruin their clothing and their parent's carpets.**

## Chapter 5 – Kyle

***Dear Kyle,***

***Thank you so much for supporting and standing up for me in class today. You don't even know how much that means to me. I hope you know that if you ever find yourself in***

***the unlikely circumstance of being bullied, picked on, targeted, belittled, or otherwise disliked, I will always stand behind you and support you. Or in front of you, punching people in the face. Seriously. Just let me know.***

***Love,***
***Brendan***

**I'm not sure if it was the bizarre encounter with Andy, or a serious of terrifying dreams that left me feeling agitated when I woke up Monday morning. Maybe both. Or maybe the dreams were caused by Andy. Regardless, I couldn't shake the feeling that something was terribly off. I was so invested in thinking about this weird feeling that it took until halfway through lunch for me to notice the looks people were giving me. They weren't bad looks yet. They weren't even describable looks – just a few more extra glances than I was used to. Like people were thinking me over when they'd hardly noticed me before.**

**Thanks to the chaos of the weekend, I hadn't quite finished my post-lunch homework, so I didn't really pay the glances much mind. Thirty minutes to complete a calculus assignment does that to you. The looks were present, and I was aware of noticing more eyes on me than usual, but I didn't start to question it until then end of lunch, when I went back to my locker to drop off my lunchbag and a note fell out.**

**My first impression was that it might be a love note from someone. I knew Andy would never do such a thing, and I was pretty sure Brendan wasn't about to keep pushing me, but after two completely unexpected confessions of attraction, the imaginative bit of my brain was up for anything. Almost anything. A love note from the principal probably would have surprised me less than what did appear on the paper – two words, unmistakably scrawled out in purple sharpie.**

**"You slut"**

**I read it a few more times. It didn't take that long, being only two words, but I couldn't quite decide if it actually said what I thought it did. When my brain finally confirmed that it did, in fact, include the word "slut" (one which was pretty much forbidden at our school), I spent a moment wondering if maybe it was meant for someone else, a locker number off or something. I couldn't remember for sure who had the lockers next to mine, but I was pretty sure they were guys… and I was pretty sure that meant nobody would want to call them sluts. But nevermind, I told myself. It must be a mistake.**

**Math class came and went. Usually, I didn't have to think in that class, so I took the time to scribble notes or draw designs for buildings. But today I couldn't keep my mind of the boys, and the note, and it seemed the only way to avoid those thoughts was to throw myself into integrals with all my might. We were just starting to cover finding the volume of graphs rotated around an axis, which was actually pretty fun – the same process as**

**finding the volume of anything, except with integrals. Even so, class still wasn't holding my attention. I flipped through my binder until I found the sheet listing our assignments for the month, pulled out a fresh sheet of notebook paper, and started carefully writing out the week's assignment. By the time I was done, math class was over and it was time for art. Or, as I preferred to think of it, time to let my inner loner take over, plug in my headphones, tune in the music and tune out the world. Art was good for that – our teacher believed that music could be an essential part of the artistic process for some people, so he allowed us to listen to music during studio time if we wanted to. I was glad for the distraction, because art also meant plenty of walking around and noticing that everyone seemed to be watching me still. The feeling bothered me, but the soothing sounds of Taylor Swift (my guilty pleasure and one of my most feminine habits) and the effort of concentration necessary for my third attempt at painting a river helped me ignore it. I painted for a while, carefully washed out my paintbrushes, put everything away and, as soon as the bell rang announcing the end of the school, rushed to my locker so I could leave before any of the awkward stares became awkward words.**

**It was too late. Brendan was already there, face in his hands, back to the hallway, leaning against the locker next to mine. I almost wasn't going to say anything, but we'd been friends so long. I couldn't help myself.**

**"Brendan?" He jumped.**
**"Oh, god, Kyle, don't scare me like that!"**
**"You're next to my locker, Brendan, what was I supposed to do?"**
**He sighed and went back to staring at the ground. After a long pause, he looked up at me.**
**"Kyle, I'm sorry. I think… I… I've made a huge mistake."**

## Chapter 6 – Brendan

***Dear Brendan,***

***Do you have the slightest idea what Mr. Danbe was talking about in class today? I never understand anything he says, and I know you actually like history, so do you think you could help me study? I'll help you with the trig homework… please?***

***Thanks,***
***Kyle***

**I remember the first time I ever saw Kyle cry. It was January, finals week, in ninth grade – the first year grades start mattering for college. For some reason, she'd been hit by a horrible bout of insomnia the night before. Two years later, she still hasn't worked out the reason for her insomnia, and it managed to start at the worst possible time: the night before her math final. Unlike my own usual attitude towards tests – that as long as I pass, I'm fine – Kyle tended to see each test as an opportunity to prove her excellence, and every mistake as a step away from perfection, especially in math and science. So she was understandably freaked out when she showed up in the morning to take her math final, the first math final with a grade that counted towards college, and was far from feeling 100%.**

**When I saw her before class, she looked a little ill.**
**"Kyle, are you okay?"**
**She nodded "I … well… I hope so. I didn't sleep last night, pretty much at all. I'm a little worried about the math final."**
**"But Kyle… you never stress about tests. You always do fantastic. Why worry now?"**
**"Because I didn't sleep last night?"**
**"I guess…"**
**"I kept dropping things and walking into walls when I was getting ready this morning. That's how tired I am. I'm not sure how I can expect to take a math test and get anywhere near a reasonable grade on it when I can't hardly remember how to brush my teeth in the morning."**
**"Kyle… you know…"**
**"No, Brendan. Stop it. You don't understand. You just go through life pretending tests aren't important and you'll never understand."**
**I figured that was my cue to stop talking. "Best of luck, Kyle" I murmured, and I headed off to my first final of the day. Mine was art, and we just had to turn in a painting by the end of the week, so I didn't actually have a test to stress about until after lunch. Not that I really cared about my history final. If I forgot history, I forgot history, there wasn't any changing that now.**
**In the art final period, I managed to put finishing touches on a landscape painting that demonstrated a number of the methods of portraying distance in art: converging lines, fading color intensity, lightening of color, lessening of detail, size, and physical position on a page (the closer something is to the horizon, the further away it appears). My painting showed a mountain road lined with trees, some trees**

**in the foreground appearing more detailed and more colorful than those further in the distance. I was pretty proud of it, and very excited to show it off to my teacher when I finished it. He also loved the painting, and I think I managed to get an A on it. Not that that was difficult with this teacher. Unlike some art teachers who allegedly grade based on the aesthetic quality of the painting, he only graded on whether you integrated topics learned in class into the artwork. Basically, if I followed instructions, I'd get a good grade. A beautiful artwork just meant I had something I were more proud to take home to show your parents, especially important considering my parents liked to hang every artwork I made in the living room.**

**When I had turned my painting in, I still had about an hour left to do a little more studying for my test. I reviewed the structure of the Roman government and spent some time reading about some of the especially crazy emperors (not that it actually came in handy on the test, but it was entertaining to know that one emperor habitually walked backwards carrying a large rock… until he was murdered on the toilet by his would-be successor). When class was finally over, I headed out to find Kyle and see if she had handled her test okay.**

**My first stop was to check the math room. I'd at least be able to tell if she'd finished the test yet, and if not, I was willing to wait outside the room until the test was over. By the time I got there, however, there was nobody – not even the teacher still sitting in the room. This could be a good sign, since teachers here are pretty lenient about letting people take extra time if they need it. Well, not all of them, but the math teacher for sure was – she figured that, at the very least, the most important part was that people knew how to do the math. If people didn't know how to do it quickly, she was less concerned, because ultimately it's ability and not speed that matters in the world. I'd beg to differ on this sometimes, but for the most part we appreciated this. It helped those of us who weren't numerically inclined to feel a little less bad about ourselves when we were struggling on a test. Few things are more humiliating in school than turning in an incomplete test because of lack of time.**

**My next stop was her locker, but I knew she wouldn't hang around there. I thought I might be able to open her locker and check if her lunch was still in there. If I could and it was, it might be worth waiting around for her. Unfortunately, after a**

**few tries, I couldn't get it open… and I definitely didn't want to look suspicious to anyone who thought I might be trying to steal things. Usually the lockers aren't that secure, and all it takes is a jiggle of the combination to get them to open, but Kyle had a habit of spinning the lock before she left her locker so nobody could get in there, especially when she was in a bad mood.**

**Without proof that she'd gotten or not gotten her lunch, I moved on to check her usual lunch spot. One of the teachers often opened up his classroom for lunching students in case people didn't want to sit in the crowded lunchroom. He was usually good for some jokes or otherwise good conversation, so this was always a popular option, and Kyle was especially likely to be found in there, since she was especially fond of this teacher. But she wasn't there this time. I did a quick sweep of the halls and scanned the cafeteria, at which point I was starting to get concerned. Kyle didn't have a particularly low tolerance for cold, but she still didn't usually like being outside in January if it wasn't snowing and/or she wasn't extra bundled in winter clothing. However, it seemed that outside was my only option.**

**I finally found her leaning against a large tree, facing away from the school. She was staring off in the distance and clearly not trying to eat from the lunch bag that was strewn on the ground next to her. I picked it up, fished out the chocolate bar that I had correctly assumed was in there, opened it, and handed it over. Snickers. Especially good comfort food around finals time, and also helpful to warm people up. She started eating it hungrily, barely moving her eyes from the spot I couldn't determine.**

**"Kyle. You aren't dressed to be out here. Are you sure you don't want to go in and warm up a bit? Mr. Henry's room was pretty empty, I think just Julia was in there."**
**She sighed. Only then did I notice how hard her lip was quavering. "I'm fine" she muttered, but the crack in her voice very clearly indicated that she was not, in fact, fine.**
**"Bad test?"**
**Wrong question. She stuffed the last of the snickers bar in her mouth, wrapped her arms around her knees and buried her face in her sweater sleeves.**
**"Kyle…"**
**She shook her head.**

**“Kyle, you could take math tests in your sleep and still pass them.”**
**She looked up at me just a little. Just enough that I could see how red her eyes were, could see her face start to dampen from a few tears. I reached out to put my arm around her, but she pushed me away.**
**“Yes, Brendan. Bad test. Now go away. I just want to be alone.”**

**Since I was pretty sure her after lunch final was art, and our art teacher would probably be understanding of the situation as long as she finished the project before week’s end, I let her be and wandered off to finish my day.**

**She got a 92% on that test. A low A, but our school didn’t bother with A minus, so it was an A all the same.**

## Chapter 7 – Kyle

***Dear Kyle,***

***I was going to say good luck on the chemistry test but then I realized you wouldn't need it.***

***Love,***
***Brendan***

**I was shocked and not sure I'd heard him correctly. "What's that?" I asked, wondering what he wanted to confess to.**
**He was quiet for a long time. "I said... I've made a horrible mistake"**
**"I know, but..." I caught myself. I didn't know, and I didn't want to know. He didn't seem to want to tell me.**

**"I'm sorry, Kyle."**

**I looked him in the eye, but I couldn't handle the emotions I saw. I don't really do emotions, if I can help it. I shrugged at him, hoisted my back pack onto my shoulder, closed my locker and walked away. I walked home alone that day for what seemed like the first time in 8 years.**

**The rest of the week seemed to pass in much the same fashion. Brendan and I on**

**strange terms, conversationally. Him alternately trying to apologize and act like nothing had ever happened (with trying being the operative word in both situations). An increasing proportion of the student body giving me strange looks as the week went on. Andy was mysteriously nowhere to be seen, not since his strange behavior on Sunday. At the end of the day on Friday, I was ready to be done, but it wasn't quite time, apparently. When I rounded the corner of the hallway to get to my locker, it seemed the hallway was more crowded than usual. A lot more crowded than usual. I groaned. The last thing I wanted just then was to deal with more people staring at me.**

**Which was unfortunate for me, of course. Because more people staring at me was exactly what I got. The realization came unfortunately slowly. The people at the edges of the crowd didn't quite recognize me as I started shoving my way in towards my locker. It felt like the crowd gave a little easier as I walked down the hall, and the people around me were chattering a little less. I tried not to pay attention, but it was hard not to notice a few people from my class looking my way. Someone started to make eye contact and I wasn't really sure what to do.**

**Just then, someone grabbed my arm and started dragging me back the way I came.**

**"Kyle!" I heard a girl whisper excitedly at me. "I just *have* to show you this new video game I got! You're going to love it!" I turned, surprised enough as it was, only to see an unusually chipper Kaylee pulling on me, with something like mercy in her eyes. There really wasn't any way I was going to get to my locker alive anyways, so I decided to follow.**

**"Okay!" I squeaked, trying to sound somewhere remotely as excited as she was in that moment. "What game is it?" I honestly doubted she knew much about games, but the girl had always full of surprises.**

**"A really awesome one!" She grinned back at me as she spoke. "You'll see."**

**Before I had the time or the presence of mind to say anything else, we were out the door. Kaylee let go of my arm and her excitement visibly dimmed.**

**"Sorry about that" she murmured. "There isn't any game. But you're welcome to come play Minecraft with me and my brothers if you want. I can drive you home after."**

**"Sure" I said. I hadn't known she had brothers. I also hadn't known her to invite people over, or be anything more than vaguely friendly to me. But at the moment, I only really had two concerns. "I just need to get my stuff first."**

**"Don't worry about your stuff" she said. Something about my tone told me she was serious. After a pause, she answered my other question. "We just need to get you out of here." I wouldn't really have called it an answer, when it brought up so many questions, but there was an urgency in her voice that led me to realize I should probably just shut up and follow her to her car.**

**Kaylee was one of only a few students given driving privileges to the school. Most of us walked or biked, because our school just didn't pull from that far away and had a strong emphasis on sustainability. The building was LEED certified, and there were rumors that they might start retrofitting in hopes of earning at least a few of the petals of the living building institute's certification. Not driving or being driven to school was a huge part of**

**this. Kaylee was allowed to drive, however, because her parents had requested she be transferred in from one of the other area high schools. Nobody knew why exactly. Some said that her parents wanted to get her away from the plethora of boyfriends that I still couldn't believe she had. I had always figured it had something to do with the academics at our school: we were generally considered to be a good school, and a handful of the high schools in the area were questionable. This theory was quickly blown, however, when I learned where she lived. She was very much within range of another very good high school. These questions still needed to be saved for later. With any luck, I could befriend her enough to find out all the things I'd been wondering for so long.**

**Before she even got out of the parking lot, she relaxed and started to talk again. "I'm really sorry to confuse you like that. I've been hearing rumors, and you've always been such a nice person, I didn't want to let you go through that without at least trying to intervene."**
**I looked at her, still not sure where this was coming from. "Thanks?"**
**She smiled. "Seriously. Don't worry about it. I think you'd have done the same." If I knew what she was talking about, I'd probably hope she was right. After a minute, she continued. "Also… your stuff is in the back. I wasn't sure what you needed out of your locker, so I used a combination of my best judgement and just taking everything."**
**I turned around and looked at the backseat. Sure enough, everything from my locker except some decorations and a few drawings from the beginning of art class were back there. "How…"**
**"Janitor let me in. We're friends like that."**
**There was a surprised silence. Or maybe a squeak, because she started laughing. "Seriously, though. Never underestimate the power of being friends with the maintenance people. That's what my mom always told me and apparently it's true. I say hi to him every morning, and today, when I couldn't just jiggle your combination into unlocking, I realized I might be able to ask him for help."**
**"So... you just asked the janitor to open my locker so you could get my stuff out? And he was okay with that?"**
**She grinned. She seemed pretty proud of herself, actually. "Yes, and... yes. Totally. He trusted that I was doing it to help you, and I wasn't actually out to steal stuff."**
**I looked over at her, wondering if it occurred to her that this kind of thing wasn't really… normal. That most janitors don't trust high school students nearly enough to just open up other people's lockers for them, and that doing so might be breaking some kind of law. I'd assume, anyways, I wasn't exactly an expert in the legal arena. I wondered if she knew the kinds of things people said about her when she wasn't there – rumors about her weird relationships with older guys, and guys her age, and when the rumor mill was being especially creative, some hateful comments about seeing her out on the town with other girls. For some reason, it seemed that people were quick to make the jump from thinking Kaylee was a slut to assuming any girl she was seen with was her lesbian lover. I suppose I didn't care either way, I just didn't see why people had to assume things like that.**

**We rode in silence for a while, until I suddenly realized I didn't have a computer with me.**
**"Kaylee?"**
**"Yeah?"**
**"I don't think I can play Minecraft."**
**"No? Why not?"**
**"I don't have my laptop. Isn't that an essential part?"**
**She laughed. "No worries. We'll find one for you."**
**"Okay, cool." I supposed that there were enough computers in my house to provide an extra one to a guest for games or something, but everyone in my family was too possessive of their things to be okay with letting someone borrow a computer for anything more than a quick Google search. As it turned out, Kaylee's family was quite different from mine: the very picture of welcoming and generous.**

## Chapter 8 – Brendan

**Something here about Kyle's attachment to grades, setting the curve, feelings of self-worth through academics as compared to Brendan's own feeling like he was just trying to fit in.**

## Chapter 9 – Kyle

***Dear Kyle,***

***Have I ever mentioned how jealous I am of your ability to make friends? I have no idea how you do it. You obviously aren't trying to be a likable person, and you clearly don't really care if people aren't interested in you. But somehow everyone is – everyone who takes the time to say hi is drawn to you like a magnet. Could not caring be the secret?***

***Regardless, don't worry about camp. You'll be fine. I think you'll even have fun. Just don't forget about me when you're gone.***

***Love,***
***Brendan***

**Kaylee's brothers were a lot of fun. So was the sister she hadn't expected to be there ("she does drama… she's never home on weeknights except occasionally to eat dinner.") She kept talking about other siblings who weren't there until I could no longer keep track of how many there were. A few of the younger ones were adopted. Everyone there was very excited about someone new to hang out on their family Minecraft server, so procuring an extra computer (mom's) wasn't difficult. We played for a couple hours, at which point Kaylee's mom showed up and asked if I wanted to stay for dinner.**
**At some point, I remember thinking, I should probably head home and get some homework done. But for now, I was happy to hang around longer. Something about this house was so warm and friendly that I couldn't bring myself to leave just yet. Besides, it was Friday, so at least I had nothing due in the morning. I thanked her warmly and called my dad to let him know that I wouldn't be home for dinner.**

**At dinner, we somehow managed to squeeze the six Minecraft players along with both of Kaylee's parents around the table. Actually, how we pulled if off wasn't a mystery. The family seemed to have money, and while they didn't really show it off, they definitely invested in a house that fit everybody, including with a large dining room. Dinner was fun, the family got along well and everyone was joking about the events of the day. The food was fantastic. It was some sort of pork pot roast thing that literally melted in my mouth, along with the best mashed potatoes I'd ever had. On top of this, there was this fantastic salad with arugula, goat cheese and slices of apple that, in spite of being a salad, was actually really good. Since both of my parents work demanding jobs, they rarely put any effort into cooking a reasonable meal.**
**At some point, probably conveniently when I was in the middle of a large bite of meat, Kaylee's mom looked at me. "So Kaylee tells me you're the latest victim of your school's rumor mill? What crazy thing did you not do?"**
**I chewed for a minute to buy time, trying to process what she was saying, and looked over at Kaylee. "Is that what's going on?"**
**She almost dropped her fork. "I… yeah… did you… did you not no?"**
**"I mean… I'd noticed something, but…" My words trailed off. I figured that that would explain things, but it was surprising. In spite of Brendan's constant jealousy that I was so easily able to make friends, I just never figured that people cared what I was doing. I took a few pensive bites of salad. I had guessed that it was mutual, maybe – I wouldn't care about them, and they wouldn't care about me, and we'd**

**just happily go about our not really caring lives, realizing that classmates who weren't friends just weren't important enough to waste precious brain energy on, when we could be spending that energy on the people we did care about, and our schoolwork.**

**By the time I woke up from my thoughts, everyone was excitedly engaged in conversation about the youngest son's soccer game the next day. Apparently he was pretty good at it, and the family all tried to go to his games. That was the nice thing about being in a big family, I supposed. On one hand, you had a lot of people there to support you when you wanted it. On the other, nobody noticed if you just needed to withdraw for a while. Sometimes thoughts just need their privacy. I enjoyed watching this family together. There was just something about them that was so inviting.**

**We played Minecraft for a while longer after dinner, finishing building the big farm that we'd been working on (I was aghast when I found out that, even on their established family server, they didn't have a solid farming system down yet). Then Kaylee offered to drive me home, which, at that point, I was grateful for. We started talking serious things again when we got in the car.**

**"So you didn't actually know that people were talking about you?"**

**"I try not to concern myself with what people are talking about, unless they're my friends. It's just a distraction, most of the time."**

**"True, but… aren't you the least bit curious?"**

**"I suppose. Everyone has been acting strange around me lately. Brendan especially, he's been all hot and cold, but I assumed that was just because…" I wasn't sure I wanted to say it, especially to someone who only as of today could be considered a friend.**

**"Because why?"**

**"So… we've been friends basically forever, right?"**

**"Yeah, I had that impression."**

**"Well, on Saturday, he tells me he's attracted to me and asks if he can kiss me – not that he wants to date me or anything, because that would ruin our friendship or whatever, of course."**

**"Mhm."**

**"But just asks if he can kiss me. Because he's wanted it for sooooo long."**

**"Ugh. I hate it when they do that. You think they're friends and suddenly it turns out that it was all physical."**

**"But see, that's the thing. The guy's never *really* been attracted to anyone. He's**

**claimed he's been attracted to a couple girls but he never seemed that serious about it. I catch him staring at guys more often than girls anyways. Sometimes I doubt he'd react if a hot girl walked by naked."**
**"You mean… you think he's gay?"**
**"Could be. Certainly wouldn't surprise me as much as he surprised me when he said he was attracted to me."**
**"I can see that. Throwing a few attractions out there to pretend he's normal, just trying to fit in. Poor thing. I can't imagine. Maybe he thought if he could kiss you…"**
**"He seemed a little relieved when I said no."**
**"So you did say no? Good. That would have made things awkward. Especially if it was a bad kiss." She laughed at this, and for a moment I wondered if she really was the wild girl that everyone said she was. Then she noticed I wasn't laughing.**
**"Bad kisses? Do you know what I'm talking about?"**
**"Uh… no. I've never kissed anyone."**
**"Yeah, me neither. But my older sister is in college now, and she's been dating around a bit, and so it's come up. Apparently it actually is a thing, different levels of kissing ability and compatibility and whatnot."**
**"I think I remember reading about that somewhere. Something about pheromones and genetic compatibility, but I don't recall exactly."**
**"Anyways, so you say he wanted to kiss you, but didn't seem to want to kiss you, and you refused regardless?"**
**"Yes"**
**"Well then. That both explains a lot and makes things more complicated. I'm not sure which."**
**"Oh?"**
**"Yeah… are you seriously not curious what people are saying about you?"**
**"Maybe a bit. Especially since your mom brought it up like she knows it's happened before." I wanted to add "to you" but I didn't quite feel like breaking the news to her.**
**"Yeah, it has. You should know, considering you go to the school. It happened to me." I wasn't sure what to say, so I didn't say anything for a while. Thankfully, she continued. "Hey. Don't worry about it. It's annoying sometimes, but I honestly find it amusing that the school as a whole considers the most virginal person ever to be the biggest slut, just because people keep seeing me with guys they don't know."**
**"Is that what it is?"**

**She chuckled a bit. "Yeah. Basically."**
**"And who are these guys?"**
**"That's the best part. Usually my brothers. A couple friends from church too, but usually if I see people from school when I'm out, it's when I'm with one of my brothers."**
**"And how do you know that's what they assume?"**
**"Well, I don't know how it started. But one time my oldest brother and I went out to see a movie… something stupid too, I think it was Puss in Boots or something like that… and someone a couple guys from our school were at the theatre, and they decided to start heckling us."**
**"Really?"**
**"Yeah. Walked up and started saying things like 'Ooooh, Kaylee, going for the older ones now, are we?' and generally being obnoxious. Not in the actual theatre, thankfully, they weren't about to watch a kids movie. Something full of extra testosterone, I'm sure. Because, you know, they needed it."**
**Girl was pretty brazen. Not my usual style, but I liked it. I was laughing, imagining her telling off a group of guys who were trying to act courageous by picking on a girl twice their size. "So how did you respond?" I asked.**
**"Oh…" she laughed more, savoring the memory. "My brother wrapped his arms around me protectively, and yelled 'you guys better not bother my Kaylee, or I'll come for you in the middle of the night!' He's big and muscular and imposing, so he pulls off the threatening look nicely. If he had any tattoos, he'd look like a convict."**
**"I can't imagine that helped things much."**
**"No, no it didn't. We both knew people were calling me a whore and saying I was getting around, and since it's so hilariously far from the truth, we decided to play it up when we had the chance. I was probably bright red and giggling, which probably just fueled their fire. Nobody wanted to talk to me the next day at school, but it was well worth it."**
**"Was it, really? Doesn't it bother you to have people spreading lies about you?"**
**"Meh. I mean, once they are, there's no point trying to stop them. The more defensive that you get, the more they hate you, and then the more stuff they'll make up. Better to feed the fire by not caring and having fun with it than by being angry, I figure."**
**"Yeah… yeah, I suppose so."**

**Chapter 10 – Brendan**

**Chapter 11 – Kyle**

***Dear Kyle,***

***Some sort of letter to Kyle***

***Love,***
***Brendan***

**As Kaylee was pulling off the highway, I realized that I still didn't actually know what people were saying about me – and she seemed to be dying to tell me. At the very least, she kept bringing it up.**
**"Okay, I guess I'll bite, Kaylee. What exactly are people saying about me?"**
**"You seriously have no idea?"**
**"No. None. I hardly noticed that people were looking at me funny, it didn't really click until your mom brought it up."**
**"Hmmm. Well that's an awkward way to find out, but I guess I'm glad it happened. Not… not that I really want to be the one breaking it to you, but at least I know what you're up against."**
**That statement sounded ominous. "What am I up against?"**
**"Oh… well…" she grinned. "Congratulations. You're South County High's latest slut!"**
**I tried to respond with enthusiasm, but I honestly couldn't believe it. Label me? A slut?**
**"Yeah… sorry. Apparently someone thought you had mono or something, and, apparently, nobody knows what mono is."**
**"That's the kissing disease, right?"**
**"Yup. And apparently we go to a school where kissing or hanging out with people gets you labeled a slut."**
**"Or not kissing people, apparently."**
**"Yeah, I guess so."**

**We drove the last couple blocks in silence, each considering our respective fates. After a few more minutes, we finally reached my house.**
**"Well, thanks for inviting me over" I said. "And driving me home, and… you know"**
**"Yeah, anytime" she said. "Actually… are you free Sunday evening? My family does a game night every Sunday, it's a ton of fun and it would be awesome to have you join. Besides… I can say from experience… you'll be really glad to have a friend… and I'm happy to be that friend for you."**
**"Yeah, seeing as I seem to have lost Brendan, I suppose so." I paused slightly mournfully.**
**"Also, I can probably convince my mom to make caramel buns. They're literally the best thing ever."**
**I smiled. Baked goods were the one thing I couldn't ever refuse, especially if they involved caramel. Besides, I was pretty convinced that I shouldn't ever turn down her mom's cooking. I smiled at her. "Thanks. I'll be there. Just send me your address or something so I can get directions."**
**"You're welcome, and absolutely. See you Sunday!"**

**I felt happy when I went to bed that night. I may have lost Brendan, for a while, and everyone else at school for that matter. But suddenly I was friends with someone I'd always liked and never quite managed to reach out to. I didn't even have to worry about people scorning me for hanging out with her, because, well, it seemed they were happy to scorn me regardless. And for that, I was almost grateful.**

## Chapter 12 - Brendan

**Something something something**

## Chapter 13 – Kyle

***Dear Kyle,***

*You're awesome. Don't let anything anyone says make you forget that.*

*Love,*
*Brendan*

**I woke up pretty groggy the next morning. I'd had a dream that the entire school had collectively thrown me a birthday party, and, with Andy at the lead, had somehow convinced the school district and all the school administration that it would be okay to just not have school for the day and instead spend it celebrating my birthday. Because I was that special to everyone. Even Brendan, not much for birthday parties anymore, got into the action and was helping people figure out what gifts to buy me. It was an unbelievably fun party and was catered perfectly to my tastes. But, of course, just as they were about to unveil the pile of presents that everyone had chipped in to buy for me, I woke up. Confused. Still feeling like parts of the dream had been real, and wondering why I had to wake up to such a different reality, where I was special to everyone in an entirely different way. But mostly confused because… why would my dreaming mind put Andy in charge? Why would he, of all people, be the ringleader of celebrating me? Was my mind trying to tell me something? Did I just wish he'd stop harassing us all the time?**

**Us. Was there really an us in me and Brendan anymore? Or was the day when we were an inseparable team of marauders, as we often thought of ourselves, gone for good? I supposed that I shouldn't dismiss the possibility of us restoring our friendship at some point, but, especially if he was somehow behind all of this, I wasn't sure that it could ever be the same.**

**Which brought me to the next question. Could Brendan's asking me to kiss him just a week before… be related to the entire school now thinking I had a kissing transmitted disease? It's not like I'd told him anything of the sort, but I had been a little bit sick a couple weeks previous, and perhaps…**
**None of it made sense. And what about Andy? But he wasn't exactly hanging around me trying to apologize for some big mistake he couldn't explain. I'd told Brendan no big deal on the kissing thing, but he seemed to be feeling guilty about so much more. I couldn't imagine he'd ever spread a nasty rumor about me, but it wouldn't surprise me, given his obsession with perceptions, if he felt somehow**

**responsible for what was going on.**

**After a while of letting my thought processes run wild, I decided there was one thing I could do to understand my situation just a little better: figure out what exactly this mono thing was. I headed downstairs to eat breakfast first, and found a pile of pancakes with a snarky note from my parents letting me know that they were going couch shopping and considered me a lazy sleepyhead for sleeping so late. It was only 9, and the pancakes were cold, so they had to have been joking. Typical. Pancakes finished and teeth brushed, I headed back to my computer to look up mono, or mononucleosis. Some of the gems I found out was that it was caused by a herpes virus (good thing that the people at school didn't know this or I'd really be in hot water), and that one of the symptoms I should be checking for was a soft and swollen spleen. I tried to poke my spleen to check if it was soft or swollen, but I still have no idea where, or what, the spleen is. I also found out that I should avoid taking aspirin if I didn't want to die, and that it's spread through saliva (kissing, silverware, whatever) and can continue to spread for months after the symptoms disappear.**
**It was all very interesting, and I got a chance to laugh at the word spleen, but it didn't really help me know how to navigate the situation, and it didn't really help me understand what I was up against. That's the stupid thing about relationships and drama. You can't solve them with science. Even a solid knowledge psychology falls flat and leaves you stranded when you're in the middle of it most of the time.**

## Chapter 14 - Brendan

***Dear Brendan,***

***My mom wants me to ask you what you want for Christmas. I think that means she's going to make me buy you a present or something.***

***Let me know,***
***Kyle***

**Kyle and my parents always thought it was adorable that we were such good friends. I think at one point, once we'd gone through puberty, they showed a little concern about how inseparable we were and wondered how it might affect our love lives (it never really occurred to either of them that we might be attracted to each other, which I suppose was good, because that would have been ridiculous). However, before and after that brief stint of worry, they mostly just decided it was fun to do things together as families just to see what crazy things Kyle and I would come up with, what strange shenanigans would somehow occur whenever we were together.**

**One year, the idea was to take us out to get pictures with Santa. Neither of our families was particularly religious, mine occasionally went to the local Unitarian church which mostly believed in potlucks… her family seemed to be devoted to science and didn't really care much about anything unrelated. This isn't to say they were atheists or anything. They just didn't see the point in pursuing religion when there was scientific research to be done.**

**Regardless, they thought it might be fun to get us all dolled up in awkward Christmas outfits and take us out to sit on Santa's lap to commemorate the one occasion in which they managed to humiliate us with their antics worse than we managed to humiliate them with ours.**

**Needless to say, it failed. We may not have been old enough to really understand what the meaning of it was, but we knew our parents were up to something when both sets insisted on choosing our outfits that day (for goodness sakes, we were 10! That's too late for not dressing ourselves!). They joined in the fun, of course, with their own bizarre red and green getups. And we were rounded up to the mall, forced into line for pictures.**

**When our turn came, Santa decided "ladies first" (heh) and asked Kyle what she wanted. He couldn't get her name right, was incredibly confused by a girl having such a masculine name. But he thought it was sweet when Kyle, in a rare moment of outward thinking, responded to "What do you want for Christmas" by pointing to me and saying "I want him to be my bestest friend forever and ever."**

**He was a little more concerned when I, always the follower and going through a somewhat shy stage, tried to respond in kind but instead just pointed at Kyle and said "Kyle". I wanted her for Christmas. Whoops. Like I said, though, I'm pretty sure our parents knew what I meant, but Santa sure didn't. He has the strangest look on his face in that picture, and both sets of parents are always happy to pull it out if they feel the need to embarrass us. Yes, they know that they don't need to**

**worry about Kyle and I having a romantic relationship, but that doesn't stop them from bringing up the idea every once in a while, just to see us blush. And this picture and the story that goes with it is the perfect way to remind us that, at one time, it seemed that's what I wanted too.**

## Chapter 15 – Kyle

***Dear Kyle,***

***I'm writing you a letter write now. It'll show up in your window via the wonderful pulley system we built. It was all my idea, right? Mhm. I'll just imagine you grimacing and punching me as I say that… heh. Okay. Well. Just saying hi.***

***Love,***
***Brendan***

**After an inappropriately large amount of time researching mono went by, I decided to check my email. Mistake. Huge mistake. Somehow, since my last email check (had it really been over 24 hours?) I managed to get my entire inbox clogged with hate mail from my school. I skimmed most of it, allowing myself to be briefly entertained by such gems as "Ur a uneducaded hore. Get a reel life" and "you're gonna burn in hell harder than the gays" (for kissing? Really? And what does the Bible say about loving and not judging people?). There was a couple emails from people who were sorry for me but so glad they weren't the ones being found out by the hivemind – these emails detailed sexual exploits so far from my imagination that I wondered what exactly the rumors were saying about me, and decided not to press further. There were also a few propositions from guys I'd never heard of, and at least one from a girl.**
**Somewhere in the middle of it all was an email from Kaylee with her address, and asking me how I was doing, so I replied letting her know of the deluge of inappropriateness that had suddenly appeared in my life. I figured she'd appreciate or at least sympathize with the attention I was getting. I just found it strange that so many people cared enough about my habits that they felt the need to shame me or beg for my sympathy, but nobody thought to ask… you know, I am rumored have a painful and possibly, in extreme cases, deadly disease. Could anyone have asked**

**how I was doing?**
**Unfortunately, it appeared that no – South County High didn't care about my wellbeing, they just all needed a scapegoat to direct their anger at. I suppose, for the time being, I was okay with providing them with that.**

**Kaylee and Kyle end up deciding to pretend to be lesbian lovers, and that's how Brendan finally decides it's safe to come out to Kyle, which restores their friendship and they live happily ever after.**